

Matthew 17:1-9
Last Epiphany
St. Mary the Virgin
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Six days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The Transfiguration story begins with the phrase "six days after Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah." This is to drive home the point that Peter never has an inkling about why he's saying whatever he says. Had Peter understood what it meant for Jesus to be Messiah then he would've responded differently at the Transfiguration. He is clueless. He equates Jesus with Elijah and Moses. Peter was looking for a Messiah who would free him from political oppression and human suffering. He wanted a Messiah who would make Peter Healthy, Wealthy and Wise. Instead as we learn in the Gospels, the only way we can understand Jesus as Messiah or Christ is to radically redefine the term. Jesus as Messiah disappoints every Jewish expectation of Messiah. He does not overthrow the Romans. He will only promise his disciples that they will share his fate. Or as I frequently say, the Gospels only make us one promise, that we will be treated no worse than our savior and they crucified him. So it is no wonder that Peter, who always says the wrong thing and looks for the wrong Messiah, is confused at the Transfiguration.

Jesus and his three closest disciples climb an unnamed hill¹ and Jesus's clothes become whiter than is possible by human washing. Elijah and Moses²

¹ Traditionally Mt. Tabor but there is no scriptural support for locating it at Mt. Tabor.

² Moses and Elijah were assumed into Heaven so they and Enoch, who was also assumed, were available to appear. According to the rabbis everyone else was in Sheol. Today's RCL OT lesson, 2 Kings 2 tells the story of Elijah's assumption. For Moses, Deut 34:5. (St. Mary's, using the 79 BCP lectionary reads the deliverance of the 10 Commandments today). Since no one knew his burial place he was believed to have been assumed. Enoch is an obscure figure from Genesis but since we read in Gen 5:24 that God took him he is believed to also be in heaven.

appear and have a conversation, apparently out of earshot of the disciples, with Jesus.

A cloud descends on them. Four men ascend a hill, near Jerusalem, Elijah and Moses appear, a cloud surrounds them and a voice from the cloud announces to Peter, James and John that Jesus is the Son of God. This voice made a similar announcement at Jesus's baptism³. No one understands it now or then.

Jesus tells them as they descend the hill, that they are to tell no one about this. He tells them this because they have no idea what they've just experienced. In Matthew Jesus strives to redefine what it means to be Son of God, or Messiah, so the disciples are counseled to keep quiet until Matthew is ready to reveal what it means in the Easter event.

Now, I would hope that had I been at the Transfiguration then I would've changed my life! I think the event would've had an impact on me. Not so the disciples. Some scholars conclude that therefore the Transfiguration cannot be historical. Had it actually happened Peter, James and John, at least, would've been changed.

But that misses Matthew's point. At the Transfiguration three men are let in on more of what it means for Jesus to be Messiah. Despite this dramatic event, they have no idea what it means and fail to process it effectively. Peter continues to get it wrong, consistently. Jesus resumes his road to the crucifixion, essentially alone, since those close to him do not understand him. Only after the resurrection are the disciples able to understand the Gospel.

Where do we live today? Are we the post-resurrection community or are we confused and on the mountain with Peter, James and John? If we're the post-resurrection community then we know that we live eternally in the light of Easter and all things are possible because that which matters most, our salvation, has been taken care of.

I know few who live this way. It is easy to lose the joy of Easter and get bogged down in minutia or the humdrum of daily existence. Despite our weekly celebration of the Resurrection most of us will leave this church behaving as we entered. Those who encounter us will see little or no visible change in our lives. We give in to the demands of our daily life.

To help us live the resurrection faith the church in its infinite wisdom has a gift for us. On Wednesday we begin Lent. While we all know that Lent is characterized by discipline and fasting what we often forget is that this is done to prepare us for Easter. Discipline and Fasting are not the end; Resurrection and Hope are! Can we engage in discipline and fasting in a manner that leads to resurrection and hope? Can we come down off the mountain of the Transfiguration and resist resuming life as it was? Can we live proleptically, that is can we live as if the promised future has already arrived?

The disciples clearly didn't. They didn't want to hear that the Messiah, and by extension his followers, would suffer and be persecuted. They wanted to know that their contributions would be recognized and honored. Jesus promised just the opposite.

³ Matt 3:13-17

Many of our fellow Christians, but I hope none of us, have lost sight of the resurrection and decided that Christianity needs respect and must demand respect from society. Many of our fellow Christians demand of the Supreme Court that Christianity be protected from any inconvenience like paying for medical care they don't believe in or the acceptance of LGBTQ people they judge as defective or disordered or simply sinful. Peter's misguided hope for Respect, Health and Wealth are alive in the expression of Christianity displayed by many.

The Gospel always talks of community. Prior to Easter, Peter, James and John were looking for individual success. Many Christians today are too. The Christ of the Transfiguration and the Gospels sought for us to embrace the gospel necessity of witness and suffering. We are called to more visibly align ourselves with the poor and the powerless. Gospel Christianity accepts burdens which it does not want and witnesses how to live with faith under them. How do we turn from being the idea of church dominant in our culture and become the congregation envisioned in the Gospels and Paul? It seems to me that the demand on our expression of church is that we stand with the orphans, the poor, those of color, those who are discriminated against for their sexuality, especially today for being transgender. To be faithful we must stand also with the homeless, and with those whose legal status is undocumented. We must stand against perversions of the Good News. For instance the Gospel knows nothing of any god given right to be armed. It knows only of a God given right to a life with dignity. I frankly do not see how the church can have an opinion on anything other than justice until justice is universal. But of course I have no power and nothing to protect. We are more fully the church, I maintain, when we have no power and protect nothing. Matthew was written in a time when the church, whatever it was at that time, had no power and nothing to protect. Having nothing to lose, it could stand with the poor and oppressed.

I think we are in a time in this country when it will be easiest to be the church. The church has lost its status and its power. So it has the chance to be the Gospel Church. All we have to do to be the church is to stand with the Gospel and resist any attempt to compromise from it. The Gospel does not stand to make us first, wealthy or healthy. Most especially the Gospel does not stand to free us from diversity or promise us secure borders. The Gospel says that we find Christ when we align ourselves with the poor. Lent is a perfect time to rediscover what that means.

Rediscovering this is rooted for me in studying the bible so I welcome you to join me and several of your parishioners at the Bible Study on Sundays in Lent. We begin our Lenten Bible Study with Ephesians. We meet from 9:30 to 10:30 and there is coffee. In the next six weeks we will be studying how the church adapted to disappointment. The hope of Easter has faded. Jesus hasn't returned. Those who were alive at Easter have died. Their children have died. Yet the church and faith persists. In the U.S. the church is losing members. For many the hope of Easter has faded. Church buildings are being closed. Faith is challenged. In Lent we will be talking about how faith persists in the face of disappointment and seeming irrelevance.

If you speak to me after Mass I'll be glad to give you more details or put you in touch with someone who attended in the Fall.

In the Transfiguration, Matthew wants us to realize that knowing Jesus before Easter was no advantage. Christianity is only possible after Easter, not after the Transfiguration.

At the Transfiguration Peter, James and John were confused. There's no sin in confusion. I just hope for revelation and clarity. At Easter Peter, James and John finally got clarity and saw what they were called to do. It is our job as the church to never let go of that clarity and to pray that our leaders embrace it. We are at a time when it will be easy to be the church. Our role is clear. If we have the faith to pursue it then we will be leading the life we were created for.

We read the story of the Transfiguration as we get ready for Lent to remind us of what's important with the hope that having this in mind we will actually change our lives to worry about what God worries about. So I invite you to spend this Lent learning more about how to be faithful in a challenging time. Join the bible study. Join us for worship daily at 8 am, noon and 5 pm, or pray at home. We can do this because Easter is real. It is not a surprise. Our end is assured. There is a place prepared for us so we can dare to risk.