

# Recognizing the Christ: Getting Real (Part 2)

## Matthew 16:20-28

*Suffering is part of the deal, but so is victory!*

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Last week, I talked about watershed events. This week, I remembered one that actually involved water.

Most of you remember the name of Helen Keller, one of the most inspirational people of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born with all her senses, a disease at the age of 19 months took her sight and hearing. For several years, Helen lived as a wild child, unable to behave or communicate. When she was seven, her family hired a young woman, Anne Sullivan, who was herself visually impaired, but had received an education. Anne struggled to get Helen to learn the simple hand signs for the alphabet, so she could communicate by spelling words. One day, Anne hit upon the idea to run water over Helen's hand while spelling the word in her other hand. Suddenly Helen made the mental connection and understood that Anne was trying to teach her a way to communicate. Helen recalled in her autobiography, "I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, set it free!"<sup>1</sup>

After that watershed event, Helen Keller learned to read, write, and speak, earned a college degree, published 12 books, and became a global advocate for the rights of women and the disabled. A watershed event can change the course of your life.

As we talked about last week, the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi was the watershed event of the Gospel, changing the course of the narrative from Galilee toward Jerusalem and the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The first part of the watershed had to do with recognizing Jesus. When he asked the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter gave the right answer: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"<sup>2</sup> The second part of the watershed was coming to grips with what that confession of faith involved and what it meant to follow this Messiah of God.

First, the disciples had to get real about suffering. The first thing Jesus told them was quite shocking: *“From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.”*<sup>3</sup> This was surprising, unexpected, and even upsetting news to the men who loved Jesus. It’s hard to imagine, hard to understand, why someone you love has to suffer and die.

This week, Carey and I had dinner with Bun Song and Sue Lee, and he asked me if I knew any Korean missionary stories, since Korea is the nation of their birth. It brought to mind a story I heard several years ago about a missionary in Korea shortly after the Korean War. There was a young Korean woman, a friend of the missionary, who was expecting a baby. She went into labor one night in the midst of a fierce snowstorm. The woman knew if she could just get to the home of the missionary, she would have the help she so desperately needed to bring her baby into the world. She put on her winter wraps and started out alone, on foot. She was several miles from home when her labor pains grew so intense and frequent that she knew she could not make it to her destination.

The young woman got beneath a bridge that afforded a bit of shelter. There alone, in the dark of night, in the middle of a blinding snowstorm, she gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. She immediately removed her coat, and then, piece by piece, the rest of her clothing. Carefully, she wound every item around her baby until he looked like a cumbersome little cocoon. Then the cold and exhaustion took its toll, and the woman lost consciousness.

The next morning dawned bright and clear and cold, and the missionary awoke with a song in her heart. She had many people she wanted to see. She packed the car and went on her way. A few miles down the road, the car sputtered and stopped on top of an old bridge. The missionary got out to check under the hood, and she heard a sound, like a baby crying. Following the sound, she went under the bridge, where she found a tiny newborn baby boy—hungry, but still alive. Next to the infant lay her friend, the baby’s mother, frozen to death.

The missionary picked up the baby and took him to her home. In time, she was allowed to adopt the boy. As the years passed, she told him how his biological mother had given her life that he might live. He never tired of hearing the story, and she told it over and over.

On his twelfth birthday, the boy asked the missionary to take him to his mother’s grave. When they arrived, there was snow on the ground. The boy asked the missionary to wait while he went to the graveside alone. She watched her adopted son as he trudged across the cemetery in the snow, tears streaming down his cheeks. In amazement, she saw him slowly unbutton his coat, remove it, and lay it gently on the grave. Next he removed his shirt, his pants, his shoes and socks, and carefully placed each item on the burial place of the mother who had given her all for him.

Finally the missionary couldn’t take it any longer, and she went to her son, placing her coat around his bare, shivering shoulders. Through his tears, she heard him asking, “Were you colder than this for me, Mother? Were you colder than this for me?” He knew she was. There was no way he could ever repay what she had done for him.

When we look at the cross of Christ, we can ask the same question. Did you do this for me, Jesus? Did you do this for me? There is no way we can ever repay what his love compelled him to do.

Of course, the teaching about suffering upset all the expectations the disciples had about the Messiah. The Jews expected the Messiah to come and raise an army and kick the Romans out and establish the kingdom that belonged to their ancestor David. Dying at the hands of the religious leaders was not on the program. So Peter (of course) took Jesus aside and rebuked him, “*God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.*”<sup>4</sup> This time it was the wrong answer. Jesus rebuked him right back: “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*”<sup>5</sup>

Satan? That’s kind of harsh, don’t you think? But Peter the Rock was now becoming a stumbling stone in the pathway of Jesus. It was just like Satan had tried to do earlier when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. Wasn’t it pretty much the same? “Jesus, you don’t want to go to Jerusalem. You don’t want to die. We don’t want you to die. Just give up on this mission of suffering.” However, unlike Satan, whom Jesus told just to go away, he told Peter to get behind him. In other words, get back in line. Quit thinking from a human and political perspective, and start thinking like a disciple.

Then Jesus began to get real about discipleship. What did it mean for these men and woman to follow a Messiah who was bound to suffer and die? It was not going to be a joyride. If they wanted to continue as his followers, Jesus asked them to do three things: deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him. Quit living for self; put God first in everything. Shoulder the burdens that brings. For most of the men standing there that day, it would mean physical suffering and death. But for every follower of Jesus, discipleship means sacrifice of time, money, energy, leisure, pleasure. You can’t do it all, and God comes first. That’s what it means to follow.

Then Jesus shares one of his most famous and perhaps most uncomfortable statements about discipleship: “*For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?*”<sup>6</sup> This form of following is not for the faint of heart or the shallow of commitment. This is all-in discipleship. This is getting real.

On December 9, 2007, at a Youth With a Mission (YWAM) training center in the Denver suburb of Arvada, Colorado, Matthew Murray shot and killed Tiffany Johnson, 26, and Philip Crouse, 24. The shooter was in the building for half an hour talking with students, and then he asked to spend the night. Tiffany was called to the front because she handled hospitality. She and her boyfriend walked up to the man, who pulled out a gun and began shooting.

After firing a few shots, he stumbled out of the door and ran away. After a student performed CPR on Tiffany, she regained consciousness and asked, “Is it bad?” The student said, “Yes, it’s bad.” Tiffany looked at her boyfriend, who was also shot, and said, “We do this for Jesus, right, guys? We do this for Jesus.”<sup>7</sup>

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German martyr, distinguishes between cheap grace and costly grace: “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

“Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all

his goods. ... it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, we can get real about hope. The suffering of Christ is real; the demands of discipleship are real. But so is the hope. Suffering leads to victory. Discipleship leads to life. The cross leads to resurrection which leads to the Kingdom of God.

The disciples focused only on the negative. Jesus lost them at “suffer and die.” That’s why Peter got so upset. But Jesus said, “*and on the third day be raised.*”<sup>9</sup> Then he told them what to expect on the other side of the suffering: “*For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*”<sup>10</sup> Here is our hope. Jesus will return in glory. He will repay those who have followed him, multiple times over. In fact, some of these disciples will see it in their lifetime.

Now wait a minute. These words were spoken 2,000 years ago. Throughout the New Testament, there seems to be an expectation that Jesus would return in that generation. But he clearly didn’t. Were they just wrong?

To clear up this last statement, let’s look at how Jesus says it in the Gospel of Mark. The scene is the same, but Jesus says, “*Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.*”<sup>11</sup> I think that gets us away from the “coming on the clouds” scenario to what Jesus really meant. Almost every disciple standing there in Caesarea Philippi that day saw the Kingdom of God come with power. They saw the glory of God in the resurrected Christ. They saw the power of the Holy Spirit come on the day of Pentecost. In their lifetimes, they saw the movement of the Gospel of Jesus spread from Jerusalem and Judea all the way to the heart of the empire in Rome. They saw the victory of the suffering Christ.

Suffering is just part of the deal. It was for Jesus. It is for his followers; we all have our share (though most of our shares are comparatively small). Here’s how you deal with the suffering:

- Have faith in the crucified Jesus, because he is also the risen Christ.
- Invest your life in discipleship for the long haul. Deny yourself; take up your cross, and follow. It won’t all be a party. Sometimes it will be demanding. But it will all be worthwhile.
- Never lose hope. Beyond the cross is resurrection. Beyond the suffering is glory. As we sing in the “Hymn of Promise,” “At the last, a victory!”<sup>12</sup> Faith, hope, and love will win. You can bet your life on it.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen\\_Keller](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:16.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 16:21.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:22.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 16:23.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 16:25-26.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Pulliam, "YWAM Director Describes Shooting, Forgiveness," [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com), December 19, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan, 1979), 47.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 16:21.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 16:27-28.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 9:1.

<sup>12</sup> Natalie Sleeth, "Hymn of Promise," *United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 707.