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## LENTEN DEVOTIONAL





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Welcome to our *God is Still With Us Lenten Devotional*.

As we journey through this 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.

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.

As you use this 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](mailto:info@illustratedministry.com) or find us on the following social networks:

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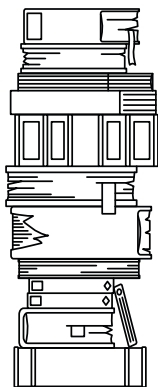
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Peace be with you!

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# WEEK ONE

Luke 4:1-14

*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.*

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## NOTES

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.

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? 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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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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?

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?



## WEEK TWO

Luke 18:35-43

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

I was working the midnight-to-four-a.m.

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## NOTES

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.

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?

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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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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?

What is one way your lack of understanding limits you?

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?

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



## WEEK THREE

John 11:3–6,  
17–44

*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

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## NOTES

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.”<sup>(1)</sup> 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.”<sup>(2)</sup>

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

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## NOTES

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.

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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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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?)

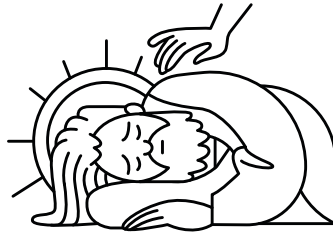
How have your relationships been affected by assumptions or misunderstandings?

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?





## WEEK FOUR

Mark 4:35-41

*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. 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: Are you really with us? Do you see what we see, feel what we feel? Are you our friend? Have we given up everything just for you to give up on us?

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

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## NOTES

solution, and suffering will come on its heels sooner or later.”<sup>(3)</sup> The waves will rise again. Lazarus will die once more. The tempter will return at an opportune time.

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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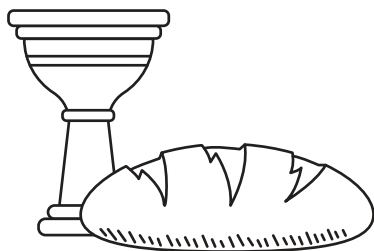
## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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?

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?



## WEEK FIVE

Luke 22:14–23

*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

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## NOTES

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."

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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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

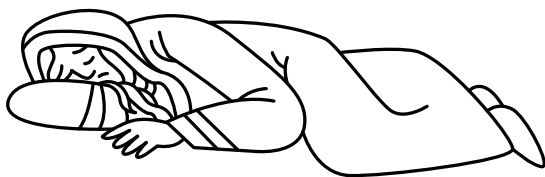
Why does Jesus let the one who will betray him sit at the table with all the rest of them?

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

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?



## WEEK SIX

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Mark 14:32-41,  
15:34

*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

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## NOTES

usher in God's kingdom. 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.

Or, as Kate Bowler sums up our time together, "We live and we are loved and we are gone."<sup>(4)</sup>

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

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## NOTES

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 kingdom-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 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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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

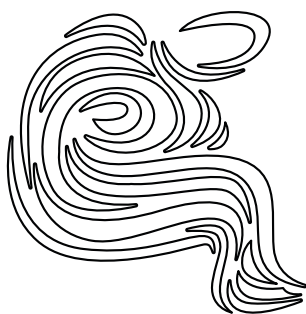
What are the differences between the disciples' grief and Jesus'? What grief do they hold in common?

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

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

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

How is God with you when you grieve deeply?



## WEEK SEVEN

John 20:1-22

*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

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## NOTES

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.<sup>(5)</sup>

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.

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## NOTES

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.”<sup>(6)</sup> 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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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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?

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?



# Endnotes

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- (3) “Jerry Sittser: Life After Loss.” *Everything Happens*, Kate Bowler, 2021. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/jerry-sittser-life-after-loss/>. Accessed January 2022.
- (4) Bowler, Kate. *Everything Happens For a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved*. New York, NY: Random House, 2018, pg. xiv.
- (5) Meinzer, Kristen. “Surprise! Why the Unexpected Feels Good, and Why It’s Good for Us.” WYNC Studios, Public Radio International, 2015. [www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/takeaway/segments/surprise-unexpected-why-it-feels-good-and-why-its-good-us](http://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/takeaway/segments/surprise-unexpected-why-it-feels-good-and-why-its-good-us). Accessed January 2022.
- (6) Stager, Curt. “The Surprising Ways Your Breath Connects You to the Entire Planet.” *Wired*, Condé Nast, 2014, [www.wired.com/2014/12/your-atomic-self-how-your-breath-connects-you-to-universe/](http://www.wired.com/2014/12/your-atomic-self-how-your-breath-connects-you-to-universe/). Accessed January 2022.

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# NOTES





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