

Matthew 28:16-20  
Proof of God  
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Rev. Kelley L. Becker

\*Title Slide

A woman, interested in finding out more about her family, joined one of the online genealogy sites. What she found out about her 9x great grandfather surprised her.

The Salem witch trials are among the most infamous events in American history. The witch hunt resulted in the deaths of 20 innocent people, 19 through hanging and one through pressing. There are memorials to each of them in the town square of Salem today, and all but one have been officially pardoned by the town.

This woman's 9x great grandfather was one of those witch victims. His name was John Proctor. He was hanged as a witch in 1692. Also interesting, John Proctor later became the main character in Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*, making him famous for generations to come.

How about you? Do you have juicy family secrets or interesting character you would like to tell us about this morning?

When asked, many people who enjoy studying their genealogy, talk about how knowing where they came from and who they came from provides some grounding for them. And there are those occasional stories that reveal truly remarkable things. Today's text flashes us back to the beginning of Matthew where the author wrote down Jesus' family tree. When we looked at Jesus' family back in January, we talked about the importance of Jesus' family tree to Matthew's story. It explained Jesus' place in the royal line of King David and therefore, as far as the author was concerned, fulfilled prophecy in that the Messiah would be from that family. But there is something else about this family tree that is important.

It includes Rahab. Rahab was not an Israelite. Remember, she was the woman in Jericho whose trade was prostitution. She helped the Israelite spies as they gathered information in order to successfully invade Jericho. Her inclusion in Jesus' family tree reminds us that the kin-dom of God is for everyone. Matthew doubles down on this in the next chapter with the story of the gift bearers from the east who visited Jesus as a very young child. They were not Israelites, yet they worshiped him.

So, while most of Matthew's story is about what it was to live in Christian community as a disciple of Jesus, these parts of the story remind us that God is *for* all people, not just for one group. Here at the end of Matthew, through the story of the disciples' post resurrection encounter with Jesus, the author draws the circle wide again, from an inclusion perspective, with one last bit of instruction, maybe the most important of all.

<sup>16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."<sup>[a]</sup>

In the biblical narrative, mountains are places where God draws near. Like Moses, Jesus' final instructions are given from a mountain. There, Jesus and his disciples are gathered and we see again what I believe to be one of the important truths of Christianity and of life.

\*It's messy. Here's why I say that. Matthew doesn't write about exactly what Jesus looked like, but clearly, the disciples recognized him. After

all, “They worshiped him...” Their friend who had been dead was present in some form. This is good news, right? “...and some doubted.” What? We would like to think if we were gathered on a mountain and Jesus was there in recognizable form that doubt would not be our “go-to.”

But that’s real. Doubt is real and this passage is a reminder that doubt does not exclude anyone from community or from the purpose to which we are called. We are not alone when we doubt. Doubt is part of our faith. The Greek word interpreted as doubt isn’t the same word associated with “doubting Thomas,” which means something more like “unbelief.” This word is more like waffling or wavering, unsure of which direction to go. According to Matthew, we can worship even while we are uncertain. The last time Matthew talked about doubt like this was in the story of Peter and Jesus walking on the water. As Jesus reached out his hand to a sinking Peter, he said, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Why did you waver? Why are you unsure? Then the wind ceased and Peter and the rest of the disciples worshiped him.

This meeting on the mountain tells us that really nothing has changed. The same elements of worship, doubt, and little faith that were present before Easter are present post Easter. So, whatever the nature of the resurrection event, it did not generate perfect faith, even in the ones who experienced it firsthand. Alas, it is not to perfect believers, but to the messy, wavering, worshiping community of disciples that God entrusts the important work of “making disciples of all nations.” That’s right...you and me.

What does this charge look like in our world today? Here is what I believe. You may think about it differently and, if so, I would love to talk to you about that. I don’t think “making disciples of all nations,” is a call for us to go into the world and insist that everyone believe the same things about God, agree to be baptized, and then insist that others do

the same. I think it has to be about revealing God and God's love to the people who haven't experienced it yet. We cannot ask someone to follow Jesus if they have never experienced the love that Jesus came to reveal. Don't you think?

So, the question for us is what are the ways in which God and God's love for us are revealed?

For many of us, God is revealed every single day through the gifts of nature we enjoy all around us. In the last few weeks, as spring has sprung, I have been reminded of how true that is for me personally and I've heard the same from many of you. I've even noticed that pictures of spring's beauty have replaced some of the political snarkiness on social media. This alone, is worth celebrating.

I've seen pictures like these!

\*(scroll through nature pictures)

If we agree that nature is one of the ways in which God reveals Godself to human beings, then might we also agree that part of "making disciples" is to care for and nurture nature?

\*In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he wrote, "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." For centuries, theologians have used this verse as the basis for the concept of Natural Revelation. In other words, the beauty, complexity, and diversity of nature are proof that God exists. So, if this is true, what are the spiritual consequences of destroying this planet?

It occurs to me that Natural Revelation only makes sense to people who have experienced scenes of picturesque mountain ranges, pristine lakes and rivers, beautiful wild animals, and backyards that are home to hummingbirds, butterflies, squirrels and flowers.

\*For the ones who have access to places like Pathfinder Parkway, Sooner Park, Woolaroc, and Osage Hills State Park, God's power, provision, and love for us are literally everywhere. But, for many people living on this planet, the nature they experience is not proof of a loving, just God. It is, in fact, quite the opposite.

When water is unsafe to consume, air is too toxic to breathe, and the sheer decay of the surrounding environment endangers the health and safety of the ones who inhabit the area — how does that reveal God? I did a quick search of places in the world where the water is unsafe to drink. It's a long list that includes Ukraine, Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, Russia, China, and Puerto Rico.

\*I'm certain that the residents in Flint, MI would want us to include them in that list as well.

\*A search of places in the world where air pollution is at dangerous levels, again revealed a long list including, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Gwalior, India, Xingtai, China, and Peshawar, Pakistan.

When the natural physical existence is taken away, broken, or heading toward death instead of life, how does this point people to God? I read a story this week, written by Jeannie Kirkhope, who runs the Appalachian Catholic Worker Farm outside Spencer, W.V. The story she wrote was about the logging of the 200 acres of forest behind the farm she runs. She wrote this after the loggers worked just one day:

\*"What was once a majestic stand of towering sycamores, so densely canopied the understory only a meadow of shade-loving wildflowers could grow beneath it, is now a sun-flooded machine-tracked dirt plain, half the size of a football field with wide open sky above it. On the edge of a smothered stream, those mighty sycamores laid stiff on their sides in a haphazard pile, an enormous mass grave of dead bodies, each one scuffed, scraped, and missing hunks of bark."

She wrote of the silence in that part of the forest. There were no birds singing, squirrels scampering, just silence. The days went on, the loggers logged and soon what was the forest behind the farm was gone. Soon after, she gave a tour of the area to some local high school students. This is how she described what they saw, “What they were looking at was nature’s Aleppo: a devastating loss of life on an unfathomable scale; total disruption of an entire community we don’t think about often enough; annihilation of an awe-inspiring natural cathedral, unmatched by human hands; a sad, systematic dismantling of a century of history that they will not see again in their lifetimes.”

<https://sojo.net/articles/solastalgia-appalachia>

How does that scene reveal God to those young people?

“The sad reality is that Natural Revelation — as we interpret it — doesn’t really exist for millions of people living in conditions where their environment is being exploited for corporate and political gain. The sad truth is that Natural Revelation isn’t equally apparent to everyone, which is why creation care and environmentalism is so important. Because if we really believe that the earth reflects God’s glory, by not taking care of it and allowing it to become corrupted — we’re essentially keeping people from experiencing the goodness of God.” (Stephen Mattson, <https://sojo.net/articles/why-it-difficult-get-christians-care-about-earth>)

The psalmist wrote, “The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known. They speak without a sound or word; their voice is never heard. Yet their message has gone throughout the earth, and their words to all the world.” (Psalm 19:1-4)

This sacred text suggests that the skies tell of God’s creative work, but what happens when all that is visible are clouds of pollution and the haze of smog? The ways in which we pollute, destroy, and exploit our

planet matters — we are keeping people from seeing God, and by making our earth less than it was created to be, we are blinding others to the full goodness of God. If Christians seriously want all people to experience God, we should start by taking seriously our role as caretakers of the world God created.

\*I learned this week about a project that our Sikh brothers and sisters have undertaken. It is called the Million Tree Project. This celebration marks 550 years since the birth of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. It's goal is to reconnect Sikhs to the environment and repair some of the damage to the planet done by human beings. According to EcoSikh president, Rajwant Singh, "Guru Nank was a nature lover. He talked about nature as a manifestation of God and many of his writings talk about how we need to learn lessons of life from nature." In case you are wondering, in the Bible there are about 1,000 references to the earth, compared to 490 references to heaven and 530 references to love. Our sacred text, along with the sacred texts of other faith traditions, carry a powerful message for the earth.

If we truly want to "make disciples of all nations" we have to make sure "all nations" can see the goodness of the God we serve. But, pointing to some words in the Bible will not do that. Herding our neighbors into small groups to talk about doctrine and disciplines will not do that either. But maybe experiencing God in the beauty of nature, in the smell of the forest, the sounds of the birds singing and bees buzzing, the taste of fresh water, the feel of soil at our feet, maybe recognizing these things as gifts from a God who loves and cares for all of creation will inspire people to have a relationship with God. It worked for many of us in this room.

\*I want to leave you with some of the questions I've been thinking about this week. How would your theology, your ideas about God, be different if you saw no evidence of the beauty of creation. If the

mountains were hidden by pollution, if the water was dark and contaminated, if the grass was dead and the trees were all gone, what would you think about God as Creator? How would that change your faith? We must remember there are people all over the world who live this every day. As followers of Jesus, we have to want something better for them. We have to want something better for our children and grandchildren too.

\*As we continue to celebrate this season of resurrection, let us commit to being part of God's work making all things new, not just for us, but for everyone. Amen.