

Hope in suffering

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[0:00] We've been in a series this Lent following the lectionary readings in John. And John is showing us these vignettes, these encounters that Jesus has with various people.

! And as he tells us these encounters, we wonder why is he picking these and not any of the other innumerable encounters that he could have chosen. And the reason, he makes explicit in chapter 20 of his gospel, he says this, very plain, puts his cards on the table.

These things are written that you may believe, and that by believing you may have life in his name. In other words, these aren't just stories about other people who lived a long time ago encountering Jesus. These are stories that are written and shared because they're invitations for us to encounter Jesus. You know, when we come to church, when we open God's Word, when we kneel in the early morning hours for prayer, I wonder how often we do that with an expectation that we're actually going to encounter someone. That we're actually going to come face to face with an almost unfathomable being.

Today, we meet two women, Mary and Martha, who encounter Jesus in the midst of their grief. It's not a surprise. Grief is often one of the primary places where people encounter Jesus.

And we're going to look at this story together. It's filled with mystery. We're going to do the best we can with the time we have, and then we're going to talk about what this means for us. Let's pray.

Our Lord in heaven, we are here this morning, and whatever we came in the door expecting, we know that we're on dangerous ground because we might actually come face to face with you.

[1:57] And we know from these stories that if and when that happens, everything's going to change. And Lord, whether we know it or not, that's what we most need. And Lord, we pray that by your grace, through these written words, we would come face to face with the living word, Jesus Christ. We pray this in his name. Amen.

So there's a man named Lazarus. Lazarus has two sisters, Mary and Martha. They live in Bethany. We know from the scriptures that Jesus is very close to this family. I think it's safe to say that when he comes into Bethany, he often stays with them. They host dinners where they invite people into their home to spend time with Jesus. So they're very close. You might say they're some of Jesus' best friends. And at this point in the story, Jesus is not in Bethany. He's two days journey east on the other side of the Jordan River in a more remote part of the country.

And Lazarus gets sick, and it's not looking good. And so the sisters sin for Lazarus, presumably, I'm sorry, they sin for Jesus, presumably expecting that as soon as Jesus hears that Lazarus is sick, he'll drop whatever he's doing, he'll cross the Jordan, he'll come, and he'll heal Lazarus.

They've seen him do it a hundred times. So they send word to Jesus. When Jesus hears the news, he says something very odd to his disciples. He says, this sickness will not end in death.

No, it's for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it. Now, if you're Jesus' disciples and he says this, you're assuming he's about to drop everything and he's about to go and he's about to heal Lazarus. But instead, Jesus waits two more days before departing. He waits two more days. And by the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been dead for four days.

[3:45] There was a Jewish superstition that after somebody died, the spirit of that person would hover around the body for two or three days and that there was a hope that that person might be able to be resuscitated if they could coax the spirit back into the body. But after four days, there was no longer any hope. It's kind of like if you've seen the Princess Bride and, you know, Miracle Max, and he talks about the difference between being mostly dead and being all dead. For three days,

according to this superstition, you're mostly dead. And then, but on the fourth day, you're all dead.

There's no possibility of resuscitation of any kind. And so the sisters, it's been four days, the sisters are utterly devastated. And when they hear that Jesus has arrived, it's interesting.

Martha, true to her nature, immediately runs out to go try to find Jesus. Mary stays at home. We don't know why. We're not given a reason. But I can imagine, given their devastation and given what we know of their personalities, it could be that Mary is so upset. And maybe she's so upset with Jesus. You can imagine her saying something like, I can't even bear to see him right now. Martha approaches Jesus and says, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Then she says, but I know now that even now, God will give you whatever you ask.

And commentators agree there's more than a note of reproach in her tone. And I think it's worth stopping and just asking how many of us can identify with Martha.

[5:16] Because here she's saying what most everyone, including me, what most of us say in the midst of our grief. Some of you haven't really been through, you're too young to have gone through a major time of mourning or grief and loss. But at some point you will. Those of us who have been alive a little longer know what it's like to be in the midst of this grief and the kinds of questions that bubble up to the surface in the face of cancer, in the face of infertility or miscarriage or unwanted singleness or chronic pain or loss or death. There's this question that sort of bubbles up in different forms. Lord, if you have the power to do something about this, why don't you? That's it. Lord, if you can do something about this thing that I'm feeling, why don't you? If you can do something about this person that I love and I'm watching them suffer, why don't you? How could you let this happen? The truth is, we know, Jesus could have healed

Lazarus with a word, with a thought. He didn't need to travel to Bethany to heal Lazarus. He could have done it the moment he heard he was sick. In fact, he didn't even need to be told he was sick. We assume he probably already knew he was sick. So why doesn't he act? He's healed all of these other people. Why not one of his closest friends? And John actually gives us a hint as to the answer, and I want you to pay attention to this. Verse 5, Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, so when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. And then he said to his disciples, let us go back to Judea.

Notice what John does not say. He does not say he loved them. However, he stayed two more days. He says he loved them, so he stayed two more days.

I remember the first time I realized this, and it was like getting hit with a two by four. He loved them, so he stayed two more days. The delay is not in spite of his love. The delay is somehow because of his love.

[7:49] Johnny Erickson Tada was paralyzed from the neck down at age 17 in a diving accident. And if you know anything about her life, she's endured more suffering than most of us ever will. And she spent years wrestling with God over this. And through her grief, she found that she was able to encounter and experience Christ in powerful and life-transforming ways. And she has since become a source of hope and encouragement for thousands of people who are facing their own various forms of suffering. And now when Johnny looks back on her accident, here's what she says.

Sometimes God allows what he hates to accomplish what he loves. Sometimes God allows what he hates to accomplish what he loves. That's exactly what Jesus is doing here.

Jesus allows Lazarus to die because he intends to use his death to reveal the truth about himself to people like us.

When Mary confronts him and says, if you had been here, he wouldn't have died, Jesus responds and says, your brother will rise again. I'm sorry, Martha. And Martha hears this and thinks that he's talking about a belief that was prevalent among the Pharisees. They said, well, one day there will be a kind of general resurrection.

At the end of time, God's going, you know. And so she says, yeah, yeah, yeah. I know. I know what the Pharisees teach. Yeah, I believe that. One day I'll see him again. And Jesus says essentially,

no, you don't understand.

[9:32] He says, resurrection is not just something I do. Resurrection is who I am. I am resurrection. I am life. And if you know me and you believe in me, the people who believe in me no longer have to worry about death. And we can imagine Martha taking a step back, realizing that she has vastly underestimated this man who has stayed in her home and eaten food from her table.

And then Jesus leans in and he asks her very directly and very personally, do you believe this? Can you imagine if you were to encounter Jesus in all of your anger and all of your grief and he were to respond that way and then he were to lean in and look you right in the eye and say, do you believe this? How would you respond?

And she says, I believe that you're the Messiah, the Son of God who is to come into the world. And then Martha sends for her sister Mary saying, the teacher's here and he's calling for you.

You can imagine Jesus saying, where's Mary? She normally comes out to see me. Where is she? Well, she's still at home. Go get her. So Mary comes and falls at Jesus' feet and says the exact same thing as Martha. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But Jesus gives a very different response to Mary than he does Martha. When he sees Mary weeping and then he looks up and all of these people who have come to support her, the Jews are wonderful. They have beautiful traditions of grieving in solidarity with one another. I think we in our sort of Western American context have so much to learn from people who actually know how to grieve well. And so all of these people are there and Jesus looks and he sees all of their faces and he sees right in the middle Mary and she's on the ground at his feet and they're all weeping. And it says in the text that we read that he's deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And with all due respect, that's a very sanitized translation. What it actually implies in the Greek is that he's shaking with anger.

Maybe it makes us uncomfortable to think of, you know, the lamb, the shepherd, you know, gentle Jesus shaking with rage. But that's what it says here. He's shaking with anger. And then one of the most profound verses in all of Scripture, it says Jesus wept. Now, immediately it raises questions.

[11:59] Why would the Lord of life, why would the man who has just said, this is not end in death, your brother will rise again, I am resurrection, I am life, do you believe in this? Why would he then weep in the face of Lazarus in the tomb? Does he not believe his own words? Does he not believe that this is going to happen? People have debated this for centuries. I believe that Jesus weeps because Jesus is perfect. Because this is what a perfect human being does in the face of grief and loss and death.

You know, a lot of people in our culture, especially men, have been taught that maturity means being strong and keeping yourself together and not getting all emotional. Crying is what weak people do, or it's what children do. Crying as an adult means that you can't handle life. If you're a Christian, it means that you lack faith. You know, don't you believe in the resurrection? Don't you believe that this is true? So why are you crying? Jesus is the most mature, perfect, powerful being there is.

He's the one who raised the mountains. He's the one who fills the oceans. And yet here he is weeping. And then after he weeps, and after he shakes with rage, then he goes to the tomb. Then he has the stone rolled away. And then he calls out, Lazarus, come out. And you can imagine the confusion as Lazarus walks out of the tomb and says, still wrapped in the burial linens, still has his face wrapped. And he sort of comes out, you know, obviously the most disoriented person there, having no idea what just happened. And then it starts to become clear why Jesus, because he loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus, decides to wait two more days. He wanted to be clear. He wanted there to be no doubt that Lazarus was dead, that he was all dead.

So that when he raised him to life again, there could be only one explanation. The power and the glory of God at work.

Crystal clear. So what does all of this mean? Why would John take this encounter and offer it to us? In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul writes to Christians, grieve, but don't grieve as those without hope.

[14:53] I think Paul is saying here that when it comes to grief, there's two ways that we can go off the rails. One mistake we can make is to not grieve. What we were saying a moment ago, to stuff the feelings down, to

minimize the pain, to distract ourselves, to numb ourselves, to act as though everything's okay, to put on a strong face. But the other way we can go off the tracks is to grieve in a way where we come on board. Right? So if you make the mistake of not grieving, sooner or later, those feelings that you're stuffing down, those feelings that you are trying to suppress, they're going to come back. They don't go, feelings like that don't go away. It might be 20 years later, but they're going to come back. They don't go away. And if you've ever grieved, you know how weird it is. You can go for months and feel okay, and then you're standing in the frozen food section at Trader Joe's, and you're holding a bag of frozen peas in your hand, and all of a sudden, you come undone. And a wave of grief crashes over you. It feels like you're going to drown.

So one mistake is to not grieve, but the other mistake is to grieve in a way where we become entirely unmoored. We lose all sense of perspective. We lose all sense of what's true and real and good and beautiful. We feel overwhelmed. And for some people, grief can sort of become an identity.

It can become a new sense of who you are. There can be a sense that it's never going to change or get better. Jesus Christ makes it possible for us to grieve but without losing hope. Because the kind of hope that Jesus offers is a very unique kind of hope. It is resurrection hope. It's resurrection hope. And the author of Hebrews says that resurrection hope is a sure and steadfast anchor for the soul. And that's what you need when you're grieving. The job of an anchor is to keep you firmly rooted in place. That's exactly what we need when we're grieving. We need an anchor that anchors our soul in what is true so that no matter how bad the storm of grief gets, no matter how much it rages, and no matter how much it feels like we're getting swept away, we stay firmly rooted in what is true.

Right? So to believe in Christ, as he says, is to believe in the resurrection and the renewal of all things, that there's an anchor there that anchors your soul that continues to testify that one day everything sad will come untrue. That one day we will realize that heaven is not just some future bliss, that heaven, once attained, will work backward and turn even this agony into glory.

It's to believe that those who now sow weeping will one day reap with songs of joy. That's the anchor. If you know that deep in your soul, no matter how hard things get in this present moment, you know in your heart of hearts that this is but a light momentary affliction when compared to the eternal weight of glory.

[18:09] You know how the story ends. You know where all this is going. And when you have that kind of hope that anchors your soul, it actually sets you free to grieve.

You don't need to suppress it. You don't need to stuff it down. You don't need to drink it away, numb it, distract it into oblivion. You can just let those feelings come. You know, I like to think here that when Jesus weeps, it's not some sort of, you know, sort of demure, elegant, that he's ugly crying. You know? And there's something deeply comforting. I may sound like I'm being irreverent here, but I think there's something deeply comforting for me when I think about Jesus ugly crying next to Mary.

A man who's simply allowing those feelings to flow freely. And I think that being able to do that at times is absolutely crucial for the healing of our souls.

Sometimes the most appropriate response to life in this world is to shake with anger. Sometimes the most mature response to life in this world is to weep.

[19:18] And it's necessary for healing, friends, because you can't think your feelings. You have to feel your feelings. And most of you, with all due respect, are so smart that you forget this.

I forget this. We think that we can think our way out of our feelings, that we can rationalize our way out of our grief. It doesn't work. You can know the right theology in your head, but that's not what you need.

The theology is the anchor, yeah. But knowing and feeling are two different things. You can't think your way out of grief. Even with all the right theological frameworks and knowledge and terminology, the only way to deal with feelings is to, guess what, feel them.

And the most mature people are the ones who know this. You know, Jesus is the strongest, most mature human ever to have lived, and he weeps. And that tells us that the strongest, most mature people are the ones who are most like Jesus, and they're the ones who can enter into grief honestly and directly.

They're the ones who don't suppress their emotions or numb themselves. You know, a lot of people make the mistake of thinking that Christians, if we really believe in Jesus and the resurrection, that we wouldn't weep.

[20:27] I attended a funeral many years ago, and they thought that the, there were very specific instructions around the funeral that there was to be no weeping and no crying because we all know where this person is going, and so this needs to be a celebration and a party, and they brought in a band, and we were all instructed to be happy and to celebrate.

You can imagine how that party went. It was a weird party. It was a bizarre party. I'm an introvert. All parties are kind of weird to me, but this one was especially weird and odd because it was emotionally dishonest.

Nobody wanted to dance and clap, and we all knew it was true, but we wanted to cry, and I think everybody went, and they put on a brave face, and then they left early, and then they went and cried. Christians should be the best at weeping, right?

It's our belief in Jesus and the resurrection that frees us to weep. So I want to apply this in a couple of ways with the time that we have left. First, I believe this shows us something very essential about the heart of God.

God is not distant from our suffering. God is not the kind of God who stands back and says, well, I'm sure it'll all work out. You know, God is not the kind of God who says, well, if you just had a little more faith, if your faith was up here and set it down here, then you'd be able to handle this better.

[21:55] Whatever you might be going through right now, whatever you have gone through over the past few years, whatever you might go through over this coming year, know that whenever you shake with anger and you weep in response to the brokenness of this world and the suffering that has caused you and your life and those you love, I believe this shows us that Christ is weeping alongside you and that Christ feels that righteous indignation at the brokenness of the world.

And if there's anyone who hates it more than us, it's him. So I believe that when we pray to God, we can know that in Jesus, Jesus is weeping alongside us, with us, for us.

What flows out of that is this second implication that I, and I think this is very true, because of this, Christians above all people should be the kind of people who know how to weep with those who weep.

Christians should be people who, you know, when you're going through something, you think, if you're not a Christian, man, who are the Christians in my life? Because I need somebody who really knows how to weep with me right now.

You know, when we're with somebody who's going through a hard time, it can be very tempting because we're nervous and we often, it makes us uncomfortable and we don't know what to say. And so we can offer platitudes as a way to kind of fill that awkward space between because you don't know what else to say.

[23:21] And so you say, you know, well, you know, everything happens for a reason. Or you say, well, you know, I know it's hard now, but life goes on. Or you say, well, you know, be strong. I'm sure you'll get through this. And I remember one time being with somebody and they were telling me what was, you know, something, stuff that was hard going on.

And I said, well, I'm sure it's all gonna work out. She immediately goes, well, how the hell do you know that? And she was exactly right. I said, actually, I don't.

You're right. I'm sorry I said that. You know, I've struggled with, I may have shared this before. I've struggled with some pretty severe bouts of depression over the course of my life.

And I know that when people say things like this to me, it makes me wanna crawl out of my own skin. And yet we find ourselves saying it because we're nervous.

What we need to remember here is that Mary doesn't really need words. Martha needs a theological correction. Mary doesn't. And I think there's a lot of Marys out there. She just needs someone to sit down beside her and be sad with her.

[24:34] She needs to know she's not alone in her grief. And that's what Jesus does. You know, I learned this very, very unexpectedly years ago.

I was having beers with another friend and he was, he had a very, you know, DC. People have their niche jobs and very highly specific contexts. And this guy's trying to explain to me the ins and outs of all the things that happened that led to him feeling really hurt and rejected and betrayed in his job.

And it's one of those jobs where he spent 30 minutes kind of explaining it all to me. And at the end, I just have to confess, I just had no idea what he was talking about. I mean, I, what I did know is that he was really hurt and really upset and felt betrayed, but I had no idea how it all got there, you know?

And I was sitting there thinking, you know, he's asked his pastor to come have a beer. He's looking for advice. He's looking for guidance. He's looking for wisdom. And I'm the pastor. It's my job to offer him these things.

And so I, but I have no, like I didn't, and I didn't want to ask him to explain it all again because then he would, you know, then he's like, man, I really made the wrong call hanging out with you. And so I just say, well, honestly, I don't know what to tell you to do.

[25:45] I have no idea how to advise you, but if it makes any difference, I can just sit here and be sad with you and maybe absorb some of the pain. And inside I'm thinking, you're such an idiot.

And I'm like, this guy's thinking, why did I come to him? You know, I should go to somebody who actually knows something, you know, and understand, you know, and can actually give me some direction here. And then I just sort of said, well, okay.

And I just thought of that. Well, I just whiffed it. Okay, you know, life goes on. And then three years later, three or four years later, they were moving out of town. And he said, by the way, I just wanted to tell you, there was this one time where you said something and it really made a difference in my life.

And I'm like, well, which sermon was it? You know, like which, you know, like I'm waiting, like which of my, the many pearls did you, you know. And he goes, this is that time that you didn't say anything.

It was that time when you just said, I don't know what to say, but I can just sit here with you. And I really learned something, you know. I learned that he didn't need advice. He didn't need guidance.

[26:48] He actually, I think, knew what he needed to do. He just wanted to know that he wasn't alone. He just wanted to know that there was somebody there who got it enough to be sad with him.

And I think almost anyone can offer that. It doesn't require expertise or training or licensure. Just a capacity to be sad. The last thing I'll say is that I think this shows us how important it is to decide what we personally believe about Jesus.

Even though Jesus raises Lazarus, eventually, friends, Lazarus dies again. Right? He raises Lazarus from death. Eventually, Lazarus is gonna die again.

And so what is the point of this miracle? Why raise Lazarus? Just so he has to go through the whole death process once more. Well, the point of this miracle is to reveal Jesus as he truly is.

To give Lazarus and Mary and Martha and all of the Jews standing by and all of us to confront us with the most important question we will face in this life, which is, do you believe this?

[28:07] Do you understand that Jesus is not just a rabbi? That he's not just a teacher? That he's not just a mighty prophet? That he's not just a soothsayer? That he's not just a life coach? That he's not just a historical oddity?

That he's not just a source of inspiration? Do you understand that he is resurrection? That he is life? Right?

Like Lazarus, we're all gonna die one day. And the single most important question we will face before we die, who is Jesus? Do we believe the claims that he makes about himself or not?

Everything hinges on our answer. Let's pray. Let's pray. Our God and Father above, you were there that day.

You knew what it was like. In Jesus Christ, you know what it is to weep and to mourn and to shake with anger. And yet, that is not the final word. We know that because of who you are, because of your heart and because of your son, Lord, as Jesus says, this will not end in death.

[29:16] We know that one day death will give way to life. Just as now, life gives way to death. One day, death will give way to life. That life is the final word.

By your grace, may we be there to celebrate on that day. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Thank you.