

At Home in a Tomb

The very first time I heard Johnny Cash, I had what could only be described as an epiphany. A wounded, wearied story-teller with a voice both smooth and gritty. A paradox, not unlike his own life. A rough sinner who knew a lot about grace and mercy. I now have nearly every piece of music Johnny Cash ever recorded. But it's not the classic songs like "Ring of Fire" or "A Boy Named Sue" that I cherish most. It's a song that appeared on the last album he recorded, released nearly seven years after his death: "Ain't No Grave."

*There ain't no grave, can hold my body down. There ain't no grave, can hold my body down. When I hear that trumpet sound, I'm gonna rise right out of that ground. Ain't no grave can hold my body down.* It's funny, how the mind works some times, but as I sat with the story of the Transfiguration, this song kept playing in my head, and I heard that jagged old voice singing over and over, "*There ain't no grave, can hold my body down.*" At first, I couldn't quite figure out why this particular song was on repeat in my head. And as I tried to make connections between this song and the story of Jesus' Transfiguration, I was initially dismissive. This song is not about the Transfiguration, but rather the resurrection of the dead in Christ, rising to new life. But there is a deeper significance to the song as well. It's about trusting in God's grace to bring you back from the brink of death when all seems lost: "*Well, look way down the river, what do you think I see? I see a band of angels, and they're coming after me. Well, meet me Jesus, meet me. Meet me in the middle of the air. And if these wings don't fail me, I will meet you anywhere. There ain't no grave can hold my body down.*" It's as if Johnny Cash was singing this song in the face of the death he knew was coming for him sooner rather than later. And when I made that connection, when I listened over and over again to him cry out "*Ain't no grave can hold my*

*body down*”, it suddenly hit me: his is the kind of conviction I need to muster if I am going to give myself fully over to God in the desert season of Lent and survive what can sometimes feel like spiritual death.

And for me, what has become a source of strength and conviction in the face of the desert periods of my life is this luminous story. Just before the Transfiguration on the mountaintop, Jesus began to teach the disciples about his own upcoming death: “*The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.*” Upon hearing this, Peter couldn’t bear the idea of his teacher suffering, even though Jesus ended his teaching with the hopeful truth that after three days he would rise again. In fact, the Gospel says Peter began to rebuke Jesus. It was too much for Peter to bear. But Jesus, in a moment that was utterly lacking in subtlety, offered this corrective: “*Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*” In the depths of his heart, Jesus knew that the only way to endure his imminent suffering was to focus on the glory and goodness of God.

And so, the ascent up the mountaintop. The dazzling white clothes, brighter than anyone on earth could bleach them. The manifestation of the great leaders Moses and Elijah. A great, overshadowing cloud, and the voice announcing from heaven, “*This is my son, the Beloved. Listen to him.*” It’s a revelation of absolute beauty and glory, to see Jesus for who he fully is. And it is followed up by an exorcism and, once again, a discussion about his own upcoming suffering. Perhaps the disciples needed to see just who Jesus truly was before he suffered his own passion. Between these two discussions of suffering and death, divine glory shone fully in the face of Jesus as if to say, “Be not afraid” or, in the words of Johnny Cash, “*Ain’t no grave can hold my body down.*”

But the Church has also believed and taught something else about the Transfiguration. This story isn't just about Jesus. It's also about us. For the Transfiguration not only reveals the glory of Jesus as the Beloved of God, but it functions as a vision of what every human being is called to become. We, too, are called and empowered to become transfigured bearers of the divine light because in Jesus, our human nature was changed into something new, something bold and beautiful, something that not even the deepest and most profound suffering can diminish. And whether it is a simple twist of fate, or careful theological planning, the Church hears this story right before plunging into a season of penitence and self-examination that often feels like a season of suffering...a long march towards Holy Week through the desert of Lent.

I remember my preaching professor in seminary saying, "We get the Transfiguration right before Ash Wednesday to remind us of who we truly are called to be before we are reminded that we are dust." And he's right. Ash Wednesday calls us to remember our mortality. Our death-determined nature. To recall and repent of our sins. Lent, as an entire season, is marked with acts of self-reflection and penitence. Or, to use a bit more vivid language, what God asks of us during Lent is to be brutally honest about our shortcomings and failures, to be vulnerable and open about the dark secrets lying in the depths of our hearts, to be willing to be torn open, torn apart, and remade into something holier than we were before Ash Wednesday. And though we look toward the horizon of Easter as our finish line, we can also look backwards, to the Transfiguration, the revelation of the glory of God made manifest in Jesus and remember that we, too, already have within ourselves the image and glory of God. As St. Paul has said, *"For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."* Yes, we boldly and vulnerably embrace our weakness and mortality, but we do it between the twin poles of the Transfiguration and the Resurrection. If Easter feels too far removed from the desert of a Holy

Lent, we can look backwards and see that we, like Jesus, are already beautiful, that blinding glory of God dwelling in our hearts, even if it is masked by our flaws and shortcomings.

And so, when Lent comes to feel like a desert tomb, a grave of my own making, I'll turn my gaze back to this holy mountain, to the Transfiguration, and I'll heed the words of that world-wearied prophet: "*Ain't no grave, can hold my body down.*" We have no cause to fear what embracing our mortality will do to us. We hope for the resurrection of Easter because we have already seen Jesus' Transfiguration, which is our Transfiguration as well. So, let's die together this Lent. Let us not refuse our mortality, the ashes, the dust, the desert, the pain of self-reflection and penitence. But let us do it while knowing who we are truly called to be, a transfigured bearer of God's image and glory, who, come Easter Day, will rise up like Christ and hear God say of us, "This is my son, my daughter, my beloved. Set the world ablaze with my love." And this conviction to persevere, for me at least, begins with the singing of a simple, yet haunting tune: "*Ain't no grave, can hold my body down.*"