

Three Saturdays and a Sunday

It was a Saturday in January – January 22, 2005 to be exact – and a chapter of my life was ending. It was the last day of business for the Christian bookstore where I had worked for 18 years. Customers continued to shop even as a crew of workers loaded fixtures onto a truck. I couldn't believe how empty the store was. I couldn't believe it was closing.

I'd been aware of the steady decrease in sales and even greater increase in expenses during the previous years. I knew the store was sick, but I had hoped for recovery. I knew I wouldn't work there forever, but I thought that I would be the one to decide when I would leave.

The month of January had been surreal. It felt like an odd combination of a visitation, a funeral, and a long-running garage sale. It was hard to say goodbye to customers and coworkers who had become friends. I treasured the heartfelt comments from customers about how much they appreciated the store. I shrugged my shoulders when they wondered, "Where are we going to shop now?" I resisted the impulse to ask some of them where they had been in the previous weeks, months, and years. Why had they waited to show up until merchandise was 70% off?

I hid my anger, but I had plenty of it to spread around. Anger at the publishing board who made questionable decisions over the years. Anger at my boss for not making it clear to me sooner that closing the store was a very real possibility. Anger at the big chain stores and online stores who were able to sell their books at extra low prices. Anger at the customers who shopped at these stores. Anger at myself for not making wiser management decisions. Anger at God for letting this business that was also a ministry end.

In the midst of my grief, anger, and disappointment, though, there was hope. Future plans seemed to be working out well for my employees. I, too, was pretty sure what I would do next.

For many years, people had been encouraging me to consider attending seminary. But I couldn't visualize myself as a pastor and couldn't imagine what else I might do with a seminary education. Eight years earlier I had spent my summer vacation learning Biblical Greek and I loved it. I began to believe I could attend seminary. As time went on, the internal and external nudges continued. So when the store closed, I perceived it as a push in that direction.

However, I couldn't agree with those who told me that God closed the store in order that I would go to seminary. Too many people were affected by that decision for it to have happened just for me. Even so, my life after the closing worked out pretty well. Income from my severance package allowed me to take a six month break before beginning school in the fall. My congregation had a ministerial preparation fund that would pay for my tuition and some of my living expenses. I was hired to be the book buyer for the seminary bookstore. God was working in the planning. The future was looking bright.

It was late afternoon on a Saturday in May—May 28, 2005 to be exact – and, as usual, best friends, Erin and Esther were together. They were typical teenagers, spending just enough time at their homes to drop off their books and bags and pick up the items needed for the next activity. They hurried to WalMart to pick up the photographs from their Junior Class Prom and then were on their way to meet friends.

No one is quite sure what happened next. Perhaps the road was a bit slick from the rain. Or perhaps the driver was distracted by the prom pictures or by the double rainbow in the sky. What is known is that, all of a sudden, instead of traveling straight down the road their car was sliding broadside in the opposite lane of traffic—and a pickup truck was approaching.

I was at home in Illinois when my brother called from Pennsylvania. "Hi," he said and then paused. I thought we might have been cut off. "How are you?" I asked. "Not too good," he replied.

“Esther is dead.” My niece died instantly when the truck hit the passenger side of the car. Her best friend, Erin, died later at the hospital.

I thought I had experienced grief before, but nothing matched what I was feeling at the moment. And I know it didn’t compare at all with what my brother and sister-in-law were feeling.

The following week was surreal. The long car ride to Pennsylvania. Staying at my brother’s house. Sleeping in Esther’s bed. Attending two visitations and two funerals. Watching my brother hug hundreds of devastated teenagers and friends.

In the midst of the grief and pain, though, there was comfort and hope. I’m amazed by the ways we experienced God at that difficult time.

It was a blessing that my parents and I were in Pennsylvania a week before Esther died. We attended her choir concert. She got up early the morning we left to hug us goodbye.

It was a blessing that my oldest brother, who lives in Indiana, had arrived in Illinois about an hour before the phone call, so he was with my parents when they heard the devastating news.

It is a source of wonder that a double rainbow appeared in the sky above the accident site at about the same time the accident occurred – and that a double rainbow had appeared in the sky over Dese, Ethiopia sixteen years earlier when my brother and sister-in-law brought Esther home from the orphanage.

I don’t know how to explain the story from a man named Bill and his five-year-old son Asa. Bill was the first one on the scene of the accident. He got out of his car to check on the girls and called 911. When Bill got back into the car he was shaken. He was pretty sure Esther was dead. He thought Erin was still alive. “Dad, did one of them die?” Asa asked. Bill didn’t want to upset him and replied, “No, I don’t think so.” Asa again said, “Dad, I think one of them died.” When Bill asked his son why he thought that, Asa replied, “Because I saw a flutter of wings on the roof and I think Jesus came to get her.”

I can’t dismiss these events and others like them as simply coincidences, so then I talk to...no, I yell at God and ask where the divine timing and protection were when the car started skidding. I still don’t have a satisfactory answer to that question. Even so, during the days and weeks after Esther died, when I seriously considered letting go of God, saying that God did not exist, I could not do it. In the midst of all my questioning, this faith, my faith, this God, my God, would not let me go. Because of God’s love and the love of God’s community here on earth, my family and I were able to experience joy and hope in the midst of the grief and pain.

It was a Saturday in September – September OK, I don’t really know what day it was, but I’m saying it was a Saturday because I think “Three Saturdays and a Sunday” makes a catchier title than two Saturdays, a Wednesday, and a Sunday. So..... it could have been a Saturday in September – perhaps September 10, 2005, to be somewhat exact – and I was sitting in my car in the parking lot of a restaurant. I was miserable.

I had moved into my seminary apartment and begun my job in the bookstore a few weeks earlier. This gave me some time to adjust to my new life before classes began. I had already read one of my textbooks, and even though I had to look up quite a few words in the dictionary, I was fairly confident that I understood most of what I read. I was looking forward to the beginning of the semester.

But then I learned the business manager of the bookstore had to leave the seminary unexpectedly. Suddenly my responsibilities in the store doubled. I needed to figure out the bookkeeping system with only about an hour of training. Soon after that, classes began and I was quickly overwhelmed. The transition to this new life was not as smooth as I expected it to be. So I sat in my car and cried and asked God, “If this is where you want me to be, shouldn’t it be much easier?”

And it did get easier, eventually. I survived that first semester. Another person was hired to share the duties in the bookstore. By the end of the school year, what I first perceived as a call to seminary, I now could name as a call to be a pastor. With each semester, class, and field experience, I became more confident that I was in the right place and on the right path. The future was looking more certain.

I majored in math in college; my minor was science. I tend to analyze life in terms of cause and effect and reasonable explanations. When examining the events I just talked about, the “reasonable” factor works at times, but not always.

A store closes because more money goes out than comes in. Yes, that’s reasonable.

A store closes just so a woman will attend seminary. No, that doesn’t make sense.

A 48-year-old woman is overwhelmed when she begins seminary study. Yes, that’s to be expected.

A woman with 18 years of bookstore experience begins work a few weeks before the unexpected departure of an essential employee. No, it doesn’t seem to be just a coincidence.

Two teen-agers die because their car is hit by a truck. Yes, cause and effect.

A short life is bookended by double rainbows. No, that’s extra-ordinary.

A five-year-old sees the wings of an angel above a crushed car. No, that can only be called a “God thing.”

Now, if these stories sound familiar to you, there’s a good explanation for that. I’ve told them to you before – twice before, actually – in the first sermon I preached here 12 years ago and on Easter Sunday 5 years ago.

It’s important for us to remember and retell the resurrection stories from our lives. We need to remind ourselves of them. We need to share them with each other. Easter Sunday, a day when we remember the most important resurrection story, is an especially appropriate day on which to do this remembering and retelling.

Resurrection is difficult to believe and impossible to explain. Even the gospel writers differ in how they tell the Easter story. There are women, and maybe some men. There is an angel. There is an empty tomb. There are a variety of emotions: fright, wonder, bewilderment, joy, belief, doubt.

In John’s account, Mary and two of Jesus’ disciples discover that the tomb where Jesus’ body had been placed is empty. The men returned to their homes while Mary lingered. She met an angel who asked, “Woman, why are you weeping?” Then she met a man who asked the same question, “Woman, why are you weeping?” At first, she didn’t recognize him, but when he said her name, “Mary,” she knew it was Jesus. When she returned to the place where the disciples were gathered, she announced with confidence, “I have seen the Lord.”

Consider the question Mary was asked not once, but twice. “Why are you weeping?” It’s not difficult for me to name some possible sources of grief for us – death of loved ones, isolation, loneliness, broken relationships, uncertainty about the future, physical illness, emotional pain.

Now consider Mary’s testimony. “I have seen the Lord!” As people of God, we place our faith, trust, and hope in the resurrected Christ, who comforts us in our grief and calls us each by name into abundant life.

I saw and experienced that comfort and new life in the stories I told you today. In the twelve years since I first stood behind this pulpit, I have experienced additional times of despair and joy; of deep sadness and deep living. I have witnessed and heard your stories of finding joy and hope in the midst of pain and grief. I have witnessed and heard your stories of new life coming out of relationships and situations you thought were dead. I am confident that God will continue to write these stories in our lives.

The Easter story and our personal resurrection stories tell us that God is incomprehensible and incomparable. God is the creator of the universe. God is the source of salvation. God calls us to deep living.

And so, on a Sunday in April – April 4, 2021, to be exact – Easter Sunday – we are reminded once again that the resurrection of Jesus Christ represents the promise of God to stay with us in our dark moments, to continue teaching us about God’s Kingdom, and to lead us all into new hope and new life.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!