

Lent 5: Show Us Your Power

Wildwood Mennonite Church // March 29, 2020

Music Leader: Audrey // Worship Leader: Joe

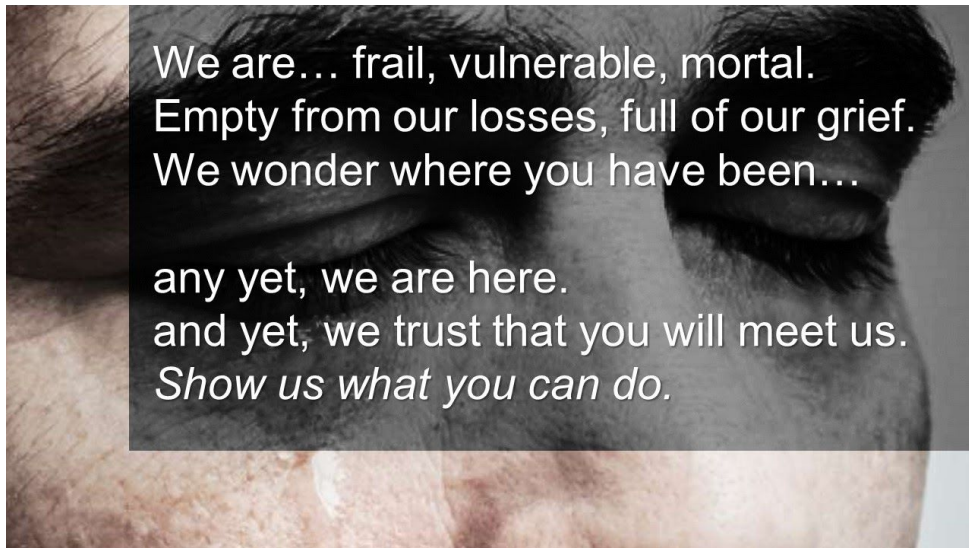
Jesus meets our tears and fears with compassion and incredible hope.

Welcome to Wildwood...

... or rather, thanks for welcoming us into wherever you are in this at-home worship format!. I don't know about you, but I'm not yet ready to call this new reality "normal," though it does look like we'll have some time to get used to it. We still miss our routine, we miss our friends, we miss our opportunity to see/hear/touch the Spirit of God in the physical presence of our church family.

And yet, here we are, still connected to one another through these words and prayers, still trusting in the same goodness and love of our Creator. In the spirit of Jacob from Genesis 28, we are learning that the "House of God is everywhere and "God is in this place, though we did not know it!" So no matter where you've been and what you've done this week, no matter your fears and frustrations and hopes or lack thereof, you are welcome in this place of worship and you are not alone.

Music For Meditation // ["Prayer of Agur" - a piano recording by Audrey](#)



Scripture // John 11:1-45 (adapted from [The Voice translation](#))

Narrator: This is the story of Lazarus, a friend of Jesus who was very ill. He was from Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha. (This is the same Mary who had anointed Jesus earlier, blessing him with an expensive perfume and washing his feet with her hair.) Her brother Lazarus became deathly ill, so the sisters immediately sent a message to Jesus which said, "Rabbi, the one You love is very ill." Jesus received the message.

Jesus: His sickness will not end in his death but will bring great glory to God. As these events unfold, the One who comes from God will be exalted.

Narrator: Jesus dearly loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. However, after receiving this news, he waited two more days where he was.

Jesus: Now it is time to return to Judea.

Disciples: Teacher, the last time you were there, some Jews attempted to execute you by crushing you with stones. Why would you go back?

Jesus: There are 12 hours of daylight, correct? If anyone walks in the day, that person does not stumble because they see the light of the world. If anyone walks at night, they will trip and fall because they do not have the light within... Our friend Lazarus has gone to sleep, so I will go to awaken him.

Disciples: Rabbi, if he is sleeping, then he will be alright.

Narrator: Jesus used “sleep” as a metaphor for death, but the disciples took him literally and did not understand. Then Jesus spoke plainly.

Jesus: Lazarus is dead--but I am grateful for your sakes that I was not there when he died. Now you will see and believe. Gather yourselves, and let's go to him.

Disciples: Okay, we'll go with you... at least we'll die together.

Narrator: As Jesus was approaching Bethany, which is about two miles east of Jerusalem, he heard that Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. Many people had come to comfort Mary and Martha as they mourned the loss of their brother. Martha went to meet Jesus when word arrived that he was approaching Bethany, but Mary stayed behind at the house.

Martha: Rabbi, if you had been with us, my brother would not have died... Even so I still believe that anything you ask of God will be done.

Jesus: Your brother will rise to life.

Martha: I know. He will rise again when everyone is resurrected on the last day.


Jesus: *I am* the resurrection and the source of all life; those who trust in me will live even in death. Everyone who lives and trusts in me will never truly die. Do you believe this?

Martha: Yes, Rabbi, I believe that you are the Anointed, the very One from God who we have heard is coming into the world.

Narrator: After this Martha ran home to Mary.

Martha: Come with me. The Teacher is here, and he has asked for you.





Narrator: Mary did not waste a minute. She got up and went to the same spot where Martha had found Jesus outside the village. The people gathered in her home offering support and comfort assumed she was going back to the tomb to cry and mourn, so they followed her. Mary approached Jesus, saw him, and fell at his feet.

Mary: Rabbi, if only You had been here, my brother would still be alive.

Narrator: When Jesus saw Mary's profound grief and the weeping of her companions, he was deeply moved by their pain in his spirit and was intensely troubled.

Jesus: Where have they laid his body?

Neighbour: Come and see, Rabbi.

Narrator: As they walked, Jesus wept; and everyone noticed how much Jesus must have loved Lazarus. But others were skeptical.

Neighbour: If he can give sight to the blind, could he not have kept him from dying?

Narrator: Then Jesus, who was intensely troubled by all of this, approached the tomb—a small cave covered by a massive stone.

Jesus: Remove the stone.

Martha: Rabbi, he has been dead four days; the stench will be unbearable.

Jesus: Remember, I told you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God.

Narrator: They removed the stone, and Jesus lifted his eyes toward heaven.

Jesus: Abba, I am grateful that You have heard me. I know that You are always listening, but I proclaim it loudly so that everyone here will believe You have sent me.

Narrator: After these words, Jesus called out in a thunderous voice.

Jesus: Lazarus, come out!

Narrator: Then, the man who was dead walked out of his tomb bound from head to toe in a burial shroud.

Jesus: Untie him, and let him go.

Narrator: Once again Jesus amazes everyone around him. How does he raise Lazarus? What kind of Rabbi can speak life into death's darkness? Throughout his time on earth, those around him are continually surprised by Jesus. he is unique. As a result, many of the Jews who had come with Mary saw what happened and believed in him.

-----END SCENE-----

Song // [Come And Be Light For Our Eyes](#) // Sing the Journey #5

Sharing Time // ["Hey Wildwood..." online sharing](#)

Not hearing from one another in person through the Sharing Time is a significant loss for many of us. It's not the same, but one way to express your grief, anxiety, prayer requests and gratitude is through the "Hey Wildwood" link above. If you're able, join us for our Sunday Morning Zoom gatherings, or check your email for the sharing items from last Sunday. Or maybe now would be a good time to pause your reading to call someone from church or elsewhere that you haven't heard from this week.

Congregational Prayer

["Blessing For Carrying Long Sorrow"](#) by Jan Richardson

*When long sorrow.
When the endless bearing of grief.
When sadness has been waking with you
for what seems like forever
and going to bed with you
for what approximates an eternity.*


*When your heart has become an ancient timepiece,
its beat measuring ages and eons,
ticking the turning of centuries,
and the stars have nothing on you for long enduring.*

*May there come a moment
when time falls away.*

*May there come
a space
between the beats
of your heart when you know
your burden carried.*

*May there come
a gap between
your painful breaths
when you sense your own self borne,
unalone in your endless sorrowing,
no longer solitary –*





*as if you could
ever have been
left in your grief,
as if you could
ever have been
for one moment
abandoned to this weight,
unencompassed by the love
more ancient still
than the sorrow you bear.*

© Jan Richardson, from her book [The Cure for Sorrow](#).

Offering Song // [I Am the Bread of Life](#) // Hymnal: a Worship Book #472

Children's Story // [Click here for Video Storytime with Rick!](#)

The book is [City Dog, Country Frog by Mo Willems](#)

Sermon // "Powerful Tears" // Joe Heikman

(If you'd rather watch than read, [click here for the video version on youtube](#))


Today our unexpected ([yet surprisingly not abnormal](#)) journey through Lent brings us to the familiar story of the resurrection of Lazarus. I say it's a familiar story because it is well-known, a bit of a preview of the Easter miracle that's coming in a few weeks. "I AM the Resurrection and the Life," Jesus says, words that have been repeated and celebrated through the ages.

And it's also familiar in that it features an unknown illness, skepticism about whether preventative measures could have been taken sooner, and an unexpected death that leaves a community in tears. Even with the happy ending of Lazarus being brought out of the tomb, apparently alive and well, the whole story is filled with a certain amount of anxiety and agitation that resonates with what I've been feeling lately. Of course the situation is different than ours, but the folks in this story are swimming in the same waters of dread and grief and raw mortality that we are.

And in the middle of the story, we read that Jesus, the One Full of God, weeps.

Jesus wept.

Having arrived too late four days after Lazarus had died, Jesus shows up in the middle of the Jewish mourning ritual now known as shiva. The community has gathered at the dead man's house, keeping company with his sisters Mary and Martha.



When Martha hears that Jesus is coming, she goes out to meet him on the road and they have this somewhat philosophical conversation about the afterlife. And that's when Jesus gives the line, *"I Am the resurrection and the life. Those who trust in me, even though they die, will live."*

That's good enough for Martha, and she goes off to get her sister Mary. When Mary sees Jesus, she kneels at his feet in tears (a description that is intended to foreshadow the coming scene of this same Mary anointing Jesus' feet and washing them with her hair.) So Mary is weeping, and her community of sisters is also weeping, and Jesus is deeply affected and joins them in their tears.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus wept? From way back when I was a kid, I thought it was strange that Jesus would cry over the death of a man that he was about to raise from the dead. I mean, he knows how the story is going to end, so why is he crying? He was about to undo the cause of their grief! If I imagined myself in that situation, I would have told everyone that it was going to be okay, that they should dry their tears and prepare to be amazed.

If Jesus knows how the story is going to end, why is he crying?

That's a telling question, one that reveals some deeply held assumptions in our culture, about the nature of grief and the nature of power.

First, let's talk about grief, and then we'll talk about power.

Like everyone else in the world, this week my internet friend ["Science Mike" McHargue is talking about Covid-19](#). As usual, Mike is encouraging people to pay attention to our emotions in this crisis, not for sentimental reasons, but because the way we feel impacts how we behave, and in these times especially the way we behave can have major impacts on the health of our world.

Mike encourages us to be honest about the difficulty of what we're facing:

This is a genuinely frightening time. We haven't had a global pandemic of this magnitude on earth in over one hundred years. My friends, this is so hard on our bodies! This is so wildly difficult for our feelings!

We are grieving. You might say, "Well, how can we be grieving, it seems like this is just starting?" Well, one, we know psychologically people are capable of something called 'preemptive grief.' When you suspect or know something difficult is coming, you often enter a grief more acute than you would if you didn't know about a loss ahead of time. So we look at signals in our world, we look at newscasts and reporting, we look at charts and graphs, and our bodies begin to grieve, fearing what will come.

I think you can actually see the stages of grief in our public discourse and in our media. Do I see denial, bargaining, anger? I do see all those things in our conversations together."

David Kessler, a name some of you might recognize as co-author of the five stages of grief with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, says it this way in an article called ["That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief"](#):

We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn't feel that way, and we realize things will be different. Just as going to the airport is forever different from how it was before 9/11, things will change and this is the point at which they changed. The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we're grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air.

What about you--are you grieving right now?

I was relieved this week to encounter these experts giving that name to what I am feeling. I've been feeling a low-level anxiety, just a background radiation of heaviness to everything. I'm usually exhausted and ready for bed an hour or two earlier than usual. I'm not sleeping well. I feel like I have a knot in my chest, just below my lungs, like I haven't been able to take a really deep breath in two weeks. (Don't worry about me, I've checked, this is not a symptom of anything medically serious...)

I'd say that's grief, some of the weight of the losses we've already felt, and a bunch of that preemptive grief of knowing that more bad things are on the way but not knowing what they are and feeling powerless to do anything about them.

That's grief. And as these experts describe, that shows up in my emotions all over the place. Denial, anger, bargaining, sadness. On repeat and random shuffle. Those show up in different ways for each of us. I've found it helpful this week to pay attention to the deeper feelings underneath, when I'm feeling angry or frustrated or trapped, to remember that this is part of my body coping with what I'm feeling.

David Kessler again:

There is something powerful about naming this as grief. It helps us feel what's inside of us. So many have told me in the past week, "I'm telling my coworkers I'm having a hard time," or "I cried last night." When you name it, you feel it and it moves through you. Emotions need motion. It's important we acknowledge what we go through... If we allow the feelings to happen, they'll happen in an orderly way, and it empowers us. Then we're not victims.



The other thing that happens when we recognize our grief is that understanding moves us to a place of patience and kindness. Once more from Mike McHargue:

“So I think if we understand first that many, most, or all of us are in the stages of grief, then we would also understand that now is an essential time for us to be patient with each other. If people are grieving, our feelings are in a state of constant activation. We find ourselves more easily drawn into anger, into fear, into panic and into conflict than we would be in other times... And if we’re going to be patient with each other, my friends, we also have to be patient with ourselves.”

There’s a whole lot more to explore in this area, and lots of good materials on the internet about how to cope with the grief and anxiety and trauma of this pandemic. If you’re looking for practical ways to do this, one place to start is with this ["Resiliency in the Time of Coronavirus Toolkit"](#).

So, back to Jesus weeping on his way to the tomb of his friend. As I said, the question I’ve often asked is, if Jesus knew how the story was going to end, why Jesus would he be crying?

The trouble with that question is that it assumes that grief is about outcomes, that if we can solve the problem then the feelings will go away. That runs pretty deep in our worldview for many of us. And so we push past our emotions to focus on problem-solving--we *arm* ourselves with information, we *fight* the disease, we *stimulate* the economy, we *sterilize* and *self-isolate* and *race* for the cure. As we should, because there is much that we can do to minimize harm and maximize healing.


And yet, the grief is still there. Because grief isn’t about outcomes.

Grief is about the journey, about what happens within you along the way. And you can’t “fix” grief by controlling the outcome--even if we could control the outcome, which we really cannot. You move through grief by allowing yourself permission, time and space to feel it and move through it.

And so, at the center of this story, we find Jesus meeting Mary and her sisters not with answers, but with tears. This is the Incarnate One, the embodiment of all that is sacred, and they don’t skip ahead to the end of the story, but allow themselves to be moved by the emotion of it.

That’s grief. God grieves with us.





Now, that's not exactly the resolution that some of us were hoping for.

Another question on a lot of our minds this week is "Why doesn't God end this pandemic?"

We read this story about resurrection power and we wonder, where is *our* miracle? If Mary and Martha got the happy ending they were longing for, why can't we? Where is God when we need them?

Again, these are questions about the *end* of the story. We want God's power to move us to the happy ending, or at the very least to give us some certainty that the ending will indeed be happy.

But again, that's a missed understanding about power. What if God's power is not about resolving things to a satisfactory ending, but about sustaining us, about meeting us in our radical uncertainty with what we need to make it through?

Where is God when you need them? Not hurrying us to the other side of our struggles, but meeting us in the middle, with tears in their eyes.

As [Dr. Brene Brown says](#), "rarely can a response make something better. What makes something better is connection." This is the power of vulnerability.

This is the gift in the middle of the story, the connection with the Source of life that is not intimidated or ashamed by our grief, but joins us in it.

There will be an end to the story--this too shall pass. There may yet be a resurrection, death may yet yield to new life.

But we're not there yet. And our well-being in this moment does not depend on the ending, for God is with us even now in our grief.

Song of Response // [We Are Not Alone by Pepper Choplin](#)

Confession and Promise

Leader: Why do you grieve, even though you have hope?

People: We grieve for what we have lost, and for what we are afraid to lose.

Leader: What's behind the tears you cry, or hide?

People: Our deep sorrow reveals deep love and compassion.

Leader: And yet you do not lose hope?

People: We take heart, for we are never alone in our grief.

Leader: From the voices of those who have gone before, from the faithful to the faithless... from the divine rustling beyond and the sacred murmur within... hear the whisper: "there is something more..."

Song // [Beautiful Things by Gungor](#)

Once More On the Journey Into Darkness

Each step of Lent is a step into deeper darkness and a step towards Jesus.



Benediction

Christ with us,
Christ before us,
Christ behind us.

Christ in our tears,
and Christ beyond the grave.

