

Walking in the Dark:  
September 4th  
John 11:17-44

What I am presenting today is not a sermon. I'm just sharing thoughts on my journey in the dark, through the dark, since Armond's death on December 24th last year. I share it not because I think I have a handle on it and not because I think you don't know much already. Some of you have experienced much more loss than I. But somehow it seems right to talk about hard things in church, and maybe encourage conversations about a topic often not discussed! As we enter that sacred space of sharing, may I take you first to a place in scripture where I have found friends to walk with whose experience I so relate to.

Read John 11:17-44 This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As we look at this story, we notice right away that **Jesus knew and didn't come/respond**, even to his friends. Armond and I experienced this silence and apparent absence too. We both prayed as did many of our friends from the time of his diagnosis until he died that he would be healed. Jesus knew Armond as a friend and yet didn't respond as we waited and wished.

Mary and Martha both said, "If you had been here!!!" **Jesus doesn't explain nor does he rebuke them.** I felt just like the sisters wanting to complain about his absence, "Jesus, if you had shown up!!! " We got no reply yet I felt freedom to express my disappointment to Jesus my friend.

Mary and Martha had **friends who were grieving with them.**

We too had friends grieving with us before - and at his death: Kathy Crannell, who came at 2:30 AM, Di and Bruce who came when I called at 6 AM, my sisters Carol and Kim, the hospice team, Chris and Karen Murphy and many of you who sent cards and flowers. immediately following. We wept together.

**When Jesus was in the presence of such sorrow, he too wept.**

I felt permission to weep and wonder, and feel all that I was feeling through the gentleness and powerful love of our friends who never once tried to stop the tears or put a bandage on the pain. Through their participation in my grief, I could imagine Christ weeping for me and with us.

**Unlike Martha and Mary, we had no physical resurrection** experience to end the suffering and sorrow.

And so I grieved and I grieve. Grieving is inevitable when you love much. Several thoughts on death, grief and walking in and through the dark have been my companions in the months since he died. It is these that I want to share, wrapped up in our experience of those last days.

**On death and dying:**

**Death is mystery.** The immediate response to Armond's last breath was how can this be??? He was just with us and now, just the house he lived in for 81 years is left behind. We had wanted more time but He is definitely gone! We, I experienced no mystical events or happenings - no lingering sense of Armond's presence, no sudden sitting up with final words that he just saw Jesus or anything like that, no physical evidence at all that God was there in the room with us and taking him home. That is not to say that we didn't feel something amazing and sacred was happening - we sang "We Are Standing on Holy Ground" reflecting the sacredness of those hours that we waited with him.

**Death is so final, and whether anticipated or sudden, it feels unexpected.** I thought I might be ready for his death when it came, but discovered I hadn't really pre-grieved, nor could I. We had about 10 years to prepare for his dying and yet, it seemed unexpected, unreal. I read a book loaned to me titled "The Year of Magical Thinking" by a widow who for a whole year could not get rid of her husband's clothes or books, or anything personal. When he came back her heart told her, he will need these things!! It took a year for her heart to agree with her head that her husband was gone and not coming back. I understood a bit what she was saying...with every item of Armond's that left the house, I felt like his presence was leaving and it brought fresh grief. I was so grateful that no one hurried that process for me.

**Death challenged me** in so many ways! I needed and wanted to argue with God. I told God I wasn't pleased with his plan: He put us together as one flesh - now he tore that apart and the pain was incredible. I had never done life on my own. I didn't feel that I could do life without my partner. I believed in Heaven but I needed help even imagining what that meant for Armond. So I re-read "Heaven is for Real" by the Burpo family and "Imagine Heaven" by John Burke. I was rewarded with renewed hope and joy at the possibilities of what Armond's entry to heaven might have been like and maybe mine someday as well.

**Speaking of Heaven...**Heaven too is mystery. We can't know much so we must let God be generous, merciful and loving as is His character. Someone's death is not the time for a spirit of condemnation - wondering or opining on whether or not someone got in or will get in. I didn't have those questions about Armond's destiny, but have become aware of those conversations around other deaths of late.

### **Thoughts On Grief:**

**Grief is the powerful companion of death.** We might not grieve as those who have no faith, (per Paul) but we do grieve. (per me) (1Thess. 4:13)

People who wanted me to skip the grieving and just hop right to how happy I could and should be that Armond was with Jesus were unwelcome and not comforting at all. I had to bite my tongue around those folks, I knew they were trying, but I found them very trying. I wasn't sad for Armond, of course, I was sad for me!!! I wanted to say, "Please let me feel my loss and be sorry, sad, unhappy, lonely, afraid and even panic. I am learning to walk in territory that is unfamiliar to me. And it is dark." Even though I had experienced both my father's and mother's deaths, Armond's death was of a different kind entirely. One's loss is their loss - whether a person, pet, income, career, home, pregnancy, a dream it doesn't matter. No one else gets to put a price tag on your loss or tell you how to grieve it.

What I do know about grieving now firsthand is that **it takes lots of emotional and physical energy**. It is exhausting and numbing. I still feel that exhaustion and sometimes the numbness. You don't just take a nap and get over it. At the time of his death I wanted to pray more, journal, think and remember and found myself too distracted, overwhelmed, forgetful, fatigued to accomplish much of anything.

Those who love, grieve. But we do have to keep walking.

### **As for walking in the dark and through the dark:**

What has become increasingly clear to me is that **Friends and Family are critical** for a journey in the dark - they are like flashlights, opening up a step or two ahead. They held my hand, helped me with the tasks before me, reminded me of who I am and whose I am, brought joyful moments into my home and life, and joined me in many tears. Creating those networks of love and mutual caring in the light is important. I'm so glad we had the opportunity to settle in at FV and First Pres. before Armond's health began to create barriers to community-building. And we had been building those networks of love and support all our lives. What a treasure. They were there before the need and in the need they were there and still are. They have been helping to stitch my heart back together.

Walking in and through the dark can be helped by the **the rituals, routines, disciplines established in the light**. The rituals that help us to walk in darkness are a blessing. We don't have many of those rituals anymore as a culture. No clothing that marks our journey through grief, no specific dates and days and ways to remember. We are on our own. How we lived together in the months before Armond's death became part of my pathway through the dark. Beginning with his last hospitalization, 2 months before his death, we began to sit together, hand in hand, as we listened to Lectio 365 both morning and evening. It was a time of reflection on scripture, Jesus, prayer and the quiet movements of love, grace, peace and faith in our lives, mostly without words. I continue that practice today. The most meaningful habits of grace for me were established in the light.

I have also discovered that **walking in the dark is intentional and so is resting and waiting**. After Armond died I had to intentionally step away from the confinements of his illness, to walk out from underneath the burdens and the dread of his approaching death. I got in the car and went to the beach, stayed with a sister and a friend, flew to Nevada, began planning for a trip to be with my daughter and her family. When Chris asked if I would participate in preaching and congregational care this summer in his absence, I had to think carefully. I was holding it together as they say, but I knew I was still in the early stages of grieving. As I prayed it seemed the thing I was to do, that somehow the doing would help me walk through this time making it significant and count for the kingdom. And it has been so for me. Now as I look forward to a quieter season this fall, I am certain that I need to take a rest from responsibility, but not from life, in order to focus on God's word and love for me and His direction for the years to come. So this fall I am choosing resting and waiting. I anticipate this fall season for me to be a time when my walk with Jesus deepens with newness in practice and passion. And I wait on his refreshing and a renewed sense of calling to a whole-hearted life in Jesus.

Two final thoughts: **To be remembered is to live on.** One of the most precious things to me, is to hear Armond's name on others' lips! To know he is remembered and loved and missed blesses me so much. It doesn't make me sad, it gladdens me even if it brings tears. Don't be afraid of my tears they water my soul and his memory.

Finally, **You Can Do This Hard Thing.** When Armond died, I was faced with immediate car maintenance to do, with December/January bills to pay, with preparation of taxes, with a million calls to make for insurance, SS, Medicare, accounts here there and everywhere. Much of which I had not done alone, and some I had never done!! There were a multitude of decisions to make. It was overwhelming. Even though I thought I was prepared for this, I was not and wondered how I would survive this loss. But Di Murphy gave me a song by Carrie Newcomer. It became my anthem. I listen to it often and sing the chorus over and over with almost every challenge of learning to live as a single person. I wish I could sing it for you. But in the absence of a recording and a decent voice, let me read some of the words. Each verse in the song has a setting -

Imagine a little child with new arithmetic skills to learn: Carrie writes,

There at the table With my head in my hands  
A column of numbers I just did not understand  
You said add these together Carry the two, now you...  
You can do this hard thing You can do this hard thing  
It's not easy I know but I believe that it's so  
You can do this hard thing...

Now imagine leaving home for the first time going off to a strange city with new people and new adventures and challenges ahead: Carrie writes,

At a cold winter station Breathing into our gloves  
It would change me forever Leaving for God knows what  
You carried my bags You said I'll wait for you  
You can do this hard thing You can do this hard thing  
It's not easy I know but I believe that it's so  
You can do this hard thing...

Now think of the worst thing you could imagine happening one night - as it did for me when Armond began to fail, his body moving toward death...

Late at night I called And you answered the phone  
The worst it had happened And I did not want to be alone  
You quietly listened You said we'll see this through  
You can do this hard thing You can do this hard thing  
It's not easy I know but I believe that it's so  
You can do this hard thing...

Now here I am 8 months later... and Carrie writes

From the muddy ground Comes a green volunteer  
In a place we thought Barren new life appears  
Morning will come whistling Some comforting tune for you  
You can do this hard thing You can do this hard thing  
It's not easy I know but I believe that it's so  
You can do this hard thing  
(Carrie Newcomer, "You Can Do This Hard Thing, The Beautiful Not Yet, 2016)

So, I will say with Paul anticipating his death in a Roman prison, "I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength." Phil 4:13 For "It is in Christ that we live and move and have our being." Acts 17:28 We are not on our own. The Lord our shepherd walks with us in and through the valley of the shadow, in the dark and through the darkness. Amen

Please remain seated while Lish leads us in the thoughtful song, "Beautiful Things".