

It Is Good For Us to Be Here

Mark 9:2-9

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When you're a seminary student, people ask you – almost ceaselessly – about your “call story.” By the second or third seminary visiting weekend, you've usually got a tight paragraph that covers, more or less, how you wound up trying to get a degree in “Divinity.” Some people are second, third, fourth generation clergy – even more, sometimes, and are sure from a young age they're going to follow in their parents' footsteps. Some folks talk about a big eureka moment where everything snapped into focus and they knew God was calling them to ordained ministry. My own story was not quite so clear or concise. It involved a lifelong love of the Church, a good deal of theological curiosity, and a lot of trial and error. There was, for me, not exactly an “aha” moment where the heavens opened and I heard God say “get your MDiv from Columbia Theological Seminary.” There was, however, a slow realization – not unlike the moment in any good investigative thriller where the journalist connects all the dots on the corkboard in red thread – that all my most significant relationships and most formative experiences were thanks to the Church. And I started to wonder if, in retrospect, God had been quietly calling me all along.

When we come across Peter, James, and John in this passage, they're having a hard time putting all the pieces together. When we meet them on this mountaintop, they've known Jesus was special for a while: they just witnessed him feeding the four thousand, and returning sight to a blind man. Peter even calls Jesus the Messiah in the previous chapter. But Jesus is frustrated because the disciples are close but

they're still not quite getting it. Immediately before this passage, Jesus sits them all down and explains very directly that pretty soon, he's going to suffer, greatly, and be rejected, and killed, and then live again. Peter in particular still doesn't get it and tries to argue with Jesus about what will happen to him, which doesn't go well. Which brings us to the mountain top, where Jesus decides the only way to make these guys understand that yes, he is the living God, and yes, he's going to die, but he will also return, is to show them. So we get what is sometimes referred to as a “preview” of his resurrection. Jesus is transfigured into divine glory, robed in blinding white, and joined by Moses and Elijah. God's voice cuts in from the heavens to really spell it out for them: “This is my Son, the Beloved, LISTEN TO HIM!”

I find this passage so funny, because it is so unbearably human. Peter has no idea what to say, what he's witnessing, much less what it means. All he can manage to say is “it's good for us to be here, let's build three tents.” Even when met Christ in all his stunning glory, even with the voice of God thundering around them, even with the prophets showing up to chat with him, these poor disciples just aren't getting it. Mark says a verse later that when they return from the mountain, the disciples are still wondering what on earth Jesus could be talking about all this “Son of Man risen from the dead” business. Even this, Jesus' last-ditch effort to try and find some way to make them understand what will happen, doesn't seem to get through. And frankly, most of why I find it funny is because I see myself so clearly in their inability to hear what is so plainly being spelled out to

them. Last spring, when coronavirus became a reality and my school cancelled in-person classes, I took my roommate, Emily, up on her offer to join her at her family's farm a few hours away, in rural Tennessee, until life returned to normal. I thought I'd stay for a week, maybe two, until things settled down, and then I'd go back to Atlanta, finish my degree, and get back to life as planned. I stayed for two months, during which the new calves on the farm grew cuter and cuter with each passing day. Being born and raised in the suburbs, with pretty much no experience with wild animals of any kind, Emily and I would walk down the long dirt driveway every day and I would try to coax the calves into coming close enough to the fence to let me pet them. And every day, they bolted in the other direction the second they heard us coming. No matter how many times Emily politely but firmly explained that the cows did not, and would not ever, want me to pet them, it just wasn't computing.

It didn't seem to matter how he tried to explain it, the disciples – at least by Mark's account – just couldn't seem to wrap their minds around the fact that the Messiah would suffer and die and live again. It just didn't fit with their understanding of what the Messiah would do and be, and they couldn't imagine a world in which Jesus would or could be killed, much less conquer death and come back. As Emily, my roommate at Columbia, reminded me just today, it felt impossible just a few months ago for us to imagine a group of armed insurrectionists violently storming our nation's capitol until it happened, just as we couldn't imagine the largest united movement for racial justice coming together in the middle of a pandemic until it happened. She said "I think we have to get creative and kind in order to start looking for where the resurrection might show up – or what Elijah and Moses are doing there when they cross our paths."

Friends, as we get ready to enter this season of penitence and preparation, of

somberness and mourning, we're asked to remind ourselves of the truth that the disciples can't bring themselves to recognize: that suffering and death are indeed a part of this story. Many of us need no such reminder this year. Sometimes it feels as though we can scarcely think of much else. But friends, we spend lent remembering and acknowledging Christ's suffering and death in preparation for the day where we are reminded that death never, ever gets the last word. And Christ gives us this glimpse into that glory and triumph here, if we can will ourselves to see and believe it.

In my preaching class at Columbia, we had a weekly exercise where we were asked to observe our surroundings in a place that was unfamiliar to us, and then write a "parable seed" about where we saw the kingdom of God around us. You could write your parable seed about something you noticed in an international grocery store, a park, a waiting room, you name it. You just had to be still and look around you long enough to see what was already there. It was a hard assignment for me, as someone who often doesn't recognize God's work until long after the fact. But after a while, I started noticing glimpses of God in real time: in the homegrown bouquet a congregant left on the communion table, in the way strangers at the store insisted the other person take the last navel orange, in the gentle reassuring squeeze of a child's hand. Like Peter, Jesus is smacking us upside the head with grace and glory and little miracles all the time, and, like Peter, we often times still don't put the pieces together until we're staring at our corkboards full of red thread much, much later. But regardless of when we come to recognize it, God's love is already alive, already quietly, persistently at work all over our lives. The resurrection arrives whether we know where to look for it or not.