

*Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

*Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."*

*When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.*

*Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."*

*When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 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!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"*

*Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

Never invite Jesus to a funeral. Just don't do it. Never invite Jesus to a funeral, because as author and pastor Max Lucado points out, Jesus interrupted every funeral he ever attended.

Of course, in our story from John's gospel, by the time Jesus gets to Bethany, the hometown of his dear friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, he's far too late for Lazarus' funeral. The community has already gathered. The words have already been said. The prayers have already been offered. The songs have already been sung.

And Lazarus' body has been committed to its final resting place. Some of the friends and relations are still at the house, but others have already come and gone, and soon it will be time to start washing dishes and writing the thank you notes.

And so when Jesus finally arrives in town, and he sees the fresh tears on the faces of his dear friends Mary and Martha, John tells us twice that he was "deeply disturbed." But this is one of those places where our English Bible translations often miss a detail when translating from the Greek. For the word for "deeply disturbed" here really has more of the sense of "felt punched in the guts" or "so upset he was sick to his stomach."

And then comes one of the shortest verses in the whole bible. Jesus began to weep.

Personally, I find that verse to be one of the most comforting words in all of Scripture. So much of the gospel of John to this point has painted a picture of Jesus as a supernatural figure. He can read other people's thoughts. He can slip through crowds who want to grab him. He always seems to be at least two steps ahead of everyone else. Thus far in John's gospel, we've seen much of the fully divine side of Jesus.

But here, as Jesus stands at the graveside of his friend Lazarus and weeps, John shows us that Jesus is also fully human.

Here's Jesus, who is God-in-the-flesh, God-come-to-earth. And here he stands at the grave of his friend and cries.

Who among us hasn't been so beset by grief that we've literally had a stomach ache? Who among us hasn't felt the deep pain deep in the center of our being when confronted with an overwhelming sense of loss?

And my goodness, friends, have we all been living through a long season of deep grief and sadness and loss. Whether we've been directly affected by the COVID-19 virus or not, rarely in human history has one event affected the entire globe at once. You may recall that on May 24, 2020, about two months into the onset of the pandemic, the banner headline of *The New York Times* said this: U.S. Deaths Near 100,000 – an incalculable loss. The subhead read, “They were not simply names on a list. They were us.” Little did we know then how much larger that already devastatingly large number would continue to grow and how much longer our lives would be disrupted to one extent or another.

Of course, the images that are coming out of Ukraine and neighboring countries are also enough to hit us right in the guts.

But not only are we grieving as a nation, many of us are grieving a deep loss in our own lives – the death of a spouse, an estrangement from an adult child, the loss of a business, the death of a dream, the sense that death is very near at hand.

And one thing we know about grief - people grieve in different ways for different reasons and for different lengths of time.

We know that Dr. Kubler Ross described the stages of grief - denial, anger, bargaining, despair, and acceptance, but we know that those stages are not linear, and it's possible to experience one or more of them in very close proximity to one another or even at the same time. Grief can subside for a bit, and then the smallest thing can bring it rushing back like a flash flood.

So one way or another, we find ourselves living in a culture beset by grief.

And the truth is, our culture that doesn't do grief very well. We learn from a very early age that if you laugh, the world laughs with you, but if you cry, and you cry alone.

We even wonder sometimes if we're supposed to be living our best lives now, if the struggle or pain we're experiencing is a sign that we're unfaithful or if God is somehow displeased with us. Such a notion might sell some books and draw some television viewers, but it's not at all biblical.

Jesus wept. Jesus was moved in his guts. Jesus shows us that deep grief is not a sign of weakness or cowardice or an abandonment of faith. Jesus shows us that deep grief is a sign that you have the capacity for deep and abiding love.

We live and move and have our

being in a community that is experiencing so much grief and pain and loss. So for heavens' sake, be gentle with yourselves, and with one another. Remember, not all people grieve the same things for the same reasons or for the same length of time.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that the church is called to be a different kind of community, to be countercultural in the best sense of that word. He reminds us that when one rejoices, all rejoice together, and when one weeps, all weep together, for together, we are the body of Christ.

But even as we grieve, we do not grieve as those without hope. There's a word that caught my ear in the conversation between Martha and Jesus. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But *even now*, I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

And Jesus replied to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, *even though they die*, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Maybe the gospel in this story, and the good news for you and me and the whole world, can be boiled down to that one little word – even.

There is far too much pain and grief and suffering in the world today. But *even now*, Jesus weeps with us.

The season of Lent stretches before

us, and the cross and the tomb are on the horizon. But *even now*, Easter is coming.

*Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil, for God is with us.*

I am the resurrection and the life, said Jesus. Do you believe this?

Yes, Lord, we believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.