

“Get Up and Do Not Be Afraid”  
2 Peter 1:16-21 and Matthew 17:1-9  
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My secret is out. I’ve been unmasked. You now know the source of the last part of my benediction, the one I use almost every week. “You will do well,” Peter says, “to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.” Pastors are thieves, don’t you know, and I stole this little gem from a former pastor of mine in Pittsburgh. But do you know where the beginning comes from? I didn’t either - I just assumed it belonged to Pastor Willie Ludlow - until I did a little research one day and learned that the author of the words “Life is not lost by dying! Life is lost minute by minute, day by dragging day, in all the thousand, uncaring ways,” was none other than Stephen Vincent Benét, a fine and popular author in his own right, but more importantly to me, the brother of William Rose Benét, who was the compiler of my most treasured reference volume, *The Reader’s Encyclopedia*, long considered the standard American guide to world literature.

*The Reader’s Encyclopedia* is a book which assists readers in getting the most out of their reading. Though its usefulness is near to being eclipsed by Wikipedia and the World Wide Web, it sheds light on vague and obscure references that readers may encounter going along through their favorite book of poetry or their current novel. It is the kind of book you would consult, should the

preacher of the day make a passing reference in his sermon to Stephen Vincent Benét, to learn that Benét was a writer in the early twentieth century most famous for his poem, “John Brown’s Body” for which he received the Pulitzer Prize in 1929. And where else would you learn that Stephen Vincent and William Rose were brothers?

My copy of *The Reader’s Encyclopedia* holds a special place in my heart and on my bookshelf because of the way in which I received it, as a gift from someone who gave me her only backup copy of this book, at a time when it was out of print. The presentation of this gift was the culmination of a semester’s worth of transfiguration experiences, each displaying the power of the English language to shape my thinking and the thinking of others. Time and time again during that semester, I was humbled into intellectual paralysis by the great essayists we read - George Orwell and E.B. White among the greatest - who displayed in the length, and often the form of, a sermon, a clarity of thought, an ability to stir the imagination, and a facility with words that made me question whether I could ever have anything to say. At times I would despair that I should ever write anything half as coherent or cogent as these esteemed gentlemen. And as if that humility were not enough, all this came after I had enrolled in this class in protest, being forced as I was to take Freshmen English as a Sophomore transfer who had already taken a year of English composition elsewhere. But praise God for the stubborn

bureaucrats who forced me into the classroom of Bethany Brown, a rough talking, Shakespeare loving, cigarette smoking, wannabe actress paying the bills as a mere adjunct English professor. Through that semester of transfiguration, it was she, through the gifts of Orwell and White, who taught me that I knew nothing about writing but also that I had some meager gifts to share in that wonderful literary form of the essay, gifts that would one day be used in the pulpits I am honored to fill. It was Bethany Brown who gave me her penultimate copy of *The Reader's Encyclopedia* at the end of that remarkable period of discovery.

Looking back, I can recall many times when I was sure I could not write another word or think another thought, that Bethany Brown would, in her own way, offer the encouraging words Jesus offered to Peter and James and John, "Get up and do not be afraid." When my intellect and my self-confidence were laid out on the classroom floor like the prostrate disciples on the ground of the mountaintop, she would find a way to help me pick myself up and take my place once again hunched over my manual typewriter to discover a strength to carry on, and carry on well, that I never knew I had. How simple a thing it is, really, to remind someone that the things we fear aren't really as fearsome as they seem. "Get up and do not be afraid," she might as well have said, or "You won't be George Orwell or E. B. White, but you won't be Stacey Steck either if you don't

stop comparing yourself to them.” And so when I got over being afraid I’d never write well enough, I began to write better than I ever imagined.

I referred to that time as a semester of transfiguration, even though I was transformed. The word transfiguration is close enough to the word transformation to lead us into confusion. But there is indeed a difference between transfiguration and transformation. Jesus was not transformed, which is to say, changed, on that mountaintop. He did not become what he was not already. He did not morph from one thing into another in either body or spirit. His face and clothes were still identifiable. Instead, it was his appearance that changed for just a short time to reveal yet more of his divinity and thus the fullness of himself as the Son of God, and with that knowledge it was the disciples who were transformed. Jesus was reflecting the light of God that it might shine on the disciples. During that semester under Bethany Brown’s tutelage, the literature of the twentieth century did not change; E.B. White’s words were exactly the same as when he wrote them and nobody edited Orwell’s words just for me. But they were revealed to me in a new light, a light which left me transformed as I came down off my mountaintop.

There are many parts of the story of Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountaintop that are worth spending time with. The raw power of God, the appearance of Old Testament figures long since gone, the voice from within a cloud. All of these offer plenty for us to ponder, but the truth is that most of us

won't come face to face with these phenomena, and probably don't want to. My Old Testament professor in Seminary used to say he thanked God every day he never had encounters with the divine like these. That's because even without supernatural phenomena, there is enough in our lives already that make us fall to the ground in fear, things which makes us question our faith or existence, our calling or our capacity to love, our ability to carry on, our integrity, indeed, things that make us question the very existence of God. Are not cancer and tsunamis and gang violence and child sexual abuse and war enough to throw us to the ground before powers greater than ourselves? Are not changes in our culture and family and church enough for us to fall prostrate, feeling acutely our inability to hold our ground? Sooner or later, we all bump up against something that makes us curl up on the floor in a little ball.

What I love about this story is that Jesus doesn't let the disciples stay in their condition. He doesn't gloat. He's not condescending. He doesn't do an ancient Israelite version of an endzone celebration. His word of encouragement is simple: "Get up and do not be afraid," and his presence is comforting. Matthew tells us that "when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone," a hint of things to come at the end of the story when Jesus reminds the disciples that "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Hearing reassuring words like "I am with you, you do not need to be afraid, have courage, get up and live your life," these

are the blessings that come with knowing Jesus Christ. No doubt the disciples were still a little shaky as they left that mountaintop, but they did travel back down the path to the rest of their earthly and eternal lives. They did survive, and they even thrived, and that is the content of abundant life, of living hope, of genuine relationship with Christ.

Matthew was wise to include this story in his account of Jesus' life and ministry because Jesus' command to "Get up and do not be afraid" is not one meant only for that mountaintop, or that day, or just for those disciples. Indeed, we can say that the experience emboldened the disciples for their futures as the leaders of the early church. You see, the encouragement to "Get up and do not be afraid" was not issued only for one dramatic episode, but also as a prelude to the passion of Christ, as a prelude to the charge to make disciples of all nations, as a prelude to the suffering each of them would endure for the sake of the Gospel, for in each of these subsequent experiences, the disciples will come face to face with overwhelming power, or a seemingly unattainable goal, and yet persevere, finding the courage to go on even when they might be tempted to fall to the ground for fear of life or failure. From this Transfiguration experience of meeting the heart, hands, and voice of God face to shining face, they took a lifetime of encouragement, a few lapses into fear notwithstanding. And so ask yourself this question: had they not picked themselves up off the ground and overcome their fear, had they run

screaming in the other direction from Christ when he said, “Get up and do not be afraid,” where would we be today? Where would *we* be today? I daresay we would be in the same condition as those who find themselves today literally, figuratively, or psychically lying in overwhelming anxiety, inconsolable sorrow, unremitting pain, paralyzing fear, inescapable violence, unrepented sin, or in a host of other ways to describe the death of despair, lying there with no one to offer a word of encouragement or a comforting presence, no one to extend a heart, hand, or voice that is connected to the body of abundant life.

If you were to search the Internet for the words to my benediction, you’d find that I’ve been misquoting Stephen Vincent Benét a little bit all these years, leaving out a few words and adding some others. But I think he and Bethany Brown will forgive me. But the reason I use that benediction most every week is because I know that what he says is true, so true that you can’t be reminded of it often enough. Life is not lost by dying. Life is lost moment by moment, hour by hour, day by dragging day, in a thousand small uncaring ways. May the God who loves us, and loves all people, and loves all creation, help us to find life by being the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in our hearts. As we share together in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, may we each experience the grace the disciples did on the mountaintop,

and may it transfigure us, that through us, God's grace may transform others as we ourselves have been transformed. Amen.