

The Greatest Show Under the Earth

By: Barbara Dickson

Standing 300 feet below the earth's surface, my family and I waited for an elevator to lift us to freedom. For five minutes I had time to contemplate the hundreds of thousands of tons of earth sitting over my head, and for a fleeting moment, I allowed myself to think: What if the elevator didn't come?

For the past 90 minutes we had toured Jewel Cave, 44 stories beneath the Black Hills of South Dakota. The massive cave, boasting over 117 miles of subterranean wonder, offered room after room of buried geological treasure. Passages such as Contortionist's Delight and the Miseries lent an authenticity to the cave's twisted labyrinth.

As we gingerly walked along see-through metal grating, we gripped the handrails for balance and peered into the cave's black recesses above and stared into its yawning abyss below. We walked along its knobby ledges and climbed 800 dewy stairs.

But while Jewel Cave proclaimed proudly its main attractions were its crystals, mineral soda straws and drapery formations, what struck me was that the cave existed at all.

I had just presumed in my naiveté that God had put all His wonder on the topside of the topsoil. I had associated mud, rock and worms with the dirt under my feet. Yet here lay a magical underworld, deep in the belly of the earth. The cave's only interior designer was slightly acidic water, mixed with minerals, seeping through faults in the earth's crust.

I also thought that caves were dark, smelly, creepy places where bats and bogeymen hung out. How careless to prejudge the place. Quietness pervaded the spacious caverns, fresh air invigorated our spirits, and I found no bogeymen lurking around the chambers.

But the most striking revelation of Jewel Cave was its darkness. The tour guide, after suggesting we hold onto our

children and the guard rails, turned off the lighting system within the cave. Blackness, thick enough to cut, enveloped us. Overwhelming, suffocating blackness. It made no difference whether our eyes were open or closed. We waited. I could only imagine the terror if our guide lost his hold on the switch.

Relieved, with the soft lights safely lit, our guide pointed out where a new room had just been discovered behind a slit in the wall; so inconspicuous, yet what lay behind the crack was another stunning grotto of jewel-like crystals and extraordinary wonders. Experts feel they have unearthed only four percent of the cave's total size. Five thousand miles of labyrinth wait to be uncovered.

As we continued to wait for the elevator, I reflected on the lessons this creation of God had already taught me. I learned that when I've decided I'm in a smelly, creepy place in my life, I should look around. By counting my blessings, I may remember that life truly is good.

In those 90 minutes, Jewel Cave taught me that when I think I'm backed into a corner and at the end of my resources, hope and a fresh start await. With perseverance and prayer I can tumble into a new room in my life, holding more promise than the one I left behind. I also learned never to assume I see the whole picture. God doesn't reveal His wonder all at once.

But the best lesson I learned at Jewel Cave was that even when darkness crowds my life, darkness so thick I panic at ever finding my way again, I don't walk alone. God lights my way as He walks beside me. There's nothing in my day that He and I can't handle together.

The elevator arrived and lifted us into the sunlight, to the sun's warmth and to the upside of planet Earth. But the cave's residue clung to my clothes and to my heart. ☪

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