Sermon preached by

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"Now about eight days after these sayings, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray."

Eight days after what sayings?? Well, the Transfiguration was eight days after Jesus told the disciples that he would be killed and that if they wanted to follow him, they had better deny themselves and take up their crosses too. There is no record in the Scriptures of what happened during the week after these stark words were spoken. No parables or miracles fill the gap. But the week must have been a time of confusion and gloom and fear. Not only would Jesus' prediction of his passion and death have crushed the disciples' hearts, but imagine: Jesus also asked them to walk the road to their own deprivation and death. Since Jesus knew that the disciples needed strength for that journey, I think that Jesus' transfiguration was for their sake as much for his, to show them that no place is too dark for holy light to shine.

So, in the surprising and unpredictable ways of heaven, the disciples got a sound and light show beyond imagining. It would have been enough for the disciples to see Moses and Elijah, the embodiment of the Law and the prophets, as a sign that Jesus was all that Israel had been hoping and longing for. It would have been enough for the disciples to hear the voice of God proclaiming Jesus as the One whose words were God's very Word. It would have been enough, but they got far more. They saw that God dwelt not only in the highest heaven but also right there in the human world. They saw Jesus shining with a light that didn’t come from a divine spotlight shining upon him but from God's presence radiant within him, a radiance beyond human possibility but no longer beyond human experience. They learned that even the way of the cross could be a way of light and life.

It was a lesson that they needed to learn - not just on the sad way to Calvary, but even after the glorious Resurrection. And that is because even after seeing Jesus transfigured, even after seeing the empty tomb on Easter Day, those miracles would have little power to change their lives unless they remembered that they were a part of the miracles too, that even though Christ might be gone from their world, he was not gone from their lives.

Like the disciples, Christ has brought us here today on the mountain top called St. Mark's Church, to pray and to get a glimpse of his glory. He has also called us to take up our cross, and there are crosses aplenty, as you know: addiction and loneliness and the meaninglessness of a dead end job, pain and poverty and childlessness. But the Good News is that God comes to pierce our darkness and transfigure us with the light of perfect Love that casts out fear, with strength to bear our crosses and maybe even to laugh on the journey, for in God's plan, transfiguration is what can happen to those whose hearts are broken enough to let light shine into them.

I am privileged to have permission to share two stories with you, two stories of the transfiguration of broken people who found light in their darkness, of hearts broken enough to let God’s light shine through them.

The first story is of another man named Peter who grasped at life just like the disciple Peter did. This Peter was 38, handsome and personable, working at a prestigious job and having the love of a fine woman. But this Peter is an alcoholic, and he ran from his relationships and lost his job and lived in squalor for eighteen months, refusing to answer the phone or read his mail, quietly bleeding to death. Peter was so determined to keep his family from discovering his secret that he rallied himself occasionally to make an appearance at family gatherings. On Easter his sister told him, "You need somebody to help you," and he saw a magnet on her refrigerator that read "I need a miracle." Two inconsequential phrases, but when Peter tells his story, his eyes light up at this point and he says that he saw a glimmer of hope in them. On his way home, Peter found himself on his knees in a city church praying the only prayer that he could remember, "Now I lay me down to sleep …" He looked at the homeless folks resting in the back pews and poured out his own pain of being homeless in spirit. And as he wept, he saw light, and it was the light of understanding, the light that led him to Alcoholics Anonymous that night. Peter's radiance is now a symbol of possibility for others who are yet in darkness.

The second transfiguration story is that of Nadia who married a bisexual man when she was a young girl. Her spouse convinced her to behave in ways that she found repulsive, and feeling degraded and worthless, Nadia quit her job, became a recluse, and gained almost a hundred pounds. She also left the church of her consolation because she felt unworthy to be there. There were two exceptions. Nadia sought help from a priest when she was near her lowest. He reminded Nadia of the permanence of her marriage vows and told her to try to be a model of decency for her husband.

Nadia was plenty sad and plenty angry at a God who had let her down and a church that had let her down. But like Peter, Nadia entered a church one more time. She knelt in the empty darkness and poured out her anger at her husband, at her priest, and at God. And when Nadia was as empty as that church, she heard her name. "Nadia," (and Nadia means hope), "Nadia, there IS new life." Nadia found that new life through becoming a counselor at Covenant House, a place that has sheltered thousands of street kids who had no place else to turn. Guided by the one who dies to save sinners, Nadia has left her darkness to shine forth with light of freedom and hope.

Like the told and untold stories of the ages, these two stories sound almost like God's fairy tales, because Peter and Nadia are living happily ever after. But these are true stories, and so they are not magic escapes from reality. Peter still hasn’t found another job like the one he lost, and he is still sad that the wonderful woman in his life has married another. Nadia is still overweight and afraid of human love, but she is no longer afraid of sinking into depravity, and she knows that with God all things are possible.

In their desperation, Nadia and Peter got down on their knees because they were empty and their lives were dark, because their hands clutched at nothing but their addiction and their fear. And these beloved children of God were transfigured when they let go of their unworthiness and shame and opened themselves to a Love so powerful that it shone both before them and within them until they shone too. And when they came out from their places of prayer, they believed that their nights of weeping could become morns of song.

Although Nadia and the two Peters and James and John went up the mountain alone, they came down into a community of faith where love is acted out, where the radical consequence of being together is that we reach out to help each other and tell each other the old old story of God's mercy and love.

Life is never without loss and sin, but in the middle of in all, Christ is present, transforming and transfiguring it all into a great love story, shining holy light into our hearts and souls and lives no matter what. No matter what.