

Up the mountain: Mark 9.1-13

From the Church of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, traditional site of the Transfiguration. Thanks to Robin for today's TFTD.



In her book *Rehearsing Scripture – Discovering God’s Word in Community*, Anna Carter Florence talks about ‘running words or phrases through your Biblical echo chamber’ when reading the Bible.

Today I read the first few words of our passage, ‘*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John ...*’ and I heard an echo.

I remembered Mark 5:37 ‘*He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James and John.*’ This is part of the story where Jesus goes to the house of Jairus having just been told that Jairus’s daughter is now dead. Jesus is going to raise her to life and allows only these three, Peter, James and John to accompany him. ‘*Talitha cum*’ he says, ‘*Little girl, get up!*’ and the girl who had died is restored to life.

The story of the transfiguration is also about resurrection from the dead. Six days before he takes Peter, James and John up the mountain, Jesus has started to tell them that the Son of Man must undergo suffering and death before rising again (Mark 8:31). Peter even tries to shut him up but Jesus silences him in turn.

And then, on the way down the mountain, Jesus brings up the matter of his

resurrection again when he instructs them not to tell anybody what they have seen until *after* he has risen from the dead. And we then read that *'they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.'* (Mark 9:10). And there's another echo. Because Jesus told the disciples not to talk about the raising of the little girl either.

But we must beware of false echoes; those things that make sense to us because of our preconceived understanding of how things work. Jesus takes Peter and the other two up the mountain and all at once they see Moses and Elijah. Peter hears an echo in his echo chamber. Hey! Moses met God up a mountain and came back down again with the ten commandments (Deuteronomy 5:2) And Elijah went up Mount Horeb as well and met God in the silence (1 Kings 19: 13). And now here's Jesus up a mountain with Moses and Elijah. It's the three mountaineers! Let's build some commemorative buildings to mark the spot! You know like Jacob did at Bethel!

The Gospel writer wants you to know that Peter didn't really know what he was on about. He was terrified out of his wits. And then comes the cloud. And the voice. *'This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him!'* (Mark 9:7). Jesus is not like Moses. And he is not like Elijah. Jesus is something very new and very different.

Peter has not been listening to Jesus. He has not been prepared to take on what Jesus is saying to him about dying and rising again. The structure of the story reminds us that Peter has already witnessed Jesus bring a dead girl back to life, an experience which should change the way anybody looks at the world. But even on the way back down the mountain, Peter and the others are still questioning what this rising from the dead might mean.

Richard Rohr, writing with an American audience in mind but frankly his thought has a wider application, has written, *"Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control, power, money, pleasure, and security. Then they tend to be pretty much like everybody else. We are often given a bogus version of the Gospel, some fast-food religion, without any deep transformation of the self; and the result has been the spiritual disaster of "Christian" countries that tend to be as consumer-oriented, proud, warlike, racist, class conscious, and addictive as everybody else—and often more so, I'm afraid."*

Encountering God through Jesus Christ should be a deep transformation of self; a game changer. Once we have accepted the truth of the resurrection, we will never see the world in the same way again, we will feel permanently estranged from the culture around us.

One final echo chamber: the voice that speaks from the cloud. Where else in

Mark's Gospel does God make his presence felt directly in the story?

The first time is at the start. When Jesus was baptised a voice came from heaven, *'You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased!'* (Mark 1:11)

And the third time is at the end. *Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain in the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.* Mark 15: 37-38).

This is the second time. Right in the middle of the Gospel. It marks the time from when Peter and the disciples fail to believe what Jesus is telling them, but they follow him up to Jerusalem anyway. God himself cries out to them, *'This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him!'*

Jesus is the Son of God. He died and was raised from the dead. Once you have accepted that nothing should ever be quite the same again. But the disciples struggled to accept that. As, indeed, do we.

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