A HOLE IN THE WORLD

FINDING HOPE IN
RITUALS OF GRIEF
AND HEALING

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For Mom and Dad
And in loving memory of Rachel

“Where you used to be,
there is a hole in the world,
which I find myself constantly
walking around in the daytime,
and falling in at night.”

—

Edna St. Vincent Millay

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INTRODUCTION

ASH WEDNESDAY

It is high noon on Ash Wednesday and I am lost in the church basement.

I had shown up fashionably late to the midday service. I frantically navigated my car to one of the few remaining spaces and ran across the parking lot, the echo of my heels bouncing off the brick walls of the church. I made my way toward the first door I happened to see on the west side of the building. Incidentally, this was the door to the basement, not the sanctuary, so while the rest of the penitents at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in downtown Boone, North Carolina, were bathed in stained glass–filtered sunlight, I was stuck halfway underground, deciphering my way through dark, flannelgraph-lined hallways, a musty-smelling rec center, and mazes of makeshift offices.

Considering the year I'd had, the metaphor is not lost on me. Fortunately, I hear the clinking of a teacup and find a woman in a small kitchen—she may have been on staff or a volunteer. I explain that this isn't my home church, that I am lost, and that I need help getting to the sanctuary. She points past a foosball table to a heavy wooden door that leads to a staircase that leads to a foyer that leads to the sanctuary. I rush up the stairs full speed ahead, my heavy, water-resistant winter coat swooshing with every hurried step.

Inconveniently, the sanctuary is arranged in such a way that the main doors enter at the front by the altar. Clearly the building's architect had never been late to church. Breathing heavily as I approach the entrance, I am faced with a decision. Do I give up the whole endeavor, trudge back to my car, and resolve to be more prompt in the future? Or do I burst through the doors in the midst of the silent reflection, a spectacle of irreverence?

Fortunately, I am not alone in my tardiness. A young, bearded Boone hipster, clad in a large trench coat, appears with the same quickened breath and panicked look on his face. We make eye contact, shrug at each other, and proceed toward the door. Grabbing a copy of the liturgy, I wait for him to enter first. I figure if I can draft behind him, maybe his broad trench coat will conceal me. No one will see me. I will make myself small. I will not be exposed.

We tiptoe in, dodging the priests' stares, and make our way to the back rows. There I sit, in the last pew, wondering if I've remembered to turn off my cell phone, but too scared to reach over to check it on account of my swooshing coat. I should have worn my fleece pullover. I am as still as a statue. The room is utterly silent save for the occasional creaking of the wooden beams above us.

Be still, Amanda. Be still.

The liturgy starts:

Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him. (Joel 2:13–14 NRSVA)

Bless. Blessing. Blessed. A word that endeavors to hold the mystery of the goodness of God, now reduced to a hashtag highlighting our veneers of happiness: the Pinterest-worthy house, the Instagrammable vacation, the picture-perfect marriage.

The priest continues:

"And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before the Lord, our Maker and Redeemer."

I take a deep breath. Ash Wednesday was an important day for my sister. That is the reason I am here at Saint Luke's, observing this holy day and participating in this unfamiliar ritual. She and I grew up in a loving Christian home with parents who modeled a faith infused with grace and inquisitiveness. Because we lived in the South, we were immersed in the evangelical subculture of the Bible Belt, and in her early twenties, my sister began to question many of the theological aspects of that subculture. Through the fear and disorientation of that experience, she found an anchor in the ancient liturgy of the High Church. The time-honored recitations grounded

her and calmed her doubts. They provided a next right step when she didn't know how to move forward. She'd become Episcopalian in recent years, but she belonged to many faith traditions. Evangelicals, Orthodox, Catholics, and atheists alike embraced her story of faithful wrestling with the truth and stubborn insistence that all are welcome at the table of Christ.

It was this tumultuous journey of faith that led her to begin writing a blog almost fifteen years ago, which quickly gained a worldwide following. Spiritual sojourners and the religiously marginalized flocked to her website and speaking engagements, finding companionship in her thoughtful reflections, wry sense of humor, curious engagement with Scripture, and compassionate embrace of the broken and wounded in the world. She went on to write five books, several of which made it on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Thousands followed her lead, dismantling many of the dogmatic religious systems that come with cultural Christianity, but finding Jesus again, like she did, somewhere along the way. My sister, Rachel Held Evans, was a once-in-a-generation writer, a prophetic voice in the wilderness, a lover of Christ, and the forerunner of a movement.

She'd written a blog post on Ash Wednesday in 2019, one year before my tardy appearance at the St. Luke's service. In the blog she stated how she would provide resources throughout Lent for confession and reflection on her website and via posts on social media. It was the last blog she ever wrote, and many of the posts she promised were never to be. Because my perfectly healthy thirty-seven-year-old sister contracted the flu a few weeks after writing that blog. She struggled to recover, went to the hospital, began experiencing static brain seizures, and died.

To write it even now seems like an act of betrayal to her. To write

it is to accept it, to name it as true, to admit the impossible. She had a three-year-old son and an eleven-month-old daughter. How could this have happened? How could God have let this happen?

"…Who knows whether he will not turn and relent…"

I fumble with my copy of the liturgy and Book of Common Prayer. My husband, Tim, and I are decidedly a nondenominational kind of people. My hands and mouth are unaccustomed to these formal incantations. Contemporary praise and worship are my mother tongue. But it has been a year of learning new languages.

> "Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth: Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen."

I take another deep breath. Five days before the Ash Wednesday service, I'd taken a pregnancy test that came back positive. Due to a miscarriage back in December, the doctor wanted to monitor me closely, ordering several blood tests to evaluate my hormone levels. The blood tests revealed that the situation was bleak. The levels were low, were not rising the way they should in a healthy pregnancy.

I'd spent the early part of the week anxiously searching Doctor Google for any sign of hope, finding the rare exceptions of mothers whose hormone levels started low but went on to have perfectly healthy pregnancies. But my body had been here before. I'd lost two other babies—had experienced the halting of a heartbeat

within my womb. I knew what it was to carry death in my body, to say goodbye to someone who was a part of me but whom I never really knew.

I had awoken on Ash Wednesday morning knowing, but stubbornly refusing to admit, that it was over. Over before it began. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

It is time for the ashes. I awkwardly approach the front, taking my cues from the more experienced Episcopalians around me. I don't want to mess up, don't want to look like a novice. But this is new to me. This is all new to me. I don't know how to carry death. The burden is still strange to me and I am clumsy in the bearing of it.

The priest reaches down and smudges my forehead with ashes, the mark of my mortal nature. My bangs get in the way and when I brush them aside, tiny flecks of ash start raining down on my nose. I avoid eye contact. My coat swooshes loudly as I return to my pew. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

I stare at the back of the trench-coat hipster's head. There are songs during the service, a homily, more moments of reflection. I struggle to focus on the liturgy. It's painful to focus. My mind ping-pongs between the fearsome nature of existence and the mundane particulars of living in this world. I am going to die. I wonder what we should have for dinner tonight. Someday my body will be rotting in the ground. Did Tim remember to put gas in the car? Tim will be worm food one day. Have I been to the dentist yet this year? Is God mad at me? How long will it be before I start bleeding?

Before Jesus drank the cup of sorrow and iniquity, He took a different cup with His disciples. He drank wine and broke bread with them. In this commonplace act of sharing a meal, He demonstrated divinely existential love. We take the elements as well, this

repentant noonday crowd at St. Luke's on Ash Wednesday. Our foreheads smeared with our mortality, we proceed once more to the altar, extending clammy, grateful hands to receive the bread. We drink from a communal cup. It tastes of grace and mercy.

We cannot know that in a few short weeks, a global pandemic would shut down the entire world. Public gatherings and the sharing of the cup would become dangerous, and we'd spend the months to follow huddled in our houses desperately trying to slow the spread of death. The Ash Wednesday service was one of the last large group gatherings I attended in 2020. It was one of the last times I reached out my hands to physically pass the peace and feel the touch of a stranger. I failed to savor it, to bask in the beauty of shared worship. We simply have no idea what is coming.

Deliver me from death, O God,
and my tongue shall sing of your righteousness,
O God of my salvation.
Open my lips, O Lord,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.[1]

As the service concludes, I wonder if anyone even remembers I'd been late. It seems a small transgression in the grand scheme of things. "Peace be with you," the priest says. We reply: "And also with you." We are encouraged to leave in silence. We exit to the sound of swooshing coats and clacking heels. We go out into the world wearing on our foreheads what we know in the marrow: we are all going to die.

I start bleeding the next morning.

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This is a book about sorrow. It is not written in stages. It does not resolve or make precise recommendations. It meanders, as sadness so often does, through unresolved reflections and feelings: confusion, desperation, determination, hope.

I've suffered through a season of loss. In November 2016, my grandmother passed away while I was in East Africa for a work trip, and I was unable to make it home in time for the funeral. In January 2017, I traveled to work as a staff chaplain in a combat hospital just outside Mosul, Iraq. I saw with my own eyes what war can do to bodies and souls. The following July, I had a miscarriage after years of struggling with infertility. I went on to give birth to a healthy baby girl a little over a year later, but it was during her eighth month of life that my sister got sick and passed away. At Christmastime after my sister's death, I learned I was pregnant again and we quietly rejoiced that the awful and unimaginable year might end on a high note. A few days before Christmas, as I was enduring my first holiday season without my sister, I learned during a routine doctor's visit that my baby's heart had stopped beating. Two months later, it was Ash Wednesday. I was miraculously pregnant again, but not for long.

I've tried hard to steel myself in the face of all this loss. I've tried to manage people's perceptions of me, determined to be the resilient humanitarian aid worker, the dutiful sister, the heartbroken but hopeful mother-not-yet-to-be. In doing so, I often neglected the significant toll all this sorrow had taken on me. I'd spend my days denying my own brokenness, circling the sorrow, unwilling to truly approach it. Then, I'd spend my evenings in fits of weepy rage, despairing and wondering why I felt like I was going crazy.

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As I write this, the worldwide death toll from COVID-19 has surpassed five million. Hundreds of thousands have died in the United States alone and the number is growing daily. Hospitals are at capacity, morgues in some regions are full, and lockdowns and social distancing protocols continue. The economic impact has led to global food shortages and financial instability. Scientists raced to roll out a miraculous vaccine, but variants continue to emerge and large segments of our population remain vulnerable. Underdeveloped nations and remote regions of the world lack access to the vaccine and to effective treatments. We have no idea how many more will die and people live with the constant, foreboding dread that the virus is coming for them and their family next. The fear and uncertainty are palpable.

All of us have been touched by this pandemic. The threat of death to ourselves and the ones we love has impacted every area of our lives. For the time being, we are cognitively tethered to our mortality in a way we haven't been for decades.

Just before the pandemic began, I came across an article about historic grief rituals from across the world. Many of the rituals from non-Western cultures are still practiced today. But most that were rooted in Western societies have died out, lost to cultural amalgamation and modernization. This article sparked my interest and started me on a journey of exploring the history of grief.

These solemn practices surrounding mourning intrigued me because I felt a distinct lack of ritual in my life in the aftermath of my losses. I'd spent the day of my grandmother's funeral in meetings at an aid worker compound in Congo. Two of my pregnancy losses were managed surgically. I'd gone into outpatient surgery as a woman *with* child and had come out a few short, anesthetized hours later *without* child. The weeks that had followed my sister's

death were a flurry of funeral planning, taking care of kids, and driving back and forth between my home and hers. The tasks, to-do lists, and trivialities of life had taken over my grieving process. As crude as the metaphor is, it was like I was lost in the basement with foosball and flannelgraph when what I needed was a sanctuary with ashes and holy water.

During the course of my study, I discovered that generations past had a robust array of rituals surrounding death that allowed mourners to be fully present in the *experience* of bereavement. These customs and traditions carved out a path and led the mourner through the physical, emotional, and spiritual exercises of saying goodbye.

We are a world that is slowly losing rituals. As religious practice declines and globalization dilutes cultures, customs surrounding birth, aging, marriage, and death are being forgotten. American evangelicals in particular have sometimes cultivated a skepticism toward rituals. Many of the sacraments and formalities of the High Church are seen as impersonal, empty, and mechanically habitual. Evangelicalism has, by and large, exchanged the supposed rote redundancy of shared liturgy for the individualized freedom of contemporary praise and worship. We default to personalized spiritual growth plans rather than scripted communal ceremonies.

Western society at large has developed a deep aversion to pain. We are experts at numbing hurt, drugging discomfort, and palliating narratives that offend our sense of comfort or safety. We speak in euphemisms. We *think* in euphemisms. We put our best face forward on social media. We avoid silence and boredom at all costs, fearful that the quiet and stillness might force us to confront our own hurts and emptiness.

These days, medical facilities and funeral homes perform the

few remaining grief rituals for us with sanitized efficiency. Customs surrounding death have been outsourced from the home to the hospital, from neighbors to strangers, from kinsmen to "professionals." Funeral services are relatively brief, and one is implicitly expected to return to normal life within a few short weeks of the loss. If we don't feel okay, we pretend.

The self-help industry has convinced us that we can "life-hack" our way to ease and blessedness. If we are self-care savvy and adequately mindful, then we can circumvent any of life's inconveniences and promptly experience well-being. We are optimizers to the core, absorbing bite-size therapeutic aphorisms via Instagram as we stand in line at the grocery store or wait in traffic. If there's a shortcut available, we'll take it. If there's a speedy solution, we're sold.

But there is no life hack for grief.

In school, I was taught reading, writing, and dubious amounts of extraneous arithmetic. I was taught home economics and history, music and microbiology. I learned to play volleyball and how to keep time in the marching band. In Sunday school I learned the sinner's prayer and the Ten Commandments. I memorized the names of all the books of the Bible in order and could recite countless Scripture passages. At my Christian college, I learned about the spiritual disciplines and was introduced to systematic theology.

I learned to serve, to pray, to worship, to study, and to love. But I never learned how to lose someone. I never learned how to grieve.

The ability to grieve deeply is a survival skill, one we've come close to losing as a society. The only way to experience sorrow is to do so wholeheartedly. With death and upheaval now surrounding us, we must recover this competency both collectively and individually if we are to emerge from this season whole and intact. We need to reclaim our traditions. We need to rediscover our rituals.

In the pages that follow, I will explore twelve rituals of bereavement. While some of the rituals are still in use to this day, few are mainstream, and most have died out or are practiced by only small pockets of society. Most of the rituals I've selected are rooted in Western culture or in Abrahamic faith traditions. I've chosen them not to neglect the scores of beautiful bereavement customs from around the world and within other faith traditions, but because I wanted to explore the rituals that my *own* culture had lost and to perhaps understand why we had lost them.

I don't make any promises with this book. I can't provide a to-do list that, if followed, will magically resurrect some forgotten rite of passage into healing. This isn't a DIY ritual renovation project. It's not a five-step plan for bypassing your sorrow through sanctimonious ceremony.

Frankly, some of these historic habits edge close enough to the bizarre that they would be nearly impossible to replicate in our current context. In many cases, the origin stories and historical significance of the customs are lost to the past, adding to their mystery and strangeness. Author and historian Colin Dickey said it well: "Our inability to trace the origins and meanings of such mourning rituals suggests that we sometimes carry out practices whose meaning we do not know and could not hope to know or to understand. It is often the physical act of the ritual itself, more than any possible meaning behind it, which matters. The ritual act itself is something of an empty vessel: it holds whatever we put into it, means what we want it to mean."[2]

What I do hope to uncover are the emotional longings that were met by some of these curious practices. What was the felt need beneath the ritual, and if the ritual is gone, what, if anything, is meeting that need now? When we abandoned our rituals, we left

a gaping hole in our experience of grief. In our rush to arrive at the hoped-for destination, we forgot the journey and lost our way.

In my hour of grief, rituals found me. They became signposts for me along the difficult path I was walking. Rituals helped me realize that I was not alone, and I was not lost. I was simply on a journey in a strange, new land.

A ritual is not magic. Like the Ash Wednesday liturgy, it simply ushers us into the reality of our own mortality and aids in the acclimation to a significant loss. I picture rituals like smooth stones stretched across a rushing river. They provide the next right step across the torrent and set our bodies in motion. I needed an empty vessel for my grief. I needed time-honored traditions and tested rituals. I needed a next right step.