

Hopes unseen and unspoken

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by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [March 27, 2019](#) issue



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One of the most challenging conversations ever. I said, “You fancy a coffee?” She said, “You bet.”

Truth was, we’d never really spoken before. She’d had her first child baptized. One of our members had berated her for wearing an off-the-shoulder dress for the occasion. I recall being unsure what to say. *Take no notice, he’s*—no, all the dismissive words I used to use I’ve now erased from my pastor’s vocabulary. *Actually you look fabulous*—uh, no. I settled for, “I hope that doesn’t spoil your special day.” Her husband couldn’t be friendlier—no inclination to talk about himself, so I never got much out of him, either. But there’s not a pastor alive who doesn’t see a couple in their early thirties with a child and think *Here’s the future, let’s not miss this moment*.

But now here he was. Prostrate, limp, a huge rubber tube going down his windpipe. *Hemorrhage, stroke*—wisps of words that make you tremble. A side room in the kind of hospital that's a temple of technology, the kind that makes a pastor, with no gadgets or expertise or ability to read buzzing monitors, feel foolish and fumbling. Really I was eager to talk to his wife alone, to find out what was really going on. So the two of us had coffee.

I had to admit I didn't know a lot of basic details—what kind of work she did, what was her background in the faith, what on earth was going on. She was breathtakingly calm, composed, and steady, bringing me into the small circle of her team. But the whirlpool of conversation circled round until it arrived at its vortex (“Will he die?”) and headed into the unknown (“Might he always be like this?”) and then the unthinkable and unsayable (“Is it easier if he died now, rather than live long or for decades in this hugely impoverished, reduced condition?”) A John Cleese character famously said, “It's not the despair that kills you, it's the hope.” But what about when you don't know what to hope for?

We did the most memorable thing you can do in a coffee shop. We sat across the table from one another in silence—recognizing that some things were best left unsaid, but that it was good not to be alone in the midst of them. I went back up to the hospital room, and I found a moment between the ministrations of nurses to say a prayer. “Oh God, here is your child. Show us your will. Do what only you can do. Give us strength for today. And take the fears of tomorrow from our hearts.”

I did all the things you do when you don't know what to do. I talked with my clergy colleagues. After a couple more visits I gave it over to a more junior member of the team. The man's name was entered on the congregation prayer list. I sent the woman an email every month or so to check in. Eventually it was time to go back and get a proper sense of how he was doing. It was one of those visits that never get an entry in the pastoral handbook. I had about 30 minutes to play with. When I got to the ward he was nowhere to be seen. After much searching it was clear he'd taken a break between therapy sessions to have a shower. The nurses didn't want to tell him I was there, and these days no clergyperson is going to stride uninvited into the showers. So I waited, and by the time he emerged I had five minutes.

But it was enough. He was talking. He could walk. This was indescribably better than I'd dared hope. His life was given over to relentless therapy, but he could get the odd night at home. He wasn't joining up all his words, he couldn't quite focus all the

time. But he was alive—he was going to live, the unspoken sentences in that coffee shop a year before need never now be articulated. There was hope.

Events took over. Christmas was intense. January swept up all unused energies, characteristically full of resolution and new starts. And then, last Sunday. It was a full-to-bursting day, when the pastor is surrounded by questions and snatched conversations and mental notes for Monday implementation, and it was time to pray with the choir. Lo and behold, two minutes before the greeting, in they walked: mom, dad, two tiny girls. I was overcome with disbelief and joy. It was Easter morning come out of the liturgical cycle. I did something I've only ever done on the soccer field: I imitated Marco Tardelli's elbow-jagging celebration from the 1982 World Cup and went and gave them wholly unprofessional hugs, as if they'd just scored the winning goal. I struggled to fight back the tears.

Wait, said her eyes. *We're not there yet*. I nodded, saying nothing but wanting to intimate, *I know, he's not fully himself, perhaps may never be, and at best it's still a long road*. But inside I was crying the tears of joy you get very seldom in ministry. Only rarely do you get to know two people, witness the worst horrors that life can turn up, walk beside them as they face the worst and dare not hope for a miracle, begin to glimpse the dawn, and then see them walk calmly into the church and take their seats for communion.

Salvation has come to this house. There is joy among the angels. Indulge me, just this once. Sometimes you get to feel resurrection.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A rumor of Easter."