

"Grieving the Loss of a Friend"

Relationships, part 5

John 11:17-37

Children's moment

Would you please join me in prayer?

Dear God, we thank you for this day in which we live and move and breathe. This life you have given us is not to be taken for granted, for you have created us with a purpose: to worship you. Grant that we might feel the presence of your Holy Spirit in these moments now, as we consider how your Word speaks to us. Give us your grace. Give us your mercy. Show us the eternal life that is found in Jesus Christ. We pray this in his precious name. Amen.

The past few Sundays, we have been discussing relationships. We looked at best friends, brothers and sisters. Today's theme is our relationships that enter eternity. How and why do we grieve close friends? It might seem unusual, but the fact is, everyone knows someone who has died. Death is a part of life, and it is something we encounter all the time.

The Christian belief of life after death is one of our most crucial teachings. Today I want us to focus on our hope in the Resurrection.

Because my dad is a veterinarian, I have had an up-close and personal view of life and death. When I was young, I watched my dad deliver lambs. It was messy, but amazing. These poor little creatures seemed so helpless at first, but within a few minutes, they could stand and move. Some of the lambs, however, were stillborn. I vividly remember my dad giving CPR to them and how some of them, against all odds, were resuscitated, and after a good coughing fit, they seemed to come back to life. It was amazing to watch something that seemed dead actually begin breathing.

For many of us, death first comes into our lives when a pet dies. Losing a dog was my children's first real moment of grief as a family. A child when my favorite pets died, that also taught me about grief. As I grew older, I experienced grief at the funerals of my grandparents, and I realized how much I missed them, and how much I wished I could have them back.

Many of us have felt that way. There is something about the finality of

death that we resist. In our grief, we go through shock and denial. We don't want it to be true. We were created with an inherent desire for life. We want to live in relationships and family and community. This is a good desire, one that God has given us.

And I think that is why for many of us who have experienced grief, the story of Lazarus is both comforting and confusing, even frustrating. This is the story of Jesus at a funeral of his friend. What hope does this passage give to us?

As you begin reading John 11, you notice some strange happenings. Jesus finds out that Lazarus is dying. Everyone around him is anxious. Few things in life make us more upset than when our loved ones are ill. Jesus is even told, “The one you love is sick.” And yet, the Bible says that Jesus waited two extra days before traveling to Bethany.

Have you ever prayed to God and wondered why God didn't respond immediately? We live in a world that expects instant answers. I can find information on the internet in the snap. I can go to the pharmacy and get medicine for my pain. We are addicted to instant removal of our anxiety and pain. “Come on, God, I'm in a hurry. Get this over with, so I can get back to my normal life, would you?”

Everybody in this story is anxious: the disciples, Lazarus' family. Everyone, except Jesus. Jesus doesn't worry. He knows that God's timing is always perfect. In fact, he tells his disciples, “Don't worry, Lazarus is only sleeping.” They think, “Then what's the problem? Won't he just wake up and feel better?”

Jesus clarifies, “Lazarus is dead.” And Jesus adds, “And for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.” (verse 15).

That is a really strange thought. It is better for the disciples that Jesus did not show up when he was first called. Have you ever thought, in your urgency, that God might do something amazing if we just hold on a little longer? Jesus says if we have patience, we will believe. That is tough to do.

When Jesus finally decides to go to Bethany, he receives a bit of a tongue lashing from Lazarus's sisters Martha and Mary. Both of them say, “If you had been there, our brother would not have died.” (verses 21 and 32.) That's a cry I can understand. More than once, I've thought, “God, if had shown up, this would not have happened. Why did you allow this, God? Don't you even care?”

Everyone has wondered this at some point.

Jesus' response to Martha is the focal point of the whole story. Look again at verses 21-26.

²¹"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;²⁶and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Do you believe this?" In the face of death, do you believe in the Resurrection? That is no idle question. Jesus is not saying, "Someday, we will understand. Someday, this will make sense. Someday, death won't matter anymore." NO. Jesus is saying, "I am the resurrection. I am the life." Jesus is right there, standing before Martha saying, "I am the answer. You do not have to wait anymore. You must only believe."

Martha's response is a testament to her faith. (Verse 27) "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." Wow. If only we all could answer with such faith.

Next, Mary comes out of the house to meet Jesus. What follows is as miraculous as it is confusing. Remember, Jesus knows what he is going to do. He told the disciples that Lazarus's illness would not end in death. God would glorify Jesus through this sickness. Let's read again from verse 32 to 37.

³²When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴"Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

³⁵Jesus wept.

³⁶Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus is troubled in spirit?! Jesus weeps?! What?! Why would Jesus weep in the face of a certain miracle?

I can tell you why: because, even though Jesus is God, Jesus is also human. And just like us, when faced with death and despair, he is troubled. He mourns his friend. The AMP Bible translation says, Jesus is moved to the point of anger. Jesus knows there is a battle between life and death. He sees his friends grieving, and he grieves with them. Jesus knows what sorrow is all about. He is a participant. He loves his friends. He feels their pain.

There are some who think God is distant and aloof. The theological term for this belief is deism. Deists believe in God; they just don't believe that God really cares much about humanity. Perhaps God cares for presidents and royalty or for major things like world wars and hurricanes, but in a deist's mind, God wouldn't glance down on a little country village where a poor family mourns the death of an insignificant peasant.

The author of this gospel begs to differ. Jesus is moved to the point of weeping over Lazarus' death. Jesus knows what it is like to mourn the loss of a friend. Jesus is fully human, and grief is a normal, human emotion. However, there is a major difference between us and Jesus. Jesus is also fully God, and Jesus can actually do something about death.

Check this out. As the people stand around doubting, saying, "Jesus opened the eyes of the blind, and yet he couldn't heal Lazarus," Jesus tells them to remove the stone. That's an odd request. We're talking about a heavy stone to keep animals and grave robbers out. Besides, the dead body has been there four days, and as the KJV puts it, "he stinketh."

Jesus never does anything haphazardly. Every word, every action is deliberate. Yes, Lazarus stinketh, because death stinketh. This is no illusion, no scam. Jesus wants to show them proof of his miracle. He prays aloud, and he shouts with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" And he does!

No one could claim it was a hoax. The man was dead four days – he was not in a coma. Lazarus had not fainted. He had not taken a 96-hour nap. The man was dead. Everyone knew it. So try, if you can, to imagine their amazement

when the dead man comes out breathing, wrapped like a mummy, but very much alive, and, hopefully, no longer stinky. This surely would have blown everyone away. Jesus shows them his glory, all right. Lazarus is alive. That's amazing!

This is great news, for Lazarus and his family. But what about us? How can this miracle from long ago be good news to us today?

It comes down to our belief in the Resurrection. In each of us has a desire for life to never end. What happens to us when we die? The short answer is, I don't know, because I haven't died yet. But the longer and more satisfying answer is, there is going to be a Resurrection. The Bible teaches that one day, after our hearts stop beating, after our lungs stop drawing breath, Jesus will miraculously bring us back to life, and we will stand before him. That is the hope of the Christian church. That is the message that has been preached for 2,000 years.

This is the hope that comforts us in our grief. This is the hope that can awaken us from our spiritual slumber. Truly, there are some who right now live as though they are dead. They live as though they have no hope. Biologically speaking, they are alive, but they do not have abundant life. They are wrapped up in the grave clothes of sin, despair, apathy, and darkness.

To all of us, Jesus speaks these amazing words: "Come forth! Eric, come forth! Jake, come forth! [Name], come forth! Come to life!" Christ wants to do CPR on our souls, and when we find eternal life in him, we are forever changed. Death and sin are no match for the Author, Creator, and Sustainer of Life!

Whether or not we are at a funeral, each day is a chance to come to Jesus, to come out of your spiritual cave. This is the gospel of hope, how we receive eternal life.

First, acknowledge that God created you. God loves you. Second, admit that you have sinned and messed up. You have lived for yourself instead of God. When you admit that, Jesus walks into your life and does a miracle. He restores you. Finally, starting living for the purposes God created you: worship, fellowship, and service. When you come to Jesus, you have eternal life in him, and on that great day of Resurrection, you will stand before Jesus and proclaim, "Lord Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

Jesus said "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" If you do, you will always find the peace and comfort you need in your grief. I pray that your answer always is, "Yes, I do believe."

Memory Verse: John 11:35-36 (NIV)

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.

Reflection Questions:

1. How have you experience death and grief in your life? Have you questioned why God seemed like he didn't show up?
2. What do you believe happens when you die? Why do you believe that?
3. The Bible teaches that there will be a general Resurrection at the end of time. What would you hope to say when you stand before the Risen Christ?
4. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life." Do you believe this? What difference does it make in your life?
5. Whom do you know that needs to hear about resurrection?