

September 15, Ordinary 24C (Luke 15:1-10)

Not everything that's lost can be found.

by [Melissa Earley](#) in the [August 28, 2019](#) issue

Todd was a 15-year-old runaway who worshiped at the church where United Methodist bishop Karen Oliveto was once pastor. In *Together at the Table*, Oliveto tells the story of Todd's absence from church for several weeks. The people were worried; many had firsthand experience of the dangers for a teenager living on the streets. They did everything they could to find him.

One Sunday, Oliveto looked up and saw Todd in his wrinkled shirt and tie, crumpled from being at the bottom of his backpack. Overjoyed, she greeted him with a big hug.

"I've missed you," she said.

"You missed me?" Todd replied. "No one ever noticed when I was gone, ever."

When we're lost we want to know that someone is looking. In Jesus' parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, the shepherd and the woman search until they find what was lost. They don't search until it grows dark, too dangerous to continue, or too hard to see. They don't search until, bone tired and bleary eyed, they figure that the sheep has fallen off of a cliff or the coin was pinched by a visiting neighbor. They search until the sheep is safely back with the flock and the coin is pressed in the hand of the woman. The story presumes that what was lost can be found.

On May 8 Amanda Eller went on what was to be a short hike on a familiar trail in the Makawao forest preserve on Maui. She left her water, phone, and wallet in her car. She didn't know she'd get lost. We don't plan to get lost.

After a rest off the trail, Eller started hiking again and got turned around. Following her gut instinct led her deeper into the forest rather than back to the trail. On day three, she fell off of a cliff and fractured her leg. The next day she lost her shoes in a flood. Official searchers suspended their work on May 12, 72 hours after the search

for Eller began.

But volunteers persisted. They searched ravines, caves, and pools. They climbed, rappelled, hiked, and dove. They killed boars and searched their intestines for human remains. The man coordinating the search was fired from his job for missing work. Eller's family posted a reward and hired a helicopter. On May 25, day 17 of Eller's ordeal, the volunteer searchers' persistence paid off. Helicopter rescuers spotted her seven miles from the central search area. She was injured, dehydrated, and alive.

Eller's rescue gave hope to the family of Noah Mina, who didn't return from a May 20 hike on the Kapilau Ridge Trail in the West Maui Forest Reserve in Wailuku. A headline asked, "Can they do it again?" as the same rescuers who found Eller started their search for Mina. They did an aerial survey and met with emergency officials. Days after Eller's rescue, the search for Noah Mina ended when his body was found at the bottom of a 300-foot fall line near the summit of Mauna Kahalawai on Maui. Not everything that is lost can be found.

When a partner, parent, or friend dies we keep looking for them. We expect them to be at the dinner table. We listen for their car to pull into the garage. We look for them at the places we used to go together—favorite restaurants, our usual grocery store. Moments of relief when we forget they are gone turn to reproaches when we remember that they are gone for good. One widow told me the relief she felt in moving: "I still miss him, but at least I don't look for him all the time."

Paul Anderson, a retired 42-year veteran of the National Parks Service, told *Outside* magazine that suspending a search is "one of the most gut-wrenching experiences you could ever go through." But sometimes suspending the search is the best thing we can do. An incident commander will decide to suspend a search when the missing person is presumed dead or the conditions are too dangerous for the searchers to continue. An active search consumes us. Every other facet of life comes second, third, or fourth to finding what's missing. When my marriage ended I looked for it for a long time. I excavated the past for clues on how to create a different outcome. Suspending the search created its own grief. It left a void that was larger than my husband's absence. But it also made space for me to imagine a different future.

A good friend's adult daughter went missing for three weeks after starting up a new relationship and breaking off all contact with her family. My friend was frantic. When she finally discovered where her daughter was, her first instinct was to get on a plane and go there. But then what? She didn't know where her daughter was living or working. If she found her, she knew it would just drive her daughter farther away. The father of the prodigal son in the parable that follows these stories doesn't go looking for his son; he waits for his son's return. There's a difference between seeking those who want to be found and those who don't, those who are lost and those who have left.

For our own well-being, we may need to stop searching for lost loved ones. But God doesn't stop. We're the emergency responders, and God is the volunteer search party. Dave Prouty, president of the Mt. Hood Search and Rescue Council of Oregon told *Outside* that "if it were up to the volunteers I don't think we'd ever call off the search."