

COME ALONG *On My* JOURNEY



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Have you ever experienced something so incredible that you couldn't wait to tell others about it? Did your words and excitement encourage them to want to listen attentively to the pieces of your experience so they could be a part of the goodness? And was your enthusiasm so great that others yearned to experience it too?

This is why I am here today. I invite you on a journey with me as I share something with you so grand that you may just want to experience it too. Or maybe you have experienced it, but not fully—and a new perspective might enable you an opportunity to bask in the goodness in a deeper way.

With our last child and only daughter, Briella, left at home, we decided to take her on a special senior-year spring break trip—anywhere she wanted to go (within reason!). Her choice: The Grand Canyon.

Have you ever been there? What do you remember from your experience? Did you look out at the beauty and vastness as your breath was taken away? Or did you think it was good but nothing spectacular?

Previous to our trip this spring, I had never been. Traveling there was always in the back of my mind, on my bucket list if you will, but I'd never researched it or asked people about their experiences. I'd seen pictures but never considered what it would be like to see it in person. And I'd never tapped into any excitement about going. But all of this changed in January when I began making our travel plans.

My dear friend, Kelly, lives in Arizona and has hiked the Grand Canyon many times. He has spoken of it before and I had thought "yeah, that sounds neat". But Kelly quickly became my person to talk to because hiking was at the top of our list. As Kelly went on and on about the names of towns and villages and hiking trails and key places down in the canyon, my head was spinning. I took copious notes and tried to follow what he said. I looked at maps of everything he was talking about to try to wrap my mind around it all. I consulted Google and dug into hiking trails. Not ever having been there nor fully grasping all the things I was hearing and researching, I found it difficult to navigate a solid plan. That's when an idea popped into my mind.

About a year ago we bought some home-gym equipment, including a treadmill. The treadmill purchase came with a year subscription to iFit. I've tried different "trainers" on the app and found one that I particularly enjoy because of the things he teaches and the trivia he shares during the workouts. I soon learned that he is a popular trainer—Tommy Rivers Puzey—you may have heard of him? Well, he travels to places all over the world and I've gone along with him "virtually" on many excursions. I sometimes even giggle and tell my family and friends about places I've been and things I've learned with him—all in fun of course. Now, I don't have a strange crush on Tommy because I have my own guy, but it is pretty cool seeing places and learning about them from him while working out—burnin' and learnin'—multitasking at its best!

So, the idea that popped into my mind was "what if Tommy has a Grand Canyon hike?". Lo and behold, he did! And so, I began the series. After my first time through I repeated the series a few more times so that I could learn all about that one particular hike and share everything about it with my family when I took them on it for real.

But here's the reality—I did the hike several times in six separate forty-five-minute workouts, not in one day. Nevertheless, I was confident that my planning and training would not only get me through the hike, but I would come out with a smile on my face and triumphant

double-fist raise when I crossed the finish line.

Here's the thing about our plans—they are not perfect.

Here's the thing about me—I am a planner and I crave perfection.

Boy did I plan for that hike! I outfitted my family with hiking shoes and backpacks. I packed a whole satchel of gluten-free snacks of all kinds—because Tommy said you have to make sure you are getting enough carbs and protein. And I made sure we would be able to carry a lot of water too—because Tommy told me "hydrate or dydrate". Well, I don't know what "dydrate" means but when it starts with "die", I listen!

With so much planning for so many weeks, it would surely bring a perfect hike, right? Well, it would certainly yield a better outcome than a hike like this that was not planned for. But the piece of this story that you don't yet know is this:

Five weeks previous to the hike, I had abdominal surgery. Though I was told not to lift over twenty pounds for six weeks, there were no other restrictions. I expected healing to be swift and to be fully recovered by the time we ventured to the Grand Canyon. The problem was, that healing was slow—far slower than I anticipated and I was still having discomfort at the time of our trip.

However, I am a determined gal and I had my mindset on doing that hike and making that trip the best ever for my best girl and my best guy—no matter what.

Starting a week before the hike, I was constantly looking at the weather to determine how we would need to dress and if it looked favorable for the hike. Could I control the weather? No! But I could certainly pray and hope for the best. As we got closer, it definitely did not

We got a "sneak peak" of the Grand Canyon the day before our hike. After flying into Phoenix, we rented a car and made the three-hour drive, arriving just before sunset. As I exited the vehicle and began walking toward the canyon, I will never, ever forget the feeling I had in my soul. Just thinking of it now brings tears to my eyes. There are no words. The vastness and beauty of what was before me absolutely took my breath away. As I looked at the faces of my daughter and husband, it was clear that what was happening inside me was happening inside of them as well. Absolutely incredible, marvelous, glorious, spectacular, ahhmazing—all of these words rolled into one. Wow God! Just Wow!

I prayed shortly after that moment. I simply thanked God for His creation, told Him of my desire for a great hike, and asked Him to show me the way. And He did.

We didn't go. Just kidding. We went but we took a different path than I had planned. We took the alternate path that God opened my eyes to—and ultimately the one my friend Kelly originally recommended.

On the morning of our hike, we got into the park before most people were even getting up for the day. We had our hiking shoes on and a few layers of clothes. The original forecast said that it would be 28°F but it had changed and was 40°F at the top. We were thrilled!

As we started our descent down the Bright Ange Trail, we met patches of ice. Now I don't know how much you know about hiking shoes, but come to find out, they aren't great on ice. I thought to myself "Dang it—that's why Tommy had those spikes on his shoes!". Well, we weren't going to let ice on the sloped trail stop us. We took it slowly and carefully and soon it got warmer and the ice went away.

As we continued down the canyon, we had to continually remind ourselves to look up. Certainly, we didn't want to stumble on a stone in our path, but also, we didn't want to miss the glory that was happening as the sun was putting on a color show all around us. We took photos, ate our snacks, talked about the grandeur of it all, and I, acting as their personal and knowledgeable guide (not only had I learned from Tommy but I also dove into other geology, history, and trivia before our trip), began my speech about all I knew. They had no choice really; they were stuck right there with me and they had to listen!

Along our path, we saw two separate mule trains. And since I saw a mule train on my hike with Tommy, I told my family all about it. A male donkey is bred with a female horse and a mule is created. They are tough animals that can go the

distance and handle the rough terrain of the Grand Canyon—even when carrying heavy supplies and sight-seeing riders!

There were signs posted along the trail, written in four languages, recommending that people refrain from hiking the entire trail in one day due to the long-distance, extreme heat, and huge elevation change. Since the weather was not hot and we weren't quite going all the way, we did not heed the warning and kept on our trek.

We saw and heard people from all over the world. We saw and talked to people hiking in for their week-long camping/hiking/river trip with all of their supplies in huge packs on their backs—oftentimes looking like the gear weighed more than them!

Our goal had become to make it to Indian Garden—about four and a half miles down the Grand Canyon. We achieved our goal! But my young, athletic daughter wanted to continue and we agreed to try another mile or two, reminding her that we would need to hike back up all the miles and over the 3000 feet we had just descended.

We went an additional mile and a half, enjoying the perfect sunny warmth with spectacular views. I found myself gasping every time I looked up because even though it was just a few feet, the landscape was always changing in grand ways. But what was extraordinary is that because we were "down in" the canyon, we were completely surrounded by its beauty.

At about the six-mile mark, we decided we'd better head back. I'd like to tell you that we all ascended back out of the canyon with a bounce in our step like Tigger from Winnie-the-pooh but that would be dishonest. The truth is, it was very hard—one of the hardest things I have ever physically done!

The trek back to Indian Garden wasn't so tough. But after that, it was a real uphill battle. There were times that I would look up at the monstrous canyon before me and wonder how I would ever make it out. We would walk for a while, thinking we were just about to the next marker (like the restroom about a mile and a half from the garden), but it seemed the switchbacks to get there would never end and right when we thought it would be around the corner, it was not.

I know I slowed my daughter and husband down—by a lot. Their concern for me was great and I think they wondered if they might have to call in a mule a time or two. But they were there, encouraging me on. It even warmed my heart that my daughter slowed down to my pace, drawing alongside of me and helping help me up all of those blasted logs.

Logs. There's a four-letter word I never thought I would have negative feelings towards. You see, in order to keep the trail at its best and prevent wash away, logs have been installed. I had stepped up so many of those logs and had so much pain that I began to dread the next one to come. But there my girl was, preparing me for the next log and holding her arm out to me for leverage.

About two-thirds of the way back up, it started raining. Miraculously there was a little shelter building at that point of our hike. The timing couldn't have been more perfect and though I had to climb stairs to get there, I was ready for a break. After adjusting our packs and our clothes, we looked out over the canyon and saw how drastically it had changed. The dark clouds lessened the majestic sights the sun had created and the rain in the canyon made it hazy in the distance. I would say that it wasn't nearly as beautiful as before but then something magical happened—another moment that will be forever ingrained in my mind.

God gave us a rainbow. Right there. In the midst of my difficult trek up the canyon, He put forth a rainbow ... reminding me of His promises and His goodness. My heart nearly burst! And though it didn't take away the pain I was experiencing, it did spur me on to make it to the finish line—a finish line that was still a couple of miles away and would come with more challenges.

Mud puddles. After the rain, we endured thick, goopy puddles of mud. So much for our new hiking shoes! Since we were nearing the top, we were also seeing more and more people—and everyone was a muddy mess, especially the young woman in the white tennis shoes!

It was somewhere around that point that we noticed a mother and son ascending the canyon at about the same pace as us (or should I say the same pace as me). The pair would be ahead and then the boy (I would guess about twelve years old) would need to stop and rest. We would pass and then I would need to rest. And on it went. Well, this boy, became dear to my heart because we were sharing the same feelings. His face was red and you could tell that his mom felt terrible for taking him down farther than what was probably wise because he was struggling to make it back to the top. So, I prayed for that boy and kept my eyes on him, urging him to finish!

As we began the final leg of our journey, the temps dropped and within a couple of switchbacks from the top, snow began to fall. But this wasn't just any snow—like the flakes we have here in Minnesota. It was what I am calling snow pellets—little balls of snow were falling lightly and then heavily from the sky. It was similar to hail but with light fluffy balls of snow! I've never seen anything like it—just incredible!

My friends, I can't make this stuff up! We did not do the hike I had perfectly planned out because we needed God's guidance. And in consulting Him, look at the glory He gave us! All of it, every single second was absolutely incredible. First, it was incredible that I was able to hike twelve miles, descending and ascending over 3000 feet without a mule to save me! It was incredible that we got to experience all four seasons in one day, in perhaps the most beautiful place in the entire world. It was incredible that we got to share in the experience together, solidifying our memories forever. It was incredible that God gave us a rainbow. And it was incredible, that at the end of our hike, He would open the skies, pouring out snow-pellet confetti all over us in celebration of the most perfect day. Absolutely incredible.

This whole experience reminds me of the journey of my life. I had big plans growing up. I didn't want kids. I wanted to be a rich lawyer, living a perfect life where I could buy all the things and do all the things.

And then something happened that screwed up my perfect plans. I got pregnant. Before I even got to what seemed to me like the "Grand Canyon" in life—



THE GRAND CANYON

graduating and being on my own, that wrench was thrown into my plan just like the wrench of the surgery and slow healing before our trip.

I had my son a month before I graduated from high school and that changed the course of my life. Though at the time, I didn't consult God to guide me (because I did not yet know Him) as I did for the hiking plans. But He knew that my course had changed and He was prepared to offer me a better path.

The hike down the canyon of my life was icy and treacherous. There were warning signs about some things that I didn't heed because it didn't fully apply to me. There were mule trains with riders who definitely looked like they were on the easier path, and I was jealous. But most of all, I experienced an emptiness inside that I cannot explain—and not because I wasn't eating my snacks or drinking my water.

Then one day, I looked up and met my Savior, Jesus Christ. He took all of my sin—including the shame of having a child out of wedlock away and gave me a new life in Him. He became my Bread of Life and my Living Water. I was empty and He filled me completely.

He poured so many blessings upon me and I saw Him in everything as I walked with Him and talked with Him. I saw colors in life I'd never seen before like the colors of the canyon as the rising sun painted them on the rocks.

For years, it was a downhill hike—I got married, had three more children, and lived for Jesus—learning His ways, diving deep into His Word, and applying it all to my life. Sure, there were stumbling stones—big and little ones. But for the most part, it was a good downhill hike lived in Jesus as I was doing my best to obey and trust Him.

Little did I know that God was preparing me for the hike back up the canyon by equipping me with His love and His ways so that I would trust Him with what was to come.

In 2017 life, as I knew it, came crashing down around me. I cannot share the details of what happened, but in that shattered moment, it was like I looked up towards the top of the canyon and was certain that I would never make it out. There were not enough mules to carry all of the pieces of my broken heart out of that dark valley.

What about my verse? Surely that would help.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him and He will make your path straight." - Proverbs 3:5-6.

Didn't I say earlier that doing this was easy? Acknowledge, submit, trust. Well, the last thing I wanted to do was acknowledge, submit, or trust. I wanted to cry and scream about how I would never make it back up and I hated the path I was on.

There were other people from all over happily going about their "hikes" in life, while I felt like I just might "dydrate"—in fact, at one point, I wanted to die.

Instead of people helping me, some were running from me and others were those blasted logs—causing more pain.

I wanted to lean on my own understanding and the last thing I wanted to do was trust God.

But then one day He whispered to me from 2 Corinthians 12:9 "My grace is sufficient for you, My power is made perfect in weakness". I thought "Okay God, I have no strength, clearly I have no control, You're going to have to help me out".

And so, He did. He carried me up all of the endless switchbacks. And then He put me down and walked alongside me, sometimes helping me over those blasted logs and sometimes providing others to offer me leverage to step over them. He even gave me people, like that boy, who were experiencing similar circumstances and feelings, and somehow that made it just a little better.

He helped me climb every difficult step to the shelter. And when I was finally able to stand on my own having made it two-thirds back up the canyon of my journey, I adjusted my pack and looked out. The majestic views of the canyon of my life were mostly gone. So much of the beauty had faded.

But then, God gave me a rainbow. It was not like the rainbow I could see with my eyes, but the rainbow of His great love and promises—clearly showing me that because I did what He had taught me to do in trusting Him, I would make it out of the canyon and even be better because of it.

The crazy thing about all of this is that I prefer God's path. It is a far richer one than I had planned. I wouldn't change anything about it, even the excruciating pain of ascending the Grand Canyon. Because of that uphill battle, God grew me in big ways, He has used my pain to help others for His glory, and He has allowed me to shine brighter for Him and fully share His goodness because of how He brought me out of that monstrous canyon.

My journey is far from over, but after conquering all I have with my Savior and King, and because I live my life for Him daily, I have a feeling that when I make it fully out of these last few switchbacks, he will pour out His confetti and say "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Earlier I gave you "the thing" about plans—they are not perfect. And "the thing" about me—I am a planner and I crave perfection. But here is "the thing" about God—He is the Perfector. He is in control. And He is the perfect Path-maker.

I wonder, do you know Him? If you do, I'll bet you have a Grand Canyon story of your own that you have allowed God to use for His glory. If you don't, I have great news at the best time of year as we are preparing the celebrate Easter tomorrow.

God sent His only son to this earth to be a perfect sacrifice by dying on the cross for your sins. Jesus suffered more than you could imagine by being mocked, beaten, and crucified. Because of this, you'll never have to walk through pain alone. And because He rose on the third day, defeating sin and death, as a believer, you get to experience eternity with Him in heaven—a place far greater than even the Grand Canyon.

This is a free gift. You have only to accept it. When you do, you will see God in everything. You will have a love and joy that surpasses your understanding. He will completely fill the emptiness in your soul. You will desire to live your life for His glory. You will be welcomed into the grand family of the Grand Creator. And because it's the most incredible family to be a part of, you will change in big ways as you shine bright and invite others to join.

As I said at the beginning—this is why I am here today. I invite you on this journey with me. I can't promise it will go according to your plan, in fact, I can assure you that it won't. But I can promise that as you acknowledge, submit, and trust God, He will make your path perfectly straight. And though it may not be an easy one to hike, everything about it will be incredible!

EASTER SERVICES:

SATURDAY,
APRIL 16TH • 4 PM
SUNDAY,
APRIL 17TH • 9AM & 11AM

Please join our family at Eagle Brook Church!

We meet at the Mayo Civic
Center every Sunday.

We look forward to seeing you there!

