

## Mountains of the Bible: Go Tell It on the Mountain (A Climbing History of Christ)

*How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of a messenger  
who proclaims peace,  
who brings good news...*  
Isaiah 52: 7

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*And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired,  
and they came to him. -Mark 3: 13*

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Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere;  
go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.

“Go, Tell It On the Mountain,” *New Jubilee Songs and Folk Songs of the American Negro*  
(John Wesley Work, Jr., 1907)

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According to the African American spiritual, “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” news of Jesus’s birth was first broadcast to the world from the tops of mountains. Not long after the Civil War, John Wesley Work, an African American church choir director and scholar in Nashville, TN set about collecting and curating a vast cannon of songs that his enslaved ancestors had sung and passed around orally for generations. He brought these songs to the choir of the Fisk Jubilee Singers of nearby Fisk College. After working through arranging the words and melodies, the Fisk Jubilee Singers toured the world, singing in England before Queen Victoria and at the U.S. White House, among hundreds of other performances. The songs revealed a hauntingly beautiful, deeply moving longing and pathos for freedom and hope—one that astoundingly arose from a people for whom freedom and hope seemed only a distant and difficult dream. While many of the spirituals are intense, slow, and melancholic (known as “sorrow songs”), others are fast, rhythmic and syncopated (known as “jubilee songs”). “Go Tell It on the Mountain” is one of the most jubilant of the jubilee songs and quickly became a showpiece in the Fisk Jubilee repertoire, noteworthy as one of the few African American traditional Christmas spirituals, as well as for its irrepressible, defiant, uplifting message of joy. “Go Tell it on the Mountain” embraces the voice of the lowly shepherds living out in the fields who were the first ones visited by God’s angel on that original Christmas night—the first to receive notice of the “good news of great joy which shall be for all people” (Luke 2: 10). Jesus Christ, God’s promise of peace and justice to the dispossessed of the earth has come, and so the enslaved singer had to shout with joy, and share this good news, first from the mountaintop, and then “over the hills and everywhere.”

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With the metaphor of redemption and salvation as a journey that we are all on, for Christians the Gospel accounts of Jesus's life have often been seen as the map for the journey. In the Gospels as we trace the journeying of Jesus, we pay particular attention to the comings and goings of this one life as both a window into the ways of salvation and redemption and God universally speaking, and also as a mirror, reflecting back to us our own journey, and the highest purpose and calling of our own lives.

In reading the Gospels, we see that journeying with Jesus is largely an outdoor affair, with so many of his encounters and teaching taking place by rivers, lakes, fields, hills, deserts, gardens, and public squares. And whether he's off praying by himself, or teaching, healing, or feeding large crowds, Jesus seems to have had a particular fondness for mountains. Like Moses and Elijah before him, Jesus found himself decidedly in the mountain-prophet tradition.

Matthew's Gospel in particular is very clearly mapped by mountains. Scholars posit that the entire structure of the narrative, the key features of the map, are the seven mountain stories that Matthew tells the journey of Jesus's life in reference to. Jesus's ministry begins when Satan drives him to the wilderness to test him for forty days and forty nights, echoing Moses's time atop Mount Sinai. At the culmination of that season of testing, Satan leads Jesus up "a very high mountain," (Mt. 4) tempting Jesus with the panoramic view from the top, telling him that he can have it all, the whole world, if he just bows down and gives his soul to the devil (see "Mountains of the Bible: Three Rules of Mountaineering"). In the next chapter, Jesus gathers a crowd, hikes up a mountainside, and sits down to teach, offering his life's keynote address, his greatest mountain sermon, the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Later on, in Matthew 14, when he needs a break from all the action, Jesus steps away by himself, and hikes a mountain to pray, a regular spiritual practice of his that all the Gospels make reference to. Refreshed and re-inspired, in Matthew 15 Jesus once again gathers a crowd and hikes up a mountain with them. This time rather than teaching, he offers healing and he feeds the multitudes. Two chapters later Jesus's journey reaches a hinge point. The story is about to shift from Jesus's teaching and healing in the Galilee region, to his final journey to Jerusalem. At this turning point all three synoptic Gospels place the most stunning of all the mountain moments in the climbing history of Christ—the Transfiguration atop Mount Tabor. The second half of the Gospel is in many ways one long final climb, as Jesus journeys from the Dead Sea (the earth's lowest point) up to Jerusalem and to the Mount of Olives. On that mountain looking out over Jerusalem's Old City, with the Garden of Gethsemane at its base, Jesus offers his final teachings and prophecies, faces his trial and execution, and rises again out of the rock-hewn tomb to new life. On the Mount of Olives he offers his very last words, and commissions the disciples in the new chapter of their journey without him. He ascends to heaven from the top of the mountain.

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*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.*

–Matthew 17: 1

I imagine that there's a certain eagerness and excitement in the air. The four friends are grateful for this time apart that they have with one another—for this change of scenery and for this change of pace. They're grateful to get to soak in the presence of one another in this small group setting, as Jesus's mountain time is usually either a solitary affair or a large group gathering. They journey to the base of the mountain that rises about six miles southeast of Jesus's hometown of Nazareth. Mount Tabor, a striking cone-shaped monadnock, rises to an elevation of 1,843 feet, looking taller than it actually is against the flat, fertile landscape of the Jezreel Valley. It's the closest mountain worth climbing to where Jesus grew up. In Luke's Gospel it's referred to simply as "the mountain," (Luke 9: 28) with something of the unspoken familiarity with which locals refer to their frequented landmarks—"the beach," the river," "the woods."



Color photo of Mount Tabor, Félix Bonfils (1890)

They pause at the trailhead to look up at the mountain rising in front of them. The peak seems to be just out of view behind the sloping ridge. They talk about how long the hike might take—three hours, four hours maybe? They reminisce about the last time they went hiking together. Then they each look down, making sure their leather sandals are strapped on tightly. They look up again, this time at the sky. It's a nice day. A blue sky with a few delicate high cirrus clouds. The weather shouldn't be a problem. It's a good day for a hike. One last look towards the top, one last adjustment to their sandals, and they're off.

I imagine that their initial adrenaline takes them a good way up the mountain before they make their first stop, pausing to catch a second wind. Perhaps they haven't been talking much on this first leg of the hike, as each has been trying to keep up with the person in front of him, as each has been trying to settle in to the rhythms of the hike.

When they pause, however, they savor the chance to talk amongst themselves. They want to know about the trip they're about to take in a few days to Jerusalem, the trip that will eventually lead to Jesus' imprisonment and execution. Why are we going, they ask? What are we going to do there? Where are we going to stay? What if something happens to you? Are you sure about this?

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Apparently, the human attention span is now less than that of a goldfish. We can hold a thought for about eight seconds. A goldfish just outlasts us at nine seconds. Of course, that may or may not be a big deal. It may or may not even be true (how can we tell what's on the mind of a goldfish?). But it makes me think of what so many mystics have said about attention and the spiritual life. Particularly, attention and prayer.

20<sup>th</sup>-century French mystic Simone Weil honed in on this connection between attention and prayer. "Attention," she wrote, "taken to its highest degree, is prayer." Or again: "Absolute, unmixed attention is prayer." Weil called this type of attention "the rarest and purist form of generosity." Such attention is the greatest gift we can give one another, and perhaps the greatest gift that we can give creation, the universe, too.

Psychologists have found that direct encounters with the natural world can go a long way when it comes to exercising and increasing attention spans. Attention Restoration Theory (ART) has shown that walking through a park or woods can restore attention spans that have been shrunk to the size of a goldfish. The idea is that the natural world abounds with what the psychologists call "soft fascinations"—we can think here of leaves rustling in the wind, or of snowflakes steadily falling, or of a few clouds drifting and shifting overhead. These "soft fascinations" beguile us quietly, and captivate our attention gently, leading us into a mindset that the psychologists call "involuntary (or effortless) attention," which is quite different from what they call "voluntary (or directed) attention," which is how we spend much of our time in an increasingly digital and urban world—directing our attention voluntarily, for example, so that we cross the sidewalk safely, and so that we send the email to the person that we intend to send the email to.

It turns out that this type of "directed attention" mindset quickly depletes or fatigues our capacity for paying attention, whereas the "soft fascinations" of nature are able to restore these capacities. At a University of Michigan study, for example, one group of students took a thirty-minute walk through an arboretum, whereas another took a walk down a busy street. When they came back and took a standard concentration test, the group that walked through the arboretum scored on average twice as well. Or there's another study (University of Illinois, 2005) of children with

ADHD. It was found that a twenty-minute walk through a park worked just as well as the best medication at helping the children concentrate.

Of course poets and philosophers have been teaching us a similar message for ages. Thoreau called it “the tonic of wildness,” saying that “we can never have enough nature.” Or John Muir, echoing Jesus’ teaching that the human spirit can’t live on bread alone (Mt. 4: 4)—“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul.”

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Jesus never called it Attention Restoration Theory, but he knew the power of teaching outdoors, and he knew how to invite attention to the “soft fascinations” of nature as a way to connect people with the perennial wisdom and the restorative, healing powers of the earth.

Jesus, Peter, James, and John have paused to catch their breath after the first push of their hike up Mount Tabor. They ask Jesus their anxious questions about what’s next. Jesus redirects their attention. “Look,” he says, as he points to a caterpillar that they had almost stepped on, just preparing to make its own metamorphosis or transfiguration. “Look,” he says, and points to the rare Mount Tabor larkspur, a vibrant blue-flowering perennial grass. “Listen,” he says, as they pause to take in the energetic, scratchy, sweet-marbled song of the Sardinian warbler.

Suddenly they start to remember what Jesus taught them on a previous mountain excursion, when on the Mount of Beatitudes along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus once taught them to “look at the birds of the air,” and to “consider the lilies of the field.” Jesus taught about how the birds and the flowers are always completely themselves, and always completely in the moment. How they find life and beauty without worrying about the future, but simply by resting and trusting in the grace of God.

And so they all pause a bit longer and look out at the world together, looking out at all the “soft fascinations” of nature, looking out at what the Chinese mountain poets and landscape painters referred to as “the rise and fall of the ten thousand things”—the sparrow landing on the pine branch, then taking off again just as quickly; the wind making the forest sing and sway for a moment, before leaving behind only silence and stillness; and in the distance, the cloud shadow drifting across the field of almonds and barley.

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*When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a mountainside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. –Matthew 5: 1-2*

After resisting Satan’s offer of control of the world on the top of the Mount of Temptation, Jesus was eager to return to the alpine heights and to share the wisdom of the mountains with the world. And so a crowd of eager, seeking, longing souls gathers around him. He climbs up onto a mountain meadow on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and he sits down among the wildflowers to speak to the crowd.

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*  
 –Matthew 5: 3

After delivering the still radical, still gorgeous, still God-soaked Beatitudes, Jesus continued with what would become known as his Sermon on the Mount, with teaching after teaching, each one still fresh and timeless, as if preserved forever in the clean, clear mountain air of their birth. He teaches about our basic purpose on this earth—that we’re here to be like salt of the earth, and like light for the world. He teaches how to pray in words that have spread from that mountainside to the whole world—“*Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*” (Mt. 5:10) He teaches the Golden Rule. He teaches that this earth, in this life—not in some other world, not in some other life—is where we seek and find and love God. He teaches about the birds and the flowers and of learning the wisdom of the earth in being fully present to the moment, fully attuned to the beauty and grace of God. He teaches—or maybe better—the mountain teaches through him, the wisdom that creation is deeply good, that to be alive is a blessing beyond words, that what the world asks from us is not to know and control, but to listen and to love. He sits there among the mountain flowers with no notes, no manuscript other than the sky-poetry of the clouds and the rock-history of the mountain, and he paints his plein air masterpiece of a sermon. He achieves what theologian Karl Barth would later lament as the apparent impossibility of theology itself. “Doing theology,” Barth said, “is like trying to paint a bird in flight.” Jesus paints the bird in flight and the flowers in the wind and the clouds in their ever-reconfiguring. He paints by teaching receptive attention to the ten thousand things of God’s creation as the highest calling that we have here on this earth, our attentive presence as our best way of praying and glorifying God—the rarest and purest gift we can give in return to the God from whom all blessings flow.



“Sermon on the Mount X (after Claude),” David Hockney

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*In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness... And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.*

-Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

With one more deep breath, they take it all in during their pause on the side of Mount Tabor, trying to savor the moment, remembering as in a reverie the beautiful mountain teachings of Jesus on the Mount of Beatitudes, and then they set off again, this time intent on making the summit. The rest of the hike up I imagine them becoming more and more in-step with the rhythms of the mountain, with the rhythms of the hike, with the conversational rhythms of one another, with the rhythms of the day, such that by the time they reach the peak, they've become fully attuned to the moment, they've merged with occurrence. And then, in something like the state of having their attention restored to maximum capacity, they finally see what's right in front of them, and what's been right in front of them the whole time.

*And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.* -Matthew 17: 2

Or I like how the pastor Eugene Peterson translated this verse in his version that's called *The Message*: "His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face."

In his commentary on this astounding moment of transfiguration, this paradigmatic mountaintop or "peak experience" in the Gospels, the second-century theologian Irenaeus had a deep insight about what the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain meant and still means when he said about it that this key moment teaches us something about God, life, and being human. "*The glory of God,*" he wrote, "*is a human being fully alive.*"

And so it is that there on the top of the mountain—there, suspended somewhere between land and sky, between heaven and earth—Jesus, Peter, James, and John—they find themselves completely exposed, open to the elements and to one another, and there in that moment it's as if they realize and marvel at the fact that there's really nobody else for them to be but themselves, there's really nowhere else for them to be but in the moment, and when the disciples look at Jesus through these clear eyes of attention and prayer they finally see him for who he really is. "When

they opened their eyes and looked around,” as Matthew 17: 8 puts it, “all they saw was Jesus, only Jesus.”

They see Jesus in a way that they never had before. They see Jesus for who he most truly is, a human being fully alive, the glory of God. And like each of us when we’re seen for who we are by another, Jesus glows with that sense of recognition. Jesus glows for having been seen.

And sunlight pours from his face.

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Each moment always fades into the next, and when you hike to the top of a mountain, the time will always come when you have to turn around and hike back down, back to the world again. Such “peak moments” don’t last forever, but they can linger forever like spots of time that leave a lasting print on the scroll of the spirit.

For Jesus and Peter and James and John, “back to the world” in this case meant back to the journey of preaching and teaching and healing that would eventually cause such a stir with the powers that be as to have Jesus arrested and executed. Back to the world meant regrouping for their next and last big climb together, up to Jerusalem and to all that was waiting for them there.

I imagine they hike down with the lightness and playfulness of the body working with and not against gravity. “How beautiful on the mountains,” as the prophet Isaiah puts it, “are the feet of a messenger who brings good news.” If climbing up a mountain can feel strenuous and physically draining, hiking down can feel ecstatic and freeing. Hiking up is indeed a “hike,” but hiking down can be more like dancing.

They reach the place where they paused on the way up. They pause again, to take in one last view of the expansive perspective on the world that being on a mountain affords. Despite the exertion of the hike, they feel much stronger than they felt on the first pause. They feel much less anxious about the future. They feel much more attuned to their bodies, and to the body of the earth. The mountain has had a tonic and healing effect.

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*After Jesus returned, he walked along Lake Galilee and then climbed a mountain and took his place, ready to receive visitors. They came, tons of them, bringing along the paraplegic, the blind, the maimed, the mute—all sorts of people in need—and more or less threw them down at Jesus’ feet to see what he would do with them. He healed them. –Matthew 15: 29-30*

As they paused there this second time, feeling refreshed and restored in body, mind, and spirit, they reflect back together on their most recent mountain experience. Shortly before the Tabor hike, Jesus returned to the mountains near the Sea of Galilee. He went up the mountain and he sat down, just as he had done on the Mount of Beatitudes. Instead of teaching though, this time Jesus taps into and offers the healing power of the mountains. “The lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute” and many others come to him, not unlike how people have long been drawn to the hygienic properties of mountain air to heal diseases such as tuberculosis. Studies show that living at higher altitudes has been linked to lower levels of obesity, lower blood pressure levels, and reduced risk of heart disease. Those who live above 1,500 meters have been shown to have a longer life expectancy than those who live within 100 meters of sea level. Clean mountain air contains plentiful terpenes as released by mountain plants like pine and lavender that ease stress and support the respiratory system.

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings,” as mountain lover John Muir put it. “Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of Autumn.”

When Jesus offered to heal the multitudes of their ailments, my sense is that he knew exactly what he was doing when he invited them to join him in the mountains. He knew that in addition to their great wisdom, mountains also have great healing powers to share.

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The climbing group of four continues down Mount Tabor towards the base. They feel stronger than when they began, although as they near the bottom, a certain melancholy attends leaving the mountain, and a certain anxiety about the future starts to creep back in to the corner of their consciousness. But they remember what they saw on the mountaintop. How they had a vision not of a different world, but of this world seen differently—this world seen in its radical splendor, the whole world “charged with the grandeur of God.” (Hopkins) They have been to the mountaintop, and now, like Bodhisattvas who have made it to the gates of nirvana, they feel the call to turn back and return to the world, and to take up their part in the sacred work of repairing the world (*tikkun olam*), and of bringing peace and justice to the suffering and dispossessed. They have work to do as “the hands and feet of Christ,” (Teresa of Avila) as those called to bring to birth the kingdom of God, here “on earth, as it is in heaven.”

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After the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, the second act of the story of Jesus begins, as the Gospels find Jesus turning his attention towards Jerusalem, and of preparing for his final mountain climb. The route to Jerusalem rises steadily from the Dead Sea twelve miles away at

1,200 feet below sea level to the Mount of Olives, rising 200 feet above the Old City to an elevation of 2,700 feet. Jesus turns his attention to making this final climb.

When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem on the week of the Passover, he chooses the Mount of Olives as his staging grounds for his time in the city. It's from this mountain that he rides a donkey into the city, cheered on by shouts of hallelujah and waves of palms. It's from the Mount of Olives that he offers his last teachings and prophecies, known as the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-28). From this mountain, Jesus peers into the deep future, and offers his most extensive apocalyptic vision. He teaches that we can't know exactly when or how the day of God will arrive, but that we must remain vigilant to witness it. He teaches prayerful attention to what God is doing in the moment, just as he taught from the Mount of Beatitudes. From this mountain he offers perhaps his most radical ethical teaching—that however we treat “the least of these,” we in fact treat him. “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,” he teaches. “I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in.” (Mt. 25: 35) From this mountain, Jesus looks out over Jerusalem and weeps over this world that he so dearly loves. From the garden at the base of this mountain Jesus prays to God on the night of his arrest. After his death and resurrection, Jesus invites his disciples to join him one last time, again on the Mount of Olives. There he speaks his last words to them, known as the Great Commission. “Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life,” he says. “I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.” (Mt. 28: 19-20) And then from the top of the mountain, Jesus ascended into heaven.



“Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives,” Edward Lear (1858-59)

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As places of teaching, places of prayer, places of healing, and places of commission, mountains map the journey of Jesus. To follow Jesus on this journey of discipleship is to be one of his “climbing companions.” And at the center of this journey, the hinge point in the climbing history of Christ, is the moment of transfiguration atop Mount Tabor. It’s the moment of truth that sheds light on all the other moments. It’s a still point in this turning world.

Hebrew folk etymology connects Tabor (תבור) with tabbur (טבור), meaning navel. Mount Tabor as the great belly button of the world, the Axis Mundi around which everything else finds its place and meaning.

That still point on Tabor is a moment of clarity and equanimity, which presents another aspect of the wisdom mountains have to give. When we are well poised and steady ourselves, we talk about “being like a mountain.”

Aldo Leopold referred to it as “thinking like a mountain.” He tells the story of his ecological awakening to the interconnectedness and interdependency of the whole community of being he once experienced on a mountain in New Mexico. As a young natural resources manager, his group was assigned the task of exterminating the wolf population. In addition to complaints from ranchers, the thinking at the time was less wolves would equal greater numbers of deer and so would be a boon for the hunting community. “In those days,” Leopold writes, “we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf.” On one such hunt, he heard the howl of a wolf echo in the mountains, and sensed that such a wild cry held a meaning that was beyond his understanding, “a deeper meaning known only to the mountain itself. Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of the world.”

His group gets within range of the lone wolf, and fires away liberally and indiscriminately, as was their way. Leopold approached the wolf just before its life went out of it. “We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes,” he writes. It was a moment of epiphany for the young naturalist. He realized then in that moment, witnessing the “fierce green fire” in the dying wolf’s eyes, that his ecological thinking had been woefully shortsighted and anthropocentric. He needed to radically expand his sense of the ecological whole, and the belongingness of everything. He needed to start learning how to “think like a mountain,” with their long, steady, expansive view of how everything has its place in the family of things.

Jesus, it seems, had this mountain wisdom all along. Jesus knew how to “think like a mountain,” or perhaps better, he knew how to think with the mountain, or how to let the mountain think through him. And so during his plain air masterpiece of a sermon on the Mount of Beatitudes, for example, he tapped into the ecological and ethical wisdom of the mountains when he

preached the radical message to “love your enemies.” He said we should strive to relate to one another and to this world as God does. God “makes the sun rise on the evil and the good,” he taught, “and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Mt. 5: 45) In other words, be like a mountain, Jesus teaches. Be like a mountain which remains unfazed by whatever befalls it, be it sun, rain, wind, snow. The mountain accepts and receives it all.

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*And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired,  
and they came to him. -Mark 3: 13*

Come to the mountains with me, the climbing history of Christ teaches, and I'll show you the wisdom of earth and the revelation of heaven. I'll show you the still point, the center, the belly button of the world. Come climb with me, and I'll show you the wisdom of the mountain, and the healing energies of the mountain. Climb with me, and your ecological consciousness will grow large like a mountain, and your attention will grow sharp like the mountain eagle's cry, and you will recognize and be recognized, you'll see and be seen, and the world will come fully alive and you will come fully alive, and sunlight will pour from your face.

You'll want to sing and shout out about this “good news of great joy which is for all people.” You'll want to sing and shout it from the mountaintops and beyond, “over the hills and everywhere.”