Good Grief

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
John 11:17-37

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I became a Christ-follower in college. While I grew up going to church, I failed to connect the dots. I had the misimpression what God wanted from me was my obedience. Somehow I missed the memo that God desired to give me love and mercy.

I was desperate to find spiritual mentors to guide me in my newfound faith. Enter C.S. Lewis. His book *Mere Christianity*, was water to my parched soul. Some of you smile when I mention Lewis, given how often I quote him. No doubt, I reference him so often because of his profound influence on my early faith formation.

Some years later, I came upon a quote from Lewis that troubled me. Lewis kept a diary to record his thoughts after the death of his wife, Joy, after only three years of marriage. Lewis married for the first time at age 58. Lewis never intended his private diary for publication. On the third page of *A Grief Observed*, he writes, “Meanwhile, where is God? When you are happy…you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face and the sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become…Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent in our time of trouble?”

Lewis’ lament unnerved me as a new believer. How could such a famous Christian author make such disparaging
remarks about God? Hold that thought! We will come back to it later in this sermon.

I suspect that some people out there who have given up on God and church feel this way. They cried out to God and were unsatisfied with the response. You may identify with Lewis’ lament. Grief is a universal Pressure Point. It may be those little griefs like the death of a pet, the loss of a job, the loss of a friendship or those big griefs. Who among us has not grieved the death of someone close to us?

You might rather I speak about something more cheerful on this summer day. On second thought, facing death head-on can be life-giving.

Our Scripture lesson tells a story of death and grief. John devotes a whole chapter to this story, 44 verses in all. It presents itself like a three-act short story.

Act 1: In chapter 11, verses 1-16, Jesus learns that his good friend Lazarus is seriously ill (11:3). Lazarus is the brother to Mary and Martha who live together in Bethany, some 20 miles away from where Jesus receives word of Lazarus’ illness.

Jesus tells his disciples, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it” (11:4). Jesus already hints that Lazarus’ impending death will become an occasion to reveal God’s glory.
Here’s the kicker. When Jesus learns Lazarus is ill, he stays put another two days (11:6). Why the delay in helping his friend? Why doesn’t he heal Lazarus at a distance, much as he does other people?

Jesus announces, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep but I am going to wake him up” (11:11). Who can blame his disciples for interpreting Jesus literally? “If Lazarus sleeps, he will recover” (11:12).

Jesus drops the subtlety: “Lazarus is dead. For your sake, I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe” (11:14). More cryptic. End of Act 1.

Act 2: Verses 17-37 are a portion of Scripture read earlier in worship. John reports that Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days. According to Jewish tradition in the Talmud, the soul hovers near the body after death for three days. On the fourth day, it departs, meaning that Lazarus is really, really dead.

When Martha learns Jesus is on his way, she goes out to meet him. “Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21). I have been debating all week whether Martha’s words express lament or complaint. She could be implying, “where the h-e-double hockey sticks have you been?”

Jesus announces that Lazarus will rise again. Martha declares, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (11:24). Back to Jesus: “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), thereby shifting the focus from a general
resurrection at the end of human history to his power to raise Lazarus.

“Do you believe this?” Jesus asks. Martha’s response ranks up there with the Apostle Peter in expressing clarity about Jesus’ mission: “I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God who has come into the world” (11:27).

Martha tells Mary about Jesus’ coming, so she rushes out to meet him also. Mary’s words “Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died” are identical to Martha’s. The only difference is that Mary weeps when she says it. Jesus is “deeply moved and troubled” (11:34). The Greek word for troubled is commonly used outside the Bible for snorting horses when agitated.

John tells us, “Jesus weeps” (11:35). He weeps for Mary and Martha. Perhaps he also weeps for the carnage caused by sin. Sin exerts a terrible toll on humanity. Sin separates us from God and ultimately leads to death. End of Act 2.

Act 3: In verses 38-44, Jesus and the sisters go to the tomb. Jesus orders the stone rolled away. Martha protests, “Lord, by this time, he stinketh (11:39—don’t you love the King James Version?). Jesus reminds them, “Didn’t I tell you, if you believed you would see the glory of God?” (11:40).

The miracle itself takes all of two verses. Jesus orders Lazarus to come out of the tomb (11:44). Lazarus shuffles out, bound in grave clothes. It takes me back to a movie from twenty years ago, Dead Man Walking.
John places this Lazarus story strategically in the 11th chapter of his gospel. Chapters 1-11 center on seven miracles or signs that point to Jesus’ identity as Messiah. The miracle of raising Lazarus from death to life is the last, quintessential sign. Chapters 12-21 shift to Jesus’ arrest, trial and crucifixion. At the close of chapter 11, the religious leaders call an emergency meeting to plot Jesus’ demise. Raising a dead man to life is the final straw. Do not miss the irony. Jesus’ act of giving life to Lazarus hastens his death. Jesus epitomizes what he says later in John’s gospel: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13).

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Three applications come to mind.

First application: Grief is not a sign of weakness. The shortest verse in the Bible, “Jesus wept” may be the most endearing. Jesus wept even though he was about to raise Lazarus. Jesus’ grief underscores its value and necessity. Grief is the price we pay for love. If we don’t love, we don’t grieve. Jesus weeps because he loves.

Second application: Grief can be redemptive. I do not mean to minimize the pain of grief—the torrent of tears and the agonies at midnight. Yet, there is also good grief. Grief can clarify life’s meaning and purpose. It enables us to become stronger and more resilient.

There is no set timetable for grief. It is not a straight-line progression. It is circular, not linear. Grief washes over us in waves.
If you or someone you know is struggling with the death of a spouse or close family member, our GriefShare ministry has created a seminar with you in mind tonight, at 6:00. One man contacted me this week, offering to testify to the benefit of such ministry. He offered to give witness, given that men are more reluctant to seek help for grief. There is also a 13-week class beginning September 9 to take the journey from mourning to joy.

If someone you know is grieving, you might take a page from the Old Testament book of Job. Job’s friends sit with him in silence for seven days in his grief. Once they open their mouths, they make a mess of things. They should have quit while they were ahead. In his book, Lewis rails against well-meaning people who offer glib advice. In my line of work, we call it the “ministry of presence.” The best thing we can offer grieving people may be our caring presence.

Third application: Grief can draw us close to God. I mentioned earlier, there is a sequel to Lewis’ story. Lewis’ mood lightens as he works his way through grief in his diary. He comes to realize that he believes in an idea of God rather than God. He recognizes his “imaginary faith.” It was not faith that sustained him but his own imagination. His imaginary faith fell down in grief like a house of cards. The only way for God to help him realize his imaginary faith was to knock it over. God offered Lewis help but he, in his own words, was beyond help. Lewis likened himself to a drowning man who could not be helped because all he could do was clutch and grab.

He writes, “My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered. He shatters it himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of
the marks of his presence. The incarnation is the supreme example. It leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins.”

Lewis later observes, “I need Christ, not merely something that resembles him.”

Joy in the Journey is another resource to commend to you. Much like Lewis, it was never intended as a book but only as a means of communicating with family and friends on Caring Bridge. Steve Hayner writes this book in tandem with his wife Sharol on his battle with terminal pancreatic cancer. Steve was a close friend, a talented professor, author and president of a seminary as well as InterVarsity student ministry.

Steve writes in one of his entries, “One person told me how disturbing it is to her to watch so many thousands of prayers on my behalf and yet to see minimal evidence of healing. Does God really heal?” Later in the book, he addresses her question. “God is committed to my ultimate healing. Being cured of my cancer may or may not be part of that healing work.”

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