

Sunday, August 21, 2011: Exodus 1:8-2:10; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

My friend believes that death is not the final story. Is she right?

by [Emlyn A. Ott](#) in the [August 9, 2011](#) issue

The day began with a worship service that was filled with a bittersweet sense of endings and beginnings. There was a procession of joy as seminary graduates were honored and celebrated. There were tables and tables of food, and young people posing for photos with their arms linked. We heard expressions of gratitude and were introduced to families that we'd heard about but never met. Every year the seminary sends out gifted leaders into a crazy, exciting time, and staff members wonder: How will they be challenged by a vocation that will include both loss and hope? Will they see that the constant struggle with what it means to believe and to be is a gift? They will, without a doubt, learn that truth, pain, loss and hope are all part of a pastor's daily liturgy.

After experiencing my own hope and joy in the day's festivities, I sped down the highway fueled by celebration-day adrenaline but also by sadness. I was traveling to visit a friend in hospice care. Then a sign came into view:

Judgment Day, May 21, 6 p.m.

"Cry mightily unto God. The Bible guarantees it."

How could I have forgotten the end-times prediction? I checked my watch. It was almost time for the moment of accountability. I stopped the car and took a photo of the sign to memorialize the day. What might it mean to face God on this day, fully knowing who and what we believe? Could I do it? Can I shape my faith in a clear way as I stand facing a future that included the loss of a dear friend?

Soon I was at Linda's bedside, where she was surrounded by family members. Linda is a 52-year-old woman of strength and clarity. She is powerful and kind but had become tiny and vulnerable within the past month. When I saw her a week ago, she was tired but determined to eat out. We shared strawberry shortcake—her favorite,

she said. But in a short week much has changed. Tonight her arms and legs are retracting. Her eyes are wide open and staring. I am not sure what she sees. She knits her brow. We want to talk, but I am the only one speaking, as she cannot. I thank her for our friendship. I talk about our road trip a year ago and my sadness that our plans for another never came to be. I tell her that I love her and that I promise to follow through on a request she'd made when she was diagnosed.

This is my friend, but I am a pastor too, and I feel drawn to do something. With my right thumb on her forehead, I trace the sign that we hold in common. One stroke down, then gently side to side. She closes her eyes and sighs. I bow my head.

I walk out of the hospice aware of what it might mean to face a future that is not what was expected, predicted or even considered. That reality has never been more earth-shattering for me. Could it be that a view into the chasm of death and loss might be an opportunity for reaffirming what I believe? My friend will soon complete a life on earth after a yearlong fight. She expected she would win and live. She was frightened, determined and curious, all at the same time. She also believes that Jesus has called her into life and that death is not the final story. Is she right?

What does it mean to be the people who are left? What does it mean for an entire community to live as though it is facing its final hours? How do its members carry on with the memories, the promises and the belief made clear to the world? How do I live into a grace that entreats, invites and demonstrates a belief in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting?

The predicted time of rapture has passed, and I've had a glimpse of heaven. I sat with my friend and saw the past, the present and the future on her forehead. My challenge is to carry what I believe until the time when my body retracts and my life merges into memory, remembrance and incorporation into the future.

Martin Luther wrote: "I care not whether he be Christ, but that he be Christ for you."

Jesus, at the point of Peter's statement of faith, gave him a new name. Life as he knew it would never be the same again.

I see the image of the cross on Linda's forehead. I hear her sigh, and I bow my head again. Life will never be the same. Jesus the Christ. Painbearer. Lifegiver. Source of grace, challenge and hope.