

Over the years I've celebrated scores of funerals, and at each one, what I try to do is to share not just the story of a person's life, but rather, how they lived. And so often, family members share stories of things that their parents and grandparents did that went above and beyond just doing their duty, but were ways that they helped them to understand both how they were loved, but also how to live. In doing these things, what I remind people is that through how they live, they pass on what their loved one showed them.

In a story she shares about her mother, Geneva Coleman writes of how she realized this as she was saying goodbye to her own mom.

It was late September, and her mom sat on the wooden porch swing covered with a blanket. Geneva's voice caught in her throat as she asked her mom if she was comfortable. She thought how strange it was for her to fuss over her that way and how her 86 year old mother had now become the mothered.

True to form, her mom said she was okay, but Geneva knew that wasn't quite true. She knew they were starting to say goodbye to each other.

Earlier that day, her mom had asked her to gather the seedpods from her flower garden. She brought them to her. As she reached to take them from Geneva, Geneva noticed how frail and small her hands were. Time had been cruel, or more appropriately cancer had been. How had she not noticed how frailer hands had become, and how her skin had become so thin?

As she placed the pods on the blanket covering her lap, Geneva thought how surreal it was for the two of them to be sitting there together on a glorious early autumn evening, visiting as they always did and talking as if nothing had changed. But everything had changed the week before when the doctor had sat with them in that tiny room and discussed the test results - results that told them that mom would not be with Geneva much longer.

Part of Geneva wanted to scream out loud at how cruel and unfair life was. Part of her wanted to run away, to outrun the pain. But she couldn't. So she just sat there quietly beside her mom as she patiently began to separate the seeds from the pods. Small hands so like her own, worked deftly to finish her task, just as they had done with every task set before her.

Geneva heard her mom explain how to store the seeds, and she remembers her telling her how to wrap them up and when to take them out again for planting. Her mom explained the depth to sow them and how far apart to place them from each other. They sat there together as the last rays of sun went over the hill, separating and wrapping and placing the round black seeds in a small cardboard box.

When they finished their task, her mom looked lovingly at her with those soft brown eyes of hers that she knew so well. He gaze never left her as she purposefully passed the box to Geneva for safekeeping.

Geneva though knew it was more than flower seeds her mom was giving her. She was trying to give her hope. Hope that there would again be flowers for her to enjoy, hope that after the winter of hurt that was coming soon, there would again be sun in her life. In preparing for a harvest that she knew she would never see, Geneva's mom was giving her one final gift - the lesson that life would go on and that after the rain, flowers of joy would bloom again in her world.

The cold winds of October blew harshly and the ground was cold the day they placed her mom there and said their goodbyes. Part of Geneva's heart went with her when she left. But the seeds remained. Tucked away where she had painted them, they remained through that first hard winter without her mom. Through the first Thanksgiving when her chair remained empty at the family table. Through the first Christmas mom's voice was not heard singing carols. Through the welcoming of the first new year Geneva had ever known without mom. Still the seeds remains in that cardboard box, wrapped tightly in a mother's love with her promise of a harvest of hope.

The robins appeared right on schedule to flit about in the warm spring sun. As if mocking the sadness within her, the earth around Geneva once more exploded with possibility. She sat alone in her swing on a day when the soft sun couldn't quite cut the slight bite in the air. It was as if Geneva heard her mom's voice int eh breeze saying "It's time. The hard hurt of winter is over and now, it's time. Time to plant the seeds for tomorrow's harvest." Her hands shook a bit as she drew the cardboard box from its place in her bureau. How strange to think, Geneva thought, that her mom's hands had touched it last. How bittersweet to think of the day that they had packed it away. But with all the strength, dignity and grace that Geneva had learned from her mom, she knew what she had to do.

And so she dug furrows in the rich brown earth. And Geneva heard her voice gently reminding her how wide to dig the rows and how deep to plant the seeds. And so she planted them, and they grew strong and beautiful like her, brining her a harvest of hope. One last gift from her mother.

As Jesus completes His mission, a message is given to those left behind: Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. And while on the one hand Geneva's mom gave her seeds, in reality she gave her much more than that. She gave her a million life lessons, the same things our moms give us. Thinking about my own mom, I think of all that she has shown me over the years about how to live. From the basics such as going into the world in a presentable manner, to the more important stuff like going the extra mile for people, being a person of patience, mercy and love, being someone who lives out your faith. My mom has done so much over the years, from the countless hours put in to helping me growing up with the homework, to the meals, to all she's done for extended family. The list is pretty endless, and I suspect it is with your

mom's too. And if you think about it, both our moms and Jesus give us the same thing: a box of seeds that are meant to be planted, so that as we go through this world we too can fill it with hope. But we do so never alone - but with the guidance of Jesus, the Spirit, and so many others.

When Jesus goes to heaven, it's not as if he is saying goodbye to the world. We still have him here; we'll celebrate that momentarily as we invoke the Spirit and celebrate Eucharist. Jesus though goes to heaven much like a battlefield general goes to a vantage point to guide the army. Jesus we hear in the second reading is seated at the right hand of the Father above all authority, principality, power and dominion. The reference is symbolic; one sitting at the right hadn't of the king is much like a prime minister directing the affairs of the state. So first, as we celebrate this feast we do not extinguish the Easter candle (like we once did) to emphasize the absence of Jesus. Rather, while Jesus is no longer physically here on this earth, we have to remember the truth that He is still here too to journey with us and give us strength. That's why the starting point is always looking to Him, and coming to Him. Receiving Him in Holy Communion, experiencing His love in confession, seeking His assistance and counsel in prayer. We will still have to carry our crosses, but we never do so alone. And to a lesser degree, this is also so very true for our loved ones, both living and dead. Geneva's mother continues to live on through her in how she continues to learn from all that her mom showed her, and how her mom prays for her still in the afterlife. Our connection to our loved ones never ends.

But here's the thing: we have a job to do. Geneva's mother may have died, but she lived on through her daughter in how the impact of being with her mom all those years changed her into a better person. That's what Christ does too on a far greater level. The apostles are forever changed not just by the Ascension, but by all that God has shown them through the Christ. Now, having been changed, it is up to them to be Jesus' witnesses. They go out and tell the world all that has happened, planting the seeds if you will that will eventually turn into a harvest of hope. For years, I too have been a witness of so many great things. Thinking of mom, I've witnessed the faith, the dedication, the love, the kindness. And in seeing these things, they've taught me so much about the faith and how to live it out. They change me as a person. Of course being human, I battle the temptations to be lazy, to be selfish, to take the path of least resistance. But when I think about what I have seen from my mom, I am reminded not just of warm fuzzy memories or nice moments, but I am challenged to live out the faith. Our loved ones do this in different ways, but Christ does it for us all. So we have to ask ourselves how have we been challenged? We are Christ's witnesses when people see its effects in our lives. When we turn away from our old ways and continue the growth we had during Lent. When we move away from jealousy, pride, envy, lust and greed towards a life of virtue. When we challenge ourselves daily to love others as Christ has loved us. We must never forget that through our actions, we can do so much to teach others what it means to be a follower of Christ as people see Him through us, something I can say I've seen in my mom and so many other people who have filled my life, and something I'm sure you can say as well.

Just as Geneva's mother's physical presence with her came to an end, the physical presence of our loved ones and of us in this world will come to an end too. But that should never fill us with fear. For we too will follow Jesus to heaven when we keep our eyes fixed on Him. And we must remember He is always with us, for the resurrected and ascended Christ is no longer restricted to one spot in the world but is accessible to all in the way that only God can be close to all. But that is also true for us too. Geneva's mother is not just a memory when Geneva looks out to the plants and flowers that emerged from the seeds she was given. Geneva's mother is alive forever in God's love, and that love will flow through Geneva because her mom showed her the way, just as Christ showed the apostles the way, and our mothers, fathers and loved ones show us the way too. May we keep our eyes fixed on heaven, knowing always that Jesus is not just out there waiting for us, but right here with us in the trenches of life. We will see that in the Eucharist, and we see it in other ways too - but let's also never forget that so many see it through you and me, for we are seeds God has put into this world called to manifest a harvest of hope through our actions of love.