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Ipswich Methodist Circuit
Sermon: 29th March, 2020
Series: Stand-Alone
Scripture: Psalm 130, John 11:1-45



Waiting & Hoping



As a nation and as the world, we are in a time of waiting, of pausing, of wondering what comes next, and how long we have to wait. The newspaper headlines this week screamed 'Life Put on Hold'.



What emotions are you feeling as you sit isolated at home? *Take a moment to name some of your feelings.* Fear? Anxiety? Disappointment? Despair? Sadness? Disbelief? Anger? Loneliness?



Most of these are symptoms of grief. We usually talk about grief in relation to death. But actually we grieve all sorts of losses. And there are certainly many losses that we as a society are facing right now. The loss of the presence of others. The loss of significant events. The loss of our freedoms. The loss of income or financial security. The loss of vacations. The loss of so many things that we took for granted.



In my own life, there are significant events that will not go ahead. My parents celebrated their Diamond Wedding Anniversary this week. We had to cancel the party and they celebrated on their own. I was disappointed for the party that I was looking forward to, and for my parents on what should have been a joyful few days. We rejoiced in the birth of our first grandchild a couple of weeks ago, but our flight to the US to go and see her after Easter has been cancelled and it could be months before we get to hold her. I ache with longing and I am sad.

But I know that I am not alone. All of us have experienced loss and some hopes for our lives that have been dashed. I have spoken to some of you on the phone this week. One of you talked about a relative's postponed wedding. Another said their son's 18th birthday party was cancelled and he was experiencing grief over the loss all the senior-year milestone events that he had been so looking forward to. I heard of visits to nursing homes that can no longer happen. I discovered a student that I know in the US is having her university study-abroad summer program to the UK cancelled. We have a funeral coming up at Chantry that is restricted to a minimal number of mourners.



So much is not happening. It feels like someone hit the pause button, and yet life is still continuing but we can't participate as we want to. We are in a waiting pattern and we are collectively grieving.

Psalm 130 that we heard read earlier talks about the Psalmist crying out to God and then waiting for a response with hope:

*Out of the depths I **cry** to you, O Lord.
I **wait** for the Lord, my soul **waits**,
and in his word I **hope**.
O Israel, **hope** in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is **steadfast love**,
and with him is **great power** to redeem. (Psalm 130:1,5,7)*

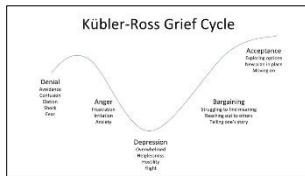
Today is the 5th Sunday in Lent and in the UK it is also the 1st Sunday of the Passion as we begin to turn our minds to Jesus' journey to the cross. Between now and Jesus' death on Good Friday, there will be a lot of suffering. The story has more and more suffering as the days get closer to Jesus' crucifixion. But it ends as we know, with the joy of the Resurrection. And, for us too, if the scientists and doctors are right, the days we are living in now, will get worse before they get better, but we are promised that resurrection will come.

In our gospel today, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, has become sick. Word is sent by the sisters to Jesus, but Jesus doesn't come immediately. He waited two more days where he was, and in that time Lazarus died. By the time he arrived, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days.

Mary and Martha were grieving. They were disappointed and mad and hurt by Jesus. They had expected Jesus to come and heal Lazarus. But even in their grief, Martha still expressed her belief saying to Jesus, *I still believe that anything you ask of God will be done. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.* (John 11: 22,27) Disappointment and faith co-exist. Waiting and praying co-exist. Grief and hope co-exist. We often call this time of waiting for answers 'the dark night of the soul'. We learn patience in this time, as we sit and wait, and look for the signs. As the Psalmist said, *My soul waits for the Lord and in his word I hope.* (Psalm 130:5) Like Martha and Mary, we have to wait and be of good courage. But unlike them, we know that John's gospel account is going to show the power of God and the resurrection life. And that what seems like death is only the beginning.

When Jesus does arrive, he sees their grief, and here we get the shortest verse in the Bible. 'Jesus wept' (John 11:35). Lazarus was Jesus' friend too, and Jesus sees their grief and he expresses his grief.

Grief is a natural reaction. We are not supposed to keep our grief locked away. Jesus wept. **He cried.**



We know nowadays that there are many emotions that go with grief. and that grieving is intentional work. The Kübler-Ross model suggests five stages of grief: Denial, Anger, Sadness/Depression, Bargaining and Acceptance. Although many people suggest these are not linear, more cyclical and you can experience all of these emotions at once, and each one more than once. Grief is a clustering of feelings.



Jesus wept. It's okay to experience these emotions that are welling in us right now at our situation. They are healthy. Be gentle with yourself. Be in the present. You will be feeling many things and that is normal.

Usually with the death of a close loved one, you and your immediate family are grieving and your life is paused, but the rest of the community do not feel the loss as strongly, so there are people all around you whose lives are moving on and who are there to support you.

The emotions we are feeling at the moment though are the emotions from a disaster that the whole community is feeling. More like when a tornado hits, or an earthquake. We will survive this together. We are all grieving, but we will not all have the same feelings at the same time. So stock up on compassion.

Name your feelings. Sit with them and acknowledge them. And then let them go. Grieving is a show of faith. Trust that God will hold us when we are at our most vulnerable. Patience too is a gift of grief as we wait in faith for God's will to unfold.



The next thing Jesus says to them all as they gather around the tomb is *Roll away the stone!* Come on Jesus! Seriously?! He's been dead for 4 days - the smell will be overwhelming! It'll stink! Why do you want us to roll back the stone?

In one of the churches I served in California, we were well familiar with that smell. It was a fairly common occurrence for us to have dead critters in the crawl space under the church and after a while, until they totally decomposed, the smell was pretty unbearable. It hit us as we walked in the door! And we'd have to throw the windows open wide.

But it is where things stink that resurrection can occur. We think in terms of life, then death. Jesus teaches us that it is the other way around. Death comes before abundant life. And so with the power of God working in this foul, messy place Lazarus is raised. And if Jesus can raise Lazarus, then he can raise us too. Resurrection is coming. **Jesus meets us in the tomb, where it stinks.** Trust and hope in that promise.



When Lazarus appears from the tomb, he is bound from head to toe. Jesus instructs the crowd to unbind him. Jesus had also instructed the crowd to move the stone. It takes a community. We cannot do this alone. And community is what I am seeing, as you all reach out to one another.

Last week we got our new Circuit Website up and running. This week our Circuit Superintendent instigated a 'thought for the day' and the articles for that and for the Circuit Newsletter have been rolling in ever since as you all tell your faith stories and lift the spirits of the community. Some of you are shopping for those who cannot get out. Each time I call one of you, you tell me who has called you, and who you have called. We are finding new ways of working. It was wonderful to have our scripture today read by the 5 of us from our own homes and connected and recorded via Zoom. My social media has been full of uplifting posts and videos of friends from seminary and clergy colleagues posting their video messages to their congregations.

Resurrection is coming. And my spirits have been especially lifted in two ways this week. After realizing that I would be unable to be with my parents for their 60th wedding anniversary, I planned some alternate gifts for them. Thankfully their local florist was still delivering and was still able to get some flowers after the Mothering Sunday rush. And an order from an online store procured a gift that was delivered on time. And the Post Office delivered the card from the Queen. And then my Aunt persuaded my parents to install Zoom. So on Thursday evening, my parents thought that my Aunt and Adrian I were going to Zoom them. We did, but we surprised them with the whole family gathered together from across the globe for an hour. We were all able together to wish my parents a Happy Anniversary and catch up with everyone's news. My new baby granddaughter even put an appearance, although she slept through it all. We lifted our glasses to toast them and congratulate them. And it felt like resurrected life.



I've also been enjoying the once-a-day local walks that we can take. As we slow down, it is possible to see the signs of spring all around us. We took a walk on Rushmere Heath, which is over our side of town, and the gorse is just stunning at the moment. My soul was filled and I was joyful.

And the words of Psalmist continue to echo in my head:

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I **wait** for the Lord, my soul **waits**,
and in his word I **hope**.
O Israel, **hope** in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is **steadfast love**,
and with him is **great power to redeem**. (Psalm 130:1,5,7)*



So, express your feelings of grief in healthy ways. Wait with patience and hope and trust that redemption and resurrection are on their way.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

Resources

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