

Peter's Faith

Jesus prayed that Peter's faith would not fail. And it didn't. Peter's courage failed, certainly. His fear caused him to deny Jesus three times. But even before Jesus' trial and death, Peter knew his role. After he turns back, after he comes back from denying his Lord, he knows that he is to strengthen his brothers.

Strange, isn't it, that the disciple who has the greatest public failure is the one whom God calls to strengthen his brothers? Jesus knew that Peter was going to be the one to fail. And Jesus chose to give Peter the extra gift of faith despite—or because of—it.

It takes someone who has walked through the valley to lead others through the valley. Peter is primed to strengthen the other disciples simply because he's been on the road they are walking. He has been afraid and denied his Lord, and then in returning to him received forgiveness. Peter has walked far enough down that road to know the road leads to the One they love the most. He can give them encouragement, food and water, and strength along the way.

Lord, give me faith today. I want your faith that is perfect. Mine is so weak. Let me trust your faith, and let your faith bring healing in our midst. —*Kristine Blaess*



Doors and Other Thresholds

I have a thing for doors. I suppose it began when I saw the doors to my first cathedral—I remember climbing the wide steps leading up to doors six times my height and hearing the sounds as they opened. The doors filled me with awe and excitement. To this day, whether at cathedrals or someone's home, I get excited standing at a threshold. It is a moment of arriving, a moment of beginning.

I have come to see how I am equally enamored with the various metaphoric thresholds I encounter in my life. As a person seeking God, I have journeyed to the threshold of faith. As one in recovery, I have knocked on the door of a clean and sober life. As a father, I have come to the place where my children and I can enter into a new level of intimacy. As a husband, I have stood where I could know and be known.

Thresholds one and all...the problem is, I'm too scared to open the doors.

Rather than open the door, I stand and admire it. I celebrate reaching the threshold. I point at it for others to see. Too often, my journey ends there. Rather than enter, I'll put a fresh coat of paint on the door or polish its hardware. I'll buy a spotlight to show the door to others, but I won't open it. I'll buy another book about Jesus instead of building a personal relationship with him. I'll create another lesson plan for newcomers of twelve-step recovery instead of traveling up and down the steps myself. I'll buy my children or wife something, rather than give them myself.

At the beginning of this new year, it's a good time to stop standing at the thresholds and cross over, to stop admiring the doors and open them. There is new, and more abundant, life on the other side, but to reach it we need to open the door. —*Chip Bristol*



Transfiguration

*Then from the cloud came a voice that said,
“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”*

— LUKE 9:35

Watching *Antiques Roadshow* on public television is a witness to transfiguration, in a way. That odd bowl that great-grandma would never allow anyone to pitch into the garbage, even though everyone in the family tried, turns out to be a rare example of pottery from a long-forgotten women’s religious community. And it’s also worth quite a bit. Nothing changed, really, about the bowl itself. It’s still an awful shade of green that matched the whipped pistachio salad Aunt Gertrude made for Thanksgiving each year. But now, someone showed us the real value by explaining what it was. Someone showed us a value we ourselves may have been incapable of seeing.

When Peter, James, and John go with Jesus to the mountaintop, Jesus doesn’t change. He goes up the mountain the Son of God. And he comes down the mountain the Son of God. Yes, his face shone and his clothes became a dazzling white, but who Jesus is—the Son of God—is the same. But in this moment, along with Moses and Elijah, God has explained, in a particular way, who Jesus is to those who will hear.

God’s son. God’s Chosen. The one we should listen to.

God shares the deep value of Jesus, a value of which we may be unaware at times. We’d rather listen to our own egos, our own agendas, even our own fears. God, however, reminds us the source of real wealth in life.

In the unexpected and odd, God shows us the wealth of our lives in Christ. —*Laurie Brock*



Unexpected Mercy

As a child, I was the difficult one. Not bad, exactly, or deliberately disobedient, but curious, daring, dangerously creative. Being punished was as much a part of my life as perpetually scraped knees.

One night I did the stupidest thing I can recall from my childhood: I talked Mikey Adams into getting into my wagon with me and riding it down the steeply sloped driveway that led to the garage under his house. What made this the stupidest act of my childhood was that the metal garage door was closed, and we both were totally aware that it was closed, when I pushed off the sidewalk at the top of the driveway.

I have no idea what law of physics my six-year-old self expected to bend. What did happen was we hit that door at top speed, with a metallic thud that resounded through our neighborhood. The wagon tipped over, we tumbled onto the ground, not particularly hurt—but while I was lying there, I saw the enormous dent the wagon handle's hinge had punched into the door. I panicked, and ran home.

As I was running in the door, Dad was coming out, a sledgehammer in his hand. News traveled all too fast in our little cul de sac. I froze, thinking “A spanking isn’t enough; he is going to beat me with that hammer,” but Dad walked on by, without saying a word. When I heard the series of ringing thumps, I knew Dad was pounding out the dent, fixing what I had foolishly broken. Then he came home, put the hammer away, and went back to reading his paper. That was the end of it.

I imagine that this is how we often look to God—like foolish, daring children who find endless ways to mess up our world, to get ourselves in trouble. And each time, God follows behind us, making things right again—forgiving us without a word but with infinite, boundless mercy we cannot begin to comprehend.

—*Janet Rehling Buening*



With You Always

Remember, I am with you always.

— MATTHEW 28:20

For many of us, it's in learning to pray the whole range of our feelings that we encounter most fully the tenderness of Christ. Even if we feel utterly lost or abandoned, we are not alone.

Years ago, my husband and I were in a neonatal intensive care unit, bending over our newborn daughter. After a four-hour struggle, she died in our arms. I was filled with grief and rage. For weeks thereafter I spent long stretches of prayer simply sobbing and pounding a pillow on the floor as waves of feeling passed through. There was no other way to be real in prayer. It was here or nowhere that I would find God, here or nowhere that God would find me.

One afternoon, boiling with anger, I imagined hurling my fists against a wall. But then the image changed: I realized that I was beating my fists, not against a wall, but against Jesus' chest. I was raging and pounding within his embrace. The anger was still there, and the fierce need to express it, but everything had changed: I was feeling it now within the embrace of love. Like a canopy, love enclosed and embraced all that was in me. All that I felt and needed so urgently to communicate—all this was received, accepted, understood, and blessed.

Yes, I was still angry, but now I was also amazed, surprised, and grateful. Love had found me in my anger. The part of me that was most raw and violent, even to the depths of despair, had been met, held, and touched by Love. Healing had begun. Healing was here.

—Margaret Bullitt-Jonas



Saving Gracey

“Gracey’s gone under the building,” said the cathedral sexton.

It was Good Friday, and the Diocesan Office, where I worked, was closed. Exterminators were scheduled to seal the building and treat it for termites—until the sexton saw Gracey, the semi-feral cat I feed in the parking lot between the office and the cathedral, duck into an open vent, a favorite refuge. Then he called me.

When my husband and I got to the office, the hoses that would carry the lethal gas were already snaking through the door, but the men told us they’d wait while we tried to rescue the cat.

We cut the lock off the access grate to the crawl space under the building, and my husband wriggled in. Soon he was back out, filthy and shaking his head; when Gracey saw him, she’d run further into the shadows. I wept. He crawled back in.

Suddenly one of the exterminators shouted, “There she is!” I saw a gray blur explode from the vent and streak across the parking lot. When I caught up with Gracey, she had ducked under the gate into the alley between the office and the wall of the cathedral garden. She turned and glared at me before disappearing around the side of the building.

“You cat!” I yelled. “We went to all this trouble to save you, and you just run away!”

Then I heard myself. I don’t remember if we made it to the Good Friday liturgy after that, but I had caught a glimpse of Good Friday from God’s point of view. *I went to all this trouble to save you, and you just run away.*

Yes, we do that. Gracey was back on Monday, and I fed her. God does that, too. —*Mary W. Cox*



Scars and Stories

In her book *Still*, Lauren Winner shares the story of her friend who, preparing for confirmation at age twelve, told her pastor-father that she wasn't sure whether she believed everything, whether she could claim these beliefs forever in front of the congregation. Her father's reply: "What you promise when you are confirmed...is not that you will believe this forever. What you promise when you are confirmed is that that is the story you will wrestle with forever."

This echoes, somewhat, the story of Jacob, wrestling—with whom? The mysterious figure. God? So his new name (Israel) would suggest. Jacob wrestles all night, and winds up with a limp and a blessing. What a deal.

Even the resurrected Christ, God incarnate dead-and-raised, kept the marks of his wounds: "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side" (John 20:19b-20a).

I mean, this is the Jesus who rose from the dead; I'm pretty sure he could've gotten rid of those scars if he'd chosen to—but he didn't, and we know a wounded Christ, a Christ who went through quite a three-day night and didn't leave unmarked.

I think it's a common impulse to want to get through life unscathed: clean, pure, flawless. I know I don't often like messiness. That never happens, though. Life leaves marks. And these marks—these physical or emotional limps and scars—are only perceived as imperfection or weakness. Perhaps, really, they're blessings. They're what make us human, what show that we've really lived. They are our stories, etched onto our selves, indelible and holy reminders.

—*Alissa Goudswaard*



Windows into Heaven

The fiery Holy Spirit has lit on many heads over the centuries, blazing up brightly in some hearts and burning into a deep and persistent bed of coals in others. In some, the Spirit has produced the “sheer holy boldness” to confront and transform worldly injustice or to dream unimagined possibilities.

Pentecost in many places means glorious music and exuberant additions to the divine drama of worship—kites and banners, balloons, and even birthday cakes! In some medieval cathedrals the reading of the great story of the tongues of fire was accompanied by showers of rose petals falling from tiny windows in the ceiling.

As the spirit falls afresh on us, what are we receiving through that window into heaven? What fire is being lighted in you, what passion, what gift for transformation? How will that fire join with others to light up the world with possibility?

The creative and mysterious gift of language is often a window for discovering the interrelatedness of many human tongues and the varied insights on the world they offer—like the fact that *beloved* and *believe* both have roots in what we “give our hearts to.” It works in Latin, too: *credo* is that which I give my heart to. *Creed* is not so much about wrapping our minds around impossible-sounding ideas as it is inviting the heart to let the Spirit work within.

May the window open wide enough for a sparking spirit to set the tinder in our hearts alight. —*Katharine Jefferts Schori*

