How many people here are afraid of heights? It’s an instinctive fear that even babies have.

I have a friend who loves heights. His favourite pastimes are skydiving and rock climbing. Not for me!

It’s not that I mind heights if I feel safe enough. Standing on an open balcony in a high-rise can give me the willies, but I don’t mind travelling up the CN tower in a glass-enclosed elevator. I feel safe.

Another friend of ours is terrified of heights. He’s a wee little short guy, so maybe he’s used to being close to the ground. He won’t even go up a ladder. But he works as a flight attendant. He says he doesn’t mind it because the cabin of the plane is pressurized and he doesn’t have the sensation of height. He feels safe.

I must admit I don’t like the part of flying when the plane first takes off. Suddenly it occurs to me that we are indeed going to be very high. But somehow when we’re above the clouds, it doesn’t feel so scary.
Heights were often a symbol in religion and mythology for a spiritual realm. It made sense if you lived in a world where you believed that heaven, or the abode of the gods was up in the sky, and hell, or the world of the dead, was below. In the middle was earth, presumably at the centre of the universe.

In some churches, women wore their hair up high in a beehive, because “the higher the hair the closer to heaven.”

Galileo managed to knock that idea right out of the park. Using a combination of mathematics and his invention, the telescope, he determined that the sun was actually the centre of the solar system, and the earth not only revolved around it, but spun on its axis as well. This horrified the church, because scripture seemed to indicate that the earth was the immovable centre of all things.

I am reading a book about the life and struggle of Galileo. He was a deeply religious man who loved his Catholic faith. His story is not about science versus religion, but the interpretation of religion. Galileo believed that God was revealed in the scriptures,
but could also be revealed in nature. It took the church a few more centuries to catch up with him.

In the story of Moses going up Mount Sinai, he goes up alone. It is too dangerous to approach the glory of God, which appears like a consuming fire at the top of the mountain. Moses waits there for six days; the same length of time that the book of Genesis tells us it took God to form creation. On the seventh day, the day of rest, God speaks to Moses. He remains on the mountain another 40 days and nights. This is the amount of time that it was believed a person could survive alone, but he wasn’t alone.

When Moses returns from the mountain, he is transfigured. His face shines with the reflected glory of the LORD. The people are also changed, because he brought back with him the law.

Have you ever had an experience that changed you in a way that was so deep, you are no longer the same person? For some of us it happens when we fall in love, get married or have children. We have been changed.
I remember having this feeling when I passed my ordination interview. This is the make or break moment in the development of a minister. It can be nerve-wracking, and this was recognized by the fact that the interviewers had us together in a separate room with a chaplain.

When I was told that I had passed, and was formally welcomed into the United Church, I literally could not feel my feet on the ground. I shared this with another ordinand who felt the same way. Something in us had fundamentally changed.

It’s not always easy to follow Jesus. In fact, it might lead to a cross. It did for the disciples. But before this, there was the event we celebrate today called the Transfiguration.

Like Moses before him, Jesus went up a mountain, but he didn’t go alone. He took Peter, James and John to witness this event. Again like Moses, his appearance changed.

Jesus is joined by the figures of Moses and Elijah. Why would Jesus have needed them there? Were they telling him something, or asking him questions? We’ll never know.
What we can surmise is that this was a visual demonstration of what Jesus had taught: that the Great Commandment to love one another was supported by the law and the prophets. Moses was revered as the bringer of the Law, and Elijah the greatest prophet.

Peter, who is a typical do-er, wants to get busy building huts. That’s what he knows how to do. It is familiar and it makes him feel safe. Like being in an airplane and looking down at the clouds. You feel safe because you can’t see the ground.

At this point, they hear a voice, declaring “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” These are similar to the words that were heard at Jesus’ baptism, with a significant addition: Listen to him! It’s not enough to say we follow Jesus, if we don’t also listen to him.

Jesus comforts the disciples and calms their fears. That’s because love always overcomes fear. That is the law that Jesus came to teach. The transfiguration changed his appearance, but it was the disciples who were transformed.
Later today we are going to come together to do the work of the church. Admittedly, it’s not our favourite activity. Most of us would rather build huts, like Peter, and retreat within them. But then we would miss the glory of what God is doing among us.

Jesus not only spoke to the disciples, he touched them. May we today, feel his touch on our hearts, that we may be his body in the world today. Amen.