

Sharing Mt. Kitazuma
Matthew 28:16-20
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There is a mountain in western North Carolina, near Ridgecrest, known as Mt. Kitazuma. It is largely forgettable—it's not particularly high, it's not an especially fun or challenging climb, and it doesn't have a memorable waterfall coming down its side. This is not an Ararat or a Sinai; it is not an Everest or a Denali.

At the top of Kitazuma, there is a small campsite, but the site is surrounded by trees and is basically only good for pitching a tent and building a fire. Back down the trail, before the summit, there is an overlook that has a really nice view of...well, mainly I-40. There are other trees and mountains in view as well, but there are dozens, maybe hundreds, of other places within a mile or two of Black Mountain that have better views. It is also a very small overlook, with room for only a few people at once, so it's hard to spend too much time here before you feel the need to make room for others.

When I was in high school, my church youth group spent a weekend retreat in Black Mountain, right next to Ridgecrest and Mt. Kitazuma. The leaders of the weekend were looking for a hike, and I took them to Kitazuma where we proceeded to climb the nine-tenths of a mile path to the top. On the way down, we stopped at the overlook, and everyone took turns stepping out to the edge and gazing at the highway. Then we walked back down.

The retreat leaders were confused as to why I suggested this hike for our group, but they were too diplomatic to say much...but from the looks on their faces and the sideways glances, I could tell they thought, "Well, that was a waste."

The problem was, they didn't understand what Kitazuma meant to me. That wasn't their fault...I never even tried to explain what Kitazuma meant to me, because it's a long and complicated story that doesn't quite make sense even when it's told. But I wished I had tried to tell it, even though I likely would've come up short.

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The gospel reading this morning is the conclusion of Matthew, the words familiarly known as The Great Commission. According to Matthew, these are the last words that Jesus will speak to his disciples, the last instruction he will give them, the last impact he will have. There are two significant parts to this scripture, each informing the other, each critical to the faith story that exists in Matthew.

The first part is what the disciples do when they come together. The scripture tells us first that they saw the risen Jesus; like the Israelites and Peter, James, & John from our scriptures two weeks ago, for the disciples, simply laying eyes upon Jesus-as-God is a critical act. Seeing Jesus leads immediately to worshipping Jesus. This is a moment of reverence and devotion.

This is why the tag at the end of verse 17 stands out: "but some doubted." The disciples are depicted in the light—they understand the reverence that this moment calls for, and they appear as men of faith..."but some doubted."

We are trained to think of doubt as the antithesis of faith, but Matthew doesn't present these as part of a polar dichotomy. There is no choice between doubt and faith; instead, there is faith that includes doubt, faith that can be trusted because it is borne from doubt. These disciples are neither cocksure nor skeptic. They are genuinely faithful...a faith that includes "the risky wavering of the one who must decide when more than one possibility seems reasonable and right."¹

We know that the disciples have this faith in part because of how Jesus speaks to them—and what Jesus says is the second significant part to this scripture. This is not the admonition to a doubting Thomas or a sinking Peter. This is the Great Commission itself, the words that will send the disciples out into the world to teach, to draw together, and to establish the presence of Christ on Earth. The Great Commission requires walking the fine line between arrogance and impotence. It requires a faith that acknowledges doubt and nonetheless emerges from that doubt. Jesus would not speak these words to his disciples unless he knew their faith could handle it.

Our faiths consist of worship and instruction, action and communication, deed and word. The one informs the other, and they need to coexist in order to exist at all.

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So...the final verses in Matthew include a human act, a Christly lesson, and (this will come as no surprise to you if you've been paying attention the last month) it all takes place on a mountain. It's an unnamed mountain, which suggests that it's not so much about a specific place connected to Israel's history as it is about being on a mountain. Matthew's greatest teaching verses—arguably the greatest teaching verses in the entire Bible—take place on an unnamed mountain in chapters 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount. And the moment in Matthew where Jesus is most clearly identified as God, the transfiguration, also takes place on an unnamed mountain. This is the third peak in the trinity: the unnamed mountain connotes Jesus as brilliant rabbi, as God on Earth, and now as the one who sends out. This is the Christian mountaintop experience: learn from God, revere God, share God.

All are present in this finale—the instruction, the worship, and the going forth. All seem equally important to the mountaintop experience. The gospel of Matthew wants to end on this note, to cement this image in our minds when there is nothing else to read.

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Generally speaking, we're pretty good at learning from God. We read our Bible, listen to our mentors, and try to have an open attitude toward new lessons that might inform our lives. Sometimes it takes us longer than we'd like to admit to learn those lessons, but listening, discovering, and absorbing are things that we happily claim. In the church, at least, we are also quick to claim an attitude of worship—again, we may disagree about how to be reverent, exactly, but we at least like the broad idea of being devoted. This is not the issue.

The issue is the third thing. The issue is sharing.

¹ M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8, 503.

I have a good friend whose daughter recently started kindergarten. She began her first day at a before-school program run by the YMCA, mixed in with students of all ages. The program began with the counselors asking everyone to go around the circle and share some things about themselves. My friend said that there were four or five kindergarteners in tears because they were struggling to share anything, even their names. They just weren't used to it. We aren't used to sharing even the most basic things about ourselves, even (for those kindergarteners) our names. It makes us uncomfortable...but it's just not that simple.

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This brings me back to my own mountaintop experience as a high schooler near Ridgecrest. I've probably climbed Mt. Kitazuma fifty times. Mostly I climbed it as a camper and staffer at the boys' camp across the highway. Often, I ran up it as part of a challenge that the camp offered to a select few of its campers. That challenge played a critical role in my development as a teenager. It is still risky for me to try to share it, but I think I owe it to you to try.

The challenge works like this. A camper will be awakened at midnight and taken out into the middle of the woods, where he will build a fire and keep it going until dawn. He may use nothing but wood to start and fuel his fire—no leaves, straw, or paper are permitted. He gets an hour to collect wood and then must strike a match. If the fire doesn't catch, he gets an additional half hour and then a second match. If neither match lights, he has failed the test. If the fire catches, he must continue to feed it all night, keeping a visible flame at all times.

After the fire, candidates are taken to Mt. Kitazuma for a morning run. The trail up the mountain is about a mile long. The candidates form a line and begin to run, keeping the pace that is set for them. Usually that pace is about a seven-minute mile, uphill on no sleep.

After the run, the remaining candidates shower, eat breakfast, and write an essay about their experience at camp and what camp means to them. They then perform hard labor—carrying logs, building fires, making torches—until 6:00 that night.

Throughout the entire test, candidates are allowed to speak to no one. They may make no audible noise. It is a grueling 18 hours. It is an 18-hour prayer.

When I tell people about the challenge, the most common reaction I get is "Why? Why would you want to go through that?" Even people who don't respond that forcefully often fail to grasp what the test truly means to boys who grow up in the culture of camp.

Kitazuma is the physical place most associated with this challenge. It is the part of the test most people fail, and it is the only spot that is fixed for all who undertake the test. Every time I drive on I-40 and pass this mountain, I remember being awakened in the middle of the night, silently urging my fire to light, and staring out over the lake at Ridgecrest while I tried to write an essay. I remember the 18-hour prayer. And I remember not only my own experiences taking on this challenge but also the others who tried, some succeeding and some not.

It is an extremely personal story for me, one that is indeed long and complicated and that doesn't quite make sense when it's told. Usually, I don't try to tell it. I have plenty of other camp stories that convey much more naturally, and it's a lot easier to stick to those.

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The relationship we have with our church is equally complex, personal, and difficult to explain to others. The rituals that we embrace here are just plain weird.

Once, I had a group of students from China visiting, and their host asked me to tell them about our church. I took the students into the sanctuary and told them about worship, about someone speaking in the pulpit and someone playing the organ. Then I pointed out the baptismal pool and explained that, every now and then, two people would stand in the water fully dressed and then one of them would dunk the other under the water. I assured them that this was a sacred, meaningful experience...but they did not believe me for one second. They were sure that the crazy American was trying to pull one over on them.

Now...lest you think this experience is about cultural differences, the truth is that I've had the same experience with Presbyterians.

And that's just the case with a relatively simple ritual. When we get into the idea that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he was both fully God and fully human, that he shared a meal with people that consisted of his body and blood, or that he died and rose again, it's even crazier. Our faith is not built on tenets that mesh with worldly logic. It is not intended to. But it is extremely difficult to share things that we know do not make sense.

It is particularly difficult to share things that we know will not resonate with others' minds when they resonate so deeply with our own hearts. I didn't want to try to explain Kitazuma to my peers when I took them there in high school because I knew they wouldn't get it, and then they'd shrug it off...and it is not something I ever wanted shrugged off. We don't want to tell people why our faith or our church or our God is important because it will be remarkably difficult to convey that importance, and if others dismiss the importance they might as well be dismissing us. We take it personally.

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When the youth and I would talk about trying to share faith or church, they would respond in a way that highlighted another trap. They would say, essentially, that they liked having their school friends at school and their church friends at church. They didn't want their worlds to collide.

I think most of us have had that experience. Sometimes it's our in-laws and our parents celebrating Christmas together, and everyone is just a little off their game. Or it might be having to introduce colleagues at work to neighbors in a restaurant, or having friends from our pasts show up unexpectedly in our present. It is weird when our worlds collide. We don't like it when it happens unexpectedly, and we certainly don't like the idea of inviting it upon ourselves.

But the gospel story is really about worlds colliding. It is about rabbis dining with tax collectors, Pharisees conversing with radicals. It is, in (nearly) the words of Paul, about a world where ²⁶ in Christ Jesus [we] are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus.² It is why the verses in Matthew today stress that the disciples are to go out "and make disciples of all nations."

² Galatians 3:27-28

It may make us uncomfortable, but if we subscribe to the faith that Jesus commissions, we should not have the option of picking and choosing with whom we share our faith, even when it makes us uncomfortable, even when our faith is inexplicable, even when we know we will fall short in our sharing.

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So...then the question becomes, “how? How do we share this intimate and confusing aspect of our lives?”

The most popular answer I hear to this question is “Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.”

Well...that sounds great. I mean, if we could all be that pithy, sermons would be about 20 seconds instead of 20 minutes. That quote takes a swing at the hypocrisy of some proselytizing while also giving people permission to act kindly (or maybe even just to avoid acting unkindly) and then pat themselves on the back for preaching the gospel with their actions. But it’s hard for me to read the final lines in Matthew and draw the same conclusion. Jesus commands his followers to make disciples, to baptize, and to teach. The actions and the words must inform each other.

When we try to share our faith experiences without using words, we end up walking down mountains while others shake their heads and think “that was a waste of time.”

The words “Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words” are regularly attributed to St. Francis even though he didn’t speak them. What he said was, “it is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.”³ Francis recognized that the gospel was all-consuming, that it needed to come out of our mouths and our actions and that it had relevance and meaning for all in our world.⁴ His quip is not intended to limit our speech or excuse our silence; they are words intended to accentuate the everpresent value of our faith.

This is a bold statement, not the copout it has sometimes become in skewed application. And in that boldness, I think, lies part of the answer to how we share what is personal and complex with those who we know will not be able to grasp fully what we are attempting to offer. To do this, we must be bold. We must acknowledge the wide breadth of our faith. And we must speak with word and with deed, sharing with all that we are and with all that we have.

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It is a daunting task, one befitting of a mountaintop. And this, I suspect, is why Matthew ends with the words that it ends with, with the encouragement that Jesus is with us always, to the end of the age. The challenge of sharing our most important essences comes with a pure and unabashed hope. Who would not want to experience hope such as this, and if it’s as good as we claim it is, how could we even think about keeping it to ourselves?

³ Jamie Arpin-Ricci, “Preach The Gospel at All Times?”, *The Huffington Post*. July 1, 2012. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/preach-the-gospel-at-all-times-st-francis_b_1627781

⁴ Ibid.

When I grew older and was serving as a youth minister, I wanted to share Kitazuma with the youth I worked with. I tried to explain why the mountain matters to me, to use the words I'd eschewed as a teenager. I could tell that, with words alone, they didn't get it, just as the act of climbing the mountain with a different group of youth hadn't been enough years before. But then I took them to the mountain, and we cheered on campers as they tried to run up it. Afterwards, I asked my youth for their thoughts, and while they hadn't experienced the history of the challenge the way that I had, they still expressed how listening and cheering and walking those steps had an impact on them, an impact that was its own somewhat sacred experience.

Church...faith itself...should be the same way: shared through word and deed from the tops of the mountains, even when the story is too weird and too complex to convey completely, even when sharing makes our worlds collide.