

Sister Death: Grieving Well

John 11:17-35

John 11:17-35. *When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'*

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus wept.

In the weeks since Easter we have been thinking together about death, about how a people whose faith is founded on the miracle of resurrection should regard and approach this universal human experience. We've talked about refusing to join the rest of humanity in their frantic denial of death. We've talked about living fully in the presence of death, and we've talked about dying with courage, as people of faith. But death doesn't affect only the person who dies; death is real and powerful also for those left behind. So today I want us to think together about how we – Easter people – should grieve. To start, I simply want to walk through this story from John 11.

Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, has died. Jesus, who had healed so many, wasn't there. He doesn't arrive at their home in Bethany until four days later. Martha meets him on the road, and her first words are: *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* Sometimes I wish we could hear the tone of voice that a Bible character uses, you know? How did Martha say this? Was she angry? *Jesus, why didn't you come sooner? This is your fault!* Was she feeling guilty? *Lord, if only I'd sent you word earlier! If only I'd made it more clear how desperately ill he was! This is my fault!* We don't know, but both would have been normal expressions of grief. Either way, though, we recognize Martha's inclination to look back in regret: *If only, if only.* That, too, is normal – not necessarily helpful, but normal. Already in the next verse, though, Martha is moving forward, restating her faith in Jesus: *But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.* Now I don't think here that she's expecting Jesus to raise Lazarus – at any rate, she seems fairly surprised later on, when he does. Instead, I think she's just affirming her loyalty to Jesus even though he had *not* come to the rescue. A person of faith may grieve as anyone else, but there is always another word to say.

After that we see an interesting exchange. Jesus tells Martha that her brother will rise again, and Martha reformulates his words into a doctrinal statement: *Yes, Lord, I believe that one day there will be a resurrection from the dead.* I'm not sure why we do this, but we do it all the time: we take Jesus' words and turn them into theological statements for us to express agreement with. Maybe it's because affirming formulas is easy. It *is* easy. But it isn't faith. Faith involves trusting in the one who transforms life *now* and giving him our lives for that transformation. That's what faith is. But agreeing with formulas *sounds* like faith and costs nothing, and so we do it. We do it a *lot* during times of grief. I can't count how many times I've heard people try to ease grief by means of doctrinal statements. But I *can* count how many times I've seen it work. Not once. You can't heal a wound by describing a bandage. Jesus knows this, and he doesn't let Martha fall back into formulas. "No," he says. "I'm not talking about a one day and somehow resurrection. *I am* resurrection. *I am* life. Trust me. Now. Do you?" And Martha does.

In the midst of this exchange, Jesus says something extraordinary. *Those who trust me may die, but they will live. And everyone who lives and trusts me will never die.* If you think this sounds self-contradictory, that means you were listening. Will we die or not? But in the paradox is a deep truth: here Jesus affirms both the reality of death and its final irrelevance. He seems to be talking less about life after death than about life *through* death, not about a different life that starts after we die, but a life centered in Christ that starts now and is unaffected by death. In the end, death has no power over us. It is Christ, not Death, who is able to transform life.

But back to grieving. Moments after Martha speaks with Jesus, Mary rushes out and says, *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* Yes, the exact words that Martha spoke. It sometimes sounds as if every grief is the same – you certainly hear the same words over and over – but that's only on the surface. Notice that Jesus responds very differently to Mary. Where he encouraged Martha to talk, he simply lets Mary cry, then walks beside her to the tomb. The sisters' words were the same; their grief quite different. And there at the tomb, in the deepest gift that anyone can give to another's grief – verse 35 – *Jesus wept.*

Let us talk about grieving, first in general by looking at the so-called "Stages of Grief," described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying*. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. The list is in your bulletin insert. Kübler-Ross's work has been tremendously helpful for many in that it names common experiences of grief and gives us permission to experience them. Anger, Kübler-Ross reminds us, is normal. Acknowledge it. Or again, depression is a common part of the process, and just knowing that can help. We are not alone, and it is not forever. Unfortunately, Kübler-Ross's insights have too often been repackaged in typical American fashion and turned into a 5-step "How To" program. People take her "stages of grief" as a checklist and a time-line for more efficient grieving. Do not do this. As with Martha and Mary, no grief is the same. We do not follow the same pattern or schedule.

But now, specifically: what about grief for us, people of resurrection? 1 Thessalonians 4 tells us, "Do not grieve as those do who have no hope." Our grieving should be different, but how? First of all, we *do* grieve. Grieving is good and right. The fact that we believe in a life that is larger than death does not change that one iota. Sometimes people act as if we ought not to be sad at all – after all, mother's in heaven now, right? No! We grieve because we love. When we love someone, that person becomes a part of who we are, and when that person dies, it hurts. The only person who never feels the pain of grief is one who does not love, and that person is himself an object of grief: he is dead already. In fact, as Christians we are to love more and more deeply than others, so we will grieve more. Remember: Jesus wept. So grieve.

Second, be angry. As Kübler-Ross reminds us, anger is a normal part of grief. Again, some will say Christians should not, that we should just take whatever happens as the will of God and not question it. I do not accept this; not everything that happens on this earth is God's will. God created life to be full and abundant and filled with love. Anything that prevents that sort of abundant life from coming to fulfillment *should* make us angry. When a child dies, be angry. When a young parent dies, be angry. When people are killed for their faith, or because of their color or language or ideas, be angry. When anyone, anywhere dies of hunger in a world that has adequate food, be angry. God did not ordain these things.

But temper anger with hope. The life that ends here is not the end. Now, please don't take this as just, "Don't cry: she's in a better place now." Too often that feels like cheap comfort. No, what I mean is that Christians know that some things outlast death, and foremost among those is love. Beyond this life is God, and God is love. This means that our love for the one who has died is only interrupted. Love is too great to be destroyed by anything so insignificant as death.

Which leads to one final thought: when you grieve for one you love, don't try to "get over it." Oh, I know: we can't live in the fire of anger or dullness of depression indefinitely. The immediate effects of grief take too much energy to cling to forever. But when people expect you to be all over your grief after six months or a year or ten years, do not listen to them. Remember, our grief is an expression of our love, and love is forever. We cannot completely remove our grief unless we remove our love. Our goal should not be to "get over" our grief, but rather to learn to bear that grief more lightly, and to use it as an incentive to love others. This is how people of Christ live, and die, and grieve: by loving others – with all the courage and tenderness of the One who lived and died and now weeps beside us.

I want to close this service with a meditation on grief and a prayer, adapted from a novel by George MacDonald:

Do not hurry
as you walk with grief:
it does not help the journey.

Walk slowly,
pausing often:
do not hurry
as you walk with grief

Be not disturbed
by memories that come unbidden.
Swiftly forgive;
and let Christ speak for you
unspoken words.
Unfinished conversation
will be resolved in Him.
Be not disturbed.

Be gentle with the one
who walks in grief.
If it is you,
be gentle with yourself.
Swiftly forgive;
walk slowly,
pausing often.

Take time, be gentle
as you walk with grief.

Come now.
Come now
live in us.
Let us stay in You,
we cannot be far from one another,
though some may be in heaven
and some upon the earth. Amen