

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

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GOD IS STILL WITH US LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

This Lenten devotional is meant to be colored in and doodled/drawn on. You will see opportunities to color, doodle, draw, and respond to prompts throughout the devotional. We invite you to allow the illustrations and spaces for creativity to draw you deeper into reflection.

Our theme for this devotional is "God is Still With Us." As we journey through the season of Lent together, you are invited to remember that from the foundations of the world, the Holy Spirit hovered over creation. The Spirit hovers, even now. When God's people seemed abandoned in Egypt, God guided them into the Promised Land. God guides us, even now. In the birth of Jesus—Immanuel—God was with us. And God is still with us, even now.

The life of Jesus shows us that God joins us in our human struggles. God does not avoid our messy lives or withdraw from our hard stories. As we live in different times, in different places, we know that we are not alone. Even in this very moment, God is as close as the breath we breathe.

This Lent, we will explore Gospel passages that remind us that God is still with us. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus experienced the fullness of humanity—comfort and pain, celebration and heartache, and joy and suffering. And when he had the choice to escape ridicule or rejection, Jesus stuck with the outsiders, the oppressed, and the hurting. The life of Jesus demonstrates that God knows what it is to be human and to be with us in all our experiences, especially in our suffering.

We encourage you to explore how these ideas and themes influence how you view God, your faith, and the world. This Lenten devotional is written to be used individually or with a group, intergenerationally, or with youth groups or adult studies.

So grab a pen, some crayons or colored pencils, and start working through the devotional.

As you use these resources, we would love to hear what was helpful and meaningful, as well as any suggestions and comments you have for improvement. Your feedback helps us continue to create quality faith formation materials. You can reach us at info@illustratedministry.com or find us on the following social networks:

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Peace be with you!

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> *Note: Please do not include attachments or links to download our files in any emails/newsletters that are posted publicly online with services like Mailchimp, Constant Contact, etc. Links of this nature are searchable by Google, and the files become accessible to the general public.*

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WEEK ONE

LUKE 4:1–14

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,
God alone will you adore.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

'God will command the angels concerning you,
to protect you,'

and

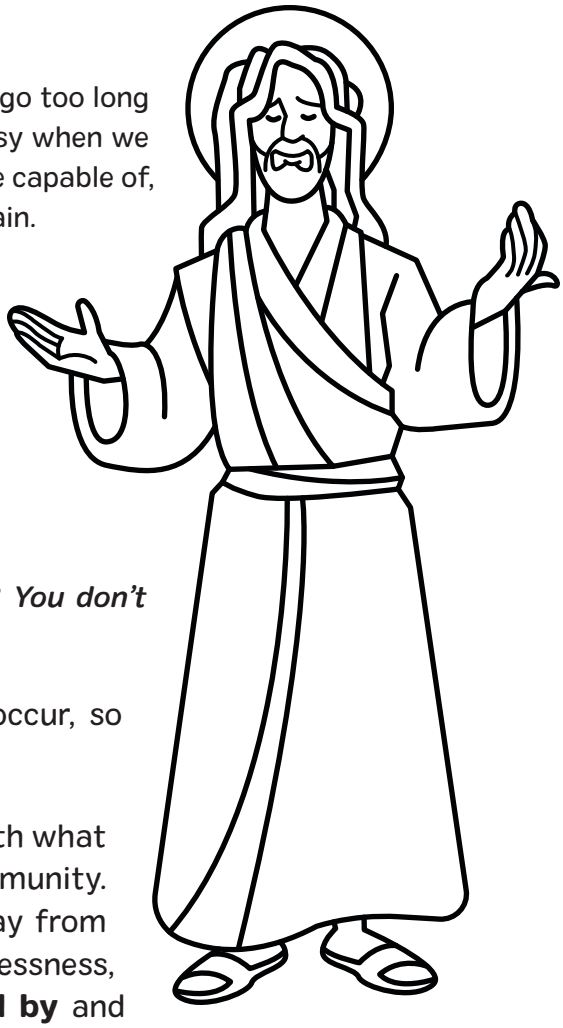
'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

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To be human is to be vulnerable.



It is to be at the mercy of our own growling stomachs when we go too long without bread. It is to be subjected to flights of fear and fantasy when we face an ***unknown future***. It is to not ever really know what we're capable of, but to be asked, moment after moment, and find out all over again.

This vulnerability wounds us, of course.

And it connects us, if we let it.

Here's the lie: *You don't have to suffer.*

That's what the tempter says to Jesus in this story:

You don't have to suffer. Hunger? Insecurity? Powerlessness? ***You don't ever have to know those deeply human experiences.***

Jesus is about 30 years old when this story is said to occur, so chances are, he's known some struggle already.

He's worried about not having enough. **He's wrestled** with what his role ought to be in his family, his neighborhood, his community. **He's wondered** about the voices calling him farther away from home, into some unknown future. **He's felt** anger, hopelessness, and helplessness at injustice. **He's felt both compelled by** and **conflicted** about the call he senses on his life.

THE PROMISE THAT HE COULD BE DONE WITH ALL THAT, THAT HE COULD LEAVE IT ALL BEHIND, WOULD BE TEMPTING FOR ANYONE WHO'S LIVED THAT LONG AND SEEN THAT MUCH.

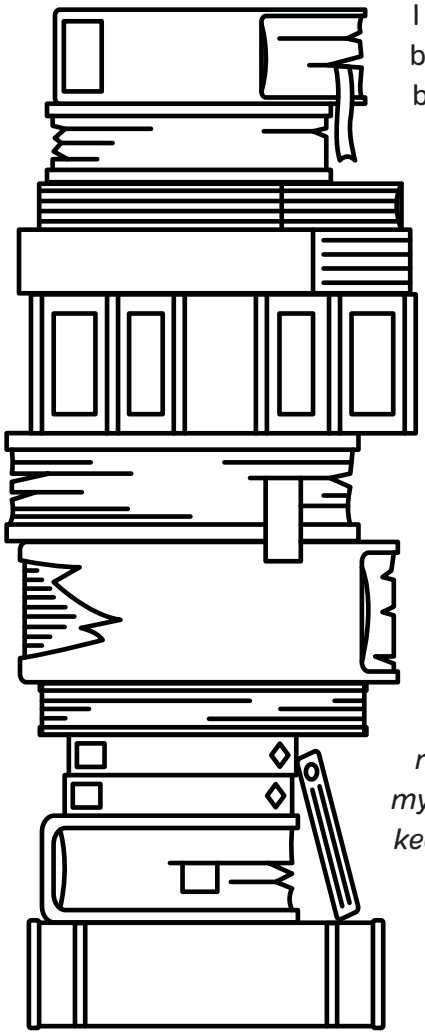
But it's a lie.

Jesus' life is the *expression* of God's vulnerability.

The ***incarnation*** means precisely that:

God's love takes on a **body**,
becomes subject to **hunger** and **insecurity** and **powerlessness**,
and that **vulnerability** is the place
where **humanity and divinity connect**.

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I remember sitting in a professor's office one afternoon, feeling swallowed by the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, the stacks of papers in the corner, the bookmarked journal copies piled high on the table beside me.

I felt so stuck in my own work, like nothing I could possibly write about for this upcoming assignment would even be worth exploring, like I didn't have an idea worth putting into words. I realized my professor had to always be doing this, always be putting ideas into words, and into the world, so I asked him, ***"How do you get past that feeling? How do you know when you have something worth saying?"***

And without hesitation, he said, **"You don't."**

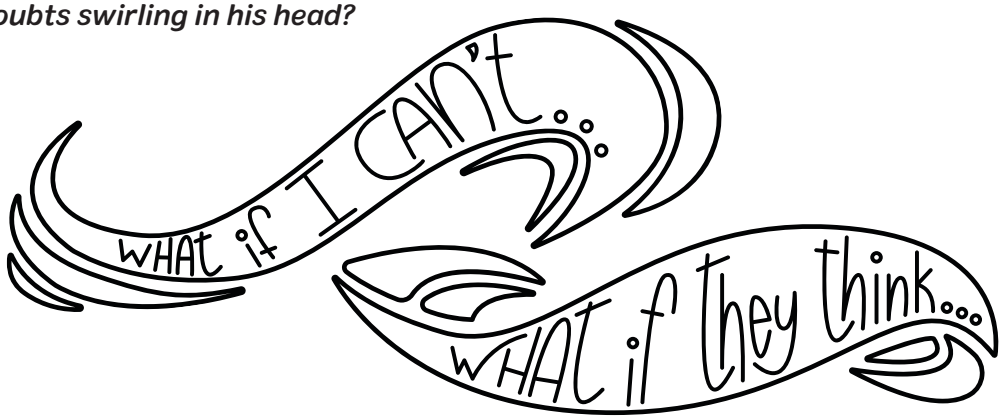
His answer was not helpful. This was not at all what I needed to hear.

He said, *"I've been doing this for decades. I have doubts every time I submit an article to a journal, every time I stand up before a class to give a lecture. I can usually manage them long enough to send another proposal or start another lecture. But before each new time, all the doubts come rushing back again. I don't ever get past that feeling. I have it before I open my mouth, before I put pen to paper, every time. So I just learned I have to keep going anyway."*

And while it wasn't the answer I'd hoped for—I still wish he could've given some magic tips for conquering these anxieties—it was honest. And these days, I'm glad for that honesty. **There's something about the solidarity of vulnerability I find reassuring.**

We don't hear more about Jesus' doubts until the "opportune time" when the tempter returns. But I wonder if that's just a storytelling device, if the Gospel writers condense all of Jesus' fears and doubts into these two stories, the one in the desert just before his ministry begins and the one in the garden just before it ends. ***Were there more?***

Before the first time he addressed the synagogue, reading from the scroll of Isaiah, ***did he have to silence the doubts swirling in his head?***



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During his recitation of the "Blessed are you..."s he shared with the crowd gathered on the hillside, ***did he feel his knees knocking?***

Any time someone called out to him for help, ***did he close his eyes, take a deep breath, and pray to his Abba*** for whatever he was about to do—offer his touch, his words—to make a difference for them? His repeated commendation to people who come to him for healing is, "your faith has made you well"—an acknowledgment that whatever happened, it wasn't a result of his power alone.

Whatever his insecurities and anxieties,
Jesus chooses to bear them
instead of embracing the tempter's lie,
dangled in front of him.

To **choose against vulnerability** would have been to deny his own self and the gift he had to offer. And it would have been to forfeit the connection with each of us, and all the world, **which the incarnation makes possible.**

In these moments, ***Jesus chooses*** to really be ***God with us.***

To be, like us, sometimes bound up in struggle, sometimes deeply tied to the limits of our bodies, sometimes held captive by our fears and our failings. And to be cradled in deep communion, sustained by real connection, in and through all of that.



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QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

In what ways is Jesus alone in this story? In what ways is he not alone?

Where do you hear the tempter's voice in your own life?

GOING DEEPER

When have you felt your doubt, fear, or need, connect you to someone else?

How is God with you in situations where you are vulnerable?

How might an acknowledgment or embrace of our vulnerabilities serve to empower us individually or as communities?

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WEEK TWO

LUKE 18:35–43

As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." Then he shouted, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has saved you." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

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To be human is to not know it all.

It is to have a ***partial perspective***. It is to see ***in part***, and to know ***in part***, and to understand ***in part***. It is to be subject to our own points of view and prejudices, to be burdened by our own boundedness.

This not-knowing **limits us**, of course.

And it opens us up, if we let it.

There are options for what we can do when we don't know:

We can remain in our ignorance.
We can pretend to know.
We can act with our partial knowledge.

OR

We can ask,
explore, pay attention,
in hopes of learning more.

I was working the midnight-to-four-a.m. shift at the cold weather shelter when a man came in and asked for **a cup of coffee** and some **socks** to bring to his friend.



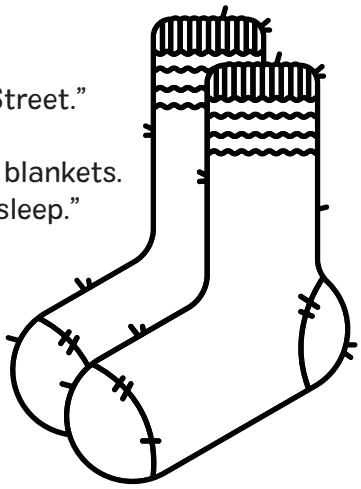
I asked, ***"Where's your friend?"***

He told me, "He stays in the parking garage over on Ninth Street."

I said, "**Bring him here!** We've got space and open mats and blankets. He can get a hot meal and a shower and a good night's sleep."

The man said, "My friend can't come inside. He gets too nervous. He won't be able to settle down and rest. Confined spaces remind him of past trauma."

I argued, "But it's so cold out tonight! He needs to be inside. ***He'll be safe here.***"



The man repeated, slowly, "He just needs a cup of coffee, to warm his hands and his insides, and some dry socks to replace the wet ones he's been wearing for days. **Please.**" I could tell he was straining to be patient with me.

It took me too long, but eventually, I realized I didn't know this man, and I didn't know his friend. And to presume that I could know what was best for either of them without knowing them was to ***deny their dignity***, their ***agency***, their ***humanity***. It was to act from a place of unearned authority and deny my own capacity for empathy.

I found some warm, thick socks, while the man poured a cup of coffee and added sugar and creamer for his friend. Then he stepped back into the cold, wet night and set out toward Ninth Street, to be present in the way his friend needed him, to bring warmth and comfort to a man who couldn't bring himself inside.

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When the blind man cries out for mercy, **Jesus asks for details**.

"What do you want me to do for you?"

He doesn't presume to know what the man needs. He doesn't assume the crowd is doing him any favors by shunning and shushing the man. He doesn't proceed with his own understanding of mercy, figuring this man's understanding must be the same. He hears the man ask for mercy, and in return he asks:

"What would that look like, for you?

How is it you would experience mercy?

How would that abstract quality be made real, in your life, in a way I can help with?"

And then, the man asks to see.

But this conversation doesn't happen easily. The man has to shout to be heard over the crowd drowning him out with their own voices.



Jesus has to lean in and listen closely to hear the voice that's almost inaudible under all the other noise.

Why is the crowd trying to **prevent** this connection?

What do they gain by silencing the man who is blind,
by not letting his words reach Jesus' ears?

Are they afraid of established roles shifting?

Are they convinced that no real change is possible?

Do they not understand the man's deep hope, his felt need?

Or do they each come with their own hopes and needs—is that what they're trying to make space for in the silence they command from the blind man?

Are they convinced they have to compete for Jesus' ear, for his mercy?

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Whatever the limits of their own understanding, whatever limitations they assume Jesus is operating under, the crowd ends up modeling for us a faithful response: they are willing to change.

They rejoice when the man receives his sight.



They celebrate with him when they see it.

It's like the Gospel writer is toying with us readers: the man who was blind experiences his sight restored, **and the crowd**, at first blinded to how wide the possibilities of mercy really are, **comes to see something new, too:**

THAT GOOD NEWS FOR ANY ONE AMONG THEM IS GOOD NEWS FOR ALL OF THEM.

To be human is to not know it all.

But that not-knowing gives us chances to get curious about each other and our world; to ask questions, modeled for us by Jesus in this story; to learn from faith that dares enough to hope, to cry out, for something different; ***to rejoice in the mercy pouring forth in response.***

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QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

What is something you wish you knew more about?

When have you rejoiced over someone else's good news? Who do you know that you might rejoice with now?

GOING DEEPER

If you were telling/hearing this story from your own context, who might be in the role of the blind man? Who might be the people in the crowd trying to silence him?

What is one way your lack of understanding limits you?

How is God with you in situations where you don't know all you might need to?

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WEEK THREE



JOHN 11:3–6, 17–44

So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

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To be human is to be misunderstood.

It is to have our motives questioned and our mistakes judged. It is to have our intentions scrutinized and our actions criticized. It is to be subjected to the gaze of others, which is sometimes cast our way generously, sometimes maliciously. ***It is to do our best and have it still not be good enough, sometimes for reasons beyond our control.***

This misunderstanding frustrates us, of course.

And when it doesn't tear us apart, it just might draw us together.

The story of Lazarus' revival begins in relationship. **His sisters send a message to Jesus**, and they note the closeness between the men: "the one whom you love is ill." It's implied Jesus should come right away, though Mary and Martha don't exactly say that. And Jesus doesn't.



The sisters interpret his delay as a lack of care.

Jesus reads the situation as a chance to display God's power and chooses to do that instead of being present in the way his friends have asked of him. Others in this scene consider his lack of rapid response to be evidence of his weakness, indifference, or betrayal.

THEY ALL ASSUME THEY UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER, AND NONE OF THEM DO.

Relationship isn't just the opening context for the story; it remains the backdrop throughout. Mary and Martha both express their disappointment in Jesus, their frustration at his delay, because they believed their friendship warranted more. Those who gather around the sisters, to mourn with them, offer comfort and care—different from what the sisters had wanted from Jesus, but gifts nonetheless. Reflecting on this story, Biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine notes that "mourning itself creates relationships."[1]

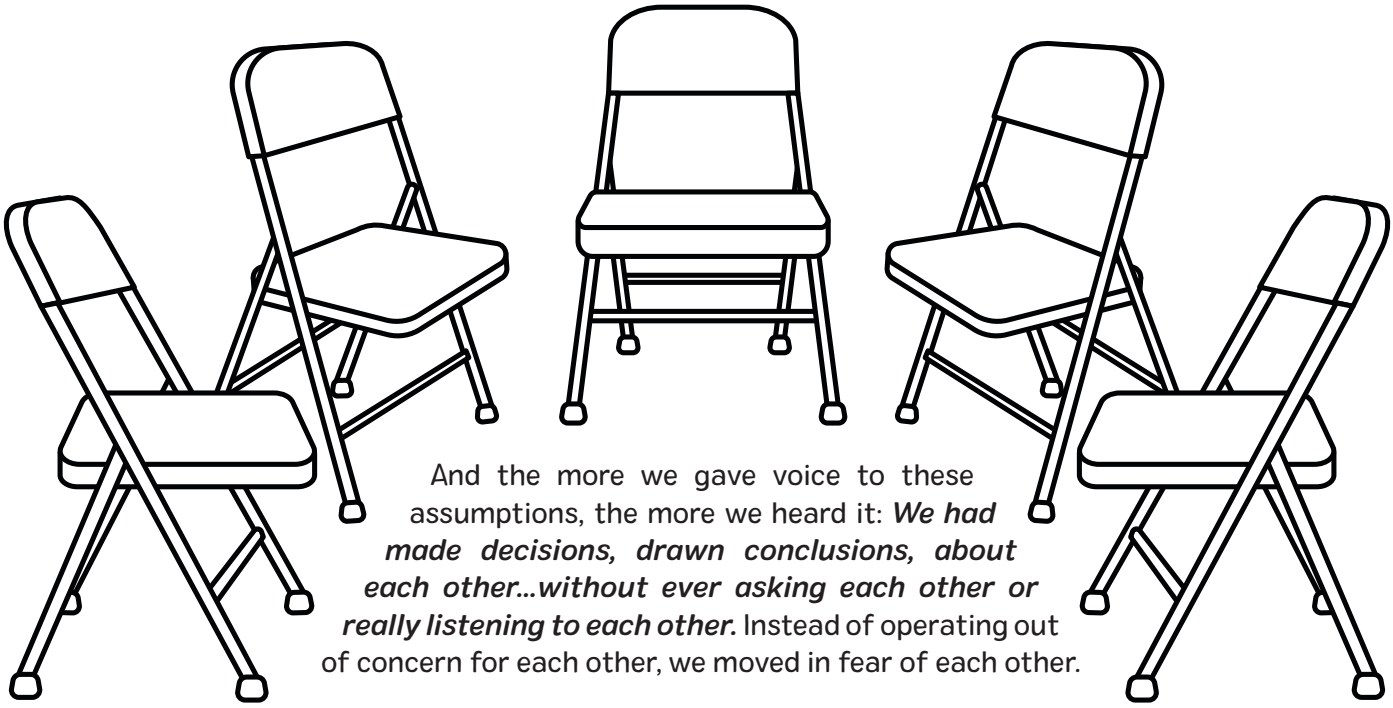
And in her teaching about how to nurture relationships both old and new, faith leader and activist Valarie Kaur underscores, "There is nothing romantic about suffering. But when others are present to suffering, that presence begins to tend our wounds. When we allow ourselves to be changed by the experience of another's pain, we build bonds with people we once called strangers. Sharing in one another's grief can also lead to sharing in one another's joy...When people who have no obvious reason to love each other come together to grieve, they can give birth to new relationships, even revolutions."[2]

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A few years ago, my neighborhood was having a rough time. Events had taken place that made some neighbors fearful—some people were mourning, some people cast blame, some people grew defensive—and it was hard to see how we might find a resolution. One neighbor engaged the services of a mediator, who listened to us each tell our story, then pointed out how many assumptions we were all making. She asked us to retell the stories, but this time, to voice those assumptions.

It was a strange exercise; speaking in this way felt unnatural. But as I explored the events through this lens, I began to understand more about my actions and reactions and how informed they were by a misunderstanding of my neighbors. **I think the same thing happened to all of us.** We found ourselves saying things like,

"I was angry about _____ because I assumed you knew _____."
"I was afraid of _____ because I assumed you felt _____."
"I didn't say _____ because I assumed you thought _____."



And the more we gave voice to these assumptions, the more we heard it: ***We had made decisions, drawn conclusions, about each other…without ever asking each other or really listening to each other.*** Instead of operating out of concern for each other, we moved in fear of each other.

Instead of taking the time, spending the energy, to really have everybody's voices in the room, we had acted ill-informed and harmed each other along the way.

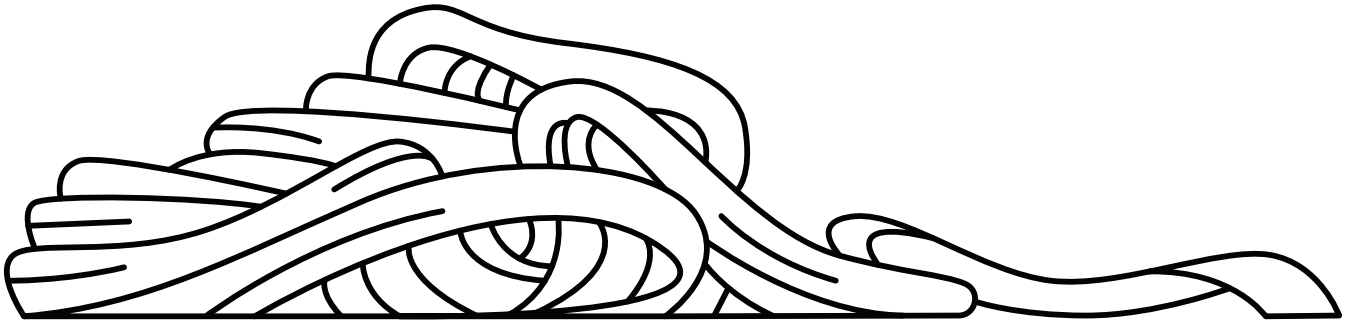
Once we'd said it several times (*"I assumed you didn't want to hear from me anymore." "I assumed you thought it was all my fault." "I assumed you were hiding in your garage."*) we realized how silly it sounded.

But we had to say it and hear it together to discover that.

Alone, all of our misunderstandings made perfect sense to us.

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When Jesus calls Lazarus to live and move and breathe again, he also calls the community to **unbind Lazarus from the burial cloths they'd wrapped him in**.



To take his place among the living is not something Lazarus can do on his own. He needs his friends, neighbors, and those who had mourned with his sisters to **set him free and unravel their understanding of who and how he was**.

There were a lot of layers to work through—the assumption that the dead will stay that way is one we make with pretty good reason—but this story challenges even that which we think we know for sure.

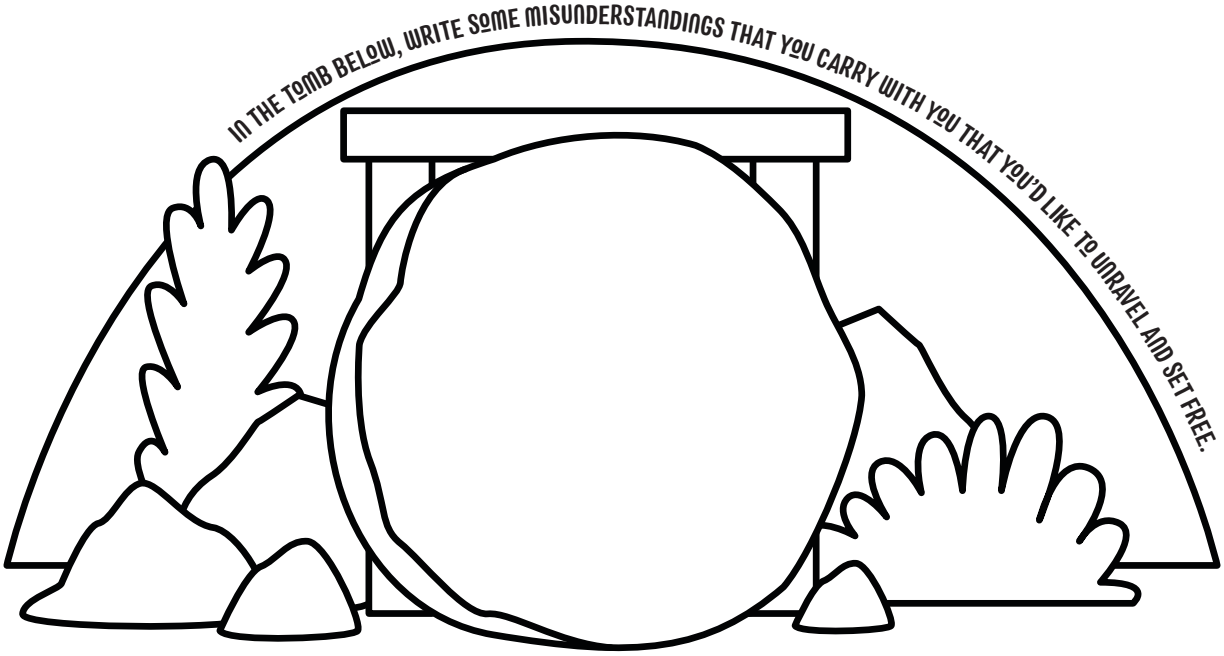
And when certainties break down, relationships can be (re)built:

shared mourning becomes **shared joy**;

tears turn to **laughter**;

sounds of God's glory,

maybe even the **RUMBLINGS OF REVOLUTION**, echo all around.



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QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

How many misunderstandings can you identify in this story of Lazarus, his sisters, and Jesus? (Which of the same might you have felt if you'd been there?)

How have your relationships been affected by assumptions or misunderstandings?

GOING DEEPER

How have you participated in shared mourning? How did that participation change or shape your relationship with those you mourned alongside?

What's one way you could show up for those in your community who are mourning or struggling now?

How is God with you when you are misunderstood?

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WEEK FOUR

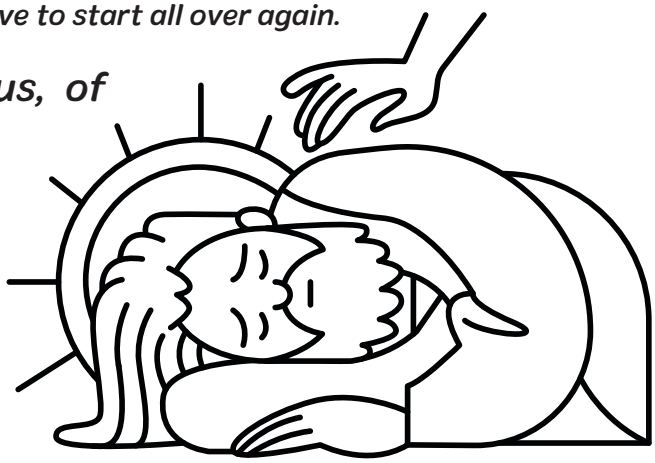
MARK 4:35–41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

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To be human is to be tossed about.

It is to be calm and collected one moment, frantic and frenzied the next. It is to be subject to forces bigger than us and beyond our control, to be at the mercy of a world that alternately nourishes us and knocks us around. ***It is to gain some semblance of order for our lives, only to have all the rules change at a moment's notice and to have to start all over again.***



This being tossed about frightens us, of course.

And it helps us know we're alive.

The disciples have some questions about this when they're on the boat with the waves rocking.

And somehow Jesus…isn't feeling it.
He's sleeping through their seasick terror.

And it's real. These guys aren't being dramatic, throwing their arms up and screaming, "we're all going to die!" at the slightest discomfort. Several of them are fishermen. ***They know this lake.*** They know what the waves can do.

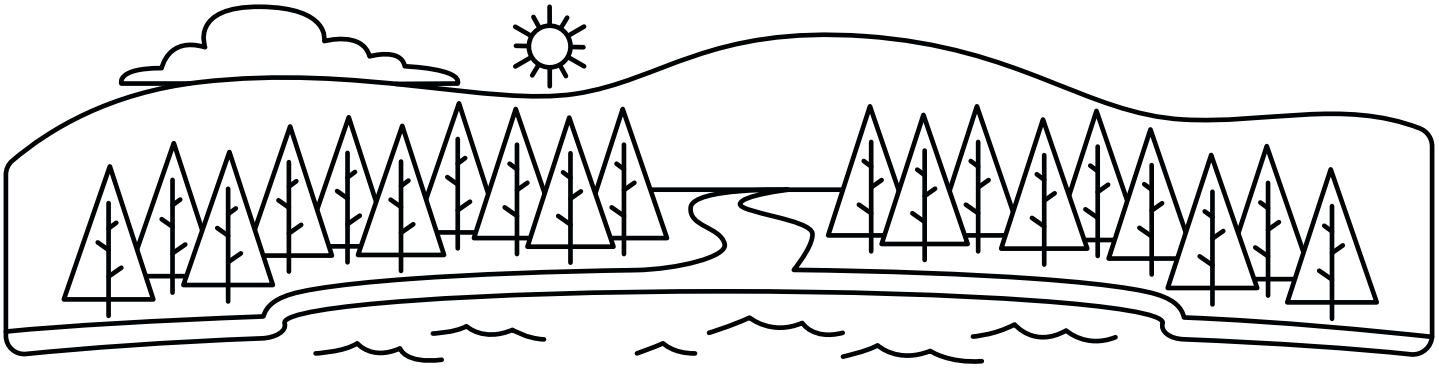


They know the many risks they've taken to follow Jesus, and they want to trust him. But when he's asleep, alone, **their doubts begin to rise with the waves:** *"Don't you care?"*

At this point, they've all ***uprooted their lives*** to follow him.

Some of them have ***left parents***,
some have ***left work,***
all of them have ***left a more familiar world,***
and they've **joined** their fates to his.

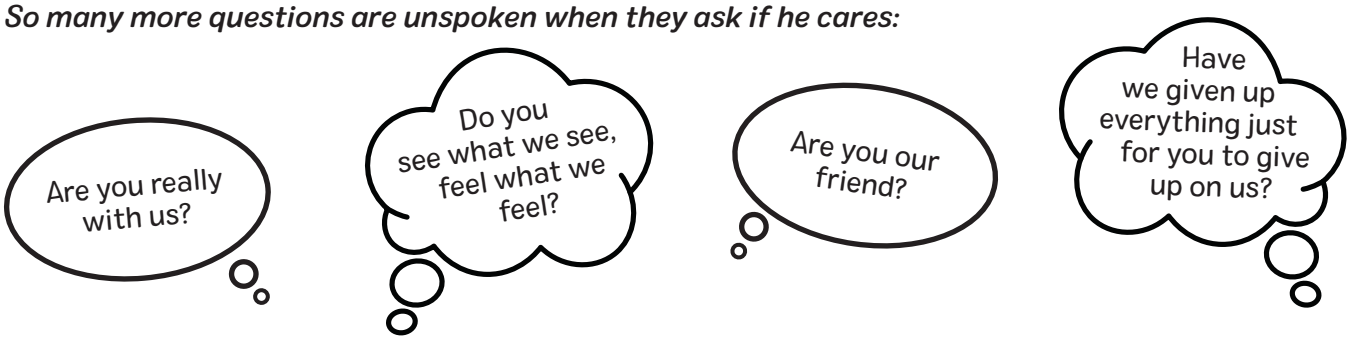
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They've headed *"to the other side"* with him, which in the Gospels always symbolizes something more than the literal distant lakeshore. Whenever Jesus and the disciples head for the other side, **we know they're about to encounter something, or someone, that will turn their world upside down.**

And the way there is **not** easy. But what they yearn for from Jesus, what they cry out to him for, isn't still waters or an easy trip. They don't need Jesus to rescue them from trouble. They just want him to **care** that they're in it.

So many more questions are unspoken when they ask if he cares:



They don't ask Jesus to **calm the waves.** They know that to be human is to be tossed about. They're just asking for ***solidarity in the struggle.*** **And that's not what Jesus gives them.**

They speak to him, and he ***speaks to the waves***.
They ask him for his presence, and ***he shows them his power***.

What he gives them is *enough to get them through the moment*. It is *enough to calm their fears for the time being*. But, like theology professor Jerry Sittser points out,

> **"The dirty little secret** about a miracle is that it doesn't last. **It's a lovely sign**—*a sign of God's invasive power*—**but it's not really a solution, and suffering will come on its heels sooner or later.**[3]"

The ***waves will rise*** again. Lazarus ***will die*** once more. The tempter ***will return*** at an opportune time.

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I wonder if Jesus had also been afraid of the storm.

Maybe not. Maybe he'd been asleep and is just so naturally trusting that moments like this don't faze him.

But what if he'd been pretending? What if the waves began to rise and he tucked himself away, squeezing his eyes shut tight, praying frantically for rescue? What if the disciples asking if he cared was the moment he realized he was the rescue, causing him to swallow his fear and step up to face the waves because his friends needed him?

What if he also needed to hear the **"PEACE! BE STILL!"** which he called out to the waves at that moment?

Maybe, whatever the reason—his exhaustion, his fear—Jesus wasn't ***with the disciples*** in this story in the way they'd asked for. But he was ***for them***, and that got them through the storm.

When it's over, the disciples stand together on the boat, newly baptized, dripping with questions and awe. They know the waves will catch them again. They might even be afraid again. But they've arrived on the other side for now.



Maybe care sometimes looks like standing alongside each other in the midst of our terror, pain, grief: showing up with bread, sitting down to listen, lighting a candle, being still together.

Maybe care sometimes looks like doing what we can to change the circumstances causing harm: taking to the streets, speaking to city council, planting trees, sharing resources.

Maybe *there are endless ways to answer* when friends or siblings or neighbors or strangers cry out, "do you care?"

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QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

How do you—or how might you—care for yourself in moments of pain, fear, or grief?

How do you care for others in those moments? How do others care for you?

GOING DEEPER

What's a reality in your life that feels like an ongoing struggle or question, solved or answered one moment and arising again later?

How is God with you when you are tossed about?

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WEEK FIVE

LUKE 22:14–23

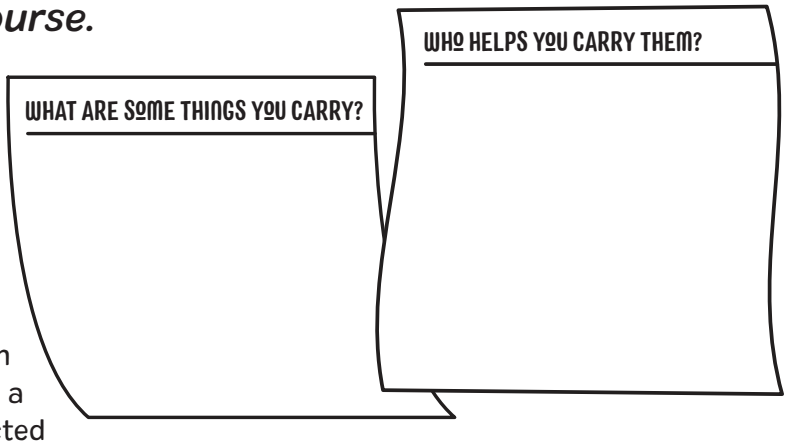
When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

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To be human is to carry each other through.

When we are weak or injured, we lean on each other. When we fall, another helps us up. However loudly we might announce our independence or denounce our mutual need, we are each other's keepers. We do not make it through our lives, even our days, solely on our own strength. We could not.

This carrying has its limits, of course.

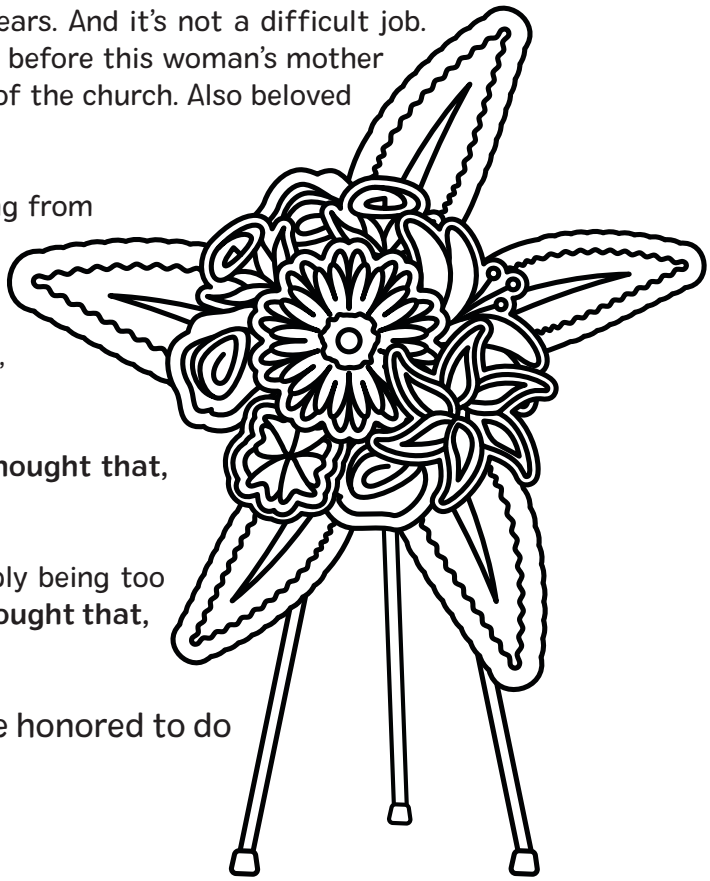


The weight has to shift once in a while—the same people can't do the carrying all the time. We take turns. It is exhausting. It wears us all out.

And it is what makes our lives bearable.

In my role as pastor, I sat with a woman to plan her mother's funeral. Her mother had been a matriarch of the church—beloved and respected by everyone. The whole community was reeling from this death. We'd talked about songs and scriptures and stories and pictures, and now we were on to the who's-gonna-do-what part of the conversation. When I asked about ushers, she said, "I'd really love it if Steve could be an usher, but do you think it would be too much to ask him?"

Steve had been an usher at the church for many years. And it's not a difficult job. What would've made it "too much" is that the week before this woman's mother passed away, Steve's mother died. Also a matriarch of the church. Also beloved and respected by everyone.



Part of the reason this whole community was reeling from this second death is it was already so saddened by the first. To return to the sanctuary to be part of the mourning for his good friend's mother, a week after he was there mourning the loss of his own, might have been too much, she thought.

But deep down, she knew it wasn't. **If she'd really thought that, she wouldn't have suggested Steve.**

I asked him and included the caveat about it possibly being too much. But deep down, I knew it wasn't. **If I'd really thought that, I wouldn't have asked him.**

And he said, **"Of course I will do that.** I will be honored to do that."

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Because this is what it is to be human. We carry each other through.

We ***recognize*** each other's grief. We ***name*** our own needs. We ***bring*** it all together, we ***witness*** and ***name*** the unbearable burdens each of us is asked to shoulder, and we ***find*** loud and subtle ways to say, **"You are not alone in this."**

At his final Passover, Jesus is carrying the weight of knowing he will soon be put to death; the weight of wanting a way out but knowing the empire will always take what it wants; and the weight of leaving his friends with a revolutionary message and the burden of their loss. **He calls them together because he needs them**—their company, their love, their faith in him and in all they have created together—**to carry him through.**

But he isn't the only one in need.

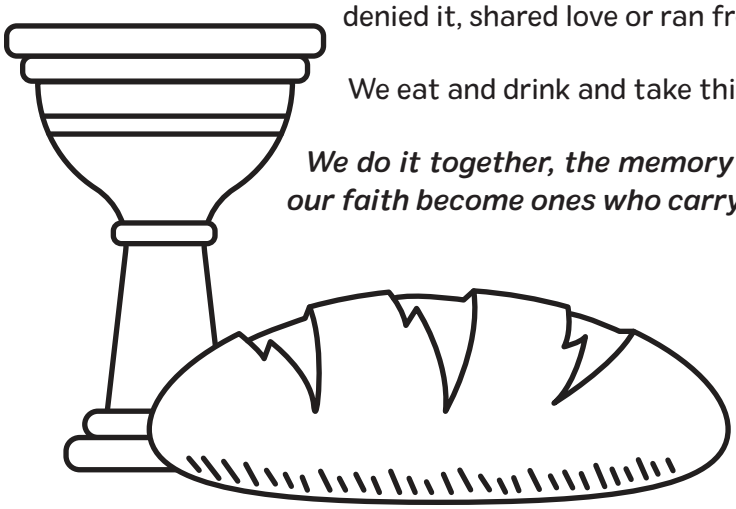
Jesus' friends are all frightened. They are all mourning. They all know what it is to have their lives upended—that's what happened when they first came to follow him—but that earlier shift was born from hope, not despair. None of them can carry the weight of this unknown future alone, so they come together.

And here, even when Jesus tells them one of them will betray him, the disciples still turn to each other. They don't hear this accusation and leave, each to deal with the news on their own. They don't grow suspicious of one another, at least not to the extent of departing from one another. They lean in. They ask each other, "Who could it be?" They trust each other for this difficult conversation.

I wonder if the one who betrayed Jesus did so because it all just got too heavy for him—the pressure he felt, the fear he harbored, his shattered hopes and growing doubts.

And he forgot his place in this communion of friends, believing he had to carry it all, alone.

As Christians today, we share bread and wine in memory of this complicated night. This night when friends showed up for each other, strengthened bonds and broke them, admitted their own need or denied it, shared love or ran from it.



We eat and drink and take this story into our own bodies, our own hearts.

We do it together, the memory becomes part of us, and these ancestors of our faith become ones who carry us, too.

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QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

Why does Jesus let the one who will betray him sit at the table with all the rest of them?

What do you think the friends remembered from that gathering, long after it was over?

GOING DEEPER

Tell a story of a time someone carried you, helping you make it through.

What does it require of you to carry someone else? What does it require of you to let yourself be carried?

How is God with you when you are carried?

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WEEK SIX

MARK 14:32-41, 15:34

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.

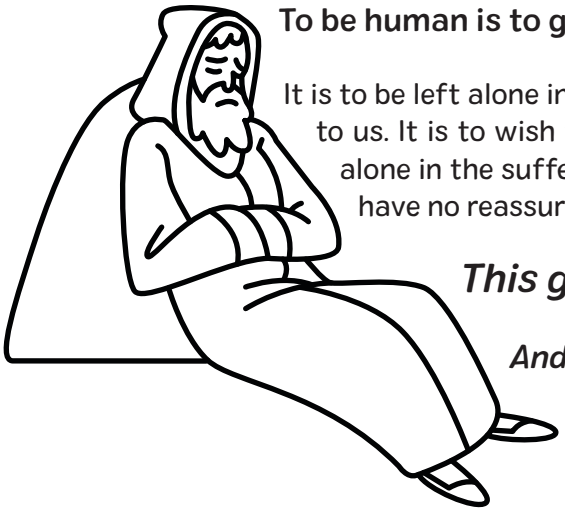
He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him.

He came a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

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To be human is to grieve deeply.

It is to be left alone in our most profound pain. It is to be let down by those closest to us. It is to wish for a life that is anything but this. It is to suffer and to feel alone in the suffering. It is to have heard the promise of God's presence but to have no reassurance there's any truth to that promise.

This grieving pains us, of course.

And it is evidence of the love we have known.

Jesus hopes for more from the disciples. Because they love him, and he knows it.

Their falling asleep in this story is so painful because they have proven themselves faithful friends, willing students, fellow laborers to usher in God's kindom. They have journeyed alongside him for years. They have shared the work of healing, teaching, praying, and telling good news with him. They have spent long nights with him, reviewing the teachings, asking him to untangle the mysteries. Jesus has opened up to them in ways he hasn't to anyone else.

They have shared in a deep communion, and here, he wants to call on those bonds to get him through this sorrow.

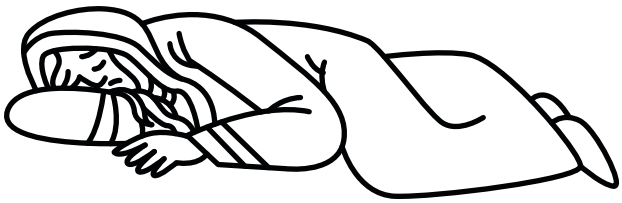


They even know his pain here: swap the garden for the lake, the end of their time together for its beginning, and we hear the same frustration and hurt. There, when the storms came, and the waves rose, they shook him awake: ***"How can you sleep? Don't you care that we are dying?"***

Here, when his friend betrayed him and set the events leading to the crucifixion in motion, he is "grieved unto death" and asks the same of them: ***"Can't you stay awake with me, even for a little while?"***

But they have their own sorrow: "they did not know what to say to him." It's weird the way the roles are flipped here. He has been the teacher, the comforter, the healer. He has been the wise one, the guide, the rescuer. He has needed them, but not like this. They have never seen him like this.

He is deeply grieved, and they are deeply grieved. In this moment, despite all of the ways they have carried each other over the past years, they cannot meet each other's needs. *And that realization only compounds the grief.*



This is what it is to be human:

To know the power of love.
To give it and to receive it.
And, at times, *to face and grieve* its limitations.
We love each other, we carry each other, and sometimes, we fail each other.

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Or, as Kate Bowler sums up our time together,

"We live and we are loved and we are gone."[4]

But even that is not the end.

When that failure, that coming undone, feels like the end, there is more to this story of Jesus and the disciples, more to our story of being human.

Jesus hints at it when he cries out from the cross, ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*** After the betrayal of one disciple and the abandonment of others, Jesus has never felt more alone. In this cry, a listener can hear the anguish, the pain, the years of self-emptying and kindom-creating coming to this hopeless end.

But what is unsaid is sometimes as important as what is said. And what is unsaid in this last cry is one more desperate hope.

This naming of the forsaken feeling didn't first come from Jesus' lips. It was spoken long before him, by King David, who cried out from the depths of his own grief:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest."

And as he speaks, he hears a response welling up from deep inside himself, recorded in the following lines of the psalm:

"Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame."

This is the complicated truth: we are never just one thing. Our hearts do not hold just one commitment. Our minds do not process just one possibility.

Even in the depths of his grief, Jesus speaks the line of terrible anguish, leaving unsaid—but heard, even so, in the minds of those who knew their community's songs and prayers—the line of genuine, ancient hope.

The disciples are not fully present as this horror unfolds. They cannot bring themselves to bear wide-eyed witness to the entirety of it. But they are close by. Their grief limits them; their love compels them. They cannot be everything for one another, but they can be something.

Maybe that something is not ideal. But it is honest. **And it is enough.**

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QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

What are the differences between the disciples' grief and Jesus'? What grief do they hold in common?

Who is present with you when you grieve? What are the gifts and limitations of that presence?

GOING DEEPER

When have you not been able to be everything that someone you loved needed? What were you able to offer? What was that like?

What are some complicated connections—like that between grief and love—that give shape to your own life?

How is God with you when you grieve deeply?

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WEEK SEVEN

JOHN 20:1–22

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

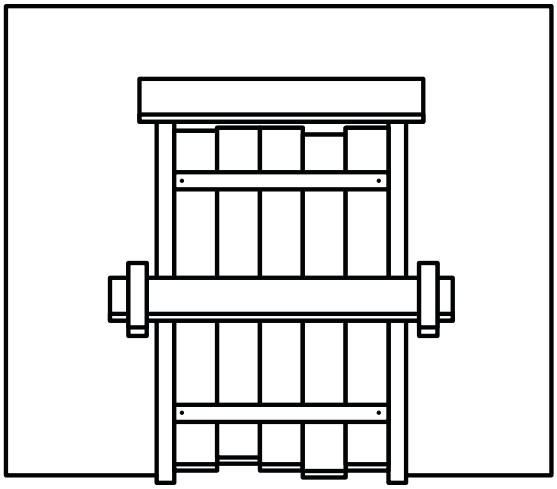
When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

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To be human is to be surprised.

It is to have the world turn itself upside down right in front of us. It is to grow comfortable with the way things are—even if we mourn them, at least we understand them—only to have the rules change on us. It is to grow accustomed to limits and boundaries and to be shocked out of them, to have some experience that defies common sense and comprehension.

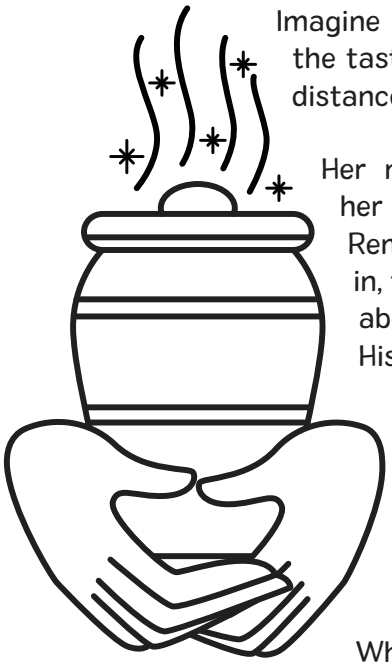
Because to be human is to be children of God, to be beloved of God, to be part of the world that is alight with the love and wonder of God. And nothing is impossible with God.



When the fearful disciples lock **themselves in a room**, they assume no one else can get in. When Peter and the other disciple hear Mary's story and run to check it out, they anticipate proving her wrong. When Mary comes to the tomb, she expects to find it sealed. **When Jesus dies on the cross, everyone knows that's the end of the story.**

But to be human is to not know it all. To sometimes be wrong.

Can you imagine that first Easter morning?



Imagine Mary approaching...**the smell of anointing spices wafting around her**; the taste of tears in her mouth; the sound of the gardener at work just a short distance away.

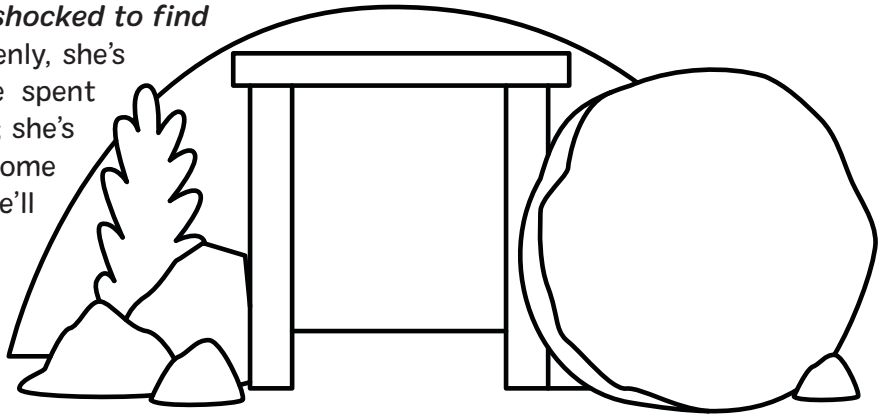
Her mind is likely wandering back and racing forward. Can you imagine her replaying the events of the last few days, maybe the last few years? Remembering when she met Jesus, thinking back over the trouble he'd been in, trying to piece together how it could have ended this way. And speculating about the days ahead—what would become of Jesus' followers? His message? His movement? Was it even "his" anymore? ***Had it become "theirs" now?*** These memories and musings take up all the space in Mary's mind when she arrives at the tomb and sees the stone is gone.

Tania Luna researches surprise and says shock is part of the "surprise spectrum." But, more broadly, surprise is what happens "anytime that you were wrong and your brain tells you about it."

When we're surprised, our brains make us pay attention. We physically freeze for 1/25th of a second. We're pulled out of the past, away from the future, and become centered in the right-here-and-now. And then we "shift." A surprise makes us curious about whatever we got wrong, and we reconsider our relationship with it: be it a person, an event, or an aspect of reality.[5]

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Mary arrives at the tomb and is shocked to find the stone rolled away. And suddenly, she's not thinking about the time she spent with Jesus or the end he came to; she's not thinking about what will become of the movement or how much she'll miss him.



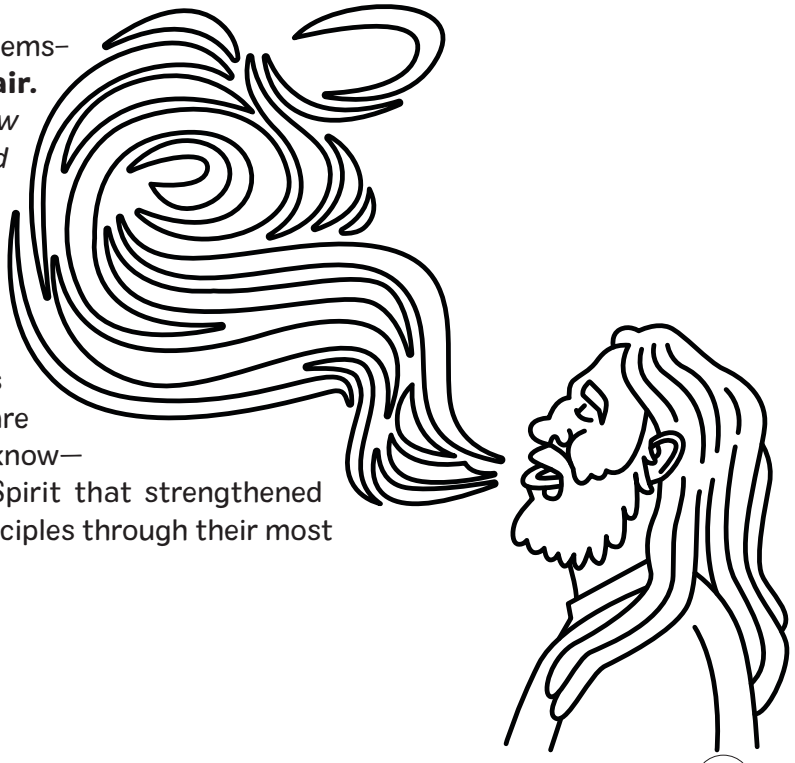
Instead, she's just in the garden, facing the tomb, and nothing makes sense.

And then…Jesus is with her, asking questions: *"Why are you crying? Whom are you looking for?"*

What if he's not asking as some kind of test he already knows the answer to, but out of genuine curiosity and care for his friend? **What if he's also surprised?** What if, after feeling so alone in the moments before the crucifixion, he's surprised that his tomb has a visitor, that a friend would remain so committed? What if he sees her, freezes for 1/25th of a second, and begins to understand that the end of his time with his friends and disciples might not be the end of all they had been and done together?

Is that why Jesus later comes to the room where the disciples are all gathered? Because seeing Mary has made him think something else, something new, might be possible?

When Jesus finds them in that locked room, meets them in their fear and anguish, ***he offers them the same Spirit that led him through his temptations at the beginning of his ministry.*** The one that helped him remember who he was and to whom he belonged. ***He breathes that Spirit into the air they share.*** The Spirit will animate and inspire them for what's ahead.



However long ago and far away that seems–surprise!—**we breathe that same air.** Scientists have discovered *"to live is to borrow and repurpose the elements of the world around you, and then release them again."*(6) And it has always been so. **The same Spirit Jesus exhaled to share with the disciples, we inhale today.**

Which is to say, **God is with us**—in the deserts or on the stormy seas of our lives, when we are fearful, or mourning, or when we just don't know—***God is as close as our very breath.*** The Spirit that strengthened Jesus in the wilderness and sustained the disciples through their most difficult days offers itself to each of us, too.

Breathe in deeply, beloved. Breathe out.

Here and now and always, ***God is with you.***

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QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

If you were Mary, what would the surprise of the resurrection make you curious about?

If you were Jesus, what would the surprise of seeing Mary again make you wonder?

If you were a disciple in that locked room when Jesus came, offering the Spirit, what questions would you ask of him?

GOING DEEPER

When has a surprise invited you to reconsider something you thought you knew about yourself, someone else, or the world?

How is God with you when you are surprised?

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