

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, March 5, 2023
The Second Sunday in Lent

Solemn Evensong
4 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Rev. John Beddingfield, *Rector, Church of the Holy Trinity, NYC*
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“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Most of us might agree that we'd like to be comforted. We want the presence of God, the love of Christ, the support of friends, family, and community. But do we really have to go through the mourning? Can't we bypass that? Or if we must mourn, can't we do it privately and quietly, out of the view of others? Since mourning is hard and makes others uncomfortable, isn't it better just to power through, and go on with the business of life?

But Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for THEY will be comforted.”

W. H. Auden knew how to mourn. In his poem, “Funeral Blues,” he lays it out clearly:

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

*Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message ‘He is Dead’.
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.*

For Auden, something has happened; something has changed. It begs to be noticed. It has to be marked and mourned. There IS no business as usual. Things will forever be different.

Most of us don't live with Auden's sensibility. We are busy and we are efficient. When someone dies, the practicalities are addressed, but often, any real mourning or grieving is limited. After the initial shock, and the essentials done, there's a kind of suspension of reality, almost as though nothing has happened. Observances are planned for some time in the future—when the weather is better, between business trips, after Spring breaks, careful not to conflict with a tournament or recital, then, and only then, the departed can be remembered fondly and happily. It's a little like they've gone on a cruise or maybe just vacationing in a different place this year. It's Easter without Good Friday.

And yet, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,” which implies that those to be comforted are the ones who have mourned. If there is no mourning, can we expect much comfort?

I can't help but wonder if part of our country's problem with gun violence has to do with our tendency to go from tragedy to tragedy, with no pause, no outrage, no grief, no mourning. We lack a vocabulary for

mourning and have forgotten basic practices. We see evidence of this when a famous person dies or there's an act of terrorism, and the public reaction can sometimes far outweigh the event, because so much bottled-up grief just finally comes out sideways.

We see mourning in this afternoon's lesson from the Gospel of John. Chapter 11 reminds us about Jesus's friend Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany. Lazarus becomes sick, dies, and by the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been dead four days. When Jesus approaches the village, people are gathered to mourn. Martha meets him on the road and shows us what mourning can look like—full of passion, anger, insult, outrage, a refusal to accept the loss, an acknowledgement that everything has changed. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” A little later, in verse 29, her sister Mary does the same thing as she confronts Jesus with her own grief.

Expressing their anger, their grief, going through the confusion of mourning, the sisters open themselves up for what eventually can be comfort. Jesus indicates what that comfort will look like as he refuses to answer the specific questions about Lazarus, or why now, and why him, but instead Jesus offers himself, the Resurrection and the Life—none of which Martha or Mary understand at the moment.

Jesus makes his way through the mourners, the sisters, and the community, and he approaches the tomb of his dead friend. And there, in verse 35 we hear that two-word sentence that sets the Bible apart from all other holy books and scriptures: Jesus wept.

JESUS WEPT!

God the Creator of heaven and earth, God the mover and maker of all, God incarnate in Jesus sheds human tears, breaks down, loses composure, risks looking weak, makes himself vulnerable, and shows us the way through mourning towards what will be the hope of comfort.

Did the shedding of tears also release something in Christ that allowed him to raise Lazarus? Did the tears open Christ up in some new way to be able to comfort those around him? Did his holy tears somehow stir the current of God's Trinitarian fountain fullness?

Tears get their due in the writings of the Servite Sister Joyce Rupp. Especially in her little book, *Praying our Goodbyes*, she reminds us of the importance of grieving and shows us how to do it creatively. She offers practical wisdom for mourning in what she calls “praying our goodbyes.” Rupp points out the many kinds of losses we experience: death, certainly; but also transitions from one place to another, ending a significant relationship, loss or change in a job, the aging of one's body.... So many aspects of life that, when noticed and mourned, can find new healing and comfort. She writes

When we pray a goodbye our focus is on hurt and healing. Many times, it is just a first step, or a beginning of the process of being healed . . . It may feel like opening a window and airing a stuffy room, or like finding the key to a door that has long been closed. It may seem like finally discovering the right medication for a lengthy ailment.

(Joyce Rupp, *Praying our Goodbyes*, Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1998, 2016, p. 60.)

Sister Rupp suggests that praying a goodbye can often include four aspects: recognition, reflection, ritualization, and reorientation.

We first **recognize** and name the hurt, the loss, the person or thing that is mourned. We then **reflect** on what this means, how we feel, what it brings up for us. We sit with the feelings and don't avoid them.

We use action and movement to **ritualize** the loss and our feelings around the loss. And finally, **reorientation** begins as one opens to God's healing and God's comfort over time, and usually in ways we never suspect or imagine.

As we move through this season of Lent, as we encounter themes of suffering in the scriptures, in the news, and in our own lives, may we be encouraged by Martha and Mary. May our tears be sanctified by the tears of Christ, and may we, too, be blessed in our mourning and know God's comfort. Amen.