

SERMON: Grief Journey

We have—as Christianity’s primary text—material written thousands of years ago in places and societies profoundly different from ours.

Nevertheless, **the authority** this text sways in our lives, *felt at a very basic level*, **endures**; *which is the fact* that the Bible is true to human experience (indeed, it is archetypal) – it expresses and embraces and informs your experience and mine.

I have spoken before (and again wish to hold up for you) that a worthwhile spiritual practice based upon this reality is the Ignatian practice known as *meditatio*—meditation. It involves (a) learning a given biblical story fully-and-well and then (b) putting oneself into the story, into the text, and playing the story through *in the place of the various characters and participants found there*, one after another.

Those ancient stories are, *in this meditative and inquiring way*, **merged into our lives**. We come to learn about ourselves by seeing what roles fit and what ones chafe, and “just how it is so” in both cases. Sometimes, we find ourselves far more the antagonists than the beloved protagonists, and thereupon we get to wrestle deeply with ourselves and with God.

But *more generally-and-immediately accessible* than the practice of Ignatian spirituality, dear people: can you open yourself to see with me how “Scripture being true to experience” means that **every person or community** whose life gets yanked off its *expected and planned-for* course **is held** in the biblical story of Exile. And **every** instance

- of finding oneself enslaved (be it by entrapment or addiction) and then
- of the struggle to break free,

is held in the story of Israel in Egypt, and Israel’s Exodus. **Every** episode of having to *discover* one’s identity and *integrate* that identity is held in the story of Israel’s wilderness wanderings. **Every** story of finding and

owning one's place in the world is held in the struggle and drama of wilderness wandering followed by occupation of the promised land.

We could go on in this manner all morning. But I will 'cut to the chase' and point specifically to the place we find ourselves in, on this forty-third day of Easter. We (in Christian community) intentionally have been rehearsing, as we do every year, the story of Jesus's followers in that first year, year 'zero' of the church, when Jesus had been taken by the powers-that-be and crucified. This, dear people, is our annual rehearsal of a story of grief. It *so profoundly* teaches us and offers to help us, guide us, in our own many stories of loss.

Before I go further, let us acknowledge that the Easter story and Easter season have lots more going on, on lots of further layers; but at the base of it all it is a grief story.

So, on Good Friday, with the women followers of Jesus standing watching, and the beloved disciple there with them, there is this vigil bearing witness to a glorious life coming to an abrupt and terrible end. There is dreadful suffering, of Jesus and also of all who love him. While that story's degree of violence is—thank God—not usual in our culture, that degree of brokenness is not at all unusual. Most of you have been there; many of you again and again; some are there now.

Then, through Easter Saturday and on into Sunday morning, every year, we revisit the continuing lost-ness and fear and uncertainty and sadness of Jesus' close band; in particular, Mary Magdalene, Peter and the beloved disciple as they come at Sunday's dawn to grieve for Jesus.

What happens next is something we *celebrate concerning Jesus* but don't talk about much, certainly not enough, concerning grief in general. *For **most** people*, at some points in the mixed-up ball of emotion and thought, body-experience and spirit-experience that is grief, there is the discovery that the one we have lost is *yet present to us*. I was constantly

intrigued about how this idea surfaced, in my decades of hospital work, be it in families that had a religious grounding and practice or those that did not; nonetheless, there would come *from one person to the rest* the consoling statement that the person who had just died would make themselves known (make themselves present) to those they love. Now, within mainline Christianity and its orthodox teaching, a person who has died has no actual-and-full existence again until the resurrection at the end of time. A person's soul does not float near the body for hours, nor off to become a ghostly visitor anywhere else. BUT it is the case that grieving people can and do project what-they-long-for into the world around them. So a grieving person wakes up and sees their loved one at the foot of the bed; or a grieving person turns on the radio and hears their loved one's voice; or a grieving person is driving down the street and ... "Oh my goodness!", they say to themselves, "is that my beloved turning the corner on the sidewalk over there?" But even more significant and even more blessed than this, *the mixed-up ball of emotion-and-thought / body-and-spirit-‘work’* that is grief *functions to make it clear* the one who is lost **has a permanent imprint on and presence in our lives.** *They have contributed to who we are.* This happens in traits they have *demonstrated to* and *inculcated in* us; it also happens when they have demonstrated behaviours we observe and *choose **not** to own* for ourselves. The grieving person finds situation after situation in life that throws them into "Sudden Temporary Upsurges of Grief" where they are reminded of the deceased person's way, the deceased person's wisdom (or folly!), and – so – the deceased person's guidance for their lives. They are yet present to us.

Today we focus on the Ascension of Jesus. This too names and informs an aspect of the mixed-up ball of emotion-and-thought / body-and-spirit-‘work’ of every upsurge of grief we go through. There may well be that moment as we wake when we see our beloved in the room; there may

well be some memory that absolutely fills and overwhelms us with its immediacy; but then comes the experience that this relief leaves. The inescapable truth hits front and centre: “My beloved is gone from me, never to return.” It is for us like it was for the disciples: standing there looking up and longing for what was (but has been taken away); confused and uncertain about what is; not knowing what to do next. And, just as it was for Jesus’ followers, *there is subsequently this phenomenon*: the eyes come down, we look around, and we necessarily must take next steps into life.

While those next steps are perhaps at first pretty-much directionless, at first seemingly meaningless, it is also the case that the grief story is not yet done. For those first followers of Jesus, the sense of void and hesitancy had book ends: one was the Ascension, the second was Pentecost, which we will celebrate next Sunday. At Pentecost, it gets discovered that the steps we take, moving onward, **can be and are intended to be**—indeed they **are resourced to be**—quite powerful and meaningful, in the *full* memory (the *full* recollection and the *full* living-on-through-us) of the one who has died.

As already acknowledged this morning, the Jesus story has, about it, layers of *meaning* and *belief* ‘on top’ of the bare grief story; but today I am reminding you that it is not just right-and-good but *needful* and *powerful* that we do not lose track of the fundamental grief story. In particular, today, as we shall next turn to hold Communion (the Last Supper), I want this *basic* grief story “framing” to *inform* your mind, heart and soul. You know how often in life, in drama and in story, people whose spouse has died, or whose child has died, preserve the lost one’s room in the house, and all their belongings there, so as to visit, to see, feel, smell and experience their beloved there? In Communion, we put ourselves in that upper room and gather around the Passover table with our Teacher, our Healer, our Saviour Jesus. We listen to him, we

hold, and feel, and consume the bread and cup he shares, we smell and we taste. We know him here with us. And, so, ritualized *grief* turns towards gratitude *and* empowerment *and* joy in the awareness of what this One has done for us, what this One means to us, and what our lives must now be all about on his account.

Thanks be to God! Amen.