

Jesus Wept

If only? Why couldn't he...? These questions hover in the air in this story from John. They are poignant questions, questions that highlight understandable human reactions to loss. Jesus is told early on that Lazarus is not well. He has time to get to Bethany, and he chooses to wait. John's gospel tells us that Jesus knows what he's doing, that his decision to wait is intentional and serves a larger purpose. According to John, Jesus plans to use the occasion of Lazarus's death as an opportunity to reveal his power to bring life in the face of death. And he does. Just beyond the reach of our text, Jesus will raise Lazarus from the dead. He will call Lazarus from the tomb long after anyone with sense thinks life is a possibility in that place. That is where this story is headed, and yet we do not get there in our reading this morning. It is tempting, though. I would much prefer to run toward the happy ending, to lift up the astonishing good news, to skirt the real grief and deep pain found in the face of the tomb in the thick of the story. And that is precisely why the grief-saturated middle of the story is where we are pausing for a bit today.

We Presbyterians may not be known for our memorization of scripture, but I have heard more than one person joke that they can quote one verse—purportedly the shortest verse in the whole bible: “Jesus began to weep,” or more succinctly, “Jesus wept,” as some translations read. This verse is more than a punchline, though. Jesus' tears and his gut-wrenching anger and sorrow when confronted with his friend's death and the grief of all who loved him are crucial clues to our understanding of who Jesus is. As are the community's responses to that grief. One chorus comments on how much Jesus loved Lazarus; another group focuses on what Jesus did wrong. And both responses are textbook ways of deflecting the pain of grief. Both responses enable the different groups to dodge the agony that necessarily comes with loss. And I am right with them, preferring to dodge the difficult stuff, the hard stuff, the agonizing stuff that accompanies grief. And yet there are moments when grief cannot be dodged or held at arm's length no matter how hard I try.

As you may know my own mother died just over 21 years ago, after a metastasis of breast cancer. She died quietly and peacefully late one June evening, while my dad, my brother, my husband, and I ate

cheeseburgers and watched “Will & Grace” at her bedside in my childhood home. After she died, I remember sitting on the stairs while others called my friends. I remember two beloved pastors showing up from my home church to hug us and pray with us. I remember waking up to mom’s friends chatting and polishing silver in the kitchen. And I remember venturing out into the world the next morning where everything looked different and yet utterly unchanged. I found myself stunned that the world kept turning, that people showed up for work and shopped for groceries and dropped their children off at the pool and made plans with friends to go out to dinner or for a walk. It didn’t compute. How could the world just move on without her in it? I found myself thinking about the W. H. Auden poem quoted in one my favorite movies, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos
The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.¹

These words made—and still make—so much sense to me and spoke to my hurting heart in a profound way. Everything stopped in that moment, at least for me. Everything stops for Mary and Martha, too. As it does for Jesus. Faced with the death of his beloved friend and the raw grief of those who loved Lazarus, too, Jesus weeps. And others weep with him, just as others wept with us all those years ago.

One of the very real losses during the pandemic was our inability to gather with one another and weep with one another in the ways we are accustomed to. We could not grin and wave at a newly baptized child, nor could we weep together as we had before. This meant that for months on end we were faced with grieving the unfathomable death toll along with grieving the loss of how we grieve. And we also got really talented at minimizing our grief. As quarantine dragged on, many health professionals worried aloud about the grief that was just under the surface, the grief we were collectively holding at bay. In March of 2021, one reporter wrote:

¹ W. H. Auden, “Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone”

When I've asked people what they lost in the past year of pandemic life, the answer often starts the same way. 'I can't complain.' 'I'm one of the lucky ones.' 'I know I should count my blessings.'

They are, of course, comparing their losses to the loss of life of [millions of] people around the world during this pandemic, which makes it harder to talk about these smaller losses. Many people have lost precious time with family and friends, or they've been forced to cancel travel plans and miss milestone events like graduations and weddings. In the hierarchy of human suffering during the pandemic, a canceled prom, a lost vacation or missing out on seeing a child's first steps may not sound like much, but mental health experts say that all loss needs to be acknowledged and grieved.

'People don't feel like they have the right to grieve,' said [one] licensed clinical social worker 'A year into this, the losses are piling up. [One client just said], "I can't complain about my grief, because people have it worse."²

Yes, the losses are different, *and* a loss is a loss. Grief is grief, and to ignore the grief, to try and brush away the hurt, to minimize what has been lost allows and even enables the pain and the suffering to brood and grow.

Clinicians speak of "disenfranchised grief," or grief for which there is no card in the racks at Target:

[Such a loss] isn't acknowledged or supported by social ritual. It can happen ... after a divorce. When the loss makes others uncomfortable — like a miscarriage or suicide — we might also lack support for our grief. But often disenfranchised grief happens around smaller losses that don't involve loss of human life, like the loss of a job, a missed career opportunity, the death of a pet or lost time with people we love. 'A constant refrain is, 'I don't have a right to grieve.'³

Know this: we all have not only the right to grieve, but the call to grieve. Grief is not easy or fun. Grieving is, however, essential. And left unacknowledged, tucked away, or tamped down, grief will rear its head in any number of damaging ways—addiction, depression, anxiety, and even rage. We must grieve and allow others to grieve for the sake of our own physical and mental health and for the sake of our spiritual health as well. It is right, good, healthy, and holy to grieve.

² Tara Parker-Pope, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/15/well/mind/grief-pandemic-losses.html>

³ Parker-Pope

So if we are going to find a way to allow ourselves and one another to grieve, maybe we can find a way to let Jesus grieve, too. I am tempted to join the chorus of blame. I am also tempted to point to his tears, observing how much *he* loved his friend, holding Jesus and that love and those tears at a safe, almost clinical distance. We may not like to think that Jesus hurts, that Jesus' heart breaks, that Jesus grieves, but Jesus has no problem with his own grieving. Jesus does not shy away from his grief; he does not put up a brave front; he does not apologize for crying; he does not hold his suffering or anyone else's sorrow at arm's length, nor does he make any attempt to hide his grief. Instead, he walks with conviction toward suffering, toward pain, toward brokenness. In plain sight, Jesus walks toward it all, experiences it all, embraces it all, embodies it all, weeps over it all, grieves it all, and thanks be to God, he also redeems it all. Redemption is of course where this is all headed, and grieving is one piece of that redemption work. Jesus does not rely on any shortcuts to bypass grief in his saving work which means that we cannot bypass it either. Jesus weeps. So can we. Jesus grieves. So can we.

Grief does not conform to a calendar, nor does it follow a predictable path. Grief can often feel like a pinball machine we did not ask to play or a roller coaster we never got in line to ride. It will cycle us through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, with blame and deep sadness mixed in, and we will visit these stages any number of times, sometimes in order, sometimes not. Grief work is hard work, and it is holy, redemptive work, too.

So, if we can find a way to come a bit closer, to sit alongside Jesus, to let his grief speak to ours, and to allow his grief to pierce our carefully constructed shells, maybe we can grieve—and encourage one another to grieve—in good and whole and holy ways. And by the grace of God, in our grieving, we will offer this hurting world a living witness to Jesus Christ, the Savior who celebrates and heals and saves and grieves. His story does not end in grief, and because of him, nor does ours.

Thanks be to God. Amen.