

Sermon by Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
Transfiguration of the Lord  
February 10, 2002

**Up the Mountain and Down Again**  
**Matthew 17:1-9**

Here we are, you and I, following Jesus.

We've been following along the rugged terrain of discipleship,  
from the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida to Caesarea Phillipi,  
even as far as Pittsburgh, and up into the hills north of the city.

We have shared in Jesus' work along the way, and we've seen some encouraging things...

- ...desperate people in Pittsburgh have been given food to eat  
and a roof over their heads.
- ...poor families in West Virginia get the message that God cares about them  
in practical ways.
- ...people facing crisis in their lives have found Christian friends  
to support them with prayer
- ...children prance around the church building, sing in a choir,  
gather in a circle to learn a Bible story  
all the time absorbing the good news of God's love for them.

These are the reasons we keep following Jesus – these reflections of God's kingdom.

But every now and then Jesus will say the most disturbing things,  
when he's not healing, and comforting, and feeding the multitudes.

His voice becomes grave, and speaks of suffering and death – his death!  
And he speaks of resurrection, which we *really* don't understand.

We don't understand why any of this has to be part of discipleship.

Doesn't Jesus know that talking about such things will scare off other potential followers  
who could really help our ministry?

Perhaps if we just ignore him on this point, and focus on the positive,  
then this talk of death won't get out of hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

And now, just today, Jesus has paid us a high honor for our loyal following.

We've been chosen to go with him on a special trip.

You and I and Peter have been chosen to go.

(We always did think Jesus liked us best, now it seems pretty obvious.)

So we set out together on our excursion and begin to travel away from our homes,  
away from the life of the city, away from the responsibilities of our households.

As we walk, we come to the foot of a mountain and begin to climb,

and as we go up we can feel the cares of our world slipping away behind us...

...the morning rush to get ready and out the door on time

...that pile of "Important Tax Documents" unopened on the desk

...the troubling headlines on the front page of the paper

...the world, plagued with violence and corruption and disintegration...  
All of these concerns grow more and more distant, as if Jesus has somehow  
taken care of them for us.  
And you and Peter and I are feeling good, our spirits are free upon on this mountain,  
the fellowship with kindred spirits is refreshing  
and we're glad to be so close to Jesus.  
I say to you, "This must be what discipleship is all about.  
This kind of peaceful feeling, this enjoyment of being with the Master  
away from the cares of the world."

\* \* \* \* \*

Suddenly Peter, who is a few paces ahead of us, stops dead in his tracks,  
and stares up the path of the mountain.  
While we've been enjoying ourselves, Jesus has moved ahead of us.  
He's turned around, now, facing us, and we all come to a stop.  
Something tells us not to take another step forward or else we'd be walking  
on holy ground.  
Jesus clothes are no longer dingy as they were when we began our journey,  
and the dust that was in his beard seems to have been washed away.  
His hair is glistening, but it's more than just the sunlight.  
His whole body is glowing with a light that is now pouring from his body.  
Everything around him seems dull and gray compared to his light.  
He becomes brighter and brighter until his clothes are a dazzling white.  
It's as if the light from his body enters into your body  
and illumines the darkest corners of your soul.  
You begin to see yourself, back at home, and back at work,  
speaking words to your family, and to co-workers,  
words that get their attention, that cause them really to listen.  
Then you begin to see a memory from your past, a face that haunts you  
and you feel the pain of past hurt, and regret, and guilt,  
but the light coming from Jesus body surrounds you;  
even the darkness of that shame  
cannot overcome Jesus' light.

Then there something moves on the mountain beside Jesus;  
there are two figures, one to his right, one to his left.  
They come out of the shadows and into the light,  
and though you and I have never met them face to face,  
we recognize them.  
One is Moses, the law-giver.  
The one who brought the commandments of God down from the mountain,  
and established a righteous way of life for the people of God.  
The one who has watched us depart from that righteous way  
and stumble into foolishness.  
And the other is Elijah, the prophet of God,  
whose cry of justice has called out for centuries to God's people  
calling us to return to the way of God's righteousness.

Moses and Elijah begin to talk to Jesus  
but you don't hear what they are saying.  
You look over at Peter and he looks completely at peace,  
as if he could stay here forever.  
I'm thinking this must be the ultimate experience of faith,  
to be with Jesus up on the mountaintop,  
away from the messiness of life in the city,  
to be caught up in the glory of heaven,  
so that even our darkest places can be faced without fear.  
I am about to suggest staying up here with Jesus, up on the mountain,  
but as usual, Peter beats me to it...  
He wants to build three dwellings – one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah.  
And I'm glad I didn't speak up after all, because Peter's words sound foolish,  
out of place – anxious babbling in the presence of the holy.  
He doesn't even have time to finish his sentence  
when suddenly a cloud begins to form overhead,  
a cloud as brilliant as the light that emanates from Jesus body.  
Peter, who is now terrified, steps back and falls to the ground.  
Now you are out in front  
and there is nothing to separate you from Jesus and the cloud.  
And from the brilliance of the cloud a voice begins to speak,  
a voice that sounds both angry and compassionate, dangerous and good,  
“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.  
Listen to him!”

These are more than words you are hearing, but a Word like no other,  
a Word that is prior to all other words  
a Word that has the power to fashion worlds, or destroy them at a whim.  
a Word that can bring perfect order to chaos, in the blink of an eye  
a Word that silences the babbling of ages with a final decree of truth  
a Word that will not fail to accomplish its purpose  
but will relentlessly pursue whom it loves until that one is found.

\* \* \* \* \*

After what seems like an eternity, you realize that all has become quiet.  
Your face is buried in the cool earth where you buried it  
almost involuntarily, when the cloud came over.  
Now you feel a hand on your shoulder, and you hear a gentle voice, almost whispering,  
“Rise up. Don't be afraid.”  
Jesus is standing there beside you, alone, in dingy clothes and dusty beard.  
Where did Moses and Elijah go? Did they disappear?  
Or does Jesus strangely resemble them both, the law-giver and the prophet?

No one is babbling now. No one struggling to control the moment,  
or Jesus, or trying to figure him out, or make him be something he's not.  
Everyone is silent, as those who have heard the voice of God ought to be  
for a while.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jesus walks past us and begins to go back down the mountain.

We figure this means we can't stay – not that any of us are crazy about staying  
after what just happened. It was a little close for all of us.

As he walks past us Jesus says we shouldn't tell anyone about this.

"Tell no one," he says, " until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Of course, we weren't planning on telling anyone anyway. Who'd believe us?

Anyone in their right minds would think we were insane.

And we're not so sure they wouldn't be right

because none of us understand what just happened, or why it happened;  
and we will not understand until the day we hear the report of the women  
running back from the tomb, telling of a stone rolled back,  
and a messenger in dazzling white apparel,  
saying that Jesus is not here, but has been raised.

But for now I think we're getting the picture...

Jesus means us to go back to the towns and the cities, back to the neighborhoods  
to live among the people

who have family arguments  
and pains in their chests  
who cry muffled tears at the graveside  
and who worry about what tomorrow will bring.

Jesus means for us to live among them,

knowing what we now know,  
having heard what we have now heard –  
this Word, THE Word.

Jesus means for us to go back a speak differently, and to act differently  
as those who walk in the light of the Son of God.

So you begin to see yourself back in your life

getting ready in the morning  
looking at the headlines in the Post Gazette  
going out to drive, and walk, and eat, and live among people hungry for hope  
and to know what you know about Jesus.  
"This is my Son...Listen to him"

And there stands Jesus beside you,

in his dingy clothes and dusty beard;  
but the twinkle in his eye and the smile on his face  
sheds new light on everything.

So we walk together

to the bottom of the mountain.

And with Jesus a few paces ahead, we turn our faces toward home,  
and follow.