

**Lauren Baske Davis**  
**11.7.21 All Saints Day**  
**First UCC Northfield**  
**Sermon on John 11:32-44**

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**John 11:32-44**

(Actual text here, but in worship the scripture was interpreted by Elizabeth Olson, using a scripture adaptation by Bob Gregory-Bjorklund)

*<sup>32</sup> When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." <sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup> He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." <sup>35</sup> Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" <sup>37</sup> But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" <sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup> Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." <sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" <sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." <sup>43</sup> When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" <sup>44</sup> The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

**Sermon**

I ran into a colleague this week from another town who I hadn't seen in years. She and I have both moved on from the churches that we used to connect through, and now she is a leadership advisor to clergy.

We caught up for a bit over conversation, and she listened deeply after asking how I'd been doing through the pandemic. Then, she said how she'd been doing, how she loves her new job, but how deeply she had been grieving, especially at the beginning of the pandemic.

"One day about 4 months in to the pandemic," she said, "I put my coffee cup under my Keurig coffee maker and I pressed the button, and turned away from it. When I turned back, I realized I must've pressed the wrong button and the coffee had spilled, overflowing my cup and going everywhere on my counter. It may sound silly," she said, "but for me that was the literal tipping point for my grief. Of course sensibly, I knew that the coffee had simply spilled over, that it was all contained on my counter, and that I had a towel 2 feet away, that could clean it up. But instead," she said, "I wept. I fell apart at the coffee spilling over the edge of my cup. And of course, it was a great metaphor for how the grief was spilling over in me too. That's what happens," she said, "when there's too much to grieve. When we don't process it. When we don't let it out. It comes out anyway in unexpected ways. Just like my needing a smaller amount of coffee—or grief—in my cup," she said, "we need extra space to grieve. We've got to let the containers of our lives have some room. So can make space for grief. So we can acknowledge it; move through it."

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A famous line traveling around the internet, (and attributed to a number of people,<sup>1</sup> unfortunately) says that “grief is love with nowhere to go.” Grief is the sadness at the struggle, the loss of expectation, having to let go when you don’t want to, the knowledge sometimes that things didn’t have to be this way, or the awareness that no one *wanted* them to be this way. It is change. It is sadness. It is not hearing someone’s voice anymore, feeling their touch anymore, looking in their eyes, smelling their scent, seeing the way they move, their gestures, feeling their presence when they walk into a room. While sometimes we think it is better or somehow more appropriate behavior not to acknowledge it—or we think we are inconveniencing people with the fullness of our feelings or our whole situation—we must make room for grief.

Last week I had another conversation with a local doctor dealing with Covid in one of the clinics here in town. She said that she feels like the entire medical health community needs a grieving—in her words, “a communal wailing”—service. To make room for the overwhelming grief.

Similarly, this week at the Northfield Area Interfaith Association (NAIA), Northfield Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Matt Hillman told our group that he hopes that as a community we can have a collective service of grieving and forgiveness with one another after the pandemic has slowed. To make room for the grief and the healing that needs to happen.

Whether we have named it specifically or not, I think many of us might know what it’s like to feel the collective grief spilling over like coffee. Three conversations I’ve had in one week have spoken to grieving. Maybe it’s loved ones lost, or the grief of lives that will never be the same. Maybe it’s dealing with overwhelming jobs, or lost jobs and businesses or livelihoods in the pandemic, maybe it’s the loss of community and face to face connection. Maybe you’re not feeling it today, but many of us have experienced it. And of course, we recognize today of all days, the grief of losing loved ones.

This idea of making room for grief is in our scripture today: permission to wail and to weep. Our scripture says that when Jesus learned of Lazarus’ death, he wept. Jesus wept. In Greek though, the word “wept” really means greatly disturbed. It’s actually the same word used about Jesus’ emotions when he flips the tables in the temple. Jesus is so sad and mad at Lazarus’ death, that he’s ready to flip the tables on death itself. And he’s about to.

And that’s good because Lazarus is, as my preaching professor Karoline Lewis put it, “super, super dead. Really, really, really dead.” Lazarus has been dead for four days. It is now after the three days where custom believed the soul stuck around. Lazarus is dead, his soul is departed and he has begun our scripture says, to stink. We can’t get more real about death than that.

So at that point when Jesus comes on the scene, Mary’s anger with him is understandable. Her grief is palpable. “Why weren’t you here?! He’s really, really, really dead, Jesus.”

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<sup>1</sup> Most commonly attributed to either Jamie Anderson or Roshi Joan Halifax via Google search

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For some of us this story is so familiar that we may not even realize that we've have dropped into the middle of the story this morning. The first thing Mary says is "Lord if you had been here." Wait, what's going on? While it might be distracting for some, for others maybe that even feels right, not to the sensible mind but to the grieving heart.

Death, loss, change, can come out of nowhere, too. Just like being dropped into the middle of the story. Nothing is sensible about grief, especially the timing. It is not where anyone wanted to be. It is profound loss. Loss and grief are so like this scripture—where we are dumped into the middle of it.

And that's fitting. There is no right time, no tidiness to grief and loss. It is messy. It's not quantifiable or qualifiable, and you can't compare it no matter who you lost and how. Grief is grief. And people are people. But I think this passage, this chunk of scripture was sliced the way it was because of what it shows us. It shows us the combination of feelings of loss, betrayal, grief, anger and suffering—along with allowing. With getting a bigger cup and making room. With taking the time for weeping.

Though we are dropped into this story in the middle, we haven't seen that Jesus was told about Lazarus' illness and for whatever reason didn't come to his side immediately. But we get the drift. This family are Jesus' friends. One of them died. Jesus wasn't there when he died. They are grieving, and Jesus is so sad and mad he's about to flip the tables again.

Before we dive right into the miracle of death to life—in that order—the miracle of Lazarus' rising back to life, let's soak in, linger, and make room for the fact what this scripture dwells in grief. Mary weeps and is angry, Jesus weeps and is angry. And if Jesus weeps, let's take that as a cue into God's character. God weeps. Love Divine, Love Eternal, when in loss, weeps. We who are so temporal, so mortal and fragile then, are free, welcomed, and encouraged to weep, to be angry, to wail. Maybe we must do those things in the ways that are right for us to heal. What this scripture shows us, what it gives us, is permission to grieve. Publicly. In the open.

Author, speaker, and researcher Brene Brown talks in a video series online about her return to church in the midst of a midlife breakdown. She says, "My return to faith was definitely around that breakdown. That's when I went [to church], you know, but I went for the wrong reasons. I really went because I'm like, 'this is hard and this hurts,' and in all the midlife unraveling books they say 'well go back to church, that's what everybody does,' so I went back to church thinking that it would be like an epidural.... And the church would make the pain go away, and then I found that faith in church was not an epidural for me at all, it was like a midwife, standing next to me saying, 'push.'"

Later, she talks about how much she didn't want to feel her own grief, and she says, "I thought faith would say 'I'll take away the pain and discomfort' but what it ended up saying is, 'I'll sit with you in it.' And I never thought until I found it that that would be enough. But it's perfect. You know, it's just I don't feel alone in it any more....I just think for me, that it's just

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about being with you. And it can't take away the pain, and I think, man, when we set that up as the parameter, that doesn't work. Jesus wept. Love weeps. That's true and it's a big deal."<sup>2</sup>

That's what we are doing today when we remember our loved ones today. Jesus wept, love weeps, and we do that together as a church, in the company of one another. This is the day we sit with one another not to take the pain away, but to be with one another in it. As we remember Bonnie, David, Bill, Penny, Gary, Mary Cay, Jerry and Helen and all of the other loved ones who have died. That's what we are doing when we bring the complexity of our lives, the losses we're enduring, when we bring brokenness or our pain to the table, and hold on to one another through it.

As a church, as a people, as the living saints, today is about being with, by sitting together in solidarity. We don't need to have the right words, we just need to make the space and take the time. This scripture reminds us that God is a God who weeps alongside.

The Gospel of John would also have us know that God weeps, yes, but God also knows and calls every one of us by name. Grief is real, and so, so hard. And the abundant grace of the story is that is that even when we feel beyond help, we are never beyond God's love. Thanks be to God for all whom we've loved. For all we hold dear and love still—for a God who knows us and knows what it is to grieve—and who also knows it's not the end. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Brene Brown featured in the video, "Jesus Wept" on *The Work of the People: Films for Discovery and Transformation* website, date unknown (2006?), accessed 11.4.2021 <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/jesus-wept>.