

Letters of ENCOURAGEMENT

God Loves You



No Matter What

November 22, 2023

A Note from Pastor April

Dearest Friends,

It's so good to be back with you!

In this week of Thanksgiving I'm feeling gratitude for a season to reconnect with many of you and to share some of the amazing ways that God has been at work in our lives during the four months that I've been away.

In a week when we will likely be reflecting on the people in our lives who matter to us, I wanted to share one of the precious relational moments that happened while I was on renewal leave: **reuniting with my childhood best friend, Liz, after 27 years.**

Liz and I met at cheerleading tryouts during the tumultuous year of seventh grade.

It was the fall of 1989, the era of big hair, tight rolled jeans, and MTV. We would spend hours at my house after school pouring through the latest *Teen Beat* magazines, scouring for makeup tips, celebrity crushes, and the latest in fashion.

We braided each other's hair, made up nicknames for our school crushes, and then proceeded to dial the numbers of these same crushes only to hang up immediately when someone answered. (Thankfully before the days of Caller ID.)



In this turbulent season of adolescence, we had found in one another a buoy. A lifeline. A place where we felt somewhat steadier and lifted up. A person whose response to our daily labor of striving to be enough was always "You are amazing!" A person who filled these years of angst with laughter and fun.



When we were 14, Liz helped me land a job at a German bakery in the downtown tourist area of our hometown. Every Saturday for several seasons, we would arrive at the break of dawn to unload the truck filled with fresh baked breads and pastries and then serve them up for the next few hours to hungry tourists.

Both of us were saving up for our dream car — a Red Geo Tracker for me, a Green Mitsubishi Eclipse for Liz.

Over the years, we navigated our way among different groups of friends. Our friendship survived the various boyfriends who came and went. (All of whom were dating Liz.) Somehow, we even stayed friends when Liz turned 16

six months before me, and her uncle talked her into buying a Red Suzuki Sidekick. (I confess that I gave her the silent treatment for 3 weeks!)

Then one day, she was gone.

To be fair, I knew where she was. In the fall semester of our senior year, she heard of an opportunity to do a semester abroad in Russia. It had been a challenging year, and Liz saw a chance to get away and make a fresh start.

It all happened so fast.

She didn't come back for graduation. Then, she was off to college in Massachusetts. We briefly found each other the following summer, but I was headed to a summer job several states away and left soon after.

That was it.

This person who had been so woven into my life...

I didn't even have her phone number or address.

What finally brought us back together was writing.

Liz, now a freelance writer, had published an article about growing up in our hometown. This got us connected on Facebook, occasionally sending messages every few years.

Last year, I was writing an autobiographical paper for a course I was taking. The writing brought to light how much I missed her. When we reconnected this time, we were much more intentional.

It soon became clear that there was another form of writing that had kept us apart all those years. It's not the kind that requires a pen or paper or words on a screen. It starts at an

early age, this human art of **crafting a story in our minds that can help us make sense of what has happened and is happening in our lives and offer us some kind of sense of identity.**

I can't remember how and when I began writing the narrative in my mind about what had caused our friendship to disappear. What I do know is that the story had some clear and guiding principles:

Liz clearly wanted to leave her life in Arkansas far behind her.

She probably didn't want to hear from me, since it might bring up memories from the past that she'd prefer to forget.

I wasn't really that important to her.

Once we have written these stories, they take on a life of their own in our bodies, more like memories than something we conjured up ourselves. We return to them when the grief or loss surfaces in some way. They offer some kind of scaffolding to make sense of what to do with our pain.

What we rarely do is take them out and examine them: *Are they true?*



This September, when we were finally reunited in her new home in Geneva, Switzerland, she offered me a rare gift.

The truth.

The story I had lived with for 27 years was just a story. A story I had written.

A story that wasn't based on reality.

As it turned out, our friendship had meant just as much to her.

There were also lots of other things going on that had nothing to do with me that had kept her from returning to our hometown. At the same time, Liz had been writing her own narratives. In her version of the story, I had moved on from her and didn't need her in my life anymore.

There were lots of tears shed as we both finally told one another the truth.

How much time had we wasted believing these stories?

This time of renewal leave has allowed me some beautiful space to explore some of the stories I've been telling about myself, about the world, and about what is

possible. It gave me room to look more closely at these narratives through the lens of compassion and truth and explore what it may look like to write new stories. Stories that are life-giving and grounded in love and acceptance.

I look forward to sharing more of those stories together in the coming months and years.

My prayer for each of you on this Thanksgiving week is that there might be space for you to examine the truth of some of the stories you might be walking into this week with.

Are they true?

Are there new stories you would like to craft that bring more life and energy?

Blessings to each of you, and I hope to see many of you in worship this Sunday at one of our THREE worship services: 9am Traditional & 10:30am Family worship in the Sanctuary, and 11:15 Nontraditional worship in Warehouse 839. (<https://hilliardumc.org/worship/>)

Grace and peace,

April



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