

“Embrace the Mystery”

The other day someone saw my name tag, which says Pastor Lew Upchurch and asked if my last name was some kind of a joke. “A pastor,” this person said, “with the last name Upchurch?” Yes, I politely replied. My last name is really Upchurch. My ancestors are from England. In fact, about 50 miles east of London is the little village of Upchurch. There’s a beautiful old church there founded in the year 1187. History tells us that the people from that area simply started saying that they lived “up from the church,” and the name stuck.

Well, guess what? I’ve carried on that tradition because today my family and I literally live up from the church. In fact, every time we and everyone else who lives in Holding Village leave our neighborhood, we get **this beautiful view of the top of Hope.**



Now, I love this. I take the kids to school in the morning and what do we see as we leave the neighborhood? The Church. I’m having a bad day and rushing to get back to the office and what do I see? The Church! My family and I don’t always talk about it. I myself don’t always pause and remember who it is that’s really present in that building when we

gather together. But over time, it has become more and more clear to me just how powerful and special a view like this is to my life, my family's life, and yes, your life too.

Because in the Church- the place where we practice our faith- the place we gather for worship— it is no longer unknown what God thinks of us. It is no longer unknown what our purpose is, or why we exist, or even what our future holds. God made each and every one of us. He saved us through the work of Christ alone. And through faith in Him, we will survive and even rise from the dead. Of course the building doesn't make any of this happen. But we must never forget that the church exists to gather God's people around his means of grace—His Word and His sacraments for the forgiveness of sins. When you and I see those marks being used according to Christ's institution, we are seeing the church!

But what is everybody else seeing? You see, when I leave my neighborhood and look down at that cupola that sits on top of this glorious sanctuary, I often wonder what people who have no connection with the faith, much less a congregation see? And what about those who drive by Rodgers Road everyday or those who eat at the new *Chick-Fila* across the street? Do they notice anything? Do they think twice about what this place is, or what goes on here, or why it even matters? And what about those who might have grown up in the church but who have been hurt by it in one way or another? What do they see? A place full of perceived negativity? A place that provides little more than a list of do's and don'ts? And what about those who might want to embrace all that God seems to promise, but find themselves experiencing another disappointment- another tragedy that proves just how crappy this world can be. What about these folks? What do they see? Is this view perhaps just a little too unsettling or confusing?

Regardless of what they think though, I know some of them have given this place a shot. Just like the many visitors that we are so blessed to have on a weekly basis from neighborhoods and communities throughout the area, a lot of people come through these doors looking for something. And thank God so many of you actually stay! **But still, there are a lot who show up and hear a sermon or two.** They might come back a month later. Then maybe a year later like on Christmas and Easter. And then, not at all. Why? Because the road in which they walk is still dark. They hear some light in the love of God in Christ, but it's not enough to really make a difference, they think. So they ignore the view and they keep on driving.

I think we've all been there at times thinking that the church offers very little in terms of "real help" in our "real lives." I know I have. That's why I consider it such a blessing to have this text from Matthew this morning. Because Jesus invites us to embrace the mystery and walk with him. But it's a dark journey that takes time until things actually become clear.

Of course, it doesn't seem that way at first, does it? Jesus takes his disciples- Peter, James, and John- up onto a mountain and he's transfigured before them. Jesus' face shines like the sun. Light is coming through his body and is penetrating through the fabric of his clothing. And the disciples see Elijah and Moses and they're talking with with Jesus. And then suddenly this cloud overshadows them, and they hear the voice of God: **"This is my beloved Son, listen to him!"** Jesus at that very moment could have looked at Peter, James, and John and said, "That's right. I am exactly who God the Father says that I am." But what does he do? He wraps all that glory up and he hides it. Peter and the boys are face down on the ground terrified. And Jesus, before he does anything touches them. "Have no fear," he says. And they look up and all they see is Jesus. No light. No other people. Just Jesus. And he takes them down the mountain road. And on the way, he says to them, "Don't say anything to anybody about what you have seen until the son of man is raised from the dead."

Think about this. Peter, James, and John know something that the other disciples don't know at this point. They know just what power this Jesus has. They know he is no ordinary man. But they couldn't say it. I'm sure they wanted to so many times. When controversies arose. When speculation was rampant about Jesus' identity. When people asked the same questions that we ask today like "Does God really see? Does he really listen? Does he really know how hard this life on this earth can be? They knew the answer was yes. Jesus was the Christ. He was God in the flesh. They knew what they saw on that mountain. But if they just told people, it probably would have gone in one ear and out the other. Because they wouldn't have understood that it was **for them**.

You see, Jesus wanted them to know not just who he is, but what he came to do. And the same is true for you and me. Look, It's no secret that we want— even demand the Lord of the Transfiguration in all his glory. If he could do it then, he could do it now, we think, so "show us Jesus, your light"! Take us out of the darkness of this life—shine like the sun

and prove to us who you really are. Can't we, Jesus, just embrace the mystery? "Yes," Jesus says, "but it's my way."

And here is where the journey gets dark, but at the same time things become crystal clear. "My clothing," Jesus says, "which was white as snow, now stripped and hung out in the dark. My flesh, which shone like the sun, now torn and bleeding. My Father who called me his Son and told you to listen to me, now forsakes me." And you will ask why? But that question will be answered by my resurrection. And all of it- all of it- was **for you**.

Look, we might want that same experience the disciples had. We might long for God to reveal himself, and prove to us that he really loves us— that he truly cares. We might want it so much that we might even dabble in church, hoping to hear a word of peace, a word of comfort—even a word that can help us make sense of this crazy life. But we don't have to go searching. Neither do the countless people in all of our lives who desperately want to look at a picture like this and know that this place really is one of refuge. That it's really a place of hope. That it's really a place of forgiveness. It's no secret that there are so many people who want to see a picture like this, and want to rejoice in what is right in the world instead of questioning what is wrong.

And in Christ's Church, where his word and sacraments are known and delivered to us, it is right. Celebrate that. And pray that through God's Spirit others are able to embrace it. Because the One who didn't stay on that mountain but set his sights on the valley to bring us to life and life eternal shows up every weekend. He is Father's Son whom he loves. And He loves you. **Amen.**