

“Greatly Disturbed in Spirit”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
John 11:1-44
February 18, 2018
First Sunday in Lent

I don't know the first thing about assault rifles.

I do know a whole lot about children. I've spent most of my adult life working with kids in some form or fashion, as a camp counselor, as a chaplain at Children's of Alabama, and with the brilliant blessings from God I get to goof around with in this congregation.

I also know a lot about death. And, in some of that work, I've learned a lot about the intersection of children and death. I have seen grief that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. I have gotten down on the floor with grown adults and I have held the hands of shaking grandparents.

Grief is weird. Grief is ugly. It's puffy-eyed and snot-ridden. It is numbness. It's like a painful gash. It's bitter cold. It's sweaty. Grief is oppressive and persistent. Grief comes and goes. It makes you hungry. It turns your stomach. Grief is different for everyone except that if you try to avoid it, it'll mess you up and eventually come bursting out the seams.

Martha first, and then Mary, say to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” I have heard more times than I can count, “I could've done more,” or “If only I'd been there,” or “We should've tried harder,” or “If they just would've listened to me.” These are normal grief reactions that come out when our souls are disturbed and I think they're the way our brains protects our hearts. Our brains offer up reason and solutions because our hearts can't make sense. So, sometimes, we say those things out loud and deep in the recesses of our souls it calms us because we know that the ifs aren't really true. Most of the time it's genetics or vile improper cell division or the wrong place at the wrong time or a wall of illness that medicine could not overcome. Most of the time, there's nothing we could've done. *Most of the time...*

For Sunday, December 16, 2012, while I was still working at Children's, I was lined up to be your pulpit supply preacher. I had prepared my sermon by Friday morning, and then we started hearing about Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. I ran into Bill Woodruff that Saturday at What's On Second, and he asked what I was going to say. I told him I didn't know. Bill was the liturgist on Sunday, and he and I each struggled to make it through the scriptures and the sermon.

Since then, I became your pastor, and I've climbed into this pulpit after Charleston. And Sutherland Springs. And Orlando. And Las Vegas. And Parkland, Florida. But those are just the ones I remember. We gather in this sanctuary every week while more than 33,000 Americans are fatally shot each year. Nearly two-thirds of those deaths are suicides, and that fact is lifted up by some as a mitigating factor, and I can only say that those folks must never have been to a funeral for a nineteen year-old who died by suicide from a gunshot.

I am tired of re-writing sermons in response to shootings. I am sick of reading about teachers, underpaid and overworked and under-supported by our society, having to act like brave soldiers and throwing themselves in

the line of fire to protect kids. I am weary of the repetitive cycle of horror and thoughts and prayers and outrage and Facebook posts and reminders that the government won't even fund research *so that we could know more* about gun violence because of NRA money¹ and the absolutely nothing that changes as we agree to prepare for the next event. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." We could have done something. But we refused. I am exhausted from it all. I am greatly disturbed in spirit.

It's easier to blame God, of course. "How long, O Lord? How long will you let our children live in fear?" And God responds as God has responded throughout the scriptures: "How long, O my people, will you let my children live in fear?" I wonder how long we might follow this Christ, with his "blessed are the peacemakers" and his "all who draw the sword will die by the sword" before we actually hear what he is saying.

Jesus encounters Martha, and then Mary, and they have very different conversations with him. Martha ends up in a theological discussion. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And he replies that Lazarus will rise again, and she brushes that off as one of those things religious people say that may be true but aren't particularly helpful in the moment. Yeah, Jesus, I know, he'll be okay in the end with that whole "resurrection on the last day" thing.

But that's not what Jesus meant. "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." This is enough for Martha. For now. She has found what she needed and she confesses her faith in Jesus. Note that nothing has been said about yanking ol' Lazarus out of that tomb just yet. Martha has come to know in her bones that Lazarus was loved by the resurrection and that he therefore lived. The theological answer, bold and controversial and standing before her is what she sought.

It's different for Mary. She has been at home, being consoled, and then, hearing that Jesus wants to see her, she leaves quickly with fellow mourners in tow. When she finds him, she does something that Martha didn't. She kneels at his feet as she says the same words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And it was different for Jesus, for instead of making his grand statement of theological truth, he is "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." And he was greatly disturbed again as he came to the tomb. And in the middle of it all, we get that beautiful short verse: "Jesus wept."

As we have noted in our journey through John, the Jesus we find in this Gospel is a step ahead of everyone. He's in control. He does things to show God's power and to demonstrate truth — never because he doesn't have a choice. Nobody puts John's Jesus in a corner.

And yet, here, he is overcome by grief. The resurrection and the life, the light of the world, the bread of life, the good shepherd is greatly disturbed in spirit and he weeps. The crowd notes "See how he loved him!" — so we know it wasn't a solitary tear slowly rolling down his cheek. When your spirit is disturbed, you cry hard and ugly. We don't know Mary's response to this, but I'm guessing his ugly cry was more along the lines of what she needed from him.

Jesus goes to the tomb and again, nothing has been said about setting a plate for Lazarus for dinner tonight. The promise of life and resurrection have been made, and Lazarus is still dead. And after this event, sometime later, Lazarus will die again. These big theological declarations do not promise there will be no suffering, no death,

¹ <http://www.newsweek.com/government-wont-fund-gun-research-stop-violence-because-nra-lobbying-675794>

no tears. These promises do not guarantee an easy path. Indeed, quite the opposite. For those who follow the Way of Christ, death is guaranteed. Nobody can promise to take away grief and loss. But with his beloved friend dead for days, the one in which we put our hope promises life.

Did you catch the little sarcastic line from Thomas before they went to Bethany? “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Bethany was near Jerusalem, and trouble was brewing there. Last time Jesus was in Jerusalem, the leadership took up stones and he nearly got arrested. The disciples know that heading back that way will mean conflict and danger. And they are absolutely correct. In the Gospel of John, this is when Jesus makes his move. He goes to Bethany, moves for a short time with the disciples into the wilderness, and then heads to Jerusalem for the Passover. There he will die, and a stone will be rolled in front of his tomb.

We grieve these deaths in Florida, and those whose names we don't know around the country who've been shot since Wednesday, and we grieve our own personal losses that never fully leave us. And, because grief is weird, there are moments when the theological answer comforts us: the truth that the life we have here is everlasting, that we are made for more than fear, that we have riches beyond our dreams in a life of service and prayer, that we don't need to understand everything, for the resurrection and the life are bigger than any worry. And, because grief is weird, there are moments when the only comfort we find is that Jesus wept and went where the suffering was and that our God knows very well the power of death and that God's son could have his spirit disturbed.

Even in Lent, we don't stop looking for light in the shadows. The stories of courage inspire us. The absolute defiance of the high schoolers in Parkland who are speaking out about what happened to them makes us wonder if there might be a disturbance in whatever force it is that paralyzes our nation. The faces of those with whom we'll pass the peace in a moment remind us that whatever misery is wrought upon us and whatever joy we build on earth, we are never alone.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace, peace, peace to God's people on earth. Amen.