

From Matthew's gospel: Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 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."

Have you ever gotten a card in the mail that you weren't supposed to open yet? Maybe for Christmas, maybe it was for a birthday or another special day. Don't open until December 25<sup>th</sup>, someone wrote on the back. As a child, my great aunt drove me crazy with cards like this.

That is the story of our gospel reading today. It is a card that arrives early. On the front of the card is a beautiful picture, on top of a mountain where Jesus shines like the sun. Moses and Elijah are there. Peter and James and John are there. Open the card and there are different things written in it. "He was transfigured before them and they beheld his glory." That's one. They finally saw Jesus for who he really was. That's what Matthew wrote. "This is my beloved son. With him I am well pleased." That's the voice of God, so maybe you want to imagine it written in bold or underlined! That is the same thing that the voice of God said at Jesus' baptism. You might remember that

as you read the bold script. "This is my son. Listen to him." That's two. "Get up and do not be afraid." That's the final thing the card says on the inside. It's what Jesus said to his disciples after it was all over. After he became radiant and they saw Moses and Elijah and heard the voice of God in the cloud and they just didn't know what to do, Jesus said simply, "Get up and do not be afraid."

But there is another message, written on the outside of the card. Don't open until April 16<sup>th</sup>, it says. Do not open until Easter. "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." Someone gave us the card with a stunning vision of Jesus, revealed for who he really was and with words to make sense of it, and wrote a note on it that said don't open it, even though of course they knew we would. And they smiled. It will all make sense soon enough, come Easter.

That's the first thing I want to offer you about our Gospel reading today, that it is an Easter card that you are receiving a bit early, and it will all make sense soon enough. But if you look at it, you might notice something

else. It is almost like you and I aren't really meant to be there. It is a personal moment in which we have been included. Have you ever been in Starbucks or some place perfectly public only to realize that the couple next to you is fighting or breaking up and you grab your latte because you think, *I am not sure I am meant to be here*. Or you realize the guy next to you is pulling out a ring and you think to yourself, *they might appreciate a little privacy*. It seems like that is also true about the story of Jesus and his transfiguration, how he only took three disciples with him, and only later did the rest of us find out.

It's a personal moment, and yet the Bible always involves us in them. Sometimes I wonder why! Think about Adam and Eve running around the Garden of Eden naked and eating apple pie and hiding from God because they know what they have done. *Maybe I wasn't meant to see that*. Or Abraham up on top of the mountain with his son Isaac, knife in hand, ready to sacrifice him. I'm not sure I was meant to see that. David dancing naked before God. There are moments that are singular, sacred, really, that don't always need company. Today might be one of them.

But I think I know why. It seems to me that is often the case with spiritual things and experiences. They don't always need company because they are hard to explain, but they deserve company because they are uniquely holy. Sometimes we call them thin places, where things of this life meet with the spiritual realm, where the curtain is drawn back and we feel like we can reach across. Often being there is the only way to value or understand it.

I was at a Presbyterian church in New Zealand the night I knew for certain I was supposed to be a priest. For a moment all of life made sense, if only for a second. Then I had to come back and try to explain it to parishes and seminaries and discernment committees, and I probably sounded like I had lost my mind. I was on retreat years later in California and took part in what they called a prayer walk, two hours of silence, walking and praying. The first ninety minutes were excruciating and I thought I should have signed up for a prayer nap instead. And then it happened. God showed up. And I was relieved. I was thrilled. And I went back and tried to explain it to the

group, and guess what. I couldn't. I stumbled onto a thin place and there weren't words.

Well it happened here again a couple of weeks ago. It was the first time we were supposed to baptize John. It was really almost perfect, only one crucial thing missing! I wish you could have been here, John, you would have loved it. There was so much love, so much fidelity. And I heard it again and again from people saying how wonderful it was. They would stop and pause. They ... would sigh in that wonderful way that you do when you have stumbled onto something holy and something has changed and you just don't have the words to describe it.

Well my friends, we are in good company. It happened to Jesus. It happened for him and in front of his disciples, and even Moses and Elijah showed up. This was the thin place in Jesus' life, and we are invited in. And there is a reason that we are invited into this sacred and personal space, because words alone don't explain it. But there is a reason that the card says do not open until Easter, because the transfiguration inaugurates Jesus' journey to

Jerusalem and to his death. If you ever thought that thin places were just blissful spaces with bunnies and rainbows, think again. It had become perfectly apparent to Jesus that he was headed to Jerusalem, where he would be betrayed and killed and tossed out like garbage. But that wouldn't be the end of his story. And for just a minute, the glory of God that lived in him shone out to give comfort and strength to him and those he loved who would share with him in this holy expedition. God wasn't going to fix this, but God would set it right.

I don't know if you find those to be comforting words: God isn't going to fix this, but God will set it right. It seems to me that was part of the message God spoke on the mount of the transfiguration. *This is my beloved son. With him I am well pleased. And I am not going to fix this, but I am going to set it right.* That's why the card says, don't open until Easter. There in the early morning light, with the stone rolled away and hope filling the air and creation becoming new, you understand why God wasn't content to fix things, but instead to set them right. That is

the way of resurrection. It doesn't fix things; it sets them right. And it doesn't always immediately make sense.

So today as we baptize John, I will ask you if you believe in the resurrection of the dead. But let me add this question to it. Do you believe in the resurrection of the living? Do you believe that it is possible for something of the glory of God to come into our midst and tear back the curtain and even, just for a passing moment, to set things right in a way we may not yet be able to understand?

"Get up and do not be afraid," Jesus says to his friends when it is over. Literally he says "be raised up" and do not be afraid. Do you recognize those words? You will! Those are the same words the Angel of the Lord says on Easter morning when the disciples ask where Jesus' body is. "Do not be afraid. He has been raised up." God was not content to fix this. God was bent on setting this right!

There was an article I came across recently that began with the words, "Now that I have cancer, it's touching time." A Presbyterian minister who was diagnosed with

cancer, who noticed his sickness seemed to allow people permission to touch him, wrote it. "It's funny that a broken body should somehow be more touchable than one that's "whole." Lifelong friends who usually shook hands started hugging him.

He made the point that in the gospels there is only one story about Jesus being touched while he was alive. This isn't to say that he never touched people or vice versa, but this minister observed that the one time in life someone reached out to touch Jesus was to betray him with a kiss... that is, until the resurrection narratives begin. There, he notes, the Easter appearances include lots of touching. Only after the awful time of crucifixion, resurrection brings this new experience of Jesus.

He concludes the article, "We seem able to touch one another in our brokenness in ways that we never can in wholeness. God likes to use broken things--broken flasks, broken bread, broken bodies, even relationships that are broken with a kiss. My body and spirit have been broken by cancer. That means it's OK to touch me. I'm thankful."

Matthew's gospel says that when the time of Jesus' glory was over, Jesus came down and touched his friends. "Do not be afraid," he said. "Instead be raised up." It will all make more sense when Easter is here.