

As we all know, sometimes life can be so hard; there's seemingly bad news all around us all the time, because it's the bad or scary news that gets the most interest from the viewer. There are the divisions that we see, so that it would seem that people who are separated by culture, by race, or by politics and many other things always will be, and that's just the way it is. And then there are the tragedies that come with daily life; some worse than others. When people are scared and dejected, it's a recipe for despair.

Hopelessness was something Amy Chesler felt one day when her mom's life was taken.

She recalls the sound of helicopters reverberating against the mountains, filling the canyon with a deafening noise one morning at one a.m. The normally quiet streets were bustling.

She was standing outside her home, tears streaming down her face. She had been crying for hours, but it felt like a minute; she says she had no concept of time. Earlier that night, she had returned home from work to find her mother lifeless. She had been killed during a heated argument with a family member and her killer had fled, leaving Amy to find the grisly scene.

In those excruciating hours, friends and family arrived and filled her suburban street. She says she can't recall everyone who showed up, as their faces meld together in her mind like a collage of love. All she can remember is that she eventually made her way to a neighbor's home; the owners were longtime friends of her mom, and they had graciously opened their doors.

Amy sat on their couch, being comforted and awkwardly hugged by people coming in and out. They said all the right things, but Amy reflected that their words sounded empty and her heart ached too much to believe them. But then, eventually a man she had never seen before entered the room and sat down with the crowd that had gathered.

He introduced himself as Detective Michael Valento. He then said "I'm here to bring you and your mother justice."

Justice, Amy thought to herself. It sounded like such a familiar concept, one she had been brought up to believe was around every corner in America. Our nation was built on justice and fairness after all, but nothing about this

night seemed just or fair to Amy. Despite fully knowing it's meaning, in that moment Amy says she couldn't even fathom ever feeling that justice had been served. Her mother could not be brought back to life.

"Thank you," she said in a stuttered voice, not knowing what else to say.

But while Detective Mike was there that night, he would also be there with her at her side to make sure his promise was delivered.

A few months later, Detective Valento was a regular part of her life. Their phone calls became an almost weekly occurrence. Each time they spoke, Mike vowed that he would do everything in his power to ensure her mom's killer would be sent to prison as expeditiously and as permanently as possible. Amy believed him at the time, but as the months wore on, and the number of hearings grew, she lost hope.

Despite her emotional struggle, Amy grew to know and care for Mike. She says he was a kind, gentle man with a heart of gold. His intentions were of the purest, and to her he symbolized the hope she once had. He was a wonderful advocate, and continued to call Amy often, checking in to see if

she was okay, asking how her wedding plans were going, and updating her on everything that was happening.

Unfortunately the months turned into years and very little happened.

Justice and the American way were not prevailing. Her hope morphed into anger. She was angry her mother's killer hadn't been accorded his punishment. She was angry her mother was gone. She was angry that a system she had been reared to respect was so clearly failing. Her mother's murderer was playing the system, and he was getting away with it. Or so she thought.

One particularly hard day, nearly four years after her mother's death, Amy came close to losing it. She had been in court all day and she was mentally, as well as physically, drained. Detective Mike had been in court with Amy and her fiance, sitting by their sides the entire time. She turned to him and pleaded, "when will this end? Why is he being protected? Why hasn't he been convicted? Life needs to go on."

Detective Mike thought carefully for a moment. He looked at Amy kindly and said, "I know it doesn't seem like it, but this is all for you and for your

mother. you have to understand that our legal system, although at times seemingly imperfect, is protecting you. If we didn't cover all of our bases right now, he could appeal and possibly be free one day. So, for now, we must be patient. I know its hard, but in America good things come to those who wait." Again, Amy's heart was heavy so she couldn't quite grasp his words, but this time she accepted the situation. She waited patiently for another year.

Five years and two days after her mother's murder, a judgment was delivered. Amy's brother was given a sentence of 15 years to life. Amy was as relieved as she could be. Justice had finally been served and she could begin to repair her own life, which had been shattered that horrific night. She remembers as she fled the courtroom for one final time, Mike had leaned in for an embrace.

After their hug, he pulled back and said, "See. I told you all would be right in the end."

At that moment, Amy's heart filled with warmth that it had not felt for a while, warmth ignited by someone who had been a complete stranger a few

years prior. This man, she says, despite knowing nothing of the content of her character, dedicated a large portion of his life to fight so she could regain control of hers. His actions, she says, showed her the camaraderie and strength America instills in people. His upstanding dedication to his country and position of service helped change her life for the better.

Detective Mike Valento of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, Amy says, exemplifies everything that is right in our country and with our police officers. And although now there is no reason left to carry on the relationship with him, she says her adoration, respect and gratitude for him will never diminish, because she says it's police officers like him who give her strength, hope and life back, and for that, she can never be thankful enough.

Despite what some in the media might lead us to believe, countless men and women of law enforcement do what Detective Mike did, and that is to bring hope to people in very dark moments. But this is something that isn't just the job of a first responder. Rather, as we are reminded of in our Gospel today, it's something we are all called to do. And to do it means reminding ourselves who God loves, namely all of us without exception,

which is how we are to see one another, and to challenge ourselves to give to others the peace and love God gives us.

Our Gospel features the two disciples who Jesus met on the road to Emmaus; two disciples who were just like Amy on the night that Detective Mike met her; heartbroken and in shock, having a hard time seeing hope. But Jesus gives them that hope, revealing Himself to them, and then when they are discussing the event again to other disciples, Jesus appears again. Note the first words are the same we heard last week when He appeared to the apostles: “peace be with you.” He then shows them his hands and feet; the wounds are still there. It’s getting at what Peter says in the first reading: “the author of life you put to death.” Sin is in the world, and in our souls. And we confront that as Jesus did. But in that, there is not despair, but peace, knowing that we are loved and our sins forgiven. And with this, there is the confidence we have too in sharing in the resurrection. Jesus shows them He is no ghost by eating with them. The resurrection is not just for Jesus, but is an indication too of our future glory. Like Jesus, Amy’s mother was violently killed. And Amy can have the hope they will be together again, as we can do too when we look at the people we have lost. Not everyone experiences the trauma of losing a person in the way that

Amy lost her mother, but all of us experience the pain of death which is real. But Jesus' grace and love is a free gift. Hopefully we are an Easter People; the resurrection of Jesus is something we share in, and this should fill us with hope and joy. Jesus comes to transform humanity and that is you and me. Just as Detective Mike helped transformed Amy's darkness, Jesus does this for us too. Maybe you are still suffering and have such pain over sins you've done in the past or others' sins that have impacted you; or over the loss of someone close to you; or things you wish you could have done differently. Jesus is there to take away the shame, the pain, and is there to give you comfort, meeting you where you are at as He met the disciples where they are at. Be filled with peace and know you are loved.

With that though, we must also be reminded that God's love is freely given to all people. Jesus appears to multiple disciples in this reading; He wants them to be one. The Eucharist, where we see Jesus too, is meant to bring us closer together. When we break bread together, we remember that you and I make up the body of Christ. The Eucharist brings us God's mercy, but should also open our eyes to that mercy being for all of us, which sometimes can be hard to do when we let divisions tear us apart and see someone's race, profession or politics get in the way. Understandably

some people can be hard to love, but our Lord gave His life for all and His peace is given to all.

And lastly, we are the witness. We have the power to proclaim the resurrection, to proclaim peace to all we meet. Detective Mike had no obligation to get involved in the life of Amy other than take her statements and do his job; but instead he saw that she was in pain, and wanted to journey with her over that long period of four years it took to get justice for her and her mom. Though his weekly phone calls and helping her to find encouragement and peace, he did so much. That's the "witness" part of our Gospel - a witness gives testimony. Remember the words we say in the Lord's Prayer; "thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Through how we lead our lives, we can bring about the kingdom through our actions of mercy.

These days it can be hard to have hope. There's so much negativity around us. Consider a seminary professor in Georgia who was recently featured in a book of prayers asking God to help her "hate white people."

The book, *A Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal*, features a prayer from Chanequa Walker-Barnes, Mercer University

associate professor of practical theology, that begins with “Dear God, Please help me to hate White people.” “Or at least to want to hate them,” the prayer continues. “At least, I want to stop caring about them, individually and collectively.” Fr. Peter West, who is active in the pro-life movement, rightly calls out that asking God to help you hate anyone is blasphemy. Walker-Barnes explained that she has no desire to hate openly racist white people and “strident segregationists” because they are “already in hell,” but instead, she wants to hate “the nice ones.” This is not a joke.

But in Jesus, He has walked among us and became one of us but through the resurrection, we share in that too knowing that awaits us after death. But the Christian’s goal isn’t to just get out of here as soon as possible, or to look back on a golden age that never was, or to give up on the world. If we aren’t careful, wrath and sloth, the deadly sins, can take over: wrath leading us to hate; sloth causing us to give up. Rather, we are sent, because for all the bad things that happen in our world, good is far more powerful. We have the power to give people hope, the same kind of hope Detective Mike gave Amy, that police officers give to victims of crime, that doctors give to patients, that teachers give to students and so many do for one another too. So like the disciples, let us recognize Jesus in the

breaking of the bread, but also like them go out into the world to help others see Jesus in you and me as agents of hope and mercy.