

*Sticks, Stones, and Mountaintops*

John Shuck  
First Presbyterian Church  
Elizabethton, Tennessee

Transfiguration Sunday  
February 26, 2006

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John,  
and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.  
And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling  
white,  
such as no one on earth could bleach them.  
And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.  
Then Peter said to Jesus,  
“Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you,  
one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”  
He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.  
Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice,  
“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”  
Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more,  
but only Jesus.  
As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one  
about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the  
dead.

*Mark 9:2-9 NRSV*

Jesus said: “I am the light that is over all things.  
I am all: from me all came forth, and to me all attained.  
Split a piece of wood; I am there.  
Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.”  
*Thomas 77 (Scholar’s Version)*

With these texts, the transfiguration in *Mark* and the saying from *Thomas*,  
we have moved beyond the historical figure of Jesus. These are stories  
about the mythical or supernatural Jesus. The Jesus depicted here might be  
called the Christ of faith. Biblical scholar, Marcus Borg, might classify

these stories as stories about the “post-Easter” Jesus. This is the Jesus of legend. This is the Jesus who has been magnified, amplified, glorified, and deified.

I think it is important to make the distinction between the historical figure of Jesus and the legendary figure. It does not necessarily mean that the legendary stories about Jesus are not important and that only the historical Jesus is important. Some might say that. You don't have to come to that conclusion. I find the Gospel of *Mark* quite valuable. For instance, I think *Mark's* narrative about Jesus provides a powerful critique of Empire. Even though it is mostly legendary or mythical, *Mark* as a whole, as a narrative, has a place in my loose-leaf Bible.

I think it is important to make the distinction between the historical figure of Jesus and the mythical figure of Jesus for the same reason that I think it is important to separate scientific inquiry from religious inquiry. I like the stories of *Genesis*, but they do not tell me anything about the natural processes regarding the formation and evolution of life on Earth. I like the stories about Jesus in the Gospels but they do not tell me much about the historical figure of Jesus.

When we make the distinction between the historical Jesus and the mythical Jesus we can better appreciate the benefits of each. We make this distinction not because one is more important than the other, rather so we so we can come to understand what each is.

The scientific theory of evolution is a good thing. The mythology of *Genesis* is a good thing. But they are not good mixed together. The same is true for Jesus. The historical Jesus is a good thing. The mythical Jesus is a good thing. But when we mix the two, we end up with some very bizarre conclusions. We get a supernatural figure who is also historical. Christianity ends up requiring its adherents to believe in this odd mixture. We get an historical figure who walks on water, for instance. The test of being a real Christian is if you believe that without doubting. It seems to miss the point.

So did Jesus walk on water? Did Jesus go to the mountaintop with Peter, James and John and appear with Moses and Elijah and become transfigured before them? Did Jesus really say, “Split a piece of wood, I am there; pick up a stone, you will find me there?” The answer to all those questions is no

and yes. No, the historical person, Jesus, neither did nor said any of those things. Yes, the mythical or literary figure of Jesus, did and said those things.

When we can keep the distinctions between the historical figure and the mythical figure, we can appreciate both for what they are. One phrase for stories like these that I like to use is this: *it never happened but it always happens.*

When you read a novel or watch a movie you know that it is not true in a literal or in an historical way. But if it is a good one, it is true in that it speaks to your feelings, your longings, and your humanity. You know the story never happened. But it always happens. Good literature, good mythology, good legends, good stories, good songs and poems, good lies, make the secular, sacred. They make the ordinary, holy.

It is in that sense that I read the Transfiguration story and these particular sayings in Thomas 77. These stories are about the messiah, the cosmic Christ, the Jesus who was made divine by those who told stories about him. I wonder what the historical Jesus did that made people glorify him so much? What did he do for others in his historical life that would cause these stories to be told? What was it that turned this man in the eyes of his admirers into a god?

This is nothing more than speculation on my part, but I think that Jesus opened people's consciousness to the sacred. He made such a profound impact that those who were moved by him felt that they were in contact with a divine presence. So moved they were, that they described him in those terms. They told stories about him and used metaphors and motifs that were reserved for holy men or the gods. Jesus gets this praise because he empowered people to wake up and to become aware of Life.

The story of the Transfiguration is the story of the followers of Jesus discovering Life with a capital L. They were aware. They were conscious. They were awake. *Mark* turns the story so it is about Jesus, but really, I think it was about the awakening the disciples experienced. Jesus helped them wake up.

Wake up to what? Wake up to that aspect of themselves that is joyful, good, and whole.

Much of life happens on autopilot. We live at the surface bouncing from one errand to the next, waiting for the next thing we need to do, worrying about the details of our lives, paying the bills, whatever it is we are anxious about. When we live on the surface we tend to miss the depth or the sacredness or the holiness of life. We may not recognize our value. But now and then, we awaken to an understanding about ourselves. To achieve this awakening we need the assistance of another who cares for us and can show us those things about ourselves that we have missed.

Psychotherapist, Erving Polster, calls this aspect of waking up “amplification.” To illustrate he tells this hypothetical story.

*Franklin picks up his neighbor’s kids when he drives his own to school. There is an accident on the road which is preventing him from getting to school on time. He arrives finally, even if a little late, but then he has to get to work fast. Unfortunately, he has forgotten he has left his briefcase at home and he needs it for a meeting where he is scheduled to present his ideas. He has the idea to call his wife as he expects that she can drop everything to bring the briefcase to his office, redirecting her own morning and saving his skin.*

*In all of this activity, what may well be lost to Franklin’s awareness is that he is a very diligent man, who loves his children and transports them with good will even in the face of turmoil, that he can rely on his wife, and that he is a person who finds a way to make things work. Too much has happened at this point for him to know any of these things or even to care. One role of psychotherapy is to illuminate those qualities that would be nourishing for him to recognize but that he has slid past. Nothing people have said to him in his secular life has made much difference. Yet, in therapy, simple statements to him about his diligence or his good will or his ability to make things work can make a surprising difference in his level of self-appreciation. In therapy, the spotlight is on, he is in it, and the therapist’s words have greater effect than that of the people whom he sees over and over and whose perspective he habitually discounts.<sup>i</sup>*

That was a quote from Erving Polster in a book focusing on the importance of developing communities that enhance each other’s lives. It is sacred

and holy when we become self-aware. In Franklin's case, he discovers that he is a diligent, loving, competent man. But a spotlight is needed—a sacred space—where another can help him see that. We all need people to whom we can turn who can remind us of our sacred worth.

Douglas L. Steere says that "...to listen another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service any human being ever performs for another."<sup>ii</sup>

I think that is the service that Jesus provided for others. He put the spotlight on them. The spotlight of compassion. He empowered people to discover their worth. They woke up and saw themselves in a new light. No wonder they saw him as the messiah. Because through his compassion they discovered the holy. He made them feel good about themselves. He made them feel worthwhile. He made them feel hopeful about their possibilities. That is the power of compassion.

Jesus, the historical person, had that strong sense of compassion. He created a sacred space for others. The mythical Jesus also reflects that. The Transfiguration story highlights the importance of Jesus. What is important about Jesus? He shows compassion for others. He offers others a healing sacred place. That is what it means to be a beloved child of God.

In Thomas 77, the mythical Jesus, the cosmic Christ, says, "Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there." This is how I read that. Your everyday work, lifting stones and splitting wood is sacred. Don't sell yourself short. Whatever your work is, the house you keep, the groceries you buy, the bank where you work, the students you teach, the deliveries you make, Christ is there. It is important holy work. And you are important for doing it. Thank you.

Most of us, and I put myself in this category, need to be reminded of our sacred worth. We need outside affirmation. We need to be in the spotlight as Erving Polster puts it. Remember, this outside affirmation is not phoniness. It isn't flattery. What I am speaking about is the sacred space and the sacred other who listens to us and helps us discover what is true about ourselves. We might think that we shouldn't need outside affirmation.

I watched the Winter Olympics. The American skier who has had a tough time, Bode Miller, was interviewed before the games had started. He said in the interview that the other skiers need other people to tell them they are good. “I don’t need that,” he said. That interview stuck in my mind. I found myself doubting what he was saying. I was thinking that I bet he does need some appreciation—maybe not about skiing, but about something. Most of us do. Even those who appear outwardly successful often do not believe it about themselves.

The secular world is cold and hard. We are harried. We bounce from one thing to another. We don’t think are doing or getting done what we should be doing or getting done. We focus on our errors or our mistakes. We try to measure ourselves to others and often think that we fall short. We need a reality check. We need to discover who we are at the deeper level. And that “who” is sacred and holy, created in the image of God. I need to experience that sacred reality check on a regular basis. My hunch is that most of you do too.

If we need it, then probably our neighbor needs it as well, even if they do not admit it. Again, I am not talking about flattery. I am talking about creating a sacred space where people can discover their true sacred worth. That is what a community like this is about. We are a place of blessing.

I am grateful for this place, for you, for your compassion, for your listening ear. We are standing on holy ground.

<sup>i</sup> Erving Polster. *Uncommon Ground: Creating a System of Lifetime Guidance* (Phoenix: Zeig, Tucker, & Theisen, Inc.), Prepublication Edition., p. 13.

<sup>ii</sup> *Weavings Magazine*. (Nashville: Upper Room Publications), May/June 1994. p. 25.