

“Climb”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
Last Sunday after the Epiphany – 25 & 26 February 2017  
Matthew 17:1-9

A Norwegian, an American, a Yorkshireman, and a Swiss woman walked into a bar. I know it sounds like the start of a bad joke, but it actually happened in March 1996 in the town of Sterling, Scotland. A friend owed me five pounds, and I intended to drink it.

Hours earlier, we’d stopped by the side of the road, intent on climbing a small mountain draped in snow, for no particular reason. Our Swiss friend refused to join us. “That’s no mountain worth my time,” she scoffed. I guess that’s how you feel when you live in the Alps.

It was foggy, and we struggled to find the summit. Visibility seemed to worsen with every step upward, but what we could see was beautiful. The wind had carved the snow, sculpted out crevices and ripples underneath the hard crust on the surface. The forms looked like cresting waves, and it was incredibly quiet, as if the fog sound-proofed the mountain. When we stopped to catch our breath and stood still, it was utterly silent, a silence deeper than any I’ve experienced before or since.

Then from the mist a figure descended: tall and lithe, with a confident, elegant stride. Owen asked, “Who do you suppose that is?” Squinting hard, I replied, “A Dutchman.” “You don’t know that!” “A fiver says I do.” “Done.” Once he got close enough, we peppered him with questions, like “Did you find the peak?” “No, too much fog.” And “Where’re you from?” and as you might have guessed, he said, “The Netherlands.” To this day, I have no idea how I knew. Owen called it pure luck. I claimed it was keen deductive skills. The truth probably lies somewhere in between.

On a different mountain, much longer ago and very far away from the Scottish highlands, four Judeans, with Jesus in the lead, found their summit. They didn't climb on a whim, though Peter and James and John probably had no clue why Jesus chose to make the ascent or why he took them with him. Perhaps they hoped for some solitude to pray, but it doesn't appear they had time for that, for when they reached the top, a blinding whiteness, like bright sun on pure snow, overwhelmed them, and the source of this searing light was Jesus transfigured.

The scene so resembled the story of Moses on Mount Sinai receiving the Law from God that it's hard to imagine they wouldn't have connected the dots, and if they needed further help, Moses and the prophet Elijah appeared, talking with Jesus. Coming just six days after Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah, this stunning sight would have confirmed in the disciples' minds the true identity of the man they followed. Everyone expected Elijah to return as a sign of the Messiah's arrival, and the presence of Moses only added more power to the claim that Jesus was the Savior for whom people had waited for so long.

Peter, trying to be helpful, to honor this holy moment, offered to build little shrines, but his motives were mixed. Confronted by this awesome sight beyond comprehension, Peter needed a way to structure the experience, to make it familiar, to cram this unique epiphany into traditional, comfortable practices, perhaps to capture the sacred moment, but the mere suggestion of it earned him a stern rebuke. A shining cloud surrounded them, and the voice of God demanded, "Shut mouth! Open ears!" And down they went, cowering on the ground full of fear, which far from being shameful was the only sensible response.

And then it ended as suddenly as it had started. They heard the voice of Jesus pulling them up, calling them to courage, "do not be afraid." They opened their eyes, and the intense brightness, the smothering cloud, and Moses and Elijah, all gone. I imagine they felt relief and

regret in equal measure. Then they began their descent, and Jesus ordered them to keep what they saw and heard a secret until he rose from the dead.

Why Jesus required secrecy from those three remains a mystery, but we know that the transfiguration foreshadowed the resurrection in no uncertain terms. Maybe Jesus wanted it kept quiet, so that people would take the cross seriously and not skip over it as a meaningless prelude to the “main event.”

In three days, we start Lent, a season designed to prepare us for Jesus’ death, so that we can be ready for his resurrection. It may seem superfluous to some, because we’ve gone through this cycle so many times, but Lent is essential. You need a dead guy before you can have an emptied tomb, but we tend to focus on the latter and forget the former, as evidenced by the fact that on Good Friday, about 60 people or so come to venerate the cross, whereas on Easter Day, around 350 show up to celebrate. That makes sense. Easter is joyous, glorious. Good Friday is stark and dark and cold, but we need to experience the cross for our experience of Easter to be complete.

Lent gives us time to get real about the cross, about the role our sin played in putting Jesus on it, about the necessity for us to die with him, leaving behind one way of life that leads to death, so that we can receive a new life, transformed by the light of Christ. To do this, we like the disciples need to keep a secret, except instead of keeping the transfiguration secret from everybody else, we need to keep the resurrection secret from ourselves – a sort of willing suspension of what we know – so that we can view the cross in proper proportion, with all its indignity and cruelty and blood and grime.

It will be tough climb: ugly, frustrating, and raw. There’s no pretty snow on the slope of Calvary, just sharp rocks, a fog-like stench drifting down from the top, and the ever-present

temptation to sit down, to slide down, back to the surface where it feels safe. That's an not enticing, encouraging, or entertaining picture. In fact, it sounds miserable, all that suffering and sacrifice and discipline, but that's the deal, or rather the ordeal we need to endure for the forty days that begin on Wednesday, the forty days that parallel Jesus' time in the wilderness after his baptism, the forty days Moses spent with God on Mount Sinai, the forty years Israel spent in a barren desert.

Lent means more than abstaining from meat or wine or chocolate or saying "Alleluia," more than getting to the gym or planning to pray with greater consistency, though these practices serve as helpful symbols, reminders of the deeper purpose. Lent involves a spring-cleaning of the soul, digging into boxes shoved into shadowy corners; boxes long-neglected, contents forgotten, unknown. Sometimes we find treasures, yet also much that needs purging, things we need to let go of to make room for what matters most.

Through this soul-full process of catharsis, we get ready for the dawn of the third day, ready to be genuinely surprised by the heavy rock that no longer blocks the way, ready to be sincerely grateful to see death lying in the dust, conquered forever. And we do not walk this path alone. In fact, we cannot. There's little hope for the solitary pilgrim during Lent: too easy to get lost; too easy to quit. Instead, we climb together with Jesus in the lead, because he knows the way up Calvary better than anybody.

During Lent, we follow his trail of blood and sweat. We follow his footsteps and the jagged furrow he dug dragging the cross. We follow the wounded man who heals, the condemned man who forgives, each step a blessing of grace, because on the cross, Jesus carries us through the fog to the summit only he can see. Amen.