

God of New Life, grant us the courage to look into the face of death with the assurance of your love for us. In the midst of our pain, remind us that there is life after death. Amen.

November 4, 2018 – John 11:32-44

“Life after Death”

On this All Saints Sunday, the lectionary invites us to gather with others at a freshly occupied tomb. We would rather not because we’ve seen enough of death lately. Just one week ago, Jewish brothers and sisters were slaughtered within their sacred space of worship on their sacred day of prayer and rest.

Three days earlier, an African American 12-year-old boy watched his grandfather gunned down by a white terrorist who fled the store and shot a second African American victim in the parking lot.

But death, which cannot be confined to shootings in the news, has even invaded our own lives. Over the past year within our own congregation, death has taken a husband, a mother, an uncle who was as close as any parent, a lover and friend, and a four-footed longtime companion. And those are just the ones that I’m aware of. Death knows no bounds. And if you haven’t experienced its touch in your life, one day you will.

And with it comes an array of emotions, such as blame, anger, and confusion, all which are natural parts of the grief process, and all which are portrayed in this morning’s scripture text.

As the text opens up, we find Mary, blinded by her grief, looking for someone or something to blame. And Jesus is the most likely candidate. Kneeling before him, she cries out, “Rabbi, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” I’ve seen blame cast on medical personnel accused of not doing their job right. I’ve witnessed God as the target for the survivor’s blame. And I’ve even watched people blame themselves for the loss of their loved one. If someone would have just done something different, this tragedy never would have occurred. In Mary’s opinion, if Jesus would have been present, her brother would still be alive.

And then there was anger. We read that when Jesus saw the overwhelming flood of grief coming from Mary and the others, he was “greatly disturbed.” And after arriving at the tomb, once again, we read that he was “greatly disturbed.” It’s an unfortunate and misleading translation of the original Greek, which is actually a word that commonly signifies indignation or anger.

Jesus was angry. For centuries, Bible scholars have puzzled over his anger. Was he upset because the crowd’s grief was hypocritical? Was he angry at people’s continued inability to believe? Was he angry because he had been the target of everyone’s blame? Or was he just angry because that’s a part of the grief process? An important part.

It’s difficult for some people to express anger. We’ve been taught to behave ourselves. And so when we find ourselves angry at God for allowing a death to happen, or maybe even angry at the loved one for dying and leaving us with feelings of abandonment, we may feel guilty for our anger. But anger is a natural part of grief. And I’m inclined to think that the human part of Jesus was experiencing anger for no other reason than because his beloved friend Lazarus was dead.

And confusion. As we stumble through the wilderness of grief, we may find ourselves confused. If you feel disorganized and confused in the days, weeks, and even months following a death, know that you are not going crazy; you are grieving. Mary was certainly confused to hear Jesus demanding that the stone at the mouth of the tomb be moved away. Had Jesus, in his own grief, lost his mind? After all, it had been four days since Lazarus had died.

Jewish mysticism taught that a deceased person’s spirit remains around the body for up to three days after death before departing. So it was thought that someone deceased could come back to life during this three-day period but not afterwards. On the fourth day, the spirit left the body, and there was no hope for life without a miracle. And besides, by the fourth day in Israel’s hot climate, advanced

decay would be destroying the body and the stench would have been overwhelming, as Mary tried to point out to Jesus.

But even though this morning's story goes into detail about death and all the emotions that surround it, it's not just a story about death. It's a story about life after death. So the next thing we know, Jesus is calling his beloved Lazarus to come out from the tomb, and that's exactly what happens. Lazarus came out from the tomb which had imprisoned him for the past four days.

And our narrative closes with Jesus' words, "Unbind him, and let him go." Taken literally, it's a practical instruction to remove the cloth strips that would have bound the hands and feet of Lazarus. Taken literally, these are the concluding words of an account of one of Jesus' most famous miracles. But we lose so much if we limit ourselves to nothing more than the literal interpretation of scripture. Because I think there is more being offered to us than that.

You see, I think those last words of Jesus – "let him go" – were intentionally placed there by the Gospel writer. Lazarus may have stepped forth from the tomb, but he couldn't begin to experience the fullness of life after death until he had been released from his bindings.

When a loved one dies, it feels like a part of ourselves has died along with them. And we can't imagine that we'll ever experience life again. We're not even sure if we want to experience it. But if we are willing to work our way through our grief, then we will. Like Lazarus, we will experience life after death. Anne Lamott has said, "You will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn't seal back up. And you come through. It's like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly—that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp."

There is life after death. Resurrection is not just an event that took place in the past, as recorded by the Easter accounts of our four Gospels. Nor is it limited to something that will happen in the future, as mentioned in Paul's letter to a Thessalonian congregation, when he wrote, "Jesus will personally come down from heaven with a shout, at the sound of the archangel's voice and the trumpet of God, and those who have died in Christ will rise first." (1 Thessalonians 4:16) Resurrection is something that can happen in the here and now. For those who feel as if a part of them has died with their loved ones, life after death is possible.

But it only happens after we loosen our grip just a bit from our loved ones. It happens as we let them go, as Jesus instructed the crowd. It happens as we begin to realize there is something other than our grief, and so we bless them on their way, and offer thanksgiving for the ways they have impacted our lives. To do so will, no doubt, feel like a betrayal of our love for the person who has died. Even more, it feels as if we ourselves have nothing to hold onto when we unbind the grief from our lives, grief which we may mistakenly confuse as love for the one who has died. But even as we unbind ourselves and loosen our grip, we discover that they will forever remain a part of our spirits, spirits that have courageously decided to embrace life after death.

The death of a loved one changes us forever. We will never be the same. We never completely heal. But, in time, we begin to live again. I want to close with excerpts from a poem written by Mary Oliver, after the death of her long-time partner:

That time / I thought I could not / go any closer to grief / without dying / I went closer, /
and I did not die. / Surely God / had His hand in this, / as well as friends... / Have you
heard / the laughter / that comes, now and again, / out of my startled mouth? / How I
linger / to admire, admire, admire / the things of this world / that are kind and maybe /
also troubled — / roses in the wind, / the sea geese on the steep waves, / a love / to which
there is no reply?

May we each come to realize that death does not have the last word. As long as there is love, there is life after death. Amen.