

Remembering Rachel

**I loved Rachel's brain, which was sharp and curious, bold and tender, all at the same time.**

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

May 11, 2019



Rachel Held Evans. Photo courtesy of Maki Evans.

In all of my confusing grief, I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry when I got to the [lectionary passage last week](#). Jesus appeared on the shore when Peter, John and a couple of other disciples were fishing. They didn't recognize him, until after Jesus instructed them to put down their nets, and they caught all those fish, without the nets breaking. Then naked Peter (an odd detail), put on his clothes and rushed Jesus.

As I wrote the sermon, Rachel Held Evans was in the hospital. As the week wore on, her news became dire. By the time I stood up to preach, my voice trembled, and I

failed at holding back tears, because Rachel had died.

The last face-to-face conversation Rachel and I had was in "[Monkeytown](#)," over lunch with Kathleen, Rachel's college roommate and close friend. We talked about the strange nature of John 20 and 21. Rachel believed in a literal bodily resurrection. I, on the other hand, read a lot of mystery in the story. I thought there were things our post-enlightenment brains, with their innate commitment to science, could no longer grasp. I mean if all the bones and blood cells came back together in a biological fashion, then why did Mary think he was the gardener? Why was he appearing in locked rooms? Why didn't the disciples on the Road to Emmaus recognize him? Why didn't John and Peter know who he was? *Something* happened. I was just not sure that I could understand it completely.

I asked these questions, and then glanced at Kathleen and muttered an apology for allowing the theological conversation to hijack our food.

Rachel looked at my collard greens, which were actually bacon juice, with a little greenery mixed in. "Take my mac and cheese," she said, as she remembered I was a vegetarian. After two seconds of protest (because boiled bacon collards were no match for mac and cheese), I relented, and we traded dishes.

The resurrection debate had been a Twitter argument that roared for days. Rachel and I had different takes on the stories, and when we got together, we often picked up on our Twitter discussions. We continued our discourse, like Barth and Tillich sparring and then riding on horses together (don't worry, dear reader, I didn't believe that *my* intellect was among the stature of Barth or Tillich. I just liked to pretend).

Even though I nodded my apologies to Kathleen, there was a tiny part of me that would never be sorry, because these were the moments I cherished most about Rachel. She could wrestle with this unbelievable grace, and she was so full of curiosity, that she never cut me off or talked over me. She never held a grudge at the end of it.

And I was in love with her brain, which was sharp and curious, bold and tender, all at the same time.

Our discussion shifted to Kathleen, as we talked about her work, teaching English as a second language to immigrants. We spoke about how the religious community

could be hostile to Democrats in general, and Rachel, in particular.

My stomach hurt. I groaned, stabbed Rachel's macaroni, and asked her, "Why do you stay in town?"

She shrugged. "My family's here. My friends are here. I like that people don't know me as 'Rachel Held Evans, the writer,' but they know me as the girl they went to high school with. I can be a normal person here."

I exhaled, thinking she had a point. It would have been nice to be closer to my family when I was raising my daughter. I didn't have any concern about being recognized as a writer, but I could understand the pressure.

So, I want to remember Rachel as a normal person. I mean, she wasn't, of course. She was absolutely extraordinary. It's easy to find a biblical scholar who speaks on another plane. When you sit down to read their works, you have to keep a theological dictionary on your lap to comprehend any of it. It's like living in a house, where all the good stuff is kept on a shelf that is just out of reach. It is much harder to find someone who can understand things so thoroughly that they can compact big ideas into a tiny Tweet so we can all reach and consume it. And the best part of Rachel's brilliance was that she was able to do that every day—with complex political analysis, moving spiritual writing, and wonderful biblical retellings. We all know that, and if you don't, you can follow #becauseofRHE, and see the power of putting the good stuff on the bottom shelf.

But today, I want to remember normal Rachel. The one I visited and laughed out loud when I saw that she had a Honda as old as mine. I want you to hear about the Rachel who had cozy Lazy-Boy furniture in her living room because there was a factory down the street, and she bragged about how she could get the remainders for cheap. We joked about the science experiments growing in our bathrooms, but she never pretended that her life was a "hot mess" (because it wasn't) nor did she curate Martha Stewart perfection for her Instagram followers. Instead, Rachel had the warmth of hospitality that didn't depend on uncomfortable couches, sterile environments, or anyone's idea of how a woman should act.

Today, I want to remember the friend who would open her arms so wide that she could take everyone in with her generosity. I loved how she looked at her husband like they were just married yesterday, and she would laugh at his jokes without holding anything back. She danced with her son as Alexa played Monster Trucks

songs. And she knew just how soothe her daughter, by moving the stroller back and forth with one hand, while cooking with the other. And I want to tell you how her house was so full of love and life that it seemed impossible that any of it could be cut short.

And today, in this Easter season, I want to remember those mysteries of resurrection, that make me laugh and cry all at the same time, because now those stories will always be tied to my hopes, and to my normal, extraordinary friend.