

Good Mourning

**A Sermon Preached by
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When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb 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 Martha 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 began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could

not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone.

And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

John 11:17-45 NRSV

Two Sundays ago I preached a sermon on the greatness of God in which I said,

Someday none of [our problems] will matter. That'll be the day when we go to Christ or he comes to us. Either way, it's going to be a very good day.

A few minutes after the worship service ended I learned that very early that morning my dad had suddenly died. I had enough faith and presence of mind in that moment to know that it was, in the deepest sense, a good day for him. My Dad died peacefully, after a long, full, and faithful life. Ever since a heart attack more than 20 years ago he was prepared for this possibility and as best any people can be, we were, too. August 30 was a good day for my Dad, but a bad day for us.

Suddenly I found myself a member of a club no wants to be in; one that almost all of us eventually join. Most all of us will go through – or have been through – the death of our parents. And many of us will bury spouses, friends, siblings, and – sometimes -- children. Mourning is an almost

universal experience, but it's not something we talk or think about much until we experience it for ourselves.

We all grieve, but we don't all grieve in the same ways. Some of us emerge from grief stronger, more sensitive, and more hopeful. Others allow ourselves to be forever bound in the grave clothes of death, caught up in a state of perpetual grief, a mourning that never ends. What accounts for the difference?

Much of it has to do with how our faith, of course. When we are sure that not even death can separate us from the love of God, we have a solid foundation on which even wobbly grieving legs can stand. On top of faith, however, we also need a healthy and faithful approach to the task of mourning. Is it something to be avoided at all costs or can it be a gateway to healing and new life? For Christians it is the latter. For Christians there is such a thing as *good* mourning.

Even if you don't count yourself among the grieving today, I want to invite you to look closely with me at our Scripture lesson. There is much we can learn from it about what it means to grieve well, and there is much we can pass on to others as we walk with them in their pain.

Grieving Stinks

The first lesson that stands out for me from the story of Jesus raising Lazarus is an almost incidental one: grieving stinks. By the time Jesus arrives on the scene, Lazarus has been dead for four days and everyone is worried about the stench inside the tomb. Even for faithful people – even for pastors -- grieving can be ugly, messy, *stinky*.

When we're grieving it's not unusual to feel

- irritable
- weepy
- anxious
- dazed
- confused and
- tired --

all within the space of a few minutes. Ever since I got the news I've felt like I was walking around in a fog. There have been moments of clarity, of course, but it's been hard to stay focused. No one likes how grieving feels. We often don't even like ourselves when we're grieving, because we're not easy to be with. Grieving is ugly.

But it's healthy. Grieving is ugly like a scab is ugly. Even though a scab looks kind of gross on the surface, underneath it a lot of healing is going on. Pretending that we aren't feeling the messy emotions of grieving – or covering them up with eating or alcohol or mindless activity -- is like picking a scab off so we'll *look* like we're healed. It only sets the healing process back. Better to accept the ugliness, trusting that your body is healing itself in God's time.

And it may be a long time. We can't rush grieving, no matter how eager we are to get through it. When my Dad died I had just returned from a great vacation. I was eager to jump back into things to get ready for a great fall season of ministry. I still feel that way. At the same time, I know that there are things I can do now, emotionally and spiritually, that I won't be able to do later, and I want to be sure to find the time and space to grieve well. There's no formula for how long it will take you to mourn your unique loss. Don't let anyone pressure you into thinking, "I should be over this by now." Be patient.

Grieving is Hard Work

But don't be passive. We can do much to make our grieving as productive as possible. Did you notice in the story the reference to the Jewish people who had come to console Mary and Martha on the death of their brother? (vv. 19, 31). These weren't simply friends and neighbors, they were paid professional mourners—people whose job it was to mourn with those who mourned.

This practice may sound strange to us, but it was just one part of a larger set of grieving practices that had been developed over the centuries to help people heal as quickly as possible. Mourning in first-century Judaism was taken very seriously. You didn't do it alone and you didn't leave it to amateurs. You got all the help you could, even if you had to pay for it.

If you're like me, you will feel better sooner if you allow people to care for you. I want to thank you all for the flood of support that I've felt from my Second Family. We have received cards, flowers, plants, food, visits, assurances of prayer, and dozens of other acts of kindness that have all worked together to communicate the message: "you are not alone," "we care," "your loss matters." When our hearts are heavy these messages are enough to keep us moving forward with our heads high. I read and re-read them and can feel in every note your care and concern. Many of you have shared stories of your own losses and they are helpful for me to hear, too. Sometimes we are stumped about what to write in a sympathy card; we don't want to say the "wrong" thing. Let me assure you: no one said, the "wrong" thing. Every word was helpful. Many of you have asked about my Mom. As best I can tell, she is doing "well," whatever that means. Kari and the boys are, too, and I really appreciate how they have not been forgotten. We are so grateful for everything you have done for us. It's good to be part of a large and loving church family. Thank you.

Grieving works better, too, when we pro-actively reach out to sensitive friends for support in the days and months after a loss. Not everyone will understand your pain, but many will, especially those who have suffered similar losses. Make a point of hanging out with them. I've been calling friends and colleagues and speaking with many of you. Each conversation is healing it its own way. Little stories of my Dad keep coming to mind, and it's really comforting to be able to share them with people. I'm the kind of person who makes sense of things by talking about them with others. Thanks for listening.

And don't underestimate the value of trained help. Counselors, support groups, Stephen Ministers, and books can guide you through your journey to recovery. Pastor Jennifer leads a very effective grief group that meets monthly. Check it out. There's strength in numbers.

I often encourage grieving people to make healing a top priority in their life; now I'm trying to take my own advice. I think we should take grieving as seriously as we would the loss of an arm or a leg in an accident. If such a thing happened to you, you'd seek immediate medical attention--from specialists--the best ones you could find. You'd follow the doctors' orders to the letter. You'd take your medicine no matter how bad it tasted. You'd expect to feel pain from time to time. You'd go to rehab no matter how tired you were. You might even read inspirational books by people

who had overcome similar losses. You wouldn't slap a Band-aid on it and expect to recover on your own in a few days. When we've suffered a significant emotional loss we shouldn't expect to heal on our own either. We need help. Maybe even professional help. You're worth it.

And be aware of your feelings—all of them. Sometimes guys, especially, have to ask themselves what they are feeling; we don't always know. This can be especially hard when we're grieving. People ask me how I'm doing and I reply automatically, "Great." And then I pause to think about what I just said and then I want to say, "Not bad for a guy with a broken heart." Noticing our feelings allows us to do something about them, before they do us in. One time when I was grieving a very different kind of loss years ago I finally noticed that I was really angry about it. I knew I had to do something with that anger so I went downstairs to the basement and smashed an entire set of old china – piece by piece – against the cinder block walls. It made quite a mess, but I got the anger out of my system and by the time I was done I was laughing. I got to the anger before it got to me.

Grieving can be a Path to Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth can be one of the hidden blessings of grieving. C.S. Lewis once wrote that God whispers to us in our pleasures, ... but shouts to us in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Sometimes it is only when we are grieving that God finally has our attention and we think the deep thoughts of life: What really matters? Who will mourn my death? What do I want to do before I die? These are great spiritual questions.

And that is a third lesson of this passage: grieving can help us grow closer to God. But it's not likely to be all warm and fuzzy along the way. In our lesson we see Martha and Mary working out their relationship with Jesus right in front of us, pleading with him. We can hear their questions echoing our own: Where were you Jesus? How could you have let this happen? Why didn't you stop it? Deep losses make us wonder where God is.

The Bible tells us exactly where God is when people are grieving. Where was Jesus when Mary and Martha wept for their brother? He was with them weeping, too. In this life we may not find all the answers to the tough questions that mortality poses, but we can know with complete certainty that God is with us even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Grieving Ends

And while that valley may be long it is not endless. The fourth and perhaps most important lesson of this story is that when we ask Jesus to comfort us in our losses, there will be an end to our grieving. When Lazarus emerges alive from the tomb, with the burial cloths still wrapped tight around him, Jesus says, “unbind him and *let him go*.” Hidden in this story is the promise that no matter how deep our grief, it need not have a hold on us forever. We will move on. Grief can be unbound with the help of God and faithful friends.

This isn't to say that we will ever be the same. I'm sure that Mary and Martha never forgot their brother. I will never forget my Dad. There are times, I admit, that I'm afraid I will, and then it's almost like I want to cling to my grief because it keeps me remembering him. But then I recall the words that I've shared with hundreds of people in their grief: Just like the people we love will always be a part of us, our losses will always be a part of us, too—a part of what makes us who we are. How we deal with those losses determines whether our grieving leaves a *scar* or a *beauty mark*.

When we find ourselves mourning, take comfort in our undying faith: just as God brought life out of death, grief can be a transforming and strengthening experience if we

- Accept its outward ugliness *and* trust in its healing power.
- Take grieving seriously.
- Invite Jesus to stand with us as we grieve, to share our anger, sorrow, and fears.
- Know that our grieving will end. If Jesus could turn water into wine, we know he can turn our mourning into dancing.

Jesus promised it, and we can believe it: Blessed are we who mourn, for we shall be comforted. Amen.

Dear Friend,

I hope you have been blessed by this message. You can request a free audio-tape or CD recording of this sermon by contacting the church office. We also have a complete sermon archive (including audio-files and PDFs) on-line at www.GrowWithSecond.org

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