

**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Dr. Duncan Johnston
Last Sunday of Epiphany
February 26, 2017**

LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY 2017

MATT 17:1-9

To say that Elizabeth Throckmorton had a bad case of missing her husband would be an understatement. We know this fine, but slightly eccentric, woman as Lady Raleigh, the wife of Sir Walter Raleigh, the English explorer who visited this continent at the end of the 16th century and gave his name to an airport in N Carolina. Among other things he named Virginia after the Virgin Queen Elizabeth, and he took back to England the potato and tobacco. Thanks for spuds, Walt, but you can keep the cigarettes. If Lady Raleigh were alive today, I don't really know what psychotherapists would make of her. There must be some disorder or syndrome that we could attribute to her, because she really did do something very odd. You may know that her husband was beheaded in 1618 for upsetting people you didn't want to upset in 1618. But it was what his widow did next that makes her worthy of taking up far too much of this sermon. According to reports, in her grief and distress Elizabeth had Walter's severed head embalmed, and then, for the final 29 years of her life, proceeded to carry it with her wherever she went. I think they call that an abnormal bereavement. This probably ruined her chances of ever getting back in the dating scene. ("What have you got in your bag?") And not surprisingly she never re-married. Even though 'my late husband introduced the potato to the English people, thereby allowing them to enjoy fish and chips' does look pretty impressive on a girl's eHarmony page.

What could be more weird than carrying your spouse's head around with you? Well, how about carrying your outdated religious experience around with you.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent. And this day every year we read the same story from one of the three Gospels that record it. This year it's Matthew. What a day it was. The ascent was hard, make no mistake about that. How hard? Well, 9,232 feet worth of hard. That was the height of the mountain that Peter, James, and John clambered up that day. Maybe they grumbled as they ascended. What can be so important that we have to climb a mountain? Why could he not just tell us what was on his heart back there, in the valley, in the meadow, in the house; why trek up here under the sweltering sun? But, they knew Jesus - often his medium was his message. Maybe there was something about this crushing climb that made a point. They knew their Bibles. They remembered how their fathers and their rabbis had told wondrous tales of ancient times – tales of mountains and Moses, mountains and Abraham, mountains and Elijah, mountains and, well, mountains and God, because that is where God showed up in those stories of old. Mountains were thin places, holy spaces. Oases, where the distance between God and people was short, the boundary between heaven and earth hazy, the gap separating God's realm from mankind's breachable. So, they accompany their master and scale the heights. What a day it was. The weariness in their legs and the shortness of their breath were soon forgotten.

Their grumbling silenced, their aches soothed, their panting stilled. And the tales of God in the past were swallowed up by God in the now.

Jesus stands in prayer a few yards away. And as he reaches his hands up to God, his face is transfigured. A strange, but beautiful glow. And his clothes, they are transformed too. They now dazzle as if the weaver had captured lightning, blended it with the fabric, and woven it into the garment. And then, as if this was not enough supernatural phenomena for one day, the Hebrew lawgiver, Moses, and the greatest of the prophets, Elijah, emerge from nowhere and converse with Jesus. What a day it was.

Peter, all excitement and amazement and elation (who wouldn't be?) blurts out something about raising some tents, proving that it's better to keep quiet and risk being thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove any doubt. But there's another voice – it's God's. And his message was as transforming, and as disturbing, as the vision that alarmed the disciples. "Bury the head". Actually, those weren't God's exact words, but it was what he was driving at. He boomed, "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." This is my Son. These others – Moses and Elijah, they were my servants, but this my Son. The lawgiver and the prophet – they had their time, they received their mission, they fulfilled their wonderful, glorious, supernatural task, hatched in my loving, gracious imagination. But that was then. This is now – and this is my Son. Don't cling to the heroes of old, however beautifully I touched your life through them. Don't enshrine what I said years ago, the marvels I performed in ancient days, the miracles I worked in you in times long gone. This is my Son. Don't pick up the head of a time now dead, don't place it delicately in a bag, and don't carry it around with you. Bury the head. This is now, and this is my Son.

When did you scale the mountain? When was it that you ascended the hill and God showed up? I know you've done it. I have too. Times when I've felt I was in the very presence of God. Some of these have been in a church and some have not. Part of my early Christian experience was spent in a Pentecostal church in the North of England and then a charismatic Anglican parish in London. And I remember times when I was so moved by the worship in those churches that I forgot all sense of time, and became lost in a cloud of calm exhilaration. Many other Christians, maybe you, can speak of the glory of liturgy, the grandeur of organ music, the beauty of a choir, even the electrifying pregnancy of silence as moments when you have been transported into God's presence. I remember another time when I was 16 and I went to a performance of Handel's Messiah by the Royal Choral Society and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in the Royal Albert Hall on a Good Friday afternoon. And my life changed. Amidst the tears. Do you know those moments? Nothing else in the world matters. All there is is you and God – time, location, surroundings, company - you lose consciousness of all of it. It needn't be a religious venue – it may be on a cliff, in a meadow, in the forest, at the zoo, an art gallery, in your own living room in that cozy armchair as you read a book of poetry.

And when that happens it changes you. You come away transformed. You've met with

God and things are never going to be the same. But then I grew older, I became an adult, important tasks muscled their way into my heart and evicted the beauty. Responsibilities were loaded onto my shoulders, people began to look to me for a quality performance. Others depended on me for protection and love. There were tasks to perform, resources to account for, people to please. And I settled down in my spiritual life; and I started to feel those moments of breathtaking worship, of heart-stopping divinity, less and less. I tried to control those moments when God did show up. And as a result, he became less real. And I really want it again. Oh, the temptation to try to turn the clock back and live those days again, to place the head, ever so gently and lovingly, in the bag and carry it with me.

Religious people are good at carrying the severed head, instead of letting it rest in peace, thanking God for it, and moving on with our new lives, where we encounter God again and again in new ways.

I've never traveled to the Holy Land, but I hear stories told by visitors, and I've formed a picture of a region that has had a transfiguration. Not the way that Jesus did, but from natural, holy beauty where the feet of God incarnate trod, into a museum of shrines - built for good reasons - to remember the dramatic events that took place on there in Bible times. At some biblical sites there's an Orthodox shrine, a Catholic shrine, and a Protestant shrine, capturing, or is that imprisoning, a moment 2000 years ago when God showed up and did something breathtaking.

Now, surely there is a difference between gratefully storing away a good memory, building a memorial, perhaps a sacramental memorial, so that you are reminded of God's grace in an earlier time, and imprisoning God. Putting God in a box. So let's be generous and assume that the intentions of the builders and custodians of those shrines are good; they're trying to help us remember the day when God showed up, and to lead us into thanksgiving. But somewhere the boundary between what is a healthy memorial designed to inspire us can become an obstacle to experiencing God now. Putting God in a box, taping it shut, and writing 'Yesterday' on it. Worshiping the severed head.

Tradition can be like the very devout Christian who would spend the first hour of every day in prayer. She loved to keep this discipline in the quiet and warmth of her bedroom. And, of course, her cat also enjoyed the peaceful atmosphere. In fact, the cat would so enjoy this time alone with her human that she would demand attention and distract her from her prayers. Now being a kind soul the lady didn't have the heart want to banish the cat from the bedroom, so she decided she would tie it to the bedpost each morning while she prayed. That way it could be in the quiet warmth of the room, but not be a distraction. And this became a daily ritual. Now occasionally the woman's young daughter would poke her head around the door to see what her mum was doing in the quiet, and she would see her praying, and she would notice the cat tied to the bedpost. So when the girl grew up and owned a cat herself she would tie it to the bed for an hour each morning while she prayed. In time her son, who was not a person of prayer, carried on the tradition of tying a cat to the bedpost for an hour each morning, although he did not understand why he should do it, or how it had ever served a useful purpose.

He just knew this was the family tradition. "This is what we do ... we tie a cat to a bedpost for an hour each morning."

But that won't do, will it? Because God is the God of today. Meeting the risen Jesus is the task of now. Today is the day of salvation. Come to God now, he may choose to meet you in a way that is wonderful, compelling, life-changing. He may not, that's up to him. But please bury the head, and come.