

“Three Can Keep a Secret...”

Mark 9:2-9

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Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison, WI

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We are about to read a story from the gospels that ranks amongst the most mystical and confounding episodes found in Jesus' life. The transfiguration happened before Jesus headed to Jerusalem, to face his trial and crucifixion. There's a lot to unpack in this passage. Mark, as a rule, moves fast and doesn't waste words. The story of the transfiguration is no exception. Listen for all the little details – the dazzling white clothes, representative of heavenly presence; Elijah and Moses, bearers of the prophets and law; the cloud of revelation, speaking the words from Jesus' baptism; the sudden disappearance. It is a dense and fast-moving passage, confounding and mysterious, thrilling and majestic. Let the mystery be a part of the passage.

Mark 9: 2-9

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[b] 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,[c] 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;[d] listen to him!” 8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, 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.

All of this amazing stuff happens at the top of that mountain. Inexplicable events, powerful visions, clothes that are lighter than any could ever bleach them. The appearance of two of the most important and revered fathers of the church. God's pronouncement, repeating the fact that Jesus is indeed God's beloved son. I have a hard time imagining anything more incredible. What's the first inclination that you would have? I know I'd immediately text my wife to tell her about this weird thing that happened at work today. She wouldn't believe me, but then I'd send her a picture that I took while it was happening, that would clear things up. The disciples didn't have this option. For one, they didn't have cell phones. But for another, Jesus put the kibosh on it before they had a chance. "He ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen". Bummer. Seriously, what a bummer. Can you imagine how hard that was to keep to themselves? My wife's birthday is tomorrow, and I had an idea for a gift for her that I was excited about. I was so excited about it that, just last week, I told her what I was getting her. I let slip a secret that had little consequence, and honestly should have been really easy to keep. Could you imagine being told that the secret that you need to keep is that the Messiah is here among us? The amount of time I can keep a secret that I'm excited about is about the amount of time it takes for me to cross paths with someone. If you're racking your brains to remember if you told me any secrets, don't worry. I promise that I will keep your secrets. I just have a hard time holding on to good news. I can only imagine what it took to hold in the fact that the disciples have just witnessed the best news. But this is far from the only time that Jesus told people that they had to keep a secret. We heard Charlie read the story of Jesus healing a leper in Mark. After that healing, Jesus told him

“see that you say nothing to anyone”. In Mark 7 Jesus cured a deaf man, and after doing that “Jesus ordered them to tell no one.” In Mark 8, Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah. After he says that Jesus “sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him”. Jesus clearly was not doing it just to get famous.

So how did that work out for him? Let’s go back to chapter 1. Jesus healed the leper and said “see that you say nothing to anyone”, to which the quick response is that “he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly”. In Mark 7, the conundrum of telling people to keep a secret is laid out very plainly “Then Jesus^[1] ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it”. Seriously. The more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. Do I think that these people were trying to be jerks? No, certainly not. Is it ridiculous that they just wouldn’t listen to him? Yes, it certainly is. The word clearly spread, the secret clearly got out. When Jesus told his disciples to get some relaxation, some people saw them sneaking off and then before they knew it, there was a crowd of 5000 that Jesus was teaching. The word got out. Even the disciples seemed to break the confidence of Jesus. The inscription at the top of the cross said “The King of the Jews”. During his trial he was mocked for being ‘the king of the Jews’. However, nowhere in the gospel does Jesus say anything about being the king of the Jews. One of the only ways that people would have known anything about his messiahship is if the beans were spilled, which would have been because the disciples blabbed. In a Bible study earlier this week I was marveling at the fact that nobody seemed to be able to keep Jesus secrets. One of the members of the group, who takes a particular interest in how the mind works, said that the human brain has a hard time understanding the word ‘don’t’. For those of you with kids, you may be nodding your heads in agreement, but it boggles my mind that these grown up adults still can’t keep their mouths closed when Jesus tells them to.

But what is the point of all this secrecy? In the passage from Mark 1, we find out that once the former leper blabs about Jesus then he becomes a bit of a local celebrity. After that, Jesus couldn't hang out in town without being mobbed by people looking to be healed. Obviously, this is not ideal for someone who wants to travel and teach in the towns and villages. It seems like the same thing happened when Jesus healed the deaf man. The more he said don't, the more they did. The more they did, the harder it was for Jesus to do his work. But why would Jesus tell his disciples to keep quiet about his Messiahship? Perhaps the key lies in what Jesus says in Mark 8: 11-12 "The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. ¹² And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation." It may be easier to believe that Jesus is the Messiah if you see the transfiguration on the mountain, but is that faith born out of understanding, or merely witnessing? While Jesus was still present with the disciples they did not seem to understand the significance of who he was. Sure, they knew he was an amazing guy. Sure, they knew that he did some amazing things. They certainly knew that Jesus had a special relationship with God. But the Gospel of Mark consistently tells us that the disciples just did not get what was going on. And if the disciples didn't get it, then certainly those who were in Jesus periphery would not be able to understand. Jesus did not want the news to get out about these miraculous events because they weren't the point of his messiahship. They were an outgrowth of his messianic identity, but Jesus was not anointed because he did miracles, but rather because of who he was. Miraculous transfigurations on the top of mountains are great, and the revelation to the disciples is significant. However, much more significant is the ways in which Jesus relationship to neighbor revealed God's character and how God calls us to treat each other. Much more significant than mountaintop transfigurations is declaration of the kingdom to come. Perhaps the disciples

grasped some of this. Certainly they tried. Perhaps we are working to grasp this, certainly we try. But the secrets out, now. There's no reason for us to puzzle through this on the top of mountains, or at night around a fire.

The secret's out. The word has spread. The Gospels have been written, translated, published, disseminated, paraphrased, interpreted, misinterpreted and proclaimed from pulpits worldwide. As he was coming down from the mountain Jesus tells the disciples "to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead". But that moment has passed. We have heard the good news of the resurrection and we have been given free rein to share this news to the whole world. Ironically, this is how the Gospel of Mark originally ended, " But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." ⁸ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid". For perhaps the first time in the Gospel, someone actually kept their mouth shut. Unfortunately it's at precisely the wrong time. But when Mark wrote the gospel, he did not just write it as a story of Jesus' life, but as a tool for us to learn from, to use in our lives. The angel telling the women to share the good news was not just talking to the women, but also to us, and to anyone who hears this good news. So how do we spread the news of Jesus Christ? One way in which the good news is spread is through a life of upright character and integrity. As the hymn says "they will know we are Christians by our love". In reaching out to neighbor, welcoming the stranger, loving the outcast, we are declaring that God's good news is that all are loved and that all are welcomed. One way in which the good news is spread is to declare what we are against. It can be hard to declare something as sinful in our world. But when we loudly decry the pervasive evils of racism, sexism and homophobia, among other societal and individual sins we are participating in the spreading of the good news, sharing that God's kingdom is open to all, and that the ways

of sin will fall away. In gathering for worship, in coming to this place to learn and grow in our faith we are declaring that the good news holds a priority in our lives, and declaring that the good news is part of who we are. Sharing the good news can be as simple as affirming to skeptics and loved ones that our identity as a Christian informs the ways in which we express our love for each other. Through mission and service, through compassion and care, through demonstrating God's love we are declaring the good news. What is this good news? It can mean so many things to so many different people. The good news of the Gospel reveals a kingdom that is radically different than the world that we know of. The good news of the Gospel tells us that we have been redeemed and given life abundant. The good news of the Gospel tells us that all of us are loved beyond our comprehension, and that this love shines through the darkness. This good news tells us that even in the face of sin, evil, death and the cross that God has the last word. That the response to this egregious and needless violence is resurrection, life and peace. Thinking about this good news makes it exceedingly clear why all of those people couldn't keep the secret that Jesus asked them to. It's the most exciting secret of all. The good news is a secret that animates our hearts and brings human beings together to celebrate the abundance of creation and the persistence of God's love. Maybe the best news of all, though, is that it's no longer a secret. It is good news for all people, it is God's grace extended to the world, and in the light of Jesus resurrection and in the light of his revelation to us, we are free to go and should from the mountaintops how amazing it is to love and be loved.