

2021 Easter: Grief

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from the Risen King!

This year we have been looking at some counseling reflections and so today, I know it seems a little backward on such a joyous day, but I think it is quite fitting, today we will look at: grief counseling.

My first Call as a Pastor was to a small town in South Dakota. There were 800 people in that town, so, it's pretty safe to say, people knew each other. The one high school, that served two towns actually, had a girl in it battling cancer. The sidewalks were painted with ribbons, the high schoolers' cars had ribbons drawn on the windows. Every Church was praying for her by name, our Church as well, the whole town was pulling for her. Then she died.

You can imagine that made waves of grief in the community. The school reached out to the pastors in town, and asked if we would be available for counseling if needed. I, of course, said, "yes." But immediately wondered, "What in the world would I say?" Now, don't get me wrong, I had plenty to say, but it all had to do with Jesus. "Would the schools be okay with that?" Turns out I didn't get called in for any counseling, but it did lead me to a realization: There is no real solution for grief, without Jesus.

I've heard the eulogies where there is no Jesus. And let me tell you, it's sad. They are "celebrating a life lived." But it's a life lived and it's done, and it's over, and it's goodbye forever. You will not see them again. And sure they give their maxims of how they "live on in our hearts" or "they are looking down on us," but what is that compared to a hug? To a laugh? Not to mention, do we even know if that stuff is true? But we all go along with it because we are so desperate to stay connected to that person.

I've heard the maxims and poems from the non-religious hospice workers. They try to give you hope: "Your dying loved one is a boat sailing over a bright horizon." As if death is the end to some fantasy novel or something, as if they are on a journey to some great other land. Now, of course, we as Christians know there is more after death, thanks to Easter, but look where we are now – we are back at Jesus and his resurrection. Without that we have no indication that there is anything after death, we have no idea if the horizon they are sailing to is bright or an icy cold, horrific storm.

And so if that is what passes for hope in other grief counseling, fair enough, but I can't say it. I can't do it. If there is no Jesus involved, all I see are coping mechanisms. They are attempts to drown out the sting and stench of death with colorful, hopeful, spices. But it doesn't make them any less dead.

The women early on the Easter Morning are going to the tomb with burial spices. Pounds and pounds of strong smelling spices and you would just cover the whole body with it. Then you roll the rock over the tomb entrance and try not to think about worms, decay, and rotting flesh. And you hope the spices are so strong you don't smell your father, or husband, or child rotting.

We can cover up death with spices, we can burn it, we can ship the dying off to hospitals, put death in nursing homes behind a curtain, we can inoculate it, we can embalm it, but we can't find Hope in it. Not without Jesus.

Because he is the One person ever to die and not need burial spices. No, on Easter, the burial spices go unused! And so it is Jesus, and he alone, that gives us Hope. Not just hope in our hearts like "Jesus rose in our hearts" or some nonsense. No, the promises of God are flesh-and-blood real! That heart beat again, and he walked and talked again, he was healed and whole.

He didn't just pass out on the cross. Spare me, the ancient people weren't dumb. And even if he fainted: there's no way he would be healed from his beatings 3 days later, can you imagine the infection and bruising? No, he died and he was made whole again. And no, the disciples didn't make it up, or hide the body, unless of course you could find 11 people who knew someone is dead and convince them to

die for saying he was alive. I don't find that likely. Especially when they all were hiding scared the week before.

And so we are left with the reality that someone was dead, but then was alive again. Physically, actually alive. And that changes things. That's more than a ship sailing over a horizon, that's more than "living on in our hearts."

And we might think, "Must be nice for him, but what about all the other rotting corpses?" Well it just so happens that this one who is strong enough to beat death, said beforehand that he would. So he kept that promise which seems pretty impossible, but he kept it. So perhaps the other things he said were true to. Like how he is the one who made all things, and how he has promised that he takes us to be with himself, and on the last day will raise us from burial spices, rock tombs, the bottom of the sea, from the stink of decay, and from the ash and dust. And you might think that promise far-fetched, you may say its just another coping mechanism like a ship sailing to sea... but then again, He's someone who was dead and is alive again! And I am inclined to say, if he can pull that off, well, why not his promises to you.

And so that is the answer to our grief. The very joy of this day, the resurrection victory of Jesus is exactly what grief counseling is about. Sure there are details.

"What do I do about the funeral, or their belongings?" Yes, of course. But that is

all secondary to the medicine of the Gospel which is: that loved one who died, who is united with Christ in baptism and in faith – the master of life and death has claimed them and has promised them immortality. And the same promises are yours. Which means, those loved ones that have gone before you with Jesus... you will see them again. And on the last day, when he raises his people up, it will be all the more real. Real flesh and blood, just like Jesus, real laughter, real hugs, just like Jesus. Real food. Real life. Just like Jesus.

That high school girl was a Christian, and that gives us a lot to say. A lot of real, hopeful things to say. But that hope and that reality of life eternal, it starts, it ends, and entirely depends on the victory that we celebrate today. This is not just another holiday with some bunnies and a Bible story. This is the day of days, the beginning of the end of death, and the dawning of immortality for all who are in Jesus. That's worth remembering, I think, in a world with so much grieving and hurting. It's why each Sunday is a little Easter, a little reminder of his Cross and Victory, to give us hope in the ups and downs of life. But make no mistake, thanks to Jesus his hope is there for us each and every day. "Lo I am with you always, to the end of the age," our Risen Lord promised. So there is always hope for God's people, even in the dark days. But today is a bright day, a day worth celebrating. So Bless your Easter celebration, and may the Lord keep us in this real and certain hope until it is realized in His Kingdom which is very real, and does not end.

Amen.