

Good Grief
John 11:1-44
Sermon by Joanne Gallardo
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¹ Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days,⁷ and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

⁸ "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?"

⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light.¹⁰ It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."

¹¹ After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

¹² His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better."¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead,¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus^[a]) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles^[b] from Jerusalem,¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

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

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

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

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

²⁷“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

²⁸After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” ²⁹When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

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?”

³⁸Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹“Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

⁴⁰Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

⁴¹So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

⁴³When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

I took a brief break from the Lectionary for this week and decided instead to focus on the story of Lazarus. I hesitated doing so, wondering if I was the only one particularly attached to grief lately. However, 2 things happened a few weeks ago as well as this past week. Deb Detweiler was mentioned a couple times during our worship hour. At convention, some of Deb’s former students were helping leading the singing and one morning they led us in some choir warm ups that had been uniquely Deb, giving credit to her and garnering a smattering of applause among the 3,000 or so gathered. I also

have had conversations with folks for whom grief, as of late, has been very real in other forms. The loss of anything dear to us, whether that's a person, or a job, or a way of being can disorient us and have profound effects on our spiritual life.

A few weeks ago I was at Princeton Theological Seminary participating in what was described as "preaching summer camp for pastors." Aside from working with amazing faculty, we got to hear long time pastors preach sermons that included scriptures that pastors often encounter. The first night we heard a lectionary sermon, the next night, a wedding sermon. The following night, a funeral sermon, the next, a communion sermon.

The story of Lazarus was used as a funeral sermon text, but really, this text can be used for anyone experiencing a loss. This is a text for anyone in need of an incarnate God. And let me tell you, I think during this time and in this space we are longing, pleading, searching for an incarnate God in a fallen, human, and messy world.

The God of my childhood was old. And white. God looked a whole lot like the God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Bearded, greying, appropriately shrouded, reaching out but not quite touching humankind, further illustrating that God is just out of reach, or at least, not quite with us. Almost. An adjacent God. Each of us is God-inspired. The very word "inspire" connotes breath. God breathing into us. Which isn't quite the same as incarnation. God, in other words, didn't feel very "real."

With Jesus, we move from this "God inspired" model to "Immanuel," God with us. God came down, took human form, and lived life as one of us, with us, for us and in spite of us. Again, with my childhood imagery, Jesus took the role of martyr or buddy, depending on the Sunday School teacher. In our scripture for today, Jesus is nothing if not fully human. Just like Jesus delves into his feelings and his humanity with the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus enters into the messy, complicated, grief-laden human emotions surrounding death and loss in this passage.

But there is no better illustration of "God with us" than in the story of Lazarus. We're taught that Jesus loves us all, but in this text, we're shown that Jesus especially loves Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. These people are his family. He really, truly loves them. This is what makes Jesus' behavior so interesting.

Lazarus is sick. People know this. He's on death's doorstep. Where is Jesus? We're told that he says, "No really, it's ok" a whole bunch of times before actually coming and seeing Lazarus' family. What I love paying attention to is this dynamic contrast with Mary and Martha. We know from the previous story of Mary and Martha that Martha is the practical, get-stuff-done one of the two sisters. She's the one that runs to Jesus and says in typical Martha fashion, "Where were you? If you hadn't been off doing who knows what with your disciples, my brother and your friend wouldn't have died." She skips passive aggressive and goes full on, guilt-laden aggressive. YOU weren't here so my brother is dead because YOU said it was going to be ok and it's not ok. BUT, I know God will give you whatever you ask...I imagine there was a bit of an awkward pause. Maybe Martha was a bit more passive aggressive than we thought.

Martha is feeling the very intense internal conflict of grief, not too dissimilar from what all of us as people of faith feel when faced with the death of a family member or other loved one. She knows Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God. She knows she has nothing to fear, and she even says that she will see Lazarus again at the resurrection. She knows all the important things, and yet, she is still full of grief. Then Jesus says some words that likely don't make sense or seem rather insensitive about being the resurrection and the life. When you're grieving, everything seems rather pithy and unimportant.

Then Mary, who was lagging behind at home, gets called out by her sister who tells her that Jesus is looking for her. Now why hadn't Mary gone out with her sister Martha? It may be a bit presumptuous to speculate, but I'm wondering if she wasn't really hurt that Jesus hadn't shown his face during Lazarus' death. If Jesus was such a close friend, where was he? Martha tells Mary that Jesus is specifically looking for her, and only then does she leave with haste.

She tells Jesus the exact same thing Martha told him. "If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." Again, Mary tells Jesus her disappointment in him. Lazarus' sisters are not happy with the behavior of the Messiah. Earlier in the passage, Jesus had said that his sickness would not end in death. And while we know the rest of the story, it did end in death. Jesus wasn't there when Lazarus died. Where was he?

Between the three of them, they all cycle through the 5 stages of grief. Might Jesus have been in denial upon hearing that a loved one was dying? Martha and Mary come at Jesus with their anger, telling Jesus that had he shown up, Lazarus would still be alive. All experience depression...Jesus weeps, Mary stays behind when Jesus comes into town, everyone starts to sit with this very real loss. Martha bargains with Jesus in her anger, saying that she knows God will give Jesus whatever she asks.

But in this story, there is no need for acceptance. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. He is once again alive. Jesus has performed another miracle, testifying to the fact that he is the Messiah.

This is a wonderful story, and I don't want to short change the miracle. I don't want to forget to remind people that Jesus knew Lazarus would come back to life and that all would be well. But I feel that in this story, that's the place where we naturally want to go. We're comfortable with that. That's the happy ending we're all looking for. Our Good Fridays are uncomfortable, so are our Maundy Thursdays, in fact. Easter is what we want to celebrate. Ascension Day. Pentecost. Anything, anything, but the painful reality that death happens.

But I want to remind us that Good Friday isn't just something we celebrated a few months ago. Good Friday happens to us many times over in the course of our lives, and not just every Lenten season. We fall into this pain of loss when we lose someone we love, whether through death, a divorce, or a parting of ways. We fall into the pain of loss when we lose a job, or our livelihood, or our health. We fall into the pain of loss when we lose our innocence, or our way of life, or when we see others hurting and we know we can't do a thing to stop it.

Right now, along with many of you, I'm still feeling the loss of Deb Detweiler. I come up here, and I look out, and I expect to see her but I don't. I don't see her name on the orders of worship and she is now off my calendar. While I fully believe in the healing power of Jesus and of Jesus' promise of eternal life and resurrection, I still find myself saying, "If you had been here my friend would not have died." Where WERE you?

Jesus is here now, I know, but no one has been resurrected. And dictating the miracles that Jesus performs is not up to me, I know that. But I find

myself to be a bit of a Mary. I don't always want to see Jesus. And when I do, I want to ask him to explain himself.

Jesus says strange things that are meant to be a comfort, but that are not really understood. And it gets a bit awkward. That's just the nature of grief. But I do take comfort in knowing that the shortest verse in the Bible, the passage that just says "Jesus wept," is there for a reason. I can't begin to know the mind of Christ, but I do know that the scriptures indicate he held it together until he got into town, saw his grieving loved ones, and took in their words. He knows he wasn't there. He knows he waited a while before showing up. He knows that Lazarus had to go through the pain of death without him. And he grieves it.

Jesus shows up as one of us, feeling the feelings of one of us, and weeps. He knows that the power has been given to him to resurrect Lazarus and that a miracle will be performed but he still weeps. He could tell the people to not fear, he will resurrect him. He could be completely impassive because he knows that his ability to perform miracles comes from God. But still, he weeps.

The incarnation is not a person that says platitudes, blesses people, and performs miracles to make people believe him. The incarnation feels with us, hurts with us, and eventually the incarnation bleeds for us. The incarnation himself dies, and experiences the pain of a body shutting down and a life coming to a close. This is the very definition of what it means to have God literally with us.

The Psalms tell us that we can literally tell God anything. No one, not even Jesus, comes at Mary and Martha with reproach when she points an accusing finger at Jesus telling him that he was responsible for their brother's death. The Psalms also ask God where God is in times of trouble. The psalms cause the psalmist to bemoan their existence. Jesus quotes a Psalm while on the cross, asking God why has God forsaken him? And I want us to remember that. That the son of God felt forsaken on the cross. Now, I know the history behind it. I know that Jesus was quoting Psalm 22. But that doesn't negate the fact that the son of God felt forsaken by God during the most difficult time in his life. Was God present? Absolutely. But knowing that God is present doesn't always cause us to feel differently. You can't approach a grieving person with the words "God is here" and expect that to change their process of grief. It is a comfort yes,

but there are times when we don't want to be comforted. We, like Mary, don't care to go out and meet Jesus on the road. We're too hurt. We're too angry. We're paralyzed by our own emotions.

I don't think we give ourselves enough permission to feel these feelings. And these feelings are essential, they're part of the grieving process. I think from little on up we're taught that we have nothing to fear, nothing to be sad about, nothing to grieve if we only trust God. And there are people who find great comfort in that and that's fine. But it is also holy and even Biblical for us to point our finger at God and say if you had been here, this wouldn't have happened. Why, why have you forsaken me?

The Psalmist frees us from any shame or condemnation of bringing our feelings to God. And God is not some immovable deity. God is not the God from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, reaching out but barely touching humanity. God changes God's self to become a "part" of the humanity. God "is" the humanity. God loved us so much that God left that comfort that comes from distance and closed the gap, became human, and bled and died just so that God could understand what it means to be one of God's beloved children.

When I am in a state of grief, grief over anything, I sometimes find it unnerving how calm people can be. It's almost as if I need a community of grief. I need to know that others also feel this way. I suppose it's a way for me to get validation for my own feelings. We get that at funerals. We get that over national tragedies. But for those personal losses, those events that happen that not everyone sees, I need a weeping Christ. I need a Christ that I can point to, a Christ I can yell at, a Christ who is also weeping at loss.

Yes, this story ends happily. Lazarus is raised. People are astounded and happy. It's a joyous moment. That doesn't negate the trauma that happened just a few days earlier. And it doesn't gloss over the event that's about to happen next in the Gospel story, the plot to kill Jesus comes to fruition. God does wonderful things. God does marvelous works. God ultimately defeats death and resurrection brings eternal life to us all. And we should all be grateful for that. But that doesn't mean that the valleys don't exist. That doesn't mean we don't look at our world and hurt. That doesn't mean we don't hear about children in cages and fathers and daughters drowning and ask "God, where ARE you?"

The benefit we have is knowing we are part of a larger story. We know that for God so loved the world. We know that the arc of our Christian story is one that bends towards justice and freedom for all of God's people. We've seen that. We can testify to that. We have that hope. But we also worship a God that weeps with us. A God that knows sorrow and loss. We know a God that bleeds. We know a God that is acquainted with grief. And in that grief, however we ourselves feel it, we know that we are good, we are whole, and we are loved.

May God bless this reading of God's word. May God bless the minds that receive it. May God bless our grief and make it good and holy. Amen.