

Dumb and Dumbfounded
Mark 9:2-10 and Exodus 34:29-35
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Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹ Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³ When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴ but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

In our New Testament lectionary passage, Jesus is in the midst of revealing himself to his disciples as the fully Son of Man, the one Daniel had prophesied about, the one who will come back in fully in glory at Jesus' second coming. Do the disciples get it? Not so much. Listen to our passage now, Mark 9:2-10, about how the disciples miss the boat about who Jesus is.

Mark 9:2-10

² 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, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one^[a] on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,^[b] one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved;^[c] listen to him!” ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

Sometimes the audience knows something that the characters don't. If we're watching a horror movie, we know that there's no way the character should go down to the basement to check out a creepy sound, but they don't. If go to see the first movie in a trilogy called *Batman Begins*, the villains might think they're going to kill Batman, but we viewers know better. And for heaven's sake, if we go see the *Titanic*, Jack and Rose might not think they're going to America, but we know better.

The writer creates tension by letting us watch the characters learn things that will later make a big difference. When Rose notices that there aren't enough lifeboats on the Titanic for everyone to fit, we go, “that seems like a stupid design flaw.” When they are boarding and Rose's fiancé Cal says “Not

even God himself could sink this ship” we say, “Could he really be that dumb?”

He’s not that dumb—or maybe he is that dumb, I mean, he did think he could compete with Leo DiCaprio—but in this case he’s not that dumb. He just doesn’t know what we know—that the ship is indeed going down.

The Gospel of Mark is written the same way. In the very first verse, Mark tells us, “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Well that settles it. Mark tells us who Jesus is—he’s the Messiah. He’s the Son of God. All of us who read it know it from the beginning.

Mark creates tension for us by letting us watch the characters learn things that will later make a big difference. Even though we know Jesus is the Son of God, the disciples don’t. And as we read this passage, we wonder if they are ever going to get it!

Today is Transfiguration Sunday and this passage tells the story of Jesus’ bringing his three best friends and closest disciples up to a high mountain, where he is transfigured. That comes from the Greek word metamorphosis—transformed—into a heavenly figure, dressed all in white. Moses and Elijah appear with him. It’s this mystical, mysterious event, designed to give the disciples a glimpse of who Jesus really is—not just a peasant carpenter or a good teacher, but the Son of the Most High God.

Peter can’t really deal with the mystery, though. “Should we, uh, make three, uh, houses, uh, one for, uh, you, one for, uh, Moses, and, uh, one, uh, for that, uh, other guy?”

Mark tells us that all three of them are scared to death and Peter doesn’t really know what to say. He just blurts this out.

At this point a cloud forms overhead, and God decides it's time to give the disciples a little bit more information. The dazzling white clothing and the hook-up with Moses and Elijah doesn't seem to be working, so God clears his throat and says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him."

Moses and Elijah disappear; Jesus and the disciples make their way down the mountain, and Jesus asks them to keep quiet about what they had seen until he had risen from the dead. At which point they're all like, "what does he mean about rising from the dead?"

Which would be fine and all, if Jesus had not already told them just six days before that he was going to rise from the dead. At that point Peter rebuked him and Jesus called him Satan. Seems like to me that would have been a good time to have started to figure out what Jesus meant by rising from the dead.

But the disciples' confusion doesn't end there. After the feeding of the 5000, Jesus asks them point blank, "Don't you understand yet?" Then a little later he tells them again that he is going to be handed over and condemned to death and be flogged and killed, and the very next thing to happen is that James and John ask him if they can sit at his left and right hand in paradise. Awkward! It is no wonder that one of my favorite seminary professors always said that they don't call them the "duh-sciples" for nothing!

They seem so dumb. Of course, Mark sets us up to think they're dumb, because he's already told us Jesus is the Son of God, but they haven't realized it yet. Even when Jesus drags them up a mountain and God's voice breaks through from the clouds they still don't get it.

And maybe that's good news!

Maybe it's good news because it's not just the disciples who don't get it. We don't get it either. Even on our best days, we don't always get it. We don't always remember who Jesus is. And heaven knows we aren't always on our best days.

There are times we don't even remember to look for Jesus' presence. When things around us are moving so fast that we hardly have a minute to breathe, let alone to pause and let Jesus walk us up a mountain and listen to God say, "This is my son; listen to him."

Then there are the days when Jesus is right in front of our face, asking us to do something that we simply do not want to do. Maybe it's a move toward integrity at work. Maybe it's resisting pornography at home. Maybe it's standing up against abuse. And we don't want to walk with Jesus anywhere, let alone up a mountain, and the last thing we want to hear is God telling us to listen to him.

And some days it just doesn't click. We want to understand who Jesus is and we want to pray and we want to be as faithful as the people around us that we admire, but it feels like even though we go up the mountain with Jesus and even though we hear God's voice, like the disciples we still don't really get it. We come to church and we go to Bible study and we pray, but it just doesn't hold together.

If any of those days sound familiar to you, keep reading the rest of the book of Mark. Because the more we read, the more we see that the disciples never really get it. They even leave the empty tomb terrified to say anything to anyone. They never really get it...

They may seem dumb, but one woman at the women's Bible study that explores the passage for the following Sunday said something that I've been thinking about ever since. She said, "They're not dumb; they're dumbfounded. They're dumbfounded, because they've never seen anyone's clothes begin dazzling before. They've never seen anyone converse with Moses and Elijah before. They've never seen anyone walk on water or feed 5000 before. And they've never seen someone come back from the dead before." They're not dumb; they're dumbfounded.

And the most dumbfounding thing is that even though they never get it, Jesus never leaves them. God the Father never leaves them. And the Holy Spirit never leaves them. The Gospel of Mark is a testimony of how the Triune God stays faithful to the dumbfounded disciples, even though they never really get it.

And the same God who was faithful way back then, is faithful right here now, never leaving or forsaking the people who never really get it, today.

That's good news for me and a friend of mine I'll call Cheri. Cheri and I were co-chairs of the Kellogg Christian Fellowship in Business School, but when I saw her fifteen years later, she told me that she no longer believed in God. I asked her why, and she said that she never really saw any evidence that God really existed. We were walking around on a beautiful fall day, so I wanted to just shout at her, "Open your eyes and look around!" but instead for once I just listened. "I just realized one day that I didn't really believe any of it any more. I guess I believe Jesus existed. But it's hard to believe that he was the Son of God if you don't believe in God any more."

When she told me this, I was pretty dejected. After all, her faith had inspired me so much while we led Bible studies together. It was so disappointing to hear about how she lost her faith, which had been so vibrant in prior years.

The good news of this story is not that I saw Cheri last week and now she's a Christian. I don't know if her perspective has changed at all. I suspect she's not any more excited about walking up the mountain with Jesus now than she was ten years ago, and I suspect she isn't any more ready to hear God say, "This is my son; Listen to him."

But this week, thanks to Mark and our passage for today, I'm not as dejected as I was. Because now I realize that no matter what, Jesus and God the Father aren't going to give up on her. And that dumbfounds me.

It dumbfounds me that their faithfulness to Cheri, and to us, and to James and John and Peter, isn't dependent on whether or not we can figure out who Jesus is. That's what the One who writes history knows. We are only characters in this story. We don't know everything. What our God, the author of history knows—that we don't know, or that we might have forgotten—is that he will be faithful to us to the end of our days, no matter how dumb or dumbfounded we might be.