

February 14, 2021

Mark 9:2-9

Transfiguration Sunday

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.

I was watching a show recently (for the life of me I cannot recall what it was), but one of the characters had their phone lost or stolen. Upon getting the new phone, he is a bit overwhelmed about recreating his entire contact list. Another friend says, "Let me see your phone" and proceeds to input their number into the phone and states, "There, now you have one friend you can call whenever you need to."

Or how about Fortune in the film Rudy (1993, TriStar Pictures), a groundskeeper at the University of Notre Dame in charge of maintaining the football field. When a short, undersized young man who does not have the grades to get in to Notre Dame and fulfill his life's dream of playing football for the Irish; nor does he have the funds to find a nearby apartment as he attends the local community college, befriends and convinces Fortune to hire him, upon learning of Rudy's living situation, Fortune leaves a window unlocked in his office, which happens to have in it a cot, for Rudy to sleep in until he saves up enough money for a place of his own. Later, when Rudy tries to thank him, Fortune says, "I knew nothing about it," referencing the fact he could have probably lost his job for leaving the window unlocked.

Or how about a devoted dog, Boncuk (Bon-DJUK) that, last month, spent days waiting outside the main doors of a Turkish hospital where his owner was receiving treatment. Boncuk followed the ambulance transporting her owner to the hospital. The daughter of Boncuk's owner took her home but said she would repeatedly run off and return to the hospital. A hospital staff member stated, "She comes every day around 9:00 AM and waits until nightfall. She does not go in. When the door opens, she peaks her head inside." For over a week, she did this until finally her owner was discharged and Boncuk returned homeⁱ

That is not the first time a dog has done this. I found another such instance of a pooch in Brazil that sat outside the doors of a hospital four months following his owner, a homeless man, who had been stabbed was admitted. He had been brought to the hospital by emergency medical services. Sadly, the man would later die, but his beloved dog had no way of knowing that and continued to hold vigil outside longing to be reunited. One staff member, said, “He would get up to let people pass by, very politely, and then lay back down again.” The staff began feeding the dog and at one point contacted animal rescue, but somehow the dog evaded capture. Later animal rescue would deem the dog was in good hands and let it stay put. He became trusting of the hospital employees and one, according to the article, had hoped to adopt him and take him home, but as of the writing of the article, he remained outside those doors hoping to be reunited with his owner.ⁱⁱ

These are powerful stories of friendship and love. Each year on this day we are reminded of love surrounded by heart-shape candy that comes in the form of candy hearts with cute and cuddly sayings on them, gigantic chocolate hearts, or even heart shaped lollipops. The greeting card section overflows with poetic and lovely words straight out of a romance novel or Hallmark movie. Yet, the above examples do not seem to exemplify the romantic love or sentimental love that often seems to be the stereotype cast on Valentine’s Day.

No, these stories convey a love that gives. A love that goes down the mountain. “As they were coming down the mountain...” Words from the final verse of our gospel lesson. Peter, James, John and ... JESUS. These seven words can easily be skipped over in the grand scheme of such a mind-blowing, almost out of this world passage of scripture as Jesus is instantaneously transfigured appearing with clothes so dazzling white that no amount of bleach could ever get them and alongside him two great prophets of old, one whose burial is never mentioned and one whisked away into the clouds on a chariot, who suddenly out of nowhere stand alongside him we might be in a state of disbelief, awe and I suspect if present alongside those three disciples, in fear and at a loss for words just as they were.

In a passage rich with symbolism and difficult to understand and even enter into as it seems like something straight out of a Hollywood motion picture, those closing seven words may not seem all that important, but in the grand scheme of who Jesus is and what God was up to, those seven words may be the second most important epiphany of this passage, next to the divine voice from the clouds that spoke, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Perhaps, greater than the awe-inspiring transfiguration or the mysterious appearance of Moses and Elijah.

Those seven words, “As they were coming down the mountain” reveal the primary thrust of Mark. Of whom Jesus is and what Jesus has come to do. Of what God is doing taking on our humanity. Jesus comes down the mountain. No longer is the presence of God found in the closest point to the sky humans of that day could get to. No longer is the presence of God found in a cloud or a burning bush. Now, it is found in Jesus and Jesus goes down the mountain with Peter, James, and John.

Standing on the other side of the resurrection, we know exactly what it means for Jesus to go down the mountain. As we begin our journey into the season of Lent, we know where these 40 days lead us. As Christians, we cannot talk about resurrection without talking first about the cross and Jesus’ death. There would be no Easter if there were not first a Good Friday.

The fact Jesus ventures down the mountain and where that will lead him is the greatest example of agape (ἀγάπη) – love. The Greek language has three words for love: Eros (ἔρως), Philia (φιλία), and Agape. Each of the three are found in the New Testament, but only agape is used when speaking about the love of God. Eros is romantic love. Philia is what we term, “brotherly love”; hence, the name Philadelphia, “city of brotherly love.” Agape is a love that gives. It looks not to self-interest, but solely to the interest of the other. It is a love that goes to the cross. It is a love that rises again so death will not have the final say and resurrection life for a fallen world is a reality out of sheer, divine gift and grace. Agape love is unconditional and unwavering. It is a love that goes down the mountain.

The next time Mark will specifically single out Peter, James and John being together is in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42), the night he shared the Passover meal with his disciples, washed their feet and gave the church the Lord's Supper. It is what we know as Maundy Thursday. Maundy means "command" and refers to Jesus' command, "To love one another as I have loved you." The very act of washing the disciples' feet is agape love.

But, back to the garden as Jesus, gathered with Peter, James and John said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." Mark then tells us Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." We know the cup is not removed and Jesus steadfastly fulfills the will of God. This is agape love. This is going down the mountain into the darkest of valleys to reveal a God who walks with, stands beside, and is with us always until the end of time.

Following his time in prayer, he returns to find these three disciples asleep. Not once. Not twice. But three times he went to pray, returned, and found them asleep even when he ordered them each time to "keep awake." In just a few verses, Peter will deny knowing Jesus three times.

Yet, going down the mountain with Peter, James and John means there is nothing they can do that will cause Jesus to leave their side. Going down the mountain looks like forgiving even when they fall asleep and fail to adhere to his commands. Going down the mountain looks like the grace that continues to love even when one betrays, one will deny, and all will abandon Jesus.

It is hard to put into words just how wonderful these seven words, "And they were coming down the mountain..." are. They are a source of great comfort. They are an epiphany. They are a promise that tell us and assure us:

- On our best of days, he goes with us.
- On our worst of days, he goes us.
- When we jump for joy, he goes with us.
- When we weep, he goes with us.
- When we sing his praises, he goes with us.

- When we fail to listen, he goes with us.
- When we feel wrapped in the arms of his agape love, he goes with us.
- When the shadow of death seems to cast aside our ability to sense his agape love, he goes with us.
- When we are awake and live into the fullness of his amazing grace, he goes with us.
- When we fall asleep, he goes with us.
- When we think we are not good enough, he goes with us.
- When we dance with glee, he goes with us.
- When we have nowhere else to turn and wonder if life is worth living, he goes with us.
- When we climb the mountain, he goes with us.
- When we journey down the mountain, he goes with us.

Praise be to God that Jesus journeyed down the mountain. Praise be to God he meets us right where we are at. Praise be to God for the amazing grace and agape love. Praise be to God that Jesus listened to God. Praise be to God that Jesus gave his life so that we could have life.

As people of the resurrection, bathed in the unconditional agape love of Christ our Lord, what does it look like to be a church that goes down the mountain?
Amen.

ⁱ <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-black-sea-pets-dogs-d4de7d04b4fe9125c98e3b80c1f3058c>

ⁱⁱ <https://animalchannel.co/dog-in-front-hospital/>