

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 22, 2026
9:30 AM

Text: John 11:1-45

Theme: Bless the Lives We Actually Have: Blessed Are Those Who Mourn

[prayer]

Today's theme is Blessed Are Those Who Mourn. I imagine some of us gathered here are mourning Gonzaga's tournament loss yesterday.

In all seriousness, one of my deep, pastoral convictions is that almost everyone is grieving something, all the time. I reached that conclusion when I finally understood that grief is not an emotion exclusively attached to the death of a beloved person. We can grieve all sorts of things: Careers. Places. Pets. Marriages. Friendships. Our health. Our identity or sense of self. Our country. Institutions. Ideals and treasured beliefs. Imagined futures that do not come to pass. Scripture also commands us to mourn our sin because sin harms our relationships with God, ourselves, and each other.

Simply put, if something can be lost, it can be grieved.

Despite this reality, our society does not mourn well. We categorize suffering and create hierarchies of grief, accepting some forms as acceptable while dismissing others. Grieving a dead child (especially if they died young) tends to rank at the top and is more deserving of our sympathy. Grieving a dream deferred ranks toward the bottom so, you know, get over it.

We also have a bad habit of putting arbitrary timelines on our grief. When I worked as a hospital chaplain, we would make calls to bereaved families on a set schedule: twenty-four hours after the death, then one week, one month, three months, six months, one year. The calls then stopped, as if grief was something we could cure in six half-hour counseling sessions. This expectation was driven by the medical industry, not by the actual rhythms of grief. Grief is not linear; it is cyclical.

We cycle around a grief event like a planet orbits the sun. Some days we will feel closer to the loss; other days we will feel further away.

And then there are all our nonsensical expectations for *how* to grieve. It's okay to cry, but not too much – you don't want to make anyone uncomfortable. It's okay to talk about it, but not for too long – again, you don't want to make anyone uncomfortable. Public displays of grief are not well tolerated – it's much better to grieve in private – because, again, you don't want to make anyone uncomfortable. And on it goes. These expectations center the comfort of others rather than the needs of the mourner.

We don't like grief because it is inefficient, messy. It can't be rationalized away; it refuses to be optimized out of existence. And so, we shove it out of the way, bury it in the interest of "getting on with life."

I last preached on our Scripture lesson just a few months ago, in the fall. I asked the question "Why do people need Jesus?" and I made the case that we need Jesus because Jesus delivers us from the fear of death, and the fear of death is at the root of our sin. The serpent said to Adam and Eve, "If you eat from this tree, you will be like God" (Gen 3:5). Which is to say, *you will be immortal and without limitation.*

The first sin was believing we could be something other than human. We are always trying to evade our mortality. But death is part of being human. And when things die, we grieve.

We need Jesus because Jesus redeems our humanity by teaching us how to be fully human. Salvation is not about escaping our humanity but instead healing it. And if God created us with the ability to grieve, then learning how to honor our grief is part of our salvation.

I love the story of Lazarus for many reasons, but the first is that Jesus gives us permission to grieve. He gives us permission by doing it himself. "Jesus wept" (v. 35). This is the shortest sentence in the gospels, but it contains entire worlds of meaning.

Who is Jesus crying for? Lazarus? His sisters? Himself?

Perhaps it is all three. Jesus is crying for his friend who died. He misses him; he is sad he couldn't be there to say goodbye. Jesus is also crying in solidarity with Mary and Martha, who have lost their brother. And it also strikes me that Jesus is perhaps crying for himself. He knows that, like Lazarus, death awaits him. After this interlude, he will turn his face toward the cross.

But above all, Jesus cries because Jesus loves. Grief is an expression of love. Those who were gathered there at the tomb with Jesus and witnessed his tears said, "See how he *loved* him" (v. 36). Jesus loved Lazarus. It is that simple. Out of his great love for his friend, Jesus joins the gathered mourners at Lazarus's tomb and mingles his tears with theirs.

Afterward Jesus performs the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead. By raising Lazarus, Jesus demonstrates that God has given him power over death. Lazarus's resurrection foreshadows Jesus's resurrection, and Jesus's resurrection foreshadows our own. "You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. I will put my breath in you, and you will live" (Ezk 37:13-14 CEB). When Jesus says he is the resurrection, he is promising us that death is not the end of our stories...life is.

But behind the miracle of resurrection is the miracle of God's love. Jesus's compassionate love for his grieving friends is just as miraculous as his miracle of raising the dead. Because compassion is salve for the soul. Compassion literally means "to suffer with." We may not understand why God allows us to grieve, but God forbids that we grieve alone. God grieves with us, walks the valley of the shadow of death with us.

That preposition – *with* – has the power to save. Because *with* is how God relates to us in Jesus Christ. God's miracle of love is a miracle of 'with.' On the cross, God's love poured out not only for us, but *with* us as Jesus faced his death – just as we all will one day face our deaths. And in the empty tomb, God's love poured out again not only for us, but *with* us as Jesus overcame the power of death. We have been promised we will overcome death, too, when we are raised from the dead into eternal life.

With is also how God calls us to relate to each other. "Weep with those who weep," Paul writes in his letter to the Romans (12:15). Be a companion to those

who mourn. Even in the face of his impending death, Jesus chose to join the community gathered in death's shadow and mourn with them. He engages their tough questions: *Where is God? Why would God allow this to happen?* Jesus doesn't offer them pat answers. Instead, he offers them the consolation of his presence and by his presence reminds them that grief should never be shouldered alone. We do the necessary work of mourning and offering comfort together, in community. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt 5:4).

Grief is an expression of love. If the Son of God felt free to show his love in such a tender and vulnerable way, why should we be ashamed to do the same?

The beauty of this story is that it holds both grief and hope in equal measure. Sometimes we want to skip over our grief or the grief of others so we can get to the promise of resurrection. But for Christians, grief and hope coexist. Through this whole story, Jesus planned to resurrect Lazarus in order to demonstrate his power over death. Even so, he still took the time to mourn. We can honor our grief *and* honor our conviction that Jesus will one day stand at the edge of our graves and call us out. All that has died will be raised to new life and remade. That doesn't erase our grief at the reality of death and loss. But it does transform it.

Reverend Steve Garnaas-Holmes writes:

*Something in you has died.
It happens all the time.
Something you clung to,
something beloved.
Maybe a hope, a memory, a gift,
a time, a power, a blessing....*

*It is no longer.
Jesus didn't save it.
It's really gone.
It stinks.*

*Too late for miracles,
you let it go.
You grieve the loss.*

*Then
somehow—
only after those tears,
that absence,
that hopelessness—
a voice calls,
“Come out!”*

*And out of that death,
that loss,
that emptiness,
a mystery comes,
alive.*

*Even now, then, attend:
what is being called?¹*

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Blessed are those who mourn...for God weeps with them.

Amen.

¹ “Come Out” by Steve Garnaas-Holmes. Posted March 17, 2026. unfoldinglight.net.