



“Who Is This?”

A Sermon Based on Luke 9:28-36
Delivered on Sunday, March 3rd, 2019
At the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
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The day had been a long one for Jesus and the disciples. Jesus had been teaching crowds early in his ministry, when at the end of the day he said, “Let’s go to the other side of the lake.” As Mark remembers it, soon after they set out in the boats, a storm blew in across the lake. Being fishermen, the disciples certainly had seen storms on the lake before, but this one was a bad one.

With the sails shredded and the masts cracked or broken and with the waves pounding the hull and washing across the decks, they were in danger of foundering. They were doing all that they knew to do, when all of a sudden they noticed that Jesus was lying in the stern of the boat sleeping like a baby. Amazed at the sight, and probably wanting every hand to help save the boat, they woke him up. “Teacher, do you not care if we die?” You know how it is to be awakened by someone who is put out with you and who thinks it’s past time to get up. That is how they awakened Jesus. It was a rude awakening.

So Jesus, most likely now put out for being awakened, got up and yelled at the storm, “Knock it off! Be still and give me some peace!” And the storm obeyed. The wind stopped, the waves calmed and the lake became as still as a mill pond.

Jesus, satisfied, turned to the bewildered disciples and deadpanned, “Why are you afraid? Do you have no faith at all?” I suspect he then walked back to the stern of the boat, laid down again and went back to sleep.

The open-mouthed disciples, dripping wet, hearts still pounding, looked at one another in amazement and said, "Who is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him?" Who is this?

Luke tells us that later in the ministry of Jesus, Herod began to hear of the miraculous things Jesus was doing and saying. Rumors abounded. Some said that this new teacher was John the Baptist risen from the dead. Others were saying that it must be Elijah, who the prophets said would return. Herod wanted to know and he said, "John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?" Who is this?

Some time ago, a friend of mine told me about something that happened in the book discussion group of which she is part. At one of the meetings, discussion turned briefly to matters of faith. One of the materialists, although I doubt she would call herself that, put this question to my friend: "How can you have faith? Why do you believe?" My friend was not able to answer very well, and so the materialist summed up the matter by saying, "Well, if you can't justify it, you shouldn't do it."

As my friend spoke of this exchange, I smiled when she repeated the other person had said. I was thinking how ironic such thinking is. For it is Christianity that is so often labeled dogmatic or oppressive because of what our faith suggests one would do well to believe. Actually, our faith is just the opposite. It opens up a universe of possibility for the believer.

What is more dogmatic? A faith that allows for the possibility of miracles and mysteries too complex for our minds to understand, or a philosophy which says that if it can't be measured, or if it can't be repeated by experiment, then it is not to be trusted or believed? One says miracles cannot happen. The other playfully asks, "What if they can and do happen?" You tell me which is the more confining of reality. Which is more oppressive?

My friend, disappointed in herself that she was unable to give a better defense for her faith looked at me and asked, "What should I have said?" I said that the best response to such a question is another question. I would ask, "Why

fall in love?" What good does it do anyone to be in love? How can any of us justify it?

The answer, of course, is that love cannot be justified. It just happens, and a wonderful happening it is. There is nothing practical about writing poems to the beloved, or in sending flowers or chocolates. There is no real way that the emotion can be measured, or reproduced in some blasted laboratory or controlled setting. The experience justifies itself. And I have yet to encounter anyone who said that they were at all troubled or inhibited by the fact that love eludes the strict confines of scientific materialism.

We all know that the questions "Why be in love or what good does it do?" are the wrong questions altogether. The right question is "What is it like?" Or "Who is it that loves you?" And what you find yourself doing is, yes, giving some description of the person or the experience, but at bottom you tell stories about it or about the person. Only stories do what is mysterious justice. Only stories or art can articulate what is beyond measure or experiment or explanation.

That is why when people asked the disciples about Jesus, and the Good News he came to embody and proclaim, They told stories. Our Gospels are those stories. What he looked like, or the quality of his voice, what kind of clothes he wore, or any other concrete particulars were simply secondary to the disciples. What mattered was their experience of those days. And in order to say who Jesus is, they had to allow for mystery.

Well did Hamlet tell Horatio that "There are more things in heaven and earth,...than are dreamt of in your philosophy." The Gospels are honest in telling us that there was more that happened than we can know or fully comprehend. And we allow ourselves to be oppressed when we let some materialist worldview tell us what is possible, rather than allowing the Gospels to open our eyes to the mysteries of God and creation.

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The disciples asked, "Who is this?" Herod asked, "Who is this?" And we ask, "Who is this?" The story of what happened that night that Jesus was transfigured before the sleepy disciples tells us who Jesus is. There is no

justifying our belief in this wonderful story, just as there is no justifying being in love. But if you really want to know who Jesus is, then Luke is more than happy to tell you about him.

Saint Anselm wrote that faith seeks understanding. Our culture, since the Enlightenment, has turned this around, suggesting that understanding seeks faith. And thus you have so many today who have what they think is an understanding of the world, and they go about looking for a faith that matches up with their understanding. Such a faith, as a matter of course, ends up being a projection of their own previously held opinions. rather than opening up the world to them. Such individualism collapses the world in upon them.

I believe Anselm knew whereof he spoke. We do well to approach the world in faith, and then allow our faith to help us understand. Peter learns this vividly on the mountain.

Seeing the mystery that unfolds before him, he is overcome and is filled with praise and wants to build three tents or tabernacles for each of the glorious figures before him. He does not understand what he is saying. He wants in some way to encapsulate the experience, but the voice from the cloud silences them all. and the voice tells them to listen to Jesus. Only later do they understand that although they may not be able to bottle the Transfiguration, they can respond to it. And they do.

For awhile, until after the Resurrection, they are silent about the whole event. How could they not be silent? What would they say? Who was ready to hear? So they are silent until their faith deepened their understanding.

When the time came for them to speak, what did they say about who Jesus is? They said that he is one who prayed. He prayed and the world changed. Jesus is one who called and loved the disciples. He is one who spoke and acted in such a way that they could see God. He is one in the line of Moses and Elijah, but he is so much greater than they were. He is one who in the midst of his transfiguration faced the suffering that lay before him in Jerusalem, and he remained faithful. He came down from the mountain and completed the journey.

He is one whom death could not hold. And he is one who promised his disciples that death would not hold them either. That is what they said about him.

That night, they saw his glory and heard the voice of God. At this point in Luke's story, Jesus and the disciples are on the way into the abyss of Jesus' passion. But on the way, Peter, James and John catch a glimpse of Jesus glorified. Later, after the horror of that last week, after the Resurrection, they would look back on that night on the mountain, and they would understand better who Jesus is.

They passed the story on to us, hoping and praying, that we will understand better as well. They told the story that we might respond and listen to him. As we prepare to enter the Lenten season, let us, with the apostles, listen to our Lord, and respond with lives of beautiful faithfulness. Amen.