

Ten years ago, like millions of families around the world, the family of Alissa Parker was getting ready for Easter. But, this year would be different.

In looking back, Alissa writes how her family loved Easter. They loved the beautiful church service, the pretty new dresses for their girls. She always woke up excited to celebrate God's promise of new life.

This year, however, she woke up with a knot in her stomach.

It had been three months since she'd watched Emilie, her six-year-old daughter, board the yellow school bus that would take her to first grade at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

Three months since her phone had rung with a message that there'd been a school shooting in Newtown.

Three months since an ashen-faced governor of Connecticut had walked into a classroom crowded with terrified parents and told them their worst fears had come true.

Emilie had been a shining light in Alissa's family—a precociously empathetic child, keenly aware of other people's feelings. She'd doted on her younger sisters, Madeline and Samantha. She would draw pictures for Alissa and her husband, Robbie, always with sweet messages, especially when they needed cheering up. The first word she'd ever said was "happy."

She was murdered by a troubled young man, who had walked into her school and fatally shot 20 children and six adult staff with two semiautomatic pistols and a semiautomatic rifle before taking his own life.

And now it was Easter, one of Emilie's favorite holidays. Alissa didn't know how she would make it through the day. Much less heal from the grief that still consumed her.

The three months since Emilie died had tested Alissa's heart, mind, soul and marriage. Robbie and her had struggled with anger and overwhelming loss. Working with a counselor, they had managed to remain emotional anchors for each other. They had done their best to keep life going for Madeline and Samantha. Their family had not fallen apart.

Yet the void that Emilie left behind remained. It was as much an abyss as a void for Alissa. She knew Emilie was with God. She knew she was safe in her Heavenly Father's arms. But those were words in her head. In her heart was a void, as if Emilie had simply vanished from existence. Churning around the edges of that void, that abyss, was pure loathing for her killer.

Alissa hated that loathing, and she hated that void. She felt helpless about both.

For three months, she prayed for those feelings to be healed. God had given her various answers to those prayers. But she didn't understand any of them. And the answers didn't make the feelings go away.

The first answer—and she admits this made her jealous—came not to her but to her husband, Robbie.

Less than a month after Emilie died, Robbie emerged from tucking in the kids one night with a look of awe on his face.

“You’ll never guess the conversation I just had with Madeline,” he said. He told her that Madeline had asked if we’d ever see Emilie again.

“Where do you think she is?” Robbie said.

“Heaven,” said Madeline.

“That’s right,” Robbie said. “So the best way to see her again is to love God and make good choices.”

Then Madeline said something surprising: “But what about the boy who shot her?”

Robbie searched for words. “How do you feel about that boy?” he said.

“I think he was a good boy but he made some really bad choices,” she replied.

“And how do you think God feels about him?” Robbie asked her. “I think he loves him but he is not happy with the choices he made,” Madeline said.

Robbie and Alissa sat in the living room as he recounted this conversation. He began to cry. "Alissa," he said, "I could feel Emilie there! I could feel her with Madeline and me."

Alissa stared at him in shock. That sense of Emilie's presence was exactly what she wanted. Some sign from God to fill the void. Why had it happened for Madeline and Robbie but not for her?

She racked her brain for something she could do to receive a similar gift. Then it came to her. She needed to pray as intensely and transparently as Madeline had prayed in her childlike directness. So she went to her church.

A few days later, Robbie and Alissa sat in prayer together there, and she began praying harder than she ever had before. Take away this void, God. Let me know Emilie is not gone.

Alissa listened intently, certain that she was at last doing what she needed to do to get through to God. And then an answer came. You need to talk to the shooter's father.

“What? That wasn’t what I was praying about!” she thought. Alissa tried to bring her focus back to Emilie. The words persisted. At last she gave up, disappointed. On the car ride home, she told Robbie what had happened. He looked bewildered too. But the words were so clear, they felt they had to act on them.

They reached out to Peter Lanza, the shooter’s father, through intermediaries. To their surprise, he responded immediately. She was a nervous wreck driving to the Connecticut office building where they agreed to meet.

That nervousness evaporated as soon as she saw Peter. He was as much of a wreck as she was. His hands shook. His face was flushed.

They sat at a conference table, and she told Peter about how she’d felt moved by God to meet with him. Then suddenly the question she most wanted to ask became obvious: “Why did your son do what he did that day?”

For some reason, she felt prompted to add: “I’m sorry you lost him.”

Peter's eyes widened at her words. He must have expected her to hurl invective. His hands stopped shaking, and the words poured out of him. He told them how his son had struggled socially at school, especially after Peter and his wife separated when his son was nine and later divorced. Diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome as a teenager, his son gradually cut himself off from Peter and then from the rest of the world.

As Peter talked, Alissa began to realize that the effects of his son's evil actions spread far beyond her family and the families of other victims. In the aftermath of the shooting, Robbie and Alissa had been showered with gifts and kindnesses from strangers in Newtown and far away.

Peter Lanza was reviled. A horrified world recoiled from him at the moment of his greatest loss and confusion. She felt sorry for him.

"Meeting you is like a glimmer of light through a dark agony," Peter said before they parted that day. Alissa wondered if it could be a glimmer for her too.

Two months later, lying in bed on that Easter morning, she still wondered. What was the thread connecting these messages from God? What was God trying to tell her? Whatever it was, it hadn't gotten through. The thought of Easter without Emilie was more than she could bear.

But she had to bear it, she told herself. Madeline and Samantha were up. She could hear them tiptoeing around in search of Easter baskets. Soon they would want help putting on their new dresses. She forced herself out of bed and summoned up her best coping smile.

Once the girls were dressed and tearing around the house in excitement, she returned to the bedroom to get ready for the service.

"Would you girls like some music to dance to?" she heard Robbie ask. One of Robbie's favorite hymns started on the stereo, accompanied by giggling and the patter of little feet. At first, Alissa nearly burst into tears, thinking about how much Emilie would have loved being there with her sisters.

Then something moved her to dress quickly and go watch. Alissa opened the door, stepped into the hall, and there were Madeline and Samantha,

twirling and laughing to the music. She grinned in spite of herself. All of a sudden, a feeling of warmth and peace descended on her. It filled her body and radiated out to the hall and the rest of the house.

With crystal clarity, she knew in her heart—it was as if she had always known—Emilie had not vanished. Yes, she had died. But she was alive in a new way with God. Alissa could almost feel her right there with them. Every memory she had of her arose in her mind and became solid and real. She breathed in the blessed sense of her.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. Robbie appeared beside her and put his arm around her waist.

Why was this happening? She had no idea. Only at church, later that morning, did she begin to understand. Listening to the wonderful Easter story, she thought again of that insight she'd had meeting with Peter Lanza—that Emilie's death was part of something larger. Now she knew just how much larger.

Madeline had sensed that larger meaning when she asked Robbie about the man who took Emilie's life. God had pointed her toward it when he counseled her to meet with Peter.

Death, God wanted her to understand, did not extinguish Emilie's light. Her grief was not the end. When she looked beyond herself, reached out to others, trusted God to make something good from the horror of Emilie's death—that was her healing.

How could she believe this, she asks? Because God had lost a child too.

Long before Emilie died, Jesus died. Then Jesus arose. Out of the darkness and grief of his death came new life.

Emilie was now part of that new life. There was no void where she had been. With God, there is never a void. Alissa says she did not have to hate the shooter for taking Emilie away. No one could take Emilie from God. Indeed, she could give even the shooter to God. She could give all of it to God. Then she could begin healing.

Those thoughts came to her as glimmers on Easter morning. Over the next several months, they became more real. She stopped hating the shooter and later forgave him in her heart. More important, she understood that ultimately it was God's job to judge and forgive. As grief and hatred left her heart, there was more room to remember Emilie and treasure what she meant to their family.

Years after the horror of that day, she still misses Emilie intensely. But that only strengthens her resolve to be the best mother she can be for Madeline and Samantha. Her grief, still crushing at times, no longer defines her. She is defined by her relationship with a Heavenly Father who embraces—and gives new life to—all of his children.

At first glance at the death of Jesus, it seems the forces of darkness have won. The powerful Roman empire and the religious leaders who wanted him out of the way has silenced Jesus seemingly forever. The hope that His followers had is crushed.

But in Easter, what this resurrection event does is to change everything. In this resurrection, Jesus is who He said He was: the incarnate Son of God. And it shows us so much.

For one, it shows us that life is eternal. Alissa came to realize that out of the darkness of Jesus' death came new life, and death would not extinguish the light of Emilie. This is not to deny the reality of loss; Jesus cries at the loss of Lazarus His friend, and we all know the pain of losing loved ones we wish were with us physically still. It's important to acknowledge that. But sometimes we think this world is all there is and put all our focus into it; and yet we know all on this earth passes away eventually. We enjoy this world, but we pass through this world. And through the resurrection, we have the hope and knowledge that there is something beyond this world far greater - what eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and we join with our Lord in that resurrection, knowing that He leads us across this life to ultimately take us home.

Secondly, in light of the resurrection we see that the power of evil is defeated. As we all know evil is all around us. Your kid faces a bully at school. Tyrants in China send people to concentration camps; we are

inundated with crime on the nightly news, and of course the war crimes being committed against the Ukrainian people. God allows evil to happen for we are not robots; we are given free will. But in the Cross and Resurrection, God takes up all the evil that could be thrown and says this is not the endgame. Love is more powerful. Let me show you. I am with you in your pain, in your hurt, and I stand with you dying and surrendering my life to evil to ultimately triumph over that. It takes away the fear of death which is why the earliest Christians were boldly proclaiming their faith in the face of persecution, and why to this day Christians face both martyrdom in parts of the world and hate in our part of the world for doing the right thing and speaking to the truth. The resurrection inspires us to know that in the face of evil, we go forward to do something greater - to speak of the risen Christ and continue to proclaim the message of love and also speak to the truth of what that love means in a world that would say we should keep silent.

And lastly, what the resurrection reveals is what Alissa came to reveal to Adam Lanza's father, and what Alissa's daughter told her father - that God loved even the shooter. To the world as Alissa said he was at best forgotten about. But as he explained to Alissa he was devastated too, and

in that conversation, she showed him mercy and compassion. The radical nature of God's love is that God died for us all; the Son is sent down from heaven to embrace all people, to call all people back, for such is the power of divine mercy. So on this Easter, as we celebrate the resurrection, perhaps we can also ask for God's help to have our eyes opened. Who is God calling you to reach out to? Or maybe God is inviting you to let go of hate and anger towards someone or a group of people. There are always people we do not like. But who do we perhaps hate? Who do we have a hard time forgiving? Who do we need to reach out to and give compassion to, or turn the other cheek towards? In Alissa's case, a meeting changed a man's life because hate was replaced with hope and love. Think of the power we have when we opt not to gossip or tarnish someone online; to pray with our kids for both those who are close to us but those who have wronged us; when we teach true tolerance; when we use respectful language about those whom we disagree; when we forgive or reach out by picking up the phone. Our Lord comes to find us when we are lost; may we do the same for one another.

As Peter says "we are witnesses of all that He did" and "He commissioned us to preach to the people and testify...that everyone who believes in him

will receive forgiveness through his name.” May the joy of Easter truly change us, and like Peter may we be instruments of God’s love and mercy. May we move forward with hope, not fear, and realize we are sent to tell the Good News to our world: Christ was crucified, died and was buried, but is arisen; and in that, we are forgiven, we are saved, we are loved. We are no longer people in darkness, we are people of light. So let us shine that light in the world and on the hearts and souls of those who need it more than ever by truly walking as people of light and filling the world with the love of the risen Christ.