

A pastor's job isn't to make bad things seem better

If you have to choose between offering false hope and the truth, go with the truth.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue



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Years ago I was asked to do the funeral of a woman whom I hadn't known but who'd lived in the parish where I was vicar. It was a sad story. The woman, who was in her seventies, had a particularly painful wasting disease. The pain became so great that one night she stepped out of bed, put on slippers and a dressing gown, let herself into the back garden, climbed the fence, walked into the local lake, and drowned herself.

I listened to her widower tell me the story, and at the funeral I talked about the things we knew and the things we didn't know. I said we didn't know what anguish was going through her mind, but we did know how deeply she was loved and will be missed. I said we didn't know what could bring her to such despair, but we did know that her life was beautiful and that those who knew her loved her and would always

cherish what she meant to them.

A week later I paid a visit to the widower to see how he was doing and show him I was thinking of him. I was fully prepared for him to say how beautiful the funeral was, and there was always a chance he might say how well I'd spoken.

He didn't. He looked straight at me, head still and unblinking, and told me, "What you said was completely wrong. You said, 'We don't know what was going through her head when she got out of bed and walked down to the lake.' That's not true. I know exactly what she was thinking. She'd tried before, and afterwards she told me what it was like. I know what she was thinking. I told you that when you came to see me last time. But you weren't listening, were you? Maybe you didn't want to listen." His tone was more weary than angry, as if I was just one of a series of people who hadn't really listened, either to her or to him.

I learned something that day that's stayed with me. If something is awful for somebody else—if I'm in a conversation with a person who is considering suicide, or doesn't know how they can go on, or is living in the aftermath of a loved one taking their own life—my role is not to make things better. Not just because I can't, but for two other reasons. Reason one is that almost any attempt I make to suggest things are really OK and the person needn't be so miserable is bound to be superficial and trite, and so it will actually increase the other person's isolation, which is a big part of what they're struggling with in the first place. Reason two is that however ineffective this effort is at persuading my companion, I may end up convincing myself—making it all the more likely that I'll get fed up with their misery, lose patience, and walk away.

My role is not to make things better, because that leaves the person more isolated than before. Instead, my role is to stand beside them as they face the hardest things in their life, one of which may turn out to be their fear that they could get to such an isolated place that they might consider something awful and destructive. If it's awful, I don't say, "Maybe it's not so bad"; I say, "It seems very painful. I wonder which is the hardest part. Maybe you can try to put it into words so I can share the thing that's giving you so much pain to be thinking about on your own."

If you have a choice between giving someone false hope and giving them the truth, always give them the truth. Once they realize the hope is false, they'll be worse off than before. But if they can name and face the truth—and find that they're still here

and they haven't scared you away—then they may learn the path to life: if we stay with the truth and walk through it, then we can come out the other side and find we're still alive. If they do that, they're on the other side of hell, and hell can't hurt them in the same way as before. And if they find you, their companion, are still there, they'll know a love that Song of Songs says "is strong as death."

Song of Songs is a love poem, and people are surprised it's in the Bible, because people expect the Bible to be very prissy. But this is the most important line in the whole Bible. It's the whole question the Bible is trying to answer: Is love as strong as death? There's no point in giving a fatuous or shallow answer to that question, or changing the subject or making a joke about it. This is the truth we're looking at. And when someone is looking straight at the truth, about themselves or about the universe and everything, the best thing you can do is to stay still and hold their gaze and not look away.

People come to church to face this question about themselves and their loved ones. Is love as strong as death? And their continuing to show up is their answer: Yes, stronger. But we can't say it for people; we can only learn to say it for ourselves. Coming to worship is a statement and prayer, that we and those on our hearts, dead or alive, may come to know the truth of those words.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Is love stronger?"