

# Looking Around

Mark 9:2-9

Emily Peck-McClain  
Transfiguration Sunday  
February 26, 2006

[Mark 9:2-9, "Looking Around," Emily Peck-McClain, Sunday, February 26, 2006]

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. That word is like another Greek word, metamorphosis. What the Gospel describes is not just a change, but also an event of epiphany, showing Christ for who he is—a holy person in the company of others like him, namely Elijah and Moses. In this passage from Mark, Jesus takes a few of his friends with him to the top of a mountain. Jesus is then transfigured before them. All of the sudden, he is wearing white clothes—brighter than any amount of Clorox could possibly get them, and he begins talking with Elijah and Moses.

The next two verses state the obvious: In reaction to what could only be the most surprising of all events, Peter mumbles out something a little ridiculous, and the Bible explains that he only said this because they were all terrified. Other translations will say that they were "exceedingly afraid". No joke! The disciples do exactly what I would do—freak out a little. Peter at least finds his voice even if he does say precisely the wrong thing. In response, more supernatural craziness happens; a cloud overshadows them, a voice booms from this cloud, and then it all disappears and only Jesus is left, presumably not wearing dazzling white clothes anymore.

Do you ever wish that you could have just kept your mouth shut? If you're like me, you might be making a list in your head about now, about all the times you put your foot directly into your mouth. Ah, there are so many! It certainly helps that Peter sets an example for us. I mean, the boy stuck his foot in his mouth and Jesus built his church using him as a cornerstone anyway. Thank God for second (and third and fourth and fifth chances)! But what is it that makes Peter's comment particularly thoughtless? If you look at it the way Peter may have, two heavenly visions have just joined your teacher in some sort of supernatural phenomenon. Wouldn't it be nice for them to have homes here on the mountain so they can stick around forever? See, he's just being hospitable! Mark, however, lets us know that Peter's comment wasn't a nice option for the three by apologizing on behalf of Peter: He said this because he was exceedingly afraid. Forgive him, will you?

The reason Mark needs to apologize for Peter is because Peter has suggested that a mystical experience, supernatural, outside of the natural world, can be harnessed and made to stay on earth, given dwelling places like every natural ordinary thing around us. Instead of living in the moment and basking in the privilege of this mountaintop experience, Peter rushes to make it permanent. My big brother, who happens to be here today, thus my need to put him into this sermon, picks on me for taking pictures whenever I go somewhere. He says he'd rather live life than look at every experience he has through a camera lens. Ah, but this way you get to look back on it later and remember it! I feel confident in saying that at least in this instance, I'm just

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like Peter. Oh, something cool is happening, great; take a picture of it! Keep it here! On the other hand: Why not just sit back and experience it? Why not live it, witness it, and then move on?

We talk about mountaintop experiences as being moments in our lives when we feel closest to God, most in touch with the divine. It's a metaphor that works particularly well for me, being from the mountains. My church in Virginia had Easter sunrise services on the top of a mountain on the Appalachian Trail. We would meet at the church in the dark and drive to the trail head and hike up. As we got to the top, the sun would be just starting to rise; the sky would turn a little bluer and less dark. The stars would fade, and the clouds would pick up traces of pink and yellow as the sun rose to meet us at the dawn of the morning of resurrection. Beautiful. A bunch of mountain Methodists in their sweatshirts greeting the sun with singing and praying. Jesus is called the light of the world, something we focus on at the beginning of our church year during Advent. The dazzle of the Transfiguration reminds us of this, too. We meet Jesus on the mountaintop and we bask in his light.

We are lucky people if we can think of mountaintop experiences as happening in the life of our church community. Although we lack literal mountains here in Manhattan, I have had equally as moving, wonderful mountaintop experiences with you. Big church family Thanksgiving dinners at Quinipet. Ribbon-cutting downstairs this past June. Watching our children and youth grow. Being challenged in the Young Adult Bible study class. Having dinner just this past Friday night with my Dinners for 8 group.

In a city of tall buildings and hard pavement, we are surrounded with mountaintop moments of closeness with God and interconnectedness in this family of faith. We feel these mountaintop moments every Sunday morning as we gather here in the presence of our neighbors to meet the Spirit of God, pray together, and hear Scripture together. I feel them every Sunday. I look forward to Sundays all week. I look forward to saying good morning to you all. I look forward to the time in the service when the space opens up to share joys and concerns. I look forward to sharing the peace of Christ with you. I look forward to hanging out with the teenagers after church. Sundays are full of mountaintop moments. They are what make the rest of the week fall into place. These experiences serve us well—they recharge us & rejuvenate our spirits.

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The mountaintop experience in this morning's text is not quite as commonplace as the ones I've been talking about. When we look at the transfiguration story, we see Peter's reaction to the astounding moment of connectedness with God by suggesting that it remain there forever. How do you react and respond to your mountaintop experiences? Of course we want them to last forever! I would love to feel Sunday all week long. I would love to stay out at Quinipet with you all year long.

When we feel connected to God, with our feet planted on God's earth, surrounded by God's lovely people, it is natural to respond as Peter does. We may or may not have the excuse of feeling terrified. Because it can certainly be awesome to truly feel the presence of God and can even be a little frightening sometimes. But the point is the same for both Peter and us—you cannot contain these experiences or take a picture and make it last. Why? Why can't we just stay on top of the mountain, blissfully witnessing God?

This is where the real transformation of Transfiguration Sunday can take flight. This is the excitement of the text. We read, "Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus." This moment of epiphany, of disclosing who Jesus is, the Son of God, the Beloved, the light of the world, is followed by the end of the terrifying, supernatural phenomenon. The three disciples look around and see no one but Jesus.

The purpose of mountaintop experiences is to reveal something to you and then send you off the mountaintop and into the valley below with that new revelation in your awareness. Your challenge is to do something with that new experience, with that revelation of who Jesus is. You get a taste of transfiguration—transformation, reformation, revolution—so that you can be an agent of change in the valley you return to. Transfiguration is about taking the light you've seen on the mountaintop into your daily life and into the lives of those around you.

Let's take this down to earth a little more. Sunday mornings are here for you to have a safe place to meet with God and your neighbor in worship. There is transfiguration happening in this room. By the grace of God, there are moments of revelation within these walls. Glimpses of Christ—a whole hour in the company of the Beloved. But you can't return to it all the time like some scene from Groundhog Day, a movie when the main character gets stuck on Groundhog Day and wakes up every morning to the same day over and over again. You have to get up at the end of the service and

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step outside these doors, back into the cold and wind, back to your jobs and apartments, back to the real work of Gospel—loving the unloved, sheltering the homeless, standing up for the poor and oppressed, and doing it all because of the mountaintop revelation that God has given you. The mountaintop exists so that you can come down with renewed energy and rejuvenated spirit to do the work of faith in the valley.

The best part of it is that Jesus doesn't leave his disciples when that strange experience is over. Mark tells us that they looked around and saw no one else there but Jesus. His dazzling white clothes may not have stuck around, but he did. For us, this means that when we do leave our mountaintop moments—our sanctuaries, our places of intimate connection with God—when we look around, we see no one else but Jesus. I wonder what it would feel like if everyone we passed on the subway reminded us of Jesus. What would happen if everyone we saw is no one but Jesus? Would we act differently? Would we take different action? More action? If we remember to look around when we're not on top of the mountain, we will see Jesus.

I couldn't help but think of my father when I was preparing this sermon, and I felt so inspired by the idea of what it would mean to look around and see Jesus in our streets and homes and schools. My dad, as you may know, is Jewish. A very sweet, very old patient of his grew up as a Baptist missionary in Brazil. She wrote a devotional, inspirational book a few years ago and joyfully gave a copy of it to my dad. In it she wrote, "My doctor doesn't understand me when I tell him this, but I see Jesus in him. That's right, I see Jesus in my Jewish doctor." This is proof, she goes on to reason, that because Jesus was Jewish, it makes sense that my father would see the family resemblance and become a Christian.

Although her sentiment really was very sweet, this is not the kind of looking around I am talking about. I am not talking about loving people because you have to—because they might be Jesus in disguise. And I am not saying that everyone is secretly a Christian or should be. What I am saying is that because we are people who have had connection moments with God, we are able to take that connection off the mountaintop and into the streets where it can make this world a more just and loving and merciful place. There is a whole world out there, beginning right there on our church steps, right beyond our doors, that we need to look at and really see. There is a whole world waiting to be transformed as a result of what we know from Transfiguration Sunday.

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It is easy to think of ways this world has changed in the past. It is easy to see how our country and our city have changed. Some change is wonderful; some is not. Whichever it is, think about all that has changed. Manhattan was a place where Native Americans lived before white immigrants turned it into farmland and gradually into the city we live in now. The United States was a slaveholding country, then a segregated country, then a country in the midst of a civil rights movement that is still hard at work making progress towards education about and eliminating racism.

And so I have this question to ask you: "How will you work to transform this world as a natural effect of your mountaintop experience with the Holy?" Every step toward that transformation matters: Every little change made. Every time you greet a homeless person with dignity and respect. Every time you speak up for someone being wronged. Every time you hug a child. Every time you say, "I love you." Every time you are a peaceful presence in the midst of a warring country. What can you do today? How will you transform this world because you've been here for the transfiguration?