

## Living with the Texts: “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”

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Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell a strange story  
about something that happened  
very shortly before Jesus was arrested and killed.  
For three years now Jesus has been preaching and teaching  
in small villages and communities.  
He preaches love and compassion and healing  
to anyone who will listen.  
Now he is getting ready to go to Jerusalem.  
And his disciples are worried,  
because he’s started to talk a little bit wild.  
He’s started to talk like he thinks he’s going to die soon,  
like he thinks it’s his destiny to be killed,  
and he gets mad at them when they tell him to cut it out.  
It’s scary.  
They don’t know what to think.

Peter, James, and John are three disciples  
who have been with him a long time.  
They were the fishermen Jesus called right at the beginning.  
He said to them,  
“Come with me and I will make you fishers of people.”  
And they came, and they’ve been with him ever since.  
Now, three years on,  
Jesus asks them to climb up to the top of a mountain with him.  
They go.  
This is desert country. It’s hot and dusty.  
The sun beats down, just a few desert trees for shade.  
As they climb, their packs are heavy  
but they feel their mental burdens get lighter and lighter.

All the pressure from the people below,  
all their needs and hopes and cares,  
it lifts for a time. They feel freer, more relaxed.

They get to the top  
and maybe they think it's time to flop down and take a rest,  
unlace their sandals and give their tired feet some air,  
pull out the canteens and drink some water.

Peter and James and John are so glad Jesus suggested this little  
getaway. He has been so stressed lately. They worry about him.  
Mountains are always good for him, they know.

They love to see their beloved teacher lying on his back  
and squinting up at the blue sky overhead,  
putting the weight of the world aside for a little  
and just enjoying the day.

Can't you see him lying back and propping his head in his hands  
with a little half-smile on his face?

Only that's not what happens this time.

What happens is so strange, it's like a dream.

They turn around and they're blinded for a moment—  
what's happened?

Jesus is glowing, his face is shining like light is coming out of it.  
His ratty old robe has turned brilliant white,  
not just white but whiter than anything could possibly be,  
pure light.

And next to Jesus are two other people they don't recognize,  
only now they do—

they know, the way you know things in dreams without being told,  
this is Elijah, the great prophet and healer of days gone by,  
and next to him Moses, he who led his people out of slavery  
and looked God in the face at the top of Mt. Sinai.

The three of them, Jesus, Elijah, Moses,  
talking solemnly together.

The disciples are shocked. They're terrified.  
They don't know what to think; they're overwhelmed.  
Peter has no idea what to do, but he's the leader;  
he feels he has to say something;  
he says, "Shall we make three dwellings,  
one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah?"  
He's offering to build them tabernacles  
like the one the stories tell us  
the Israelites built in the desert as a house for God.  
But he's just babbling, he has no idea what's going on.

Then a cloud appears above them,  
and out of the cloud they hear a voice, saying,  
"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Then, nothing.  
They blink and the cloud is gone.  
Moses and Elijah, disappeared.  
Jesus is there in his ratty old robe again.  
The sun beats down, but that strange shining brilliance is gone.  
The birds are singing.  
The day comes back as it was.  
But something has happened.  
Something has happened.

Days later, Jesus is arrested and tried and killed.  
And Peter and James and John and the other disciples  
have to pull themselves together and mourn and go on without him.  
And that strange memory lingers.  
What was it?  
Was it a dream?  
Was it a vision?  
What was that voice booming out of the cloud?  
Something happened there.  
Something happened.

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Beloved friends, on this day  
when we are lifting up the life and death of a man  
many of us would name as the greatest prophet of this land,  
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,  
I can't stop thinking of that story from Matthew and Mark and Luke,  
that moment when the disciples turned  
and saw their leader, their teacher, transfigured, glowing like the sun,  
and they knew something weighty and most serious was happening.

On the rainy night of April 3, 1968,  
Dr. King stood up at a church in Memphis, Tennessee,  
and spoke to the crowd of people there.  
I want to play for you now his closing words on that evening.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its  
place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do  
God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And  
I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get  
there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a  
people, will get to the promised land!  
So I'm happy, tonight.  
I'm not worried about anything.  
I'm not fearing any man.  
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

The very next day Dr. King was gunned down by an assassin's bullet.  
Friends, I tell you a mystery which I do not understand:  
something happened that night.  
How could he have known?  
How could anyone have known what was coming

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., speech delivered 3 April 1968, Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ Headquarters), Memphis, Tennessee.

on that next dreadful day?  
Dr. King had been receiving death threats for years.  
There was danger in the air.  
But no one had any reason to suspect what was about to happen.  
The Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles was there that night. He recalls,

Many of us, grown men, were crying.  
We didn't know why we were crying.  
We had no way of knowing  
that would be the last speech of his life.  
And then he took us to the mountaintop....  
He preached himself through the fear of death.  
He just got it out of him.  
He just dealt with it.  
And it was like, what did he know that we didn't know?<sup>2</sup>

Dr. King's mountaintop was the great Mt. Sinai,  
the place where Moses stood and looked on the face of God.  
Dr. King's story was the great story of Exodus,  
a prophet leading his people out of slavery  
into the Promised Land of freedom.

But today I'm thinking about that other mountaintop  
where Peter and James and John looked on the teacher they loved,  
transfigured, glowing with light,  
and in my imagination it is the same light  
that glowed in those words of Dr. King  
and still has the power to bring tears of sorrow and wonder and awe  
to all who loved him and love him still.  
I'm thinking of all of us who were left behind  
and had to figure out a way to keep going.

I am a skeptical person by nature.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in "Remembering MLK's Prophetic 'Mountaintop' Speech," posted at  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89326670>.

I've never witnessed anything I would call supernatural.  
But that speech of Dr. King,  
something happened there.  
Something happened.  
And in my mind I almost think I hear a whisper saying,  
*it's OK,*  
*it's OK,*  
*what you think of as death is not what you think.*  
*It's OK.*  
*We are held,*  
*we are free,*  
*we are safe.*

Will you be with me once more in a spirit of meditation and prayer:

On this day when our hearts are heavy  
witnessing to all the violence that surrounds us,  
may we be comforted and strengthened and renewed  
by the grace and mystery that surround us unceasingly.

As we mourn the death of Dr. King  
and so many other martyrs to justice;  
as we mourn for those killed in Arizona,  
those whose lives have been taken here in our communities,  
those who are killed every day by violence in every land on Earth,  
let us also and always open ourselves to wonder and hope.  
Let us rejoice in all those good and decent people  
who rise up again and again  
and call us to live in a better way,  
Let us marvel  
at the way hearts can change and soften and heal.

And so let us recommit ourselves to the cause of justice and peace.  
In our every thought may kindness dwell.  
May our speech be an inspiration to all who seek hope and wisdom.

May our every deed, rooted in love,  
take root in the ground of history  
and help to make this earth a place of justice and freedom for all.  
And may we trust always in that power which has brought us forth  
and sustains us and will receive us in the end.

In the name of Dr. King and all whom we cherish,  
in the name of Jesus and all the teachers,  
in the name of everything sacred,  
in the name of love,  
let us say:  
Amen.