

Rising from the Dead?

What this story teaches us is critical for our lives: We can see the glory of the risen Christ.



‘Is this Transfiguration story true?’ Consider I Peter 1:16-18. This event challenges the human mind because it is outside of our experience. Which is what makes it so important. The earliest hearers of this story wondered at its authenticity, or to put it into our current vocabulary, some said it was ‘fake news.’ Peter is writing, ‘No. This is the real deal! We were there and we saw it with our own eyes. If you believe me believe this event is real.’

Next, let’s set the context for it. Consider Mark 8:31-32. Jesus was the Messiah, the Promised One of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament.) He was supposed to be, they believed, a political hero, a force for societal change, the one who would transform their lives in tangible ways. Now he is saying he must be killed? ‘Stop talking like that Jesus!’, Peter tells him.

Now, when we look at Mark 9:2, and it says ‘after 6 days’, this is what we are to understand. The six days reference is Mark’s most historical date, adding to its reliability. These three men, Peter, James and John, the ‘inner circle’ or ‘kitchen cabinet’ for Jesus, have for 6 days been struggling with Jesus’ saying that

he would be killed. And they are not happy about it. They wonder about it, wondering if Jesus is in fact the Messiah.

Think about this, though, from Jesus' perspective too. He knew he was going to be killed because he was the Messiah, and once the authorities understood that they would want to destroy him. The Rebel Jesus. Destined for political assassination.

This is why the Transfiguration happened. Everyone there needed to know for sure that they had this right. Jesus needed the counsel of Moses and Elijah, he needed to affirmation of his Father's voice. But the disciples needed the Transfiguration even more. They needed to know that Jesus was the one they, that all of Israel, had in fact been waiting for.

(SLIDE) The disciples are given a view of Jesus in his glory as his clothes become 'dazzling white.' What the Disciples saw was not Christ as he now is in heaven, Calvin points out, but the vision 'gave them a taste of his boundless glory, such as they were able to comprehend....Christ appeared 'so far as they could endure the rays of his infinite brightness.'

(SLIDE) Next they see Elijah and Moses talking to Jesus. What a conversation that would have been to witness, right? But it was beyond their full

understanding then. (SLIDE) It baffled Peter into proposing a foolish response.

Let's set up camp!

Peter shows the limits of our understanding and perception of glory. Calvin writes, "...he foolishly dreamed that his present aspect, which was temporary, would endure forever. And what if the Kingdom of Christ had been confined in this way to the narrow limits of 20 or 30 feet? Where would have been the redemption of the whole world? Where would have been the communication eternal salvation?"

Is this not our error too? We think that the glory of Christ can be found only within certain walls, or cities, or even nations. How foolish we are, just like Peter. The glory of Jesus Christ will be displayed over not only all the earth but all the universe, and over however many other universes there are that our most brilliant minds and most powerful telescopes have not yet begun to discover.

No, what they beheld was not the full glory of Christ, which 'no eye has seen, no ear has heard', but rather, it was limited to 'beholding for a moment, as in a bright mirror, the divinity of (God's) Son.'" (Calvin)

(SLIDE) To bring the matter to a high point the voice of God enters the scene, from a cloud, which represents to people who know their Old Testament, the

presence of God, and he affirms, for Jesus, for the disciples, just who this Jesus is: God's loved Son to whom we must listen.

But it is also an affirmation for us, the Church of Jesus Christ. Which is why its truth is so important. This story affirms all that we need to know. That Jesus is the Son of God. That Jesus Christ fulfills the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah). Jesus died because he had to die. But that is not the end. And that is the most important thing. Jesus will rise again. He arose.

(SLIDE) This turns out to be the most troubling aspect of the whole day for the disciples. What does he mean that he is 'rising from the dead?'

They leave the mountain top experience in wonder not at what they saw of the glory of Jesus but at the focus on the mystery of rising again. They did not understand that this Messiah was not a political savior nor a military general. They saw Jesus in all his glory but could not conceive that this was but a preview of the real coming attraction, that Jesus needed to be a Suffering Servant Messiah before he could be a Risen Messiah.

They do not leave the mountain with questions about Jesus' changed appearance, nor the appearance of Moses and Elijah, nor the rebuke for wanting

to stay there, nor the command to keep this quiet. No, they question what in the world 'rise from the dead' means.

That is hard to comprehend. It is outside of our frame of reference. It is not fake news, but it is not easy news to absorb. The disciples saw and heard and still struggled to understand. We share their struggle, which is why we need to keep our eyes on the target of this story, what it is really trying to help us in faith comprehend.

Big Idea: Focus on life's glimpses of the glory of the Risen Jesus Christ, until that day when we too rise, when we shall behold him face to face.

(SLIDE) When we look with our spirit-eyes then we can see the light breaking over the dark mountain. This is the gift of faith. To see what the world cannot see. To believe what the world cannot believe. To see the glory of the Risen Christ as it starts to appear in the darkness, this is our source of hope.

You might think it is asking a bit much for God to ask us to believe all of this without the benefit of seeing the glory of the Transformed Jesus in this life. We do not get glimpses of the glory of Christ's transfigured, dazzling clothing nor (shining) face.

True. But we do have a mirror in which we see Christ at work, revealing his glory.

We can behold the face of Christ in the faces of those we live and work and play with. You can see it in the joy people show when they are volunteering to make someone life better. You can see the face of Jesus reflected in the faces of just ordinary people doing ordinary things, when they are mysteriously swept up in the moment.

I appreciate the way Frederick Buechner writes about seeing transformed faces in “(t)he face of a man walking his child in the park, of a woman picking peas in the garden, of sometimes even the unlikeliest person listening to a concert, say, or standing barefoot in the sand watching the waves roll in, or just having a beer at a Saturday baseball game in July. Every once and so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it’s almost beyond bearing.” (*Whistling in the Dark*, Harper San Francisco, 1988, p. 108).

But of course it’s not just in people’s faces that we behold Christ. We see his glory in the marvelous theatre to which God has given us a front row seat; we see it in glorious sunrises and sunsets, in a bunny’s nose, on a butterfly’s wings.

These are the place where 'we shall behold him, in all of his glory', until that day when we see him face to face, and the reality of what it means to rise from the dead will finally make perfect, beautiful sense to all who have listened to the voice of God in the cloud as they behold the light of the face of the Risen One.

