

The story of Mary and Martha mourning the death of their brother Lazarus is an ordinary story. I say ordinary not to belittle their experience, but to take this story out of the realm of the extraordinary occurrences of the bible and into the world that we are familiar with. It is ordinary to experience profound grief at the loss of a loved one. It is ordinary for friends and family to descend from far and wide, attempting to bring comfort and consolation – or at least a casserole. It is ordinary that, in times of trouble, we turn to our most closely-held beliefs: about God’s love, about the power of connection, about resurrection into new life.

These are not ordinary times. The pace of change that we are experiencing is not ordinary: it was only three Sundays ago that you all were here in the sanctuary; it was only two Fridays ago that your kids went to school in person. These are not ordinary times. You know this from the rate of infection and death in our country and around the world. You know this from the surge in people filing for unemployment assistance and from the turmoil in the stock market. And you know that these are not ordinary times because everywhere people are responding in extraordinary ways. A Congress that has been gridlocked for over a decade has authorized spending an unprecedented amount of money. Churches and businesses and schools that have always said that digital was not for them have found themselves meeting online – and, despite the challenges, have found it to be meaningful and surprising in all kinds of wonderful ways. In this time of physical distance, many of us have increased our contact with the people we love – yes, those we live with, but also through more texts and phone calls to our loved ones across the country and world. These are not ordinary times, and we are not responding in ordinary ways.

But even in the midst of these extraordinary circumstances, this familiar story of a family in grief is alive for us. Because however ordinary the experience of mourning a loved one, and however varied our experiences of loss, there is something that all grief has in common: it is earth-shaking. Because that’s what grief is: it is the process of adjusting to a new world, a world with a gaping hole where someone – or something – we love is supposed to be.

In this story, Jesus is away, preaching in another town, when he gets news that his good friend Lazarus is ill. Lazarus’s sisters, Martha and Mary, tell Jesus to come home, but Jesus declines: he decides to stay where he is -- to do nothing -- for two days, because, he says, “This illness does not lead to death.” Here Jesus is the *eternal* optimist – in the long run, the *really* long run, everything will turn out just fine.

Eventually, Jesus does make his way to Bethany, where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. By this point, Lazarus has been buried for four days. This is enough time for everyone else to be there: they’ve made the funeral arrangements, had the funeral, and now are making sure that Mary and Martha aren’t alone in their grief. Martha sees Jesus coming down the road, and she comes to meet him – not to greet her long-absent friend, but to express her righteous anger. “If you had been here,” she cries out, “my brother would not have died!” She is mad at him for not acting sooner. She knows how powerful Jesus is, and she is angry that he did not use his power to heal her brother before it was too late.

After this, Mary – who had stayed in the house – comes rushing out to Jesus. When she sees him, she has the same words: “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” She is weeping. Her friends and family, who came with her to see Jesus, are weeping. At this, Jesus is both deeply moved and deeply troubled. And so, Jesus weeps.

It is in this passage from the Gospel of John that we get some of our most powerful language about Jesus and resurrection. Jesus himself says, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."* He turns to Martha and says, *"Do you believe this?"* "Yes!" she says. *"I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."*

But this affirmation of faith comes *before* we see Mary, the others, and Jesus weeping. Their grief is not a rejection of their beliefs. Their tears are not a sign that their faith is not strong. This most profound statement about the resurrection lies *right next to* the tears. Sometimes I think the Gospel message is complicated. Here I find it astoundingly, beautifully simple: it doesn't matter how much you believe in eternal life, death still hurts.

Mary, Martha, and Jesus teach us a lesson to hold onto: it doesn't make you a bad Christian to grieve. It doesn't make your faith any less strong to weep over the future that has been lost.

It's okay to weep over staggering death tolls.

It's okay to mourn the loss of your daily commute, missing the chance to be alone or to have the simple freedom of getting out.

It's okay to be sad that the Olympics were canceled and that we can't go play with friends.

It's okay to be angry that, in a country where we thought we had everything, we don't even have enough protective equipment in our hospitals.

It's okay to feel lost without your normal routine.

It's okay to cry imagining your loved ones being sick and alone, even if they're just fine.

It’s okay to weep even if you believe in the innovation of scientists and the resilience of our country. It’s okay to mourn even if you are glad for the chance to reconnect with family. It’s okay to be angry even if you are amazed at communities coming together to care for one another.

It’s okay to grieve even if you believe in the resurrection. Mary, Martha, and Jesus teach us a lesson to hold onto: it doesn’t make you a bad Christian to grieve. It doesn’t make your faith any less strong to weep over the future that has been lost.

But there’s one more thing: this story does not end with weeping. This story – this story that I told you was an ordinary story – does, in fact, end in resurrection. We often think of resurrection as coming back to life. We can imagine that Lazarus could return to his life as if having had a strange, week-long dream of having been dead. Many of us have been talking about our post-Covid lives this way: “when this is all over” we say. It’s as if we’re Lazarus saying, “when I’ve awoken from this strange dream of having been dead.” But resurrection in the Christian tradition is not about a return to normal. Resurrection is about *transformation*. After Jesus’s resurrection, he did not go back to his life as he knew it before – he was transformed, and so was the Church.

We, too, are called to transformation, but we cannot be transformed unless we let go of what is being lost. We can imagine that Lazarus, Mary, and Martha are transformed by this resurrection: we can imagine that Lazarus might reassess his priorities, or that Mary will tell her brother that she loves him more often, or that Martha will newly commit herself to following Jesus. But we can only *imagine* the ways that they are transformed, because after Lazarus is raised from the dead, the narrative moves on to talking about something else. Which is to say:

transformation is still on the horizon, and we don’t know what it will bring. But if we follow their lead – if we run toward each other with our grief, if we are willing to weep for what might be lost – then we know that transformation is coming.