

**Eyewitness to Majesty©****2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9****February 26, 2017****Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates**

Tonight is the big night when all the Hollywood movie stars will get all glammed up and walk the red carpet. The cameras will be flashing and news people will be interviewing them. Some of them will be there with great high hopes that they will win that golden statue named Oscar – a symbol of their achievement in becoming famous and great – great actors and actresses.

Tonight is their night for glory. It is the night when they shine. Of course for some, it may be their *only* night to shine. If they don't win, if their movie isn't that well received they could be raised up this evening ... and never be known by next year.

That was sort of what the people Peter was writing to were feeling about Jesus. They were questioning the validity of the second coming of Jesus – of Christ's promise to return and to raise his Church up. Maybe they felt that Jesus' time to shine had faded.

Peter obviously is doing all he can to encourage and convince them that Jesus is still as divine, as relevant and as worthy of trust in his promises as he was when he was on earth. These were new Gentile Christians who were facing persecution; who were about to give up all hope in the faith.

Peter says he and James and John were eyewitness to Jesus' majesty. Isn't it true that when you are talking to someone who actually was there and witnessed something, it is much easier to be convinced ... to believe the story?

I want to share an interesting story with you that happened when I was a senior in high school. One morning my brother David and I were standing outside waiting for the school bus. We lived out on a gravel road, eight miles from town. It was real early and just barely light outside.

Suddenly, I looked up and saw this round, shiny silver object flying up in the sky. I was so surprised and excited! Of course, I pointed to it and showed it to David who also was amazed at what we saw.

It absolutely was a UFO. Because it was unidentified, it was flying, and it was an object that we had never witnessed flying in the sky before.

It was flying high enough that we could not see detail on it but low enough to see that it was not a plane, it wasn't a drone (at least at the time we'd never heard of a drone and it did not look like any drone I've seen since). It was fairly large and flying rather slow.

David and I were very puzzled and excited. This was a time when flying saucers were the thing to talk about.

The school bus came and we had to get on and we were very animated as we told our bus driver and the few friends that were already on the bus what we had seen. They got excited too, just by our excitement and description.

We never did know what it was, or see one like it again, but fifty years later I still remember that morning and how I felt seeing it.

Are you convinced that we saw something? Could you see in my face and hear in my voice the excitement as a firsthand eyewitness?

Well, that was what Peter was hoping for the new Christians – that they would see in his face something even more exciting – the reflection of what he, James and John had seen in the light shining from Jesus' transfiguration.

Peter was there, on that mountaintop, and saw with his own eyes this amazing metamorphosis of Jesus. He saw Jesus changed from a common looking human to the glorified God that he is.

He saw the prophets of old with Jesus – Moses, who represented the law – the 10 Commandments; and he saw Elijah the prophet who represented all the prophets of old and the prophecy they gave to the people about a coming Messiah.

Both Moses and Elijah, like Jesus, went up to the high, holy mountain where God was there in the clouds. Both performed miracles and both were rejected like Jesus was.

Peter's response was to build three booths as a memorial. He surely was making the connection here of the Feast of Booths which was a celebration or festival, reminding the Jewish people of the time when God led them through the wilderness, keeping them safe and guiding them with his shining glory through a cloud of fire.

There is no response to that suggestion. Instead, we hear the voice of God coming from a cloud – just as we did in Jesus' baptism. God says, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

God is saying this is the one to trust. Jesus is the one to understand, to obey and follow. This is truly my Son ... the Messiah. God doesn't want memorials. God wants us to be living memorials as we witness to the glory and the power of God's Son. He has the power to save us all from our sin and from the death that has bound us up.

Here is Peter – hot tempered, impetuous – yet the first one to say that he believes Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. He made that confession just before this mountaintop experience. But then, he rebuked Jesus' own teaching about his upcoming death.

And Jesus rebuked Peter. In fact, he called him Satan because Peter would not hear and accept what Jesus was saying about his suffering and death.

I'm not sure why Peter thought it was so good that he and James and John were there, but I do think we can see how good it was for Peter to actually witness this glorified Jesus – Jesus who knew exactly what he was talking about; Jesus who shone as the Divine Savior.

And we might wonder why these three? Why is this little group Jesus' pick for this mountaintop experience? They are obviously the inner circle with Jesus. These three seem to be closest to Jesus' and seem to be the apprentices, if you will, as they learn to lead.

Peter is the one Jesus renames "The Rock" and says he is the one who will be the builder of the Church.

When these three disciples heard the voice of God, they fell to the ground. Terrified. And Jesus comes to them, puts a reassuring hand on them and tells them not to be afraid. When they look up all they see is Jesus. Moses and Elijah are gone. It is just Jesus now that their eyes are focused on. He is all they see.

So. So what? What does this amazing story have to do with us? What is our lesson, our challenge? What do we gain from this story?

First of all, we read that soon after this they went back down the mountain, back to their hard, difficult lives that were going to get much, much harder as they made their way to Jerusalem and to the cross where Jesus would endure much suffering and death. And Jesus tells them that they were not to tell anyone what they had seen until after his death and resurrection.

This was an amazing experience that would empower them to be witnesses, to be strong leaders and teachers in the face of unbelievable opposition and persecution, but also as they preached with conviction, because of what they had seen, as more and more people would come to believe.

They were now going down the mountain and into the valley. They had been as high as they could be, elated with the experience they had just had. But they were going to the valley where they would experience the darkest days like they had never experienced before.

In the valley we see shadows. Shadows that are frightening and intimidating. But if you think about it, a shadow cannot really hurt you. And shadows are only there because there is light coming from somewhere – right? Without light there would be no shadow.

In all they faced, they remembered the light shining from Jesus' glory. They could face shadows and valleys because of the empowerment and encouragement of the Light.

So when we are in the valleys, when we are facing shadows in our lives, we too can be encouraged as we read the story from an eyewitness. The shadows in our lives cannot hurt us because we have the Light of Christ's glory always reflecting through that shadow.

But we also are called to think about the times in our own lives when we were perhaps terrified, yet amazed as we realized we were in the holy presence of God. Some of us may think we've never had that mountaintop experience, but some of us certainly have.

Just as Peter was an eyewitness and shared his experience, we too are to share our own experiences of the glory of Christ with those who are facing valleys and shadows ... those who have no experience of the Light, or who need to be reminded of the presence of the Light – the Light of the world.

We who are believers can surely name some experience of God being in our lives ... of God giving us the encouragement and empowerment we have needed in the times of being in the valley and in the shadows.

There is nothing quite so great as an eyewitness to the majesty of God – except the actual majesty of God that dwells in our Savior, Jesus Christ. He is the one to trust. The one we can follow with all assurance that no matter what, He is with us and will lead us out of the shadows and into the full light of his glory.

Let us watch for the places where we see him and let us tell the world what we have seen. We no longer have to be silent. He is risen and we are witnesses.

Just as the disciples made their way down the mountain, into the valley – just as Jesus was about make his journey to the cross, we now are making the transition from Epiphany – where we see these amazing glimpses of who Jesus is – into the journey of Lent where we will reflect and consider all Jesus went through in his saving death for us; where we will discover anew what our response should be.

I hope you will make it a priority to begin the Lenten journey together this Wednesday as we come to observe Ash Wednesday and to remember how frail we are as mortals and how much we need a Savior. Amen.

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