

“Woman, why are you weeping?”

John 20:1-18

In John 11, Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus is sick, “Lord, he whom you love is ill”. By the time Jesus gets to Bethany four days later, Lazarus is already dead:

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!” (John 11:32-36)

There are three amazing things to notice in this story.

First, Jesus, unlike us, doesn't grief-shame others. He doesn't say to Mary, “Suck it up buttercup!” Or to Martha, “Buck up, little camper, and stop mourning as one without hope!” Instead, the scriptures say Jesus feels deeply *tarasso* – literally meaning troubled or shaken up – by Mary and Martha's sorrow. Jesus responds to other people's grief with compassion, not judgment.

Second, Jesus, unlike us, doesn't say, “I'm sorry” for his tears. Instead he weeps publicly, and without apology. Jesus does this even though he resurrects Lazarus five minutes later. Jesus grieves his heart out and hopes like mad at the same time, thus proving grief and hope can and do sit side-by-side on the loveseat of your heart.

And third, the people around Jesus rightly identify the source of his grief. Not weakness, a lack of hope, or a failure to trust, but love.

The witnesses to Jesus' tearstained cheeks cry out, "See how he loved him!" Likewise, Mary and Martha observe, "Lazarus is the one whom Jesus loves!" What could God be doing here through Jesus' tears other than showing us that our grief is a legitimate response to the death of someone we loved? A love without limits cherishes every inch of ourselves and our lives, even the sad and salty stretches like the last two weeks with the deaths of LuAnne Simon on her 64th birthday and 48 year old Christine Gira, daughter of Bev Merk.

As Jesus wept at the death of his close friend, Lazarus, so now Mary weeps at the death of Jesus.

John 20:11-13 . . . ¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

Jesus and Mary are teaching us how to grieve the death of a person we love.

In our January-February book study of "Love Without Limits" by Jacqueline Bussie she writes about how love doesn't shame grief. A quote from her book . . .

My schooling with Mr. Grief began when I was twenty years Old, and in my third year of college. My mom, who was only fifty years old, started to forget stuff. I don't mean things like keys or suntan lotion. I mean things like me. One day the two of us were in the car, driving to Big Lots. A car ran a red light and almost hit us. "That was so scary!" I exclaimed, still in shock.

My mom said, "Yes, it was. But you know what's scarier? Sometimes I look at you and I don't know who is the mother and who is the daughter."

Once, on a Girl Scout trip, I saw a fish flail helplessly at the bottom of a canoe. Its mouth and gills heaved in vain to find the lost source of oxygen. When my mom forgot who I was, I became that fish.

I decided I needed to see a Christian grief counselor. When I mentioned it to my father, he reiterated the rules of my raising, "counselors are for crazy people." Somehow, grace intervened, and I ignored his advice. I made an appointment. When I arrived, the first thing I spotted was a Jesus fish over the office door—surely a good sign for a girl-turned-fish herself. I dove right in.

I confessed to the counselor that I was struggling with depression, grief, and lots of anger at God. In exchange for my honesty, she chastised, "The first thing you have to recognize is that despair is a sin against God. You know that, right? We should never grieve as one who does not have hope." My jaws gaped even wider on the canoe floor. I never went back. Not to that counselor nor to any other, for far too many side-heaving years.

I did, however, go home and look up 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14: 'But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died'. Read in the shadow of the counselor's interpretation, these words only compounded my grief. Oh great, I thought. *I'm already failing everyone around me, and now I'm failing God too.* The passage left me no comfort, only questions. Was grief a sin? A failure of faith? A sign of lost hope?

Wasn't it possible to grieve and hope at the same time? What would it even look like to grieve with hope, rather than without it? Honestly, I had no clue.

In time, the seed the counselor had planted—that my grief betrayed God and that God was mad at me for it—grew monstrously large. God became to me like Snuffleupagus was to Big Bird on Sesame Street, except in reverse. Everyone else could see my best friend, but I began to fear that he was imaginary.

Years later, I learned that way too many of my friends and students have had similar painful grief experiences -- for example, my friend Gabrielle, who was seventeen when her father died. For months it was all Gabrielle could—or wanted—to talk about. Several months after her father's death, Gabrielle was at a party at the home of a family friend. While talking about the loss of her dad with some of the guests, she started to cry. The hostess, who was in her forties and wanted her party to stay upbeat, scolded Gabrielle and said, "You know, you're not the only one who's ever lost someone." Gabrielle was stunned. She stopped talking about her dad's death with anyone until decades later. She grieved in silence. She sank into a deep depression. Gabrielle had been grief shamed.

You've heard of fat-shaming, right? Making people feel ashamed of their bodies? Well, grief-shaming in our culture is equally a thing. We make people feel ashamed for their sadness.

Here's what we learn to do with grief in our culture: squelch it, hide it, ignore it, repress it, deny it, numb it, medicate it, forget it. And when all else fails, judge it.

In our culture, grief eats away at self-love like a flesh-eating spider. We've turned grief into one more reason for some folks of faith to hate themselves. For those whose self-love is already in low-battery mode, this added drain is deadly.

Take it from me. When I was sad and depressed about my mom dying, eventually I became sad and depressed that I was sad and depressed. Things got so bad that at one point, I wished myself gone.

Think of all the clichés in our culture about pain: Don't be a Debbie Downer. Don't wear your heart on your sleeve. Don't air your dirty laundry. Don't worry; be happy. These popular sayings teach us one lesson: your grief is shameful and embarrassing – unload it as soon as you can. Since we're calling things by their right names, let's be clear: inside most of our pop-culture clichés lurks a pit viper of judgment, coiled and ready to strike.

An unhealthy number of Christians see grief as a sign of a weak and shabby faith. Many people of faith don't say this out loud like my counselor (ouch), but often you can feel them thinking it (still ouch). It's the sentiment slithering beneath sentences such as *it's all part of God's plan*, and *She's in a better place now*. Translation grief is a failure to trust and hope in God, a breakdown of belief in redemption and resurrection. We thank Jacqueline for her wisdom.

Back to our Easter text. “Woman, why are you weeping?”

As she begins to straighten, half turning from the small opening, she senses someone standing by her. In her grief she does not fully turn to look the stranger in the face when He asks her the same question as did the heavenly messenger. “Woman why are you weeping?” At such an early hour this could only be the gardener of Joseph's tomb. As she pleads to be shown where Jesus is, Mary thinks only of a corpse. With all the warmth and familiarity of its ring, Jesus calls this bewildered, wandering sheep of His flock by name.

She knows His voice and cries “Rabboni”, “Teacher!” Jesus tells her not to cling to Him for He is now leading the way to the Father. She is to go and tell His followers.

“Woman why are you weeping?” Mary Magdalene was no doubt a mess. A few days ago, she watched her best friend and teacher mercilessly tortured, flogged, crowned with thorns, and nailed to a cross. She watched them pierce his side with a spear. She watched Jesus die.

“Woman why are you weeping?” Early in the morning on the third day she finds herself at the tomb’s entrance and the tomb is empty. As the tears stream down her face, she bends to look through the opening and she sees two angels. They ask her, “woman, why are you weeping?” She can only mumble over and over again that they have taken away her master.

A man is behind her and asks her, “Woman, why are you weeping” no one has stolen the body. It is the risen Jesus.

Women do not just weep when they are sad. Women also weep when they are overwhelmed with joy. So, when Mary finally recognizes the risen Jesus, the tears stream out even faster and she clings to Jesus.

Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

Suddenly, suffering and death is not final. The Coronavirus, Brain surgery, cancer, unfaithful spouses, drug addiction, alcoholism, poverty, nursing homes, the sudden deaths of LuAnne and Christine, are suddenly not final. Bearing the cross, being nailed to the cross, is not final. Suddenly, there is much more.

There is this resurrected Jesus Christ leading the way to the Father. Woman, why are you weeping? Don't cling to me. Go, and tell what you have seen. Go, and tell what you have seen.

Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

May the peace of God . . .

#380 – Hallelujah! Jesus Lives!