

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Every Day: The Gospel Call
Mark 9:1-27**

God's Word speaks to us in many different ways. There are laws in God's Word, and there is poetry and lists of genealogies, but most of God's Word to us is a story. Most of the Bible is a story because everybody loves stories. Everybody loves stories because when you hear a story, you can get inside it, and you get inside it by becoming one of the people in the story or identifying with one or several of the people in the story. We see the truth of our lives in other stories. Much of the Gospel story comes as old man Peter (Peter, the apostle) tells young man Mark (John Mark) stories, and then Mark writes them all down and puts them in the Gospel of Mark. One of the times they talked about Jesus, Old Peter must have said, "Let me tell you a story. It's a true story about two sons and two dads. I remember like it was yesterday." Peter said,

2 After six days Jesus took [me,] James and John with him and led [us] up a high mountain, where [we] were all alone. There he was transfigured before [us]. **3** His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. [Mark 9:2-3]

You know, this is the only time in all of the New Testament that this ever happens, that physically, Jesus' looks changed. All through His life and even after the Resurrection, He looked like He has a normal human body. This is the only time that His body looks different. Here, just for a minute, up on a mountain, the disciples get to see Jesus as, literally, the light of the world and they will never forget it. I know that they'll never forget it because at the end of His life, Peter writes some short letters to encourage the church and in 2nd Peter, he says this,

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty [2 Peter 1:16].

'I'm telling you what I saw up there on the mountain. I was there. I was an eyewitness of His majesty.' Back to the story.

4 And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Elijah and Moses are the most important people in the story so far. Moses represented the past, the Law that was given by God in His faithfulness for the saving of His people. Elijah was a prophet who talked about the future, about the end time and God's hope. Moses, the past, Elijah, the future, and Jesus right between them saying, "Past, present, and future, I am here."

5 Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters-- one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." **6** (He did not know what to say, they were

so frightened.) **7** Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are called the synoptics, that is, seeing with the same eye, synonymous, same, optics, eye. In all three of these stories, God the Father only speaks two times, and when He speaks, He says the same thing. Up on the top of the mountain He says the same thing He said at the baptism of Jesus. "This is My Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!"

8 Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. **9** As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. **10** They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant.

"What does it mean to rise from the dead?" So that's the story of the first Father and the first Son up on the mountain.

14 When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. **15** As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. **16** "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. **17** A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son,

Here is the second dad and the second son. The man says, "Teacher, I brought you my son,"

who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. **18** Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

Laura and I had a dog once who developed epilepsy. It's uncommon, but the dog developed epilepsy and would stop in the middle of the living room and just literally fall over rigid, shaking and foaming and quaking. It was a terrible thing to see. I could barely look at him. All you could do was walk over to him and hug him and hold him and pray he would be okay. As I thought of this scene, I thought, I felt so bad about a dog. What if it was your baby girl? What if it was your son and all you could do is hold him and try to stop him from killing himself? The story goes on.

19 "You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"

They do not teach in seminary how to respond to a crisis like this. When somebody says, "Please, help me," do you say, "Oh, you unbelievable people, how long do I have to stay with you? We brought this boy to your disciples but they couldn't do anything." It's hard to tell here but I think Jesus must be talking to the disciples now. He says, "How long before you get it?" Then He says maybe the most important words in the story.

Bring the boy to me." **20** So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. **21** Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. **22** "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." **23** "If you can't?" said Jesus.

"Everything is possible for one who believes." **24** Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

It's a little talk about faith and doubt and unbelief. You have to be clear about what's what. On Easter Sunday we are going to talk about doubt and we are going to spend a month after Easter talking about the doubts that every single one of you have or at least have whenever you're awake. We all have doubts. That's not the same as unbelief. Heather Zemple says that while *doubt* compels us to run to God to debate, complain, argue, and question, *unbelief* causes us to abandon God. It causes us to deny the power to be changed, to refuse to step out toward a scary faith, toward a scary God we don't understand. "I believe. Help my unbelief."

25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." **26** The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." **27** But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. **28** After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" **29** He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

What a story! What a chapter in the story! If you are telling that story to kids, I guarantee you, kids are going to ask, "What happened next? Can we read the next chapter before we go to sleep?" But we're adults. We've already got plenty to chew on. The great thing about stories is that you see yourself in them. Who are you in this story? Some of us hear this story, and we're *the disciples*, aren't we? We believe. We're on Jesus' side, but we come into places like this and wonder, why doesn't this Jesus thing work for us all the time? We're like the apostle Peter. We get afraid up on the mountain. We don't know what to say but we keep talking anyway. We talk about things we don't understand. We catch glimpses of God up on the mountain and say, "There's something there" but down here in the valley, it all gets so confusing for us, doesn't it? Some of us believe but the power of our lives is so small.

As you heard this story, many of you are saying, "I may be a disciple or not, I don't know, but I've got to tell you, I'm more like *the sick son*." On the inside, many of you feel beaten up or battered. You just can't fix what you've broken or what has been broken in your life. Some of you are living in the pain of a broken relationship or fear or anger or guilt or shame and under the surface, you cannot make it stop. "Oh, God, help me!" Some of you feel like disciples and some of you feel like the sick son, but I'm betting that within the sound of my voice, every single one of you has spent time feeling like *the desperate father*. "I love so much and I can't change it. I want so much to fix it and I can't fix it. I want so much to believe it and I can't believe it."

Peter tells Mark a true story of two little boys, two sons, and a true story of two fathers. The first Father says, "This is My Boy. This is My Son, My priceless Son, and I love Him very much. Listen to Him." And He lets Him leave the mountain and go down in the valley. The other father says, "This is my son. You disciples couldn't help him. If You can help him, God, please, please help him. I believe. Help my unbelief. I believe but for God's sake, help my unbelief." A tale of two dads and two sons.

The only way you understand what happens down here, day to day, in the valley of death, in the valley of suffering and guilt and shame and D minuses on tests and broken marriages and alcoholism and lost jobs and cancer and infertility and just the steady trudging of life, the only

way to understand what happens in the valley is to get what just happened up on the mountain. Here's where Jesus gets embarrassing. Some of you went to Princeton and Harvard and the University of Minnesota. You are extremely well educated. Some of you couldn't get into Wheaton so you went to one of those schools, and if you go out into the society of your peers and say, "I believe that Jesus is the unique Son of God. I believe He is alive and working in my life," people will look at you like, "Okaaaaay, how about those Twins?"

But I've got to tell you, you cannot understand what happens in the valley, you can't get away from the supernatural Jesus if you are actually going to see the real thing. The teacher Jesus doesn't cut it. The miracle worker Jesus, it's not like He doesn't matter, but He doesn't cut it. The only Jesus that matters is the Jesus who stands up on the mountain and the Father saying, "This is My Son. Listen to Him." And He comes down off the mountain and dies and comes back from the dead. The transfiguration up on the mountain is the key to understanding the valley because it changes the way that you and I see Jesus. That's what Kari Dubord was trying to teach the kids. How do you see Jesus? [Pictures shown.] It's like I'm outside at night. I'm going for a walk and I look up and see a beautiful star and I go, "Wow! I never noticed that before." And one of my friends is with me and says, "You think that's something!" He has been looking through a telescope and that same star turns into *this!* I'll never see a star the same way again because I have seen *this!* Every time I look up into that part of the sky, I'll see *this!* Trust me if it doesn't feel like this next one will never happen, it will. Eventually you will walk outside and you will see *this*. You will see a green leaf. It's a tough illustration in March. And at the tip of that leaf will be a little drop of water and you'll go, "Oh, a sign of life!" And your friend will say, "Let me show you something," and he'll take that little drop of water and put it under a microscope and you will see *this!* A whole kingdom inside that drop of water and you'll never see a drop of water the same again.

That's what happened up on the mountain. They saw this man walk up the mountain with them and they saw *that!* They still don't understand completely. They probably never will. They don't always remember but they will never see Jesus the same way again because of what they saw up there. To the end of his life, Peter is going to say, "Not cleverly written stories, folks, I witnessed *His majesty!*" So if you're going to have a life-changing faith, the key for you is not to have an *oh-Jesus* moment. The key for you is not to have a mystical experience where you feel God's closeness. The key for you is to have eyes to see who the real Jesus is up on the mountain and hear the Father's voice saying, "This is My priceless Son. I love Him. Listen to Him. Listen to Him down *there* in the valley." The power of this story is that the Father up on the mountain sends His Son down into the valley to die for that twitchy little son who needs to be healed and for that father who cries out, "Help me!"

I'd like to bring this home to you. There should be cards at the end of each pew. One way or the other, there should be a card for everybody here. They look like this. If you are near the end of the pew, take one and pass them down the row so everybody gets one. If you don't have a pen, steal the one closest to you. They should be in the pews.

A story is just a story until it comes home to your soul. All week I've been thinking about the mountaintop and life down in the valley. I've been thinking about my friends down in the valley. One of them is named Zach. Just as I was leaving town, I got word that Zach was skiing at Vail. He is a ski racer, an eighth grader, and he's flying down the mountain and skis right into a tree. His sister is next to him and she freaks out. Little Zach is in a coma and they airlift him to the hospital. His mom and dad are out there with him and all through the night, his dad and I text

back and forth from different parts of the country. “How’s it going now?” “Know that I woke up in the middle of the night and I’m praying for you.” And Zach’s dad goes, “Oh, thank God, keep praying.”

I thought of Zach but I’ve got to tell you, I thought more about the father and the mother who were sitting there watching their little baby boy. The good news is that we believe Zach will recover, but all week long his mom and dad have been saying, “I believe, God. I believe. Help my unbelief. Help my son but help me believe that You are down here in the valley.”

I thought about my friend Mike this week. For years Mike came to a Bible study we were in. He came as the token doubter, I think just for the doughnuts and to show his wife, “Yeah, I’m a good guy. I go to the Bible study.” He really was much more about the questions than he was about any answers. We were friends, we really were, but then Mike got a brain tumor and called me up and said, “Hey, can you come to the hospital?” And he said, “Tell me about this Jesus.” We talked and he said, “I want that. I’m through playing around.” We prayed together and it was a life-changing moment for Mike. He spent the next three years of his life *living!* Not clawing up the mountain top, not all these different, being-cool things. He was *living* following Jesus and people took notice about how God had touched him.

I think about people down in the valley here, people like you, like my friend Matt. Matt and I play basketball together. He’s a great all-American guy, great looking, neat family, all the money that Jesus ever wanted. He was doing great. He’d come to church here religiously, Christmas and Easter. Then he started having kids. He had a couple of kids and was just about to ask me to baptize his kids. I was in the locker room with him, and I said, “Hey, Matt, you don’t want to ask me to baptize those kids until you’re coming to church yourself, right?” And Matt goes, “Oh, yeah, right, right.” It wasn’t until several years later that Matt came to me and said, “Things are going so well but underneath, my life is a train wreck. Underneath, I just wonder, do I love her? Can I help them? What do I really believe in? Help me.” I talked to him about the Jesus up on the mountaintop coming down to walk with Matt, to die for Matt, to come and bring Matt back to life.” And he did not get it that day or the next day or the next month, but then another friend of ours used exactly the same words and Matt got it. Now Matt follows Jesus just like Peter did. He’s just like Peter. He gets scared. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about and says something anyway, but he sees Jesus, and he follows Him.

What’s your story? What do you need help to believe today? “I believe. Help my unbelief.” What’s your story? You sit there saying, “I do believe. I believe God can help me live with this cancer, or worse, with her cancer. I believe that. Help my unbelief”. “I believe I can be forgiven for what I did but I don’t believe.” “I can’t stop hating them for what they did, Lord, that firing or that lying or that leaving or that hurting. I believe in forgiveness. Help my unbelief.” “I believe we can have a happy family. Help my unbelief.” “I believe,” I had written this in my notes, “I believe he can stop drinking,” and there was a guy right here last night who cannot stop drinking. “I believe he can stop drinking. Help my unbelief.” “I believe God can rescue my loved ones. Help my unbelief.” “I don’t believe. I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about but I want to. There’s something missing. I want to.”

God is not here to be our valet or our magician or our buddy. God is here, come down from the mountain, His priceless Son, the Father’s priceless Son, come down from the mountain into the valley of death. And He lives and dies and rises for us and for our doubt and fear and shame

and guilt. I want to have you hear God say, "I love you. I LOVE YOU! I believe in you. I want you to be forgiven and live a new life and be healed."

We're going to do something a little different now. I'm going to pray and at the end of my prayer, we're going to have a spiritual exercise up on the screen. We would ask you to use the cards that were passed out to respond.

Lord Jesus, Peter told us that story because he felt like one of the failed disciples. He felt like the sick son. He felt like the dad who couldn't believe just like all of us. I ask You to send Your Son off the mountain today that we might listen to Him, that He might forgive some of us and rescue some of us and bring to life some of us, and that He might stand there so I can say, "Help me believe, God. Help us believe." I would ask You, Lord God, to point out those areas in my life where I do not believe You, whether it is about my relationships or my money or my health or my future. I ask You to show me those places where I can say to You, "Help my unbelief." I am sure there are people here who have never made that leap and said, "Jesus, I believe." They haven't yet said, "I believe that You died and were buried and rose." I ask that they would say, "I believe" so they can begin the journey with You. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit, we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.