

## **[How] Can We Return to a Mountaintop Moment?**

Let's begin this time of reflection in prayer. God, with gratitude for the lessons we learn from all moments of our lives, help us to reflect this morning on those extraordinary, stand-out mountaintop moments and how we might best carry them with us – to shine your light more effectively in the word. Amen.

People of loving Christ light, can we return to a mountaintop moment? Among the enduring lessons from my years as a teacher in outdoor ministry camp settings and in public elementary school classrooms was the tip that open-ended questions are almost always more fruitful than closed-ended (yes/no) questions. Can we return to a mountaintop moment? Yes, I think we can.

Well, it turns out that closed-ended questions are as unfruitful in preaching as they are in processing a ropes course group activity or in guiding a group of fourth graders through a literacy lesson. Yes, we can return to a mountaintop moment. Is that all there is to say? No, that's not all. A faith path filled with only yes/no questions could be spiritually numbing. Some of us have participated in religious communities dominated by closed-ended questions, and the effects on us have varied. Perhaps the gift of a close-ended question is that it can reveal clarity, reinforce conviction, and lead to further questions.

Can we return to a mountaintop moment? Yes, I think we can. And we need our memories (our times of reliving those moments of extraordinary awareness) to buoy us through all of our more ordinary moments and our dull moments. Thankfully, scripture heard the deep longing in my original question and gently nudged me along to further wonder this: **how can we return to a mountaintop moment?**

I sense from the story of Jesus, Peter, James and John going up the mountain, being at the pinnacle, and returning to ground level that we can return to a mountaintop moment according to the extent that we were fully present in it when it occurred.

The question I want to explore together this morning is this: **how can we be fully present in a mountaintop moment so that it stays with us and can be powerfully accessible to us in the future?** Jesus and his three close friends move in ways that offer insights into how. And the Apostle Paul offers testimony to the people in Corinth and to us about what it can look like to outwardly bear the extraordinary light of Christ.

Let's take a moment to bring to our conscious awareness one of our own mountaintop moments. When have you felt surrounded and uplifted by an inexplicably strong sense of God's presence – of a presence of love, empowerment, connection, peace, possibility? I will ask in a moment if anyone would like to share the physical location or a key sensation from the mountaintop moment that comes to mind.

I'll share one of mine with you. I have summited a mountain in the Dominican Republic, stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon, and moved along high faces of mountains on this continent; but one of my most cherished mountaintop extraordinary moments occurred along a country road very near my childhood home in Northern Wisconsin. I was about eight years old and my grandma Liza and I had taken our bicycles to a good black raspberry picking spot. I remember my attention being drawn to a chickadee perched on a shrub a mere few feet away from me. I slowly, quietly reached my arm out toward it. Chickadee left her perch and landed on my shoulder. She stayed only a moment before flying away. In that moment, I felt embraced by a peace-filled quiet and companionship.

**I wonder: what are some of the physical locations of the mountaintop moments that have come to your minds? And I also wonder: what was a key sensation you felt in that moment?** I was roadside in Wisconsin, and I felt peace-filled quiet and companionship. Would anyone else like to name aloud the place or the sensation of an extraordinary moment?

- *Being allowed to be at her mother's bedside at the moment when she left this earthly life – thanks to her mother's openness and God's love.*
- *Being in her living room when her daughter called immediately after being hit head on by another vehicle and walking safely out and away from her car.*
- *When a pair of bald eagles flew overhead just as his parents' ashes were being poured into the river by two grandchildren.*
- *At a time of deep struggle in her own life, she witnessed a mother bird saving its baby as it was falling out a nest and felt deep assurance for her own life.*
- *During her father's dying moments, as a group came past his room singing "Jesus Loves Me," he commented that it was beautiful and then passed away.*

Wow! Thank you. Keep sharing our mountaintop moments. They happen everywhere. They lift different sensations in each of us.

Let's turn to our gospel reading for today. How were Jesus and his closest friends fully present that day such that the experience stayed with them and would be powerfully accessible to them again in the future?

I would like us to examine five movements: the disciples being led up a mountain, Jesus' appearance changing from the inside out, Peter blurting his awe in real time, an enveloping voice of affirmation, and Jesus' admonition again publicly speaking about the experience. I find a key mountaintop sensation present in each of these movements.

We heard this: *"Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain."* They were open to being interrupted. Like us, they likely had routine obligations on their mind that day. They likely needed to arrange food and lodging for the day ahead. When I worked in outdoor ministry, arranging and hosting retreats, we often spoke about the positive power of pattern interrupt. Being led up a high mountain was not on their to-do list for that day, but the disciples trusted the Spirit's lead as they experienced it through Jesus. **I wonder: might you develop a practice of trustfully welcoming interruptions in your days?**

We heard this: *"[Jesus'] appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. His clothes shimmered, glistening white, whiter than any bleach could make them."* The disciples witnessed Jesus glowing – bright and shimmering. I sense that Jesus was truly, genuinely present with himself in that moment. From time to time, I share one of my favorite brief quotes about integrity. It comes from the 1999 film *The Big Kahuna*. Hear these words from a character played by Danny DeVito: *"Then you will attain character because honesty will reach out from inside and tattoo itself all across your face."* *"Then you will attain character because honesty will reach out from inside and tattoo itself all across your face."* **I wonder: might you develop a practice of welcoming your true, genuine self to be present in more moments of your life (whether in the company of living friends or the saints of your life who are with you in spirit)?**

We heard this: *“Peter interrupted, “Rabbi, this is a great moment! Let’s build three memorials—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah.” He blurted this out without thinking, stunned as they all were by what they were seeing.”* I imagine in a group this size I am not the only one to identify with Peter. Identifying deeply with him, and I feel the spring-loaded energy that accompanies his blurting. And I feel some grief at what was lost for all of them when he did not allow space for silent experience. **I wonder: even if you don’t heavily identify with Peter, might you develop a practice of loving restraint in moments when you are feeling the need to react quickly to something surprising, disconcerting, or hurtful?**

We heard this: *“Just then a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and from deep in the cloud, a voice: ‘This is my Son, marked by my love. Listen to him.’”* This moment hearkens back to Jesus’ baptism and a question I asked us a few weeks ago: will you receive and trust God’s affirmation? **I wonder today: might you develop a practice to openness to affirming love through whomever it comes?**

And we heard this: *“Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. ‘Don’t tell a soul what you saw. After the Son of Man rises from the dead, you’re free to talk.’ They puzzled over that, wondering what on earth ‘rising from the dead’ meant.”* We know in our spirits that Jesus knew how much trouble he was in. He knew he had more work yet to do before his life was taken from him. So, pragmatically, he needed the quiet to be maintained for a time. But I wonder what he wanted for those disciples in asking them to be quiet. Perhaps he hoped they could deepen their faith yet a bit more before he needed to leave them.

**I wonder: might you develop a practice of honoring your need for internal processing of your experiences so that you can then share them with the strength of deeper clarity?**

We also heard these words in the letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth: *"It is not ourselves we preach, but Christ Jesus as Sovereign, and ourselves as your workers for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts, so that we in turn might make known the glory of God shining on the face of Christ."* I wonder, in line with being open to receiving and trusting God's affirmation, might you develop a practice of learning to recognize through what personal traits you most effectively shine the loving Christ light?

Returning full circle through all the experiences we also shared, how can we be fully present in those extraordinary mountaintop moments so that they stay with us and can be powerfully accessible to support us into the future?

I would like to close by sharing with you another generous blessing from Irish teacher and poet, John O'Donohue in his book *To Bless the Space Between Us*. It is entitled "For Celebration." I invite you to close your eyes (if you are comfortable doing so) and hold your hands and your whole self open to this affirming blessing.

*Now is the time to free the heart,  
Let all intentions and worries stop,  
Free the joy inside the self,  
Awaken to the wonder of your life.*

*Open your eyes and see the friends  
Whose hearts recognize your face as kin,  
Those whose kindness watchful and near,  
Encourages you to live everything here.*

*See the gifts the years have given,  
Things your effort never could earn,  
The health to enjoy who you want to be  
And the mind to mirror mystery.*

Friends, may we develop practices that allow us to be fully present in all of the moments of our lives – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Mk 9:2-10, 2 Cor. 4:3-6