

It has been said death is the great equalizer. This saying is a reminder that all people will one day die. While this is indeed true, we can also say all people will experience grief and sorrow over the death of a loved one. So maybe we can say grief is also the great equalizer. For some, the death of a friend or loved one may have been years ago. For others, like myself, following the recent death of my Dad, grief is fresh.

Today's Gospel lesson tells the story of Jesus and his friends experiencing grief coming from the death of a loved one.

The story begins with Jesus being somewhere other than where he needed to be. Jesus' friends, Martha and Mary are in trouble. Their brother Lazarus is dying. They send Jesus a message hoping he can come right away to help. But instead of dropping everything and going to his friends, he stays away two more days. Jesus didn't even make an attempt to attend Lazarus' funeral held some 24 hours after he died.

Then after announcing Lazarus is dead, Jesus decides to go to his friends. His disciples are puzzled why he would go now. Jesus gives us a clue something important is going to happen when he says, "For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe."

As Jesus is on his way to Bethany, the real drama begins. Jesus arrives in time to grieve and mourn, but too late to apparently be of any help. Martha comes out and meets Jesus on the road. Martha lets her grief and frustration out. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But now I know that God will give you whatever you ask him." Martha's words are biting. They are desperate. She is filled with heartache. We have all felt grief like Martha. At times we have all felt abandoned or ignored by God. At times we have all suffered and prayed for God to act and all we hear is silence.

Jesus lets Martha express her hurt, her pain, her anger. Jesus lets her share her despair and grief. Jesus could have done something, maybe he still can. Jesus tells Martha, "Your brother will rise again." Imagine the God of the universe, speaking to you directly after a loved one has died. "Your loved one will rise again." You and I would take these words as words of hope and comfort. But Martha is too lost in her grief to fully understand. She doesn't comprehend who is speaking to her. She doesn't fully grasp what Jesus is saying. Her response to him is something all Jewish people of that day believed. "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Martha gives the standard response, but one also accepting Lazarus' death. Martha is clinging to hope as best she can, but she doesn't see the immediate truth of Jesus' statement. Then Jesus gives her, and us the promise, "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." Yet Martha still doesn't seem to fully understand what Jesus is saying.

Jesus continues towards Bethany. Now Mary, Martha's sister comes out to meet him. She falls on her knees and says the same thing as her sister, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

After hearing Mary echo the words of her sister, it is Jesus who now understands. These two women cannot see past their grief and sorrow. They can only experience the fresh grief of their brother's death. They only wish for their brother to be alive. All they can see is the hole their dead brother has left in their life, in their world.

This time, Jesus doesn't try to remind them of who he is. He doesn't tell them what he is about to do. He simply shares in their grief. He is moved by their heartache and despair. Jesus knows what he is going to do, but the deep grief of Mary and Martha touches him deeply. Then we hear some of the most important words found in the Bible. Jesus "began to weep" over the death of his friend.

We have all been there. Grieving after the death of a loved one is what it means to be human. Grief is the great equalizer.

While a death of a loved one is never a good thing, the story of the death of Lazarus teaches us something. Maybe it isn't only the disciples, or Mary or Martha who needed to see Jesus' power at work. Maybe Lazarus didn't die only so we can see a miracle. Maybe he died so we can see Jesus experienced grief firsthand. Through all this, we know Jesus truly understands what it means to grieve the death of a loved one.

Once Jesus knows what it is like grieve like we do, Jesus goes to Lazarus' tomb. Jesus has learned grief, but Mary, Martha, the disciples, the crowds, and us, are about to learn death does not have the final word.

As Jesus stands in front of Lazarus' tomb, he says, "Take away the stone." Martha protests. Martha the one who just confessed Jesus is the Messiah, the one promised by God to save God's people says, "There will be a stench for he has been dead four days."

Martha, stuck in her grief, doesn't have any hope of seeing her brother this side of death. Full of grief himself, Jesus gently scolds Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believed..." Jesus told her he is the Resurrection and the Life, and we are about to see what that really means. Jesus then says, "Lazarus come out."

And using the image of what happens on the first Easter, the stone is rolled away. The promise Jesus makes to Martha "your brother will rise again" comes true. Lazarus walks out of the tomb. his hands, feet as well as his face, were wrapped with strips of cloth, following the burial customs of that day. Seeing him, Jesus tells the people, "unbind him and let him go." And with this, Lazarus lives again.

In today's Old Testament lesson, we hear of another time of death, another time where there appeared to be no hope. When Ezekiel saw his vision, the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. They also were waiting and wondering if God would come to them and help them. It is easy to see these verses make a similar point as the Gospel lesson. Ezekiel saw the vision of the dry bones brought back to life and told the people of Israel there was hope a new life was coming. In the same way Jesus came to bring life and hope to all those who trust in him, even in the face of suffering and death.

With all of the uncertainty, with all of the fears, with all of the suffering the world is going through because of the Covid-19 virus, our world could be considered a place of dry bones. With all the sickness and deaths due to the virus, not to mention the other diseases, natural disasters, and accidents that are still taking place, it would be to give up hope.

Because Jesus is the resurrection and the life, because God's spirit is with you, even in the valley of dry bones, there is hope. And as I recently saw in an email, hope can't be quarantined.

Every day the TV news has a story or two of hope, a story of people giving of themselves to help those around them. In this time of disruption because of Covid-19, I believe Jesus is calling you and me to live out the hope we have by caring for our neighbors while keeping ourselves safe. Might I suggest you take a few minutes and either text or call a person who is a first responder, or a medical worker, or one who works in a grocery store or in some other essential service and thank them for being there for us. Maybe you can call a friend who lives alone just to let them know you are thinking of them. Or you can bring a measure of hopes to the children in the Department of Juvenile Justice system who cannot go home. Information how you can do this is available on our congregation's Facebook page.

Yes, while we are sheltering in place, there are many ways to show we have hope.

We are told things may get worse before they get better because of the virus. No matter how difficult life becomes, remember Jesus promises to always be with you. His presence may not be easily seen, but as the sun is always shining above the clouds, on even the darkest of days, Jesus is with you.

So instead of wondering and waiting to see if Jesus will come to you as Martha and Mary did, look to Jesus on the cross to see God's love for you. Trusting in Jesus does not promise you will never feel grief, sorrow or pain again. Nor does it mean the Covid-9 virus and its impact on our lives will go away anytime soon.

Yes, in these times of uncertainty and upheaval in the world, in your life, when you feel like the dry bones of Ezekiel, take heart. You are not alone. Jesus cares for you. Jesus is with you for now and for all eternity for he is indeed the resurrection and the life for now and for all eternity. Amen.