

This is both petrifying and a privilege- when I was asked to speak this morning I was instantly terrified and began to consider what I could speak to or share with you that would be worth it and valuable to hear. I have settled on sharing my story of faith and while it may not be revolutionary I do hope that by the end of my time sharing you are able to learn a bit more about me and what Jesus has done in my life and how ultimately small moments from other Christians changed the trajectory of my life.

PRAY

2016

A decade ago I began studying at Brock - As I started meeting people and making friends I continued to meet christians... they were in my classes, they lived in my building and I began to wonder why it felt like they were popping up all around me. I had grown up in a secular home, attending catholic school and taking mandatory religion courses so I knew about the Church in a general context. The faith that I saw growing up in school was very different from the way these new friends of mine discussed church and talked about their faith. It felt all together more personal and they seemed genuinely excited about it. It was not rigid or behaviour based it was connection and relationally driven. Truthfully it was very compelling to see people my age who were so similar to me in many ways yet living a different life when it came to faith.

One of my closest friends, Kait , I met through an elective science course in first year. She was kind and confident in her faith in a way that was inviting and over time we began having some conversations about faith. Kait asked me if I had interest in working through the Alpha course. She explained it was a way to navigate some of these conversations with guidelines and I was intrigued so we began meeting in her dorm room and worked our way through the sessions. I remember feeling satisfied that the topics covered were things I had curiosities about but didn't have the language for. Discussing things like prayer, the person of Jesus and the bible – I was happy to ponder these ideas and comfortable to share and ask questions since she was a friend and we were in a familiar environment. We tried praying together and then she encouraged me to pray independently and while it felt wholeheartedly uncomfortable. I did give it my best efforts and was pleasantly surprised by the connection I seemed to feel to God as I made it a more consistent part of my day. Alpha helped me to come to conclusions about what faith could look like and the difference between following Jesus and following religion. I will always be grateful that Kait was bold enough to ask if I was interested and patient enough to work through the course with me.

It is worth saying that we were both 18/19 at the time and that even though Kait was confident in her faith to lead us through this she was also confident enough to admit when she didn't know something. She would sometimes call a friend/parent or pastor who she trusted and get back to me with answers or ideas

for us to follow based on our conversations. In a world and culture where Christians often speak loudly and in certain terms it was refreshing to hear and engage with someone who didn't know it all and was willing to learn alongside me.

One of my favourite verses in the whole Bible comes from **Matthew 28** - its resurrection morning and the women have just found the empty tomb - the angel tells the women to go and tell the disciples that Jesus is ahead of them on his way to Galilee - once the disciples travelled to Galilee to the mountain where Jesus had directed them they saw him - **AND when they saw him, they worshiped, but some doubted.** The disciples doubted... those who were travelling with him constantly and watching his miracles first hand - few people who could truly attest to the Messiah and some doubted. I've always felt it is so compassionate to include that in the retelling of the resurrection story. To make sure there is room for you and I to know that we believe and yet comfort in knowing that doubt is nothing new nor something to be ashamed of. This verse has carried my faith in moments when I needed validation in my doubt and when discussing doubt with followers or question seekers.

Spring 2017

Okay so now I've completed the Alpha course with Kait and my first year at University. I was moving home for the summer but my parents had also moved two hours from where we'd lived when I was in highschool, during my first year of university. So even though I was returning "home" it was a new city with no

friends and no community. Looking back it was a critical time for my faith - I had spent the last number of months in a sort of incubator and now I was faced with some choices. I committed to attending a church weekly, praying independently and on my way to and from work I would listen to worship music. It began a new normal if you will. Many of those habits have stayed with me all this time and it was then that faith really began to take form. I bought my very first bible that summer, stayed consistent in studying it and learning. By the end of that summer my faith felt like my own and I began to identify as a christian. I chose to get baptized that fall and began investing my time in the church here at Southridge when I returned to school.

Okay now we are gonna skip ahead a few years to 2021 - I had finished my degree at Brock and was feeling connected to the church here at Southridge and Niagara as a home but was also feeling ready for an adventure and I knew that if I did not take a risk then I might always regret it. I decided I would move to Halifax and I was committed to finding a church and hoping that it would provide me with a sense of belonging in a new city. I began attending a church in the city near my house and after a few months had made 1 single friend... I was showing up Sunday morning, sometimes Thursday nights and making a point to go to the YA group. At this point we were still encouraged to wear masks in church so I will give that caveat for why I maybe hadn't connected with many people. When I felt brave I would introduce myself to new people or linger in the church to see if

someone would come talk to me. I hadn't made much progress after a few months and so I did what anyone might try... I approached the tech booth guy after the service and asked if I could volunteer. SHOCKINGLY I was told they did not need and volunteers - so I offered to help with the youth but I was told I hadn't been attending the church for long enough to serve with kids ( which is much more understandable than " we don't need volunteers" ) but suffice it to say I was hurt and felt quite defeated.

Now, around that same time I began working my first big kid job in Halifax - we were expected in office consistently with this role and I was happy about that. My first day in office I was quite nervous and timid. My team lead brought me around and introduced me to everyone and then showed me my spot in between Sarah and Felicia. My role that week was to read through policy, procedure and retention information. So I hunkered down and got to reading. Sarah and Felicia worked away and after a little while one of them turned to the other to discuss an artists new album that had just come out. Thinking back I cant remember who the artist was just that it was a worship band that I loved at the time. My head whipped around in excitement while also trying to remain casual and I listened as they discussed the music group. I shyly interrupted at some point and asked them if they were Christians - it was the start of what would turn into a very impactful friendship. It didn't take long for these women and their families to become my community in Halifax. We did not attend the same church on Sunday

morning but that didn't seem to matter because we had meaningful conversation and connection outside of that hour on a Sunday morning. If anything it was more meaningful to attend different churches and then discuss what we had learnt that Sunday - we each attended churches of different denominations and this made for interesting conversation. Both women were living lives filled with change and struggle and let me in on what they had learnt or were learning - how God had moved and shaped them and the impact of the gospel on their lives. They were both married and raising children and in a different season of life and yet that did not stop them from including me in their lives outside of work. I was invited to meals and parties and roadtrips. These relationships made up for the lack of community I was feeling on a Sunday morning in church. Jesus was present in my everyday and not just the Sunday morning. It was a crucial time for me to learn that the impact of the "church" goes well beyond the walls of a building on a Sunday morning.

My friend Sarah's son once explained to me (even being about 8 or 9 at the time) that they referenced a Sunday morning gathering as "Meeting" not church. I hadn't heard this language before and was confused as to why the change. He explained that the church is the people who attend week after week and the meeting is the gathering of the people who are the church. They were going to meeting, not going to church. That change in language has stuck with me because I think we often use the language of a building and a people

interchangeably when in reality they have two very different and significant roles in our culture and communities.

In the end Halifax was not the home I wanted it to be and so in 2023 I moved back to Niagara - it was not a failure but an adventure and it satisfied something in my soul to know that I had tried. I returned not only to Niagara but to Southridge and in many ways the community that I had left a year and a half earlier still remained. This time around I was ASKED to be a volunteer in youth ministry and many people made a point to include me and encourage me back into this community. It is not lost on me that I went from learning about Jesus through worship music to singing it from the stage on Sunday morning and declaring these truths. My story isn't miraculous but God has worked miracles in my life. I am in many ways just a gal who is trying her best and hoping that I reflect the person of Jesus well day to day. I often struggle to speak about my faith confidently in circles where I existed without faith for many years. Family gathers, relationships with family friends and friends from highschool - I often struggle to articulate just how significantly my life has changed since following Jesus. I try and fail and try again to convey how I have been shaped and molded.

My encouragement this morning both to you and as a reminder to myself is that it took a university student one invitation to participate in Alpha, but it might take several invitations for your neighbour or classmate to agree. It made all the

difference in a new city that co-workers created a community in our workplace through honest conversations and quality time. We might be the only gospel someone ever hears and we all have the capacity to show up in the spaces we already occupy and be who Jesus has made us to be. I have to trust that in my workplace and community I am where God wants me - and to be obedient to share and invite others into my faith as I go. That way maybe along the journey someone else will be impacted or influenced and come to know Jesus also.

BAND- I love music - it connects me to Jesus and also to other believers who are vulnerable enough to make christian music about the joys and challenges of living a life of faith. Emma Nissen is a christian Jazz artist and on her 2024 album Love Like You she sings a song called walking each other home. The premise of her song is that our destination is heaven and our role here on earth is to be a host of heaven and in that vain then we need to be a light in darkness in order to guide people home. We are all searching for belonging and to be a part of something that is bigger and more significant than just us. So then lets seek to create a culture of walking each other home, to be alongside someone on a journey whether they are new to faith and need to see a little more light in the world. Or if they are already a believer but its clear they are walking alone a lot of the time. Can we push ourselves to be the people who act as a host of heaven here on earth and seek to walk humbly beside one another while we walk each other home.