

When They Saw Jesus
August 2009
Peace Church

Good morning Peace Church! It is good to be back here for this month. Four years ago almost to the day, our family first walked into Peace Church at the beginning of a seven month stay in Munich, and from then on, we have remained closely connected to this community, now through the emails and the Prayer Chain.

I bring you greetings from Shoreline Free Methodist church in Seattle, Washington, in the northwest corner of the USA.

Let us pray.

This text from the last four verses of Matthew is one of the most frequently memorized in the entire Bible. It even has its own nickname, the *Great Commission*. Even though there is a commission from Jesus at the end of each of the four gospels and in the first chapter of Acts, when Jesus gathers the community who had accompanied him and then he sends them out for ministry, the Matthean version, the *Great Commission*, is the best known. Certainly it has held great significance over the last several centuries in launching innumerable Christian believers to far-flung places around the world. Its importance to Protestant foreign mission began with William Carey, a non-descript British cobbler until he wrote a little pamphlet, based on the *Great Commission*, arguing that this text put an obligation on Christians to convert the so-called "heathen" in foreign lands. His pamphlet became a best-seller, earning enough money for Carey and his family to sail to India as one of the first Protestant missionaries to that country. Carey has been called the *Father of Modern Missions*. In fact, many here in this room are Christians today because of the worldwide Protestant missionary movement that followed after Carey. Unfortunately, Mrs. Carey, who thought she had married a cobbler, not a missionary entrepreneur, went insane, literally, trying to care for her many children in a foreign land far away from her beloved *Great Britain*.

I mention all of this to emphasize that the emphasis in the popular exegesis of this passage has been on Jesus' command to *GO!*, with the *GPS* (or the compass, whichever better fits your technological ability) pointed to all nations, or anywhere that is far from where one currently resides. However, this is a mistranslation of the Greek. (Refer to the text printed in the bulletin.) The word, "*GO*," is not a

separate command; it is actually a participle which, in English, would have an "ing" at the end and should be translated, going. The verse would then begin like this - "Therefore, going, or as you go." It adds urgency, dynamism, movement. It reinforces the action of the main verb. For those of us NOT headed to far-flung places, rest assured; we're not disobeying a command from the lips of Jesus, but we're not let off the hook from the commission; this urgency, this call to dynamic movement applies to all of us.

In case you're wondering what is the main verb -- it is the verb, make disciples, a favorite of Matthew's.

There is so much to say about this text, so many important themes to consider, but this morning I want to make just two points.

First point: Jesus' all authority and always presence on those whom he commissions.

Notice the fourfold ALL which frames the last two verses: All authority, all nations, teaching all that I have commanded you, and I am with you ALWAYS. The first and the last of these are particularly noteworthy. In the first, Jesus tells his followers that ALL authority, as in the universal extension of authority, has been given to him. Now, in light of his resurrection, the prophecy Jesus spoke to the high priests during their interrogation in ch. 26 has now been fulfilled, "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." That is what Jesus means by ALL authority, and those whom Jesus' commissions are covered by this ALL authority.

And then the last ALL - I am with you Always - confirms Jesus' immediate presence with those whom he commissions. In the Hebrew Bible, this affirmation of God's immediate presence occurs often before a dangerous mission, as in Joshua 1:5, immediately preceding Joshua's entrance into the promised land. "No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you." This is the confirmation of Always presence that Jesus gives to his disciples as they leave the mountain. In other words, what this means is that those who are commissioned receive their orders from the one who has ALL authority and from the one promises to be with them

Always. On Jesus' authority and presence, they can absolutely depend no matter what they encounter, no matter what happens, as they follow his commission to make disciples. Nothing is greater than Jesus' All authority and Jesus' Always presence.

Second point: When the eleven disciples saw Jesus, there was a mixed response, some worshipped and some hesitated.

Let's set the scene. Jesus has just been crucified, dead, and buried. After the Sabbath, the women, who went to the tomb, had an unexpected encounter with an empty tomb and an angel, who proclaims that Jesus has been raised. On their way to tell the others, Jesus meets them, they fall down in worship, and then he gives them a message to have "my brothers" go to Galilee, where they will see Jesus.

In the next verse, the eleven disciples gather on the mountain as instructed. Upon seeing Jesus, these who spent many, many days and nights with Jesus (in other words, they knew Jesus very well from their time together) have two responses, according to the NRSV text, "they worshiped him but some doubted." Matthew has an affinity for the verb, to worship, in Greek - *proskuneo*, using it 13x, whereas Mark & Luke only use it 2x each. Five of the times *proskuneo* occurs in Matthew, it is actually a change from the same story in Mark. In other words, in a story that Matthew & Mark have in common, Mark doesn't use the verb *proskuneo*, but Matthew inserts it purposefully. The verb signifies worship as a physical gesture of submission, most often a falling down at Jesus' feet. So when one reads the first part of this verse knowing the meaning of *proskuneo*, one should translate it as, "When they saw Jesus, they fell down at his feet ..."

The second half of the sentence, often translated as "but some doubted," is more difficult to ascertain its meaning because it is the only time in the NT that this verb, *distazo*, is used, though when it appears in other Greek literature, it has the meaning of to doubt, or to hesitate. It is clearer what the verb does NOT mean. It does not mean "little faith" as in a small amount because Matthew uses that word elsewhere. And it does not mean "no faith," a word found in John's gospel but not in Matthew's. So what does it mean?

Let's return to the idea of worship as a physical gesture of falling down. Could it be that there were some among the eleven who hesitated? Who, maybe for a brief

moment, maybe longer, stood and stared, or fell down a little less involuntarily, with some hesitation? Whether it is translated "doubt" which carries a mental, even intellectual sense, or "hesitation" which fits better as a counterpart - I think - to the physical gesture that is worship, the idea is that some were less fervent in their worship, perhaps more guarded.

I find this enigmatic detail absolutely fascinating because Matthew makes it clear that despite their mixture of responses when they see Jesus, they all receive the commission, they are all covered under Jesus' authority, and they are all guaranteed Jesus' immediate presence. All of them, whether they fell immediately and involuntarily at his feet in supreme devotion or whether they hesitated for whatever reason, all of them walk down the mountain with the same commission and the same blessing. None are excused, none are favored, none receive more or less, none are left out.

This mixture of worship and hesitation is us, isn't it? Just as when the eleven disciples saw Jesus, there is bound to be a mixture of responses among us gathered here together at Peace Church. Some of us are hot wired for complete devotion no matter what; it just comes naturally and easily. For others of us, faith is more of a struggle or a process to be worked at doggedly, in fits and starts. Yet all of us will leave this sanctuary today covered by Jesus' authority and by the blessing of Jesus' presence as we engage in his commission of making disciples. Why is this reassuring? Because those who seemingly worship today with ease may hesitate tomorrow, and those who hesitate today may tomorrow fall down in unambiguous, unqualified, unfettered, worship.

In the name of the Triune God who accompanies us to the end of the age, forever and ever. Amen.