

Watch for the Morning

In our twenty-first century North American culture, there aren't too many subjects that remain off-limits. Back in the day, there were at least three topics that were not considered appropriate for discussion in polite society. That was then. And this is now. But there's still one subject that people don't really like to think about, much less talk about. It's death. In some circles, it's a conversational taboo. But on this fifth Sunday in Lent, the church reads Scriptures that confront us with death.

These passages resonate with us today, for these Fairfield Circuit churches have been touched by sorrow. In the years that I have been with you, this congregation has lost some dearly beloved members. They are missed. They are lovingly remembered. Our hearts go out to their families.

But we don't always know what to say to grieving relatives and friends. Sometimes we say as little as possible and hope they understand. It does help to offer presence. To just *be* there. Loneliness and isolation intensify grief. Having opportunity and feeling free to talk about a dear one can ease the pain of loss.

Being able to share stories about that person keeps him or her alive in memory. Support groups of those who have also experienced loss, offer comfort.

Many of you, maybe most of you sitting in this sanctuary, know how it feels to lose someone very close to you. A grandparent. A parent. A sibling. A spouse. A child. Their passing alters your perspective on life and on the world. You become a person who has experienced the death of a loved one. This is not the sum total of who you are. But it is a part.

A few moments ago we read together a psalm that may touch your innermost places. If you've ever sat at a bedside. If you've cried out of the depths of the night. If you've waited and watched for the morning.

That's how we envision the sisters Mary and Martha, keeping watch through long nights at the bedside of their brother Lazarus, as the story in today's Gospel reading begins. But despite the sisters' vigil and their appeal to Jesus, Lazarus loses his battle with illness. Their only brother dies. And with him, the hope of Martha and Mary seems to die as well.

In these days after the burial, in this time of heartache, Jesus comes. Jesus meets Martha where she is. "Lord," she

laments, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Not long afterward, her sister Mary says the same thing to Jesus in just the same words. What a very human cry!

If you’ve ever lost someone dear to you, this may have been your cry as well. When grief seems unbearable, don’t we turn to God? Don’t we call on God? Don’t we acknowledge God as the almighty One? The only One whose power is greater than the power of death?

But even as we faithfully confess that God *could* have done something to prevent such a deeply painful loss, we express a measure of incredulity that God *did not* do something to prevent it. There’s a confrontational edge to our words: “Lord, if you had been here, my dear one would not have died.” *Why, God? Why weren’t you there? Why did you allow this to happen? Lord, how could you?* These words are tinged with anger, aren’t they?

Do you think it’s okay to be angry with God? With this One who knows all about you and loves you anyway? The Scriptures affirm that God knows your every thought even before it’s on your tongue. Even though God knows what’s going on inside you, God yearns to hear from you. Longs to be in communion with you.

My brothers and sisters, in the pages of your Bible, do you not find anger at God? If you've spent some time in the Psalms, you know that many are prayers filled with every human emotion. Including anger.

Not too many years ago, a young woman in her twenties was killed. Violently. Senselessly. She was an only daughter. And her mother cried: *Why, God? Why did you let this happen?*

God seemed distant. Seemed not to be listening.

But then, different people started telling her the same thing, in exactly the same words. These were the words: *God's heart is breaking with yours.* And, humbled, she began finally to understand that God had answered through those human voices.

Grief comes, sooner or later, to each of us. We go through it. We can't go under it or over it or around it. We have to go through it. And sometimes we weep. Tears are cleansing. Tears are a release. When someone you care about is weeping, sometimes your own tears can convey more than words ever could.

The Fourth Evangelist tells us that Jesus starts to weep. Weeps for his friend Lazarus. Weeps with Martha and Mary. Jesus doesn't rebuke them for their complaint. Nor does he

rebuke you and me. This is the God who comes to us. This is the God who meets us where we are. This is the God who grieves and suffers with us. This is the God who weeps with us. This is the God whose heart breaks with ours. We don't need to be afraid of revealing our deepest feelings to this God who understands our emotions—having experienced every one of them.

This fully human Jesus loves his three friends who live in Bethany, a village on the outskirts of the capital city. For the past several weeks, we've been traveling with Jesus toward Jerusalem. Getting closer and closer. Today we arrive with him at the tomb of Lazarus, only a couple of miles from the city gates.

Here in the graveyard, we are *so* out of our comfort zone. The odor of death permeates the air. Fills our nostrils. Death is all around us, reminding us of all that lies ahead for Jesus. Ironically, it's his raising of Lazarus from the dead that seals Jesus' own fate. It's after his greatest sign—his revelation of power over death itself—that religious authorities decide that to let Jesus live would be to risk their occupied nation's security. And their own!

So, in the Bethany cemetery, the cross looms large before us. Deep in the season of Lent, we begin to get an inkling of how his first followers could deny and abandon Jesus in his hour. With a sense of foreboding, we confess our own reluctance to go through that time with him.

For the setting of Lazarus's tomb foreshadows the tomb of Jesus. There are striking parallels. A heavy stone covering the tomb's entrance is taken away. A man who has died several days earlier becomes alive again. A grave no longer holds its occupant.

Today, Jesus calls Lazarus to come out! And calls others to unbind him.

Who can you and I unbind today, this week, this month? Is there someone who's bound up in grave clothes of depression? Of canceled sin? Of guilt? Of anxiety? Of fear? Of hopelessness? Is Christ asking us to do the work of unbinding them? Of loosing and liberating them? Of enabling them to move freely out of deadening constraints and into life? Is this not the call you and I are hearing from the One who gives new life to Lazarus?

The One who speaks through the prophet Ezekiel in a vast valley of death. The One who, onto the dry skeletons of the house of Israel, brings sinews and flesh and skin. The One whose Spirit breathes life into dead bodies.

So to you who have been through a long, dark night, to you who wait and watch for the morning, Christ Jesus who is faithful makes a promise: *Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?*

Believer, Jesus has told Martha, and he is telling you: *I am the resurrection and the life.*

And because he is the resurrection and he is life, *God who raised him from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.*

Because he is the resurrection and he is life, we know these words to be true: “Death is not extinguishing the light from the Christian; it is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.”

Because he is the resurrection and he is life, death loses its power over all of us who bear Christ’s name. Death loses its grip. Dread and fear and even grief give way to hope; hope that

transforms not only the spirit in which we journey through this world, but the spirit in which we complete our journeys.

Because he is the resurrection and he is life, not only is the way we die radically changed, but also the way we live—live *now* in the One who will never leave you, the One who meets you where you are. At his table, he comes to you. At his table, he fills you with his very self, that he may abide with you in all your tomorrows, in your always and in your forever. At his table, he fills you with his gracious self. And he lives in you *today!*

Morning is here, beloved. Because Jesus Christ is the resurrection and he is life.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.