

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany – Epiphany being that season that sits between the arrival of the Magi to worship the Christ child, twelve days after Christmas, and the beginning of Lent. The season where we focus on ways in which the reign of God was manifest in Jesus. The ways he showed us and told us what that reign looks like.

Today we get one last “hit” of disclosure before entering the wilderness three days from now on Ash Wednesday. And the hit is a really big one – it’s the Transfiguration – an event recorded in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke).

Yes, there are small differences between the three accounts, but on the essentials of this extraordinary episode they agree: Jesus takes his three closest friends up onto a mountain; while they are there, Jesus’ face changes, his clothes become radiant, and he is joined in conversation by two long dead prophets; Peter blurts out something silly about a building project; and a cloud descends on all of them, out of which they hear a voice claiming Jesus as the beloved, chosen son and telling them to listen to him. Later they go back down the mountain, where the disciples seem to be as ineffectual as ever and a frustrated Jesus again saves the day. In other words, after all that, it seems, not much has changed.

So what’s with the Transfiguration, then? What really happened there?

Turns out, it’s not terribly clear. “Interpreters are far from a consensus as to its historical roots”, notes New Testament scholar Alan Culpepper in the New Interpreters’ Bible Commentary. He continues, “Does the transfiguration report a mysterious event or vision during the ministry of Jesus? Is it a post-resurrection appearance that has been placed back in the ministry (which might explain why not much seems to change)? Or is it entirely the creation of the early church to affirm its confession of Jesus as the exalted Lord?”

I’m inclined to dismiss that last possibility. Conspiracy theories, on the whole, though not entirely implausible, are usually a bit of a stretch. Particularly ones that involve making something up out of whole cloth. But the second one; this idea that a Lucan editor might have played fast and loose with the chronology of events to foreshadow the astonishing ending of the story, by inserting, at a critical juncture, something that actually happened later? Dropping this vision of Jesus in glory back between two predictions of his suffering and death, right after Peter confesses he’s the Messiah, and just before he “turns his face to Jerusalem” where the cross is waiting? Hmmm.

Maybe we *can* imagine such an editorial strategy; designed, perhaps, to help later disciples keep on keeping on when things get really awful. A strategy that encouraged them to embrace a “future” reality which in truth was already present. A momentary lifting of the veil that enables us all to persevere through territory that is often difficult.

Because we know: we have seen and we have heard, that the true abiding in God that is eternal life is both with us now and awaiting us in the future...

In February of 2017, I took a road trip with my traveling buddy Betsy. This wasn't our first – the year before, she helped me drive my little Miata cross country, from Pennsylvania to Los Angeles. Our route took us first up the Owens Valley to Lone Pine, where we visited the World War II Japanese internment camp at Manzanar; then crossed over to Death Valley. From there we dropped back down to Needles and turned east.

I remember the day was particularly bright and chilly as we drove along route 89A, which runs across western Arizona toward Sedona. Some of you may know this road – it winds through the mountains, then eventually drops down past Jerome, a once bustling mining town perched precariously on the mountainside, and into the tiny village of Clarkdale below.

I remember, vividly, how as the miles slipped by, the gorgeous landscape into which we were heading would come in and out of view. Beginning high up, the striations in the buttes beyond Sedona were soft, muted purples and the valley floor far below was bathed in warm golden light. Part way down, when we pulled over at a turnout, the angle had shifted; the colors had changed a bit, and some features of the land had become more prominent. And when we stopped again, further down, to take more photos, it was still the same incredible landscape, yet again different. The frame through which we were seeing it had moved. And so had the sun.

As I reflected this past week on this notion that the Transfiguration might actually be a post resurrection appearance that has been moved back into the narrative of Jesus' life and ministry, it occurred to me that this idea that Jesus' followers (and that includes you and me) might from time to time, in the narratives that are our lives, have experiences that place us squarely in the reality of resurrection – both his and ours, that idea is really fascinating.

The bases for the academic hypothesis for “misplacement” (that's what they call it in the commentaries) are the striking elements that the Transfiguration shares with post-resurrection events reported in Matthew and the book of Acts – including Jesus' ascension, and Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus.

Much like the way in which the glorious future came in and out of view from Route 89A, that shining reality of life rising from death, of God's taking the worst that can befall us, and the worst that we can do to one another, God's taking that and bringing forth from it healing and hope and possibility appears and reappears to us. Because that is who God is and has always been. Because that is what God is doing, and will do eternally.

Now “mountaintop experiences” are one of the ways we see the glory of resurrection. For me, a moment of shimmering disclosure was when, a few years after the ending of a long marriage, a cross country move, both my parents’ deaths, and my becoming part of this community, I stood in awe at the rim of the Grand Canyon, blown away by the new life that had found me. Blown away by the reality of resurrection.

But there are also smaller stories – the “coming in and out of view” stories of the winding road, when in the aftermath of failure or loss, or two years of living with a global pandemic, we catch glimpses of new life somehow always emerging. In small, tender moments of healing. And the beginnings of hope. Hope for reunion, and that “more” of peace and joy that is both present and future.

I imagine that if you and I think about it, we will realize that indeed we actually have experienced or heard about a “misplaced resurrection story” or two. Just yesterday morning I had a conversation with someone who lost their beloved awhile ago, who that very day, or maybe it was the day before, had this...thing happen...that was...well, all I can say is, Alleluia, Christ is risen. Resurrection is real. There’s life beyond this one. God keeps bringing life out of death. To hear that, to know that, gives me, and I hope all of you, hope for the road ahead. Which is such a blessing.

And so as we ready ourselves to enter into Lent; that season in which we face squarely the worst that can happen and the worst that we can do to one another, when we rehearse what did happen to Jesus of Nazareth challenged the wrong people and spoke truths that were too terrifying to bear, don’t be surprised if somewhere along that winding road that leads to the cross, long before we get to the other side of it, visions and experiences of that glorious resurrection unexpectedly come into view.

Notice them, and cherish them: You are being given a foretaste of that glory that is beyond our imagining that lies ahead.