

I know that it's irrational. I know that I'm safe and can trust my surroundings. I know this, but it doesn't matter. I have a fear of heights. It's not a paralyzing fear, but it's certainly more than an abiding respect. :) I think because I know that it is irrational, I set goals for myself to challenge those fears. My bucket list includes things like hang gliding and tandem sky diving. Now, it's highly likely that those things will stay right where they are on my bucket list, but they are there nonetheless.

As many of you know, my husband and I just celebrated our anniversary. We were brainstorming what we could do to celebrate ... it didn't have to be romantic, but it needed to be something out of our normal routine - something special. Then it occurred to me ... ZIP LINE. We could go up to the Green River Gorge in Saluda and do the zip line: what I would later learn is AMERICA'S STEEPEST AND FASTEST ZIPLINE CANOPY TOUR. 1100 vertical feet of extreme excitement. It would appeal to my husband's adventurous side, and it'd be a first step of sorts toward my bucket list goals. (Yeah - I don't know - it made sense to me at the time.)

I can also be a bit of a control freak, so as I always do when I attempt to quell my anxiety, I made a plan. I would study the techniques of the guides, I would follow instructions to the T, I would not wimp out. It was going to be okay - better than okay! It was going to be great!

So, the morning comes. The babysitter arrives right on time and off we go.

We get there early, which was good with me as I lurked around the training area where groups were getting their safety speeches and being taught how to steer and what to expect at the end of each of the ziplines. I watch the other zippers put on their harnesses, helmets and safety gloves and watch as each piece of equipment was checked for proper fit. I noted that two guides accompanied each group. I listened as instructions were given as to how to hold your body as you zipped, and what to do when you came to the inevitable abrupt stop. I learned what to do if for some reason the guide was not able to bring you in to the safety of the platform at the end of the zipline or when your stop resulted in a trip back toward the no-man's land between the trees. I watched three groups as they took their turns leaping out into space toward a destination through the canopy too distant to see: suspended by a (really far too small) harness and trusting a (really too thin) cable suspended

(really too far up) in the air. After reassuring each participant of the safety of the equipment and the expertise of the guides, the only real warning they emphasized was to be sure not to end the zipline facing backward. Doing so could result in bodily harm. Keep it facing forward and you'd be just fine.

And then, suddenly, it was time for our group to get suited up, listen to the safety speech, and clip-in to the first tree-top platform at the edge of the gorge. I positioned myself in the middle of our group – not at the front because I knew I'd need to feed on the courage of those who went before me, and not at the back because I'd likely chicken out without the pressure of people waiting their turn behind me. It was all very strategic.

As I waited my turn, I stood as close to the tree as possible to limit the possibility of seeing just how really high up we were. I kept my eyes up, I took deep breaths, I tried to laugh along to the jokes our teammates were making about face-planting into trees. (Which by the way were really not very funny.)

And then the lady in front of me practically springs off the platform and screamed out a mighty “whaaaaaaa” until she disappeared from sight. The scream lasted a really, really long time. Fortunately, the hum of the cable lasted just as long as her hollering, so good, logic-based reasoning told me that she must have been zipping that whole time rather than falling from some ungodly height as she passed through the trees. The guides didn't seem to notice anything out of the normal. Everything must be okay.

Then it was *my* turn. More deep breaths. The guide told me to stand on a stepstool so that he could properly clip my harness into the ball-bearing mechanism attached to the zip line. That's about the time panic set in and I stopped breathing. I looked back at the building about 25 feet behind us, perched on solid ground and surrounded by heavy-duty, secure guard rails.

Then it hit me: they actually expected me to stand on a stool at the edge of a platform mounted to the top of a tree and trust a half inch cable to take me to some unseen, unknown and very possibly fictitious destination somewhere out there ...

Well ... then I realized: I get to choose what my faith in this moment looks like. You may have missed it, but today's gospel reading speaks to this kind of a situation.

The disciples had studied Jesus's teachings and ministry techniques. In order to follow Jesus' lead, they had adopted his itinerant lifestyle, had said goodbye to their families, and surrendered all that they had: all those worldly things and relationships that had defined them prior to their call. They followed his directions

as closely to a T as they could, and they certainly hadn't wimped out. At least not yet.

So in today's readings, when Jesus encounters 3 would-be disciples - faithful souls from among the crowd following him, Jesus cautions them as to what that might mean. Jesus more or less tells them to take a few deep breaths, and really consider if this is something they want to commit to. The cost of discipleship and following Jesus' lead requires more than just enthusiasm. (And the first and third are so eager!) To the first would-be disciple, Jesus explains that following him may mean homelessness. It may mean surrendering financial security and not being sure when or where they might get their next meal. And to the third, he explains that the life of a disciple must be his first priority and that the follower's purpose must be single-minded.

The second of the would-be disciples is clearly not as eager as the other two to be conscripted into Jesus' service. Jesus approaches him with a directive to follow him. For the third would-be disciple, it will mean no longer being bound by earthly relationships and obligations.

So, I hitched up my big girl britches, closed my eyes, and ... (really it happen so fast) ... I launched off the platform. I heard a squeaky voice that I only barely recognized as my own cry "Sweet Jesus!" as I flew through the canopy of the Green River Gorge.

I think it might have gone better if I had paid more attention to our guides' instructions on how to *avoid* getting backward on the line. I remember them telling me not to do it, but in that moment, flying through the air among the trees, I couldn't remember *how* they said I was supposed to steer - it was not at all intuitive! Despite frantically steering this way and that, I couldn't seem to keep my feet in front of me and I did the only thing the guides said *not to do* -- I got to the end of the zip line backwards.

Spoiler alert: I survived. My pride was wounded, but gratefully, not my head. Despite my best effort, I hadn't failed (survival, after all, was the primary goal), but I hadn't exactly succeeded, either.

Jesus is fully aware that his followers will not always follow his instructions to the T. He knows that he will be betrayed. He knows that they will doubt. He knows that they will wimp out ... sometimes even when it matters the most. He knows they are not entirely capable of the single-minded dedication he asks of them. He knows they aren't able to go into this life of discipleship with their eyes wide open ~ how could they possibly know what they will face or what will be asked of them?

We managed about five zips before the guides mentioned that some of the ziplines are out of order and in need of maintenance. Which was only mildly stressful until they said not to worry, we'd walk from one line to the next and enjoy a little snack and learn a bit about the local geography. The bit about the ground sounded great, and I was all in.

Until ... it occurred to me that there was no elevator ... or ladder. It dawned on me that we were 130 feet up a tree, and the only way down was a rope. I've never rappelled before. Dangling in midair by a thin cord has, I might point out, never been on my bucket list, and was not part of the plan. I had come to zipline, not rappel: one goes across, the other **straight down!** Up to this point, I had followed the instructions as best as I could. Aside from that first backward stop and a terribly ungraceful dismount to the platform, I had more or less figured out how to steer and was a bit less clumsy in my dismounts. And, I'm proud to say, I had not wimped out. But rappelling was not part of my plan. Someone in the group moaned, 'O dear God, you've got to be kidding me.' ... it might have been me.

When I asked how high we were, the guide said, 'only about 55 feet.' Wimping out was certainly on the table when the instructions included words like, 'stand on the very edge' and 'your toes should hang off.'

But there was no way out. I couldn't exactly zip back *uphill* to the previous platform, and I couldn't shimmy down the tree... I thought to myself, I've done hard things before, and I can do this, too.

This experience on the zipline has been a parable of my own faith journey. I always have my own plan, and somehow things never go as I imagine they should. My need to control my circumstances and to keep my options open keeps me from being a very good follower at times. I had to force myself to roll with the events of the day, which required that I face some deep-seated fears and trust the guides' instructions and the various routes to our final destination.

I do the same thing in my journey with Christ – I struggle with worries about my financial future, I feel a pull to stand in the safety of my metaphorical tree and not risk going near the edge where God often calls me. I am often daunted by previous experiences when I was no longer able to steer myself or was clumsy in my attempts to be faithful. And yet, when I choose to follow where I know Christ is leading me, things always turn out better than I could have hoped.

I seem to need to be taught again and again that to be a follower of Christ, I must be single-minded in my desire to go wherever he leads. I must be willing to make the sacrifice that is asked of me. I must be willing to trust that as long as I am following his guidance, I won't be separated from my life-line. And as long as I

make a faithful attempt at whatever it is God is calling me to, things usually have a way of working out which don't involve face-planting into a tree at 35 miles an hour.

Trusting God is hard – be it while courageously rappelling to the distant ground below, or while going about the mundane routines of our day-to-day lives. It requires that we relinquish control over everything that we hold dear ~ over our own journey, over our avoidance of potential failure, over our need to manage the perceptions and expectations others have of us, and possibly even over our own financial and material security. To be a disciple means we are to abandon ourselves to the love and purposes of God. It means being willing to dangle our toes over the edge, not looking back in fear of what we believe is beyond our capacity.

When it was my turn to rappel down to the ground, I was somewhat vocal about expressing my reservations. The guide asked if I trusted the world's premier engineering geniuses. As I narrowed my eyes at him, wondering what he was going on about, he explained that the rappel's pulley system is a feat of German design and lowers each person at the 'same rate of slow.' "Haven't I heard you mutter a few prayers so far this morning?" he asked. And then he proudly pointed to the manufacturer's name on the pulley: Deus. "God made that pulley system. Just trust God."