

Matthew | But they doubted ...

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Alison Sampson, reflecting on Matthew 28:16-20

It might shock you to hear this, but there are days when I find it hard to identify as Christian. There are days when I struggle to hold onto faith. And there are days when I wonder what on earth I am doing with my life, preaching these few and futile words. For I look around and see nothing but chaos and a world going up in flames.

‘We all worship,’ I told someone recently. ‘Whether or not we’re aware of it, we are all giving our lives to a story. It might be capitalism, it might be nationalism, it might be the way of Christ.’ And the story which is shaping the world right now seems to be that might is right, military force is God’s tool, God bless America. So buckle down. Fight for oil. Burn fossil fuels. Work hard, watch unreality tv, go shopping, buy a gun. Persecute the vulnerable and care for no one, absolutely no one, at all. Why attend your son’s wedding when there’s golf to be played? Just do what you like, hurt when you can, and grab anything and anyone within reach.

And while I can’t embrace that particular story, its counternarrative is also powerful: We’re all going to hell in a handbasket, and there’s nothing I or anyone else can do about it. The kingdom of God is at hand? Yeah, right. The gift of the Holy Spirit? As if. Love has transformed the world? I doubt it. All I can see is death all around, so what on earth am I doing up here?

It was three days after Jesus was killed. His body had been lanced, then removed from the cross. He was well and truly buried. Death was all around. So Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb and face up to the evidence of death.

But the earth shook and heaven broke open and a messenger came down and rolled back the stone. Perhaps to prove a point, he sat upon it. Then through his words, simple and powerful, the women were given good news. ‘Go and tell the disciples he has risen from the dead, and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him,’ the messenger said. So the women left the place of death, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell the disciples. And on the way they met Jesus and embraced and worshipped him, and he reiterated the messenger’s words.

What happened next? Through the women's words, simple and powerful, the disciples were given good news. So they walked away from the place of death and returned to Galilee, back to where their story began. There they, too, met the Risen Christ. They worshipped him, and they doubted, even as he entrusted them with good news.

But did you hear it? 'And they doubted.' The earth had rumbled, the heavens had opened: and they doubted. The women had encountered a messenger from God: and they doubted. They had all met the Risen Jesus: and they doubted. They worshipped him: and they doubted. He commissioned them: and they doubted. He promised to be with them: and they doubted.

And right now you might be doubting me, because your Bible almost certainly says 'some doubted.' Yet the Greek is simple: 'They worshipped him, and they doubted.' They did this and they did that, third person plural, aorist tense. There is no qualification in the Greek. It seems doubt is something translators are uncomfortable with, assigning it to just a few. But in Matthew's words, 'They worshipped him, and they doubted.' It seems doubt is part and parcel with faith.

In the face of chaos, in the place of death, in my feelings of futility and foolishness and doubt, I find these words deeply encouraging. For in these three little words – just two in the Greek – there is all the permission in the world. To be a disciple, and to doubt. To live the faith, and to doubt. To follow the call, and to doubt. To share the good news of the gospel, and to doubt. To look around and see the chaos and destruction, yet insist that words are powerful and love can transform, and to do this despite our doubt.

How, then, do we live? What words do we speak? What is faithful doubting discipleship?

Going back to the story, Jesus is clear through what he does and does not say. First, what it's not. It's not about thinking the right thoughts or parroting the correct theology or insisting that we believe that the resurrection happened. Jesus doesn't demand any of these things.

Nor is it about being wholehearted or even sure in our faith: for the disciples worshipped him, and they doubted, yet he still commissioned them.

Nor is it about bunkering down with all the answers, waiting for others to show up. Instead, Jesus sends disciples out, and he instructs them to pass on

his commandments to those that they meet. And what commandments are these?

Scrolling the news, one might think they were about the use of a godly military force to wipe out a civilization. One might think they were about compelling others to bow down to the Ten Commandments. Or one might think they were about controlling the bodies of women, queer folk and brown people. But the disciples are encountering Jesus in a particular location, and we should pay attention to this. For they're on the mountain in Galilee where he delivered his great sermon, so it should be ringing in their (our) ears.

To refresh your memory, blessed are the poor, the grieving, the humble, the just, he had said; blessed are the merciful, the authentic, the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for pursuing justice. Shine your light, be honest, he had said. Never avenge, don't judge. Love your enemies, he had said, and pray for those who persecute you. Choose God over money; choose generosity over hoarding. Choose love, choose life. As well as commands, the sermon contained stern warnings: against prayer for show, against hypocrisy, against prioritising religious rules over love.

From the Crusades to the colonies to present day Christian nationalism, much of the bin fire of the world is caused by people trying to impose their version of Christianity on others. It's a Christianity of domination, to be instilled by force if necessary, and it's completely divorced from the Sermon on the Mount. Yet the commission to proclaim the gospel, to baptise, and to teach people to obey Jesus' commandments is anchored in this sermon. Thus any proclamation must be good news for precisely the people Jesus cherished: the poor, the grieving, the peacemakers, the justice-seekers, and all who speak truth to power. And it must lead away from the places of death towards fullness of life for all. Paradoxically, Jesus' commands are the antidote to the violence and domination that plague the world in his precious name.

Turning to an earlier story, in Genesis we meet a god who hovers gently over the face of chaos, and breathes spirit into it, and speaks words which enable life to emerge and goodness to grow and flourish. And then we discover that we are made in this God's image, and so this work is also our own.

Like the story of Jesus, the story of creation never sanctions violence, domination, or death. Instead, it too is a story of intimacy, breath, word, life,

goodness, and blessing. It too is a story of trust and commission. And it too is a story which suggests that our well-chosen words can help life to emerge and goodness to grow and flourish.

So whether it's the first creation story of Genesis or the new creation in Jesus, our call is consistent: in places of darkness, confusion and chaos, to speak words of life and blessing. This might mean gazing into the face of violence and speaking words of truth and peace. It might mean gazing into the roiling heart of greed, and speaking words of generosity and freedom. It might mean gazing into the turmoil of our own lives and noticing which stories shape us, and choosing those which fill us with generative words which in themselves give life to others.

Whatever, wherever, our call is to do this faithfully, whether or not we believe it will do any good. For history is shaped by ideas which only found their moment after their first thinkers were gone, and visions which were only fully realised once the visionaries were long dead. Jesus' movement spread like wildfire only after he'd ascended into heaven to be everywhere present in a way eternally elusive and uncertain. And our loving words can touch others in ways we will never know or understand.

In the face of chaos, in the place of death, in feelings of futility and foolishness and doubt, I insist on this: Not one of us can predict the future, nor our effects on those around us. A butterfly flapping its wings in the jungle might contribute to a typhoon half a world away. Our work is simply to share the good news with those who need it, and breathe life wherever we go. What happens next is in God's hands – and is absolutely none of our business.

So in our faith and even maybe especially in our doubt, let us proclaim through our words and our lives that the reign of Christ has come. God's will be done, God's love be shown. Amen. Ω