

A Grief Observed

John 11:1-16

Jim Zazzera, Faith Presbyterian Church, 01.13.13

C.S. Lewis, the writer most renowned in the modern day for his fantasy books, “The Chronicles of Narnia,” was a man of incredible imagination and ability. He is also known in some circles for being one of the great apologists for and defenders of the Christian Faith. His book, *Mere Christianity*, is a classic. Yet fewer people know him as the keen observer of life that he was. Nowhere does he demonstrate this more clearly than in his book *A Grief Observed*. Here, he distills his thoughts from the journal entries that were written after the painful cancer and the death of his wife, Joy. Lewis writes with a poignancy that is unrivalled. Listen to how he begins this book:

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.

At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me.¹

There are few things as powerful and mysterious as grief. Notice that Lewis titled his book not “Grief Observed,” but “A Grief Observed” as a way of acknowledging that each person’s grief is different, and every person’s experience of suffering, loss, and death is unique. We cannot observe grief in general, in the abstract—we can only know our own particular grief.

I know that many of you have faced the experience of illness and death. I have had the privilege of standing with many of you, if only for a moment, as you passed through this time. And for those of you who have lost someone you love, I know that the scenes of that person’s life and death are even now being recalled to mind. There is little I need to do to conjure up those experiences. In fact, there is nothing I could say to stop you from remembering. Because the pain of our loss, our grief is deep. Over and over I am told by people how a holiday, a birthday, or a particular anniversary will bring that person to mind, and reboot the pain that we felt at the time of his or her death.

Because we have that experience, we come to this story of Lazarus with no small amount of insight. We know what it is like to see a loved one suffer. We know what it is like to witness death. And so when Mary and Martha send word to their close friend Jesus and say, “Lord, he whom you love is ill,”² or as another translation puts it, we understand.

Now most of us have heard this story and know how it ends; Jesus shows up at Bethany, says something about resurrection, and brings Lazarus back to life. (But that is not today’s story, that is for the next Sunday and the one after.) Let us pretend for a moment that we don’t know the end of the story, that we are the disciples who are experiencing this fresh pain, before the outcome is known, that we are Mary or Martha, languishing in our grief.

I don’t know about you, but when I read this story the thing that I cannot let go of is Jesus’ initial response to the whole situation. Two of Jesus’ closest friends tell him that another close friend is ill. Notice they do not

¹ Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*, Kindle Locations 179-183.

² John 11:3, NRSV.

ask him for anything, but it is clear as we read the story that the illness is dire and that Jesus knows it. I am brought up short when I read the description of Jesus response to Mary and Martha in verse 5 and 6:

Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.³

What is going on here? Shouldn't Jesus be rushing to Lazarus side? Shouldn't he be catching the next Southwest Flight to Bethany? Isn't that what you would do? Even if only to be at the bedside of your dying loved one, don't you simply want to offer your presence to him or her? *But Jesus doesn't go—at least not immediately.*

And though Jesus does give some reasons for his delay, they are puzzling to me. In verse 4 he says:

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.⁴

When Jesus says, "this illness does not lead to death," is he saying that his condition is not as bad as others think it is, and that Lazarus will "get over it?" We, of course, know that that is not true. When Jesus says, "It is for God's glory," is he inferring that God's power will somehow be shown through this situation? Are the needs of Lazarus and his sisters discounted—so that a much greater audience could experience the mighty works of God? When Jesus says, "the Son of God may be glorified through it," is he saying that somehow his fate is mirrored in the fate of Lazarus? Is Jesus death and resurrection prefigured here in the life and death and life (again) of his beloved friend? *Whether deliberate or not, Jesus is cryptic here.*

It is tempting for us to say, "Jesus knows what is going to happen, he knows he is going to bring Lazarus back to life, so he is really not worried about a few days delay." *But I find that too easy and somewhat callous.*

We might also say, "Jesus is trying to teach us all a lesson about life and death and suffering, both his and ours..." But I don't believe Jesus exercises control in such a way. I don't think he turns the people he loves into object lessons.

Yet the fact remains, Jesus deliberately delays going to Lazarus' side. He intentionally waits two extra days before seeing Mary and Martha. *Ultimately, I am not sure why he does this.* Surely, Jesus can look ahead and see that Lazarus' particular illness will not end in ultimate death. Surely, God is glorified by his resuscitating of Lazarus. Surely this story is a kind of picture of Jesus' own final days.

In the end though, I don't think Jesus is stage-managing this scene to make some theological point. At best, maybe he knew that his choice to stay a few more days would be the most benefit for those he loves. Like a father who won't let the child play with that friends who is a danger, like an adult child who must face the difficult choice of removing the car keys from an aging parent, like the teacher who is a tough grader, always pushing her students to excel...Jesus makes a hard choice.

I am sure Jess knew his delay would cause pain to his friends. Yet I think it is possible that Jesus delays his travel specifically because has the best interests of his friends in mind.

When we overview this story, we find it is really about what it means to face death. This story, a preface to one of Jesus greatest miracles, a tale of what some say is Jesus' most important sign short of his own death and resurrection⁵, asks us to face some hard realities with deep trust in God.

³ John 11:5-6, *NRSV*.

⁴ John 11:4, *NRSV*.

First, in verse 7, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to Judea. Presumably, Jesus hadn't told them about his friend's illness. When they hear of this idea, their memories of how it was last time in Judea quickly emerge. "Isn't that where you almost got killed? Are you sure you want to take that on?" But Jesus is willing to face death – Lazarus death – and his own.

Then, later on in the passage, Jesus talks about Lazarus to his disciples. They are confused when he talks about Lazarus "falling asleep." They minimize Lazarus' death. "He will be alright," they say. Jesus is quick to correct their misunderstanding and make it clear. Boldly Jesus tells them, "Lazarus is dead!" He doesn't mince words. Jesus doesn't turn death into a sympathy card, he doesn't whitewash it by calling it "passing away" or "sleeping." Jesus is willing to face death.

Finally, as if to underline what has come before, that most underrated apostle named Thomas makes a bold proclamation, whether out of solidarity or resignation we are not sure. "Let us also go with him, that we may die with him." Let us go together, and let us be willing to face death!

There is a certain courage implied in this part of the story. There is here an important truth for all of us who are tempted to tell someone "it will be OK," in the face of death. It may or may not be OK, Jesus may or may not show up soon, but we are called to face the reality of the suffering and grief. C.S. Lewis is again helpful here when he says this:

*Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand.*⁶

What makes us think that Jesus will show up immediately to solve our every problem? Though like, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, we might consider ourselves "friends of Jesus," what makes us think he will protect us from pain and grief? What makes us think we can spout clichéd words of consolation, instead of walking with one another into the depths of the pain? What makes us think we can avoid pain and think that simply speaking words of resurrection and new life are enough?

As with all Bible texts, many things are being communicated in this passage. But I think at least one thing we are being taught here is the courage to face death. Remember, this is Jesus, the same man who said that anyone who wants to "save" his or her life must "lose" it. Facing death is part of our life. *Facing death with trust in God is Christ's gift to us.*

What Jesus tells his disciples about Lazarus he is telling all of us—this illness will not *terminate* in death. Death is painful and powerful and real, but it is not the last word. That is the consolation. That is good news. That is where God's glory is to be found.

There is one more puzzling thing about this passage. And it is Jesus mysterious saying in verse 9 and 10. Jesus is responding to his disciples fear about going to Judea, in a sense, their fear of death. When they say, "are you sure you want to go there again?" he responds, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them."⁷

⁵ Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John*, p. 654.

⁶ Lewis, C. S., *A Grief Observed*, Kindle Location 347.

⁷ John 11:9-10, *NRSV*.

Again in the Gospel of John, we are back to this theme of light. In sixteen separate verses we see this word, this theme used. And almost always, the word “light” references Jesus⁸:

- John 1.5: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.
- John 8.12: Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”
- John 9.5: As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”
- John 12.46: I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.

We face life when we can see, when we have light. We face death, when we are led by the light of the world, When we are guided by Jesus the Messiah.

You see, Jesus never sought to live life in avoidance of suffering. Jesus himself NEVER sought preservation from death but glorification though it.⁹ *And perhaps that is the most important message of this story.*

Nicholas Wolterstorff was a professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale University. Most of his books, though thoughtful, were objective and academic. That is until 1987 when he wrote the book *Lament for a Son*. This journal style book of reflections is the recounting of his grief at the death of his 25 year old son in a mountain-climbing accident. In the book, he doesn’t write as an academic, but as a man of faith and father who buried a son. Listen to both his insights and pain:

Elements of the gospel which I had always thought would console did not. They did something else, something important, but not that. It did not console me to be reminded of the hope of the resurrection. If I had forgotten that hope, then it would indeed have brought light into my life to be reminded of it. But I did not think of death as a bottomless pit. I did not grieve as one who has no hope. Yet Eric is gone, here and now he is gone; now I cannot talk with him, now I cannot see him, now I cannot hug him, now I cannot hear of his plans for the future. That is my sorrow. A friend said, “Remember, he’s in good hands.” I was deeply moved. But that reality does not put Eric back in my hands now. That’s my grief. For that grief, what consolation can there be other than having him back?

Nothing fills the void of his absence. He’s not replaceable. We can’t go out and get another just like him.¹⁰

We can never really experience the power of the life Jesus brings until we face death (and all that comes with it) seriously. And facing death means grieving. Facing death means suffering. Though I do not think God plots and creates situations for us to learn from our suffering, I still think it is necessary for our growth that we do suffer. And maybe that truth, that courage, that honesty, that faith is what we can take away from today’s story.

If I could, I would like to end with just one more quote. Martin Laird, the author of a book entitled *Into the Silent Land*, writes:

God in Christ has taken into Himself the brokenness of the human condition. Hence, human woundedness, brokenness, death itself are transformed from dead ends to doorways into Life.¹¹

⁸ All from the NRSV.

⁹ This phrasing comes from Dale Bruner in *The Gospel of John*, p. 663.

¹⁰ Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Lament for A Son*, pp. 31-32.

¹¹ Laird, Martin, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, Kindle Locations 1643-1644.

When we face suffering and death, may we grieve deeply. When we grieve, may we know that God grieves with us. And in our grief, may we find the presence of God. In that same grief, may we find doorways to life.

Amen.

Next Step Questions

1. Read John 11:1-16 again. What one thing strikes you most profoundly from these verses?
2. Can you remember a time of deep grief? What was that like for you? What (if anything) did you learn from that time?
3. Why do you think Jesus delayed going to see Lazarus? Does it surprise you that he waited?
4. Is there a time when you wanted God to “show up” in your life but God never did? Why do you think that was so?
5. How can illness and death be “for God’s Glory?” What does Jesus mean by “glory?”
6. Do you think God “creates” situations to teach us? Does God “stage-manage” our lives? Why or why not?
7. Why is it so hard to face death? What kinds of things do we do to avoid it? What do we stand to lose if we do not face it?
8. What did Thomas mean in saying, “let us go and die with him?” Why is following Jesus so often associated with death?
9. Author & priest Marin Laird writes, “God in Christ has taken into Himself the brokenness of the human condition. Hence, human woundedness, brokenness, death itself are transformed from dead ends to doorways into Life.” How are death, suffering, and grief “doorways” into life?