

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2026 • 10:30am
Trinity Episcopal Church • New Orleans, LA

The Rev. Lex Breckinridge

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. The beautiful story of the raising of Lazarus is a story about grief. It's also a story about love.

But first, it's a story about grief. It begins with Mary and Martha, sisters in the midst of the experience of grief and loss, and their grief is amplified because their friend Jesus didn't come when they called him. They imagined that if Jesus had shown up on time, their brother might not have died.

So along with grief and loss, it's also a story about blame. You know, blame often accompanies grief. In the midst of pain or loss, we often want to assign blame to push away the pain.

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Notice that Martha and Mary both say that to Jesus at some point. Jesus, if only you'd come when we called you, my brother would not have died.

Martha and Mary aren't the only ones experiencing grief and loss, though. Jesus is also experiencing grief and loss at the death of his friend. Jesus began to weep, we're told, as he approached the tomb of Lazarus.

The one who in John's gospel is presented as the Lord of heaven and earth weeps at the death of his friend. The Lord of heaven and earth himself experiences the pain, sorrow, the suffering of human loss. Grief is as much a part of what it means to be a human as joy is.

Joy we welcome, grief we push away. But we need both to have the experience of being fully human. David White is one of my favorite living poets.

He lives on Whidbey Island near Seattle. Zonnie and I have had the good fortune to hear him read on many occasions. And if you ever have the opportunity to hear David read his poetry, run, don't walk to get there.

Here's a short poem of his called The Well of Grief. The Well of Grief. Those who will not slip beneath the still surface on the well of grief, turning downward through its black water to the place where we cannot breathe, will never know the source from which we drink.

Nor find in the darkness glimmering the small round coins thrown by those who wished for something else. What a beautiful and profound image. The bottom of the well of grief is the source of life.

The secret water, cold and clear. But you have to slip deeply into the well. You have to slip into the well to the point where you feel like you can't breathe.

If you stand outside the well, just throwing your coins and hoping for a different result, you miss out. And does running and hiding from grief lessen the pain of grief? What do you think? Slipping into the well of grief, going all the way down. It means you're fully alive.

So the story of the raising of Lazarus is a story about grief and loss. The grief of Martha and Mary and the grief of Jesus. Jesus experiences grief.

God experiences human grief. And that means we are never, ever alone in our grief. God knows the pain of our grief.

And this is also a story about love. About how love breaks into the midst of grief and loss. I'm the resurrection and I am life, Jesus says.

And then he turns to Martha and asks her if she believes him. Yes, Lord, I believe, she replies. Remember last week when we said that the turning point of the story of the healing of the man born blind wasn't the healing itself.

It was the man's declaration to Jesus, yes, Lord, I believe. I think that's what's going on here. Martha says, yes, Lord, I believe that you are resurrection and you are life.

You know, in John's Gospel, faith isn't understood as agreeing with a set of propositions. It's not making some kind of mental assent to a set of doctrines or dogmas or creeds. No, faith is believing, trusting in Jesus as the Word made flesh.

Trusting that in Jesus, God has come into the world. Faith is when we come into relationship with Jesus and allow Jesus to become the blueprint for our lives, the blueprint for our lives. Drawing close to Jesus's heart, we draw close to God's heart.

And when Mary and Martha do that, grief becomes joy. You know, John's Gospel reports that Jesus worked seven miracles. And these miracles are meant to be understood as signs of how God in Christ works in the world.

And this is the last one of these signs. You know, the miracles aren't important as miracles. I mean, Lazarus, after all, is eventually going to die a human death.

No, these miracles are signs of God's action. The raising of Lazarus is Jesus's last sign before he enters Jerusalem to face his own death. And it's the final sign that the Lord of heaven and earth is also the Lord over death.

When we allow Jesus to walk alongside us through the pain of grief and loss and death, we carry with us our hope for resurrection and new life. I'll share a story with you about grief, loss, and love. I had a brother named Tommy who was 18 months younger than I. He was happy, filled with life and energy, a really sweet toddler.

He was also a Down syndrome child. My mom and dad used to tell me that Tommy and I were inseparable. And then the summer when I was three, Tommy caught pneumonia and died.

A terrible loss that was the source of considerable grief in our family. And then in November of that same year, four of my cousins, whose ages ranged from six to 18 months, were killed in a tragic accident. You can only imagine the grief.

Now, I certainly had to imagine the grief because to this day, I've got no conscious memory of either of these events. Of course, I would have experienced the deep pain and separation and loss from my dearly loved brother and the cousins who I've played with two or three times a week, but I have no memory of that either. Now, fast forward to my college years.

The summer I was 20, I was working as a counselor at the Diocese of West Virginia summer camp, a place called Peterkin. It's much like our camp partner here in Louisiana. It's in a place of sublime natural beauty in the Allegheny Mountains, near the headwaters of the Potomac River in the eastern panhandle of West Virginia, a couple of hours east of Washington, D.C. One late summer evening, I found myself on a rough-hewn log bench on a hilltop overlooking verdant farmland.

In the distance, I could see the south branch of the Potomac River arising out of the Alleghenies, the gentle breeze, the hum of the cicadas, the farmer in the distance, cutting summer wheat. That whole scene was speaking to me deeply of the glory of creation. I remember that scene and that feeling to this very moment, and then completely without warning, completely out of the blue, I began to weep, I mean, to really cry.

You know, at first, for a few moments, I didn't understand what was going on. And then, again, without warning, I saw my brother Tommy's face. And then I saw the faces of my four cousins, all those faces that I only knew consciously through old photographs.

And gradually, gradually, I realized what was happening. I was grieving, consciously grieving the tragic events of pain and loss that had happened so many years before. It was cathartic to finally grieve openly and consciously.

And then, as the tears stopped, I began to experience an intensity of light and a sense of deep and powerful peace. A sense that all was well. A sense that Tommy and Roberta and Billy and Robbie and Mary Beth, they were well.

That they were whole and that I was whole. That they were at peace and I was at peace. That they were with Jesus and I was with Jesus.

That knowing of the deep peace of Jesus, I experienced in the midst of grief and loss, was a knowing deep in my bones, deep in my soul, in the midst of grief and loss. Jesus was there. Carrying me down into the well of grief.

Carrying me to the secret water, cold and clear. The source of my life and the lives of Tommy and my dear cousins. But I had to go down, all the way down.

Down through the black water of the well of grief. To find that source of new life. To find resurrection.

As we follow Jesus through Holy Week, we'll be following him down into the well of grief. Saying goodbye to his friends and his betrayal by one of his friends and then abandonment by the rest of them. We'll see his unjust trial and his brutal execution.

We'll follow Jesus all the way down through the black water, cold and clear. All the way down to the bottom of the well of grief. And we'll see that the way down is resurrection and new life.

This is what we mean when we say that Jesus is the pattern of the blueprint for our lives. Jesus has pioneered the path for us, my dear sisters and brothers. Down, all the way down, down into the well of grief.

And it's that way down. That way down, that's the only way down. Which is always the way to new life.