

Grief, Unbound
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Ezekiel 37: 1 - 14

¹The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

John 11: 1 - 45

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But 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." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus 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. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

²⁸ 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." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ 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. ³² 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." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ 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." ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² 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." ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ 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."

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Grief is one of those realities of living.
 If you live well,
 if you love,
 you will grieve.

It is a universal, unbreakable truth. We are all dying.
 And on top of that
 this world ~ this life
 is incomplete and unfair.
 There are eventualities
 and there are far too many tragedies and too-soons.
 There are partings that are quick
 and partings that are spread out over time.
 None of them are easy.
 None of them come without the accompanying work to miss, accept, and
 place in a greater context of what it is that we believe.
 And **none** of us experience these things in the same way.

Patton Oswalt, a comedian whose wife died last year, suddenly, leaving him a widower and single father to their young daughter, told an NPR reporter recently that¹

When it comes to depictions of grief...pop culture failed me. I could reference movies, comic books to make sense of a situation. And this is the one thing where I absolutely cannot because so much of - especially the comic book heroes and people that I like - Daredevil, Batman, John Wick - part of their motivation is based on losing someone that they love. Which then of course leads them to travel the world learning martial arts and doing CrossFit and getting really cut.... And that's not been my experience. When you lose someone, you tend to eat Wheat Thins for

¹ <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=519223604>

breakfast and rewatch "The Princess Bride" about 80 times and not sleep all that well. So - I don't know when the push-ups are going to show up in my grieving process.

When she received the diagnosis that would take her away from her two small children, Nina Riggs² shopped for a sofa for her family on the internet, between doses of the narcotics that kept her pain at bay. A sofa that would hold her entire family and would continue to hold them when she was gone, an image she couldn't bring herself to imagine.

Grieving the death of her best friend, whose side she didn't leave during the final weeks, weeks filled with tragic intensity as she watched her friend die, Catherine Newman reflected on the universality of grief, and wrote,³ "You already know this, but I hadn't understood it. I hadn't understood that you're stuck loving only hearts that could stop beating, that will. You love them with your own stretched and scarred organ, the one that might pound on long after, like a dumb animal. Like it didn't get the memo about the heart and what the heart can take.

Grief,

as you already know, because you are alive and feeling people affects all of us differently.

There is no schedule.

There is no one response.

And, in my opinion, there is no healing from those big griefs.

Time doesn't heal, in time you learn how to cope.

Which leaves us with struggling how to respond.

To find the right words in situations where there aren't right words,
only the willingness to pay attention and acknowledge
there are things that cannot be fixed,
only relationships to be nurtured and honored.

Grief is front and center in our texts for today.

In John it starts with Jesus, who gets the message that Lazarus, the beloved, is ill.

Jesus, the one who can change it,

the one who can change everything and anything,

is being pulled in so many different directions, so many different needs.

He's trying to be a good leader,

not merely responding to the tugs for his attention

but being proactive in how he shares and shows God's love.

What would it have been like if he had never said no?

If he had responded each and every time someone asked or wanted something?

Did Jesus want to drop everything and go to the one that he loved,

the brother to Mary and Martha, who he also loved?

Did he want to help?

I can't imagine a world in which he didn't.

And yet, that wasn't the only thing before him.

There were threats in the land around Lazarus. And other work. Other people.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/25/fashion/modern-love-when-a-couch-is-more-than-a-couch.html>

³ <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/11/25/mothering-my-dying-friend/>

What Jesus knows, believes, and says-

~something that we only occasionally grasp with both hands~
is that no matter what, we will be okay.

When Jesus says that Lazarus' illness doesn't end in death,
the word is actually more relatable to a separation from God.⁴
In Life and in Death, we belong to God.

The disciples, who, don't understand
because they are written to show us what it is like to not understand,
take Jesus at face value rather than plunging into the depths of his words.

They do not know there is reason to grieve.

They see only the threat that Jesus's traveling to Judea can bring.

It is not imaginary. It is real. And they'd like to avoid it.

Motivated by fear, fear of danger. Fear of losing Jesus.

But faith cannot grow where fear is blooming, and Jesus will not abide with their fear.

Only Thomas seems to understand here.

Thomas, who will later doubt, knows that traveling to Judea might lead to Jesus',
to their death, and is willing to go forward,
following Jesus, with open eyes and an open heart.

They go to Judea.

And Martha comes out to meet them.

Was she shielding Jesus from the friends who had gathered to mourn with her?⁵

Friends who might see Jesus as a threat rather than a savior?

Her grief leads her to deeper truth, and to speak with great faith.

Martha, of Mary and Martha fame.

The sisters hosted Jesus and it was Martha who rushed all around trying to make everything perfect,
while her do-nothing sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet, listening.

Jesus called Martha out for trying to do rather than be her faith,

and maybe Martha is trying to make up for it now,
because here she isn't busy or flustered or angry.

She grieves through acceptance, and digging deep into the greater truths of her faith.

Yes, he would not have died if Jesus had been there, but he will be a part of a greater resurrection.

Her words are not angry or accusatory, she is sorting her grief by acknowledging her beliefs,
and allowing them to sustain her.

"Yes, Lord, I believe."

Mary, Martha's sister, is not as gracious.

She says the same words, "'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

But she is kneeling, requesting, weeping.

There is an edge to her words not found in her sister's.

Is this anger? Is this more profound sorrow?

I'm not sure the lines between the two are terribly distinguishable in times of great grief.

And Mary is grieving.

⁴ Brian Stoffregen <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john11x1.htm>

⁵ D. Mark Davis <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2017/03/jesus-enters-danger-zone.html>

Ted Wardlaw writes:⁶

You understand [the] dismay, don't you? When it's your brother gasping for breath on the deathbed—your sister, your husband, your wife, your child, your parent—you're not looking for some timeless truth about death. You don't want a telegram that explains it all. It may be that you're not even looking for someone who can change things, or who has something powerful to say. But what you are looking for is someone who, instinctively, is willing to drop everything to get there and make the coffee and handle the telephone and, in a host of other simple ways, to stand with you and shoulder the pain with you and—most importantly—suffer with you. Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus, and Jesus seemed remarkably unmoved. He didn't rush to the bedside—didn't even send flowers. He just threw off some truth about the glory of God...

Fred Craddock adds:⁷

Let there be no misunderstanding. Martha, Mary and Lazarus are not simply props for a spiritual story. They are real people trapped in death and grief...

And Jesus, too. Is grieving. Is overcome.

Is he angry when he sees the Judeans follow Mary out of the house,

knowing that what will happen will now be on display rather than an intimate moment among friends?

Is he frustrated that he can't have even this private moment?

The text has him "huffing" just before he lets the tears fall.⁸

But Jesus, too, is no prop.

These are real lives, his is a real life, and this is not a parable.

Jesus is "greatly disturbed,"

or as Mark Davis translates, "Jesus groaned in himself."⁹

And I can only imagine that when he asks them to roll away the stone

so he can go where he goes and do what he does,

his irritation does not diminish when Martha

suddenly panics and rush to caution him about the smell that is likely in the cave.

The superstition was that the spirit would linger around the body for three days,

Lazarus has been in there four by the time Jesus arrives.

He isn't a little dead, he is a lot really dead.

But still, Jesus has to be thinking,

isn't this what you asked me here to do?

Why do you panic when your theology becomes a reality?

Jesus goes to the tomb, they roll away the stone, and he calls for Lazarus to emerge.

"Lazarus, Come Out!"

are the words Jesus says when Lazarus emerges from the cave, days dead he has been in there.

"Unbind him, and let him go."

"Unbind him, and let him go."

⁶ Theodore J. Wardlaw, "When Jesus Wept," *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 200, 37.

⁷ Fred Craddock, "A Twofold Death and Resurrection," *The Christian Century*, March 21-28, 1990, 299.

⁸ <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john11xi.htm>

⁹ <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2017/03/jesus-enters-danger-zone.html>

Unbind, and go.

Words that are a call, words that are a command, words that are a commission.¹⁰

Words from a God who does not plan tragedy or desire pain,
 but a God who can call life out death and bring dry bones back to life.
 Even the driest of spirits,
 the most skeptical of souls,
 the hardest of hearts.
 God can revive.

Unbind, and go.

Unbind the fears,
 fears of what might be and might happen and know that in life and in death you belong to God.
 Your call is to live and follow Jesus, here and now.

Unbind expectation,
 the more you expect the less you can receive as gift.

Unbind the shell of protection
 that keeps you from deepening relationships, being vulnerable.
 The shell of protection that keeps you from being you-
 Wonderfully, beautifully and in the image of God you have been made.
 Not to be perfect, but to be you. Unbind the shell of protection.

And go.
 Go to listen.
 Go to serve.
 Go to witness to the love of God-
 as Thomas and Martha and Mary and Lazarus and Jesus did before you.

Jesus Christ, light of the world, took on flesh to show us it is possible to live
 a greater love, a greater hope.

Be that love. Be that hope.
 Unbind and go.
 Thus says the Lord. Amen.

¹⁰ Tara Woodard-Lehman http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tara-woodardlehman/unbind-him-and-let-him-go_b_4964454.html