

“A Death-Defying Feat”

John 11:1-44

Series: The Experiment Week 2. Blessed Are Those Who Mourn

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Over the last thirty-three years of ministry, I’ve received my share of strange phone calls. Perhaps the oddest one came from a total stranger.

“Hello, Rev. Hoglund?” asked an elderly voice.

“Yes, this is Rev. Hoglund,”

“Rev. Hoglund, this is Franklin Eisenhower. I am wondering if you would do me a favor.”

“What is that sir?” I asked, a little suspicious.

“I want you to do my funeral...Rev. Hoglund are you still there?”

The request left me speechless. Funeral directors ask me to officiate at services for those who have no minister. Yet they are already deceased. This was the first time I met someone shopping around for their own funeral. I felt like saying, “You’ve called at a good time. We are having a special sale. If you sign up now we’ll throw in a Lord’s Prayer at no extra cost.” But I didn’t. “Certainly, Mr. Eisenhower, I will do this for you,” I agreed, “but would you mind if I met you first?”

The visit was very cordial. After some initial introductions I asked,

“Mr. Eisenhower, are you sick?”

“No, I’m in fine health for an old man,” he chuckled.

“Then why did you call me?”

“I have no children and, except for a niece and nephew, no other family. So I want to make all the arrangements for when my time comes.”

That seemed very sensible. He heard my name from a neighbor who went to our church. After all, some say when it comes to funerals I’m rated “Best in Bucks.” We worked out the details for a brief graveside service. I offered a prayer and said goodbye.

Years passed and one day I received a call from a funeral director who sounded like the grim reaper. He informed me Franklin Eisenhower had died and left instructions to contact me. The graveyard, however, was all the way up in Easton, Pennsylvania. He gave me directions and the time of the service. On the day of the funeral I left with what I thought was plenty of time. Unfortunately the directions were not correct. He told me to look for exit 33 instead of Route 33. In the days before GPS, I was completely lost. I stopped in every Burger King, McDonalds and Wendy's along Route 22. Nobody ever heard of this cemetery. But if you want to shake someone up, go through the drive thru and say, "Quick, I need the cemetery." One kid said, "You want fries with that?"

Meanwhile it was getting later and later: 10, 15, 20 minutes. Finally, by some miracle, I found it. I was a half an hour late for the funeral. The two mourners and the funeral director were getting in their cars. One of them made a few remarks over Mr. Eisenhower and decided to leave. I felt terrible. I was angry at the funeral director for giving me the wrong directions. I was ashamed for letting Mr. Eisenhower and his family down. He planned this out so perfectly and I blew it. So I walked up to the graveside by myself and did the service I promised for Mr. Eisenhower.

I wonder if Jesus went through the same emotional ringer as he stood by the grave of Lazarus. Jesus was late for the funeral ... four days late. This is one the most emotional scenes in the Gospels. The pain is raw. The grief is laid bare.

You cannot live without facing loss. It starts when we are young. You lose a friend. You're cut from the team. They let you go from your job. Your health or your finances suddenly go south. Your teen acts out in rebellion. Your parent explodes in rage. Your partner gives up in resignation and leaves. Your children grow up and go off to college or marriage. And then there is the grief which overwhelms you in the funeral home or as you stand by the open grave. It washes over you and threatens to drown you.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4) Some Christians assume grieving is a sign of weak faith. They worry that weeping means we don't trust God. I cannot tell you how many times a wife, husband, parent or child has come to me at a funeral and said, "I'm not going to cry. I promised myself I would not break down. I shouldn't cry because I know she's in a better place." The only one who knows what that better place is like is Jesus. He poured out His grief by the grave of His friend. If you want to learn how to go through grief, watch Jesus.

The story of Lazarus begins with **Absence and Abandonment**. Jesus is teaching on the other side of the Jordan River when a messenger arrives from Mary and Martha, "Lord, the one you love is sick" (John 11:3). Reading between the lines, you sense an urgent 911 call. And yet Jesus waits. A day. Then another. Doesn't He care? Of course He does. Of all the families in the Bible, Jesus especially loves this one. Is He afraid? The disciples fear for his life. When He finally says,

“Let us go back to Judea” “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?” (John 11:7-8).

Jesus is not afraid. He intends to perform a death-defying feat. From the moment He hears the news of Lazarus’ illness, Jesus says,

This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it (John 11:4).

It takes about a day to return to the tiny village of Bethany. Passengers on the road probably tell Him Lazarus is already dead. As they approach the outskirts of town one person waits for Jesus: Martha. There is fire in her eyes.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21).

Martha knows God gives Jesus whatever He asks but what good is that now? His absence cost Martha her brother. He abandoned her.

When grief visits, it can feel like God has fled. “If you had been here, Jesus, my wife wouldn’t have left.” “If you had been here, Lord, I wouldn’t have had a miscarriage.” “If you had been here, Father, I wouldn’t have this disease.” “If you had been here, God, I wouldn’t be standing by this grave.” Absence does not make the heart grow fonder for God. You feel abandoned by Him.

Yet your crisis is never beyond God’s care. Jesus may have been late for the funeral but He was not too late to comfort and care, to help, to heal and give hope. In the depth of grief, you may feel alone and abandoned. Yet, “God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’” (Hebrews 13:5). God promises to be present. When you feel He is absent, reach out for Him. He is there.

When Martha and Mary are finally face to face with Jesus they pour out their **Anger and Accusations**. From the stories we have of these two sisters, you pick up a portrait of their personalities. Martha is efficient, task-oriented, tell-it-like-it-is. Her sister Mary is quiet, curious, sensitive, brooding. Martha wants help in the kitchen to get the bread on the table. Mary sits and listens to the Bread of Life. Martha gets in Jesus’ face. Mary falls at Jesus’ feet. They each handle their anger differently. Martha is explosive, Mary depressive. Yet both come at Jesus with the same accusation. “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” (John 11:21, 32).

None of us grieve the same way. No one can tell you the right or wrong way to go through it. There are no short cuts, no easy solutions, no five simple steps, no pat answers. When it comes to grief, you can't run through it, you can't run from it, you just have to wrestle with it. In his little book *Good Grief*, Granger Westberg writes those

who face up to their loss by wrestling openly and honestly with the problem came through the grieving experience stronger, deeper and better able to help other people with their grieving.¹

What happens next is very revealing. After the sisters unload their anger and accusations, what does Jesus do? He **Absorbs** it and offers **Assurance**. He does not argue with them. Jesus never defends Himself. Are you afraid to be angry with God for fear He will punish you? Look throughout Scripture, especially in the Psalms, the Prophets and Job, and you will see cries, complaints, even criticism of God. In fact, it's these honest, angry expressions which often lead to release and relief. After Martha unleashes her accusation, Jesus offers assurance and hope. "Your brother will rise again" (John 11:23). Almost unconsciously Martha replies, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24). Yet she misses His point. Jesus looks her in the eye and says,

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26).

The question startles her. The conversation suddenly shifts. Her dead brother is no longer the issue. They are not debating some resurrection at the end of the world. Now Martha is in the spotlight. What does she believe? Does she believe in Jesus? Does she believe He holds the key to life right here and now?

"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (John 11:27).

In the pit of her grief, in the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus gives her hope. Jesus offers assurance and Martha accepts it.

¹ Granger Westberg, *Good Grief* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) p. 19.

That would be an empty assurance if Jesus did not back it up with **Action**. Now unfolds one of the most curious scenes in Scripture. As Jesus takes in the tears of Mary, Martha and the neighbors, He becomes angry.

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled (John 11:33).

That translation is too soft. Jesus is intensely angry, stirred up, unsettled, agitated. A tsunami is swirling in His soul. What triggers this storm of emotion? Martha and Mary's accusations? The mourner's who doubt His miraculous powers? Is He angry at Himself for arriving too late to save Lazarus?

No. His anger aims at another target: death. From the very morning of creation, He witnessed the terrible destruction wrought by sin and death on His beloved creatures. It makes Him furious. So like a Great Physician He descends into the world to stop this plague. Like a Good Shepherd, he comes to beat off the ravenous wolf. Like a returning King, He invades occupied territory to set His people free. But before He can win the battle, sin and death, the greatest terrorists of all, kill His friend Lazarus.

As He stands beside the tomb Jesus begins to weep. The tears of God stain the path to Lazarus' tomb. It's comforting to know God weeps when we weep. But if that is all He does, it's not enough. It's reassuring to know God stands beside us when we mourn. But if that is all He does, it's not enough. It lifts our spirits to hold on to memories of our loved ones. But if that is all we have, it's not enough. It's wonderful to carry on the legacy or perform a mission in someone's memory. But if that is all we have, it's not enough.

We need Someone to **Attack Death**. As Jesus stands before the cave sealed with a stone, His anger flares again. That stone is a challenge Death throws in His face. "Do you see this tomb Jesus?" Death mocks. "I have your friend Lazarus in here. You think you've come to beat me? I have a tomb just like this one waiting for You over that mountain in Jerusalem. Before you know it I'll have You safely sealed away in the grave too." Death throws down the gauntlet. Now comes the death-defying feat.

"Take away the stone," Jesus ordered. Shock rips through the mourners.

"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." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (John 11:39-40).

Then, with the same voice which called Light out of darkness and scattered stars and planets, Jesus cries, "Lazarus come out!" And there at the mouth of the cave is a dead

man walking. "Take off the grave clothes," Jesus orders the shocked witnesses, "and set him free" (John 11:44).

Jesus shows us the way to grieve. He does not hold back the tears like a stoic. The full range of emotion pours forth from Him: anger, agitation, sorrow. He grieves with Mary and Martha. Where is God when you hurt? He is alongside you sharing your pain and tears. When you are tempted to shake your fist at God and say, 'Lord if you had only been here this wouldn't have happened,' remember, He is not late. He is already there.

Yet there is one more lesson: eternal life begins today. The life of those who die in the Lord is not ended but changed. Eternal life begins now in this world and goes on, through death, into the next. How do we know? Two miles from Lazarus' tomb is another empty tomb from which the stone was rolled away. Because that tomb is empty we are filled with hope now. Because that tomb is empty we are filled with life now. Because that tomb is empty we can join the Apostle Paul and say,

Death is swallowed up in victory. O death where is your victory? O death where is your sting? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! (I Corinthians 15:54-57).

It was one of the saddest sights I have ever seen. I walked into the Intensive Care floor of Doylestown hospital after Sunday morning services to find a woman lying in bed, tethered to a number of monitors and machines. Her mother, husband and two teenage boys were in the room. Though they were members of the church this was the first time I met them. The woman was in a coma. The family was in tears. One day she was healthy, the next – completely unconscious from a disease the doctors could not diagnose. Their best guess was encephalitis. And it was Mother's Day. Her sons were so upset they were afraid to touch her. Gently I asked them to come near, we joined hands and prayed over her.

The next day I went back and saw her husband Chuck sitting at her bedside. With amazing confidence in his voice he said, "Beth is going to be alright." "How do you know?" I asked. "Last night I went home and opened my Bible and the first thing I read was from John 11. It 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' (John 11:4). She's going to be fine and God will get the glory." I didn't want to doubt him but the situation did not look good. Even the doctors gently suggested the family prepare themselves.

Yet gradually, slowly, miraculously, Beth came out of the coma. As Chuck predicted, she was completely healed and God received all the glory. Some time later, I asked Chuck what he would have done if Beth did not recover. He said, "I'd cry. I'd mourn. And then I'd look forward to seeing her in heaven."

Come to Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life.

And don't be late.