

Sports. It should absolutely come as no surprise to most of you that if you were to ask me the thing that I am grieving the hardest in the midst of this new normal we're living in, it would be the loss of sports. I mean, of course, take away all the church stuff and how much I miss all of you, that goes without saying, but the sports thing, I still haven't quite gotten it under control. This is supposed to be like the *best time of the year*, March Madness, baseball's opening day was supposed to be last week, basketball and hockey pushing towards the playoffs. It's supposed to be non-stop. ESPN is supposed to barely be able to keep up with the coverage, and yet here we are, showing documentaries and doing countdowns of the best sporting events that have already happened, and I will be honest, I find myself clinging to the ESPN home page like it's the last drop of water in the ocean, just hoping that there might be some new news today, something to talk about, something to get excited about, and mostly...it's a whole lot of not much, and I'll be honest, it's entirely disheartening.

For all of us these days, that thing is there, that thing that maybe just doesn't feel like all that big of a deal in the grand scheme of things, but is the thing that to your heart was the last tick of loss it could take that threw you headlong into grief because of our current situation. It could be vacations or concert tickets, birthday parties or school dances, the opening of

Busch Gardens or that first trip to beach for the year. No matter what, we all have them these days, those things which we are longer for that we know just might not happen, and I think for awhile there's been this air of these things are too small to grieve. Like we've told ourselves that since they're "not a big deal" we should feel guilty about being sad about them. We've only on scant occasions during all of this given ourselves permission to just be honest and say we're grieving, grieving over whatever it is that we were looking forward to but which now may not happen. Because it feels like that word, *grief*, should be reserved for bigger situations, situations like our gospel this morning, but here's the thing, grief is grief, no matter how big, no matter how small, it's there, and thankfully, we have a God that can handle grief, no matter what size it comes in.

I'll be honest when I say that to me, this is simultaneously one of my absolute favorite gospels because it has a deep level of profound wonder and joy to it, but it's also the one that just about rips my guts out at the same time and frustrates the living daylights out of me. So let's deal with the frustration first...this entire gospel feels like it doesn't need to happen, like it absolutely, unequivocally could have been stopped. Jesus *knows* what's going to happen. It's blatantly obvious he knows what is going to happen *to one of his best friends*, and yet he does not go. He stays put for two days,

knowing full well the astronomical amount of grief this is going to cause Mary and Martha. Grief that they have absolutely no trouble laying right before Jesus' feet with words laced through with accusation, pain, and lament. *If you would have been here...* my brother would not have died. I've said it before, I will say it again, I don't think there's any more heartbreaking sentence in the whole Bible. *If you would have been here...* I wouldn't feel like this. *If you would have been here...* I wouldn't be grieving. *If you would have been here...* Lazarus would be alive. But you weren't, and he's gone, and everything is awful and where on earth *were you?* It's awful. Plain and simple Mary and Martha both believe so ardently in Jesus, in who he is, in the power he has, and they feel like he's let them down. And now, their entire world has boiled down to a fever pitch of grief and pain, all because Jesus dilly dallied.

And yet...there's something amazing that lingers in their conversations. Something that given the circumstances you might not think should be there...hope. Even in the face of her abject grief and anger, Martha is still willing to proclaim words of resurrection, words of belief, words of trust that Jesus is the Messiah. Somehow in the face of death, she is still able to hear words about *life* and trust them, and that is frankly, astounding and utterly uncanny, because as we all know, sometimes that

level of faith in the midst of that level of devastation is the hardest thing we can ever possibly do.

That is the tension of this gospel, this push and pull between lament and belief, anger and trust, heartbreak and faith. Every single person in the gospel experiences it. The disciples can't really tell which way is up, is Lazarus asleep, dead, can Jesus do anything, are they going to be in danger, what in the world is going on? Mary and Martha both very strongly live out both ends of that spectrum, pain and yet trusting their beloved friend and Messiah. The crowds don't know what to think, they're so moved that Jesus loved Lazarus and yet the question lingers, couldn't he have done something? Even Jesus himself...he knows what he's about to do, what he's capable of doing, and yet in the face of that sealed up tomb he can't help but weep for his friend that he has lost, even if only for a few moments.

But then all of that pain and all of that grief, all of that tension, that push and pull of pain, loss, and hope explodes with only three simple words, "Lazarus, come out!!" And just like that...the only thing that is left is life. Into a situation that seemed destined only for pain and death and darkness, Jesus scatters everything in the name of resurrection and hope and life. Lazarus lives and when Jesus says unbind him and let him go, you have to wonder if he isn't only talking about Lazaraus, but about everyone gathered

there around that tomb. Unbind yourselves from your grief, from your fear, from whatever it is that is keeping you gripped in darkness, let it go, be free, *live*. Imagine the freeing power of those words...unbind him and let him go. Unbind him from death and let him live. Unbind yourselves from grief and let yourselves hope. Unbind yourselves from pain and let joy in.

I keep finding myself profoundly amazed at how each week the gospel seems to be *the gospel* we need for our current circumstances and this week that amazement was off the charts, because I'm not sure there's a word we need more. A word that tells us that even the Savior of the entire world mourned. Even the Messiah wept in the face of loss and grief, giving us all the biggest dose of permission we could ever need to feel our grief, own it, and let out the tears that maybe we've been holding in or trying to fend off. Because let's face it, even Jesus wept, and we aren't Jesus, so whatever it is you're grieving, you're allowed to feel it. You're allowed to feel it and own it and cry over it, even if that thing is an empty March Madness bracket. No one gets to determine what is too big or too small for grief. This gospel lets us hold that our grief is our own and we can express it in whatever ways we need to, because God is big enough to hold all of those expressions, our anger and our lament and our tears. God is big enough to scream at, when it

feels like what you want to scream is if you would have been here, none of this would have happened!!

And that right there is where this gospel grabs us and pulls us to the other side of our grief and our anger and our fear, because for as much as there are going to be days of this where we don't feel like God is here, God is *always* here, breathing words of resurrection and hope and life into a world that feels like it is entirely gripped within the hands of death and darkness. Jesus didn't leave Lazarus in the tomb, and this world is not going to stay locked up inside of its homes for the rest of our days. Resurrection and life will happen. That is probably the boldest statement of faith that we can have right now, the belief that resurrection and hope will still get the final say.

There are going to be very loud voices in the midst of this that will say that God made this happen or that this is happening because God has abandoned us or because we have abandoned God. That will lament why God isn't just fixing this. God didn't make this happen and God absolutely hasn't disappeared. God is right here dwelling among us, the six feet of space that we're leaving between each other is filled with the Holy Spirit breathing hope and peace into situations that feel hopeless. God is in our living rooms, in our hospitals, in your home office, in your car, in the

grocery store, in Zoom meetings, in teacher parades, and electronic passing of the peace. God is here in the hands of doctors and nurses and scientists who are feverishly trying to slow this down, find a way to stop it. God hasn't disappeared and God is working through God's people to help us figure a way out of it, and figure it out we will, some way, somehow, and with a lot of patience, we will get there, and once we do, once our doors are opened and we can hold each other again, it is going to be the deepest rush of resurrection joy we've ever experienced.

Today, tomorrow, for the next however many weeks we live this, we recognize that we live in the tension. The tension between ardent faith and abject grief, between frustrated angst and relieved joy, between trust and fear, and God is with us in that tension, forever offering a word of love, a word of resurrection, a promise that no matter what Jesus is the resurrection and the life and that is only ever going to be the thing that wins. Easter is not far off...hope is not far off...and even if it looks a little different this year it is no less real, no less powerful, maybe this year it will actually feel even more powerful, because we are so desperately craving a word of life and resurrection in our lives. It's ok to be longing for the tension to cease, and it will. And we will hear those words, so sweet, so amazing, unbind us and let us go...and the world will resound with hope. **AMEN!!!**