

Today is the day in the church year when we do the holy work of remembering those who have gone before us: those whom we have loved - and continue to love - but see no longer.¹ We hold them in prayer, acknowledging their continued presence with us, honoring how our lives were impacted by our relationship with them, and grieving tangible interactions with them. Yet while we mourn their death, as Christians, we rejoice that one we love has entered into the nearer presence of our Lord. We joyfully celebrate the promise that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

As hard as the grief process is, it's a comfort to know that death doesn't have the last word. We Christians are the people of the resurrection. It was on that third, glorious day that God acted and Jesus rose from the dead, bridging the gap between the earthly realm and that of Heaven, and giving us the opportunity to rise with Christ to life eternal. And so we post-resurrection Christians are a third day people. For the disciples and others who loved Jesus, those first two days with Jesus on the cross and then buried in the tomb were a doozie, but that third day? That third day was definitely worth the wait, just as he said it would be.

And so we post-resurrection Christians are a third day people. The disciples and most of Jesus' other followers were also 'third day' people. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, there is story after story of how God acts on the third day, intervening in human affairs to bring about new life, reconciliation, and second chances.

In our first creation story, after light has been created, after the sky and the waters have been created, vegetation is created... the first form of *life*... on the third day.²

¹ BCP 498

² Genesis 1:12

Later in Genesis, Abraham is sent (with his firstborn in tow) to Mount Moriah, way off in the distance, where he has a divine directive to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Abraham gathers up all the necessary supplies and begins the wretched journey. By the time they reach the mountain, Abraham is prepared to do what he has been called to do. Yet on the third day, the day when they arrive, God acts by providing a ram as a substitute for his son.³

The third day after the Israelites reach Mount Sinai, God came down upon the mountain and spoke with Moses, pronouncing the 10 Commandments.⁴

On the third day, after praying to God for release, King Hezekiah is healed of his fatal disease.⁵

On the third day, Jonah is expelled from the belly of a great fish.⁶

I could go on. While we are defined by the resurrection of our Lord on the third day, our identity as people of the third day comes from our deep Jewish roots.

In light of this long-standing theological tradition, Martha and Mary are less than thrilled that Jesus finally arrived ... on the *fourth* day. Their tradition reinforced the understanding God is a God of action, and they had trusted Jesus would intervene on behalf of his dear friend Lazarus.

But the third day had come and gone. Day Four had arrived. The day after God typically acts. The day all hope is lost. Mary and Martha woke up that morning and had to face the fact that God had not acted. Their prayers had not been answered. It wasn't until this day that Jesus finally shows up on the scene.

We know that by the time Jesus arrives, Mary's grief is palpable. She is clearly no longer in a spiritual state of ecstasy at the foot of her Lord (anointing him with oil) as she was at their last encounter, but rather she kneels at his feet in a state of despair. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." This is no ordinary lament, this is an accusation. These are the words of a person betrayed. These are words of anger and grief and hopelessness. From

³ Genesis 22:4-5

⁴ Exodus 19:16-19

⁵ 2 Kings 20:5

⁶ Jonah 1:17

her perspective, Jesus has not only let their beloved brother needlessly suffer and die, but Jesus has consigned the two of these women to a life of abject poverty without a man to financially provide for them. So these words are also words of incredulity and fear. “If you had only been here...”

He sees her tears, and those of others gathered around. And Jesus weeps.

This is the only time in all of the Gospels that we hear of Jesus having this sort of emotional moment. He has borne the rejection of his hometown, nearly driven off a cliff by the very people whom he has known and loved his entire life; he dutifully denies himself the joys of marriage and family; he is persistently scrutinized and challenged by the authorities; he is often exhausted by the constant demands of his disciples and other followers and has little time to re-energize; he encounters individuals with extreme disfigurements and diseases who are brutally mistreated; he will be mocked, beaten, and hung on a cross. And never is Jesus more deeply moved and emotive than when Mary articulates her hopelessness and despair and feelings of anger and betrayal.

It seems to me that Jesus knows already how this story is going to end. Earlier in this chapter, before they began their journey back to Bethany, Jesus told the disciples that Lazarus was ‘only sleeping,’ implying that Lazarus’s morality is not on the line. Jesus has known all along that Lazarus is going to be fine. Yet Jesus is “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved,” and weeps for the suffering of those he loves.

Speaking only for myself, this is the single most compelling story in all of the Gospels. It is through this story that I no longer need to take a leap of faith to experience a connection with the one who is both fully God and fully human. On the fourth day, Jesus, fully God, knowing he is about to bring Lazarus back to life, is also fully human: he weeps because those he loves are suffering. The divine reality and the human condition merge in this moment more fully for me than at the virgin birth or on the cross or on that blessed third day when Jesus rose from the dead. On that fourth, miserable day, God in Jesus entered into our experience as people broken – not by sin or death – but broken by a lack of hope. And that hopelessness broke his heart.

It means a great deal to me that Jesus didn’t immediately go about the business of fixing Mary’s pain, but he entered it, and was present with her in

it. And then, yes, he showed her that hope is not lost – it is never lost, even when (from our perspective) it seems like there is no reason try to hope again.

Maybe it means so much to me because I've had my share of waking up on fourth day mornings, and so many people who I care deeply for experience those fourth day mornings, too. It's probably safe to say that most of us have first-hand experience with devastating loss, and an utter bewilderment as to how to go about the business of putting one foot in front of the other.

For Lazarus, Martha, Mary, and all the others gathered on that day, he called them back to their truest identity: God's beloved children, people of the third day, people of hope and life and wholeness and second chances. God does the same for us.

When we encounter those periods of deep sorrow, loss or pain, it is not unfaithful for us to grieve. Grief is beautiful and hard and necessary and holy work. We hurt because we have known love, and that love doesn't end just because a relationship does.

Whether we are angry and hurt like Mary, feeling as though our *raison d'être* is gone, if we dare to keep watch, God will show up. God enters that hurt, that hopelessness, that suffering. In time, we will see the result of God's continued activity in our lives. In time, we will catch glimpses of the new life which is offered to us – perhaps not when we want, or the way we want – but we are brought back into our life in community through the grace and love of God. New joys and new loves await us and our sense of hopelessness will eventually wane. In time, we will realize that God has guided us out of the shadow of fourth day despair and back to the light of third day life.

The suffering we experience is not the end of the story. Our God is a God of action. Our God is a God who enters into our experience and weeps with us when we are heartbroken. Our God is a God who “will wipe away the tears from all faces” and “swallow up death forever.” “Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”

How does the story end, you ask? With life. With joy and restoration and reconciliation. With communion and fellowship with all the saints and the ineffable joys that God has prepared for us ~ that's how the story ends.

Thanks be to God!