

# Back to the Mountain

Matthew 28:16-20

Mountains are significant places in the Gospel of Matthew, locations where important events occur. Jesus' most famous section of teaching is delivered when 'he went up on a mountainside and sat down' (5:1). A similar setting is described with regard to the Feeding of the Four Thousand beginning in 14:29 and the Transfiguration occurred when 'Jesus took with him, Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves' (17:1)

It therefore seems appropriate that the closing scene of the Gospel takes place when, 'the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go' (28:16). We can't be sure that this final encounter with Jesus takes place on the exact site of the Sermon on the Mount but the connection is made by most commentators on Matthew. The scene of his most famous teaching would surely have been a poignant one for those hearing the call to 'make disciples... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' (28:19,20).

We can only wonder what was going on in the minds of the disciples as they looked ahead to this encounter with the risen Jesus. Alongside the joy and wonder at his coming back to life some must have reflected on the last time they were with him in Gethsemane, when Matthew tells us that 'all the disciples deserted him and fled' (26:56). As they meet again on the mountain, we are told that, 'When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted' (28:17). The word translated as 'doubted' by the NIV also conveys the idea of 'hesitation' or 'being in two minds,' suggesting that that the disciples struggled at this moment to know how to react to Jesus.

Before mandating the disciples with the words we refer to as 'The Great Commission,' Jesus speaks about the basis on which he is able to command them. Earlier in the Gospel he has said that, 'All things have been committed to me by my Father' (11:27a). Now he speaks of how, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (28:18). Stanley Hauerwas offers this helpful commentary on the status of the resurrected Jesus:

'The devil has lost. The devil had offered Jesus authority over all the kingdoms of the world if only Jesus would worship him (Matt 4:8-11), but Jesus's whole life was a refusal of that offer. It was a refusal that required Jesus to endure rejection and crucifixion, but through that endurance he has triumphed.'<sup>1</sup>

The Great Commission begins with Jesus command to 'Go and make disciples of all nations.' Our English word mission is based on the Latin word *missio* which means 'to send,' a reminder that at the heart of outreach is the idea that we have been sent by Jesus who was himself sent by the Father (see also John 20:21). The Commission is not to find recruits who are willing to 'tick a box' which identifies them

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*, 2006, 249

as followers of Jesus. People become disciples through the break with the world which occurs in baptism and through their willingness to submit to all of Jesus' teaching.

After the Commission comes a promise. In one of opening scenes of his Gospel, Matthew comments on the visit of an angel to Joseph foretelling Mary's pregnancy: 'All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us")' (1:22,23). This phrase 'God with us' bookends the Gospel, which finishes with the promise of Jesus to be with us, 'always, to the very end of the age' (28:20).

### **For discussion**

1. In Matthew 28:17 we are told that 'When they [the disciples] saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.' Stanley Hauerwas has commented on this verse: 'Again we see Matthew's absolute candour. There is nothing to hide. Even after the resurrection some of Jesus's disciples doubted. Matthew does not tell us what form their doubt took, but one doubts that they doubted that he had been raised. Rather, their doubt regarded their ability to obey and follow Jesus. They have not forgotten that they deserted him.'<sup>2</sup> How does it change your view of the Great Commission to consider that it was given to a group of people, some of whom were experiencing doubts?
2. In verse 18, Jesus tells his disciples that, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' How do you think his resurrection would have changed their view of who he was and how to respond to this statement?
3. In verse 19, we learn that the command of Jesus is to 'go and make disciples of all nations.' Can you think of ways in which our church can become more genuinely multicultural in all it does? How would such a change impact our witness to the community?
4. In verse 20, Jesus emphasises the importance of teaching disciples 'to obey everything I have commanded you.' Do you think that our contemporary approaches to evangelism place enough emphasis on how challenging it can be to follow Jesus?
5. On Sunday we noted that the Great Commission is followed by the promise of Jesus to be his disciples, 'always, to the very end of the age.' What difference would it make to this passage if the command wasn't accompanied by this note of assurance?

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*, 2006, 248