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A Hopeful Grief

As I tell this story from scripture this morning I want you to place yourself in the story. I have taken liberties to add between the lines with some help from *The Book of God* by Walter Wangerin.

It was a beautiful spring day, almost the end of the rainy season. The fields near Jericho would be ready for barley harvest soon. The dreariness of winter was almost past; the sun ruled the days. The land was rich and fat, promising a full harvest. Shepherds were preparing to lead their flocks toward Jerusalem. Soon thousands of sheep would be bought and sacrificed at the Passover. There was energy in the air, excitement of all that was to come.

But for one household in Bethany there was no joy, no goodness in the season, no kindness left in the world. For Martha and Mary this day held unspeakable sorrow.

Martha sat in the corner of their sleeping room, the bedding rumped and soiled. She didn't care. Her hair was unbrushed, her body needed washing, she had not eaten in a long time. She didn't care.

Friends looked in on her asking if they could help, or sit with her, but she sent them away. She didn't care.

She heard Mary and her friends in the next room, sometimes raising their voices in wails that made Martha cringe. It irritated her, she wanted no one with her.

Her brother Lazarus had died, here in this room. He had been sick for seven days. They tried everything they knew to help him, even sent word to their good friend Jesus, but to no avail. He died. It was now four days ago that he had died, in the night with just her and Mary with him. What would become of her and Mary? Who would provide for them? They were alone. And why had Jesus not come – the one who loved Lazarus as much as they did, maybe more?

The morning after he died the mourners came and the lament began, with sobbing and wailing, tearing their garments. There was no joy. There was no hope. It had died in the night.

Women came to wrap the body in linen strips, covered all of the body, even his face. He became a faceless heap. He was carried through the streets by men on the way to the tomb where they left his body. The going and coming back to the house was filled with mournful sounds of weeping and despair.

Martha had been sitting now for three days in her room, caring about nothing, unable to move, totally bereft. She was aware that the mourners were still in the house, but she wanted only to be left alone.

An elderly woman stuck her head in the room and whispered to her and then turned to leave. Martha was suddenly alert. "Wait, what did you say? Jesus is on his way? Ha, for what reason? He is too late. He wouldn't come when we sent word, when there was still time, and so now he is showing up. Wonderful."

All of a sudden Martha had energy, not hopeful energy but angry energy. She was out the door and on her way to meet Jesus. She had a few things to say. He saw her coming and stopped and let her come to him. And come she did. When she got to him she balled up her fists and beat his chest and, cried with anguish, "Why weren't you here when we needed you? If you would have come when we sent for you, you could have helped Lazarus, he would not have died." She put her forehead against his chest and sobbed until there were not more tears. She felt spent. And then she said softly, "Even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give it to you."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

"Yes, yes, I know in the resurrection at the last day." There were more words spoken, and then Jesus asked to see Mary. Martha hurried home and got Mary and she too came to Jesus with the same words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

As Jesus lifted his eyes to see the grieving people he began to weep with them.

This was a gut wrenching grief and heart breaking. We of course know the end of that story but we will not go there this morning.

Grief: Grief is a part of everyone's life. If you are old enough to love, you are old enough to grieve. We grieve because we are human. We grieve because we were created for connection, and when our connection with something or someone is severed, we mourn, we lament, we grieve. I hope that we can normalize this journey of grief as we think together about it. Grief work is not fun, but as Richard Rohr says, "Grief that is not transformed will in some way be transmitted." Our hope as a pastoral team is that, as we talk about grief, you will find places and people to listen to you, grieve with you, and walk the journey with you. We have named the series "A Hopeful Grief" for a reason. This is not to make you feel sad or mournful, but to bring hope to the sadness that is already in your heart. We as children of God do not grieve as those without hope.

The visual of pots comes from the book, *Tear Soup*. The grief that old woman Grandy is facing in the book is never defined—it could be a whole variety of griefs, all the way from "not fair" to

“more than I can bear.” Think about the grief you carry right now. Which pot would you put it in?

Let’s think of some of the grief we might be carrying:

-pet died -moving -flunked a test -house burned down -friend died -loss of career
-loss of hearing -loss of sight -infertility -children in trouble -
possession stolen -death of child-divorce -illness -fatal diagnosis -loss of
mobility -unfaithful spouse -loss of driver’s license

Some of these griefs are minor in the whole scope of life, but how we face them in the specifics of life is very significant. If we feel validated, valued, and heard, we will be aided in our acceptance and living into the new reality of the loss.

As someone greeted me after my last sermon, they said, “I will not remember what you said, but I will remember your story.” As I reflected on that and how much I have learned from stories, I decided to invite two people to join me in this conversation about grief. People who have/are living into the reality of loss. These two people represent two different kinds of losses, and hopefully you can identify with them and help you give voice to your own grief.

These two are not more important, and their grief is not more important, and their stories are not more important than any of yours, I just had to find two willing participants.

I have invited Cheryl Kauffman Snyder & JD Smucker to join me this morning. (Come on up.)

We will work at this under three different headings which are named in your bulletin:

The Grief

The Grind

The Grace/Gift

Speaking to Cheryl & JD (after sitting down).

As we talk this morning, I’m hoping that as much as possible you will forget you have an audience, and that what you share will be an encouragement for the audience. So, in short, “Forget about them and talk to them.”

The Grief. We heard this morning’s story of Lazarus death and the events around it. Would you name your grief and any events around it?

(Interact with this)

The Grind. In the story of Mary and Martha meeting Jesus after his death, I think there was a fair amount of anger with Jesus. They had sent word to him of their brother's illness, and yet he didn't show up. They asked the "why" question and the "ifs" of the situation. Can you talk about the range of emotions, questions you asked: what you experienced, and what could we expect? Where was/is God in this journey? (Did anyone say to you, "I know just what you are going through?" Was this helpful or not?)

(Interact)

The Grace/Gift. Just as wheat is ground and crushed into flour and then made into bread - what has been the *grace or the gift* of this journey?

(Interact with content)

Thank them for their vulnerability and openness.

(They remain in their chairs while I go to the podium to conclude.)

Cheryl and JD have touched only a very small part of their journeys, but I hope they have provoked you enough to think about your journey, your places of grief, your unfinished business that you will for your health's sake embrace.

Conclusion: Grief is a journey, one where the route is not spelled out. GPS will not help you here. You will never be the same, and there has been a shift, whether your loss was "not fair" or a heartbreak that sat on your chest for days. We must embrace the grief, walk into the darkness, so that we can see the sunrise. Grief is a process that one should not rush or hang on to, but allow it to happen. Grief needs community—we need each other. My prayer is that you will find those people who you can share your grief with.

Hear now the grace of Psalm 13 that began as a lament.

(Cheryl and JD leave platform after Loanne reads the last two verses of Psalm 13.)

Benediction: Friends, may you go with hope in the midst of your grief. May you know the promise of God's presence with you as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death.