



**L**ETTERS TO  
MY WISE  
TEACHER  
AFTER THE  
DEATH OF  
MY SON

SUSAN SONNENDAY VOGEL

*Epiphany, 1991*

*Our world has changed.*

*Mark died on December 16 after having sustained critical injuries in an automobile accident on December 9.*

*Christmas this year brought hope and promise and comfort as never before. And we know now what it means to be carried by the love and prayers of the community of faith. We are terribly sad, and we are also thankful. We miss Mark. Our lives will never be the same. And we give thanks for the wonderful and fun and turbulent and frustrating and awe-filled and good 23 years we had together with our son. We know now, truly know, that he is safe. And we are thankful.*

*The memorial service for Mark was one of thanksgiving and redemption. We used the fine service in The United Methodist Hymnal and sang Easter hymns. We then celebrated Christmas. And now we are discovering what it means to go on with our lives.*

*February, 1996*

As I try to make sense of our loss, and wander about in grief and confusion, I have been thinking about all I learned with you. You taught me to be a careful theologian. Week after week, as I wrote those short, concise papers on Christian doctrine, you made me see how one little shift can have monumental implications in one's faith. The nature of Christ: God or like God? *Homo-ousia* or *homoi-ousia*. The same substance or just not quite the same.

I also remember that we worked hard to distinguish between immortality and resurrection. Immortality is Greek, not Hebrew, and is not the primary understanding in the Christian tradition. Eternal life, in New Testament terms, does not have to do with life after death. It is the life lived in Christ—starting right now—and continuing forever. We talked about Greek and Hebrew understandings of body/soul. The Bible witnesses most clearly to that concept which does not understand a soul apart from its bodily life. So, at death, we die—our whole self dies. And our whole self awaits resurrection. It was always so clear.

And then Mark died.

A friend gave me a quote from Roger Kahn that begins, "The world is never again as it was before anyone you love has ever died, never so fixed, never so gentle, never so pliant to your will." I wonder if it could be paraphrased to say, "The world of one's theology is never again as it was . . ." It is not so fixed, so pliant to the logic I have always brought to it. I dream about Mark. I

hear him telling me to move on with my life. I sometimes have a sense of his presence that does not fit with the finality of death until that day of resurrection. And the strange thing (strange for me, who always has had to figure things out and have the answer) is that I do not have to understand or try to explain how or where or when.

What has become important to me is simply the word of Paul: "If we live we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." For right now, I give thanks for the assurance that Mark is held in God's love, and that nothing in all creation can separate any of us from the love of God we know in Christ Jesus.

I do not need to explain the in-between times. I do not need to figure out "where" he is. I do not understand about God's time and our time. But this does not mean that "resurrection" is unimportant.

### *The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.*

I learned the Creed in confirmation class and have said it most Sundays for more than 40 years. The Sunday after Mark died we returned to worship. I expected I would cry through the music and prayers, but I was not prepared for what happened to my voice as we said those familiar words. Tears came and my voice caught as I affirmed, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

It used to be "a doctrine of the church." I wrote papers about it, and when I was preparing to be ordained, I had to define what I understood it to mean. Somehow I do not remember much of what I thought was important about those words through all of that explaining. Now it has to do with the everlasting life of my son, the resurrection of this body to which I first gave birth. It is not now an esoteric exercise in credal affirmation. It is my fervent mother-hope that my baby, my first-born child, is not lost forever, is not lost to me forever, is not lost.

I used to be amused at all those questions about what our bodies would be like in the resurrection—whether we would recognize one another. What did it matter? It matters now.

In one sense, I feel foolish asking the questions. Apparently, though, people have been asking them since the beginning of question asking. And judging from Paul's extensive responses, it was a lively issue in the churches at Rome and Corinth.

I do not need an answer, which is a good thing since I am not likely to find a very definitive one. I do need "pieces" to put together that are more than simply a doctrine. I need to have a grounding for my living without Mark in this life—and what it means for me to affirm the resurrection of his body and his everlasting life.

I was surprised by how helpful it was when I read these words from H. Richard Niebuhr: "I do not believe that death has been conquered because I know that Christ rose from the dead. I believe that Christ rose from the dead because I know that death has been conquered."

Aiden Kavanagh, writing in the Yale Divinity School journal *Reflections*, says this thought itself seems worth rescuing from those who are merely literate in theology. As he understands what Niebuhr is saying here, the resurrection of Jesus the Christ is not so much the first cause of the conquest over death, but a symptom of it. A deep truth throughout Hebrew and Christian scripture is that the whole saving history of God's dealing with God's people is a tale of the steady overcoming of death and its

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dominion in our lives. God in Christ comes bringing life. Christians begin life by dying to all that is past in baptism, after which they never die again.

I am not sure I know just what that looks like. Perhaps I am simply back to the assurance that Mark lives in God's love, as he always has. And in God's wisdom, we will know resurrection in the way God has planned for us. And I can go on with Niebuhr and say that because I know death has been conquered, I know that there is resurrection.

In one sense, I know already that resurrection is true. For, in a way that is perhaps an intimation of what is to come, I have been brought to new life out of the agony of death and loss. With Mark's death, I knew death. And God has brought me out of that death into a life which has the miracle of new strength. An intimation.

Nietzsche (whom I do not have many occasions to quote) wrote, "That which does not kill you makes you stronger." That is, indeed, a resurrection I have known. I know of others who have been killed by their loss—become ill, are broken in spirit, give up, stop living—though they may continue to survive.

While I do not understand how or why, God has "multiplied the fruits of the Spirit in the soil of my soul" and is creating life all over again. An intimation of resurrection. God continues to work in and through me—and in all of us touched by Mark in his living and dying—to bring healing. God is building up and God is also pruning—cutting away all that would threaten us, bringing new life and strength and growth.

Is that to misunderstand—or even trivialize—resurrection?

I do not know how it will be in the end time. I live in the promise that God, in God's own wisdom, will keep us in love and grace, and that we will know a new heaven and a new earth. In the between time, I know that God has brought me "a mighty long way," has made a way for life when all I knew was death, and has set me on a path to witness to others who know only death. An intimation, a foretaste.

*I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting.  
Amen.*



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