

The View from the Top

Mary Lawrence

I should have known better. The opinion of our fit, young guide who described the trail as “a short, easy hike” should have prompted further inquiry as to his definition of “easy.” It was our first day in Colorado, and I was still getting acclimated to the differences in elevation and topography between the Texas Gulf Coast and the Colorado Rockies. Excited about being in the midst of the natural beauty surrounding me and away from the Texas humidity and heat for a while, I decided to go along on what was promised to be a short, easy hike.

The seven of us started out for the trailhead just after dinner. Paul, our trail guide, and his two dogs, Maya and Tinker, led the way. It turned out that this was a daily ritual for Maya and Tinker, and they were quite excited to have additional company on their evening excursion.

The first clue I had that this endeavor might not be as “easy” as promised was when Paul circumvented a question regarding the necessary skill level for completing the hike by saying that the view from the top would be worth it. Experience has taught me that when someone says “the view from the top is worth it,” what they really mean is that the view from the top will exact an excruciating toll on your body.

Once we got to the trailhead, however, I remembered why I said “yes” to this hike. The air was dry and cool. The aspens quaked with the slightest breeze. The pine trees towered over everything except the mountains which were breathtakingly gorgeous. So I reminded myself that I was in good shape and that my daily walking regimen would serve as preparation for

just this moment. I was more than ready.

Well, not exactly, as it turned out. It took the first steep incline for me to realize that there’s a difference between walking on flat concrete 35 feet above sea level and on mountain trails 8,500 feet high. I soon found myself wishing that I could muster even a small portion of the liveliness of my new canine friends, Maya and Tinker. They were the trailblazers of the group, charging on ahead of us before turning around to discover that none of their human friends were keeping up with them. So back down the trail they would come bounding, trying to light a fire underneath us. No one could match those two for sheer energy and enthusiasm!

It wasn’t long before we stopped for the first of what would be combination rest stop/teaching moments. Paul was good at sensing when we needed a moment to catch our breath, yet he used the time for more than just that. It could be a photography lesson, a history lesson, a nature lesson; it didn’t matter. What mattered was that it helped us focus on our surroundings and not on our aching muscles. At this particular stop, Paul pointed out the different types of pine trees and told us how to tell them apart. I also learned why the aspen is called a “quaking aspen”—because just the slightest breeze will cause the limbs and leaves to quiver and quake. And it took two trips to Colorado, but I finally learned how to tell the difference between chipmunks and ground squirrels—both have stripes down their backs, but only the chipmunks have them on their heads.

It was time to move on. Paul gave us a choice. We could continue to take the

direct route to the top or we could take the scenic route which promised a trek through Goblin’s Forest. How can you resist something named Goblin’s Forest? So, off we went. Instead of paved walkways neatly laid out with well-established signs, the “scenic” route offered a crude, earthy path with subtle markers. Paul’s directions to us went something like this: Turn left when you get to the tree with the piece of white fabric on it. Then make another turn when you get to the aspen with the orange cloth tied around it. And when you get to the two fallen trees, don’t turn, but walk over them, and this will lead you straight into Goblin’s Forest. Paul told us to remember his trail markers in case we wanted to do this on our own sometime. I think I spoke for everyone when I told him we’d just wait for him to lead us.

At Goblin’s Forest, it was time for another nature lesson/rest stop. This one was on state flowers, birds, and trees. We talked for a while to stall Paul from moving on too quickly, but he set our hearts to singing when he told us that we were almost there. Our destination was “just around the corner.” I didn’t believe him for a second, and I couldn’t help but joke with him about his sense of what “almost there” meant. Coming out the other end of Goblin’s Forest, we were still struggling somewhat, still huffing and puffing, still catching our collective breaths (well, at least most of us were), but we were also laughing and teasing one another and acting as though we had known each other for much longer than the few hours that had passed since we all first met.

The hike continued, as did the

conversations and the laughter. We talked about the books we read in our high school literature classes. We discussed the relative merits of Steinbeck and Hemingway, and how their writing shaped our lives. We debated the pros and cons of 35-millimeter cameras versus digital cameras—a debate never resolved, as I recall. We shared our stories and listened as others told theirs. I'd never been on a hike quite like this before.

Finally we got to the top, arriving just slightly after Maya and Tinker. We made it! I celebrated by sitting down, catching my breath, and gazing out at the view. Paul hadn't lied. The view from the top was worth it—it was nothing short of spectacular. I sat in silence, fixing my eyes on the majesty of God's creation surrounding me in panoramic splendor. Others were capturing the moment on their cameras. I was satisfied capturing it in my mind. At last, Paul broke the silence by pointing out a nearby rock formation that had a number of smaller piles of rocks upon it. It was a tradition among the regulars, he said, to create a new pile each year to commemorate each climb to the top. He showed us his pile of over one hundred rocks from the previous year. Then he added another rock to his new

pile, already at forty or so. I looked at him, and I think he knew what I was thinking. He smiled at me and I thought, well, why not? I had made it to the top, after all. It wasn't a Mount Everest sort of a top, not even close, but it was a first for me, and I wanted to celebrate it. So I did. I picked up a rock and started my own pile. It was a pile of one, but it was a start!

Sitting out at our cabin later that evening, I wrote these words in my journal: "When we got to the top of the peak, the view was worth it. Again, a struggle to get up there, huffing and puffing, but the view was great. But what's more, the journey was worth it, too, I think. Those morning walks helped me to witness this great creation, witness this majesty."

It had been that sort of a day. A day that makes you pause and remember, even if but for a moment, all that brought you to that place where you find yourself. I thought about the rock I left behind on the trail. And then I recalled what God's people have done anytime they have wanted to remember something. Just as Jacob did at Bethel and Joshua at Gilgal, God's people build a pile of rocks — a pile of rocks to provide a

physical reminder of that which needs to be remembered. So what was it that I needed to remember from my rock pile of one? I needed to remember the journey. I needed to remember to not be so focused on the destination that I missed out on what got me there. Yes, getting to the top was great, but those morning walks around my neighborhood were a part of the same journey, a part of what got me there. The same goes for the discussion on Hemingway and Steinbeck. So was learning the difference between a chipmunk and a ground squirrel. Enjoying the company of others as we made our way to the top was a part of the journey.

I hope I continue to add more rocks to the pile I started. I wouldn't want to think that the story ended along a mountain trail in Colorado. Just like our stories, our journeys don't end, either. They start fresh with each new step. The rock that marked one trail's end is also the first stepping stone for the next new trailhead. It is the next step to new places, new adventures, new ways of discovering and uncovering more of what it means to follow Christ. It is a reminder of a last step and a first step, of where I have been and of where I am going.