

[Spirituality](#)



St. Patrick is said to have spent 40 days at the summit of Croagh Patrick in Ireland in A.D. 441. Today, pilgrims still travel from around the world to climb the mountain.
(Mark Piper)



by Mark Piper

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@markpiper](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

November 18, 2023

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

"Did you make it to the top?"

I responded in the affirmative.

"I think you're the first one up today. Any view?"

I responded in the negative.

The restoration worker wished me well and my descent continued in earnest. Climbing Croagh Patrick, I was learning, was a three-and-a-half-hour journey in three parts: the excited ascent, the frustrating summit and the growing down.

I was in Ireland with my wife, Regina, to celebrate our 10-year wedding anniversary, but a torn tendon in her foot meant I would be hiking County Mayo's 2,500-foot holy mountain alone. St. Patrick is said to have spent 40 days here in A.D. 441. But even before Patrick, this location has been revered and trodden by pilgrims — and now I was one of them.

On the way up, I had seen almost no one. The mountain had a few streams with some green vegetation, but there were no trees, only various types of rock and a few sheep. Every now and then I had stopped to observe, maybe take a photo and then set out again, picking up the pace.

Advertisement

The clouds were dense, but I could see enough to know that if I lost my footing, it would be a long way down with only rocks to break my fall. But the weather cooperated, the scenery was beautiful, the ascent was fun and I had finally reached the top of Ireland's holiest mountain.

A white stucco chapel marks the summit of Croagh Patrick. Once I had made it, I walked around and said my prayers as my exhilaration turned into contentment — and then, disappointment. This was it? This was the top?

The clouds were thick; too thick for a viewing of Clew Bay below or its 365 islands. But a bigger disappointment followed: The chapel was locked.

I really dislike when churches are closed. I feel a church building ought to be like a tabernacle: lights on and doors open. But alas, I found out, the chapel here is only open a few times per year, despite being a holy site of pilgrimage with people arriving daily.

I was alone. I could see the wind whip wisps of moisture around me. And while I didn't perform the prescribed formula of prayers suggested by the signage, I sat down and prayed in my own way. Then I waited, perhaps for some sort of religious experience in the morass of gray I'd found myself in.



A white stucco chapel marks the summit of Croagh Patrick, Ireland's 2,500-foot holy mountain in County Mayo. (Mark Piper)

Did I expect to see God? No. But an apparition or vision would have been nice. But there was no epiphany or burning heart, just a little disappointment. The peak of the holy mountain didn't provide a mystical experience. I decided it was time to go down.

And that's when I got the religion I was looking for. Not in the ascent, not at the summit, but on the descent — the going down and getting to the final destination.

The metaphor of faith as a journey suggests movement and change. I sum up my faith life by quoting Catherine of Siena, "All the way to heaven is heaven ... because Jesus is the way."

My movement and participation in the here-and-now kingdom of God is what matters; it's what I will be judged on. Therefore, if I take care of today, heaven will take care of itself. One step at a time, if you want another cliché.

The steepest part of the mountain, and the part with the loosest rocks, is near the summit and I quickly realized that going down would be harder than going up. I remembered the poetry of Joseph Grant. If we want to obtain Holy Wisdom, that religious experience I didn't have at the summit, we've got to slow down, come down and grow down.



Mark Piper at Croagh Patrick (Courtesy of Mark Piper)

Some pilgrims climb this mountain barefoot; I did not. Nor did I have a walking stick, so to "slow down" was necessary; I was in no hurry and some things take time. To "come down," for Grant, is to be humble, to recognize that Wisdom is among the lowly, not the lofty. And in coming down Croagh Patrick, I met and talked to many people. I was alone no longer.

I passed a middle-aged dad and his son, spoke to two women from Canada, heard a young group speaking German and another a mix of English and Irish.

Closer to the base, I passed an elderly woman with a knee brace and mobility issues that couldn't compromise the pep in her step and excitement in her eyes. "Did you make it to the top?" she asked, looking to the summit.

I could see that the clouds were finally breaking. I said, "I did. And it looks like you'll get a view when you get there."

Near the end of my descent, I thought of Moses coming down Mount Sinai. I thought, also, of Elijah searching for God. Finally, I thought of Jesus and how the ascendancy of mountains to be with God was flipped, first by God coming down at Christmas, then by Jesus asking Zaccheus to come down out of the tree, and finally in Mark's Gospel, where people cut through a roof to lower a friend down to meet Jesus at ground level among the lowly.

That's when I got the religion I was looking for. Not in the ascent, not at the summit, but on the descent — the going down and getting to the final destination.

[Tweet this](#)

Lastly, Grant says that Wisdom draws us out of our heads toward the ground where truth may be felt with our feet — to "grow down" is essential. The height of a 90-foot sycamore tree is impressive, but its impressive height is only possible because the seedling in the dirt also grew down, slowly, sinking roots that kept growing down.

I had now descended Croagh Patrick.

When I returned to the car, I found my wife napping. There was a pub at the foot of the mountain and I thought perhaps I could grab a glass of Murphy's, but I had been

away from Regina long enough. It was time to end this climb.

I can't say for sure that I received Holy Wisdom on the way down. But not every fruitful journey is about climbing higher. I was on a wedding anniversary trip, after all. It mattered less whether I communed with God at the top; what mattered was that I made it back down to my wife, without whom there'd be no occasion to be in Ireland at all.

I'm glad I made it to the top of the mountain, but I'm gladder still that I made it down, back to her. Now, together we are on our way to the next destination.

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 22, 2023-Jan 4, 2024** print issue under the headline: On Croagh Patrick: Lessons from scaling and descending a holy mountain.