

The Great Commission
Matthew 28: 16-20
April 17, 2016

Nick Redmond
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

During my first year working here five years ago, I shared a story about hiking the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu in Peru with my wife Kimberlee. We had both always wanted to see Machu Picchu, and heard about the 4-day hike through the Andes Mountains to arrive at the ancient ruins – and in our foolishness somehow thought this would be a great way to spend our honeymoon.

So after our wedding, we flew down to Peru and eventually found ourselves stepping foot on the Inca Trail – backpacks and boots on, ready to make the trek. The first day wasn't too bad – there were ups and downs, flat stretches, and beautiful mountains that towered up all around us. We felt

pretty good! Then we came to the second day of the hike. The trail went up. And up. And up. There were no flat stretches, no rolling hills – just one steady climb up the mountain to the almost 14,000-foot pass which is appropriately named “dead woman’s pass.” Fortunately, Kimberlee did alright. For me, however, it was a bit of a struggle – and I think they probably changed the name to “dead man’s pass” after they saw me huffing and puffing along the hike.

After the grueling hike, we eventually made it to the pass, and we were faced with a beautiful view of the endless range of mountains all around us. We took a seat on some of the rocks and just took in the beauty of it all. We had made it to the top!

Today we also come to one of these big mountaintop view moments as we prepare to confirm this wonderful group of 8th graders. They’ve spent the past 8-months in what sometimes might have felt like a never-ending hike up the side of a mountain. We’ve had Sunday morning classes when I’m sure many of you would’ve preferred to have slept in instead. There have been homework assignments, daily spiritual practices, field trips, a service project, and two weekend retreats. Just last week each confirmand shared individual statements of faith that they wrote, as well as creative projects that spoke to different aspects of their faith. Our confirmands have wrestled with the big questions of faith – who is God? Why do bad things happen? What about other religions? They’ve debated, they’ve spent time in personal reflection,

they've prayed, and they've wondered. To all of the confirmands – you have put so much effort into the year! It must be nice to finally have made it to this day, right? Today you stand on that mountaintop after the long journey and you've made it! Congratulations!

The disciples in this morning's scripture passage also stood on a mountain – it was after Jesus' death, and they had received instructions to go to this mountain in Galilee. They too had a difficult journey up to this point, they had been called from their ordinary lives to follow this man named Jesus. They traveled with him through the countryside – I imagine they were often tired, hungry, and sore – yet they still kept following this man and learning from him. They followed him as he returned to Jerusalem – where he was accused of crimes and sentenced to death. They watched as he was executed on a cross, and they heard the stories days later of the mysterious empty tomb. So after their long journey, they finally arrived at this place Jesus had instructed them to go. They were there – they had made it! Surely this was the end!

It was then on that mountain that something incredible happened – Jesus appeared to them! Now in the other gospels we have other stories of Jesus appearing to the disciples, but in the book of Matthew, this is the only story we have of his appearance – and it's also the very end of the Matthew's gospel, so we know this was an important moment.

Yet when Jesus appears to the disciples, they don't all respond with cheers, excitement, or an awesome party for Jesus. Instead, we're told that some of the disciples worshipped him, and some of the disciples doubted. Even in this group of Jesus' closest disciples and friends – these 11 people who had followed him around for so long – some of these people doubted that this was even real.

Later in our service our confirmands will answer some questions about their faith and what they believe and they will then be confirmed as members of the church. It's a big moment in the life of faith – and a big mountaintop on the journey of faith. But this passage is a great reminder that being confirmed doesn't mean that you suddenly get all of the answers. There's no answer sheet that you receive this morning that gives you the perfect explanations to your questions, there's no comprehensive book of knowledge that you receive in a secret backroom ceremony; there's no “aha” moment where angels come down and the voice of God shares with you the meaning of life.

The journey of faith is one very much like what the disciples experienced. On one hand we have these moments of deep worship – singing hymns together, sitting around the campfire on a retreat, taking communion, sharing in a deep conversation or having a moment of real, honest prayer. On the other hand, we also have moments of doubt. Times when we wonder – is this really real? Jesus, are you really there?

If you remember nothing else from this confirmation year, remember this: you do not walk this journey alone. If all of the confirmands could turn around for a second – just look at all of the people here in this congregation. These are people who have nurtured you, cared for you, and have helped you on your journey to this day. They’ve also been walking this journey of faith, and just like you, they’ve had moments of connection to God, as well as moments of doubt. I’d like to ask everyone here this morning in worship – how many of you have ever had a feeling of connection or relationship with God at some point in your life? Now, how many have ever had a question or doubt in your faith at some point?

It’s easy to see how we aren’t all that much different from those very first disciples. We all experience moments of connection and moments of doubt – and both are normal. Yet we have this community here to support us in our walk of faith whatever we might be going through.

It’s in the midst of this worship and doubt, that Jesus responds to the disciples. He doesn’t try to explain how the resurrection works, or how he’s somehow appearing before them. He doesn’t give a proof of God’s existence, or answer any of the questions that must have been going through the disciples’ minds. Instead, he says this: “Go!” He tells them to leave the mountain. To be disciples out in the world. To baptize, to teach, to share all that he taught them. He passes on his authority to them and tells them now it’s *their* turn to share the good news of God’s grace, forgiveness, and love. Jesus

will no longer be physically with them – but *they* are now called to be Jesus’ hands and feet in the world. Their journey has not ended, it’s only just begun! Jesus called them – and us - to go out into the world as disciples – to share God’s love with those who feel unloved, to share God’s forgiveness with those who feel unforgivable, to share the light of Christ with those who feel overcome by the darkness of the world. Jesus calls us to go!

On my own journey on the Inca Trail – I was reminded of this never-ending journey. That tall mountain pass I mentioned? That wasn’t the end of the hike. There were actually *two more* mountain passes ahead. That mountaintop view was merely one stop along the way – our hike would have many more moments with peaks and valleys – tough climbs, and scenic views. Our journey had not ended, it had only just begun.

At the end of this confirmation year, Jesus reminds us that our faith journey does not end with confirmation. It does not end with Easter, it doesn’t end with marriage, or sending kids off to college, or retirement. Today we’ll have a wonderful celebration as we recognize these confirmands and their journey up to this point. We’ll look out from this mountaintop and give thanks for this special moment – but tomorrow begins the journey ahead. It’s a journey that will last your entire lifetime as you seek to walk in the steps of Jesus Christ. And Jesus calls each and every one of us to walk ahead on that path of faith together. It doesn’t matter if we are overflowing with praise for God’s presence our lives, or whether we struggle with lots of doubts and

questions and have a hard time feeling God there – Jesus calls us to walk the journey. It doesn't matter where we've come from or who we are – Jesus calls us to walk the journey. It doesn't matter how much money we have, or what our grades are, who we love, or what the color our skin is – Jesus calls us to walk the journey. So today may we all take that step forward in the journey of faith, knowing that we walk this path together – with Christ present by our side. Amen.