This story at first seems scarcely to be believed, but after checking a couple sources, I have good reason to trust its authenticity. Back in 1933, the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt predicted the dangerous times unfolding in her home country of Germany. She decided that she had to escape. Arendt made her way to the border where a sympathetic German family had a house whose front door opened in Germany but its back door opened in Czechoslovakia. The family would welcome guests in the daytime and give them dinner. Later under cover of darkness the guests would exit by the back door into the forests of Czechoslovakia and eventual safety in the city of Prague. To me that story is a wonderful metaphor for faith and hope, and I’ll return to it in a moment.

Advent is a hopeful season. We look forward to what is to come, the incarnation of God in the birth of Christ, the fulfillment of God’s desires for all creation in the second coming of Christ. Hope goes by many names: trust, confidence, expectation, optimism. Emily Dickinson said: Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul—and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all. Our reading from Romans 8, however, gives a more visceral definition of hope. Paul writes, Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, hoping that creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay; [for we are] groaning until now in labor pains, groaning and waiting for the redemption of our bodies. Hope as expectation—a persistent song—yet also a deep longing, groaning as it awaits redemption at last.

Hope is something tough. It can carry us through hard times and places of darkness. But what happens when hope is lost? What happens when the medical prognosis is not good and all that remains are hospice care and comfort measures? What happens, as in the song Charlotte sang, when the young soldier doesn’t return from war and the only answer you’re given is “Missing in Action”? Lost hope is real. There are times we’ve all felt it. There are many, even here, who characterize their life as shaped by lost hope and unfulfilled expectations.

The bible offers many stories that insist upon a hope that surprises us and moves us out of despair into places of faith. There is the story of Abraham and Sarah, old in years yet who are given the gift of a son. There is the story of the valley of dry bones, lifeless and barren but through the breath of God are linked back together, bone to bone, sinew to sinew, until they become living beings again. There is the story of Lazarus being called forth from his tomb—the powerful story of Christ emerging from death to life on Easter morning, and the persistent, hopeful cry of the church universal, “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.” There is no doubt that hope is a critical part of what we believe and what keeps us going as Christians.
But let’s be honest: Sometimes hope is lost—sometimes there’s a disconnect between those stories of scripture and the reality staring us in the face when we look in the mirror or sit despairing at our kitchen table in the early hours of the morning. The church’s answer can’t simply be a “pie in the sky” response—that in the end it will all work out, so just wait until that “great gittin’ up morning” when we finally understand everything at last. No. We need a faith that is tough enough to talk about lost hope, about broken hearts and about a creation that is literally groaning as it waits for a promised redemption. Advent is the season built around this tough faith—a faith that relies upon patience and trust and believing in a candle’s dim light more than the ever-surrounding power of darkness.

So to start with: Life is not simple. Life is not a matter of black and white choices, of obvious good vs. obvious evil. There are gray areas in life. And there are times when pain cannot be avoided. The example Paul mentions is still valid today: The pain of labor is necessary if you wish to have the joy of a child. The act of becoming fully human often involves moving through stages that are uncomfortable, even painful at times. We joke about learning through the “school of hard knocks,” but there is truth in that description. Now, not all pain is instructional. There is pain and suffering that is contrary to life’s values—that keeps us from becoming fully human. We must never forget that there is evil and sin in the world that is contrary to God’s will.

So the first step in dealing with lost hope is to look honestly at why it was lost. What was the basis of our hope—and what changed to make us lose it? Bad things happen in life—bad things that are the result of poor human choices, sinfulness and brokenness both in our life and in the world around us. In Matthew 13, Jesus described this reality as if living in a field where good and bad seed have been sown together—so that good plants and weeds grow up side by side.

In the midst of that reality, sometimes our hopes are too narrowly defined. We tell ourselves hope is proven to be trustworthy when good things happen to me and bad things happen to someone else. These good things might simply be driving around the city safely, having enough money to pay our bills, not throwing out our back or tripping and breaking a hip. But the problem with narrowly-defined hope is that some days we do have car accidents; some days we can’t pay our bills; we throw out our back or break a hip or get a cancer diagnosis or a loved one dies unexpectedly. Hope cannot be grounded on simply having good days. When it is defined this way, it is easy to lose hope when things go bad.

For many of us, spiritual hope can survive a fender bender or a broken bone. But sometimes a string of bad things happen—and we start having trouble seeing how it will ever get better: the ending of a marriage or a career, the inability to beat an addiction, or worse. Hope in hard times can feel like wishful thinking and the temptation is to give up on faith—to lose hope entirely. Like Paul said, in those moments we groan—we literally groan in our pain, seeing around us only decay and bondage and disappointment. The first step was to ask ourselves, What was our hope and why did we feel like it let us down? The second step is to remind ourselves that the God we worship is a God who
knows suffering. God in Christ weeps for us and with us. God in Christ has known pain and abandonment and even death. We need to remind ourselves that God is not defined by power and omnipotence, but by love. And to love means to make yourself vulnerable—because part of you is no longer in your control but placed in another’s hand. That other can be a child or a spouse or a family member. It can even be a love we have for our neighborhood or country or the earth itself. To love is to hope, even though this love will be messy and vulnerable and complex; but in the end, to love is to live—it is to become fully human—to be children of God, because God is love.

That groaning and yearning Paul spoke of is one aspect of loving while living amidst the wheat and the weeds, the good and bad of life. That is why finding the hope we have lost begins when we expand our narrow definition of hope—when we allow ourselves to love, to be vulnerable—when we trust that the God who knows us, also suffers with us, groans and yearns with us, while ever assuring us that the Good can be trusted and Love will prevail. Love wins.

Now go back to the story of Hannah Arendt. I love the image of a house that literally straddles a border. I love that in that house people are welcomed in by one door and they have a meal inside. They understand the messiness of what was going on around them—the real danger on one side, the opportunity on the other. Yet in the midst of that tension they fully live—they share food—they care for one another—they love. And at the right moment, they exit by a different door. Work remains to be done. Risks do not disappear. But a new direction opens before them—a path that leads to freedom and redemption and life.

Are you a person full of strong hope, or one of fragile hope, or one who has lost hope? 1) If your hope is gone, picture this house on the border and move toward it. Remember what you value and love in life and trust it is in that direction. Walk by faith, even small steps. God is patient and kind and ever-faithful. 2) If your hope is fragile, then step inside the house. Become part of that house’s community—share a communion meal—sing a song, offer a prayer, love one another as Christ has loved you. 3) If your hope is strong, perhaps you’ve already stepped out the back door into a new land—a land of possibility that can be trusted even as there remain risks to be faced and moments of sadness and loss to be endured. Yet Paul’s words ring confidently in your ears: In hope we are saved.

Hope is no simple thing. Hope is a promise, an expectation, a faithful optimism. Hope is a thing with feathers, a song we carry deep within us. Hope is a house where we find ourselves when it really matters—where together we remember what is truly important about this life. Hope is moving from one place to another, ever looking toward a horizon which does exist—and which has been revealed to us in an Easter resurrection and a candlelit Advent promise: Beloved, in hope we were saved. Thanks be to God!

1 Sarah Bakewell, At the Existentialist Café, 2016, p. 95.