Preface

If you follow the church year and the lectionaries that accompany it, you will celebrate the Transfiguration at least once a year—and possibly twice.

Like many festivals of the church, we don't know exactly when and where the observance of the Transfiguration began. Most likely its roots lie in the churches of Jerusalem, Palestine, and Syria, as early as the fifth century, if not earlier. By the seventh century, the Greek church in Jerusalem stipulated Scripture readings for the Transfiguration on August 6. The earliest known homily preached at a liturgical celebration of the Transfiguration dates back to this time, from a monk named Anastasius, who belonged to the monastic community of Mount Sinai.

How did August 6 become the date for the annual celebration? It obviously doesn't fall into the part of the church year that tracks the life of Christ from Christmas to Easter to Ascension. The best conjecture is that its timing is derivative of another early church celebration, the feast of the Holy Cross, which falls on September 14. Count backwards forty days from September 14 and you land on August 6. The timing makes good sense: the Transfiguration is tightly framed on either side by Jesus' first and second prophecies of his death on the cross. After he comes down from the mountain, he turns his face toward Jerusalem. The forty-day period from Transfiguration to Holy Cross thus serves as a kind of a shadow Lent in an obverse church year.

From its origins in the east, the feast of the Transfiguration gradually moved west. It first appeared in Latin liturgical manuals in the ninth century and spread out slowly over the next several centuries. The big turning point for the Transfiguration as a liturgical feast in the Western church was, not a little ironically, a military victory. Christian armies defeated the Turks at Belgrade in 1456. In thanks-

giving, Pope Callixtus III formally adopted the Transfiguration into the Roman calendar. He kept its date as August 6.

It was Lutheran reformers Johannes Bugenhagen and Veit Dietrich who introduced the Transfiguration into the other half of the church year. In their revision of the church calendar, they matched the long-standing observance of the Baptism of our Lord on the first Sunday of the Epiphany season with the Transfiguration of our Lord on the last Sunday of the Epiphany season. Given the echoes between the two events in the life of Christ, this timing also makes good sense. Much like setting a fixed date for Transfiguration forty days before Holy Cross, the reassignment of Transfiguration to the last Sunday before Lent recognizes its pivotal timing in Jesus' journey toward his death. Both Baptism and Transfiguration call for the liturgical color of white, bookending an otherwise green season.

Ever since the sixteenth century, the annual observance of Transfiguration on the last Sunday of Epiphany has been the standard in Lutheran churches. In due course this timing was adopted by the Church of England, though it only came to prominence in the late nineteeenth century, and without dropping the August 6 observance. Nowadays, any Protestant church following the Revised Common Lectionary will, at least by default, observe the Transfiguration annually on the last Sunday of Epiphany. The Roman Catholic Church maintains the fixed date in August but also stipulates a Gospel reading about the Transfiguration on the second Sunday in Lent, with similar intent to the Reformation churches. Transfiguration continues to be observed on August 6 only by the Orthodox churches.[1]

Though late to start and slow to spread, the liturgical celebration of the Transfiguration testifies to its enormous importance in both the life of Christ and the interpretation of his redeeming work in time and eternity.

And yet, when was the last time you heard anyone, preacher or otherwise, speak of its enormous importance?

There is no end of reflection on the incarnation at Christmas, the strange victory of the cross on Good Friday, or the greater victory of triumph over sin and death on Easter. Even Pentecost has made

a comeback in the last century, thanks to the Christians who named themselves for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. But what have you got for Transfiguration?

I felt this aporia when I returned to parish ministry after a long spell in ecumenical and scholarly work. I enjoyed preaching on Transfiguration the first time. In my second year I stretched to find something to say. In the third, I resorted to the Greek and happily discovered the word "exodus" in Luke's account. But by the fourth year, I had to conclude: I have nothing left to say on the Transfiguration.

And then I thought: that can't possibly be right. I cannot have plumbed all of the Transfiguration's depths in just three sermons. *Surely* there is more going on here than I've realized so far.

So I started digging. It didn't take very long to discover yes, there is a *lot* more going on here than I realized. All I had to do was tug on one slender thread within the Transfiguration story to find that it was connected to an intricate, gorgeous web stretching across the whole of Scripture. Keep tugging, keep finding. I settled on seven ways of looking at the Transfiguration, but I promise you that even the hundred and twenty pages of this book do not exhaust the possibilities!

I hope, though, that these seven ways of looking at the Transfiguration will be more than enough to keep you eagerly returning to this story year after year, whether you are a faithful follower of Christ treasuring all these things in your heart or a preacher proclaiming the Gospel for the upbuilding of your congregation.

A few notes about what follows.

To map out the intricate interconnections across the Scriptures, I've tracked words through both Testaments. Greek words in quotations are denoted in English transliteration in the exact form they take in the New Testament, including diacritical marks. Greek words referred to outside of direct quotations appear in their dictionary form.

Hebrew words are denoted in simplified English transliteration, without diacritical marks (which are considerably more extensive than in Greek if you are trying to be strictly accurate). Moreover, Hebrew words appear in their basic dictionary form, rather than

their exact appearance in the Old Testament, because there is so much more variation as they are conjugated, declined, prefixed, or suffixed that they will be less obviously the same words to English-language readers unfamiliar with Hebrew.

You will see in these pages Greek words from the Old Testament, too. That is not as self-contradictory as it sounds. Greek was already the universal language across the Mediterranean centuries before Jesus' time. Jews in Palestine as well as in the diaspora knew Greek and used it extensively. In the third century before Christ they made translations of their originally Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, for their own use as well as for the edification of interested Gentiles. The New Testament authors were well acquainted with these translations and often used them—though sometimes they made their own translations or used local variations. The standard ancient Greek version of the Old Testament is called, in English, the Septuagint, which derives from Latin for "seventy," referring to the seventy (actually seventy-two) Jewish elders believed to have translated the Torah identically all at the same time. For this reason it is sometimes abbreviated as LXX, which are the Roman numerals for seventy.

The reason to refer to the Septuagint when undertaking a canonical interpretation of a Gospel story, as I'm doing here, is this. Since the Greek-speaking and -writing authors of the New Testament knew the LXX, they would often intentionally select its choice of Greek words when they wanted to echo and allude to the same Old Testament passages. That gives us strong clues toward their theological intentions. When Greek words from the Septuagint are noted in this book, they appear in the exact form they take in the text, diacritical marks and all.

Certain events in Jesus' life are designated with a capital letter to distinguish them from what could, in principle, be experienced by someone else: thus the Baptism, Transfiguration, Passion, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus. Many people have gotten baptized, but the Baptism with a capital B refers to Jesus alone. I also follow the convention of small caps for "Lord" or "Lord God" when

it indicates the unpronounced holy name hiding in the background, but only in direct biblical quotations from Old Testament Hebrew.

The Transfiguration event is recorded in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and in the Second Epistle of Peter. I list them in this order because I assume, along with the vast majority of biblical scholars, that Mark's was the first Gospel to be written down, and was known to both Matthew and Luke, who used it as the basis of their own Gospels, which is why the three of them together are called the "Synoptic" Gospels—they see together (*syn*) with one eye (*optic*). The relatively unknown and unloved Second Epistle of Peter is probably one of the latest-written books of the New Testament, but it also includes an account of the Transfiguration. I have made my own translations of these four biblical accounts of the Transfiguration, which are interspersed between the chapters that follow. When I quote from these specific sections, I am using my own translations. Other quotations from the Bible are taken from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

Mark 9:1–10

1 And he was saying to them:
Amen I say to you all
that there are certain ones of those standing here,
the same ones will no way, no how taste death
until they should have seen
the kingdom of God
having come in power.

2 And after six days
Jesus takes along
Peter and James and John,
and he bears them up
to a high mountain
by themselves alone.

And he was transfigured
in front of them,

3 and his clothes became
extremely gleaming white
in such a way
a bleacher upon the earth
could not whiten them.

4 And there appeared to them Elijah,
with Moses,
and they were talking together with Jesus.

5 And Peter
speaking up
said to Jesus,

Rabbi,
it is good for us to be here,
and let us make three tabernacles,
one for you and

one for Moses and
one for Elijah.

6 For he did not know
how to speak up,
for they'd come to be frightened out of their wits.

7 And a cloud
came to be overshadowing them,
and a voice came to be from the cloud:

This is my Son,
the beloved;
listen to him.

8 And all at once
looking around
they no longer saw anybody
but Jesus alone
with them.

9 And them descending
from the mountain
he charged them
that they describe
what they saw
to not one single person,

until when
the Son of Man
should rise from the dead.

10 And they held back the word to themselves,
disputing what it is,
to rise from the dead.

Metamorphosis : Jesus

If you want to meet God, then go either to a desert or to a mountain.

John went to the desert, no less deserted for the river in its midst, to contemplate the pathways of God and preach repentance in hope of the forgiveness of sins. He fed on locusts and wild honey and attracted sinners and hypocrites for company.

Jesus also went to the desert, though one without a river, having only stones for food and the devil for company. Then he returned to the towns and cities and the byways in between them, preaching repentance, forgiveness—and more besides.

Having already done the desert, halfway through his sojourn, "after six days Jesus takes along Peter and James and John, and he bears them up to a high mountain by themselves alone" (Mark 9:2).

The vagueness of the mountain's name and location has long frustrated piety. Mark and Matthew say only "a high mountain." Luke refers to "*the* mountain," as if you should know the antecedent already. The curious dark-horse witness of Second Peter calls it "the holy mountain." But that begs more questions than it answers. It is holy because of what happened to Jesus there? Or was it holy to begin with?

You might be tempted think the designation "holy" makes Mount Sinai the obvious choice. After all, it's the one mountain where the Lord God did actually appear in flashing light and clouds and glory.

But in the Scriptures of Israel, "the holy mountain" is *never* Mount Sinai. "The holy mountain" is always and only Mount Zion in Jerusalem on which the temple stands—or possibly an eschatological extension thereof. Thus Psalms 48 and 99, three major prophets (Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel), and four minor prophets (Joel, Obadiah, Zephaniah, and Zechariah).

Yet Mount Zion in Jerusalem cannot possibly be where Jesus took his inner circle, among other reasons because it is impossible to be

alone there! Anyway, in Synoptic logic, it is much too soon for Jesus to be anywhere near Jerusalem. The mountaintop moment marks his turn south *toward* Jerusalem, temple, and the cross. So we must look elsewhere for our mountain.

Up to this point, in Mark's telling, Jesus has been in the neighborhood of the Sea of Galilee, close to his adult hometown of Capernaum, crossing the sea by boat and healing a blind man in Bethsaida. From there he pushes on to the northernmost point of his earthly life, the villages around Caesarea Philippi.

For sheer proximity to the area, the best mountainous candidate is Mount Hermon. It is scripturally resonant, too, a boundary marker of the promised land and evocative in its snow-capped majesty. Psalm 133 compares the goodness and pleasantness of brothers dwelling in unity to "the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion!" Maybe in this way Mount Hermon borrows some of Mount Zion's distinctive holiness.

However, in the early 200s, church father Origen awarded the distinction to Mount Tabor, and it has been known as the mountain of the Transfiguration ever since. Churches have stood on Mount Tabor since at least the fourth century; the bishop of Tabor attended the Fifth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 553.

In favor of Origen's choice, Mount Tabor lies close to Nazareth on the way back south from Caesarea Philippi, a place you might well pass if you were planning to carry on all the way to Jerusalem. You'd easily reach it "after six days" of leisurely hiking. Tabor, like Hermon, serves as a boundary marker for the land of Israel. It is the site of battle chosen by Deborah, prophetess and judge, to confront the armies of Sisera.

The truth is, we don't know for sure which mountain it was. What we do know for sure is that a holy thing happened there, enough to render any remote, second-rate, or forgotten mountain luminous with holiness.

They reach the top, and the thing happens. "He was transfigured in front of them."

The word itself has become luminous. In our Latin-derived

English, we only use it of Jesus, and only in this instance. We even bestow upon the noun the distinction of a definite article and a capital letter: *the* Transfiguration.

But in the simplest sense of the Greek that lies behind it, *metemorphṓthē*, it's an ordinary word. *Meta*: beyond. *Morphḗ*: form or figure. Combined, placed in the past tense and the passive voice, all it means is "changed."

All it means? As if it were obvious what change is! How can something be something else? Is it still itself? Is there continuity of identity, or rupture? Does the change reveal what was always there but hidden, or does it create something entirely new? If one form dissolves and another appears, does the reality behind the form perdure, or vanish? What is the relationship between being and becoming?

A simple word, yet in its wake "change" drags along one of the most ancient, most fundamental, least understood, least resolved questions in the entire history of human thought.

The impossible, impenetrable simplicity of the problem is revealed by the chief English use of the noun taken right from the Greek, "metamorphosis," to describe how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. The transitional state is the chrysalis. You would assume that the caterpillar inside the chrysalis does something straightforward and sensible, like sprouting wings from its existing body. That is, after all, what it looks like on the other side: a caterpillar with wings.

But in fact, once sealed inside its living tomb, the biological entity that is the caterpillar dissolves. It actually digests itself! It is formless and void, a molecular chaos, or to put it in the vernacular, goo. The tiniest fraction of cells survives the process, reassembling the goo into a butterfly. And so the resulting creature is and isn't itself; it remains the same and becomes something different; its lifespan is both continuous and radically severed.

So to assert that Jesus was "changed," "metamorphosed," "transfigured" in front of them says entirely too little. Or entirely too much! Luke deletes the word altogether, likely because, as an elegant rhetorician in the Greek language, he suspected it would connote metamorphoses of the pagan type: Zeus metamorphosing into a golden

shower in order to violate the unsuspecting Danaë, for instance.[2] Whatever the change in Jesus signifies, it doesn't signify *that*.

In any case, all three Evangelists immediately need to furnish further details.

Mark swiftly shifts the focus. *Jesus* was transfigured, he writes, yet the visible result was only that "his clothes became extremely gleaming white in such a way a bleacher upon the earth could not whiten them" (9:3). That word "gleaming," *stílbonta*, is what's called a hapax legomenon, a one-off in New Testament vocabulary—though Homer used it in the Iliad. "Shining," "glittering," or "radiant" could all work, too. The point is the brilliance, the degree ("extremely"), and the uniqueness in kind.

But in case you don't quite grasp how remarkable this is—that the metamorphosis is not of this earth—Mark adds a further down-home detail. Jesus' clothing is white in a way that exceeds the technical skill of laundry specialists. The old-fashioned English term "fuller" is often used in translations. The task of "fulling" stands in for the whole range of tasks involved in preparing wool for spinning, including cleaning it and fluffing it up—"fulling" it. The Greek term is *gnapheùs* (another New Testament hapax legomenon), meaning the person who cards the wool with brushes to prepare it for spinning. The wool needs to be cleaned before carding, with something fast and noxious like lye or slow and pleasant like the sun. The cleaning process bleaches, hence the whiteness. But only up to a point.

What's going on in Jesus' Transfiguration isn't a matter of materials science. Washing, bleaching, and purifying all imply their opposite: that up till now, the garment or person in question was dirty. Hence David prays in Psalm 51:7, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." The Lord accuses through Jeremiah, "Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me" (2:22), and later pleads through the same prophet, "O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil, that you may be saved" (4:14). Daniel foresees a time when "some of the wise shall stumble, so that they may be refined, purified, and made white" (11:35, cf. 12:10). Malachi warns that the day of the Lord

is not what you think it is: "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap" (3:2).

If Jesus' garments were only just as white as what a fuller or *gnapheùs* could manage, then he would be a purified man ready for the day of the Lord. But *only* that. Only a sinner in need of purification who just so happens to have undergone it. Mark wants you to understand we are not talking about *that* kind of whiter-than-snow garment. The Transfiguration that comes upon Jesus is something altogether different.

Matthew drops the fuller analogy, Luke does, too, and both expand Mark's spartan description, each in his own direction.

Echoing Mark, Matthew says Jesus "was transfigured in front of them," but he looks first to Jesus' face. It shone, *élampsen*, whence English "lamp," like the sun.

Matthew likes shining as a metaphor. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had already taught, "Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light [*lámpei*] to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine [*lampsátō*] before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (5:15–16). Do so and you will count among the righteous, who "will shine out [*eklámpsousin*] like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (13:43, alluding to Daniel 12:3).

But where are the righteous to be found? Only Jesus shines like the sun, and only here on the mountaintop. When he is crucified, the sun itself will go out. "Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour" (27:45). It is no accident that news of the risen Jesus comes "toward the dawn" (28:1).

Still. The sun is an ambivalent choice of image, probably avoided with reason by both Mark and Luke. The cloud—as we will see in a later chapter—is much preferred as the meteorological vehicle of the Lord's Presence. The sun, by contrast, is regularly put in its place as an obedient creation serving the Lord's good pleasure, perhaps in memory of the sun-worship practiced by the Egyptians or in competition with the sun-worship practiced by the Canaanites, Babylonians,

and Persians. Deuteronomy warns against lifting your eyes to heaven and bowing down before "the sun and the moon and the stars" (4:19), "which I have forbidden" (17:3), a danger that becomes a reality in the times of the kings (II Kings 23:5, 11; Jeremiah 8:1–2).

Ezekiel has a potent vision of the rivalry. He is carried away in the Spirit by "a form that had the appearance of a man. Below what appeared to be his waist was fire, and above his waist was something like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming metal" (8:2). In the inner court of the house of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, the prophet witnesses "about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east, worshiping the sun toward the east" (8:16). It's the culminating abomination of many abominations in the temple. The Lord promises to have no pity on them.

In fact, the only unambiguous, unqualified association of the God of Israel with the sun appears in one verse of one Psalm: "For the LORD God is a sun and shield" (Psalm 84:11).

The next-best usage is a generous simile for an excellent ruler like David. As the king himself says in his last words, "When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning" (II Samuel 23:3–4).

If Matthew wished only to emphasize Jesus standing in the house and lineage of David as its rightful heir, then the simile stands. But worthy as this is, it's altogether inadequate for the Evangelist's christological goals.

More likely Matthew is asserting the accomplished victory of the Lord over his rival the sun, such as the prophet Isaiah foresaw and the Book of Revelation repeats: "The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light; but the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended" (Isaiah 60:19–20, cf. Revelation 21:22–25, 22:4–5).

For all that, the contrast might not be so much Jesus-versus-the-sun as Jesus-versus-the-disciples. On the mountaintop, the face of

Jesus radiates light. On the same mountaintop, the disciples "fell on their faces and were exceedingly frightened" (Matthew 17:6).

Luke agrees with Matthew that more is happening with Jesus than his exceptional attire. But he is wary, on several levels, of how his Synoptic brothers have reported the story.

So first of all, having as he does a particular interest in Jesus' prayer life, Luke sets the whole Transfiguration in the context of prayer.[3] While Mark and Matthew's versions could be construed as a casual walk or a vigorous hike, Luke makes it one of many instances of Jesus going away in private to pray (cf. 9:18, 11:1, 22:41). Jesus had already made a habit of withdrawing to the desert (5:16) and the mountain (6:12) to pray: the usual places you go to meet God. That the Transfiguration should come upon him on the latter, not in the former, sets Jesus apart from John—another particular interest of Luke's.[4]

And so, "he ascended the mountain to pray. And in his praying the appearance of his face came to be different" (9:28–29). As noted above, Luke drops the word "metamorphosed." But he concedes that the face became "different" (*heteron*). How different and in what way, Luke refrains from clarifying. Actually, he puts in a further buffer to clarity by saying that the "appearance" (*eîdos*) of Jesus' face is what became different. This Greek word indicates the visible manifestation of something—it derives from the verb "to see"—but can mean form or shape, much the same as the *morphḗ* in metamorphosis.

Luke's apparent hedging points to the age-old problem of relating a transcendent vision accurately. The first chapter of Ezekiel, for example, reads like a chain of barriers to comprehension, while in fact being the prophet's only way of helping you even begin to comprehend. Repeatedly he deploys words and phrases like "as it were," "as for the likeness," and "like the appearance."

And that's just for creatures. When it comes to God, Ezekiel practically stutters in his effort to depict what exceeds the senses. "There was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance... And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I

saw as it were the appearance of fire... Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (1:26–28). Luke is the only one of the Evangelists to use the word "glory" in the Transfiguration. He has learned from Ezekiel the impossibility of describing glory—and the necessity of trying to do so anyway.

As it turns out, at the Transfiguration Jesus' face becomes "different" in more ways than one. Very soon afterwards, he will "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). And he's told us twice already what's going to happen to him when he gets there.

Matthew and Luke both return to Jesus' clothing and its exceptional whiteness. The first says "his clothes came to be white like light" (17:2), the second that they were "lightning-white" (9:29). Either way, they concur with Mark: this kind of whiteness does not lie within the realm of earthly possibilities.

Here we are back on safer ground. White garments have a long symbolic reach, backwards into Israel and forwards into the eschaton.

Luke can, in fact, reach right back into that first chapter of Ezekiel to borrow the Septuagint's term: *exastráptōn*, dazzling or flashing like lightning. "As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness [*exastrápton*] around it and fire flashing forth continually and in the middle of the fire something like gleaming amber... Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot, and they sparkled like burnished [*exastráptōn*] bronze" (Ezekiel 1:4, 7).[5] In Ezekiel, the cloud is what dazzles like lightning, but in the Transfiguration, Jesus' garments are what dazzle. That's Luke's subtle way of stacking up and overlapping the respective identities of the Lord God and his beloved Son.

Even more important than Ezekiel's is the role the prophet Daniel plays in the background of the Transfiguration—and, indeed, in much of the Gospels' depiction of Jesus. As this prophetic book turns from fiery furnaces and lions' dens to wild and disturbing visions, two figures take center stage.

First, "as I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning

fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him" (7:9–10). White and light characterize this figure.

Then comes the second. "And behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed" (7:13–14). The association with both the clouds and the Ancient of Days is evocative, but this second figure's identity remains underdetermined, until chapter 10.

There, after an extended period of fasting, Daniel beholds "a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning [*astrapês*], his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished [*stílbontos*] bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude" (5–6). As in Ezekiel's report, Daniel has to buffer his observations with qualifications: "one in the likeness of the children of man" or "one having the appearance of a man" (16, 18).

Note that there is a certain range permissible here. The exact appearance of the remarkable figure isn't nailed down, in part because it can't be. What in any case could be meant by a "face like the appearance of lightning"? The Evangelists draw on a general set of qualities circling around the "son of man": his whiteness, lightness, and brightness.

Ay, there's the rub. Radiant white light is *so* evocative that it can't be contained just to a divine figure. It bounces around and shines everywhere.

So in a much later apocalyptic book, greatly inspired by both Ezekiel and Daniel, whiteness is distributed prodigally. In Revelation there are white hairs (1:14), white stones (2:17), white horses (6:2, 19:11), white clouds (14:14), and a white throne (20:11). Above all, white garments (3:4–5, 3:18, 4:4, 6:11, 7:9, 7:13–14, 19:14). Yet it is not the crucified and risen Lord Jesus who is arrayed in white, but those he has gathered and preserved for himself, from martyrs to elders.

The only unmistakable application of this set of images to Jesus appears in the first chapter of Revelation. John of Patmos sees "one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength" (1:13–16). To apply the term that Revelation does not, this Jesus is *transfigured*.

And this in turn points us toward a mystery that will require the rest of the book to solve.

In the accounts of his Resurrection, Jesus is absolutely, certainly, definitely *not* the figure robed in white or dazzling like lightning. At precisely the moment you'd *most* expect him to be set apart by his appearance, he isn't. The risen Jesus is in fact so unremarkable that Mary Magdalene doesn't recognize him at first, nor his companions on the road to Emmaus, nor his disciples on the boat squinting at the seashore.

More strangely still, the whiteness, lightness, and brightness are transferred to others—unnamed messengers at best. Mark reports how the women, upon entering the tomb, "saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed" (16:5). His robe is not whiter than a bleacher could manage, but distinctly white all the same.

Matthew employs images he didn't use for the Transfiguration but that draw on the same prophetic sources: "And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning [*astrapḕ*], and his clothing white as snow" (Matthew 28:2–3). The angel, *not* Jesus.

Luke puts a similar figure at the Resurrection—"While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling [*astraptoúsę̄*] apparel" (24:4)—and also at the Ascension—"And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes" (Acts 1:10).

The unnamed messengers bear some resemblance to the transfigured Jesus, but not at all to the risen Jesus.

More to the point, the *transfigured* Jesus bears almost no resemblance to the *risen* Jesus!

The Evangelists do not intend you to doubt that the Jesus of the Transfiguration and the Jesus of the Resurrection are the same Jesus. Most certainly, he is one and the same Jesus.

What they want you to grasp, rather, is that the Transfiguration and the Resurrection are telling you two distinct things about the same Jesus. They are not to be interchanged or collapsed. To lose either is to lose something crucial about Jesus.

So if it's not a preview of the Resurrection, then what *is* the Transfiguration?

What can it mean for one and the same Jesus, eternal and everlasting, to *change*?