



## **Faith Amidst Grief**

**John 11:17-44**

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Have you experienced a significant death in the family? I don't mean just any death – I mean a loss that will forever change the way you look at life and death itself.

The first funeral I remember attending happened when I was in elementary school. I had a friend, Sara, who had been on my Odyssey of the Mind team. We were good friends. She died of leukemia when we were not even 11 years old. Elementary school students rarely have the capacity to understand the real permanency of death. The grief of death is somewhat lost in the vague perception and juvenile hope that the deceased will eventually come back. I'm not sure this is what Jesus meant when he said we are to have the "faith of a child," but I know that how I felt when Sara died stood in stark contrast to how I felt when my first grandparent died.

I had just turned 18. It was the fall semester of my senior year of high school. Grandpa James was an iconic figure in my family. A former director of the University Singers at Florida State University and a life-long music director at Trinity UMC in Tallahassee, Florida, this man was revered. He had personally built the family house, an underwhelming, but homey space that has always served as the convening spot for family gatherings. Even at 80-something years old, he managed to provide care for the 26-acre property, driving his John Deere to clear brush and maintain the lawn so the cousins could enjoy a game of touch-football. When he passed there was no misplaced belief that he may return. His loss was permanent, and it sent shockwaves through the family. The grief was, and one could argue still is, palpable.

The loss of young life shows just how impartial death is. The loss of every life reminds us of how none of us are exempt from such an end.

And yet, regardless how many times we are reminded of death's beckoning call, the loss of a loved one is never easy. Such was the case for Mary and Martha. Their brother, Lazarus, had been ill. If we back up to the start of chapter 11, we find that the sisters had sent to Jesus, hoping he might come and make their brother well. I imagine this was not an insignificant illness; the sisters knew this was serious. They didn't wait to call for help, and they didn't call for a doctor. They knew Lazarus didn't need a medical professional, he needed a miracle.

After hearing that Lazarus was ill, Jesus stayed two more days before travelling to see Mary, Martha, and their sick brother. As the previous chapter ends, we're told Jesus had gone and crossed the Jordan River, to the place where John had baptized. Jesus' journey to Bethany would not have been quick. We're told by the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had already been dead for four days.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she didn't wait for him. Martha went to meet him as he arrived in Bethany while Mary stayed home. This is just like Mary and Martha – Martha is the more aggressive one who keeps herself busy, while Mary is the more passive one, who sits in attentive patience. These are similar responses to the time Jesus visited their house for dinner. And though their responses to Jesus' arrival may vary, they both maintain a shared grief.

Martha calls out to Jesus as he enters the village, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Mary arrives, a short time later, she takes her familiar place at Jesus' feet. Her behavior might have been different, but she speaks the same indictment as her sister, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Their corresponding indictments against Jesus are a witness to their shared grief. Though we may respond differently to grief, none of us are not immune to its pain.

In response to Martha, in verses 23 through 26, Jesus says, "Your brother will rise again. I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. Do you believe this?" Martha replies to Jesus in verse 26 by saying, "Yes, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Martha's testimony is one of the best articulated statements of faith in the whole of the gospel text. And yet, while Martha has this conviction in who Jesus is as the Son of God, she does not seem to fully grasp what this means. Even after making such a profound claim of faith in the identity of Jesus, she seems to think his power offers a hope only for the future.

When Mary came and offered her indictment on Jesus, she begins to weep. Her grief has manifested itself in tears of pain. Her brother is dead.

In verse 33, we read, "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews were also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He asked, 'Where have you laid him?' The said, 'Lord, come and see.' And Jesus began to weep."

*Jesus wept.*

Hailed as the shortest verse in the whole of the Biblical story, the verse invites us to ask an important question: why did Jesus weep? Why is Jesus so deeply disturbed in spirit? Why is Jesus so deeply moved? "From the beginning of the story, it is clear that Jesus acts in keeping with his perception of God's purposes; that he is entirely committed to enacting and bringing glory to God, whatever the path; and that as the sovereign agent of a sovereign God, he has the power of life and death."<sup>i</sup> Jesus has repeatedly made it known that Lazarus is not going to remain dead. In verse 11, Jesus says, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." In verse 4, Jesus says, "The illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." In verse 23, Jesus says to Martha, "Your brother will rise again." He shows no sign of believing Lazarus is, or will remain, dead.

And yet, even in the midst of his knowledge of what is about to come, Jesus is deeply agitated – deeply moved – moved to tears.

It is suggested by some scholars that Jesus is moved to tears because Lazarus was not just another member of the community, but that to Jesus, Lazarus was a brother. Jesus' tears are considered indicative of the tears we all shed at the loss of a family member.

It's suggested by others that Jesus' tears are in response to the pain of seeing Lazarus' family and friends in such deep grieving pain. Perhaps Jesus' tears are not in response to Lazarus' death directly, but are a response to the pain the community felt because of Lazarus' death.

And yet, I can't help but think, if Jesus was so deeply grieved by the pain of Lazarus' death, or by the pain expressed by the grieving community, why didn't he just get on with the miracle and bring Lazarus back to life? Jesus doesn't seem to be quick to move on with the narrative of the story. Like the story of the storm on the sea from Matthew 8, which we read last week, I think we try to move too quickly to the concluding miracle in our attempt to skip the indictment of Jesus in the midst of the journey.

As they arrived at the tomb, some of the Jews said to Jesus, "Had you been here, couldn't you have kept this man from dying?" At this, Jesus was again greatly disturbed. Jesus tells them to move the stone, which sealed the grave. Martha says to Jesus, "Lord, there will be a stench in there, it has been four days." She knew that Lazarus was dead, and that his decaying body would have already begun to smell terribly. Jesus rebukes her in response, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

In Matthew 8, we are tempted to marvel at Jesus' command of the sea and the winds that bring the storm to a dead calm, while skipping over his rebuke of the disciples having such little faith. Here, in John 11, once again, our temptation is to skip to Jesus' call for Lazarus to come out from the grave, rather than listen to Jesus in the midst of our grief. Jesus once more offers a rebuke for their lack of faith. Martha, the one who just moments early proclaimed with such great articulation a glorious statement of faith, now expects the grave to have the rotting stench of a dead man. Jesus knows otherwise, for the faith of Jesus is not the faith of humanity. Jesus rebukes her, saying, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

The story makes clear that Jesus knew the outcome all along. There is never a hesitation in Jesus' words or response; he knew that Lazarus was going to get up and walk out of that grave. He had no reason to weep for the death of one, even a deeply loved one, who would soon be walking as if death had never been. He had no reason to be moved to tears because of a shared grief. He had no reason to be deeply disturbed because of the fear of Lazarus' death. And yet, I can't help but wonder if death is his concern.

As I read the story, I wonder if Jesus' grief – if Jesus' tears – aren't for Lazarus' death, but are instead for fear of his own.

I wonder if Jesus' grief at Lazarus' tomb isn't felt for the same reason Jesus grieves in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal. Matthew 26:37-38 say, "Jesus left the group of disciples, and took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and he began to be grieved and agitated. Jesus said to the disciples, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death.'" I can't help but wonder if Jesus' grief and tears at Lazarus's tomb are not shared for the same reason he was grieved in the garden: due to a self-acknowledgement that his faith will ultimately lead to his death.

Such a grief is easy to recognize in the garden. His betrayer will soon turn him over to the authorities who will lead him to trial, which will lead to the cross. He knew that his faith would lead to his death, which is why, in the garden, he asks God if there might be another way. In the garden, Jesus prays, "Father, if possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want be done."

Here in John 11, I can't help but wonder, was Jesus so aware of the faith lacking from Martha and Mary, a lacking faith made obvious in their doubting of the Lazarus's resurrection, that Jesus knew in that moment his faithfulness was going to be needed to compensate for the lacking faithfulness of those who followed him? Did Jesus become greatly disturbed at Mary's tears, because even Mary, the one who sat so attentively at his feet, has a faith lacking the full trust in God's goodness? Did Jesus become greatly disturbed because, even though Martha had offered a strong statement of faith just moments earlier, standing at the grave, she seemed to lack conviction in the faith she had so powerfully proclaimed.

Time and time again in this story, Jesus makes it clear that Lazarus' resurrection – the waking up or coming to of Lazarus – will be done to glorify God, and to glorify the son of God. We spend so much time focused on the miracle work of Jesus in the resurrection of Lazarus, that even we, who are not in the midst of our grief at our brother's death, seem to miss the focus of the story. The purpose of the miracle is "not that the family should be reunited in happiness, much as Jesus would have reveled in that family joy."<sup>ii</sup> The purpose of this story and Lazarus's resurrection is to exemplify Jesus as *the* faithful witness of God's great love.

In this story, Christ tries, time and time again, to call those who are mourning death to a new vision of life. We have this unfortunate belief in the Western world that we can manipulate and create our own destinies. If we but try hard enough, if we study enough, if we have enough street knowledge or enough business acumen then we become capable of doing anything for ourselves that we set our minds to. "Such false thinking spills over into our spiritual and religious thinking, creating the illusion that we can give life to ourselves."<sup>iii</sup>

We see in the Biblical text this constant reminder, that though we are often found lacking in faith, there is one who had faith sufficient – faith abundant. Though we are often looking for the quick, and miraculous, fixes, there is one who demonstrates a more faithful and permanent

way. Though we are often so focused on our temporary existence, there is one whose witness call us to see the glory of eternal life.

When our love failed, the love of God remained steadfast. When we thought life was over, Jesus reminds us that in his presence, through his faith, we are invited to receive eternal life. As the tension and struggles and grief of this world ratchet up with the fear of the unknown, and the fear of not-knowing, hear the gospel text as it proclaims, our salvation was never about our knowledge. Good and faithful disciples have always lacked the faith needed to comprehend God's full glory – thanks be to God, that Christ was sent in perfect faith, that our lives may be redeemed despite our insufficient faith. Thanks be to God that Christ was sent as a witness to God's love and glory, that you and I may trust in the faithfulness of the incarnate one, the Son of God, Jesus our Savior. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson. *John: A Commentary (New Testament Library)*. Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> Gerard Sloyan. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: John*. Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

<sup>iii</sup> Michael Koppel. *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 2*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.