

Good morning. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Maria Salas. I have been attending this church for almost 3 years now. Many of you have seen me around Hope involving one activity or another. Some quick facts about me first:

- 33 years old
- Half Colombian and Half Italian
- I have no children (other than my white scruffy four legged one named Peggy Sue)
- I work full time Veterinary Oncology & Hematology Center in Norwalk (yes, a cancer center for animals) and part time at Broad River Animal Hospital
- I recently decided to go back to school for nursing (and am attending NCC part time)
- I divorced after being married for 8 years
- Have a wonderful boyfriend of over 2 years Matt that I love very much

I ask that God would bless my words today. That it would be obvious how many seeds were planted throughout my life that brought me to where I am today. I pray that this morning, God would allow those same seeds to be planted in hearts that He has brought to Hope Church.

I will give you some quick facts to set the stage for what eventually would lead to my mother's addiction to drugs and alcohol which pretty much shaped the rest of my life. Due to my grandfather's involvement in some shady business dealings, my mother ended up in Colombia where she met my father and became pregnant with twins. She lost my twin sister while having her appendix removed there. As my dad likes to tell everyone, "I was made in Colombia and born in the US". A few years later, my mom's twin sister, my Aunt Debbie, committed suicide in her early 20's. I would say that this tragic event is what really triggered what would become a downward spiral for my mother.

To be completely honest, I don't have many childhood memories at all. I look at pictures of my past, and kind of remember the day the picture was taken, but I seem to have lost all details. I can tell you that my mother was never really there. My parents got divorced when I was about 3 and she remarried shortly after. I went by his last name all the way until 6th grade. I grew up thinking he was my father. The few images that I do remember have to do with my mom and her 2nd husband fighting, drinking, getting high, etc. We lived in Brooklyn and Boston but always ended back in South Florida with my grandparents. Eventually they too got divorced. My mom would be gone for days, months and even years without word leaving us with her parents. In all, she had given birth to 5 children during her worst years. My grandparents cared for the first 4 of us. The 5th child was abandoned at the hospital by my mother and then adopted. He was what one would call "a crack baby". His name is Dominic and I did meet him when he was about 5 or 6 years old. As my grandparents got older, they could not care for all of us. My siblings were passed around and eventually adopted. My youngest brother stayed with my grandparents.

They called my father (after not seeing or talking to him in 10 years) to come get his daughter. I was entering 6th grade at the time.

As you can imagine, going to live with my father at that age after never even knowing him was about as awkward as it was for him to have a teenage daughter all of a sudden. Also I suddenly had a new last name, which was Salas. Looking back, I guess I felt pretty unwanted for having been given away by the only parents I knew, my grandparents. I began rebelling almost right away. I would sneak out of the house at night with my cousins. We would go meet boys, drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes and even get high sometimes at 13 years old. Though it was a challenging time for me, this is where I first can recall seeds being planted. My dad would force me to go to church with him at least twice a week. It was in Spanish, which I didn't speak. I would see them lifting their hands to the heavens when singing. There was such emotional prayer there. I thought they were all crazy, but I was forced to go anyway. Eventually, he kicked me out and I went to live with his sister and her children who were all about my age. Another seed was to be planted there. Every night she would make us sit together in the bedroom, I and my 3 teenage cousins, and read the bible out loud and pray before we could go to sleep. We took turns opening the bible randomly and each would read a few verses. We hated it and didn't see the point, but had to do it anyway. We were all getting into trouble regularly but my aunt was praying without ceasing for us and was sure that her prayers would be answered. I would go visit my grandparents from time to time who had moved to Daytona with my little brother. They made me hang out with their teenage neighbor, Erika. Another seed was to be planted by her. She had written bible verses all over her walls. She only listened to Christian Rock. I would be forced to go to youth group with her. They would ask me if I was "born again" and I would just say yes, because I didn't know what it meant and wanted to fit in.

Eventually, my dad's family kicked me out too and I had to move back with my grandparents in Daytona next to the crazy Jesus-Freak girl. At that time, lucky for me, she had just started going to the public high school and was a bit more "normal". To this day, we still keep in touch and she is like my family. My mom showed up while I lived there when she got out of jail. She had found Jesus while there as so many do. She also had given birth to another daughter that was living with her 3rd husband a few hours away. I remember driving down there to take her back with us. She was about 2 at the time and I won't go into the conditions she was living in. Many of you have met her. Her name is Katie and she is 16 years old now. Not long after, my mom had my youngest sister, Sierra, now 11. My mom had found a church and joined a group there for Evangelism Explosion training. Here comes another seed....She would study that book all day. She would sit at the kitchen table every morning and do devotionals and then start practicing on all of us. She was trying to make us all admit that we needed to be saved and that Jesus was the one to do it. We all thought she was nuts but let her keep doing it since it appeared to be keeping her clean for the time-being. In the meantime, I was exploring psychics, tarot cards, angels and other means of spirituality. I even

attended Catholic Church on a pretty regular basis by myself. For my entire 11th grade, I was an exchange student in Turkey. I would make my way to a catholic church every Sunday while there because for some reason, I felt a connection to home when I was there.

In 1997, I met my ex-husband and moved to South Florida to attend Florida Atlantic University. While attending school, I worked with a woman that probably was the prize-winning seed sower. She was completely on fire for God. She witnessed to me constantly and invited me every week to her church, which she was sure I would just love.

In June of 2000, I finally gave in and went to her church. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before. During the sermon, I honestly thought that she had somehow told the pastor I would be there (out of 10,000 people) because it seemed like he was talking to me. At the end of the service he invited people forward that wanted to make a change in their life. Before I knew it, I was standing there, weeping, with maybe 50 other people reciting a prayer asking for forgiveness of my sins, asking Jesus to be my Heavenly Father, my friend, my counselor, my Rock and my Salvation and for Him to change my life; that I would be a new creation. Subsequently, I was baptized at a local park. My life changed immediately. My friends thought I had joined a cult. I had a hunger for righteousness at that time, that I have never been able to grab hold of again like that.

We'll fast forward through time now...

- Throughout these years, my mom had relapsed and gotten clean again several times.
- I tried to have a baby, and went through several attempts with fertility treatment with no success
- I was angry with God for allowing people that I considered irresponsible to get pregnant yet withholding that experience from me
 - o Hadn't I done everything that was asked of me? Didn't God owe me that?
 - o I have come to accept that now and thank God for being in control and not allowing me to decide everything. It's very humbling yet freeing at the same time to know that I'm not in control even when I think I am.
- Unfortunately, I slowly began to drift away from God. Looking back, I had left God but thankfully, God had not left me.
- My husband at the time and I barely spoke and lived in separate bedrooms. I'm embarrassed to say that we were both even dating other people during this time, which was a mutual decision. To our family, we were pretending everything was just fine. Even to my church (which he did not attend), I put up the façade that everything was normal in my household. That was far from the truth and God knew it all.
- One day a just a few years ago, my little sister asked me what kind of drug was used with a pipe that was white. She was asking me because she had seen my mom with it in the kitchen one night. My mom lived upstairs with my sisters and

my ex-husband and I lived downstairs in the house that we own. I had been suspicious that things weren't right lately. She had started drinking recently and that always seemed to lead to worse demons. She always wanted to believe that she could have a glass of wine at the family events like everyone else. I tried to make her see that she wasn't like everyone else, but it didn't work. I made the difficult decision that night to not allow her back into my house until she got help. I had to explain this all to my 7 and 12 year old sisters before my mom got home that evening. I had no idea how I was going to take care of them since I was traveling about 18 days out of the month. I prayed hard that night and felt a peace overcome me. I knew that God would take care of us and he did. She walked herself down to the local hospital and checked herself in that night. She stayed as an inpatient for over a month. My dog, Stanley, would sleep upstairs with the girls to make them feel safe. They would get themselves up, get ready and then walk to school. To this day, I don't know how we would have done it without God. I praise God, since that incident, my mom has been clean. She attends meetings every day and sometimes twice in a day. The Lord uses her to speak to incoming patients at the very same hospital that she walked to that day.

Once I felt that things were under control with my mom and my sisters, I stepped out in faith to move to CT. Though the circumstances of my move were not Godly, I still believed in some twisted way that God would use it. My mom had never learned how to be a mom. She had not raised any of her children or had to provide for herself. I decided that if I left, she would be forced to take on the role of mom (which I had been doing until that point). I was scared to leave them, but I knew in the back of my mind that God was in control. At this point of my life, I had entered into some destructive behavior and basically had forgotten that I was a child of God. I had forgotten all of the things that the Lord had gotten me through. I was filling my life with internet meetings, partying and traveling.

The ironic thing is that when I got to CT, I immediately started looking for a church. I attended Hope Church several times and then felt led to attend a youth Sunday during that summer. God really used Chip Valandra and Emily Larkin to encourage me. That was key in my getting involved here at Hope. Shortly after finding this church, I met Matt. I know the Lord brought us together and I thank him for that. I am a totally different person than the one that walked through those doors almost 3 years ago. I have such a wonderful family here at Hope and I can't thank God enough for leading me here.

So... what's different then if I still am not perfect? The difference is that I know who my Creator is. I know that He has an unbelievable plan for my life if I allow Him to be in control. I know and acknowledge that if left on my own, I screw up my life. Every time I have taken God out of the equation, I enjoy things short term, but I am always so miserable in the end. With God in control of my life, I feel at peace even when the storms are swirling around me. Everyone is always asking me how I deal with all this

stuff and how I make time for all of the activities I have. It is all because God does it through me. He has given me forgiveness and peace towards my mom, who I resented and hated for many years. I have not yet healed my relationships with my brothers who are in and out of jail. I know that God is working on this still and I have confidence in His promises. I know that He'll never leave me or forsake me. I am so thankful that anytime I somehow turn from God, he doesn't give up on me. I am also positive that He who began a good work in me will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ. I chose the song "Twilight" for offertory today because I really feel like it describes my heart. Shaun Groves wrote that song and in an interview, he had this to say, "We are caught between what was and what is not yet. I am caught between the person I was before I met Christ who didn't desire, know or understand Christ and the person I WILL be which is a person who ONLY knows Christ only wants Christ and always pleases Him. But this time in between, I am both people. I am torn. I am torn between my way and God's way and in that way I, like many believers am in a state of twilight – thankful for the light dawn and just praying for morning to finally overcome the night."