



I remember one pastor when I was growing up who seemed to elevate her preaching in a way that I hadn't quite experienced before. It was more personal, more captivating, more real. But about the same time Pastor Julie officially became a pastor in the church, she met the love of her life in Bruce. He would not only support and encourage her ministry, as a professional photographer taking pictures of precious moments in worship, and walking out with her during the final hymn, but he made her believe whole-heartedly that she was worthy of being loved to the fullest extent,

something that she didn't always believe for herself even though she could proclaim that to everyone else. Pastor Julie eventually took a call to a congregation in the Pacific Northwest, and as nature-lovers it only enriched their life together. In between work obligations, they would travel and continue shaping children and grandchildren's lives often from afar. They seemed to be one of those couples who exuded the promise to love each other as long as they both shall live.

And then, last year, Bruce was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia. The outlook was not promising, to say the least. They did their best to maximize the time left with more nature, and family, and photographs, and even worship. But, come this past May, Bruce was gone. Pastor Julie was and still is one of those gifted preachers, but no seminary training can prepare you for when it hits home.

Pastor Julie officially became a pastor on the day when the church recognizes Mary Magdalene, a woman whose ultimate story, the ultimate encounter with Christ, I believe hits home for tonight. A reminder that Christ comes not just for the joyous, but for those who weep as well. Christ comes for Pastor Julie, for Mary Magdalene, for those who can't always celebrate the supposedly joyous occasions. So, I want to share with you what Pastor Julie wrote on her latest anniversary of the day when she became a pastor, a day that made the church all the better for it. She wrote,

This one hits so differently this year. Honestly, everything hits differently now. Making coffee, going to sleep, waking up...nothing is the same.

Bruce and I hadn't found our way to one another quite yet on this date twenty years ago. That would come a month later. All of that possibility was just in front of me....all of that love....and I didn't know it yet.

Today I'm going to go pick Bruce up. Rather, I'm going to receive his remains...now composted into soil. And not all of him: some of him will go to the forest in his beloved PNW and nurture trees and plants. But some of him will come home with me and some will stay with the kids and even though that's not really him, it's a tangible thing, something we can touch.

Then I'm going to have lunch with my friends who have been kick [butt] friends for a long time. Then I'm going to go hug my grandbabies and eat dinner with them and play and laugh and sing and probably read some books. That's enough for one day.

I do always reflect on Mary Magdalene on this day as well, and now I am captured by the part of the story described in the Gospel of John:

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

Mary's grief speaks to my own on this date this year. Mary weeps outside of the tomb, looking to see where he is and I am transported to an ICU bedside...machines quieted and removed, his bed facing the bright morning sun and Mt. Rainier gleaming and my own weeping.

Of course, I am not Mary Magdalene and Bruce was not Jesus (he would laugh at this obvious sentence), but grief is grief is grief. And it needs room and space, and it just needs what it needs.

And Mary knew Jesus when he spoke her name. And I can still hear Bruce speak mine. Jewels.

And on this date, twenty luminous, life giving, terrible, challenging, wondrous, magnificent, years ago, God called my name, just as God first did in baptism, to say "I have things I need you to do. Will you go?"

I will. I still will.

Granted, not everyone can rise out of grief in the same way. Tonight, we honor both: those who can and those who cannot. But for those who cannot, for whatever the reason may be, we insist that Christ has come to rise for you, and will keep on rising to be with you, no matter how long it takes. Because, nothing can happen in this life to separate you and Pastor Julie and Mary Magdalene and anyone else from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord for tonight and always. For that Greatest News for us all, we certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen.