

The gospel is taken from the gospel of St. Luke, the ninth chapter, beginning at the 28th verse.

*"About 8 days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God and Jesus Took with him Peter and John and James and went up the mountain to pray and while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men Moses and Elijah talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with Him. Just as they were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus "Master, it is good for us to be here, let us make three dwellings one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them and they were terrified as they entered the cloud then from the cloud came a voice that said "this is my son; my chosen; listen to Him." When the voice had spoken Jesus was found alone and they kept silent in those days and told no-one of any of the things that they had seen."*

Here ends the reading the Gospel of St. Luke. So you know that when I am looking at a gospel story for preaching I always say "what can I be curious about" and I encourage us to read scripture with that. Because we've read so many of the stories, so often that sometimes we can't even hear the message. So I thought "What am I curious about in this story and what I was curious about is what did Moses and Elijah and Jesus talk about? It's a pretty dramatic scene. In fact you can just see that the light is leaving that scene of the resurrection up there we're Jesus rose, all white. It's probably something like that. You can see that in the

stained glass there. And it was a dramatic moment. But why did Jesus bring Elijah and Moses down after they had already certainly died, why were they brought in to talk? And the reason is in the scripture and it's just mentioned very subtly but it's very important. They came to talk about Jesus' death. This text uses 'departure,' other texts will use the word 'Exodus' but it's His death. So Jesus brings in Moses who symbolizes the law, Elijah who symbolizes the prophets and then there's Jesus who symbolizes the Gospel and is the gospel. He brings these figures together to talk about his death and I want to talk about planning a really successful death because that's what Jesus is doing with them. What can we learn from that? And I found three things that I took away from this as I was reading it. The three things were:

- 1) It's important to think about your death; I want to talk about that
- 2) We do have spirit guides. These are spiritual guides that are guiding Jesus; and
- 3) The importance of mystical encounters. As we see this is a very mystical experience. It won't get much more mystical in the gospels until Jesus' resurrection, than the story of the Transfiguration we heard today.

So let's start with planning your death; not a very romantic, exciting, positive, upbeat thing to talk about. In fact our culture tries to dismiss death as though it doesn't exist. We talk about passing away, they've departed, they're no longer with us but death is a crucial evolution in our spiritual life to the next world and it's something we shouldn't be ashamed or embarrassed about and it can be a very good planning tool. In my coaching practice, one of the exercises that I have done, and I've done for my clients that has been very profound is asking them to

write out their memorial service, their funeral. Tell me where is it held? Who speaks, what do they say? What kind of music is played? Is there music? What do you hope they're going to say about you after you go? And first my clients say "Oh my gosh, that's so depressing." But they try it and they do it and what's amazing is by planning with the end in mind as Stephen Cubby would say, "When you plan with the end in mind, death on earth, it actually makes you more strategic with the rest of your life. Because when you plan that death and you say these are the things that are going to happen at my funeral and these are the questions I had: Who is going to be there? What are they going to say? What do I need to change in my life now to make that experience fantastic? And so I would invite anybody here tonight or listening if you write out your memorial service, your funeral and you want me to look at it, I'd be happy to engage you on that document because I found it extremely helpful in planning out what's the most important thing to accomplish in life. And that's what Jesus is doing. He's doing he's playing out his final days.

Planning for death can be a new thing and then, particularly for ministers who do a lot of funerals, they kind of get used to it but for most of us not so much. My first experience dealing with a funeral and a memorial service was when I was a kid in college doing a summer internship for the Lutheran Church in the Pocono Mountains for Campgrounds and they gave me a collar to wear, you know, I wasn't a minister and I had kind of long hair and those crazy glasses with the tie dye [00:06:31] and the glass, crazy glasses with the lens and the moustache, and I was doing the best I could and I got a call one day from a funeral home through the church and they said "hey look we're really desperate. We've got somebody who just died; they need a memorial service at the grave and they're relatives

have flown in from Germany and there's nobody to do the service. Would you be willing to go over and do the service? We'll pay you Two Hundred bucks if you do it. Two Hundred bucks, I was sort of [00:07:05] and terrified. I went to the funeral home and I had never seen a dead person and the guy brought me back in and he had a horrible sense of humor and he brought me back into the area where the bodies were being embalmed and, you know it sort of, I don't know, just sort of freaked me out. I'd never seen anything like it with the big stitching and he is making jokes "I like this business nobody ever complains ha, ha, ha." Oh geez, he's smoking his cigarette then he says "when we want to change out the suits for the people, you don't like the brown suit or blue suit, we just change the heads." And I was just like "Ugh, gross; this is a guy, clearly this is his business, this is his every day. He's making jokes and he says "And you, you're the Minister? Look at you. "Oh great, I mean I really didn't look the part. So then he says alright. He pulls out what looked like a little keg to me, he says "Here it is," and that was the ashes and he said "get in the hearse, they're already there, it's hot and they're already waiting." So I get in the hearse, I put the urn on my lap and we drive out to the graveside service. We get there and I'm a responsible guy right; I fastened my seat belt. And we get there and I can't get my seatbelt open. We pulled the hearse right up to where the crowd is so we're only five feet away and I say "You're seatbelt, I can't get the seatbelt off." Then this comic, [00:08:31] says "You can't get the seatbelt off? Who wears a seatbelt in a hearse; we drive five miles an hour; nobody has ever worn that seatbelt." So he plays with it and the crowd is kind of looking in "Oh there's the young Minister I guess but he's not getting out of the car." And he said "I guess we're just going to have to drive up to the side of the service and roll your window down, you'll have to

do it seated." And I'm like "Oh dear God; you've got to be kidding." I am in complete panic and he looks for a screw driver and he tries to break it with the screw driver; He cannot get it off. So finally, I had to do the humiliating act of pulling the seatbelt like this and crawling out of the car, with the family all standing there. Worse, they were from Germany and I tried using a German prayer that I had been taught, only to find out that at this point in my family, this prayer had been passed down so many years that it was no longer German. And so they said "That was a beautiful prayer but what language was that?" So I had screwed up the entire thing. I had not planned well for the end. I challenge all of us to take this lesson from Jesus to plan for the end. It's a funny story but on a more serious note, I think we do have to plan for the end. So one is that Jesus, the one time he brings in these guys is for his death. The second thing that a church like this, is comfortable discussing and thinking about it that there were people guiding Jesus who were no longer physically on Earth. I believe that all of us have those same things. We can call them guardian angels, spirit guides, whatever they are they are all around us, they want to help us and those most difficult things that we're facing, we have that; we have our Elijah's and our Moses and I'm convinced of it. In this space Swedenborgian, we might be one of the few in Christianity that truly Embrace that but I will say in my own experience I've had times where I felt relatives or people that I've lost recently, have absolutely been involved in my life in a positive way and so not much preached about, but I would like to talk about that mystical aspect about those on the other side actually working on our behalf and that we can tap into it. I don't know it'll be quite like the Transfiguration I doubt that but they are there.

Then the third part is the mystical part. Why did they do this Transfiguration; really part of it was Jesus needing advice and the second part was He was trying to show the disciples "you're going to know a very difficult time. This is the real deal and you needed something dramatic to show you." So I am not one of those people who have seen physical angels, some people do; I don't But I've definitely had mystical experiences in my life that have guided me at the right moment. I don't know whether I have more of them than others or I'm just paying attention or that I have such a weak faith that I need mystical experiences, but I've definitely experienced. When I was going to Harvard Divinity School, I immediately went to where the Swedenborg school of religion was in Cambridge because my grandfather had studied there and the school of [00:11:49] was gone; it was now the school of design so I was very disappointed. I wanted to see that building my grandparents had lived in; I heard about it as a kid. Lo and behold I get a job at the chapel at Harvard University and the Minister knowing that I'm tight for cash says "You could live at the Minister's house if you'd like and you'll have no rent but you're going to have to essentially be the butler and I was like "No rent? You had me at no rent; Great. I'm there" So I become the butler at the Minister's house at Harvard University and in no time the Minister Peter Gomes, my mentor, says to me "Rich, you told me you had this Swedenborgian ancestry right?" I said "Yeah." He said "you know you're sitting in the Swedenborg School of religion from the early 1900's and the late 1800's?" And I said "No, actually I know the address, it was across the way," and he said Oh no you're wrong. In 1968, Harvard picked up the building and moved in. You're in the house that you're grandparents lived in." It was a very difficult time for me and being in that house and getting that find, meant a lot to me. Paying attention

to those things can have transforming experiences. Fast forward to Church of the Holy City; years ago I was cleaning up, there was some trash in the balcony, old books and things that had gotten water logged and there on a top of the trash heap was a ripped, torn photograph of the house; of the house that I lived in that my grandparents lived in; clearly a Minister who preached here, that was where he went to school; that was his school picture; and there it was. So I took it, cleaned it off and it was a sign to me. I get signs like this all the time and I think if we're paying attention, we can have transfiguration experiences, if we're open to it and they're incredibly helpful. I don't believe in Jesus or God because I understand it or because I've been taught it; I believe because I've experienced it. I've had experiences in my life and I believe that we can have those experiences and I think that's also what the Transfiguration is saying; that God and Jesus is an experience not an intellectual exercise but it's a life transforming experience. So let's plan our death. Let's plan our death with the end in mind, let's be open to those spiritual guides that could help us in that very difficult process and then finally let's pay attention to the mystical guide posts in our life; they're helping us when we lack the faith that is so necessary. Amen.