

Sunday, March 26  
9:00 & 11:00am



*Tears  
and Hope*

“Tears and Hope”

March 26, 2023 | Fifth Sunday in Lent  
Charlie Berthoud | John 11:17-25, 32-44

In life and in death, we belong to God.

Let's say it together: **“In life and in death, we belong to God.”**

This statement is at the core of our faith and it's our refrain this Lenten season, as we reflect on the reality of death, and as we seek to treasure the gift of life and to strengthen our hope in the gospel promise of abundant eternal life.

Lent is a good time to be thinking about life and death. We begin with Ash Wednesday, with ashes on our foreheads or hands to remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Lent continues, moving toward Holy Week, as we ponder the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Let's talk about:

- Life is short
- Affairs in order
- Cremation, burial, organ donation
- Memorial service
- Purpose and intention



During this particular Lent, we've encouraged honest and open conversations about life and death issues such as

- The reality that life is short and that sometimes people die way too soon
- The importance of having our emotional and financial and logistical affairs in order
- The plans for your body--cremation, burial, organ donation options
- The desires for a memorial service—songs, scripture, speakers
- The intentionality of your life. Are you living in a way you really want to live? Are you living with a sense of purpose? Are you living in the way you want to be remembered?

In addition to these big questions, we've had an Adult Ed class to explore the theology of the death of Jesus, to help us go beyond traditional individualistic understandings of Jesus dying for our sins, to help us see the broader implications of his crucifixion and resurrection.

Today, we turn our focus to the reality of grief—something we all experience. While we grieve at life transitions like job changes, graduations, and retirements as well as broken relationships, the biggest grief for most of us is the death of a loved one.

The death of a loved one leaves a hole in our lives. Something vital is missing.

Imagine for a minute your kitchen table, or your dining room table, or the central location where you most often sit to eat, read, talk, and work. What if one day that table was suddenly gone. Some people use this image to help us understand grief—the loss of a something essential to our daily life, the loss that leaves a big hole.

While you can go to the store and buy a new table, but you can't replace a loved one who has died. The hole in our lives remains.

Unfortunately, in our culture today, we avoid talking about death. Imagine if your friends came over and saw your kitchen table was missing and didn't say anything.

Not only do we avoid talking about death, but we also consider grief and tears to be a sign of weakness.

In a baseball movie, Tom Hanks' character, famously says "There's no crying in baseball."

For too many of us, especially men, there's no crying in life.

Gospel reading for today tells of the death of Lazarus, and it includes Jesus' affirmation "I am the resurrection and the life" which are the words I used to open a Christian memorial service.

This reading also includes one of the most memorized verses in the whole Bible. John 11:35 reads "Jesus wept." Two words in most translations. Newer translations have "Jesus began to weep" but a lot of people know the two-word version.

If you went to Sunday School and were promised a sticker if you memorized a Bible verse, John 11:35 was you go to verse. "'Jesus wept.' Where's my sticker?"

Haha. Actually, it's not a bad verse to memorize, not a bad idea to take to heart. Jesus, God in flesh, cried when his friend died. Listen for God's word.

<sup>17</sup> When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup> Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup> and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life.

<sup>32</sup> 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." <sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup> He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." <sup>35</sup> Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" <sup>37</sup> But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup> 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." <sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see

the glory of God?" <sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup> 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." <sup>43</sup> When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" <sup>44</sup> 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."

Thanks be to God for the words of the Gospel.

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*"Don't cry; she's in heaven."*

*"Why are you so sad? He is at peace with God now."*

*"Look at him crying! I thought he was a Christian? Where is his faith?"*

I've heard variations of these comments dozens of times over the years, and every time I hear something like this, I cringe. Well-meaning people try to discourage tears and make people feel better. And some people think tears show a lack of faith.

But we can have faith in heaven and in God's steadfast and eternal love—we can be resurrection people--and at the same time be very sad that our loved one is no longer physically present with us on earth.

In short, it's OK to cry. It's OK for Christians to cry. Jesus cried, and so can we.

Author Washington Irving put it well:

There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love.

Tears are part of the journey of grief.

No one's journey is exactly the same, but there are common themes.

Walter Brueggemann is one of the greatest biblical scholars of our time. He has a helpful framework for the book of Psalms, which can help us as we think about the reality of

grief. He says there are three types of psalms:

Orientation	The recognition that life is good
Disorientation	The reality that bad things happen
New orientation	Different perspective, deeper wisdom, new strength

(From *The Message of the Psalms*)

Using this framework with death, we go from being thankful for good people in our lives, to the inevitable disorientation of death, to the gradual and non-linear new orientation, where we do not go back to the way things were, but we find new meaning, new peace, and new purpose.

Orientation	Life is good <i>We love the people in our life</i>
Disorientation	Bad things happen <i>Someone dies</i>
New Orientation	We change and grow <i>The hurt remains;</i> <i>We are kinder, wiser, deeper</i>



Grief is not easy. And grief shouldn't be ignored—something I learned a long time ago.

In college, I was one of five leaders of our Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship group. Weeks before my junior year started, one of the other five died unexpectedly. His name was Phil.

I was overcome with shock which moved into denial. I didn't want to deal with it, so I didn't go to the funeral, and I never really talked about it with mutual friends.

I didn't even cry until weeks later at a campus memorial service, but after the service, I tried to put Phil's death behind me and move forward. All the years later, I still grieve.

Since then, I've learned to be more intentional about grief, with the variety of emotions and stages.

*Good Grief* is a little book that was first published in 1962, but it has remained popular over the years, despite some of the examples being very culturally dated. Author Granger Westberg identifies ten stages of grief, but he is very clear that this doesn't mean we should progress in an orderly fashion from one to two to three and on to ten.

He invites readers to look for themselves in the stages, with the sense that in a time of grief, we will probably experience most of them.

He includes stages like shock, depression, guilt, anger, sadness.

We need to take our time with grief and resist the cultural push to "get back to normal" It takes time, and we might circle back through several or all of these stages.

And yet we also need to keep moving, even if it's just one tiny step at a time. Being aware the stages of grief can help us on the journey.

The last two stages remind me of Brueggemann's idea of "new orientation." Those final stages are:

Gradually Hope Comes Through  
We Struggle to Affirm Reality

As we journey through grief, we learn that we are not alone.

As Christians we affirm the hope that God is with us always, and that in Jesus Christ, God knows the reality of grief, suffering, and death.

We hear the hope in Psalm 23:4

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil, for you are with me;

We hear the hope at the end of the gospel (Matthew 28:20)

Jesus said, remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

As we keep moving forward, we recognize that we are not alone in our grief.

We are surrounded by others who might be able to help us, and who might be dealing with their own grief, seeking encouragement and hope from us.

In Romans 12:15, Paul encourages followers of Jesus to be in solidarity with each other, including tears, saying:

Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.

In Galatians 6:2, Paul tells followers of Jesus the essence of our faith is about taking care of each other in times of hardship.

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

We are on this journey together. We need each. And that means we can cry together and we can talk together.

One more story.

When I was in seminary, I spent two years as an intern at Riverdale Presbyterian Church in New York City. Every spring, the church had a big festival in the church parking lot, with music, food, and a variety of booths. An older couple in the congregation was known for running a flower table every year; it was their thing as I learned my first year. But a few months later, one of them died.

So at the following spring festival, the remaining spouse is seated at the flower table by himself, after decades of sharing that with his wife. Because of my upbringing and a variety of factors, everything in me was saying "stay away from him" to avoid sad conversations, and if I did bump into him, my natural inclination was telling me "don't say anything about his wife."

But I had taken a pastoral care class, in which we talked about the importance of acknowledging grief and giving people time and space to share. So defying my introverted, New England, male instincts, I went up to the table and after some small talk, I said something like: "When did you and your wife first start with this flower table?"

As I recall, he got a faraway look in his eye, and then told me about their history together.

I don't remember the specifics, but I do remember that we had a good conversation, with laughter and tears. And I remember that he seemed grateful that someone acknowledged his wife and gave him the chance to speak.

It's OK to ask people about loved ones who have died. If they want to talk they will, if not, they won't. I've heard from too many people who are even more sad because no one ever mentions their deceased loved one.

Losing a loved one is hard. We need to help each other, we need to cry together, as we journey forward in faith, living toward the hopeful future of Isaiah 25.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces....

It will be said on that day...

“This is the Lord for whom we have waited;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

Thanks be to God. Let us pray.....