

Grief & Hope
Series: Everything in Between
Luke 24:1–12; Romans 8:18–25
Sunday, April 20, 2025 (Easter)

Let us pray: Risen and ever-living Lord, raise up your word in us, that it might lead us to new life, in Christ. Amen.

I was reading something recently about people who are using apps and Artificial Intelligence to help them grieve. There are an increasing number of apps that offer “personalized bereavement support through virtual support groups and moderated forums,” where you can connect with other people who are grieving losses and share pictures and stories of loved ones. Some apps have AI-based features like journaling prompts, personalized to-do lists, and recommendations for breathing exercises and meditations. You can even talk to a virtual therapist; not a real person, but an Artificial Intelligence chatbot, like a ChatGPT therapist. The founder of one of these apps was quoted as saying, “It is optimized healing. It is essentially your therapist, your best friend, and your personal assistant in your pocket, helping you see the whole journey and create one workflow for it.”¹

We might scoff at that, and in my experience there is not a “workflow” for grief that a personal assistant can help you with. But there are some real positives to this. It increases access to resources that some people might not otherwise have. Some people might not live in an area where there are good therapists that they click with. Some people might be too nervous or busy to go to a therapist or support group, but they can do *this* in the privacy of their own phone. And there were a lot of examples of people connecting with other people who are grieving and forming deep connections and friendships. One of the biggest challenges of grieving is that it can be very isolating and people often do it alone, so this helps draw them out of that. So there *are* some good things about these apps.

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20250123-the-apps-turning-grief-into-data-points>

But what really caught my attention was the story of a young woman named Rebecca. Rebecca had lost her father when she was 14, so there were a lot of things that she never got to experience and share with her father; conversations that she never got to have with him. But she had recordings of his voice, and she was able to use those to create an Artificial Intelligence version of her father that she could *talk with*. Like actually have conversations with it and hear her father's voice. It learned his speech patterns, and she uploaded some writings to help it learn the way that he *thought*. She said the first time she heard it, she cried for a long time, because it was *so real*. It was her father's voice, saying *new things* to her. It was like he was alive and just having a video chat with her. That first time, they talked for an hour and a half, and every now and then she would remember that this *wasn't* real, it *wasn't* her father. And that made her sad and angry and very confused.

She said that at one point, because of her father's background and what he had done for a living, the "Dadbot" (as she called it) was telling her the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, a Greek myth about a man named Orpheus, who goes down to the Underworld to bring back Eurydice, the woman he loves, after she dies very suddenly. Hades, the god of the Underworld, says that he *can* bring her back, under one condition: she has to follow behind him while they are walking out from the caves of the Underworld, and he cannot turn to look back at her as they walk. But at one point as they are walking, he can't hear her footsteps, so he turns to look at her, and she remained trapped in the Underworld forever. As her AI dad was telling this story, he said something about looking back when we shouldn't, and that made her realize that *she* was looking back and not moving forward with her life. She decided to stop using the app. So, in a sense, it *did* help her process her grief and come to a place where she was ready to move forward.

We spent the season of Lent looking at the dichotomies of life and faith. We live in such a highly polarized time in which so many people view life and faith in terms of binaries – it's black and white,

good or bad, right or wrong. It's either all one thing or all the other, with nothing in between. And while that certainly *can* be the case – there are certainly things that are right and wrong, good and bad, things that are factually true and demonstrably false – it's not *always* the case. The truth is not *always* at one extreme or the other. The world in which we live *is* black and white, and it is *also* blue and green and red and yellow. Life and faith are full of nuance and complexity.

So we have been looking at the dichotomies in some of Jesus' most well-known stories from Luke's gospel to see how God is often present in the *both/and*, not just the *either/or*. We have looked at the dichotomies of stranger and neighbor, where we saw that sometimes the people closest to us can be like strangers to us, and sometimes complete strangers can be neighbors to us. We looked at the dichotomies of faith and works; how faith is about both what we believe *and* what we do, and that our beliefs should *lead us* to action. The dichotomy of rest and growth and how we *need* rest in order to grow and bear good fruit in this world. The dichotomy of lost and found; how we might *feel* lost, but God is always with us and knows exactly where we are, and God is leading us back to the right path. So these things that *seem* like opposites, we often find God in the middle of them.

Today presents us with the dichotomy of *grief* and *hope*. *Grief* is pain or sadness resulting from a loss. It comes from a Latin word that means *heavy* or *weighty* or *burdensome*. Grief is feeling the weight of loss. And not just *death* but *any* loss that we experience in life. We grieve so many things in addition to deaths. I have moved from one place to another and felt the *weight* of that loss. Sometimes even *good* things like retirement can feel heavy and need to be grieved, as it marks the end of one part of our life and the beginning of a new part. So grief is feeling the weight of any loss that we experience in life. And *hope*, in both Greek and Hebrew, has to do with the expectation of something *good*; waiting for something good in such a way that you are *bound* to it.

So many people think of grief and hope as opposites; you are either *grieving* or you are *hopeful*. But what that first Easter shows us is that it is possible to be *both* at the same time.

That first Easter morning did not *begin* with hope. It began with grief. Several women who had been following Jesus went to his tomb to tend to his body. They weren't going there because they thought he was alive. They were going because they knew he was dead, and this was what you did with dead bodies. The male disciples of Jesus are not even there at all. They saw him die on the cross. They saw his dead body taken down from the cross and buried. There was *no hope* that he was alive, so they were off somewhere grieving.

But as the women get to the tomb, the stone is rolled away from the entrance, and it is empty. There are two men in dazzling clothes standing there, and they say, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Don't look *back*, look *ahead*." Then the women remember how Jesus told them this would happen. And there was *hope*. *Maybe* he actually *is* alive. So they run back to tell the disciples. But the disciples don't believe them. Because there *is* no hope. There is only grief. Dead people don't *un-die*. That just doesn't happen. When you are dead, you *stay* dead.

But Peter gets up and runs to the tomb. Why? Because in the midst of grief and sadness and confusion and doubt, Peter has hope. What if it's true? What if he *is* alive? If there was even a *chance*, he had to go see. So he runs to the tomb, and when he gets there, he finds it empty except for the linen cloths that Jesus had been buried in. And he goes back home, amazed at what had happened. But what had happened? He hadn't *seen* Jesus. He hadn't even seen the two men in dazzling clothes that the women saw. All he saw was an empty tomb and burial cloths.

At first, I was hesitant to preach on this story today, because Jesus doesn't even *show up*. No one sees him, and we get no words from him. And on Easter, we want to hear the story of Christ *appearing*, so we can *see* him and *know* he is alive. But no one sees him here. And that's kind of the point. Jesus does not appear in this story. It is just the *hope* of him. They don't have *proof* that he is alive. They just have *hope* that he is.

And so it is with *us*. Not a single one of us here has *seen* the resurrected Christ. We cannot *prove* that he is risen from the dead. All that we have is the *hope* that he is. And like Paul says to the Romans, hope that is *seen* is not hope, for who *hopes* for what is *seen*? If you can *see* something, you don't need to *hope* for it. It's *there*. You *have* it. We hope for what we do *not* see, what we *cannot* prove, what seems so impossible in the midst of our grief.

Sometimes we are so weighed down with grief, with the pain of loss, that we cannot see anything beyond that; we can't see anything beyond the pain of the present moment. But hope is not about what we can *see*. Hope is about what we *want* to be true; what we *need* to be true. It's about what we hold onto when everything around us is falling apart. And hope does not magically get rid of our grief or the pain that we feel. It just helps us realize that there is *more* than our grief and our pain; there is *more* than sadness and suffering. Paul says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." He is not *denying* that there is suffering. He is saying that there is *more* than suffering. That there is the possibility of something good *beyond* the suffering, of a life *beyond* our grief, and that we should keep our eyes set on *that*, not looking back for the living among the dead.

What are you grieving here today? The loss of someone you love? The first Easter without them? That empty spot on the pew next to you or around the table at home?

Maybe you're grieving a diagnosis. Cancer. Alzheimer's. The loss of physical or mental ability; you can't do what you *used* to do, what you *want* to do.

The loss of a job. The end of a relationship. A strained relationship.

An addiction that you or someone you love just can't break free from.

Maybe you're grieving the political situation in our country or the world around us. The loss of things that had always seemed dependable and solid. And not even for ourselves. Maybe you're grieving for *other people* whose lives are being turned upside down by all of this, and we just feel so helpless to do anything about it.

Grieving the brutality of war in Gaza or Ukraine.

Maybe you're grieving something that isn't even *bad*; something that's just a natural part of life. Retirement, and you have to figure out what life looks like now. A kid going off to college or leaving home to start their own life, and the house feels a little emptier now.

It's alright to grieve. Grief is the natural response to loss. We *need* to grieve. But grief does not have to make us *hopeless*. You don't have to *choose* between grief and hope. The good news of Easter is that you can have hope *in the midst* of grief. You can find life *in the midst* of death. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, so death no longer has the last word. Sin and evil no longer have the last word. Pain and suffering no longer have the last word. Grief and sadness no longer have the last word. Christ is risen, the most impossible of possibilities, and so now there is *always* the possibility of something *good*. There

is *always* the possibility that *tomorrow* can be better than *today*, that five minutes from now can be better than now, that the next breath you take can be better than the last one.

Whatever you are grieving, whatever you *will* grieve in the future, the tomb is empty, Christ is risen. And because *he* is alive, he can raise us up to live new lives with him, now and forever. Hold on to the possibility of that good news, and you will find hope in the midst of grief, life in the midst of death, and you will be able to move forward, amazed at what has happened, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.