

Julian's Alleluia

Sarah Byrne-Martelli

"Luz" walks into the intensive care unit alone. She is slight in stature, timid and wide-eyed, wearing an oversized Red Sox sweatshirt that makes her appear even smaller. As the palliative care chaplain, I await her at the bedside of her dying husband, "Julian." He was rushed to the intensive care unit by ambulance in the early hours of the morning.

I met Luz and Julian months ago, during a previous admission for treatment of his newly diagnosed aggressive cancer. They are in their late twenties. Julian and Luz fell in love while playing in the praise band at their church. He plays drums and she sings. His father is their pastor. He officiated at their wedding; he will be officiating at Julian's funeral.

Julian is emaciated. His eyes are closed, his breathing ragged, his face calm. Luz has no family support at Julian's bedside. Due to the enhanced precautions during the Covid-19 pandemic, our end-of-life patients are allowed only one visitor. In previous visits, Luz and Julian have been pleasant, but always kept a certain emotional distance. They have focused on the promise of a miraculous healing; any grief they carried was kept hidden. I have prayed with them; I have heard stories of their courtship; I have seen joyful videos of their praise band. Today is different.

Luz and I sit together in silence. She is trembling, alternating between wailing out loud and shivering in numb silence, clutching her husband's bony hand. She says quietly, "I want my mom." Then louder, "I want my mom!" I gently place my hand on her back. I wrestle with thoughts of the new social distance guidelines and the need for human touch. Due to standard precautions, I am wearing a gown, mask, gloves, and goggles. I look barely human. I am the only person here, and I am essentially a stranger. Yet she is my neighbor, and I am hers.

A great teacher once said that you should engrave words of Scripture upon your heart, so that when your heart breaks, the words of Scripture will fall into the cracks and your heart will pray on its own. My heart breaks open toward Luz. The words fall in, and I say quietly, "God is with us." We pray together. I can't fix this. I can't change this. All I can say is what I know to be true and stay present with Luz for as long as she needs.

As a chaplain, I often think about the "peace which passes all understanding" (Phil. 4:7). I pray with patients and families for the peace that transcends the limits of our human questions and emotions. So much is beyond our understanding that I don't dwell upon the question "why." I never have. Instead, the question is "how." *How* do

we respond and care for each other? How do we put one foot in front of the other, and breathe, and be gentle with one another? How do we pray, and even praise, seeking the peace which passes all understanding?

I see this peace in “Barbara,” who keeps vigil at the bedside of her dying mother, a devout Catholic. She wonders why the process is taking so long. As I engage her in sharing about her faith and their relationship, it dawns on Barbara that her mother was always telling her to be a more patient person. Maybe this is her mother’s last lesson. With this realization, Barbara finds a moment of the peace which passes all understanding. I see this peace in “June,” who, despite her advanced dementia, can still sing all the words to “Jesus Loves Me.” I see this peace in “Ron,” who is acutely grateful for the gentle caregivers who support him after his leg is amputated due to an accident. I see this peace in the midst of profound grief. How do we face grief that is beyond all measure?

We look to Christ: how he lived, prayed, healed, grieved, died, and trampled down death by his death. Jesus himself demonstrated that death is a cause for lament. He expressed profound grief alongside Mary and Martha as he wept for his friend Lazarus. Those who were near Jesus on that day interpreted his weeping as loving grief; they said, “See how he loved him!” (John 11:36). And Jesus’s weeping at Lazarus’s grave was not merely emotional. Leading up to this event, Christ had been teaching about the resurrection. His response took on particular intensity within the context of his life and anticipated death and resurrection.

We look to Scripture: In the Psalms, King David laments, “My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death

have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me” (Psalm 55:4–5). Even with Christ’s life-giving death, there was grief. There was lamentation because he was taken from his people: “The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day” (Mark 2:20). His separation from his people brought them grief and confusion. Christ’s followers, and notably his mother Mary, stood vigil at the cross as he died (John 19:25). One can only imagine their grief as they witnessed his crucifixion. After Christ’s burial, Mary Magdalene “stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept, she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the foot. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’” (John 20:11–13). Jesus then revealed himself to her and called her to share the good news of resurrection with the world.

Our tradition teaches us, then, that grief is part of being fully human and that lamentation is part of life. We who anticipate the hope of eternal life are not expected to hide our sorrow over the loss of loved ones. Only by contemplating death, and experiencing the anticipatory grief that comes with it, may we come to understand that Christ, by dying, becomes our liberation, “upon those in the tombs bestowing life!”

As we face grief, we are called to a balance of joy and grief, cross and resurrection. Our faith teaches us how to *think* about grief and death, as well as how to *act*. It teaches us how to be present, both mentally and physically. We know how to practice liturgical vigil, standing at the cross on Holy Friday, keeping watch and praying the Psalms. We know how to stand and wait in prayerful anticipation in

the dark, as we anticipate the Paschal hymn, “Come receive the light.” We know how to keep watch in quiet anticipation. We know how to sing and to pray when our hearts are breaking.

I ask Luz if there is a special song she could sing or play for Julian. She pulls out her iPhone and starts playing a contemporary Christian song with lyrics from Scripture. We hum together, our eyes brimming with tears. At the chorus of “Alleluia!” Julian opens his eyes and looks directly at Luz for the first time that day. He whispers “Alleluia” and the floodgates open: Luz cries, Julian cries, and the stark ICU room glows with a certain light. The familiar words of liturgical prayer arise in me: “Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. Glory to Thee, O God.” The musical settings are different, but the Alleluia is the same.

How do we survive in the face of grief and loss? We survive as did the myrrhbearing women. They did what they knew they had to do. They showed up to pray, to lament, and to be present. It was not clear what would come next. It was not clear what the future held. One can only imagine the myrrhbearers’ grief as they walked to the tomb of Jesus. Likewise, we who anticipate the hope of eternal life are called to be present in these places of unknowing, of loss, of sorrow. We have faith in the ultimate goodness and triumphal love

of God through Christ. We grieve as those who find hope in Christ’s gift of eternal life.

I am guided by the words of Father Alexander Schmemmann, who in his book *The Liturgy of Death* exhorts us to rediscover death through three lenses: tragedy, victory, and hope. He calls death a *tragedy*, an “ontological catastrophe” worthy of genuine lament. He views death as a *victory*, the “victory over death achieved by Christ.” And finally, he calls us to rediscover death as *hope*, that “mounting light described in the hymn to the Theotokos that speaks of the ‘dawn of the mystical day.’”¹ This framework grants us space to grieve, to sing, and to lament. It does not assign limits to grief, but instead frames Christian grief through a hopeful lens of sorrowful joy.

Even in the deepest sorrow, Luz and Julian mustered the spiritual courage to sing “Alleluia.” How many times have we uttered this word in liturgy? Will it be the last word that leaves our lips, as it was for Julian? I am honored to pray, to praise, and to lament with patients like Luz and Julian. What a gift we are given in the practice of our faith—a faith that embodies bravery and presence, prayer and gratitude in the midst of death. Let us always remember that Christ is the one who heals, who visits, who consoles, and who co-suffers with us, even unto death. Alleluia! ✽

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¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Liturgy of Death: Four Previously Unpublished Talks* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2016), 16.



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