

Think Bigger  
John 11

By Dave Urbanski

What is your plan for dealing with sadness in life?

There is brokenness in our world. Everybody has experienced (or is experiencing or will experience) pain. Not "the Phillies lost the World Series" pain, but real sadness from devastating personal losses, whether it's a difficult diagnosis from a health challenge or the loss of a marriage or the death of a loved one.

On Sunday, as Pastor Scott took us through the account of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead in John 11, he reminded us that as Christians we have resources that can help us face, process, and get through real sadness in life.

One pretty amazing thing about this account is that John says in verse 5 that Jesus loved Lazarus, as well his sisters Mary and Martha — and because of that love, Jesus intentionally waited several days to come to his seriously ailing friend. Why? Pastor Scott admitted that the reason is hard to grasp in our human minds and hearts, even though Jesus said it was "for the glory of God."

But Pastor Scott added something else — that Jesus doing something like waiting to come to Lazarus instead of getting there as soon as possible runs right smack into our human tendency to communicate to God with "if" statements.

In verse 21, Martha saw Jesus finally arriving after Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days, ran out to him, and told Jesus "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Not so different from things we tell God — either in our hearts or with our mouths — "God, if you love me then you'd solve my problem ... or take away my pain ... or fix this relationship." If, if, if.

God has his own timeline, his own agenda, and God is indeed "love" ... then he loves us all the time, even amid deep, unexplainable sorrow. (Which I admit isn't terribly hard for me to write at this very moment as I'm not going through deep, unexplainable sorrow at the moment — but others reading these very words right now are. I can only acknowledge that deep, unexplainable sorrow has come my way ... and will again. The only remaining factor is: How will I respond? How are you responding? How will we all respond?)

To Martha's credit, right after her "if" statement she makes a faithful declaration in verse 22: "But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." In addition, when Martha tells Jesus she knows Lazarus "will rise again in the resurrection on the last day," Jesus reveals an all-important truth to her: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though

he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Let us all allow Jesus to ask this question of each of us. Do we believe these things he's saying about himself? Belief on this level isn't easy, and indeed the Lord himself must provide us with the capacity to believe it — but it's important that we continually examine ourselves in this way. And may our response echo Martha's: "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

That's one of the keys in this account. Instead of saying, "Lord, if you did things my way ..." we need to get to a place where our trust in Jesus is the most important factor amid pain, even pain that doesn't go away easily ... or at all! Pastor Scott gave us a great hint here, noting that instead of coming to God with "if" statements, we should focus on Jesus' "I am" statements from Scripture (e.g., "I am the resurrection and the life").

Pastor Scott also told us that God's love language is our belief in him, our trust in him — in all the ways we express it.

Here's another way we can strengthen our belief in Jesus: verse 33 describes him as "deeply moved" and "greatly troubled" by the sorrow he witnessed around him — and verse 35 says "Jesus wept." We do not follow or worship a God who is aloof and far off; Jesus had his fill of pain and sorrow — and on a level we will never grasp. Pastor Scott noted that all kinds of bad things happen in life, but Jesus is right there to experience it alongside us.

Perhaps the most poignant observation from Pastor Scott was his interpretation of the moment Lazarus emerges from the tomb after Jesus calls him out of it: Lazarus still was in his grave clothes! Verse 44 reads that "his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth," after which Jesus told the onlookers, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Pastor Scott told us how that reminded him of salvation, as we're all "dead in sin," and the only thing we can do is trust Jesus "who calls us out of the grave" so that we can "enjoy the beauty of life." BUT each of us needs others who will come alongside us to take off our grave clothes in the form of things like anger and addiction.

There is brokenness in our world. We all will face unimaginable sadness. But because Jesus is the resurrection and the life, he makes HIMSELF available to us not just in times of great difficulty and sorrow, but in all times. He gives us peace and strength — and allows us to participate in the healing we all need by letting remove each other's grave clothes so we can fully enjoy the life he has given us here, even as we wait in joyful expectation of our eternal life to come.