

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
John 11:1-27
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Wrestling with Grief

Shortly after Dorman Holcomb passed, I took time to write down a few things about Dorman that I did not want to forget. And so I penned what I call Dormanisms. In other words, things that Dorman would say or do that were so typically him. For example...

When you would greet him each day and ask him how he was doing...he would always respond with "Just fine."

When you asked his opinion about this thing or that, he would first say "I don't know." And then proceed to tell you everything you wanted to know, didn't care to know, and then some. And finish by saying, "And that's all I know."

If something was disturbing, troublesome or disliked. He would exclaim, "That's phewie."

If you asked him to do something, which seemed like a daily event around here, he would always with respond with "Not a problem."

When he didn't particular care for something, he would grunt.

And when he was done with a conversation or topic that we were discussing during session and was ready to move on...he fidget in his seat and say, "And so..."

I laughed the other day remembering Dorman in this way.

But truth be told, I have never lost someone that I loved as much as I did Dorman Holcomb. He was my friend, my mentor, my partner in ministry, my main cheerleader and support, a father figure, and ski buddy who was always ready to play hooky and hit blue bird days at Timberline Lodge at Mt. Hood. He always loved hearing my stories about crazy hiking adventures. Losing Dorman has been one of the hardest things I've endured and something that I am still wrestling with in my grief.

So today that's what we are going to talk about...wrestling with grief and how that often goes hand in hand with our wrestling with God. Because we can't separate one from the other.

That's what we see in our scripture story today as we encounter Jesus, Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Jesus' good friend Lazarus had become very sick and eventually died. Mary and Martha had called out to Jesus to come and heal him, but Jesus chose not to and instead let him die. Not only were Mary and

Martha wrestling with grief, but they wrestled with why Jesus wouldn't do for them what they had clearly seen him do for other people.

Join me as we read from John 11:1-27 and we hear how this story plays out.

“Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

2 (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) **3** So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” **5** Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. **6** So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, **7** and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”

8 “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?”

9 Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light. **10** It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.”

11 After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”

12 His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” **13** Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

14 So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, **15** and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

16 Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. **18** Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, **19** and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. **20** When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

21 “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22** But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

23 Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

24 Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; **26** and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

27 “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

In Philip Yancey’s book, *Disappointment with God*, he shares a story about a young man who wrote a commentary on Job in the Old Testament. It was a very compelling book about maintaining faith in God amidst life’s adversity. The young man believed what he had written until some years later when he too faced a series of losses that he struggled to get beyond. Much later, he confessed to Yancey that he no longer believed what he had written.

As Yancey listened to countless stories of grief and loss, he settled on three key questions that no one asks aloud as they wrestle with God amidst grief.

Is God unfair? Is God silent? And is God hidden?

Or put in the context of today’s story, why didn’t Jesus heal Lazarus as he had so many other people? Why didn’t Jesus respond to Mary and Martha when their brother had become deathly ill? And why was Jesus no where to be found when he was needed most?

I believe we see answers to each of these questions in our story today.

First, why didn’t Jesus heal Lazarus as he had so many other people?

Right off the bat, Jesus told his disciples, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s son might be glorified through it.”

So there was an over arching purpose that God aimed to achieve which was greater than simply bringing Lazarus back to life. Think about it for a moment with me. How many other people can you name right now that Jesus either healed or brought back from the dead? I can’t remember many names that is for sure. But I certainly will never forget what he did for Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. The fact that this story still speaks to us today is remarkable.

I wonder then if there was another purpose that God had in store for Martha.

We’ve seen in past stories, how Martha was an expert at running the show, of getting things done, of being in control. And we Marthas know what that’s like. What we Martha’s hate most is when we are not in control. When we can’t fix things. When we can’t just get’r done! Can I get an AMEN from we Marthas? Ha, ha!

Folks, experiencing the death of a loved or a relationship is one of those moments when life as we know it comes to a complete stop. When we are no longer in the drivers seat. When God alone is in control. I tell people that the first year of grief is like walking through quicksand. It’s hard enough each day to remember to eat, let alone get through the myriad of tasks that need to be done.

Barbara Brown Taylor in *Learning to Walk in the Dark* states, “Step 1 of learning to walk in the dark is to give up running the show. Next you sign the waiver that allows you to bump into things that may frighten you at first. Finally you ask darkness to teach you what you need to know.”¹

Grief teaches us to stop. To feel deeply our loss. And to sit with it for a while.

I remember early in my chaplaincy training at the hospital during seminary when I walked into the room of a man my age who was dying of colon cancer. He was grieving. So as I tried to be helpful to him, I asked “Is there anything I can do to help?” He snarked back, “Yea, you got a cure for colon cancer!” That taught me to shut up and simply be present with those who were grieving.

My friends please be careful with your words as you comfort those who are grieving. Please never say to someone who has lost a loved one... “At least they are in a better place. Their suffering has ended. Or maybe God needed another angel.” Oh how I hate that one because it is so theological and biblically wrong.

These statements are harmful. They do not comfort someone in their loss. A friend who lost a parent as a child confessed that someone in their church told him that last statement...and what it did for him was to say...well if God needed her more than me...screw that God. I don’t want anything to do with him!

The only acceptable thing to say to someone in mourning is simply “I am so sorry for your loss.”

What we are to do... is to sit shiva with people. Sitting shiva is the ancient Jewish grief tradition. We sit with our grieving friends in silence for as long as they need. Typically that is a week. But we don’t try to explain away their pain or attempt to make things better.

We simply mourn with those who are mourning. We weep with them.

You see our temptation when faced with death, is that we want to do, to help, to fix...because it makes us feel better...when we feel so out of control.

Perhaps Jesus wanted Martha to sit with her grief for a while and escape her compulsion to always be needed. The only way she would ever do that was if her only brother died.

Was Jesus fair? No! Does Jesus have to be fair? No! Does Jesus owe us anything? No! The truth is that Jesus is free to act however Jesus so desires according to his will and his plan for our lives. Even if it means allowing death.

Second, why didn’t Jesus respond to Mary and Martha when their brother had become deathly ill? Was Jesus silent?

Again, No! Jesus was not silent. He spoke truth to Mary and Martha in their grief. He gave them what they needed, not what they wanted. They wanted their

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (NYC: Harper Collins Publishers, 2014)15.

brother to be alive. What they needed was the hope that more life existed beyond the grave...what they needed was just little bit of faith, even the size of a tiny mustard seed, that if they believed in Jesus that they would have everlasting life.

Remember what Jesus told his disciples before arriving in Bethany where his friends lived, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe."

Again we see that Jesus had different purposes for Lazarus' death. To bring other people to faith in him and spiritually bring them back to life from the grave.

Some of us sitting here today know what's like to sit in the tomb of grief and unbelief. It's a sad, scary, and hopeless place to not believe in Jesus. Because death seems final! But my friends, here's the good news. We don't need to have it all figured out. Even if we have a little bit of wonder that this story could be true is enough for Jesus to grow into full blown faith.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." In these beatitudes, spiritual poverty and grief are moved from the "loss" side of the ledger to the "gain" side, enabling those who suffer to view their hardships as blessings."²

The Prophet Isaiah wrote, "I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who called you by name."³

My friends, the cold hard truth is that Jesus, the creator and sustainer of all things, the author and perfecter of our faith, owes us nothing! He isn't obligated to answer to any of our gut wrenching questions as we wrestle with grief.

Does Jesus answer Martha's question about why he was unfair for not healing Lazarus as he had others? NO!

Does Jesus explain to her why he had been silent? NO!

Does Jesus justify why he chose to remain hidden for that entire week while Lazarus was sick and buried in the tomb? NO!

Jesus simply asks them and us a question. Do you still believe that "I am the resurrection and the life. That whoever who believes in me will live, even though they die; **26** and whoever lives by believing in me will never die?"

Church do we believe this?

Even Job of the Old Testament believed this. Though he suffered loss more than anyone else, he still cried out, "I know that my redeemer lives and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my

² Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 87.

³ Isaiah 45:3

flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes - I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!"⁴

I think God wants to give us that same assurance today.

And finally, why was Jesus no where to be found when he was needed most? From my own experience of learning to walk in the dark, I think what God is doing is weaning me from the romantic gushy feelings that had in my early faith life. Only in walking through darkness and grief can I mature to having a relationship of presence. That I just enjoy God for who God is and not dependent upon how God makes me feel or what God does for me.

It's like a marriage of two older people who simply enjoy each other's company for who they are and not necessarily for how they make each other feel or what they do.

There are things that we can only learn while in the dark. For example, "In the book of Genesis, God first created in darkness; light only came some time later."⁵

Or take a seed for example. It starts to grow in the dark hidden place of the earth. Or a baby that begins to grow in the darkness of a womb. Or Jesus coming to life at the resurrection in a cold dark tomb.⁶

Barbara Brown Taylor again exclaimed, "In the absence of any sense of God, I wish I had known that it was still possible to trust God."⁷

Even when we feel like God is no where to be seen, God is there, hidden, working miraculously behind the scenes.

If you are wrestling with grief today, there are four little booklets that I'd like to share with you written by the Stephen Ministries program. A Time to Grieve. Experiencing Grief. Finding Hope and Healing. And Rebuilding and Remembering. These are tremendously helpful in making sense of grief and to let us know that we are not alone. If you would like copies of these please see me after worship and I'll give some to you.

So here is the hope as we wrestle with grief.

Grief ought not last for ever. It will eventually go away. That is not to say that we truly ever get over the loss of losing someone we loved. No we just learn to wear our grief differently as time goes on. As the words of Psalm 30 speak so beautifully.

⁴ Job 19:25-27

⁵ Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 168.

⁶ IBID, 129.

⁷ IBID, 162.

“You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead;
 you spared me from going down to the pit.
Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people; praise his holy name.
For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime;
 weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.”

That is Good News! Amen!