

December 19, Advent 4C (Luke 1:39-45, 46-55)

## **It's hard to believe in an enchanted world.**

by [Marlena Proper Deida Graves](#) in the [December 1, 2021](#) issue

A few days ago, as I got in my vehicle to drive home, I had the urge to call my mom. But I stopped myself from speed-dialing her number, because her phone is no longer operative. I had to put the phone down and consciously remind myself that my mother is dead. She died June 27 of metastatic breast cancer.

Suddenly, a torrential downpour of tears cascaded down my face. I could barely see to drive and contemplated pulling over to prevent an accident. Fortunately, my sleeve served well as a tissue. I held it together until I walked into our empty house; our three daughters were in school and my husband, Shawn, was working. At home, I wailed freely without disturbing others or causing accidents.

Last night I listened to Ola Gjeilo's choral piece *Song of the Universal*. Again the tears came. I turned off the light and crawled into bed, but I could not stop crying. A little later Shawn got into bed. Lying there in the dark, I tried stifling my sobs. I was in no mood to verbally articulate my grief. Furthermore, I knew if I tried to, another dam of grief would let loose.

When I could stifle my sobs no more, I threw caution to the wind, startling Shawn. "What is wrong?" he asked.

"I do not know where my mom is. I can't find her. I mean, I know she is in heaven. I believe she is in heaven, but I have no way of understanding exactly where she is." He grabbed my hand and put his arm around me to comfort me. In between expressions of uncontrollable grief, I asked, "Did you feel that way when your dad died?" Shawn's dad died 20 years ago, at age 55 from cancer.

"I never thought about it in that way," Shawn confided. "It never occurred to me to look for him." He experiences grief differently than I do.

I experience my mom as lost, and I want to find her. Like the widow searching for the lost coin, I'll tear up the house to find her. For me, finding her means being able to wrap my mind around the nature of her current location and activity. My grief has allowed me to identify with Mary Magdalene: "They have taken my Lord away . . . and I don't know where they have put him" (John 20:13).

Heaven is nebulous. Where is heaven, and what is she experiencing there? My siblings and I cared for her until and after her dying breath. We loaded her body into the hearse after she was pronounced dead. It was the first time in months she was not under our watchful eye and care. I had trouble letting the funeral director take her away from me. He did not treasure her like I did. I did not want anyone indifferent to the worth of Mami's life caring for her in death.

These thoughts swirled around inside me, and then I said aloud to Shawn, "I agree with the apostle Paul: if Jesus has not risen from the dead and there is no resurrection, if this is all there is, then this is stupid. We might as well embrace nihilism because in the end, it is completely depressing" (see 1 Cor. 15:12-19).

Here in the United States, miracles are largely passé, the afterlife seldom mentioned. Perhaps it is because we can find a scientific explanation for nearly everything. Our secularism, our unbelief, reminds me of those in Jesus' hometown who could not or would not believe Jesus was the Messiah. Matthew reports on the result of their incredulity: "He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith" (Matthew 13:58). I suppose the same hometown friends did not believe Jesus' birth was a miracle. Perhaps none of them were among the shepherds to whom the angels appeared to announce it.

In our temporal moment, we are somewhat like Jesus' neighbors: cocksure we know what there is to know about our surroundings. And if we don't know, we Google it. Whether implicitly or explicitly, we deem people and cultures who believe in an enchanted world—in the supernatural and miracles, God and the devil and demons, heaven and hell—as simple and backward. Dare I mention these cultures consist mostly of the Black, Indigenous, and people of color in the majority world?

At times I flirt with disenchantment, with a secular outlook. Yet more and more I am convinced that J. R. R. Tolkien had a command of what is real—an enchanted reality that surpasses the sensory and superficial. I do not believe my struggle with Mami's death to be permanent. For I rely on the great cloud of witnesses, living and dead, to

pray for me, to uphold me in the faith, when I am agitated in my grief. My hope is that soon it will be said of me, as John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth, said of Mary, "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Those promises involve finding Mami again one day, being able to hug her and be with her forevermore.