“Splinters and All”

Matthew 16:24-17:8

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What happened during those six days? Matthew doesn’t fill us in on the details. So we’re left to wonder: what happened in those six days? What happened after Jesus told the disciples the truth about discipleship? They’d been following him for quite some time, and now he brings up the reality of their situation. He tells them that if they want to follow him, they must deny themselves and pick up their cross, splinters and all.. Those who want to save their precious lives can find an exit. Those who can’t handle the weight of their cross can back out now. Before proceeding further, Jesus tells his disciples that they must seriously think about what they are getting into. They can’t go into this halfheartedly. They can’t carry on if they are in it for their own glory. Only if they are willing to pick up their crosses and humbly follow, will Jesus let them continue.

You can probably think of an example from a book or movie, where a character learns they must die in order to succeed at their mission. Harry Potter comes to mind for me. I apologize for any spoilers I’m about to give away, but if you haven’t read the books or seen the movies, I highly recommend them. In the story, Harry is a young wizard who finds himself in a battle against Lord Voldemort. He learns from a prophecy that the only way for Lord Voldemort to be defeated is if Harry Potter dies. Harry is then faced with the reality of his situation. It’s a rather frightening one, with a grim outcome. He must decide if he is willing to proceed, or if he’d rather go hide and live off the grid. Abandon his responsibility for saving the world.

This is the decision the disciples are facing. Jesus gives them this loaded information and they must decide what to do with it.

So what happened in the six days after Jesus tells them this? How did they react? What did they say? Matthew is so vague on the details! Were they scared? Were they contemplating heading home rather than heading to Jerusalem? What were they feeling as they came to terms with this situation. Once they learn what it really takes to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

I can’t say for sure, but I would venture to guess they didn’t respond with confidence. They probably didn’t give Jesus a firm “yes” right on the spot. We’ve seen other times when these disciples act foolishly. Times when they miss the point and fail to thrive as disciples. Times when they doubted or questioned or just plain denied Jesus.

So why would this scene be any different? Based on their pattern of behavior, the disciples were probably freaked out by Jesus’ information. Pick up our crosses? Lose our lives to save them? Was that in the fine print when we signed on to this discipleship gig? I don’t remember seeing that in the contract. Perhaps they spent those six days figuring out whether or not they wanted to continue on this journey. Trying to decide if discipleship was really worth it. Wondering if they could handle it, splinters and all.

Or maybe they just thought Jesus was being dramatic again. Perhaps he was speaking in hyperbole. Exaggerating his story. Maybe they spent those six days trying to decipher this cryptic message. They could have spent that time determining if he was mentally unstable. His words were pretty bold. Hard to believe a sane person would say them.

We can’t say for sure what was going through their heads in those six days. Matthew doesn’t tell us that part.

But six days after this dramatic scene we are told of another dramatic scene. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a mountain. He doesn’t seem to tell them what he is up to. But they trusted him enough to follow him up that high mountain. Suddenly he was transfigured before them, and turned into a very shiny, bright white Jesus. His face shone like the sun. His clothes turned whiter than any bleach could turn them. Moses and Elijah appear. They nonchalantly begin to talk with Jesus. The disciples are overcome by wonder and Peter offers to build dwellings for the three. But then God interrupts and speaks from heaven. “Here’s my boy,” God tells them. “He’s the real deal, the beloved Son of God. I’m proud of him and I recommend that you listen to him!” The disciples fall to the ground in fear and Jesus comes over to them. When they look up, the whole scene has returned to normal. The lights and voices and dead prophets are gone. It’s just them and Jesus, telling them not to be afraid. As quickly as it all happened, it was all over.

These three disciples have been given a preview of Easter.

After giving them the bad news that their stories will end in failure and losing and death. After they had six days to mull all of that over and decide if it was worth it. Jesus takes them up the mountain and gives them a taste of Easter. He offers them this glimpse of hope. Confirming that he is the son of God. That he is backed by those great prophets Moses and Elijah. That God has sent him to transform the world. That he is the bridge that connects heaven and earth.

In this Easter moment, the disciples are told that after the struggle. After trudging through this world with all the pains and struggles that come with it. After living the dangerous life of a disciple of Jesus, it will all be worth it. Resurrection will come. Jesus will triumph. Salvation and relief will arrive. Telling them wasn’t enough. They had to see it with their own eyes.

Jesus shows them that their story is not hopeless. Yes death will occur, but resurrection always follows. He tells them to stay focused and remain faithful, even in the hard and ugly times.

When the life of discipleship gets hard for us. When it turns out not to be what we expected. When participating in the life of the church is more disappointing than fulfilling. When following Jesus is more difficult or more painful than we anticipated, we’re given reminders that it isn’t hopeless. Picking up our crosses, bearing that burden with splinters and all will be worth it. The challenges and pains and fears that we have today will be transformed by God. All of the pain we endure, the fear we experience will be but a distant memory when we are swept up into the presence of God.

This story reminds us that following Christ is hard. It isn’t always rewarding. But we have to keep our eyes focused on that future hope that in the end it will all turn out okay.

As this scene on top of that mountain reminds us, Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Our hope is in him alone. Because in Christ, there is hope in transformation and healing and resurrection.