

5 Lent March 26, 2023
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Rolling the Stone
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Living with grief can feel terribly heavy, like an enormous weight has been put on you. Comedian and actor Billy Crystal described grief this way in his deeply touching and funny one man show *700 Sundays* where he talked about how he processed the grief he felt after his father died when he was only fifteen years old. After his father's death, Billy Crystal said it felt like he had to carry a huge stone boulder around with him everywhere he went and it made it impossible for him to fully engage with life; to care about his schoolwork, his friends, his family, even sports. Everywhere he looked all he could see was who was not there, and that felt as heavy as an enormous boulder.

A friend of mine who is a marriage and family therapist, and teacher also uses a boulder to explain how grief feels. She says that when grief is new, it feels enormous, heavy, and as impossible to move as a boulder. Everywhere you go, it feels like you have to push this boulder – figuratively speaking of course – which is hard, emotional work, and is one reason why people feel tired in those early days of grief. As life goes on, and you keep pushing the boulder, day after day after day after day, gradually, slowly, it gets smaller and smaller and smaller. Until the day it is as small and smooth as a pebble. Then you can bend down, pick it up, and put it in your pocket so you can carry it with you wherever you go. That is how grief transforms from a burden to a comfort, something that is no longer in your way, but has become part of you.

Today's Gospel reading is about grief. All 45 verses are heavy with grief, like the boulder or stone covering Lazarus' tomb. The grief in today's Gospel is primarily that of two women, two sisters, Martha and Mary who were grieving the death of their brother. What is remarkable about their grief is how through it, they came so close to resurrection life, they were transformed by it. This makes them not only exemplary followers of Jesus, they are also models of faith we can learn from and find inspiration for our own lives.

Today's Gospel did not begin with death. It began with a message from the two sisters about their brother's illness. We also learned Jesus cared deeply for Lazarus and his sisters. These were not causal friends or acquaintances; they were part of the kind of family you can create along the way of life. The word used to describe their relationship is love, the kind of love families of all kinds share.

Despite his love for this family, Jesus did not rush to their side. Lots of folks have trouble with this part of the story. Maybe you do too. Because it doesn't look like love the way many would describe it. But what we all need to remember is love is not a means to control people. God's love is bigger than that.

When Jesus finally showed up, Martha went to talk to him and at first, she didn't sound that different from Billy Crystal when he talked about how inadequate he found the rituals of mourning. All Martha could see was the death of her brother, even when looking at Jesus. That's normal and understandable. Jesus didn't not shame her. He listened to her with deep compassion. And at the same time, Jesus challenged Martha to let her grief draw her closer to who Jesus is. In their conversation, Martha revealed she understood the doctrine or academic understanding of resurrection. But Jesus responded by stating he is the resurrection. Jesus is not a doctrine. Jesus is a person. This is how he challenged Martha by saying the resurrection isn't only a theory or doctrine, it is a person. It is Jesus himself.

Biblical scholars like to remind us, this point is the pivotal moment in today's Gospel because the conversation between Martha and Jesus summarizes the main question of John's Gospel: Will the faithful continue to try and force Christ to fit their limited understanding of reality, religion and faith, even if those understandings are well intended, or will they allow the Risen Christ to change their minds and hearts, and receive the radical fullness of his grace? It's a powerful question. A deep question. One we still are invited into.

The question invites the possibility that through the sadness and pain of her grief, Martha could actually glimpse resurrection life on the other side of grief. That is what she did. It is Martha who in John's Gospel proclaimed belief in Jesus not as a nice guy, not as a teacher, not as a prophet. Martha proclaimed and believed Jesus is the resurrection.

Martha's sister Mary had a different encounter with Jesus. She gave Jesus her grief, and he received it. So much so Jesus did not shed one or two sympathetic tears, he wept. When presented with her sorrow, Jesus didn't tell Mary to pull herself together, he entered her grief with her. Love does that. Love isn't afraid of grief, or sorrow or sadness. Because grief is just one of the many forms love takes.

It was the love of God in Jesus that restored Lazarus to life. For clarity's sake, what happened to Lazarus is not the same resurrection of Jesus. The detail about how the author of the Gospel described Lazarus when he came out of the tomb helps us understand this. Even though life had been restored, Lazarus was still referred to as the dead man, and was described as still being bound with strips of cloth. His face was covered with the shroud. Like grief itself, Lazarus emerged from the tomb not being able to see and had to have all the death garments removed from him. Lazarus would need those garments again. However, when Jesus was raised those same garments were all that was in the tomb. Jesus was no longer wearing them and would never need them again.

While it might sound like a happy ending, the point of today's Gospel reading really isn't Lazarus' restoration of life. The point is God is the giver of life, not the one who takes it. Through Jesus' resurrection, death becomes part of life, not its end. The love God has for us is much too powerful to end in nothing. God is willing to show us this by dying with us and raising Jesus to new life.

That is why grief, as awful and heavy as it can feel, especially when it is new, can also – slowly, gradually, with the help of belief in Christ – be transformed into a lifelong comfort and new life.

If you find yourself feeling that heavy burden of grief today, perhaps you can find some comfort in knowing you aren't alone. Martha and Mary not only felt what you feel, they can show us how faith produces the endurance to roll those stone boulders of grief down to size. One way we can start is to share your grief with Jesus, let him enter your grief with you. Another step is to pray for those who show you compassion and be grateful for what you do have and remember that grief is part of love. Perhaps if we learn to practice this kind of gratitude, we'll find ourselves closer to the transformation resurrection life can bring, and better recognize when it is in our midst.