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Russ Ferguson: Beauty in the midst of chaos and carnage

After a deadly firing-range accident, a Navy chaplain learns that beauty exists even in the wake of tragedy. Search for it and point it out to others, he says, for it is a glimpse of the resurrection.

by [Russ Ferguson](#)



Photo courtesy of Russ Ferguson

June 4, 2013

The night of March 18, 2013, will forever shape my ministry. Throughout that long night and into the morning and the days and weeks that followed, my calling as a U.S. Navy chaplain, my ministry to a battalion of U.S. Marines at Camp Lejeune, N.C., was tested as never before.

Indeed, *I* was tested in ways I could never have imagined in all my years of seminary and internships, clinical pastoral education training and ministry to my Marines.

It was the last night of a month-long training exercise in California and Nevada, one final event using live rounds on a training range. During the final run, a 60 mm mortar round exploded in a mortar tube, [killing seven Marines and injuring seven others and a sailor](#).

Although the prospect of death and injury is a constant presence for Marines and their [chaplains in a combat zone](#), it is unthinkable in a training exercise. It simply doesn't happen.

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Like most pastors who are called to minister after any kind of mass casualty, I was not there and did not see the physical chaos and carnage caused by the explosion. But I did see the aftermath and witness the emotional wounds left by the blast.

After being awakened in my tent with the news, I saw my Marines and sailors returning from the range in a state of utter emotional chaos. Hardened young Marines walked around in a daze. Some lay on the ground, crying, screaming and wailing to God. One kicked a heavy Kevlar helmet, sending it rolling the length of a football field.

In all my years of education and training, we never talked about how to handle a large-scale catastrophe within my own congregation. Uncertain how even to begin to address the scene unfolding before me, I walked up to those who were the most distraught and just sat with them, giving them a shoulder to cry on and a space to question and curse God. I listened as they told me what they had seen. I answered their questions as best I could. And I prayed with those who asked.

As they told me the names of the dead and injured, I found myself in the same state of shock as my Marines and sailors. I knew these men, had deployed with them and loved them as brothers.

Over the next few days and weeks, all of us could easily have spiraled into prolonged malaise and despair. But one Marine did something that helped prevent that from occurring. In many ways, it was because of him that the battalion recovered quickly and chose to focus on honoring the legacy of the fallen and injured.

About 12 hours after the accident, as we prepared to board the buses back to the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center in Bridgeport, Calif., I noticed a crowd gathering on the road. Moving closer, I was stunned by what I saw.

Silently, the Marines and sailors were taking turns walking to the side of the road where, prompted by that one Marine's spontaneous act, they had stacked rocks inscribed with messages in a makeshift memorial to the fallen. Now, one by one, they were walking to the roadside, removing the rank insignia from their uniforms and placing them on the memorial.

They might not have known it, but these Marines were in their own way re-enacting a biblical ritual, marking sacred space with stones. Like Joshua, who had the Israelites gather stones as a way to remember their crossing of the Jordan, my Marines were constructing something that would last, at least in their memories, forever. In the midst of carnage and chaos, they were creating beauty -- and in the process were teaching this pastor something about ministering after a disaster.

Watching the construction of that memorial and then reflecting on it during the two-hour ride back to Bridgeport, I realized that after the initial shock has passed, the challenge of ministry in the wake of inexplicable tragedy and suffering is how to construct meaning and point people toward healing.

Whether it's after a bombing at the finish line of the [Boston Marathon](#), a fertilizer plant explosion that destroys a town in Texas, a schoolhouse shooting or a military accident that brings once-invincible young men face to face with death, people seek beauty in order to leave the darkness behind.

As pastors, we are called to point people to the beautiful in the midst of chaos and destruction. Sometimes, maybe even always, beauty is hard to find amidst such suffering, but our task is to point the way.

We are resurrection people who live in the bright light of the beauty of the risen Christ. Some of us may feel uncomfortable preaching resurrection in the face of death's harsh reality. And some of us may be in contexts where we cannot explicitly preach the message of resurrection.

But as my Marines taught me, the beauty that humans create in the wake of tragedy is Christ working in and through us. Pointing people to that beauty shows death -- and us-- that it has no hold over us and is only temporary.

No, death is not defeated by fundraisers and memorial runs to support fellow marathoners. Mailing teddy bears to children who have been traumatized by school shootings does not make death any less real. Nor will eulogies by infantry Marines, filled with quotes from Shakespeare and Taylor Swift, bring back their fallen brothers.

But somehow death loses its “sting,” as Paul said, in the face of our natural inclination to construct beautiful memorials and hold candlelight vigils following horrible events.

For Christians, death loses its power not because of such acts but because of the reality that they point to: Christ defeated death once and for all.

That claim is easy to doubt in the wake of tragedy. In such moments, it is easy to see only chaos and carnage all around us. But even then, beauty exists, however small or insignificant it might seem.

Search for it and point it out to others. For it is a glimpse of the resurrection, a sign of the power and beauty of the risen Christ over death. It creates space that opens us to the love that heals.