

West coast witness: Matthew 16:13-20

by [Peter S. Hawkins](#) in the [August 9, 2005](#) issue

One August I was hiking with new friends just 15 minutes north of the Golden Gate Bridge. They wanted to show me a favorite trail, a path that winds its way through summer-golden hills, past ravines of alder, oak and eucalyptus, and then straight on to the Pacific. We climbed the crest of a ridge that placed us dramatically between sky and sea, at a height even above the gulls. There we ate our picnic lunch and fell into a rambling conversation about politics, real estate values in an earthquake zone and the virtues of sauvignon blanc over chardonnay. Then I mentioned offhandedly that perhaps I viewed something or other the way I did because I was a Christian. This revelation did not strike me as a big deal. After all, they had been talking about Buddhist meditation, Sufi parables and personal spiritual rituals. My saying that the Eucharist was central to my life did not seem out of place.

My remark turned out to be a gauntlet thrown down between me and them, a line unwittingly drawn in the sand. Was I really a Christian? Did that mean that all other religions were “wrong”? That Jesus was the only Son of God? That he was born of a virgin? That he was “in” the bread and wine?

There I was, confronted by people of good will and genuine lovingkindness, suddenly made to be Defender of the Faith, the Tennessee Valley Authority on hard sayings and Christian claims.

I do my best to avoid confrontations of this kind, especially when it comes to saying “really” yes or “really” no. Mystery is usually my refuge. But in that moment on the rim of the Pacific there was no place to hide or run, no way to squirm away from the question of Jesus Christ.

All three of the synoptic Gospels stage similar moments of reckoning, as in Matthew 16, when Jesus forces the disciples to say who they believe him to be. Not who do most people say that I am, he asks, but what do you have to say about me? In John the situation is a little different. Many of Jesus’ followers are deserting him after it seems as if he’s become too much to handle. He asks Peter if he too will think better of the whole business and turn away; whereupon Peter says, “Lord to whom shall we

go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

Cut from Caesarea Philippi to the Pacific coast 2,000 years later. It does not take a stretch of the imagination to see that what confronted me on a cliff overlooking the sea was an update of that Gospel moment. My California friends were turning me into that other Peter; they were asking me to say who I believed Jesus Christ to be. Was he uniquely the Son of God? Were other religions therefore false? What exactly was I swallowing when I took communion?

I failed pretty miserably that day. No doubt I whined that such things were terribly complicated; that Christ’s divinity and the virgin birth were not dogmas of the same magnitude; that the life of faith was not a true-and-false test. But if forced to answer yes or no, I would have said yes. I can only claim to be a more or less befuddled follower of Jesus Christ, one who has been marinating in an ancient tradition for a lifetime and is now finding his 21st-century way within it.

I wager that my friends thought I had fudged. Shouldn’t a professor of religion be able to render a better account of the hope that is in him? I pondered taking a course on comparative Christology, but of course my friends were not asking me for anyone else’s Christology. They were asking for my own Jesus.

I am not sure I can do much better now. I confess that Jesus is the Son of God, the bread of heaven, but I would never tell someone else that his or her religion was false. I affirm week by week that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary but also understand my friends’ incredulity at such an affirmation. I cannot explain Christ’s presence in the Eucharist; I only know that I cannot imagine my life without that bread and wine, or apart from the church that continues to keep the feast. I live, in other words, in a mess of imprecision, on the edge of the land, between sea and sky.

But if anyone were to ask me if I would care to simplify my muddle by walking away from it, then I would repeat the words that Simon Peter spoke when he too was given the chance to skip out. “Lord, to whom can we go?” Later on, of course, Peter ran away from these certainties; no less than three times he denied knowing the man from Nazareth. Christians come from a long line of failed evangelists and fudgers of the gospel. Think even of the great confessors of the church—who among them understood who Jesus Christ is? And for whom is he not a puzzle and an offense?

What Peter said to his Lord comes as close to bedrock as anything I know, and comes nearer to stating my bare belief than the more elaborate affirmations I make week after week. "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to know and believe that you are the Holy One of God." There it is in a nutshell: an affirmation to stake a life on, a Lord not to explain but to follow.