

Luke 9:28-36

Glorious

Three Sundays after Easter, and I think I owe you a resurrection appearance. It's just kind of worked out that I haven't preached that sermon yet. Even on Easter Sunday, the characters in the reading for that day were the women who come to Jesus' tomb and the two men who suddenly appear and speak to them. But no Jesus, not yet in Luke's account of that resurrection Sunday. And so, let's turn back to an earlier time, in Galilee, on a mountaintop, and Jesus and three disciples and a couple of visitors.

But when we think of resurrection, this is what we expect and want. Shouldn't the Savior who has been raised from the dead be shining and glorious? That's how we picture him, isn't it? coming out of the dark tomb, the stone rolled away, and Jesus walks out unhurt, and resplendent like the blinding light of the sun? It's how the Apostle Paul experienced him, that time on the Damascus Road, when the bright light shined on him, and Jesus spoke. But that's not what happened to the disciples and the women and any others who saw him those days before he was taken up into heaven. He was changed after death and resurrection, and they didn't recognize him, but not because he was brilliant and majestic, but because he was so ordinary, like he blended in to the background: he looked like

the gardener, a day laborer, to Mary Magdalene when she saw him in the cemetery that morning; he was just another traveler on the road to Emmaus, when he caught up to and walked with two of his unnamed followers; he shows up late in the upper room where the disciples are hiding- startles them because they didn't expect him- and then shows them his scars; in Matthew's story, he meets the disciples on a mountain- I'll bet it's the same mountain as here at the transfiguration- and we're told that they worshipped him, but that "some doubted." They wouldn't have doubted if he looked like this. No, the regular Jesus, dull and not shiny, is not what we expect at all; "regular" is not what we want. We want him beautiful and clean and perfect. But this is the single time- of all the moments of his life and even his afterlife- that the divine, glorious Jesus shows himself to us. Everywhere else in his history, we must see his divinity and his glory displayed in other, simpler ways.

Glory, it's what we want for ourselves, and what we hope is happening right now, to our loved ones who have gone on before us. But the pearly gates and golden streets are merely metaphors for peaceful rest in a safe place after the struggles of earthly life; and nowhere does it say we will wear wings. The description of heaven in Revelation comes out of a genre of literature not meant to be taken literally. Even back then, believers never thought it to be the literal truth.

But that's still what is in our minds: light everywhere, our bodies floating above the clouds, a sense of warmth and calmness and ease- no one can say that's wrong, but nobody knows, either. What the gospel writers emphasize, instead, is what Jesus was as God's man on earth- even after he has died and been raised up: a man in sandals and a robe, still bearing the scars of his hard life and his hard death. What does it tell us- the glorious Messiah, walking the dusty roads? That he still had something to show them, still something more to teach his followers; and maybe that's true for us today. Yes, perhaps the word of the gospel is the hope of resurrection- an anticipation of a white, shining eternity; but also the assurance that he is with us now, the Lord we have known all along- not someone unknown or hidden or "other," but a human just like us; who is glorious in his humility; as Prophet and Teacher and Savior, his humanity draws us to him. It is not shimmering, transfigured Jesus, but Jesus with the dirty robe and the smudged face, who calls to us, who comes as God's demand upon us- that we, too, live out our humanity for other persons; and comes to us as God's blessing- so we see that we are most fully his creatures when we act like Jesus: then, are we closest to God.

Only here does Jesus take on the divine look. As he meets and talks with Moses and Elijah, those stalwarts of the faith- who we are told, "appeared in glory"

with him. You'd think all that light would break through the sleeping eyes of the disciples, and when at last it does, Peter speaks, but is quickly corrected by the voice out of the cloud. And then, it was Jesus left alone with them. Isn't that also God's word to us, the things that remain? The light is gone; the glory has gone. We can't hold onto them- we are just not meant for it; we can't live in those fleeting glorious moments, they slip through our fingers. Even if we could cling to the glory, it would just make us proud, and separate us from everybody else. So, it is God's intention even, God's will, that the glory depart- look, the cloud comes over them, dims the light, and brings them all again into the dull, commonplace world. That is when the voice says, "Listen to him!" This is the word for us, "listen," not the whispered discussion of the great ones, on the mountaintop, like in verses 30-31, but the ordinary knowledge and the day-to-day, faithful following of dusty roads and the usual hurts of existence and the silence and loneliness that come to us all. That, but also this: Jesus was still there.

Yes, the gospel story will continue, to the point that he does ascend up into the skies. But we believe, even so, that he has never left us alone. And we are here, to give God thanks for that blessing: that we are together, and that his spirit of humility and kindness and sacrifice moves among us, and makes us friends.

“Listen to him,” the voice speaks out of the cloud. Hearing voices is a difficult, and even troubling, concept. But let me reiterate, it points the disciples to the one who was still there, not to the great ones of the past, to Moses and Elijah who were so renowned- for what they were and for the legends and miracles that were associated with their names. But Jesus is called “Son” and “Chosen”; and *he was still there*. I gotta think, that’s an important religious point. The voice doesn’t direct the disciples back to the old days and the old ways, of tried and true religion, of history and tradition, of rules and the written word, but directs us to a *religion of presence*. Of a God who is near- even enveloping them in the cloud on the mountain, and with them in all the pains of the world; of a Lord who is caring and humble, who permits his glory to fade into common humanity; of a people who follow and try to obey, and who greet one another with kind words, who love and serve each other because that is what people do who understand that the glory of God truly dwells within the simple, human acts of compassion. A religion of presence. That is how we have come to know Jesus, and he is shown and proven to us every day by those most like him.

As important in this passage as Jesus' glory, is the fact that he stays behind after the other glorious ones have left. It means that God is God of life- and not just shiny, heavenly afterlife; and so we understand that God never leaves us alone: God, concerned with all of us in this life. And God gives us this command, which is also our greatest hope, "Listen." Because we know then, that God speaks, and is close enough that we can hear; and that God wishes to tell us and show us such love and kindness: so that we might believe; so that we might be compelled, as grateful listeners and hopeful believers, to give love and to show kindness to others.