

One of the things that you would notice if you came to church over the past few days is the transformation that takes place. On Good Friday, everything is barren in the church. The linens are removed; the tabernacle is empty; the sanctuary lamp is out. Often the lights are kept lower. And we remember once again how far our God went to show us how much we are loved by him, as we meditate on the passion, receive Him in Communion, and venerate the cross.

Holy Saturday, you enter the church in complete darkness. And from the darkness emerges a fire at the entrance to the sanctuary. The priest says: 'Christ yesterday and today...The Alpha and the Omega. All time belongs to him...' as we light the candle from that fire, and chant "Christ Our Light" to which people say "thanks be to God." We then hear the story of salvation history through the Old and New Testament, the story told of how God intervened time and time again, coming to our rescue, culminating with His triumph over death on Easter.

The problem though is that as life goes on, sometimes that transformation, from darkness to light and life, can be slow. God can seem far away. Much like the apostles locked in the room, having a hard time seeing past the death of Jesus, sometimes we can be the same way. And inevitably, we can ask "OK God, so where are you now?"

In a story called "Dying Faith" shared by a woman who felt God had abandoned her, Bobbi Carducci writes of how out of suffering an incredible loss and seeing nothing but darkness and pain, God found her.

She writes that she turned away from God the day her sister was murdered, a cruel and violent end to a strong and beautiful woman. A woman who throughout her life radiated joy and love.

Throughout her life, her sister embraced the weak and the small, the daft and the needy. She laughed at the pompous and stood up to the bullies. Unfortunately she always fell in love with the wrong man. Because of these things, she had reason to cry far too often. Her passing ripped a hole in Bobbi's heart, altering her world.

She knew from hard experience, long before her sister was taken, that life could be cruel. Babies, including one of her own, are conceived and not born. Children cry from hunger, and young men go off to fight in distant lands, never to return. Life is fragile. But this shattering loss was too much for Bobbi to bear.

"How dare you!" she cried, shaking her fist toward heaven. Ironic she thought, since she no longer believed in God at that point. She railed at this nonexistent being for failing her sister, for failing her, and for taking away her sister when she wasn't ready to let it go.

She cursed at God, saying you could have saved her if you tried. Why didn't you try?

When He didn't answer, didn't bring her back or bother to explain Himself, Bobbi closed her heart against the pain. She wrapped her grief in anger and slammed the door on faith. God didn't listen to her curses. He paid no mind to her tirades accusing Him of being a fraud, a sham, a made-up being created by the weak-minded and the gullible.

Apparently, He wasn't quite ready to let her go though. Bobbi says He kept tweaking her reminding her with her own words that He was there, waiting for her.

"Oh for God's sake" she said when she dropped a plate while emptying the dishwasher.

"What in God's name are you doing?" popped out when she came upon out when she came upon one of the kids bathing the cat in the sink.

"Good God girl" was her exclamation when she was told some news from a friend.

"God bless you" she said when the grocer sneezed.

"One nation under God" she recited leading the Pledge of Allegiance with the kids in their classrooms at the school's Open House.

Bobbi tried to make herself stop. Force herself to think of something else. The car needs new tires. She forgot to put five dollars in Kelly's lunch bag, and she needs it for a field trip. What time is it?

One time she found herself uttering "Hail Mary, full of grace..." at night.

"That's enough of that" she'd say, and pull the pillow over her head, only to go on thinking about the stresses of life from the mortgage to the other bills.

In spite of the pain, Bobbi would smile in the dark, remembering the her sister. She'd remember the time her sister had that same sort of problem with her rent, and everyone pitched in to help her out. She sees her sister's face, remembers how she laughed and cried and promised that as soon as she got back on her feet, she would help the next person who would need help. And in fact, she did many times.

Bobbi found herself talking to God. "She won't get back on her feet this time, will she God? Stop it! Get out of my head and leave me alone. Isn't it bad enough you let her die? Let me sleep, please just let me sleep. Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee...No I'm not sorry for anything. I did not offend this time, you did. You offended me by taking my sister away. You offended my mother by taking her child. You offended me today by being a fake and a liar. You promised you would answer our prayers. You promised to watch over us. You promised us life everlasting. I know she must have prayed that night. In the fear and confusion of what was happening to her, she would have asked for your help. How could you turn away and leave her to fate? Tell me. How could you turn your back on your child?"

Tears stained her pillow every night for months. She was so tired and worn out that she could barely function, and Bobbi had no place to find comfort, no faith to carry her through the unending days of darkness. She was failing her children, sleepwalking through her job. Life had become mere existence.

Finally one night, out of sheer exhaustion, she forced everything from her mind and drifted off to sleep. That night, there were no dreams to disturb her rest. No memories of two little girls playing house or running through the grass. No recollection of silly teenage fights over clothes and make-up. And blessedly no nightmare imaginings of her sister's final moments. Finally, she slept.

The next morning, Bobbi woke up feeling refreshed for the first time since the funeral. There was a hint of clarity to the world once again. She began to think she might survive this. She was altered, diminished in her loss, irrevocable older, but she would live on and carry on her sister's spirit with her.

Looking at her sister's picture on the dresser, she could feel her love. Hear her insistence that she continue to live.

Eventually, over a great deal of time, after much soul-searching and months of questioning, Bobbi began to see the truth. God didn't do this. He didn't allow it to happen. A man did this. A broken justice system failed to protect her sister. And since God didn't want to see His child suffer, He was there, easing her fear, enveloping her in His love. When the time came, He took her home, fulfilling his promise of everlasting life. He then began to focus His attention on healing those left behind. What Bobbi failed to see in her grief, what she turned away from in her anger and fear, was the vision of God's everlasting love as God turned toward her the day that man killed her sister. And at last, she knew, God hadn't abandoned her. He was with her, with her sister, and He always would be, because God is love.

While only a few may suffer through a loved one's life coming to a violent end, there is no getting around the fact that as we go through life, the night can seem to last forever. Darkness comes in many forms. We experience death as children, and as the years go by continue to have to deal with inevitably saying good bye to loved ones on this earth, and eventually we face our own mortality. We suffer through pain in many forms; some of it through illness, loss of job, financial strains; others self-inflicted through the decisions we make to distance ourselves from God and others called sin. Other times we just gradually get lost, not seeing that God is there or thinking we have any need of him, and we just drift from day to day, not realizing that we are in fact walking in the dark without God.

We respond in different ways to it. Sometimes, we try to escape our problems. Hence video games, vacations, materialism and putting our energy into acquiring more toys or money or power. Other times we become numb, because life can hurt and we'd rather not deal with sadness and grief. We can look around at the mess in the world, and not

see past it, wondering exactly what Bobbi did - OK God, are you there? Do you care at all? Where are you in the midst of all this?

What we have celebrated as Christians the past few days is God's answer to this. A God who is not silent. Not removed. But a God who is alive. A God who seeks us out. And Easter gives us the hope and the reminder. The hope that God is waiting for us, and that heaven and God are very much real. But the reminder that through the darkness comes the light, and God is not just out there waiting for us to get through life, but is still with us here in the trenches on our journey, and uses us to bring His love into the world.

The question is how do we see God when, like Bobbi, it can sometimes be hard to see past the pain that life brings?

For one, I look to this whole story of what God has done, in particular through the Son. When we look to Jesus, we are reminded that God Himself experienced what we did. He did not just watch from afar. He came to be born as one of us. He lived among us. He showed us how to treat one another with mercy and love. And then He laid down His life, dying as we die. He knew betrayal, being left by not just Judas but by Peter and others close to Him. He knew what it was like to be gossiped about and cast aside by people, as He dealt with this throughout His ministry. He knew what it was like to feel like God was distant, when He asked for the cup to be taken before He died and cried out "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Trusting in the Father, but feeling like the Father was so far away. When we look to this, we see a God who is in there in the trenches with us, experiencing all that we do.

Second, when I look to the Cross, I am reminded of how much I am loved. Bobbi did not realize it right away, but God was seeking her out. Sin is ugly. And it's all there in the Passion: physical violence; cowardice; lying and gossip; abuse of others; greed; envy; pride. We may not want to admit it, but all of us through our actions and inactions are responsible for the crucifixion just as much as Pilate, the Sanhedrin officials and soldiers who nailed our Lord to the Cross. At a funeral, we often put up pictures of our loved one on vacation, at a party, at a family dinner, and it's all smiles. No one would get up and talk about the bad things a person might have done. But, there is no hiding these things from God. What would the tape of your life look like if it were edited and all that was shown was every sin, every thing you did in private, tried to hide, every thing you didn't even think about at the time, and how it impacted you and others? It would be pretty ugly most likely and we'd want to hit fast forward. Perhaps like Adam and Eve we would run and hide when God showed up. And even if we do not always think about it, or want to pretend there are no shadows in our souls, all of the things we do, God takes upon Himself to Calvary. God showed up in the Garden and there was judgment; but God showed up again in Jesus and there was liberation. And He came again in the Spirit and there was strength. What we have to do is to reach a point, where we can let go and let God. Bobbi finally surrendered and turned her anger over to Him, and it went away. For us, maybe we need to think about our lives, and ask ourselves what do we need to turn over to Him? We can put so much energy into appearing to be perfect to

others, but God knows better. We do not have to be perfect, we just have to ask for His help. Whatever our sins might be, whatever we might want to pretend at times isn't there or just ignore, Jesus says to us "turn it over to me" and just as He conquered death, He can help us overcome them too, because He loves us for who we are and who we are not. Yet with His help and love, He will make us whole. So let His love take over. Reach out, and let Him heal you.

Third, we have to remember life is eternal. It can be so easy to lose sight of that. Yes, we are dust and unto dust we return, but because of Christ, by suffering for us, dying for us, and rising, we too are changed as Jesus is changed. No longer is Jesus limited by the constraints of time and place. The resurrection gives us a glimpse of our future glory. We experience grief, and on the one hand we have to acknowledge that a person we lose will not walk this earth again physically, but we also are reminded that Jesus liberates us from the grave. The tomb is not the end for us. As Bobbi realized, God enveloped her sister with His love, and He does the same for us too. That should give us hope.

Fourth, with that, this Easter event reminds us of the amazing goodness in people. Jesus through all He does for us, shows us how to love one another. And what we see is just as the good triumphs on Easter, that is true in people as well. In my priesthood, I've seen many dark things. Teen suicides; drug overdoses; alcoholism; and people dying much too young. But through all of these things, I've seen hope. I've seen people come together to support each other. The year I was ordained, I had the difficult funeral of a 16 year old cancer victim. I prayed for her recovery, and remember thinking how unfair this was. Why did God allow this? But at the funeral, the church was full. To this day it is the largest funeral I have presided at. And I saw the love in that congregation of her family, her friends, and all these people who's lives were changed for the better. For Bobbi, it was the selflessness of her sister that she remembers and that changed her. So remember, our loved ones are not just a collection of photos. They live on forever in God's love, but also in you in how you change this world for the better as they changed you for the better.

And that gets me to my final point. You and I have a job to do. Remember the words of the young man in white to Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother James: "go and tell." They are to tell Peter and the others, who are afraid not knowing what has happened. Bobbi's sister did that for her and her family through her actions of love. And you and I have the power to do that too. By being there for others; giving them the gift of time; listening to them; journeying with them through their life, and sacrificing for them. As children we look for an Easter basket; but as we age, we all are looking for God, and you and I can help one another find Him.

When I was ordained, we had prayer cards printed up as mementos of our ordination day. One of the verses I had on the back of my card was Romans 8, where Paul writes: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things,* nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." And

that's because the primary thing that I wanted to do in my priesthood, and still want to do, is to help people realize just how much God is in love with them.

So maybe you are like Bobbi, and have suffered loss and are having a hard time seeing God. Maybe you've become too busy to make time for God. Or maybe you think God is too busy to be concerned with you. Or perhaps you've just been beaten up by life. God doesn't mind anger. But what God doesn't want from us is silence. Good Friday seemed to have the silence of the Father, but the Father acted and rose Jesus from the dead. We too can emerge from our pain, our sins, our battles, it just takes trust. So trust in this fact: you are loved by God. So respond to it. Open up your heart to Him. Make some time for prayer. If you've been away from church for a while, return and know you are always welcome in His house. Let His love cast light on your shadows. And like the two Mary's, bring his love into the world.