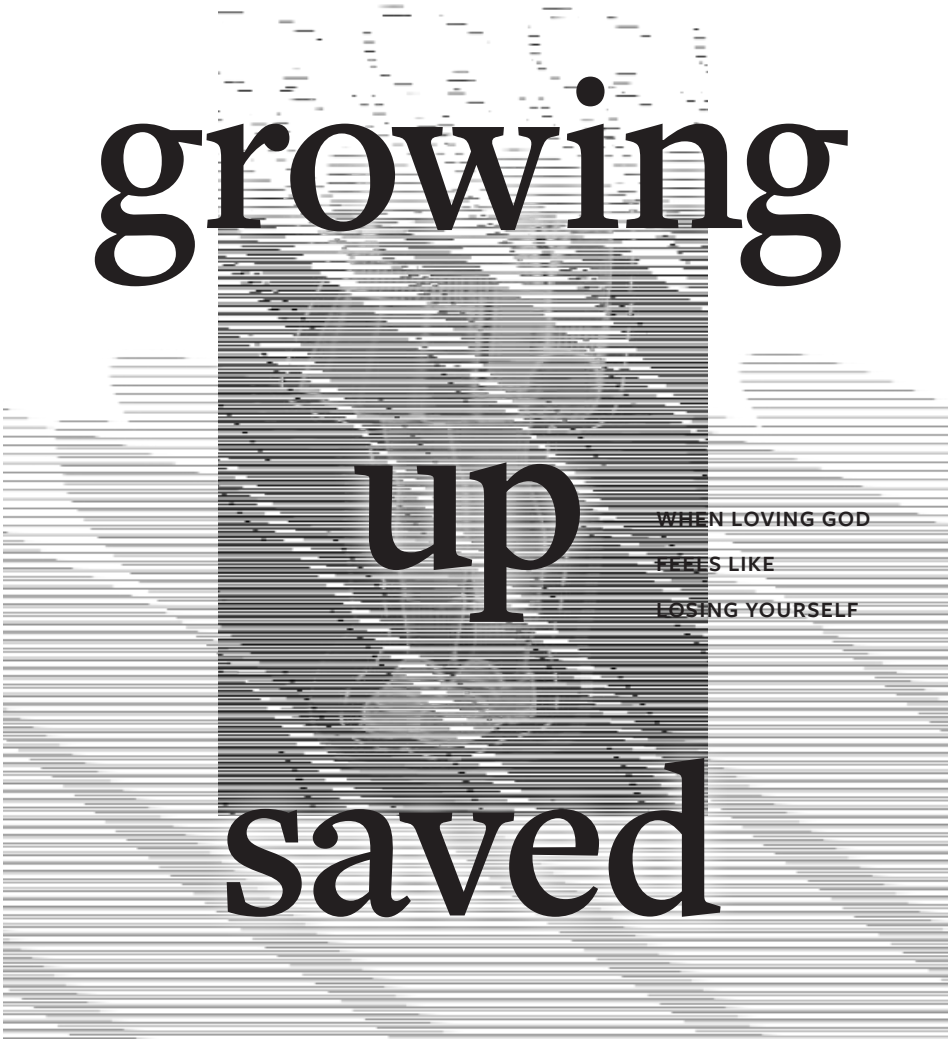
Kristen LaValley

growing up saved

WHEN LOVING GOD FEELS LIKE LOSING YOURSELF



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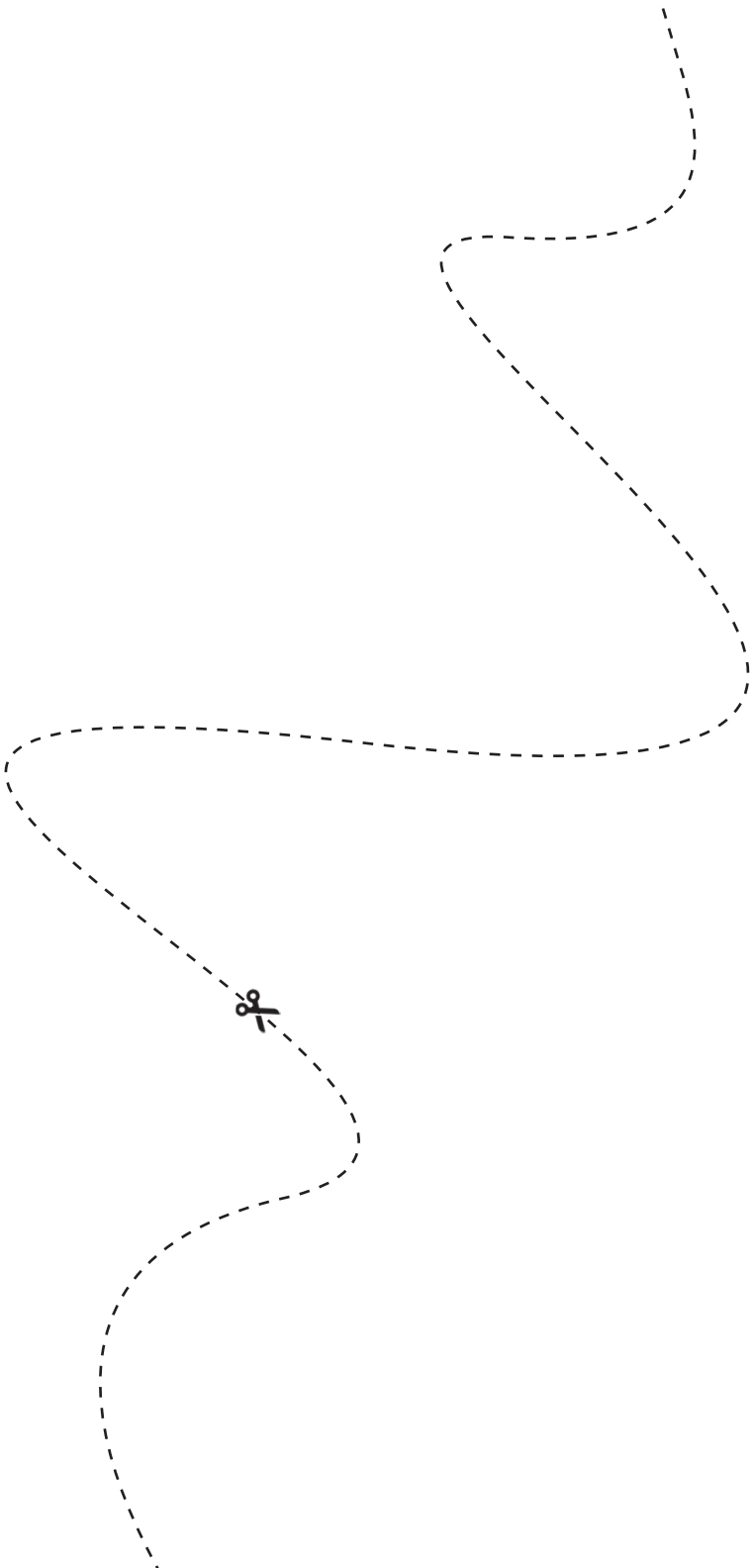
Before You Begin

IF YOU, LIKE ME, GREW UP SAVED in the '90s and early 2000s, you might recognize a few familiar phrases in the chapter titles. They're tongue-in-cheek nods to the culture that raised me, but that's not really what this book is about. If altar calls, rapture prep, and martyrdom drills weren't a part of your spiritual upbringing, don't worry. You don't need that background to find your way through these pages. But if you *do* catch the references, welcome. You're in good (slightly traumatized) company.

Another thing to note before you begin is that telling the truth—the whole truth—can be dangerous. The stories in this book are drawn from my real life, shaped by memory and meaning. But in a few places, I've changed some details to protect my family's safety and my own. If telling the truth didn't come with consequences, some parts of this book would read quite differently—and I suspect you'll know which ones. These are the stories I can tell without losing more than I already have. I hope that the shadows and echoes of what really happened will outline the shape of a wound that has long since healed over.



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Introduction

I'M THREE YEARS OLD, sitting on the stairs at my aunt's house during a family gathering. I've just said something funny, and my aunt takes out her camcorder to have me say it again.

"Tell me what you said again, Kristen. Where is Jesus?"

I kick my little legs and respond, "Jethus ith in mah haht and he bit my tongue."

Everyone laughs. I run off to play. I'm barely potty-trained, but I've just made a confession of faith.

I'm five years old, sitting in the front seat of my mom's car, turning onto Holly Drive, Nana and Papa's street. This will become one of my earliest memories. I say a quiet prayer in my head and turn to my mom and say, "I just asked Jesus in my heart!"

She smiles and says, "That's great, Kristen!"

I'm fifteen years old. Last week I got caught at the mall with a boy I met in a chat room. Dad spanked me, and I'm grounded from prom and for life. I'm cleaning my room, and I find my *Extreme Teen Bible* under my bed and throw it.

Later that day, I find the tossed Bible lying open in a corner. I pick it up and glance at the devotion on the page: "Be encouraged! It doesn't matter what you've done in the past, where you've

done it, or who you've done it with. God loves you and wants to forgive you."

I start crying. "Okay, Jesus. I'll follow you now."

I'm thirty years old. My husband, my kids, and I have just been pushed out of a church we love. I'm sad, angry, lonely, and scared. I'm not sure if anything I've believed until now is true anymore. I'm terrified of what that could mean for me. I write in my journal, "Have you ever loved me? Have I ever been worthy of your love? I'm not sure anymore. Maybe your promises weren't for me."

I'm approaching forty years old. My faith has unraveled in ways I never could have imagined at three, five, fifteen, or thirty. My journey with Christ has been complicated, frustrating, and beautiful. I have held on through mental health crises, traumas, and a late-in-life ADHD diagnosis. And somehow I have come to peace—not the kind of peace I once chased through self-denial and spiritual striving, but peace with myself, and in that, peace with Christ.

I have spent most of my life thinking God was disappointed in me. Many nights in my childhood were spent lying awake, listing every tiny thing I'd done "wrong" that day, just in case Jesus came back or I died in my sleep. Every breath I took felt like a threat to my eternal life, so I prayed my whole self away. I didn't just *think* I was bad; I felt it deep in my bones. I don't mean that in the general, fallen-world "we all sin and fall short" kind of way. I mean deep, personal, existential disappointment. I believed my very existence made God sigh. I grew up believing that holiness guaranteed you a life without struggle and that righteousness meant suppressing anything inconvenient or undesirable about yourself. I thought that if I prayed hard enough, disciplined myself enough, denied myself enough, I could finally become the kind of person God

wanted me to be. I have journal pages filled with prayers begging God to change me.

Why did you make me this way?
Please break me and make me more like you.
I'm sorry I'm not good.

I didn't realize then that the things I was begging God to change weren't my "sin nature." They were who I was—a reflection of the image of God in me. But because I had been formed in a faith framework where holiness was just as much about what could be perceived as it was a posture of the heart, I saw my uniqueness—my struggles, my emotions, even the way my brain worked—as barriers to being loved by God.

I spent years trying to break myself into pieces, attempting to get away from things that were just . . . me. I read the books. I attended the conferences. I rededicated my life at altar calls over and over again. I did my best to mold myself into the kind of person who would finally feel at home in her own skin. But instead of making me holy, it made me miserable. I hated myself, but I thought that was a virtue. I thought self-loathing was the appropriate response to a holy God.

That self-hatred had consequences. It affected my ability to form healthy friendships. It made me believe that love was something I had to earn. It made me anxious, obsessive, starved for approval. And eventually, when I couldn't hold it all together anymore, that self-hatred turned outward—toward the only one I thought I could blame. God.

When sin entered the world, it didn't just break our relationship with God—it broke *everything*. It fractured our relationships,

our sense of safety, even our connection to ourselves. We inherited shame, and that shame has made us hide ever since. And yet, when Adam and Eve hid, God searched for them. "Where are you?" he asked. He wasn't disgusted by their nakedness. He didn't withdraw his love. He went looking for them.

For years, I believed that freedom meant perfection. That to be free in Christ meant to be free from my struggles, my doubts, my complexities. That once I arrived at some mythical level of spiritual maturity, I would finally feel loved and at peace. But that's not freedom. That's a trap. Real freedom—the kind Christ has given me—is the freedom to stop hiding. To stop pretending. To stop performing. To let go of the exhausting work of being acceptable and instead rest in the truth that I already am accepted.

I no longer believe that my struggles disqualify me from grace. I no longer believe that my identity is wrapped up in whether I get everything right. I no longer believe that God is standing over me with a cosmic clipboard, evaluating my worth. I no longer live my life flinching, waiting for divine punishment. I am free because I know who I am—loved, held, forgiven, covered, and safe.

I've danced at altars and left the church. I've led worship and removed worship playlists from my phone. I've spoken to large crowds about the goodness of God, and I've shaken my fist at the sky and declared God a jerk. My faith has bent and broken and unraveled, and yet in my weakest moments, I have breathed a prayer: *Where else would I go?*

Faith isn't as linear as we might have thought.

I guess there are a few places I could go. Many have traveled this road before me and with me and have ended up at different destinations. Faith, as it turns out, isn't as linear as we might have

thought. For a child, it's simple: "Ask Jesus into your heart, and you'll be saved." For an adult, it's a bit more complicated. When our deeply held beliefs can't comfort our traumas, our grief, and our doubts, we struggle to reconcile what we thought were spiritual guarantees with the reality we're living in. For most of us, belief is a decision that happens many times over the course of a lifetime.

A few years after we left our last ministry position, heartbroken and disoriented, I found myself in an unexpected ministry walking with people who have been hurt by the church, have experienced some kind of faith-altering trauma, or have become disillusioned with their faith. In private messages, Zoom calls, writing courses, retreats, "chance" meetings with strangers, or scheduled cups of coffee, I have been a witness to stories of pain and trauma that have gone long unheard. Because of what I've seen, held, and carried, I've become a fierce defender of the deconstructed, the wounded, and the *done*.

I've watched people desperately try to cling to the faith they once knew, even as it fell apart in their hands. I've held them as their trauma collided with tightly built frameworks, shattering what once felt sure. I've helped them connect with resources and communities—sometimes to leave abusive relationships, sometimes to find safety outside the grip of leaders who use their authority to manipulate and control. I've wept with them as they tried to make sense of a God they were told loves them, and heal from the harm done to them in his name.

Almost ten years and hundreds of people later, it's clear that

no one steps into this kind of pain and unraveling willingly. They are catapulted into it, alone and afraid, not turning their backs on God but begging him to throw them a rope. They're just trying to find a way to hold on to him when nothing they've been taught about him feels true anymore.

I see them. I know them. I *am* them. I found my way to Jesus with both pain and disillusionment in hand. He welcomed me. So did his people. So now I do the same thing for others. How could I do anything else?

Maybe you've spent your life feeling like something in you is intrinsically broken. Maybe you've never felt like you are enough. Maybe you were taught that God's love is conditional, that you need to get your act together before you can be embraced. Maybe you're still carrying the weight of a faith that was formed in fear.

I want you to know this:

You are loved by God.

You are also *liked* by him.

And it has nothing to do with what you have or haven't done—it has everything to do with who he is.

God isn't waiting for you to become someone else. He isn't holding back his love until you reach some unattainable spiritual milestone. You don't have to earn it. You don't have to perform for it. You don't have to prove you deserve it. You don't have to contort yourself into the shape of someone holier, quieter, or more certain. You're already his. That's the radical love of Christ—the kind that doesn't flinch at doubt, at failure, at the slow unraveling of all the things you used to be sure about. It's the kind of love that holds steady when everything you thought you knew about God, yourself, and your faith starts to come undone.

Many of us who grew up saved have to unlearn the weight of

striving, the fear of getting things wrong, the exhaustion of trying to lift the heavy weight that bad theology and misunderstandings put around our necks. We have to relearn what God's love really is—not the version handed down to us, but the true love of God that sets us free.

Wherever you are on your journey with faith—whether you grew up saved like me or found Jesus somewhere else on the timeline of your life—I think you'll find pieces of your story in the tapestry of mine. This book is about the undoing and rebuilding of faith and identity. It's about finding God, maybe for the first time, in the spaces where we thought we were alone.

If you find yourself in my story, I hope my words are a lighthouse for you—not the soft, sentimental kind, but the kind that cuts through fog and panic and says, "You're not alone. You're almost there." It's a flare from someone who's been adrift too—someone who has questioned everything, walked away, come undone, and slowly stitched herself back together. And if some small part of you still dares to hope that life can be beautiful after heartbreak, that maybe God doesn't flinch at your existence, and that faith can feel like a deep breath instead of a burden, these words are for you. Let's find the shore together.

You don't have to contort yourself into the shape of someone holier, quieter, or more certain to be accepted by God. You're already his.

1

Friends Are Friends Forever (Unless You Backslide)

When Belonging Becomes Conditional

MARIE TERRACE, MILLTOWN, NEW JERSEY, 1996

I'M SITTING ON MY KNEES on the floor of my living room with my older brother Christopher and my little brother Jonathan on either side of me. Mom sits my little sister Abby, who just had her first birthday, on the couch next to her and picks up my newborn baby brother Zachary from his baby seat to give him a bottle. Dad's here, but he isn't, really. He sits on the chair in the corner of the room, quiet and still.

Jonathan is only five, so he's fidgety and silly and keeps asking questions that have nothing to do with what my older brother and I have recognized is a serious family meeting. We exchange looks but don't speak. Last night, Christopher pulled me into his room and told me that something bad was happening at church and that we needed to be good so we wouldn't add any more stress to Mom and Dad. We're only eleven and nine, but we know something isn't right.

Mom takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. "I have to tell you guys something. We won't be going back to church this Sunday. Dad doesn't work there anymore."

I catch my breath. Christopher freezes. Jonathan wails, "What? Why?"

Mom exhales.

"Why, Mom?" I ask.

"Some of the people at church decided they don't want him to be the pastor anymore. We can never go there again."

My heart is racing. "What about Sara? Suzanne? Gia?" I'm only thinking of what this means for me. The church is my whole world. My family. My school. My friends. I don't have a life outside of it. I can feel something shift in Christopher next to me. The air around him changes, and his shoulders straighten. He's asking thoughtful questions, suppressing his own fear and confusion because he recognizes what I can't yet: Our mother is heartbroken.

Jonathan is crying now and asks the question that's most important to him—a question so innocent, so achingly sincere that it slices through the heaviness in the room: "Will we get to bring our refrigerator with us when we move?"

Mom laughs, and a few tears fall down her cheeks.

I don't understand much of what's going on. But I know enough to know that everything is going to change.

In case you're wondering, no. We didn't take the fridge with us. We did, however, pack up a nice starter kit of unresolved grief, trust issues, and relational trauma. As it turns out, when your life collapses, it doesn't always come with a tidy emotional timeline.

Some things take time to process, but eventually you start to realize where the fracture happened.

There are moments in your life that become a dividing line. Everything after The Event is the *anno Domini*. All it takes is one giant wrecking ball to split your life into two sections: before that day and after that day. For me, there was "before East Brunswick" and "after East Brunswick."

This isn't just a metaphor, it's how we talk about things in my family. It serves as a verbal shortcut, packed with meaning that doesn't need unpacking, to contextualize our lives. "Well, after East Brunswick . . ." No one needs to mention specifics. The statement alone is packed with meaning and implication—everyone in the conversation knows exactly what it means. "East Brunswick" carries a heavy weight in our family lore.

My dad had been pastoring a church in East Brunswick, New Jersey, for a few years. This church was supposed to be *it* for my parents. The last stop. The place they'd stay. Their Camelot. They'd grow old and we'd grow up, and it would be good.

When my mom sat us down for a family meeting, she'd just given birth to my little brother, her fifth child. I didn't know she'd gone into labor early because of the trauma she'd just endured at the hands of the church they served. I didn't know about the creepy phone calls or why we'd gotten a fancy new caller ID attached to our phone. That night on the living room floor, I didn't know I was sitting in a fraction of the darkness my parents had been living in for months.

All I knew was what they told us.

In the days following that family meeting, Mom explained what happened in terms we could understand. You can't really tell a child, "There was a coup against your father," so what she told

us was, "The board decided they don't like Dad anymore." They put him on trial in front of the whole church and accused him of all kinds of things—all of which were untrue, but the truth didn't matter.

My dad sat on the platform of the church—the same platform he'd stood on and preached from every Sunday—in front of his congregation, his staff, and the officials in charge of our regional denomination, and listened as they blindsided him with accusations. He was stealing money, they said. The treasurer stood up and said he wasn't. He cared more about the toilets in the church than the people, they said. My dad *did* care about the cleanliness of the toilets more than the average pastor, but even at nine years old, I knew that was a bit of a stretch. One by one, the accusations came. The ones that could be factually proven or disproven were. The ones that were subjective hung in the air and cast a dark shadow over everything that had once been good.

Everyone chose sides. Some were in support of the mutiny against my father. Some were against it and spoke up. Some were against it and stayed quiet, but there are no passive participants in injustice. There's no neutral. Even those who didn't choose a side made a choice. My mom, pregnant as could be, sat helplessly in a pew next to her mother as her husband was torn to shreds. At the end of the trial, one of the district officials said to my dad, "Take your family and get out as fast as you can."

A few hours later, my mom was in the hospital delivering my little brother, several weeks early. My older brother and I processed this event for years. We brought it up all the time, asking more and more questions as we got older, forcing my parents to reprocess their trauma with us over and over again. I like to think of it as intergenerational healing, but they'd probably call it harassment.

We just wanted to make sense of it, and as we matured, so did our understanding of what happened. But that day, sitting on the floor of our home that the church owned, all we understood was that our parents were sad and we weren't going back to our church, our school, or our friends.

Over the next several weeks, our phone rang nonstop. Everyone wanted to talk to my parents, to find out what happened, to offer their support, to get the real story. But there were also harassing phone calls, demands for us to leave our house, threats, heavy mouth-breathing on the other end of the line. My parents taught us to wait until the caller ID revealed who the caller was before answering. Of course, I didn't really know why we were doing all that. My dad was always an early adopter of new technology, so I'm sure I just thought it was one of his new gadgets.

I couldn't have known the psychological torture my mom and dad were enduring. All I knew was that overnight, everything I knew outside my home was gone and my mom was sad and my dad was angry. Everything in my life had revolved around our church, and then it didn't anymore. I just woke up one day and everything in my life was different.

"Different" has a way of quietly rearranging everything inside you. Friendship is important for all genders and all ages, but we can probably all agree that for nine-year-old girls, friendship is more important than, say, *breathing*. There are studies upon studies that show friendship at that stage is a critical part of identity development. It helps kids feel like they belong somewhere, like they're okay. It teaches them how to handle stress and helps them grow

into their emotional and social selves.[1] There I was, at nine years old, stripped of contact with every friend, with little capacity to understand what was happening.

I didn't really feel the magnitude of the loss until one day in the first weeks after my dad was forced to resign from his position. I wasn't old enough to connect what was going on with my dad with the people who were our friends there. I hadn't talked to my best friend in a few weeks, so I decided to pick up the phone and give her a call.* As I was punching the last number into the phone, my mom must have sensed it, as moms tend to do, and she came running into the kitchen. She grabbed the phone and slammed it back on the receiver, and for the rest of my life, I'll remember the look on her face in that moment. Her eyes were wide, her eyebrows raised, her face pale. She was out of breath as if she'd just stopped me from running in front of a moving train. I was stunned and confused as I looked at her, both of her hands braced on the kitchen counter, tired eyes narrowed at me as she shook her head.

"We can't call anyone right now, Kristen," she said desperately. "We don't know who our friends are."

And I guess that's when everything really changed for me. That's when the ceiling cracked, and everything I'd had before that moment became just a sad memory. That's the moment that colored everything in my life moving forward and cast a shadow over everything that had come before. Because when you're nine, and you've never been through anything hard, and you don't have the emotional maturity to understand betrayal and people not liking your mom and dad, and your world revolves around your

* You might wonder why I would do this when we were already screening calls. Yes, I should've known better. But as you'll learn later, little Kristen had a bit of a "deficit of attention" problem.

friends, being told that you don't know who your friends are anymore shifts something big and important inside you.

That was the day I changed. I'd never be wide-eyed and naively accepting of people again. I would always side-eye, question, and doubt. I would forever choose exactly how much I'd give of myself and keep the rest of me to myself.

The church had betrayed me. It had broken my parents' hearts. It derailed my life. And although I didn't have the maturity to piece all these things together at that age, a narrative was being written in stone inside me: *The church cannot be trusted.*

My mom's simple explanation for why I couldn't call my friend formed itself into a core belief. "We don't know who our friends are" was an absolute, indisputable truth for me after that point. I believed that if I kept people out, I would stay safe. But constantly questioning the intentions and motives of the people in your life does more to keep *you* out, and as it turns out, it doesn't really do much to ward off pain. Even if you build up walls, people still find their way in through the cracks, and once they're in, they can break your heart.

Sometimes you just won't know who your friends are.

Friendship in spiritual communities can give an illusion of strength and depth. The intimacy that happens within the church gives us a false sense of relational and emotional safety. It feels safe because we all love Jesus, right? We can't imagine hurting each other. There's no way the people we break bread with would ever betray us or wound us so deeply we can't get out of bed. (Ahem. Jesus and Judas would like a word.) It's like living in a gated

neighborhood, where we walk around saying, "That bad thing that happened in that other place would never happen here." We rationalize the spiritual abuse or relational splits that happen in other churches and speculate on why they happened. We think if we can understand why something happened, it will vaccinate us against the pain and trauma we've perceived but haven't experienced.

But what happens when our knowledge doesn't protect us? What do we do when our belonging becomes conditional? What if the security of our community is ripped away from us the moment we ask the wrong question, we challenge the wrong tradition, or we confess to the wrong struggle? If our acceptance in a spiritual community hinges on conformity, not connection—on following certain unspoken rules, on saying all the right things and believing all the right things, on keeping our doubts and fears tucked away so they don't make anyone else uncomfortable—that community is not a reflection of the body or character of Christ. If you find yourself in a space like that, exit through the side door. Belonging should not have to be earned.

Healing comes when the church is willing to make eye contact with your pain instead of being afraid of it.

When we're hurt in places that should be refuges for us, we metabolize the belief that community is conditional. Because it kind of is. Or at least that's what our experience has been and because of that, our faith is shaped by our fear of being cast out, rather than our transformation in Christ.

True community—the kind God intends for us—doesn't have neighborhood watchdogs policing behavior and determining who's on the list to get in or out. The church should be built on love, not control. Your community should be safe enough for you

to be together, knowing full well that you're capable of hurting each other but choosing to stay, mend what's broken, and care for one another . . . and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

When we assume church is a safe place, we tend to open up with abandon and share intimate parts of ourselves with people, even when we barely know them. We immerse ourselves in each other's lives. We welcome strangers into our homes and into the lives of our spouses and our children. Caution is treated as cynicism—a trait that is widely considered un-Christlike. If you want to assimilate into a community, be open, be friendly, be hospitable, be extroverted, and for goodness' sake, put your guard down.

But being guarded isn't a flaw rooted in sin or cynicism. It's a protective, defensive position that we take when something has happened to make us feel unsafe. We come into this world wide-eyed and looking for love and protection. When we're rejected, mistreated, or neglected, we learn to protect ourselves. This is a good thing, wired into us by the one who made us. It's an instinct that helps us survive.

No one wants to get hurt in the same way twice, so we learn, whether consciously or subconsciously, to protect ourselves. The only way to heal from the pain that causes these defensive responses is to go through a process of repair. To repair relational wounds, we need healers. To find healers, we need to be in community. But how can we heal without returning to the place where we were harmed?

The question of how to heal after harm is one that has been asked often in recent years. There's been a broad conversation in evangelical spaces about pain that happens in and because of the church.

For a while, we called it *church hurt*. That phrase has been used as sort of a blanket term for any pain that happens in a church community. I'd like to make a distinction between *church hurt* and *spiritual trauma*.

Church hurt is an event that happens. This could be anything, big or small, that causes a person pain inside a faith community because of something that happened within that community. It could be caused by a pastor, a board, another church member, a teaching, or a church split. Spiritual trauma is the wound that's caused by such an event. If it helps, think of it like this: Church hurt is the cause; trauma is the effect. They're connected, but not the same. Not everyone who has been hurt in the church has trauma, but everyone who has experienced spiritual trauma has been hurt in the church (maybe not in a church building or by a specific community but by someone who shares the same faith). What they've experienced is a very real trauma, not a lesser one, with unique pain points that result from deep immersion in and then a sudden split from a spiritual community.

To understand the full impact of that kind of wound, we have to talk about what kind of trauma it actually is. Relational trauma is a category of trauma that's often overlooked or dismissed. It's a kind of trauma that happens when harm is caused within a significant relationship, like with a caregiver, a family member, a partner, or a close friend. While it's harder to identify, the effect this kind of trauma has on the brain and nervous system is the same as any other major trauma. When you're hurt inside a relationship where you expected safety, the damage cuts deeper and lasts longer. Because of how intertwined and complex our relationships within the church are, spiritual communities are often perpetrators of relational trauma.

The saying "The church didn't hurt you—people did!" is an oversimplification that feels dismissive to those who have been wounded inside one. It's the spiritual version of "It's just a flesh wound!" Instead of acknowledging the pain, that mentality trivializes what we've experienced. When someone dismisses our pain, it absolves them of the responsibility to repair it. If they decide it isn't a big deal, that the pain isn't justifiable, then they don't have to sit in the discomfort of acknowledging that something harmful happened. They don't have to look inward at their own heart and behavior, and they don't have to look outward to hold other people accountable to theirs. They don't have to question the system of power that's in place or the motives and integrity of the people who sit in those seats. It's easier to dismiss than to engage. But isn't that what we're called to do?

When we're wounded by a spiritual community, our brain doesn't register it as "Oh, a couple of people hurt my feelings." Our brain registers the event the same way we'd process any other kind of trauma. Parts of our brain shut down. Our nervous system moves into freeze, fight, flight, or fawn, and we sometimes get stuck there. We become reactive, defensive, reclusive, distrusting. We lose weight or gain it. We discover new addictions. We make impulsive, reckless decisions.[2]

I'm sure you can think of times in your life when you've acted like this or, perhaps easier to remember, times when people you know have been reckless in the fallout of pain. I mean, raise your hand if you've ever impulsively reshared a snarky post because it said what you wanted to say about something that happened to you. (Both my hands are up.) Some people, in the processing of their pain, push everyone out, start fights around the dinner table, or are just generally unpleasant to be around. I've done and

been all those things. The reason for these responses is simple but incredibly complex: People who have experienced spiritual trauma aren't bitter—they have PTSD.

The church often meets this pain with criticism instead of grace. Instead of having our trauma acknowledged as a deep wound that needs to be cared for, we've been told to get over it, to not get bitter, to forgive, and to move on. As if it could ever be that simple. The church has positioned itself as the voice of correction rather than the hands of healing, and it often condemns the symptoms of trauma without ever addressing the source of that pain.

But this kind of response is not aligned with God's character. God's response to the wounded looks nothing like rejection, insensitivity, or impatience.

- While some spiritual leaders might label hurting people as "troublemakers" or "divisive," God sees and acknowledges our pain. "The Lord is near the brokenhearted; he saves those crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).
- While some leaders value community or religious rules over restoration and healing, Jesus ignores legalistic outrage and heals the hurting (Mark 3:1-6; Matthew 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11).
- While some communities weaponize Scripture to punish and shame, Jesus sees the whole person, their worth and their humanity, and offers mercy over condemnation (John 8:1-11).
- When broken, sick, and hurting people come into Jesus' presence, he doesn't recoil from them. He welcomes them in, touches them, and makes them whole (Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48).

- When leaders value their image over relationships, Jesus pulls back a chair and pats the seat, welcoming outsiders to sit at the table (Luke 5:27-32; Matthew 9:10-13).

Repeatedly throughout the life of Christ and the story of God and his people, we see Jesus breaking religious expectations so he can heal, restore, and embrace those the system cast out. God doesn't minimize our wounds. He doesn't shame us for how we process our pain. He doesn't demand that we heal on any sort of timeline or in a way that makes other people comfortable. As you can see in the story of Jesus, he's never really cared about religious comfort. He meets us where we are, exactly as we are.

Jesus never pushed away the questioner, the sinner, or the hurting. He stepped closer to them.

If you've been told that your pain will make you bitter, that your anger makes you a sinner, or that your questions make you unfaithful, remember: Jesus never pushed away the questioner, the sinner, or the hurting. He stepped closer to them. He pulled the hurting and the cast-out into his atmosphere, and he does the same for you.

Two decades after I sat on the living room floor as a little girl and watched my world turn upside down, I sat on my own living room floor and delivered news to Zach that did the same thing to him.

Against all my best efforts and hopes, history repeated itself.

As I relayed what had just happened, I watched Zach go from sitting upright to putting his head in his hands to lying back on

the couch, arms spread wide, as if to brace himself from an impact that had already shaken the house down. Eventually, he was on his back on the floor, staring at the ceiling as we spun into an unknown orbit.

Although I'd walked into ministry jaded and expecting betrayal, this still knocked the air out of me. I thought I'd done everything I could to protect myself from feeling this kind of pain again. But here I was, shattered by the church. Again.

When Zach and I were newly married, we were invited to interview for a youth pastor position. We sat in the boardroom and were interviewed by the pastor and a handful of board members. The interview was going well. I was making them laugh, Zach was impressing them with his sincerity and passion for youth ministry. But then I had to go and do the thing I always do—sometimes on purpose but usually on accident—I told the truth. I forgot you're supposed to dress it up and repackage it, especially when you're, I don't know, *interviewing for a job*.

When one of the board members asked me if we had any reservations about accepting the job, all my twenty-two-year-old audacity and complete lack of professionalism and, you know, lack of any common sense at all formed the thought, *Yeah, I do. I don't trust boards.* And then I said those words *out loud*.

To my surprise and yours, we got the job. In fact, they responded to my deeply buried and newly unearthed childhood wound with empathy and compassion. They nodded their heads and said, "Well, we hope to be the board that changes that for you."

And you know what? They did. We were there for four years, and although there were different challenges that led to us leaving a little sooner than we thought we would, it was never the pastor or the board or the people in the church. They treated us well from

the interview to our very last day. They loved us well, and we still keep in touch. It was such a blessing to have our first post–college ministry position be such a positive and healing experience.

But in a new church and a new chapter, I was in the fetal position, lost, questioning, angry, and broken in almost every way a person can be broken. Zach and I went into survival mode, pushed everyone out, and became as insular as we could. No input, no output. We needed to heal, and we didn't trust anyone.

When we started trying to assimilate into new churches, my nervous system wasn't ready. Everything familiar was a reminder of what we'd lost. Well, what had been stolen from us. Worship music reminded me of the years Zach and I led worship teams together. That was gone now. Dropping my kids off at Sunday school reminded me of how the leadership sat across from me and told me that no one wanted my three-year-old son in their class. "Turn to your neighbor and say hello" might as well have been, "Look at the people who will slash you to pieces."

My whole body would shake as I walked into the building every Sunday. I flinched at every person's attempt to welcome me in. I side-eyed every invitation and overanalyzed every conversation. I was experiencing what my therapist would later tell me was *hypervigilance*. I was on guard, eyes shifting to every corner of the room, looking for danger, identifying threats, and doing what I needed to do to protect my family.

In the book *Escaping Enemy Mode*, Jim Wilder and Ray Woolridge define *enemy mode* as a brain state that affects the way we view and perceive other people.[3] When we're in enemy mode, we instinctively

see other people as threats, operating under the assumption, "You aren't on my side." It makes us hostile and disconnected, and causes us to amplify even the smallest interactions as being bigger and more threatening than they actually are. It turns our relational circuits off so we're unable to befriend or re-friend anymore. When we live in enemy mode, we've adopted an us vs. them mentality, and the longer we're in it, the harder it is to get out.

Enemy mode runs rampant in the Western evangelical church. We learn early on in our faith walk who's "in" and who's "out." Those who don't think like us, believe like us, vote like us, or do church like us are our enemies, whether we call them that or not. For me, growing up in a charismatic denomination, the "them" were Baptists, Catholics, and any belief system that didn't center around the works of the Holy Spirit. Also included were Democrats, people who were divorced, non-Christians in general, and celebrities (unless they made a public declaration of faith and hadn't made any questionable decisions afterward). We prayed for the salvation of all those people, of course—we wouldn't just *judge* them—but they weren't a part of "us."

When you've been hurt in a spiritual community, the reality of "us vs. them" becomes a crushing blow when you become the "them." You know what the people on the inside are thinking and saying about you, because you've thought it and said it too.

When people experience hurt in church, they don't leave in good spirits. They leave broken and bleeding, adrenaline rushing, to get somewhere safe and protect their families from further harm. Enemy mode is instinctually activated inside them, and what comes out often looks like anger or bitterness, but underneath it's usually just fear or pain. The rejection and harm are painful enough in themselves, but what really sends people over

the edge isn't usually the event that caused the pain but the lack of nurture and care in the aftermath. Many church communities take on the mentality, "If you aren't a part of *my* church, you aren't a part of *the* church." Not my sheep, not my problem.

Our faith, if it is anything at all, is intrinsically relational. But how can we honor a faith that's communal when we elevate so many other things above community? How do we repair if we value personal peace over unity?

If you like a good Scripture word count like I do, the phrase "one another" is used over one hundred times in ninety-four verses in the New Testament. Many of those verses refer directly to the relationship between brothers and sisters in Christ. They're about loving one another and encouraging us to care for one another in spiritual and practical ways.[4] We're to comfort one another, bring peace to one another, serve one another, accept one another, forgive one another, and try our best not to bite, devour, or consume one another. We're supposed to seek *good* for one another. And I just think that if the people who wrote these letters to the early church and those who canonized them into Scripture and the God who inspired both groups felt that the concept of caring for one another is *that* important, then so should we, you know?

But the reality is that many of us have experienced the opposite of these commands in church spaces. When I reread these verses after Zach and I faced spiritual trauma as adults, I fully scoffed at them. I thought, *Ha! Yeah, right. As if anyone actually does any of those things.* I spent a lot of time looking backward at my painful church experiences and living in the *what-if*s of it all. What if someone—anyone—had stood up for my dad long before he had to stand trial? Maybe it would have never gone that far. What if, instead of being left isolated and alone, we'd been immediately

taken in by a community and cared for so we could repair the relational wounds and prevent the trauma from settling into our nervous systems? What if, instead of telling Zach and me to "leave quickly and quietly," the people we reached out to for support told us to not roll over and to report the abuse to an authority? What if someone had spoken up against and to the authoritative powers instead of being privately outraged? What if, instead of blindly following abusive leadership, people had asked curious questions, invited Zach and me to the table, and allowed us to defend ourselves—or, at the very least, speak for ourselves?

How would the trajectory of our lives have changed if things had been handled differently? If we were seen and held instead of cast out, would the experience have been as painful? If people didn't assume, *Well they must have done something wrong,* and instead thought, *It's not my job to determine who deserves my compassion,* would our sense of identity still have been shattered? How would my life and my faith look if the body of Christ had cared more about connection than control? Where would I have been if someone had helped us pick up the pieces of our life instead of watching from a distance, afraid to get too close to our mess?

When we take the "one anothers" of Scripture seriously, they become the principles for how we care for each other. And with these principles, we're equipped not just to care for each other but to be the healers who patch up wounds caused by someone else. We have the power to turn the relational circuits back on in someone's life. Healing other people's hurts is the work of Christ. Some churches focus so much on spreading the gospel and "saving the lost" that they neglect the needs of their immediate spiritual communities. We hinder the spread of the good news when we let those who already believe it be harmed by those who claim to live

it. It shouldn't matter if we "agree" with the ferocity of their pain. It isn't our job to figure out who's right and who's wrong. Jesus didn't ask many questions about those he healed. He just healed them.

The Kingdom of God is better when people are healing and healing one another. Do you believe in the mission of Christ so much that you're willing to pick up a cross that isn't yours to carry? When Jesus said that we'd do "even greater things,"[5] I wonder if he saw a future where an entire generation takes responsibility for harm they didn't cause and heals wounds that may not be visible. When Jesus healed, he did it supernaturally, usually instantaneously. The miracles he performed could be seen, touched, and measured—water to wine, storms calmed with a word, a few loaves and fishes multiplied to feed thousands of people. Maybe the "greater things" he said we'd do aren't necessarily in the awe and wonder of instant, tangible healings. What if the miracles we're to perform are the slower, less obvious work of healing the spiritually sick, wounded, traumatized, and broken? What if the bride of Christ can present itself as holy because we have carried one another into wholeness?

The reality is that wounds in a spiritual community slice deep and cause unthinkable harm—harm that often stretches across generations. These wounds cut into our core need as humans to be known and loved and safe. It unhinges fundamental wiring in our brains. What starts as "We don't know who our friends are" becomes "I have no friends," which becomes "I *can't* have friends," which leads to "I'm safer without friends." We're naturally driven to self-preservation, and losing community in a brutal way is a justifiable reason to stay away from that kind of environment indefinitely.

But sometimes someone turns the light back on. Sometimes the wound heals and the wounded person becomes a healer. A

church made up entirely of healers isn't some utopian ideal; it's what it was supposed to be in the first place. What if our spiritual wounds were never given the opportunity to fester and spread infection?

I was a walking open wound for a long time—from a little girl on my parents' living room floor to a thirtysomething-year-old wife and mother just trying to survive. The circuits were down, and I liked them that way. But then something started to change.

After we left our church, I was a shell of a person, which is putting it lightly. Zach and I began to unravel our theology of church, and as we did, we couldn't escape the "one anothers." And I did try. Repeatedly. But eventually we both realized that regardless of how long we'd been part of the church, we'd never been a part of one that embodied those commands. Not in the way Scripture requires, anyway. And honestly, I didn't want to be a part of something like that. It was too much. Too close. Too intimate. Too known.

As someone with chronic church pain, I was resistant to the idea that I needed to step *closer*. But as I read the words on the pages of the Bible I was trying not to resent anymore, I couldn't escape the intimacy it described. I wasn't sure if I'd known *anyone* in that way. I didn't know if I was capable of it. It certainly didn't feel safe. But I accepted that if God created me for community, and if he intended his church to be what Paul described in those letters, then I had to be open to relationship. I had to open myself up and let others know me.

And then it all happened—fast and against my will. One day there was a message from Melissa, a woman I used to go to church

with. We hadn't gotten to know each other much at church, and we'd both since left, but she wanted to be friends. She remembered a wildly inappropriate joke I'd made about Smurfs in our small group, and I guess that's what made her think I'd make a safe friend. I had edge. She had grit. Maybe we had more in common.

So we got crepes, and she let me know that we were friends now. She gave me ample warning that her friendships weren't fluffy. "I get intense really fast, so hope you're good with that." I wasn't sure I had a choice! To be honest, I didn't want a friendship like that, but I knew I needed it. So I let her in.

Melissa's invitation to friendship was the first of several in a short span of time. Against my best efforts to keep to myself, a few women pushed through the walls and elbowed their way into my life. And I'm grateful.

After a lifetime of keeping people at arm's length, you kind of get used to having things that way. But these new friends saw something in me that was worth knowing, and they stepped past my defensive position and drew me out. By wanting to know me, they made me knowable. They welcomed me, accepted me, and celebrated me.

This was the first time I'd had friends outside the denomination I'd grown up in. It was the first time I had friends who didn't believe the same things I did. It was the first time I didn't need to be theologically vetted before I was allowed a seat at the table. They just pulled out a chair and told me to sit. There were no pretenses, no side-eyes, no demands made of me. Just people who enjoyed my company and wanted to get to know me. It healed me, piece by piece, bit by bit. Some of them stayed in my life, but other relationships have been like waves hitting the shore. Sometimes people crash into your life and fade away, with no ill

will or dramatic breakaway—just the natural movements of the relational ocean. But sometimes someone sticks.

Kasey is my stickiest friend. Our friendship story is long and funny and a little dramatic at times, but the most important plot point is that she was one of the first people who turned my relational lights back on after our church ripped me apart. She was kind, empathetic, and generous, and she somehow lived her life without the slightest bit of judgment against anyone.

She listened to my stories, affirmed my pain, drew things out of me that I didn't know were there, and called out things that needed to be called out. She was loving and honest but never told the truth with malice. She taught me how to resolve conflict without burning a bridge and made me believe I was worth knowing. She said things to me that no one had ever said before, like "Your needs are not a problem" and "You're not bothering me by existing" and "No, I will not delete your number just because we had a fight." She taught me how to trust—not just because she could be trusted, but by being a good friend to me even when I tried to shut her out. She kept her light on for me. She healed a heart she didn't break and taught me how to do the same.

Relationships are complicated things, even without spiritual and relational trauma. But when your relationships are interwoven with your spiritual identity, the loss of one often means the loss of the other. When a spiritual community rejects a member or pushes them out or ices them out or edges them to the outskirts of their circle, it causes damage that can't be fixed easily. It fractures an intrinsic part of a person's identity, and that fracture affects their ability to connect, to attach, and consequently, to heal. But when you find someone who turns the light on for you,

those relational circuits in your brain start to flicker again . . . a little bit at a time.

I once saw a tweet from Jackie Hill Perry that said, "Know what healed my church hurt? The church." At the time, I wanted to throw my phone across the room. It felt trite, dismissive—like someone telling me to just get over it. The church had rejected me, wounded me, cast me out. Now it was supposed to heal me? Hard pass.

My frustration wasn't about her words—it was more about my understanding of the church at the time. To me, church was a single institution, a system that had failed me aggressively and repeatedly. My only understanding of the church was my limited experience with it. I'd been in the same denomination since I was born. My parents, siblings, cousins, and grandparents on both sides of my family had all been in that denomination. I didn't have friends outside my belief framework or outside my denominational circle—a denomination that I'd now decided to leave and separate myself from entirely. If that was what church was, I didn't want it. If that's where I was supposed to heal, I'd stay sick.

The thing about the church is that before it's a denomination or a building or a group of people, it's a living, breathing organism. It isn't contained by structures and systems; it's an extension of Jesus himself. People who are in Christ live and move and breathe by him and through him, and they follow where he leads. And like any good Shepherd, he leads them to good pastures. After we left the church, the Shepherd led his flock to me, and they didn't look like any flock I'd ever seen. They weren't tied to the same church, the

same denomination, or even the same belief systems. They simply were led by Jesus, loved Jesus, and saw in me what *he* saw in me: a sheep with a couple of broken legs who needed a Shepherd and a flock to care for her.

As it turned out, Jackie was right. The church *did* heal my church hurt, but if I'm being honest, that's putting it lightly. They didn't just heal something that happened to me that they had nothing to do with; they took responsibility for every hurt I'd experienced, every lie I'd believed, every belief I'd doubted, and they showed me what it means to be a part of the family of God. They made eye contact with my pain and weren't afraid of it. They listened to my doubts and didn't panic about them. They didn't wait for me to "get past" my mental health issues before they invited me to the table. They didn't wait until I was certain of what I believed to recognize the value of my presence and influence. They called out the good in me, challenged the weaknesses in me, and taught me what it means to be safe in Christ.

This didn't happen in a singular group in a singular place. These were individuals, with no connections to each other, who showed up in my life in the most unexpected places. They didn't know they were healing me. They were just moving in Christ. They didn't ask for recognition for the good things they did for me; they just did them. And they didn't do them because Jesus told them to; they did it because that's who he compelled them to *be*. It was never about me but about who they were in Christ. With these people being the extension of his presence on earth, I learned to trust again. They healed thirty-year-old Kristen . . . and they healed nine-year-old Kristen too.

If you've been fractured in a relationship with someone who shared the same faith as you, the idea that you will ever trust

someone in a similar space again may sound impossible—maybe even a little offensive. If you were a part of a church that called itself a family, only to have them push you out or abandon you, or if you've ever been iced out because of your doubts and questions, you might think it's safer to be alone. If you experienced a crisis so heavy and complex that people were too scared or overwhelmed to step into it with you, or if you simply grew and changed, and that change was seen as a threat, you might feel like community will never be worth the risk, ever again. And that's valid. Betrayal, rejection, and harm in spiritual communities will always carry a specific kind of sting. But it won't always take you all the way out. When those broken parts of your identity heal, you don't see people as a threat anymore. You learn to let people in and start to trust again. Eventually, you get to the point where you're secure enough in who you are—in your worth, your purpose, your place in the Kingdom of God—that the hurts that come your way can become a part of your story, but not the entire book.

When our identity in Christ is secure and our sense of self has a strong, rooted foundation, relationships can be a *joy*. I've found that they are ultimately worth the risk.

When you find someone who turns those relational circuits back on, someone who feels safe, someone who loves you and welcomes you for who you are and what you're wrestling with, lean in. Take your time. You can inch your way back into relationships if that's what you need to do—so long as you keep moving. For most of my life, I didn't know who my friends were. For years—decades, even—I didn't care to have friends at all. But now I know who my friends are.

You might not know who your friends are today. But you will.