

The Rev. Ali Donohue

St. John's Church, Kula, HI

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Sixth Sunday of Easter - Year C

We've all now heard the extraordinary news that Amanda Eller, the missing hiker, was found alive in the Makawao Forest on Friday — 17 days after she set out on a short hike.

Because my teaching semester ended a few weeks ago, I was able to volunteer a few hours to join search parties. Not as much as I would have liked and a sliver of what many others gave. As I left the search one day I truly wondered where God was in this whole thing. I thought: God knows where she is, but we don't. All these people are looking, and yet God is not inserting himself into the search in a way that could really help everybody: by telling us where she is. There were so many people who believed they were given this special information that they had to develop a tip line just for well-intentioned psychics. But from all reports, none of them were right. We simply were not given any special revelation. Not like in this mourning's reading from Acts of the Apostles, for instance, where a dream instructs Paul where to go. Not like in the reading from the Book of Revelation, either: no rich and vibrant vision of a pool or a waterfall to guide us. Nothing supernatural in this search effort. Everything human.

And yet just because God wasn't miraculously dropping a pin on the search maps, it didn't mean God was absent. We know that such a thing

is never true: there is no place, no search, no tragedy where God is not to be found, somehow. God is with us, always.

After Amanda was found, many quite naturally exclaimed, “Praise the Lord,” and “God is good!” Praise is easy in this case because this search was successful — but plenty of people go missing and are never found, or are not found alive, or are found years later. This Memorial Day Weekend has us bring to mind all the Prisoners of War the U.S. never found or the soldiers missing in action who have never been recovered. And no doubt their families bristle at the idea that God directed this particular helicopter to Amanda, but God didn’t do the same when their loved one went missing. That doesn’t make sense either. God does not play favorites like that. So how does God work? Where do we look for evidence that God was there?

This morning’s Gospel offers us a clue. In this passage from John, Jesus reminds us that even though he is leaving, the Advocate, the Comforter, has been sent to us as our ally. Embedded in the human heart is the Holy Spirit, and we follow her by paying attention to the movement of our hearts and going where we feel her presence, which means going where feel more hopeful, more loving, and more at peace.

Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner wrote that all theology is anthropological; it does not begin outside the human person but in our very depths. We can’t talk about God without talking about ourselves. Specifically, he identifies our *experience of transcendence* as his starting place, an experience so

basic to us it is easily overlooked. We *experience* God, even when we do not name it as such. This transcendence is so central to Rahner's understanding of the human being-God relationship that he gave it a name: the supernatural existential. Whether we want it or not, embedded in our hearts is the Holy Spirit, and her presence makes us all more than mere humans. We are all wired for God: we are wired to to experience love and want to dwell in it, we are wired to sniff out peace of mind and heart and to move in its direction, we are wired to to experience hope — even when all evidence says we shouldn't — and to believe it, to move with it.

Discernment — which all of us are called to do, every day — is to pay attention to these movements in our heart. Discernment acknowledges that we will experience despair and hopelessness, for instance, and that we need to know that these feelings are not of God. Those feelings are called desolation, and we may have them more often than we'd like, but Ignatius advises us not to make decisions in them. Consolation, instead, is a sign of the way to follow. Peace, joy and hope are the north stars we follow.

I cannot in good conscience claim I was helpful to these search efforts; instead, I feel like I brushed up against grace in action. I didn't give a lot of time and I was frustrated by the small amount I gave, but I sensed a surprising amount of consolation from the crew.

On my second search day I downloaded the GPS app, as instructed, and I tracked my group's slow winding progress. Because I subsequently

submitted our group's data to their mapping efforts, I was then placed on an email list that gave volunteers a lengthy nightly update. And as the days rolled along, and Amanda was not found, I observed the tenor of these emails change, in a rather unexpected way. Instead of acquiring a bit of fatigue or hopelessness, as one might expect, they became more confident, more committed, more loving. Initially we were addressed as volunteers, then friends, and ultimately as family. They were pragmatic and thorough and down to earth about the search and the decisions the leaders were making about where to go and what they needed, but over time they became more and more grateful, effusively so. We were told we were loved and appreciated. As days wore on, and the chances of finding Amanda alive were dwindling, these letters from Chris Berquist and the other leaders became more hopeful, more optimistic, and more grateful. I grew to look forward to these emails because they amazed me with their hope, their love and their strength. They lifted my spirits. And they made me wish I could keep coming. They were contagious. They were consoling. Where it would have been fully understandable to encounter frustration and despair, we encountered hope and love. Their determination led me to remark to Kerith one night, in amazement: "They're *never* going to abandon this search." And she lovingly replied: "I'd probably look for you for a month." Which is helpful information, friends: if ever I get lost, work hard, because you only have a month to find me.

What the search team exemplified is Rahner's assertion that the human *is* supernatural. Because of the Holy Spirit, we are never merely human

creatures; always we are connected to God, always God is at work in our hearts, guiding us toward all that is good. The supernatural does not come from outside of us; it arises within us.

So where was God in this search? Well, exactly where we have been told we'd find God: in the human heart. Ultimately, Amanda was found because of hard work, love, and luck. The search parties organized from base camp allowed the team leaders to determine that she wasn't within a few mile radius of her car and they invested in a helicopter to go looking further afield. Even if our on the ground efforts felt unsatisfying, those hikes made it so that the search could move way out. And in truth, she got lucky. She happened to be in a clearing Friday afternoon when the helicopter flew low overhead.

And she was found because a few leaders and loved ones followed the consolation. They felt deep peace and hope when searching, so they searched. They felt desolation when they stopped. They felt despair and frustration when they believed the worst. So they kept at it.

There's another missing hiker on Maui now — also a fit young person named Noah Kekai Mina — up in the hills near the Iao Valley.

Unfortunately, his last-known coordinates are in dangerous terrain, and volunteer hikers are not considered helpful in this effort. We can pray for him and the professionals who search, but at this point that is the extent of the community's involvement, which is too bad. But if that changes, I have

no doubt the volunteer effort will show up there as well, ready to put in long, arduous hours of looking.

Many of us, I suspect, wish God would intervene just a bit more in life. We don't have to be in a forest for two and a half weeks to experience the feeling of being lost ourselves, of not knowing where we are going, of getting turned around easily. Some of us have been in Amanda's shoes who herself said she had followed her gut instinct on the trail in full confidence, only to head in the exact wrong direction. For ourselves or for our loved ones, we might wish God would occasionally drop a pin on a map and help us figure out where we are headed. More often the not, we could use the help.

But God is very much a God of the process. Amanda was found, and in pursuit of her, so was a new, amazing community. So when you feel lost, trust that the Holy Spirit, embedded deep within your heart, is alive to you and to those who love you, drawing all of you toward that which is good, bringing comfort, reminding us all we are never truly alone. Follow the peace, the joy, the hope. You may not find who or what you are looking for. After all, tragically, not everyone who is lost gets found. But you may just find something amazing, something you thought was long lost. You may find God in the face of a stranger. You may find the kind of comfort and peace only God can give us. And you just may find the best part of yourself: the God in your heart. Amen.