Thank you for coming; thanks to Charles and Lived Theology for inviting me and hosting this important conversation. I'm very grateful to be here with you, although I stand before you in early stages of grief over the loss of my student and very close friend, just beginning to deal with the trauma of being so close to a state sponsored execution, as you'll surely notice by tears that will well up as I speak. All I can do right now in the midst of the grief is tell the story. But every aspect of this story has implications for the fight to abolish the death penalty and dismantle mass incarceration, which we have plenty of time to explore in our discussion afterward.

I met Kelly Gissendaner in January 2010 in a nondescript classroom at Metro State Prison for Women near Atlanta. She arrived for class beaming with excitement about the journey she was about to begin – participation in a yearlong academic theology program sponsored jointly by four Atlanta seminaries. Since she had been sentenced to the death penalty and lived in solitary confinement, Kelly was particularly eager to share community with others, if only one morning a week. And she was grateful for the opportunity to explore the Bible and theology in a rigorous manner that would nurture and deepen her devotional life. That image of her on the first day of class remains vivid to me because it captured the core of who Kelly was — who she had become: someone

full of contagious joy and gratitude, open to others and to new experiences for growth and ministry.

Kelly's process of transformation began shortly after she arrived in prison following her conviction for planning the murder of her husband, Douglas Gissendaner. A pastor began visiting her and initiated a series of difficult, yet compassionate, conversations that urged her toward courageous self-reflection. This same pastor visited Kelly for almost 17 years. Her commitment to Kelly, along with that of the prison chaplain and chaplaincy interns, provided steady, ongoing love that fostered change. So by the time I met Kelly in 2010 she had already undergone a significant transformation.

In the theology program, Kelly learned to love God with her mind in a way that strengthened her already active devotional life. She asked honest questions about her relationship to God, others and the world. She read scripture and grappled with centuries-old theological questions. She discovered her authentic theological voice in the midst of this work. "From the start of the theology class I felt this hunger," she said in her 2011 graduation speech. "I became so hungry for theology, and what all the classes had to offer; you could call me a glutton." My relationship with Kelly began in the classroom as I got to know her and other incarcerated women not only as students, but also as human beings – as kindred spirits – wrestling with some of life's most urgent questions. And it

only deepened six months into the year when a new warden arrived at the prison. In her graduation speech, Kelly described this moment:

> "There came a time when ... my worst fears became my reality – I was pulled from the courses. I was taken from my theological community. Being pulled from the program devastated me as badly as if someone had just told me one of my appeals had been turned down.
>
> "Since I couldn't go to the theology class ... the instructors came to me …That gate ... was meant to keep everyone and everything separated from me. But that gate couldn't keep out the knowledge that I was so hungry for, nor friendship and community. And it sure couldn't keep out God."

This change afforded us the chance to have two hours of one-on-one conversation every Friday. When I moved from Georgia to Iowa for an Assistant Professor position, Kelly and I continued to stay in close contact. I visited her, along with the rest of my former students, in prison weekly during summer and holiday breaks and continued to have hours of one on one time with Kelly.

Last February the call came from Kelly's lawyers telling me that she had received her death warrant, including the precise date of the execution, which was set for two weeks later, Wednesday February 25. Since the U.S. Supreme Court had denied her last

appeal in October 2014, Kelly had been living in an intensely liminal space, fearing that each call or visit from her lawyers bore the bad news. A month before her last appeal was denied, she and I had set up fifteen-minute collect calls to add some structure to her week and to provide her a small amount of extra support.

I had known for a while that, because of my close relationship with Kelly, I would speak at her clemency hearing, scheduled the day before the execution. We would be asking that the Board commute her sentence from death to life without parole. A year before, at the prompting of her dedicated team of lawyers, who guided her case for 17 years through the appeal process, I wrote the letter to be submitted with her fifty-four page application, uniquely filled with testimonies from officers, inmates, prison volunteers and staff, and a former warden.[1] When I got the February call, I quickly made arrangements for my courses in Iowa and bought a plane ticket back to Atlanta, assuming my primary role would be to accompany Kelly through visits and to speak at the clemency hearing on her behalf.

When I arrived in Atlanta the weekend before the scheduled execution date, I learned that although I was on her "death watch" list and thus able to visit her the day before and the day of the execution, I was not allowed to be added to her regular visitation list. I spent the weekend instead meeting with her lawyers and practicing my

clemency speech alone in my room ad nauseam. As time drew closer, I realized that I was terrified of speaking before the Board of Pardons and Parole, terrified not only of their authority but also of my inability to speak authentically into a situation that was inherently arbitrary and nonsensical. I would be addressing five men who had the incomprehensible power to take or save Kelly's life, who need not show any guidelines or reasons for their opinions, and who worked more on a political timetable (granting clemency approximately once every [four to six] years) than on the basis of the specific case before them. The whole process had a wave of inevitability about it, interrupted only by moments of hope grounded in the reality of who Kelly had become.

My letter to the Board shared this reality: how I first met Kelly that morning in the classroom where she arrived beaming with excitement, and how six months later we continued to read theological texts, this time through the bars of her cell, including one book by former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Williams describes healing and restoration as the act of facing our memories, "the ruins of the past," and building from them here and now. Restoration, he writes, "is going back to the memories of the painful, humiliating past and bringing them to redemption in the present … to Christ [who] comes to repair the devastation."[2] I told the men that comprised the "mercy board" how Kelly had done and continues to do this incredibly difficult work, how she has gone

back to her painful memories, increasingly took responsibility for them, and showed profound remorse. I told them of our most recent visit last Christmas day, how she wanted me to know more fully her involvement in the crime, not just who she is now but who she was then. For most of the time I knew her, Kelly could not speak directly about the crime because the case was pending, and her counsel wisely advised that she not talk about it with anyone except the legal team. But once the appeal process was over, Kelly wanted me to know. The power of these moments, where she looked me in the eye and confessed concrete sins, where in turn I proclaimed to her the depth of God's forgiveness, will stay with me forever.

Most poignant for Kelly were the writings of Juergen Moltmann, known internationally as the theologian of hope, whom she read in my theology foundations course in prison. Kelly knew that I had a collegial friendship with Prof. Moltmann and asked if it would be appropriate for her to write him. She did and correspondence between the two quickly ensued. Moltmann was so impressed with Kelly that he asked me if I would bring him to meet her when he traveled from his home in Germany to Atlanta, where he would be delivering the Reformation Day lecture at Emory University. This led to Prof. Moltmann giving the keynote address at the theology graduation in October 2011 and to a two-hour pastoral visit with Kelly and me. I told the Board that the

time I shared with the two of them in that small visitation room will remain one of the most significant experiences of my life. On the one hand, it would be hard to find two people more different in this world – a German academic who is one of the most widely read and respected theologians of the 20th and 21st centuries and the only woman on Georgia's death row – yet I was struck by how similar they are and how real the connection is between them on account of what the early church fathers called "faith seeking understanding." I told the Board of Pardons and Parole how Kelly has an extraordinary ability to create community, seen by the fact that Prof. Moltmann not only sought Kelly out, but also, on account of their friendship, chose to spend one full day of his three-day visit honoring her and her fellow graduates. Her ability to create supportive community is seen in the testimonies of the women she has encouraged while on death row, who have inhabited rooms in lock-down next to her. It is seen in a photograph taken at graduation of her fellow students looking at her with such admiration and respect as she delivers her speech. In that letter I told them I shared that admiration and respect, fostered through our journey together, as I consider her a central figure in my own development as a Christian and a human being.

Aware that my words were imperfect and incomplete, I practiced my five-minute speech one last time early Tuesday morning. I headed downtown and shuffled my way

into a small court room filled with people advocating on Kelly's behalf, a community of people, most of whom I knew: pastors, chaplains, theology instructors, a formerly incarcerated woman, and Kelly's children, also victims of the crime, who begged these five men to spare their mother's life. For over four hours, together, we documented the fruits of her redemption: reconciliation with her children, ministry to inmates full of despair whom no one else could reach, counsel to troubled youth who visit the prison, and daily concern for others. As I sat in the back row waiting my turn, I listened to the truth of her life be boldly proclaimed. The air was thick with the presence of God in this truth-filled speech.

The air was also thick with a cloud of suspicion demonstrated, no less, through the theological assertions made by the Board. Kelly's lawyers had advised our community of religious advocates that although it was appropriate to tell Kelly's story in the language of her transformation – the particular language of Christian faith – we should do so without making sweeping theological proclamations or engaging in theological debate, a request with which we all heartily agreed. We were not there to preach, nor were we advocating that Kelly should be given mercy because she was a fellow Christian but because she was a restored human being who had an enormous amount to give if granted life in prison. In a startling dismissal of church-state separation, though, the Board of

Pardons and Parole, all self-identified Christians, initiated a series of theological questions, interrogations that revealed what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls a "fanatic belief in death": "What about the thief on the cross? Jesus could have used his power to get him down, but he didn't," one member said with conviction. "Doesn't the fact that Jesus died on the cross show that good can come from death?" asked another in earnest. Later in a prayer vigil for Kelly, Rev. Yolanda Thompson responded to these questions with appropriate indignation. She said,

> We were asked, why would Jesus not stop his own execution on the cross. Really? In the Bible belt in Georgia, you're asking a room filled with pastoral leaders *that* question? Really? Why did Jesus die on the cross? *Why*? So that Kelly can *live* … and [in the words of the Psalmist] 'declare the works of the Lord.'[3]

After the Tuesday morning hearing, holding in tension apprehension and hope, I raced to the prison to see Kelly before visitation ended, the first opportunity I had to see her since Christmas day. There, she and a few companions were anxiously awaiting news of the hearing. "Your children were amazing," I said as others arrived, and together with nervous excitement we shared the details of every testimony we could recall.

Early Wednesday morning I made my way back to the prison under a winter advisory warning, unsure what the day would hold. By the time I arrived, the execution

scheduled for that night had been postponed to five days later because of the possibility of snow, but we still awaited the Board's decision. To pass the time, our small group of visitors played "I Spy" with Kelly in a small and completely bare visitation cell, fully aware of the absurdity of the game and our attempt to distract ourselves from the pending news. To stay hopeful, we playfully imagined what it would be like for Kelly once she was living in "general population," sharing visitation space with the rest of the inmates the next room over. We joked about the crowds of visitors swarming the vending machines, her pushing up against the rope like the rest of the inmates, calling out over the commotion, "They're out of burgers? Okay, get me the pizza instead!" Then the call came that stopped us in our tracks.

Kelly was ushered into the next room to take the call from her lawyers. The five of us in the visitation room grabbed each other's hands, stared stoically at the wall, and took deep breaths as we waited to hear if this woman full of life and purpose would be executed by the state in just a few days. Minutes later, Kelly walked past the window of the visitation cell and turned the corner shaking her head. "We lost, we lost," she said underneath a stream of tears. Her daughter slammed her fist on the table and fell into a heap on the floor. Hours later, reflecting on the horror, Kelly would say to me, "I had to

pick my baby up off the ground." Leaving her alone with her children, we huddled together in the hallway, and holding onto one another, wept.

In the weeks before the clemency hearing I reflected on how my mind and body might process this all, wondering if I would be able to wrap my head around the surreality of it enough to feel any emotion at all. As one who has struggled with depression, I have known inner darkness, a dark night of the soul that at its worst feels like an abyss, an interior hold that seems as though it may never be lifted. Until that moment, though, I had never experienced this abyss outside of myself – the finality of what transpired, the knowledge that no amount of trying can budge this external reality, this abysmal place where there is no turning back, where there is no person to whom you may direct your complaint; where no amount of mustered energy counts, where nothing can stop what is now, in all absolute terms, inevitable. This is the power of death. This is what it means to be surrounded by the powers and principalities of death, to be hemmed in on all sides. As others rotated back into the room with Kelly, I sat in the vast, empty visitation hall weeping into this void. Our last hours of visitation were spent mostly in shared silence as we all continued to absorb the news together, a silence broken only by sporadic words addressed to Kelly: "Your life is so valuable. We love you so much."

Until, at the end of visitation, two members of Kelly's legal team burst in, breaking through the silence. Her investigator marched straight up to her, stopped Kelly's attempt at a consoling hug and instead, grabbed her face, pulled her close and said, "Listen, we are not giving up. Remember Daniel in the lion's den? You are in the lion's den my friend, but this is not over." Her fervor startled me out of despair, and I breathed in new life. I do not know when it exactly happened, perhaps sometime in the hour and a half drive back from the prison, not too long after the void, but a renewed resolve welled up within me, a determination that Kelly's execution would not happen in silence, behind closed doors, without the world watching. I did not necessarily think her life could be saved, except by her lawyers who were working around the clock, but I did think her story could be told. We could raise her voice, demanding that her life be witnessed and this execution be condemned. When I got back to my brother's home in Atlanta, without much of a plan I reached out to a colleague at the New York Times, simply wondering if the theology certificate and the story of Moltmann's friendship might be of interest for his weekly religion piece. As I did so, I noticed Facebook and cell phone messages from a few close friends. A group of about fifteen, all of whom were connected in various ways to the prison theology program, were already gathering to strategize next steps – faculty, theology instructors, pastors and priests, doctoral students and seminarians, and a

former inmate who credits Kelly with her own transformation. That night in the living room of a dear friend the #kellyonmymind campaign was born. Bolstered by the embodied hope of her lawyers and these companions, I wrote on social media that night: "Our message is the beauty and concrete value of Kelly's life. … We still cling to a sliver of hope."

In that living room we met every night to strategize under the organic leadership of pastor-activists and scholar-activists who, although not professional organizers, drew on previous activism and knowledge of social change. Within a day or two, the New York Times piece was out, getting picked up by other media outlets from CNN and the Washington Post to Fox News and the Christian Broadcasting Network.[4] Kelly's story was impacting Christians across the political divide, pushing the logic of Christian faith to its outermost limits, pressing Christians to reexamine and reaffirm the truths we proclaim about repentance, forgiveness, redemption, and hope. In the five short days leading up to the rescheduled execution, we launched a major social media campaign reaching over four million people, wrote for Huffington Post and CNN.com, gathered letters from religion scholars around the world who advocated for Kelly as their fellow theologian, started Faith Leader and Groundswell petitions and delivered over 80,000 signatures to the Governor's office. We mapped out talking points, made targeted phone

calls, published press releases, held a press conference and an action at the State Capitol, produced short documentaries, hosted a prayer vigil and sparked vigils in seminaries across the country, and responded to numerous local, national, and international interview requests. The movement was happening so quickly we could barely keep up. Each strategic decision bore enormous weight and one risky decision about messaging, timing, or placement led to another. Casting aside our day jobs as much as we could, we threw ourselves into the work, every concrete act arousing passion for the possible and throwing open the future. This was our participation in God's liberating power, already revealing itself in threats of snow. This was our "fanatic resistance" to evil and death.

We told Kelly's story everywhere and every way we could, most poignantly in a series of short documentaries, one of which quite literally raised her voice:

[PLAY][5] (2.5 min)

Driven by resurrection hope, we ended the documentary with those words: "As long as Kelly has breath, hope is still alive. So we must act while there is still time. Tell Governor Deal he DOES have the power to halt this execution. Tell Georgia's Board of Pardons and Parole that there is STILL TIME to reverse their decision."

Because the Georgia legislator had passed a law removing the Governor's power to commute sentences from death to life a few years earlier, there was no obvious place to

direct our complaint. Indeed, the Governor's public response to the flood of messages he received was to appeal to his *lack* of authority and wash his hands. We sought to expose his Pilate-like response and flood his office nonetheless – reminding him that he did have political influence over the Board since he appointed its members. At the Sunday evening vigil, I read Luke 18, particularly relevant since the Governor had released a statement earlier that week telling people to "quit bothering"[6] him about Kelly. It reads,

> Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by her continual coming'.

"We have come here tonight to bother Governor Nathan Deal," I said to a packed chapel. "We have come here to wear out the Board of Pardons and Parole with our cry for justice – restorative, merciful justice. We have come here tonight because we are not giving up."

Earlier that Sunday morning, I visited with Kelly one last time, rotating in and out of the visitation room with family and close friends, since she planned to spend

Monday's short morning visitation alone with her children. Kelly lived the best she could in the present moment, soaking in the time together – laughter led seamlessly into tears and back again. I watched as she and her stepmother, her last living parent, said goodbye: grasping hands, wailing, and pleading with one another to remember how much they are loved. Later I went to make a phone call to ask my ride to pick me up a bit later, since visitation lasted longer than I thought. An officer had given me permission to use a phone at the prison entrance, but I unknowingly crossed an invisible line that ended my visitation, and I was not permitted to go back. "I didn't even say goodbye," I said in a state of shock to an unyielding officer. That night, as I drove to the prayer vigil, Kelly called. I pulled off I-75 into a hotel parking lot and spoke to her for the 15 minutes the collect call allowed. "Kelly, this doesn't feel real; I don't know how to say goodbye. We are still fighting for you," I said, as I tried to share all the beautiful things being said and written about her. "I feel everyone's love," she said, "I do." With just a few seconds left on the call I stammered, "The only thing I feel confident of is that Jesus will be there with you tomorrow night. I know he will be." "I know he will be, too," Kelly said as our phone call ended.

On Monday evening, a group of us traveled to Jackson, Georgia, to the site of the men's prison that houses the death chamber. Some of our group headed to the grounds

where a few hundred people would keep vigil, including a handful of women who had been in prison with Kelly. A few of us went on to New Hope House, a ministry that provides hospitality to families who visit men on death row as well as a base on execution nights for loved ones and lawyers, a sanctuary tucked away from the media and crowds where they can receive as much information as the lawyers in contact with the Attorney General's office can provide. The execution was scheduled for 7 pm, but as often happens there were several delays as we waited for the Supreme Court to rule on appeals to the higher courts. Hours later those last minute appeals were denied.

More hours past and finally we heard that there might be a complication with the lethal injection. Information was spotty, until finally, close to 11 pm, the Department of Corrections issued a last minute postponement due to an unidentified problem with the compounded drug. It appeared to be "cloudy." All planned executions in Georgia were temporarily postponed and would resume once the analysis of the drugs was complete.

Cheers rang out at the vigil on prison grounds. At New Hope House, we breathed a collective sigh of relief as we took in the news. Inside the women's prison in B Unit, a number of women had gathered around the television praying until the coverage seamed to end. They dispersed under the assumption that the execution had taken place until a woman who had been listening to the radio burst down the hall shouting, "She's alive!

She's alive!" Waiting in the holding cell next to the gurney, having no idea what was going on, Kelly also heard through the local news that there was "more drama in the Gissendaner case."

The next morning, headlines read, "Religious leaders see delay as an act of God"; tweets proclaim: "Snow. Cloudy Drugs. @GovernorDeal @GAParoleBoard @ SCOTUSblog call this off before the plagues and swarms of locust arrive!"; and editorials ask, "What else must God do?"[7] Months later, as we awaited another death warrant, Kelly's investigator tells me, "The more I've thought about it the more convinced I've become that Kelly's life was saved that night because of the work you all did to make sure the world was watching. The Department of Corrections didn't have to stop that execution on account of the drugs."

On Good Friday, as I walk across the prison compound with Malaika, a student in the theology program, she tells me that the delay of Kelly's execution reawakened her faith and gave her back her strength. "It had been so long since I had seen God move," she says. Still reeling from the experience just a few weeks before, I ask – more for me than for her – "What if the worst still happens? How will that effect your faith?" "I've thought about that a lot," Malaika responds. "All I can say is that I needed to know that God is still moving. Now I know."

We lived in this knowledge of God's movement for seven months and in the tension inherent in it – the tension between God's work and human agency, that liminal space where hope dwells. (27 min)

Kelly and my fifteen-minute collect calls resumed when she was able to use a phone a few weeks later. She told me how militarized Cobra officers burst into the visitation room moments after she had said her final goodbye to her children, and rushed at her shouting, "Against the wall! Get up against the wall!" as her children, still looking on, exited the room. She told me how she was driven back to her cell that night after the stayed execution, only to awaken to orders to pack her belongings once again. As the van passed Jackson a few hours into the trip, she breathed a sigh of relief, assuming rightly that she was not heading back to the execution chamber but to Pulaski Prison for Women instead. There, in unfamiliar environs, removed from her former prison community, and over three hours from her family, she would stay until her next execution date.

In early June Kelly told me that I could get on her official visitation list for the summer and see her on the weekends. For three Sundays I drove down county roads, deep into the rural south, past cotton fields and confederate flags hanging from trees at

the woods' edge, and I thought of the connection between slavery and prisons in this Christ-haunted south. Biblical scholar Lee Griffith writes that during the experience of exile, Israel learned the connection between enslavement and imprisonment. Their lesson was this: "The God who frees the slave frees the prisoner too." Griffith says, "The biblical word regarding prisoners is both simple and scandalous: liberty for the captives. …The Bible identifies the prison with the spirit and power of death. … Whenever we cage people" – and we may of course add, whenever we execute them – "we are in reality fueling and participating in the same spirit [Christians] claim to denounce."[8] As I drove through this plantation land, now the soil upon which the prison industrial complex grows, I thought of Frederick Douglass, "Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference," he wrote, and I heard echoes of King, "Who is their God?"

The summer visits were hard. Kelly was in a state of depression I had never seen her in and the weight of uncertainty was wearing on me, too. In theory she was grateful for the time she had been given, but it was hard to get through each day. During our last summer visit, though, she was visibly more hopeful than I had seen in her in some time, having just received a letter from Moltmann, who was planning to visit her when he

traveled to the United States in November. This news raised her spirits and gave her energy to return to the writings we first read together in my theology course.

Like me, Kelly had a conversion to hope after reading Moltmann's theology for the first time. My conversion here in graduate school gave me energy to actively work for real social change even when I am tempted toward despair. Kelly's conversion in prison gave her a new sense of purpose and direction, even and especially in the face of death: "For a while now, and because I was on death row, I didn't have a plan for my life," she shared in her graduation speech, "but I now have a plan. … The theology program has shown me that hope is still alive … Even prison cannot erase my hope or conviction that the future is not settled for me, or anyone … I have placed my hope in … the God whose plans and promises are made known to me in the whole story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. … The greatest journey I've ever taken," Kelly concludes, "is through the theology program, which has affected all aspects of my life. … Now I can do nothing but obtain all the knowledge I can through the Bible, theology, and great theologians like my friend Dr. Moltmann. … This journey will never end, and I've come to a point in my life where I've found out who I am, where I'm hoping to go, and what direction to take. In the theology program, I found people, my fellow students and instructors, who are on that same journey."

As we awaited the next death warrant, which would come just a few weeks later in early fall, we invited others to join us in this journey of reflection and action through the hashtag #theologyofhope. On both sides of the ocean, professors engaged seminarians and graduate students in reflections on hope in light of Kelly's pending execution. Everyday on Facebook and Twitter we paired insights from Moltmann, like "God's belief in us awakens our powers and gives us new ones we never dreamed of" with concrete actions: "We have the power today to fight this execution and be a voice for mercy. Call GA Board of Pardons and Paroles, 404-656-4661.

Our reason for reflecting on hope during that time may seem obvious. On the one hand, our hope was clear: We hoped for clemency, that Kelly's death sentence be commuted to life in prison without parole. On the other hand, what it means to be people of hope in the face of condemnation to death is not at all clear. For, the threat and likelihood of death surrounded Kelly on every side. In the midst of this, Moltmann writes that we are tempted toward false certainties in one of two ways, each of which betrays the difficulty of hope and makes us passive. On the one hand, we are tempted toward the presumption that surely God will not let this happen, the execution was halted before, and if we keep the faith, we will get what we hope for; and on the other hand, we are tempted toward despair that we surely will not. We presume that nothing we do will matter; the

Georgia Board has spoken and they denied clemency in February. In contrast to both of these temptations, biblical hope affords strength to live in the tension between false certainties. As we fought for Kelly's life, we had no certainty, only a command: We were to "live into the possibilities and promises of God" in active resistance to death – promises that include the kingdom come (Matt. 6:10), the reconciliation of all things (Col 1:20), the total restoration of this world (Eph. 1:10), and that nothing is lost (John 6:39) – all our energies are gathered like patchwork into the tapestry of God's restored world. Hope demands we live into the kingdom of God *now* – live into God's intended social order "on earth as it is in heaven," with confidence that when we do, we "revolutionize and transform the present." In this way, hope actively contradicts present injustice.

As it turned out, those months since the stayed execution had been for Kelly a Garden of Gethsemane, a long, dark night of loneliness and anxiety, where it was hard for her to focus and hard for her to sleep. But when I spoke with Kelly in mid-September, the day after she received her second death warrant, she sounded strong. "I am determined," she said, "to make the most of every moment I have." That determination gave me permission to live fully in the present moment as well.

And we did, at her "death watch" visitation on Monday September 28th, as about twenty of us rotated in and out of the visitation space. The mood was celebratory – we

were together in robust community – even as we awaited news about whether or not the Board would grant Kelly a second clemency hearing at the last minute. I was sitting around the visitation table when a friend reminded Kelly of her favorite camp song, "Pharoah, Pharoah" sung at a Kairos retreat she did in prison. The two jumped out of their seats and sang, moves and all, "Pharoah, Pharoah, Oh, Baby, Let my people go," ending the chorus with a playful, high-pitched "Free!" The officer in the back, charged with recording Kelly's every move, was writing furiously, and the four of us around the table were laughing hysterically, everyone so full of life. Kelly turned that space, called death-watch visitation, into a song and dance of freedom.

Later in the visit, a long time death penalty abolitionist, Murphy Davis of the Open Door Community, relayed a message from retired Chief Justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, Norman Fletcher, who had spoken a few nights before at an anti-death penalty banquet. He no longer supports the death penalty, and told Murphy that he was wrong, on *legal* grounds, to deny Kelly's appeal when her case came before him. His ruling would have granted Kelly life. "He's eaten up by his role in your pending execution and he's asked for your forgiveness," Murphy said, to which Kelly quickly responded, "Please tell him he is forgiven. I don't hold bitterness or hatred. I don't want him to carry this."

On the drive back from the prison in early evening, after saying my final goodbye, I got a call from Murphy. "Have you heard?" she asked in a tone I could not decipher. "The board has granted a hearing." I wept with relief like she had received clemency itself. A second hearing was extremely rare and it led us all to believe that the Board must be open and moving in a different direction.

On Tuesday morning, the day of the scheduled execution, I agreed to go on CNN later that afternoon to talk about Kelly. I was nervous not only about the interview but also that I might find out the news of the Board's decision while on national television. My friend Mary Catherine, who visits on death row and accompanied Marcus Wellons during his execution last year, came with me for support. I was backstage in the makeup chair, having mascara applied, when she placed her hand gently on my shoulder and told me the news that came through a text: "Clemency denied." I dissociated, as psychologists say, and I couldn't find my way back into my body the rest of the night. Minutes later, I sat in front of the camera and watched as CNN anchor Brooke Baldwin read the statement from Doug's parents as it scrolled down the screen. [Play clip]

That night I learned that the Board made Kelly's three children choose between visiting their mother one last time or fighting for her at the clemency hearing. They chose to fight. But once there, only the oldest son was permitted to speak. The Board had once

before dismissed their plea that their mother be spared and now they silenced them altogether. A few weeks before, we released this video that captured what the children said during the first hearing. [Play clip]. The board dismissed the evidence of Kelly's transformation, not only reconciliation with her children but also ministry to inmates full of despair, as seen in this short documentary, where Nikki Roberts speaks of Kelly's ministry to her. [Play Nikki clip].

In the Family Restaurant at the truck stop across the street from Jackson prison, a small handful of us who knew Kelly well gathered for the night. Kelly could call her lawyers' cell phones and remained in touch throughout the evening. When all legal options had been exhausted and the U.S. Supreme Court denied the last appeal, Kelly called one final time. Her daughter Kayla put her on speaker; we crowded around this little device held in the palm of her hand and heard Kelly sob, as she grieved her own death. She wept not only because she was rightfully scared in the face of so many botched executions but also because she had so much to live for, and wanted to live even as she had faith that God's mercy and love awaited her. Kelly dwelled, even to the end, in biblical hope, a hope that does not give up on this life for something better beyond the grave but rather affirms this life. Kelly wanted to continue her relationship with her children, her ministry to other inmates, her exploration of theology. Sobbing with her, we

told her we loved her and that she wasn't alone. But every word felt inadequate to me, until, Cathy Zappa, my friend and colleague in the prison theology program, shouted into the phone: "Kelly, you can do this. You can do this, Kelly." "Let nobody rob you of your dignity; you are a beloved daughter of God," Moltmann wrote to her in his last letter. "Those who want to take your life really don't know what they are doing. Forgive them; their future is dark. You are the truly free one." Half an hour later, strapped to the cruciform gurney, as one condemned and free, Kelly sang "Amazing Grace" until the poison took her life. "There in the Georgia night, the amazing grace of Kelly Gissendaner was silenced," wrote Chattanooga Times columnist David Cook. "As children wailed in truck stop booths, the state-sanctioned machinery of death rolled through the Bible Belt night like an I-75 rig." In a poem penned the next day urging readers not to look away from the evil clearly on display, theologian and death penalty abolitionist Peter Gathjie wrote, "I will not speak of resurrection for three days."

A few weeks ago I appeared with Moltmann on a live podcast that was celebrating the 40th anniversary of his book, *The Crucified God*. I was asked what this book means to me in light of my experience with Kelly and I shared the vivid image of Juergen signing Kelly's copy of *The Crucified God* inside the prison. The symbolism of that moment is as powerful to me as the story Moltmann tells in his autobiography, of the book falling from

the shelf of liberation theologian, Jon Sobrino, into a pool of blood after six Jesuit priests were slaughtered by the Salvadorian Army in 1989. Moltmann's book speaks of a God in solidarity with those who suffer – in solidarity in a particular way with victims of execution – and the text itself was a witness, in both cases, to the God who bears the reality of state sanctioned murder in God's very self in order to overcome it. Juergen was then asked how we are to understand hope in light of Kelly's execution. His answer was firm and clear:

"Hope is protest." (15 min)

[1] Cite link to declassified clemency application on Georgia Board of Pardons and Parole website. <pap.georgia.gov>
[2] Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publishing, 1995), 64-67.
[3] Vigil video
[4] Links to NYTimes Oppenheimer Piece; CNN.com piece; Washington Post; Fox News; Christian Broadcasting network.
[5] [["Because Kelly is behind bars she cannot speak to you herself," the documentary begins, "so we ask you to listen to the words she has written as we lend our voices to lift her story." Drawing on the art of the spoken word, diverse voices present portions of her clemency confession and graduation speech:

> It is impossible to put into words the overwhelming sorrow and remorse I feel for my involvement in the murder of my husband, Douglas Gissendaner. / There is just no way to capture the depth of my sorrow and regret. I would change everything if I could. / I will never understand how I let myself fall into such evil but I have learned first hand that no one, not even me, is beyond redemption through God's grace and mercy. / Hope is still alive, despite a gate or guillotine hovering over my head. I still possess the ability to prove that I am human. / Labels on anyone can be notoriously misleading and unforgiving things, / but no matter the label attached to me, I have the capacity and

unstoppable desire to accomplish something positive and to have a lasting impact. / Even prison cannot erase my hope and conviction that the future is not settled for me, or any one. / I have placed my hope in the God I now know. / I rely on the steadfast and never ending love of God.]]

[6] Cite article.
[7] Cite David Cook, Chattanooga Time Free Press .

[8] Griffith, 102, 106.