

“Rocky Mountain High”

March 3rd, 2019
Luke 9: 28-36

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Back in 1994 my husband Alex and I went hiking in the mountains in Kootnay National Park. One day we climbed to the top of one mountain. This wasn't major mountain climbing — I don't even think there was much scrambling but as always, it was a long slog to the top.



But once we finally reached the top we did exactly what you would expect. We stopped, took deep breaths and took in the spectacular view... and then just sat down and rested, enjoying the thrill of being at the top of the world. Then, all of the sudden a major storm hit ... complete with lightning and heavy, heavy rain. Suddenly, being on top of the world didn't seem like such a great thing.

In a lightning storm you're always told to make sure you're not the tallest thing around ... well, that's a challenge in the west. There's nothing like being in the middle of the prairies in a lightning storm, but when you're on top of a mountain and there is nothing but skree around you, it is a major problem. Alex and I found a ditch, a big crack and jumped into it. Of course, it didn't take us long to figure out that the crack was formed because of water and we soon found ourselves in a river of all the rain pouring down on the mountain.

While it was summer and had been a beautiful day, we were now soaked to the bone and cold, waiting for this storm to pass. We had eaten our lunch several hours before, but I had a Mars bar that I kept in reserve in my pocket, so we managed to enjoy the moment with our Mars bar. (I've often thought that that would make a great commercial for Mars!) Anyway, I don't remember how long the storm lasted or how brutal it was finding our way back to our tent many hours later; but I will never forget that mountain top experience.

I don't know how many of you have had mountain top experiences. I know some of you have. And I'm no longer talking about the times that you

have literally been on top of a mountain with the breath-taking views and the overwhelming sense of just how small you are. I'm talking about the times when you have spiritually been on top of a mountain. Those times when you have encountered the Holy and known with a certainty at that moment that the presence and existence of God is more real than anything else you can name.

Jesus took Peter and James and John up a mountain one day to pray. But while they were up there the disciples experienced something amazing. They saw Jesus transfigured. Jesus' clothes became dazzling and he began to glow with the glory of God. Then they saw two others on the mountain with them: they saw Moses and the prophet Elijah. This was the kind of experience that requires you to shut down your left brain because there is no 'understanding it' — there is only 'experiencing it'.

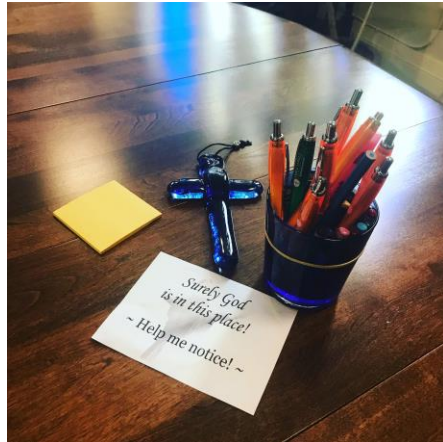
Still Peter does his best to do something. He just can't seem to 'be' in the moment ... he has to 'do' something. So, not unlike almost any good church person when the power of God is displayed; Peter proposes a building project to distract them from the uncomfortable and unexplainable. While that might work ordinarily this is quite a moment and no attempt on Peter's part to distract works. Instead the experience heightens, a cloud descends, and they hear the very voice of God saying "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him".

The disciples had an experience that they could not explain that left them with a certainty in their gut that Jesus was in fact the Messiah, and that he was in fact the Son of God. In that moment the eternal intersected with the temporal, the immortal crossed paths with the mortal, heaven met earth, the extraordinary and the holy collided with the mundane and the ordinary. It was as if in that brief moment there was a crack in the realm that separates earth from heaven and heaven leaked through and was experienced by Jesus and three very ordinary people. And in that moment, they experienced what before they had only known by faith.

Mystical or spiritual mountaintop experiences still happen. The Celts call them "thin places" — where the wall that divides the spirit world from our ordinary world becomes very thin. If you have not had one yourself then you probably know someone who has. It's always surprising when people start sharing. These special experiences can look like Mount Everest or like Mount Royal in Montreal (which, let's be honest is really just a big hill). You often hear about people having a near-death experience where people recount feelings of love and incredible peace and being in or moving toward a very wonderful and appealing light. I heard one person tell me about how incredibly anxious and nervous he was about an upcoming surgery, but then just before being taken in, a feeling of incredible peace and warmth surrounded him and he knew that God was with him. Your experience might have been a tiny fleeting moment in a worship service or while going for a walk where you just

felt that presence, that peace, that love, and you knew you were not alone. You knew that it would be ok.

I believe everyone can experience a moment like this. If you've never experienced a Holy moment – or a God Sighting as we often call them around here, you may need to learn how. It's about being present to the Presence



that is all around us. I have a sign that is on my desk that says: "*Surely the Presence of the Lord is in this place. Help me notice.*"

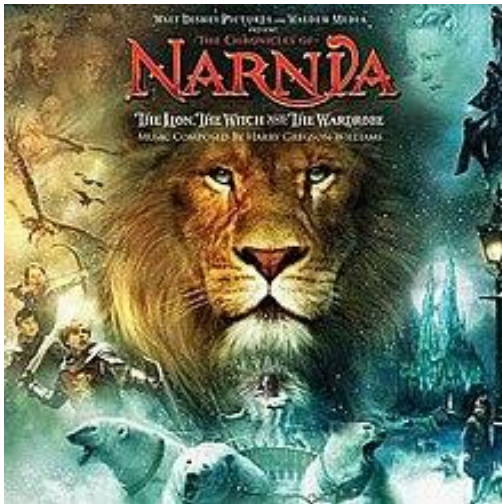
I have had many spiritual mountain top experiences, some bigger than others. I remember when I walked the Camino in Spain at the end of the day settling in to a hostel and then going to a church service at a nearby Catholic church. I had no spiritual experience in that church. It was really odd actually, because it seems that none of those present were Catholic (or at least no one seemed eligible to receive communion) so the priest performed the entire mass while barely acknowledging the 15 or so pilgrims who were there. (I attended many others that *were* meaningful, including particularly the final one in Santiago that was incredible.) But after that service, on the way back to the hostel to do my laundry, I happened upon a very small cave, maybe the size of a small powder-room bathroom. Inside there was a candle lit and some little icon images of Jesus and Mary and maybe a few others. I stopped in to pray and as I did – well it's hard to explain in words— but the energy around me was incredible. I remember hearing God whisper "Don't rush out of this place, stay and receive." So I stayed and prayed and felt that life energy for many minutes ... I'm not sure how long until it faded and I left. The owner of the hostel said it was a very, very old little church. I felt the presence of God more strongly in that place for reasons I don't understand. But that experience seemed to revive me and give me strength.

I absolutely believe that these experiences are a glimpse...a thumbnail sketch of the things to come. Because the only two things in life that are certain are death and taxes, we will all one day be permanently and eternally fully alive in that place where no taxes are paid, where no joints ache, where no relationships are broken or complicated, where no tears are ever shed. It will be a wonderful thing to pass over into the next life.

Even though the places or spaces are equally real, while we are here in the time and space of temporal life the other seems distant and even unreal. It's a bit like that cartoon that had the twin babies still in their mother's womb and the one twin turns to the other and says "Do you think there's a mother?" I

believe that we are as close to God and to eternal life as a baby not yet born is to his or her mother and to 'real' life... it is all around us, we are in it. And yet we are also as far away from the eternal as a baby who is not yet born is from 'real' life. Though the baby can hear and maybe even feel the stress of a bad situation or the joy of a mother's release in laughter, nevertheless, they could never begin to imagine life outside the womb. Even if their brain was fully developed and they could think like an adult they still could never fully put together what life after birth would be like. That's because it has to be seen and experienced to be understood.

One day we will all experience and understand. For now, all that we have are glimpses. We need to hold on to these glimpses, because when you come down from the mountain it is tempting to shake your head and forget about it when you're surrounded by reality of to-do lists, debts, or relationships or aches and pains.



At the beginning of the book *The Silver Chair*, which is one of C.S. Lewis' Narnia Chronicles; Aslan the Lion, who represents Christ, is on top a mountain with Jill, one of the main characters. Aslan is giving Jill the mission that she and Eustace need to accomplish while they are in Narnia. Before sending her on to Narnia Aslan gives her one more piece of wisdom. "And secondly," he says, "I give you a warning. Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly: I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is

clear; as you drop into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind." (Chapter 2)

It is hard to hold onto that special moment, when your faith is strong and everything seems so clear, but if you can... one of the blessings of having or hearing about these special experiences is that they help us to live and to cope with real life.

Immediately following today's reading of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain is a story of Jesus healing the boy suffering with seizures. I believe that part of the reason that we sometimes have exceptional encounters with the Holy is that these encounters — even our ordinary encounters with the Holy in prayer, in worship — these encounters empower us to reach out in faith.

It is important that our experience on Sunday spills over into our experience on Monday. Actually, forget Monday. It is important that our

experience on Sunday spills over into the parking lot after church. Our experiencing God's love should change the way we handle real life. These encounters are meant to give us the courage to make changes in our life and to make a difference in our world. They are meant to give us the strength to cope and endure with the stress and the difficulties and anything else that life sends our way. Jesus and the disciples were certainly going to need all the help they could get. The demands on them by those in need were increasing, but more significantly from this moment on the mountain-top on, Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem and towards those last brutal hours of suffering and death.

When you have been on top of the mountain you can do and face anything. You've almost certainly heard this before, but this is what Martin Luther King Jr. said on April 3rd, 1968, the day before he was assassinated in a speech in Memphis:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Amen and thanks be to God.