

# Hope on the Hill

Miranda H. Lotz

My children were grassy and wet that early fall day as they rolled down the hill over and over again. They giggled and slid down the muddy slope. This was not quite the experience I hoped to give when I dragged them from the suburbs of Washington, D.C., up to rural New York, but they seemed more pleased with this outcome than any other. Rain drizzled, and trees hung on to their green in a last attempt at modesty before their gorgeous reds and oranges were revealed.

As I stood at the crest of the hill watching my children's delight, I looked down at the path and saw a gentleman coming up the track. *Wow, that guy looks like Bill. But Bill and Alicia live in Alabama or Louisiana or somewhere down South. They wouldn't be up here. Not in the middle of the school year.*

I motioned to my husband to come and see. "Doesn't that guy look like Bill?" He agreed, and we chuckled at the absurdity of having friends we hadn't seen in years suddenly arrive at the top of the Hill Cumorah at the exact same time we were there. It would be almost as miraculous as having an angel appear and show a young boy the location of buried golden plates.

By then the gentleman had walked farther up the path. He looked up, and with the effervescence of surprise, we saw his face and recognized that it was, in fact, Bill. His children pushed ahead of him, swarming up the path, and Alicia followed close behind, making sure everyone reached the top.

Six years ago we had been stationed together in Montana but hadn't seen each other since our respective moves across the country in service of the United States Air Force.

We stood and chatted as their children joined ours rolling down the hill—all of our children except one. My daughter sat patiently in her stroller wheelchair clapping her right hand against her weak left arm, hooting her delight as the other kids rejoiced. She was born without a gene that stops tumor growth. So she grows tumors. All over her body.

Earlier that summer, we had traveled from Virginia, where we now lived, to Texas Children's Hospital in Houston, the largest children's hospital in the country. We hoped their chief neurosurgeon would be able to remove the offending tissue without causing further damage. The goal was to stop her daily seizures. At four years old, she could walk haltingly across the living room, she was fed by a G-tube, and she could not speak.

After a few minutes of general catching up, Alicia turned to me and said, "So the surgery went well?"

"Well, it didn't cause her further paralysis or damage, but it only stopped her seizures for about a month," I answered simply.

"But you're okay with that? You seem okay." Alicia's eyes gently searched mine for the truth.

I nodded and heard myself say, "The Lord was so much in the details of how we were able to get this surgery in the first place that I know he loves us even though things didn't turn out the way we hoped."

But Alicia's question reverberated in my mind in the following months as I adjusted to the looming, lifelong care of a medically complex, nonverbal adult, who would someday be as big as I was, a person whose care might last the remainder of my life. I started to question whether God really did love us. Was I okay with this? No. No, I was not.

As a child, I would quietly sneak into the "white room" of our house, aptly named because someone in the seventies thought that putting pure white carpet into a living room was a great idea. My mom, however, realized the folly of white carpet and a household of children. She kept us out of there unless we were having home teachers over or practicing the piano. It became a pseudocelestial room for us, a quiet place where there was no roughhousing or shenanigans. On a glass table near a brass and crystal lamp lay an oversized white leather Bible with beautiful illustrations and gold-leaf edges.

To me, the most intriguing story in that Bible was the story of Abraham, whose impeccable obedience on the top of a hill brought rescue from sacrificing his son—at the very last minute. A ram in the thicket. Perfect obedience was thus the key to being saved from doing awful things. It was so clear. I would quietly look at the picture of Abraham poised to slice through his child with an angel holding back his arm.

I certainly wanted a ram in the thicket for my daughter's situation. Wasn't there a way to save her from this terrible life of suffering and heart-ache? And if I was honest, a way to save me from providing the care she would need to survive it? Had I not been obedient enough to qualify for the desired miracle? I felt I'd been inspired in the steps I took before her surgery.

Maybe the real test was just beginning, and the miracle was still to come. Maybe I needed to increase my obedience a bit more. More scripture study. Longer and more fervent prayers as I begged wholeheartedly for deliverance. More church service. More care for my family. More. More. More.

Each morning I felt like Sisyphus muscling his boulder up the hill. G-tube feedings began at six a.m. and lasted for a half hour while her pump pushed formula into her stomach. These feedings were repeated every three hours until nine p.m. when I would throw away the formula bag, plug in the pump to charge, and prepare the formula for the next day. Then there were doctors' appointments to manage her multisystem organ involvement. There was speech therapy, physical therapy, feeding therapy, and occupational therapy. She started special-ed preschool far from our home, and although it was nice to have someone else care for her for three hours, I worried not just about her having a life-threatening seizure but about her getting abducted or abused since she wasn't able to ask for help or tell anyone. My anxieties would spin and spiral while she was gone—a whirlpool of fear that I could drown in. When she returned home, the emotional exhaustion would give way in the face of physical exhaustion. I would complete all her daily care knowing that it would begin again the next day. No respite. No stopping. Perpetual, never-ending care. Hello, hill. Hello, boulder.

On top of this, I had five other children (my oldest was just thirteen years old) who needed and deserved a mother's attention, love, and support even when I was emotionally bereft and wiped out physically. My husband understood my utter despair and helped as much as he could, but he was feeling his own grief, trying to provide for us financially and managing the real stresses of being an active-duty service member in the military. We both held our sorrows tightly to ourselves so that we wouldn't drown the other who was barely staying afloat.

In Relief Society one day, the teacher asked what brought me joy, and I responded, "Do I have to answer?" I was so completely empty despite doing more of the things that I knew were right.

Why did I feel so hopeless? Why didn't God save my daughter from her seizures? Why wasn't he at least saving me from my despair?

One evening, I arrived late to book club at a friend's house—my sole social outing each month. I hadn't read the book. My friends, who were all about ten years older than I was and about a hundred years wiser, sat around discussing the true account of Ernest Shackleton's trip to the Antarctic.<sup>1</sup> They talked about how the crew was stranded on the ice for 492 days, enduring months of darkness, then their boat was crushed by the floes before they daringly rowed in lifeboats to Elephant Island. Once they were there, their leader abandoned most of them and took a smaller group of men to row hundreds of miles to South Georgia, where hope of rescue lay.

"Wow. How many of the crew survived?"

"Twenty-eight."

"How many of them were there to begin with?"

"Twenty-eight."

I was shocked. "He saved *all* of them? How is that even possible?" I asked incredulously.

"He was always very concerned about the morale of his men. Even when they had to do terrible things, they would get together every night to tell stories and jokes, and sing together. When he took the small crew with him to go for help at the end, he brought the most cynical person with him because he knew that the men he left behind could not withstand his negativity. Shackleton's motto was *Fortitude Vincimus*—by endurance, we conquer. That's what the ship was named—*Endurance*."

I felt heat rush to my face and heart. By endurance, we conquer. Everyone made it home safe. That's what I wanted for my children. For my marriage. For myself. I wanted to feel rescued from the polar darkness that seemed to be surrounding me, from the floes of ice crushing my heart.

I just needed to reclaim some laughter, jokes, stories, and music. I needed to send my cynicism on a long journey. I needed some hope.

But what was hope anyway?

As I added some levity into my life, I also worked to understand hope.

Faith, hope, and charity have always seemed enmeshed to me. Where does one stop and the other begin? I wanted to have a very clear definition of what hope was so that I could finally obtain it. I decided to reverse engineer hope by analyzing its sister virtues: faith and charity.

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1. Alfred Lansing, *Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

In *Lectures on Faith*, attributed to Sidney Rigdon and Joseph Smith, we're taught that faith is a principle of righteous action based on beliefs about who God is and why we can trust him.

In simpler words, faith is knowing, trusting, and loving God. We come to know God through the words of the scriptures and the living prophets. As we learn who God is, then we begin to trust him to redeem us. We trust his timing and know his goodness.

We show our trust through obedient actions and keeping the commandments. Jesus Christ himself said, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). So our knowledge of who he is allows us to trust in his redemption enough to obey him; our obedience is the sign of our love for him.

Our obedience is not an investment we make to try to yield further dividends of blessings. It's an act of devotion, regardless of outcomes. Abraham didn't know there was going to be a ram in the thicket. He didn't obey with the belief that he would be rescued from experiencing heartache. He obeyed because he knew, trusted, and loved God. Which brings us to charity.

Charity is the pure love of Christ. It's the love that the Savior feels for each of us. It's the devotion we feel toward him, but even more importantly, it's the love that he wants us to feel for each other. It's a portion of God's love, given to us so that we can value the people around us the way he does. He doesn't ask us to manufacture this love for others out of thin air. Like every spiritual gift, charity comes from Christ.

Charity is seeing our brothers and sisters as they truly are. Knowing and loving them with their flaws. Trusting that they will make their own choices and that the Savior can help strengthen them. It's loving them the way God loves them—wholeheartedly.

At this point, I began to see the pattern. Faith is knowing, trusting, and loving God; charity is knowing, trusting, and loving others; and hope is knowing, trusting, and loving ourselves.

Hope is believing that I am personally able to do what I need to do and that I will make it back home to my Heavenly Father and Mother. Charity is believing that no one is beyond the redeeming grace of God. And faith is believing that the Savior makes it all possible.

An essay on the Church website reads, "Hope is the confident expectation of and longing for the promised blessings of righteousness. The scriptures often speak of hope as anticipation of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ."

It goes on, “In our everyday language, the word [*hope*] often has a hint of uncertainty. For example, we may say that we hope for a change in the weather or a visit from a friend. In the language of the gospel, however, the word *hope* is sure, unwavering, and active. Prophets speak of having a ‘firm hope’ (Alma 34:41) and a ‘lively hope’ (1 Peter 1:3). The prophet Moroni taught, ‘Whoso believeth in God might with surety hope for a better world, yea, even a place at the right hand of God, which hope cometh of faith, maketh an anchor to the souls of men, which would make them sure and steadfast, always abounding in good works, being led to glorify God’ (Ether 12:4).”<sup>2</sup>

If hope is an anchor, then it keeps us steady during the storms of life. Knowing that we can handle the things that come our way when we are coupled with Christ allows us not to capsize when the winds of tribulation blow or when waves of depression and anxiety start to rise. Charity is our helm, the tool we use to steer our souls, giving our lives direction and purpose. Our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is our sail. He can harness every misfortune, each trial that blows against us, and bless us with power and speed to move forward.

We can “press forward with a steadfast faith in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Ne. 31:20).

Shackleton’s men may not have called their camaraderie and goodwill by the names of faith, hope, and charity, but they certainly exemplified those virtues. While I couldn’t stop the *Endurance* from sinking to the bottom of the ocean, I could certainly help myself.

I could trust that I was enough as I was: flawed, tired, and discouraged. I was still enough because of Christ. I could tell myself the stories of how God had prepared me for the experience of being a caregiver. I could laugh about the disgusting things I was doing and the hoops I had to jump through to get the necessary care for my daughter. I could rejoice in the triumphs of my children whether they were typical or not. I could sing praises to God, and those songs would echo the melodies from my daughter’s heart, because I knew that “Jesus, listening [does]

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2. “Hope,” Topics and Questions, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed November 29, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/hope>.

hear the songs [she] cannot sing.”<sup>3</sup> I could “lift up the hands which hang down” and strengthen “the feeble knees” (Heb. 12:12).

As I recall standing with my friends that rainy day on the Hill Cumorah, I remember the peace I felt as I answered Alicia: “The Lord was so much in the details of how we were able to get this surgery in the first place that I know he loves us even though things didn’t turn out the way we hoped.”

Being a Latter-day Saint in the United States military makes for a small world. But not that small. To meet our friends at the top of the Hill Cumorah when we lived in different states, with eleven children to wrangle between us, in the middle of a school year, on a rainy day—that wasn’t a coincidence. That was providence. Miracles do come but usually in unexpected ways. Seeing them there was the miracle that began my understanding of my relationship with God and the relationship between faith, hope, and charity.

Now I realize that hope isn’t in outcomes—at least earthly outcomes. It’s a feeling of deep personal confidence that I am enough because of my partnership with Christ. That things will turn out alright in the end, but that this isn’t the end. It’s accepting the duality of my nature—that I need to grow to become more like him, and that I’m perfectly whole right now because he fills me.

Now I know that hope doesn’t come from the ram in the thicket. It comes from the altar of stones at the top of the hill where a son was not spared, rather than where one was.

It comes from a “green hill, far away, without a city wall, where the Dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is my rock. I will lean on him as I struggle up Mount Zion. Hello, boulder. Hello, hill.

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This essay by Miranda H. Lotz was a finalist in the 2023 BYU Studies Personal Essay Contest.

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3. “There Is Sunshine in My Soul Today,” in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 227, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/hymns/there-is-sunshine-in-my-soul-today>.

4. “There Is a Green Hill Far Away,” in *Hymns*, no. 194, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/hymns/there-is-a-green-hill-far-away>.