

The Power of Grief

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Preaching on:
John 11:1–45

The title of my sermon this morning is The Power of Grief. As you heard, my uncle died this past week. And it's been hard on me and on my family. We have a small little family. We only had four baby boomers in our family. And we've lost my aunt and my uncle in less than a year. And then my mom just about two and a half years ago. So it's been a lot for little family. A lot of loss and a lot of grief.

And I think in order to begin to understand what I would like to try to say this morning, I have to define a difference between mourning and grief. Mourning is a period of pain and an experience of pain over a great loss. Grief is not just the experience of pain over a specific loss. Grief is a confrontation with the power and the reality of death and suffering in our world at a much larger scale than one particular loss or one particular death. Grief is bigger than mourning in the sense that we're asked to confront the whole reality of pain and loss in our world. And I want to talk to you about the power of that confrontation and what it can do for us once we're on the other side of it.

I will never forget the moment that I was sitting with my mom in her hospital room—she had been admitted to the hospital because the tumor in her abdomen, the largest tumor in her abdomen, had

sucked up all the blood in her body so that she had no blood left anywhere else for all the things that blood needs to do. And so she went into the emergency room on the verge of death, and they pumped her full of liters and liters of new blood. And she was admitted to the hospital for a number of days as the doctors were trying to stabilize her and figure out what they could do for her. And I went to visit her and we had a long conversation about life and death and our relationship. And at the end, she said to me, “You know, I think that I would be better off in hospice than here in the hospital. I think I'm ready to die.” And what a heartrending thing that is for a son to hear his mother say! And at the same time, I felt so much relief because I knew in that moment that my mom was going to have a good death. Not a painless death, not a griefless death, not a death without any kind of resistance or fear. But it was a good death because in that moment, she had confronted the reality of what had to come. She accepted it. She was willing to live with it. And I think that our scripture reading this morning is not a story of resurrection—not primarily, not fundamentally. That is the end of the story, but it is a long scripture reading that is primarily about the confrontation with death, the acceptance of death, the wrestling with grief that must come before the miracle can come, before the resurrection can come.

The story of Lazarus' resurrection, it doesn't pull any punches at all, does it? One of my favorite depictions of the raising of Lazarus in art is a painting from the 1400s by Nicholas Froment. And if you want to Google Froment and Lazarus, this painting will certainly pop up on your phone. You can see it, you'll see a picture of Lazarus rising from the grave. And it is so clear that this is the resurrection not of a happy body, but of a cadaver that's been in the ground for four days. And you see Martha over on the left hand side of the painting, and she's got a handkerchief over her mouth, and she is swooning because of the smell that she had warn to Jesus about. And Lazarus rises, stiffly from the grave, absolutely stiff. His face is held by a death rigor. He's smiling like a corpse. And no one in the crowd who is watching this looks happy at all about what they're witnessing. Many of them have averted their eyes. They can't look at it directly, and it looks much more like a scene from a haunted house or from a horror movie than it does like a miracle story from the Bible. Because I believe that Froment understands that the story is a meditation on death as much as it is a meditation on resurrection. I think that this is a story about Jesus' own struggle in his life and journey to face death so that he can live more fully to be the person he has been called to be, to live that fearless, selfless life of service to others that he's been called to.

So I want to just talk a little bit, trace that out, this struggle with death in the text—it is not an easy resurrection; it is not an easy journey. When Jesus receives the word that Lazarus is ill, he says to the disciples, “This illness does not lead to death.” Well, he was wrong about that, wasn't he? He says it's for God's glory so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. Well, that may be the end of the story, but Jesus is not being realistic about the fact that he is actually going to have to confront death, really confront death. And we'll see that in a moment—that he does that. This illness does lead to death, and it is only by leading to death and to dealing with that death and that grief that we get to whatever may come beyond it, the glory, as Jesus calls it. So Jesus, in fact, is maybe fooling himself a little bit here, and he ends up, it says, staying two days longer in the place where he was, even after

hearing that Lazarus is ill. And we'll talk a little bit more about that delay in a moment here and what that was all about.

Then Jesus, after two days of delay, he begins to talk to the disciples about the need to go and visit Bethany. And he says, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. And that's an interesting euphemism for death. And it makes me wonder about the fact that Jesus can't say right away that Lazarus has died, that he has to use a euphemism, that he has to say he's passed, he's fallen asleep. He can't quite get all the way to death. And he does it in such a way that it even confuses the disciples, and they don't know what he's talking about. What do you mean he's fallen asleep? And Jesus says, "No, all right, fine. I'm trying to tell you that he's dead. And let me tell you something else for your sakes (for *your sakes!*) disciples, I'm glad I wasn't there. But I'm not so sure that it was for the disciples' sakes. I wonder if it's for Jesus' sake—Jesus' own nervousness, his own fear about the process and the prospect of facing this grief. And the disciples seem to understand that Jesus is struggling with something here that is bigger than just Lazarus and Lazarus's death, that Jesus is in some way facing his own death. They're saying, "Oh, please don't go back to Judea. Everybody in Judea was just trying to stone you, the temple authorities and the Pharisees. Please don't go there." And he says, "No, I've got to go." And so the disciples say, "All right, we're going to go too, so that we may die with him."

Now we get to this interesting note here that Jesus arrives, and Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days now. Jesus delayed for two days before heading to Bethany, and he seems to suggest that he does it because he doesn't want to get there while Lazarus is just sick, he wants to make sure he's good and dead for the miracle Jesus wants to perform. But the math says that that can't possibly be true because when Jesus arrives, Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days. And that means that if Jesus hadn't delayed for two days, when he arrived in Bethany Lazarus would've been in the tomb still for two days, which is plenty dead to perform a resurrection. So we begin to see that Jesus's resistance here is not about the miracle that he is going to perform. It's about his own fear of facing that tomb, that reality and that grief.

And so when Martha runs out of the house, she says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And Jesus has a very logical, composed conversation with her about the fact that "I am the resurrection in the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." It's a little cold. And then Mary runs out of the house and Mary, of course, is the one who is most distraught. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." The same phrase. And this time, Jesus doesn't give her a theological response. This time, Jesus gives her an emotional response. He sees all the mourners weeping around her, and he, it says, "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, where have you laid him? They said, Lord, come and see. Jesus began to weep." Then Jesus again, "greatly disturbed, came to the tomb." This is the confrontation that Jesus has been avoiding, the one that he was afraid to speak of, the one that he was afraid to feel. It is only now that he is ready at the tomb to roll away the stone, to face the death that's inside, and to call Lazarus out.

Some biblical scholars have written that Mark and Matthew and Luke leave the story of Lazarus out altogether perhaps because they may have felt that it took away from the impact of Jesus's own resurrection story which follows so closely on the story of Lazarus's resurrection. Because it's a really big story, so why would those three gospels leave it out entirely? Such an enormous miracle, such a big moment in Jesus' life? But I would argue that John includes the story of Lazarus, not as a foreshadowing or a distraction from the resurrection to come, but as a confrontation with the pain of death before Jesus' own coming crucifixion. The point here is that even Jesus must face death. And even for Jesus, it's difficult to do. And as Christians, I think we need to accept the full lesson of the text—that Jesus is, yes, the resurrection and the life. And yes, those who believe in him will never die. And that to really live into that reality and to one day die a death that surely rests in that faith we (just like Jesus) have to get uncomfortably close to death: to see it, to feel it, to grieve it. We must accept it, and we must not think that we can do that without paying a price, without a struggle of some kind. And that struggle is grief.

Jesus says, blessed are those who mourn. And I've come to believe in my own confrontations with death and in my own grief and mourning, that the truest Christian is the one who most deeply mourns the pain and the suffering in this world. Because it is only from the perspective of mourning and from deep grief that the veil of this world is pulled back and we see life in it's the truest reality of it's fragility and vulnerability—the deep, deep pain that we've all felt and that we all know. It is only from the perspective of mourning that we can really hear (emotionally) the calling to serve this world and all of its deepest needs. When we grieve, we begin to learn how to live. That's the gospel message. If we want to experience and participate in God's greatest power, then (just like Jesus) we need to travel physically and emotionally into grief to get to the place where death is. Now, this has been the theme of many of my sermons this Lent, because it's a theme of Lent. I think it's certainly the theme of Holy Week and Good Friday. If we want to experience God's power, most fully, we need to get close enough to the suffering places of our world so that we can feel it for ourselves. Instead of avoiding the hardest realities of existence, we need to pick a fight with them, wrestle with them, heal them, and accept them.

Those who do not follow Jesus' command, to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, and to visit the prisoners, I don't think that they don't do it because they're just lazy. We don't do it because we're afraid. But when we get close enough to heal and to comfort, and to feed, and to clothe, when we come to the tomb, we have come to the place where God's power and activity is most visible. If we're unwilling to deal with death, we can get stuck in a life that is way too safe, way too small to ever act out these incredible words of faith and triumph, “Unbind him and let him go.” Avoiding death, not knowing grief, limits our lives. But faith facing death frees us not only to a good death, but to a fearless life of love and service. So blessed be those who mourn. They will get so close to God's power that they may be comforted.