

## On confident footing

When my father-in-law was in his final days, before he was moved from the hospital back home under hospice care, the nurses asked the family if they wanted a priest to visit with him. My father-in-law was a Protestant evangelical pastor, and this was a Catholic hospital. My wife doubted that her dad would desire such a visit. The Reformation had occurred, after all.

But she knew better than to decide without consulting him, even in his last days. Ever interested in creating an ecumenical moment, her dad said yes, he did want a visit.

This reminded me of the last words attributed to Voltaire, the French enlightenment writer and philosopher who, on his deathbed, was asked if he wanted to renounce the devil.

“This is no time to be making enemies,” he said.

The young priest in the hospital was quite respectful and polite in his conversation. When he asked my father-in-law about how he felt about his future, the reply was loud and clear enough for everyone in the room.

“Confident,” he said.

This was a sacred moment. It was a voice from within him, as well as a voice from God, echoing in the room. My father-in-law was not declaring “Mayday.” This was a grace-filled moment that said, “I don’t know where this is going, but I know who is going with me.”

Later, when he was moved home under hospice care, he drifted into a coma. A blood disease made his arms too swollen to move without splitting the skin. Even in his unconscious state, move-

ment would cause his face to go into a grimace of pain.

And yet, when it was time for him to go, with his daughters, son and wife around his bed, he calmly, painlessly, lifted both arms toward the ceiling as if to receive a package. Or a Presence. It was as if he were getting assistance in stepping off of a curb, onto a street. Or



off of a rotating planet, into eternity.

We live under a shadow. Deep down, we know we’re going to die, and we know that the people we love are going to die. And we know that grief is excruciating. Grief is the companion of love, for when the person we love dies, our grief is the measure of that love.

When it comes to death, “What we must never do is get over it as soon as possible, or make as little of it as we can,” said Eugene Peterson. “‘Get over it,’ and ‘make little of it’ are unbiblical and inhuman. Denial and distraction are the standard over-the-counter prescriptions of our culture for dealing with loss; in combination, they’ve virtually destroyed the spiritual health of our culture.”

Imagine the grief of Jesus’ followers when he died. Mixed in with that grief was confusion—had they been misled

all this time? Did they just fall for one big cosmic joke? Or fear—would the authorities now come after them for being followers? Or guilt—should they have tried harder to protect Jesus? But mostly, I imagine, it was grief—grief over one they had loved, and who had loved them so purely.

Then imagine Mary at the empty tomb. Still grieving, still confused, still fearful, still guilty. All of those feelings blinded her to the Presence of God, standing in front of her. And then Jesus delivers what some say is the shortest sermon in the Bible. He simply says, “Mary.” The word pierces the grief, confusion, fear and guilt. It is God saying that he sees past all of the things that we think define us,

and Eternity speaks our name.

I imagine my father-in-law heard something similar—“Jim”—and his response was to raise his arms toward the voice.

The Risen Christ is near, and he is speaking your name, my name. He’s seeing past the things that lock us up—our grief, fear, doubt, confusion and guilt. What is the state of our being now?

Confident.



Dean Nelson directs the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. His book about seeing God in everyday life is “God Hides in Plain Sight: How to See the Sacred in a Chaotic World.”