

After my grandfather died and we returned to his house, we got a window into his life as he had left it. We saw artifacts that embodied the very essence of him: a pantry full of his favorite items from Trader Joe's and Costco; shelves of books meticulously labeled and organized; old photos showing the pride he took in the life he lived. As we did this, we shared memories of what we missed most about him. We found ourselves yearning for his wisdom and caring disposition just as much as we missed his stubborn insistence on doing things his way. In our process of paying attention to what we missed, we also noticed our gratitude for *that* moment, in which extended branches of the family tree had finally come together after many years apart.

Grief is not a short-term process. Sometimes the news of death is a cataclysmic event, marked in our memories as the moment when we were forever changed. Perhaps more often, grief comes in spurts – while some days everything feels almost completely normal, other days we are overcome by emptiness from what has been lost. These moments may come during the “first time since the last time” – the first Thanksgiving or Christmas or birthday or trip to the grocery store since everyone was together. What may have seemed like an old grief suddenly swells up anew. These holidays and routine errands are a reminder that the person we love has ended their earthly journey, but here *we* are, trying to go on living in this new world -- without them.

Grief is mourning the loss of life. We grieve when someone we love has died. But we also grieve when the life we imagined for *ourselves* is no longer possible. Getting sick or not doing the job we love or not going to the places we want to go are all forms of losing the life we

imagined for ourselves. It is a loss when we cannot even *imagine* what our lives will be like more than a few days into the future.

And yet, despite this grief, some part of us goes on, trying to exist in this new world without those lives we used to know. As we go on living, we can't help but notice what we miss most about life as we knew it before. This hurts. We still have birthdays, and with the celebration comes a reminder of what is no longer possible. But when we make a list of all the people who we can't invite to an in-person party, we notice who is most important to us right now. Dates of canceled graduation ceremonies are approaching, and with them, we mourn the familiar rites of passage we had been looking forward to for years. But with the disappointment over missing familiar celebrations comes the opportunity to notice what this transition means for individual students and families. Each passing week and month bring with them new first-times-since-the-last-time. But in noticing what we miss, we also allow ourselves to discover what is most important to us.

When we celebrate Communion, we begin by remembering a story of something that is no longer possible. Like a family gathered around the table with an empty place setting, we remember the last time that Jesus ate with his disciples before he was killed. Whenever we observe this ritual, we try to put ourselves back in the place of *how things were before*: how it was when Jesus was alive and eating with those closest to him.

This practice of remembering how things were before began immediately after Jesus's death and the women finding the empty tomb. Two disciples were in the middle of such a conversation when a stranger came up and asked what they were talking about: *you must be the only one in all of Jerusalem who does not know!* They were so caught up in the immediacy

of their bizarre grief that they could not imagine that anyone would not know about it. But the stranger was curious, and the two disciples were hospitable: they told him about their experiences and invited him to stay with them for the night. As they told the stranger about how things were before, the disciples started to notice what they missed most about Jesus's redeeming presence.

Then, something remarkable happened. The stranger whom the disciples had invited to stay broke a loaf of bread. When he did this, their eyes were opened: they realized that Christ was in their midst.

We call the meal before Jesus died the Last Supper. That makes *this* meal, this blessing and breaking and sharing of bread, the first time since the Last Time. The Gospel describes how amazed the disciples were at what happened. But here's what it does not say: It does not say that the disciples decided that, from this time forth, whenever two or more are gathered in the name of Jesus and bless a loaf of bread, his presence will be made known to them in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the meal. It does not say that the disciples knew that this would be the ritual around which Christians would gather for millennia to come. It does not even say that they believed such a sacred moment would be possible again.

These disciples were in the midst of forming a new ritual: gathering together, remembering the power of Jesus's presence, and breaking bread. They did not know that the ritual that gave them meaning in their time of grief would go on to bring *us* life.

The poet Mary Oliver offered simple instructions for living a life: "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."

These two disciples were caught up in the news of the world. Something terrible and remarkable was happening around them, and they could not help but watch. The spiritual life is built up by cultivating a habit of attention: attention to others, attention to love, attention to the inner workings of our souls, attention to God. The disciples' attention was rapt in the tragedy around them and the uncertainty of what would come next. But they were building up their endurance for watching, and so when yet another extraordinary thing happened, their eyes were open.

A man who these disciples thought was an ignorant stranger took bread and blessed it, and as he broke it, they recognized the risen Christ before them. Something that could have been ordinary turned out to be astonishing. The spiritual discipline of paying attention not only requires that we keep our eyes open – it also demands that we keep our hearts engaged. When our eyes are open, we will see many things that are ordinary, plenty that is beautiful, and a good deal that is painful. Keeping our hearts engaged means that we will be *astonished* by all that this life has to offer.

After Christ appeared to the two – and immediately disappeared again – they journeyed quickly to find the others because they had extraordinary news to tell! Neither the two who had seen Jesus nor the others knew for certain what this story would mean for the rest of their lives. What matters is not that they knew immediately how to make sense of such an unlikely occurrence. What matters is that they *told the story*, because telling our stories means that someone might remember them later.

Right now, it is hard to imagine anyone not knowing the life-altering reality of this pandemic. That day *will* come: time will pass, memories will fade, new crises will demand our

attention. If we can imagine ourselves talking to people in the distant future who don't know what we are currently experiencing, we might be like the disciples encountering a stranger and saying, *you must be the only one in all Jerusalem who does not know!* Like those disciples, remarkable things are unfolding before our eyes. Perhaps we are like those disciples, forming new rituals that will continue to bring us meaning in years to come – new ways of gathering and showing love, new ways of worshipping, new ways of celebrating life and death. But like those disciples, we have no way of knowing which of our *first-times-since-the-last-time* will forever transform how we live. And Like those disciples, there are simple tasks for living a life set before us: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.

Due to circumstances beyond our control, my family could not gather to celebrate my grandfather's life until a year after his death. In the interim, we had to find other ways of grieving: reading books by his favorite authors, remembering his love of nature when we saw a beautiful landscape, lighting candles in his memory. Finally being together was all the more dear because our ongoing process of grief brought us more in tune with what we missed. In sharing these memories, we inspired each other to orient ourselves toward those things that we learned are most important from the life that we lost.

We do not yet know what new thing God is unveiling in our midst. There's only one way for us to find out: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.