

Can't Stay on the Mountain – Luke 9:28-43a

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So, Peter, James, and John were on that mountaintop with Jesus praying one day. It was a routine happening—Jesus did this often with those to whom he was the closest. And amid this, something unique occurred. It was one of those experiences—the never-to-be-forgotten encounters that leave us reliving it time and time again into the future. Jesus' appearance changes and his clothes turn the color of our paraments this morning, and Moses and Elijah show up next to him.

Peter is so in awe that he wants to stay right where he is, hoping that this Holy moment will never end. And while saying this, a voice from the cloud exclaims, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

It had to be unforgettable to them. It was a moment of God's revelation so unique that Peter, James, and John were left speechless.

What are those moments you wish had never ended? A vacation? A job you just absolutely loved? Your time with your spouse before he or she died?

Or maybe they were more specific: a dinner out with your son or daughter who were only briefly in town, or that walk on a beautiful 70 degree, sunny afternoon, or a night's sleep that was too short.

Whatever the moment, they are those we don't want to give up. They bring us joy, peace, and a break from the ordinary in our lives.

Peter, John, and James, though, had something extraordinary happen to them pertaining to their following of Jesus. This moment was an outlier, probably. These moments that had no explanation probably didn't happen every day, although they witnessed some pretty incredible things in their journey with Jesus.

We've all had those outlier moments, too. Sacred moments that just stick out and won't be forgotten.

There have been several for me in my professional life. Without explanation, the Holy revealed itself when I hadn't expected it in that particular way.

I remember the Christmas Eve at a former church several years ago when a drunk woman decided she was going to interject herself into my Moment with the Children from where she sat in the congregation. She was bound and determined to shout out all the characters in the nativity scene as I lovingly and painstakingly described each to the kids.

That wasn't the Holy moment, though. The Holy moment was when the woman's ex-husband's new wife came out of the choir loft and sat next to her—and comforted her, and was a friend to her in that moment. Jesus' representative. Holy.

There was also the moment in the aftermath of the death of a young Navy pilot in a former congregation. His wife and young girls were left to mourn the loss of a great husband and father. It was a horrendous time, and yet it was a beautiful time of connection within a family of faith—of gathering strength from one another in the midst of tragedy.

It culminated when we flew to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where Chuck was laid to rest in the National Cemetery. It was wintertime, and the wind was blowing, and it was frigidly cold.

But there in those elements, at the end of Chuck's physical journey, we commended him into God's eternal care. And together, we were warmed by the assurance that death would not have the final answer. It was an unforgettable time of being ensconced by God in God's love, not being able to be let go of. Holy.

You've had these occasions. Even in times of trouble, there are moments you'll never forget. Moments that, because of God revealing Godself in a unique way, you wish that experience wouldn't end.

But those moments do end. At some point, we can't remain in that unexplainable, mysterious, and somewhat magical moment that occurs on mountaintops. Peter, James, and John couldn't. They wanted to; Peter was prepared to building dwellings, three tents or shrines for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah so that they could remain there.

Instead, there was simply a voice and a command from God: "This is my son. Listen to him."

Moses and Elijah disappeared, and the rest of them were not heard from again until they had exited the mountaintop.

We'd all prefer that this scripture passage from the Revised Common Lectionary would end on top of that mountain. But it doesn't. It ends with what happens the next day when they had come *down* from the mountain.

"Enlightening as the Transfiguration may have been, it changes nothing about the challenges and difficulties to come. The very next episode makes this clear (Luke 9:37-43). Upon hearing a father's request for his son's healing, Jesus responds with great frustration: "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" (9:41).

It suggests that the shift from mountaintop to valley was a hard turn even for Jesus.

“The mountaintop experience speaks to Jesus’ significance and purpose—but does nothing to alter the challenges to come. This “coming down off the mountain” puts into perspective the relative significance of spiritual mountaintop experiences in our lives today: While providing affirmation to us, and giving us formative experiences, the call to ministry leads us not to stay there, but to return below, where the hard work of healing happens. After all, Jesus’ ministry is not transformative and redemptive because of what he did on the mountain, but what he did in the valleys and wilderness areas elsewhere.” (Troy Troftgruben, *Working Preacher*)

The writer R.C. Sproul speaks to this when he comments on this text: “The disciples wanted to stay on the mountain. They didn’t want to be involved in ministry. They didn’t have to work out the concerns of the church, or the ministry of redemption, or a ministry of compassion. They wanted religion for what it would do for them, so that they could bask in spiritual joy and delight on this mountain without any intrusion of duty. But the purpose of the mountaintop experience for them is the same as the mountaintop experience is for us: to send us out of the church and into the world to be participants in the death and in the humiliation of Christ.

The mountaintop experiences we have with God strengthen us for what we are called to do off the mountain: walking with Jesus in the hard, messy, and ordinary moments where we are called to be disciples.

This is where we will spend the vast majority of our journey with Jesus.

The country singer Vince Gill wrote a song years ago that's been well-received by people of faith. It's called, "Go Rest High on that Mountain." At the time of someone's death, the song is a commendation to the deceased.

"Go rest high on that mountain, Son your work on earth is done. Go to heaven a-shoutin', Love for the Father and the Son."

Someday, we will all rest high on that mountain. And in doing so, we will have an eternal mountaintop experience. But, until then, we're not called to stay on the mountaintop. Our work on earth is not yet done. There's the journey of witness to Christ the Messiah who goes to the cross for the sake of the world and then rises to victory in defiance of sin and death.

We treasure those unique moments when the Holy is majestically revealed to us. And strengthened by them, we then we come down into the valley and walk a long, ordinary, and sometimes treacherous path with the one who claims us as his own.