

John 11:1-4, 5-7, 11-29; 32-45  
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell  
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## **The Wilderness of Grief**

In August of 2009, the Russian submarine *Kursk* sank. One of the survivors, 27-year-old Lt. Cap. Dmitry Kolesnikov, wrote a note to his wife while waiting to die. Two words from that note were framed at his funeral: “Mustn’t despair.”

Can you imagine hearing that at a funeral? Would “mustn’t despair” console them console those family and friends? Would it console us in our moments of grief?

### **The Reality of Grief**

There is no “right” way to grieve. It comes in waves, often when we least expect it. And in today’s story, Jesus meets grief with tears.

Sometimes the shortest verses in the Bible are the most powerful. I guess that means long sermons are a big sin. I told my wife this and she said “No, long sermons cause people to sin.” See, that’s the kind of support I get at the Harrell home.

Short Sentences. God is love. It is finished. Jesus wept.

That’s the Bible’s answer to grief: Jesus wept.

At the end of John 10, Jesus says, “I and the Father are one” and has to escape arrest. The religious authorities fear that Jesus’ growing influence will provoke Roman violence, which would happen 40 years later when the Romans destroyed the temple. Jesus retreats into the wilderness. But then something happens — something that pulls him back toward danger. Lazarus, his friend, is sick. His sisters, Martha and Mary, send word. Jesus curiously stays put for two more days.

### **The Exasperation of Grief**

When Jesus finally arrives, Martha and Mary say the same thing: “Lord, if you had been here, he would not have died.”

It’s part belief, part blame. “You could have done something, but you didn’t.” We’ve said it too.

As a pastor, I’ve heard grief voiced in many ways, but underneath it often lies the same feeling: “God, why didn’t you do something?” Why did you allow that car to cross the center divide? Why did you allow my child to go off the rails? Disease to

invade my body? Take people from me who mean so much to me in my life? You are able! But you didn't do anything about it!

Some of you know the ache of saying, "If only you had been here."

Jesus doesn't rebuke them. He lets them be human. He meets them in their pain. And even knowing resurrection is coming, Jesus cries.

Expressing grief — especially through tears — is not a sign of weakness but a necessary part of healing. Suppressing it often leads to anxiety, depression, or physical illness. Jesus doesn't suppress. He lets the tears fall.

Verse 33 says Jesus was "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" — a mix of anguish and anger. Jesus doesn't offer a pep talk. He weeps. Loudly enough for onlookers to say, "See how he loved him."

My now-retired therapist would tell me to "wring the rag" when tears come — let yourself fully cry. That's what Jesus does here. Ugly crying. Sobbing. Maybe even howling.

We weep over what we value. Jesus values Lazarus. He values all of us who've stood at graves. Jesus weeps not just for Lazarus, but for the billions who have mourned. And for your grief too.

Maybe the Lazarus in your life is the child who won't speak to you. The body that's betraying you. The church that let you down. The friend you can't believe is gone. The faith that once felt so alive and now feels like dust.

Whatever your Lazarus is — Jesus weeps with you.

And we need this, because grief is hard but holy work. As a pastor, I've accompanied so many in grief. With families whose loss was so raw, it was hard to breathe. There were no words. Just presence. Just tears. And something holy in the silence. Jesus wept — and then he spoke life.

### **The Hope of Grief**

Yes, death still exists. But as preachers in the Black Church tradition often say, "where we put a period, God puts a comma."

With God, the story is seldom over when we think it is. Some things in life must die to be resurrected:

- A marriage that ends can lead to new life.

- The way you relate to your child, parent, or friend might have to die for something healthier to grow.
- Your relationships with addictive habits, overwork, or false identities have to die, for newness and health to break through.

The psychology of grief tells us we often resist these deaths out of fear. But letting go — when it's time — can open space for healing.

Death and resurrection are built into the DNA of our faith: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Jesus knew raising Lazarus would lead to his own death. After this event, the Scriptures tell us, “From that day on they planned to put him to death.”

And still, he did it. Because that’s what love does.

### **The Community of Grief**

If Jesus weeps over us, we must be a people who weep with one another. Here’s a church slogan: “Stone Church: a place where you will never cry alone.”

Grief must be witnessed. Healing happens in safe, empathetic relationships. We don’t heal in isolation. We heal in community.

Even in the miracle, Jesus relies on community:

- They roll away the stone.
- They unbind Lazarus.

Jesus calls Lazarus out. But it’s the community who sets him free. Jesus tells \*them\* to participate.

So, Jesus says to us: “You unbind one another. You work for healing. You roll away stones. In a world full of death, hate, and injustice, be my body unbinding the brokenhearted.”

Cry with them. Believe together with them that whatever the pain is — with a God of resurrection — it can be a comma.

Lazarus was dead for four days. It smelled. The old King James Version uses this language from Martha: “Lord, by this time he stinketh.”

Jesus walks into the stink of Lazarus’ tomb. And he’ll walk into ours too.

Our wounds, our shame, our secrets — Jesus doesn't flinch. He calls us out, unwraps us, and gives us life. And if that's true, then "mustn't despair" starts to make sense.

Whatever is buried in you — grief, regret, fear, numbness — know this: Jesus doesn't wait for it to smell better. He just comes. He stands outside the tomb. And he calls you by name.

Amen.