

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
March 2, 2025

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. ~Luke 9:28-36

This is an ancient story and it's among my favorites. A samurai warrior approached a revered master and said, "Master, I'd like to be a great warrior like you. How long is that going to take me?" The master said, "It will take you five years." The warrior thought to himself, "Five years? I really don't have five years." And so he said, "OK, how about if I were to double my sessions with you, my preparation and my practice. How long would it take me?" The master said, "It will take you ten years." The young man was perplexed but he tried again and said, "OK, well how about if I were to give up all else and focus on this goal night and day? How long will it take me?" The master said, "It will take you twenty years."

The young man was getting agitated and said, "Now forgive me but this doesn't make any sense to me. I keep offering to do more and more and each time I offer to do more, you tell me it's going to take me longer and longer to reach my goal. How can this be?" And the master said, "The answer is clear. With one eye so fixed on the goal, you have only one eye for the Way."

Only one eye left for The Way. The way, the path, the journey, the walk.

It's the heartbeat of this beautiful old story and it's the heartbeat of today's gospel, and really of Jesus' entire gospel proclamation to his followers, the Followers of the Way.

Follower of the Way. It always strikes my Fairfield University students as odd that we don't call the earliest followers of Jesus *Christians*. But we don't because *they didn't*. The term Christians didn't really develop until the second century. In Paul's time and right into the early second century the term was People of the Way. Followers of The Way.

People Of the Way. That was their name and identity for decades.

And that might strike us all as a bit curious. Not People of the Cross? Or People of the Resurrection? Or People of the Holy Gathering? No- they were known and they knew themselves as People of The Way.

And that tells us a little something about this Way that is so central to Jesus' teaching, to his sermon on the mount and on the plain, to his parables and stories. Jesus shows us, simply, the way to the Kingdom, to God's peaceable and eternal Kingdom. It's the heart of the prayer he taught us, which is a Kingdom prayer. A prayer for the way. You *alone*, my God, are holy, the prayer we know as *The Lord's Prayer* begins- I follow you alone. Form me, my God, in your life-giving Way; in the way of forgiveness and faithfulness and steadfastness, in service, and devotion. Jesus invites and exhorts and urges us again and again to join him on this life-giving and wondrous way.

And he does it again today. It's of course the heartbeat of today's beautiful yet bracing gospel story. This is one of those gospel stories that we feel deeply in part because. . .we can connect to the main character in a pretty direct way. Peter is on the mountaintop and, after giving up much and following Jesus, he seems to have arrived. He feels special, and we just might too. This is a peak experience and wants to hold onto it, maybe even to call it a day.

And yet we know in our heart of hearts that this sense of arrival, this feeling of power, is an illusion, a *false* kingdom calling to him. We know this because arrival and power and *feeling special* can call to us as well. It's an alluring call but, and we know this ultimately, it's a false one. I watched a very moving conversation recently between a senator and one of the oldest residents of his state. The senator's question was the one we all wanted to ask: *What's your secret?* The man he spoke with looked great in his tenth decade, was still active and enjoying his life palpably. The older man paused for a moment before answering and pondered his answer as if he'd never been asked before. And then finally, and softly and eloquently he said "I believe the secret is knowing simply this: that throughout our lives the top of one mountain is the bottom of the next, so you've got to keep climbing. Just keep climbing."

Yes indeed. This was his own beautiful and very affecting way of telling us that it's not about a destination but about the way, the way that continues on and in fact that never ends. For us as follower of the Way, that's particularly true because we know that indeed this Way, the Way of Jesus, never ends- that it continues even beyond our beautiful but limited number of decades here on this beautiful earth. We know that this Way never ends, that we grow eternally in God's love, that we are prepared and refined and made pure and whole evermore as citizens of the Kingdom, as vessels of God's mercy and love.

The top of one mountain is the bottom of the next, so you've got to keep climbing. Yes- and in fact today it is God in fact who delivers precisely this message on a literal mountain. Peter, James and John accompany Jesus up the mountain and it's quite an experience: Jesus's appearance is utterly transformed as, of all people, Moses and Elijah, the ultimate luminaries, mystically appear. We can understand why Peter wants to build three dwellings and hold on to this moment for ever. But the experience wasn't meant as an end point, an arrival. No, my friends, God says- you can't stay here. You're not meant to stay, even if it feels as if you've arrived. Rise up, my friends, and follow! Rise up, and resume your lives along the Way.

I was honored to lead a memorial for an elder in our own family, our matriarch, who also lived into in her tenth decade. I knew her as Aunt Alice, and there's no one else who's been more formative in my life. She and her family were parishioners as it turns out here at St. Thomas's when her children were young. There were eight family members offering remembrances, so I had to keep it brief, and I thought of one snapshot of a moment when she shared her own secret to a long and happy life. She had made dinner and had used special dishes, which she didn't do often. I offered to help clean up and in my haste I dropped an especially precious piece and it fell to the ground and shattered. I was horrified, of course. There was just a brief pause and then Aunt Alice looked at me and said: "It's OK. It was meant to be enjoyed. Nothing lasts forever." And in those words I learned her secret. *Hold lightly. Don't hold on to things that can hold on to you. Keep moving.*

Later, Jesus will say this another way, in these searing words: *Your very life is calling for you.* Yes! Our very lives demand us more than ever; we need both eyes fixed more than ever on the call that summons us; a call from those around us in great need, a need ever more acute and increasing; a call from a world that needs us more than ever; a call to stand for justice, to stand with truth; to stand clearly with any who would be scapegoated or dehumanized; a call to live the Way and that way alone that he showed us and to know that it is the way of hope, it is the way of light and of life, that it is the *Way of the Kingdom* made real by the one takes us up on a mountain, not to stay there forever, but to fill us *all the way full* with precisely that light

and life that he alone brings to make us ready, to equip for the next mountain. And we have many more to climb. I love these words, written by a 19th-Century Scottish priest who was also a poet:

*All life is a journey, not a home.
It is a road, not the country.
and those transient enjoyments which we have
though beautiful in their way
those incidental and evanescent pleasures of which we may sip are not home;
they are little inns only upon the roadside
where we are refreshed for a moment
that we may take again the pilgrim staff and journey on
seeking what is still before us:
the transfiguration that lies on ahead for the people of God. Amen.*