

Exodus 24: 12-18
2 Peter 1: 16-21
Matthew 17: 1-9

Myths and Eyewitnesses
February 26, 2017
Mary R. Brownlow

I am not much of a photographer. Once in a while, I do manage to take some photos when I am on one of my long-distance walks, or in a particularly scenic spot. But mostly I am too distracted with the actual view, and pretty skeptical of the camera's ability to really capture it, so I don't spend much time on taking the photo. So, how do I tell the story of the walk to someone who's never been? Luckily, William often brings out his phone for documentation, as in the last couple of years when I was completing my summiting of the 214 Wainwright Fells in England. So, now, I can remember things like the climb up Helvellyn: by way of a path called Striding Edge. It's an arête, a sharp ridge walk, followed by a steep scramble to the summit. With the wind blowing on the top, the amazing views over lakes and fells, it is, in short, a mountaintop experience. There are tricky bits, scary bits, but it's exhilarating. You see things from a whole new angle: where you have been and where you are going. For me, as for others, climbing up high is a metaphor for the spiritual journey, with all the fear, uncertainty, and sense of wonder that may come with it. I don't have visions too often, so the views from Helvellyn or Mount Lafayette or Mount Whitney have to be my substitute. Those experiences belong to me: unless you have been to those summits on those particular days, you'll just have to take my word for how it looks and feels. You can only be convinced of the truth of it if it rings true with something in your experience, in your story.

So here's a story for you: Jesus and three of his friends climbed a mountain one day. There at the top, away from everyone else, they had a vision – at least that's what Jesus called it. They heard voices. They saw where they had been and where they were going. It was exhilarating and scary. Then they went back down the mountain and continued their journey to Jerusalem, where suffering and death were waiting.

Decades later, the writer of the Gospel wrote this all down. As happens so often with visions, words seemed inadequate. And, no phones, no video. There was brilliant, dazzling light, like the sun. There were people there, and somehow the disciples knew that they were Elijah and Moses, though of course they had never met Elijah or Moses, or seen photos of them. There was mist and cloud and fear. There was a voice that told them to listen to Jesus. Then they were told to keep all this to themselves until after Jesus was raised up.

More decades later, someone using the name Peter wrote about this again. The writer says that this story is not a "cleverly devised myth," but a real account of people experiencing the power and glory and majesty of Christ. Something true was conveyed by that vision on the mountain, and Christ's followers, generations after that hike in Galilee, held on to that truth like "a lamp shining in a dark place." Clearly, the author of this letter was responding to someone who said, "That never actually happened: you made it up." And, even though the author could not have been Simon Peter, and could not have climbed the mountain with Jesus, he still claims that vision as his (or her) own. What do we make of this? Can we, should we, do we claim a vision which our own eyes have not seen? Even when there is no photographic proof?

We have been trained lately to be suspicious of memory and even of eyewitness accounts – perhaps with good reason. An article in *Scientific American* by psychology professors some years ago said:

“The uncritical acceptance of eyewitness accounts may stem from a popular misconception of how memory works. Many people believe that human memory works like a video recorder: the mind records events and then, on cue, plays back an exact replica of them. On the contrary, psychologists have found that memories are reconstructed rather than played back each time we recall them. The act of remembering, says . . . Elizabeth F. Loftus of the University of California, Irvine, is “more akin to putting puzzle pieces together than retrieving a video recording.”

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, and we are on the cusp of a season, putting together the puzzle pieces of ancestral memory. Transfiguration ties together the beginning and the end of the Epiphany season. We started with the Baptism of Jesus: when we also heard “This is my beloved Son.” We are heading into Lent as the time of the final journey, towards death in Jerusalem. And we are anticipating Easter, which is the real demonstration of a transfigured life. We anticipate Easter, when a glorified and glowing Jesus comes to the disciples, touches them – which he does whenever he wants to heal and console – and says, literally “Be raised!” On the mountain, Jesus says this, then commands them not to speak of this event until he himself has been raised, this time from death. There is something about this vision that can't be understood until after the resurrection.

Our challenge today is to hear the stories - whether the story of Moses meeting God in cloud and fire, or the story of Peter seeing the face of Jesus shine like the sun – to hear the story and claim it in some way as our own. We would have to take some kind of leap to do this: an interpretive leap through the lens of myth and into understanding. A myth, after all, is a tool that helps us understand a universal truth, helps us put the world in some kind of order. Myth is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: “A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.” And G. K. Chesterton comments in *Everlasting Man*, “In a word, mythology is a search; it is something that combines a recurrent desire with a recurrent doubt...” The brilliance of God can be blinding, and we may need myth and story, to help us bear the light. There may be some here who just want to take the transfiguration story at face value: “OK, it happened, I have no problem with it, let's move on.” There may be others who say, “That's impossible- no way those disciples actually saw that. It's a myth, let's move on.” But I think it would be good for us to jump into the story ourselves, and see how it can inform our living.

In some ways, the stories we find in Scripture are both memories and previews. As such, we have to locate them in their context. In the case of the Transfiguration, we know that six days earlier, Jesus gave his disciples a hard teaching. He spoke about what would happen once they got to Jerusalem, predicting his own death and resurrection. Then he said, “If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” The disciples, full of naïve enthusiasm for the growing Jesus movement, really wanted to ignore that whole part. Much more appealing is this fantastic vision of glory. Peter seems to think, “Here is the perfect opportunity to get busy with my own agenda, because who needs that death in Jerusalem thing.” Unfortunately, God chimes in: “This is my son, the beloved...listen to him!” Listen to Jesus, who will locate you, let you see where you have been and where you are going. Listen to him, standing as he does on the edge of a journey – yes, a journey of transfiguring power, but also of powerlessness and pain. This is the mythic story we are given to send us into Lent – a vision as memory and preview.

Of course others have had visions. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a famous dream: a myth of sorts, based in memory and hope. Sometimes we have less famous dreams. Sometimes we share them, if we're not too shy. It can be part of our legacy, our oral history, which was actually the beginning of the Gospel record as well. I have noticed that more and more people are seeing the value of recording the experiences and visions of their elders, of stories passed down over generations. Maybe some of you have heard the Story Corps projects of the Library of Congress on public radio. This project encourages people to have their friends and relatives pass on pieces of family lore before they are lost to the silence of death. In those recorded conversations, each person speaks their own truth, often describing a mountaintop experience, often telling what is most important to them, often naming their vision. This is holy work.

What can we take from the story of Jesus on the mountain with Peter and James and John? I think that those disciples realized that Jesus didn't just belong to them. He was connected to the hopes and fears of generations before, to those who taught the Law and those who were called to prophetic witness. I think that they began to realize that they had to listen to him when he talked about his suffering and death – not to brush it aside, but to really consider what it meant. And I think that later, they realized that all this only became clear in retrospect. They had to come down off the mountain and go back to the daily ministry, the daily walk towards Jerusalem. It was an evolving vision.

Through Jesus and his followers, we are connected to the hopes and fears of past generations, to our prophetic tradition, to the global community. Through his story, we know that following Jesus does not mean the avoidance of suffering. Through the Gospel, we learn about the day **after** the vision on the mountain, when Jesus is asked to heal a little child. No more dazzling, no more voices from clouds, just the hard work of caring for one another.

Transfiguration is the story of those who have a moment of brilliant insight, a moment of connection, then continue to function as ordinary people. But they don't forget that moment: it fuels their understanding and their work. They have seen where they were and where they are going.

We can follow this example and find the courage to testify to the presence and power of God in our midst today. The community of faith is invited to be on the lookout for more epiphanies, more evidence of the in-breaking of God, whether clothed in light upon a mountaintop or in far subtler ways. Lent is about to begin, and this could be a form of Lenten discipline: the discipline of testimony, of contemplating and sharing the ways in which God's presence and power have been revealed in everyday life for the building up of our community. Just as my account of walking up mountains will have to be accepted by you as something special to me, I might have to take the story of your transforming insight on faith. If there is a myth, a sacred story that gives power to your life, I want to hear your eyewitness account.

Our church year is turning toward Lent, and we will set off, figuratively, into the unknown. We follow Jesus into the desert, where he saw visions and began to understand his calling. That is in our future too: the dusty path, or no path, the rocky heights, the lonely depths. But, unlike Jesus in the desert, more like the disciples on the mountaintop, we do not travel alone. We have the possibility of a shared vision. Climb that mountain with me, and tell me what you see. Amen.