



MEETING GOD IN
GRIEF & HOPE

by Jacqueline Bussie

It's that time of year again—All Saints Day. The day carved out in the church calendar to remember all those who have died and reflect upon the gift of their lives. With each passing year, we add new names to the list of “saints” whom we mourn and celebrate. For many of us a particular name reappears, year after year, at the top of the list—the name of that loved one whose death has most deeply scarred our soul's skin.

For me, that name is Charlotte Bussie. Charlotte Bussie, my mother, was my best friend—until the day she forgot who I was. When my mom was only 50 years old, when I was only 20, she was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. During the next 16 years, my mother left us slowly, as if on a train traveling a millimeter a day. Until her death in 2007, I was my mom's primary caregiver during the summers. Though I used to be too ashamed to admit it, I have not “gotten over” her death. I still often grieve.

Becoming an outlaw

During my mother's long illness, I started thinking—a lot—about the way that tears in our culture are treated as a source of shame, embarrassment and weakness. Think about it: what do we usually say whenever we start to cry in front of someone else? “I'm sorry,” we say. Slowly, over time, I started to break this cultural “law.” I stopped apologizing for tears. I was becoming an outlaw.

I also grew dissatisfied with the cliché culture that surrounds much of Christianity. While my mother was dying, well-intentioned folks uttered adages like: “It's all part of God's plan” and “Everything happens for a reason.” When she finally died, they said things such as, “She's in a better place” or “God needed another angel.” These grief clichés made me feel farther from God

than ever.

At my mother's funeral, a church friend gave me a sympathy card inscribed with 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14: “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.” Though the card was meant to comfort me, instead, it made me worry that my grief was yet another way I was failing in my faith.

You see, I believed in the resurrection and hoped against all hope that God's arms at last drew my mom close and ended her suffering. But in all honesty, this hope did not make me miss her any less. I still grieved and struggled with feelings of anger, doubt and bewilderment. My reading of 1 Thessalonians stirred guilt into my already hot mess of struggles. I found myself asking, “Is my grief sinful and wrong? Am I guilty of grieving as one ‘who does not have hope’? How do I grieve as one who does have hope? Is it possible to grieve and have hope at the same time?” I used to worry that I was alone in these concerns, but teaching theology at ELCA colleges for the last 14 years has taught me that many people of faith wrestle with these same questions. Perhaps you are one of those people.

No clichés in Christ

To answer the question of how Christians are supposed to grieve, I returned to the Bible. When Jesus journeys to Bethany because Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus, has fallen ill, he arrives too late. Lazarus has already died.

“When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews... 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” (John 11:33–35).

Re-reading the story amid my own sadness, I was

struck by this fact: Jesus cried, even though he knew he would resurrect Lazarus five minutes later. Equally remarkable? Jesus did not fill the air with clichés about why Mary and Martha and everyone should stop being sad because “it was part of God’s plan” and “God had taken Lazarus home.”

I noticed that Jesus did not instruct Mary to be ashamed of her tears. He did not tell her that her grief signaled a lack of hope and trust in God. Instead, Jesus cried with her, and was “greatly disturbed...and deeply moved” (John 11:33). Digging deeper, I discovered that a Greek word, *etaraxen*, that the NRSV Bible weakly translates as “moved,” literally means “agitated/shaken back and forth,” and thus figuratively means becoming upset, terrified or troubled. Additionally, the Greek word translated in this passage as “disturbed” literally means “to snort with anger” or “to groan with disappointment.” An accurate reading of this scripture is therefore the following: When Jesus came face-to-face-with death, he was angry, terrified, troubled, upset and deeply distressed.

The tears of Jesus

I find so much comfort and instruction in this story. Here Jesus shows us what authentic faith looks like in the real world. When confronted with the death of someone he loved, Jesus grieved his heart out and hoped like mad at the same time. He believed—and knew—Lazarus would rise again (John 11:23), but he let his tears flow anyway. He did not choose between grief and hope, nor did he force anyone else to. Jesus, in other words, shows us that grief and hope can co-exist in faithful hearts not as an either/or, but as a both/and.

Jesus’ tears reveal that even though Christians believe in redemption and resurrection, we can and

should mourn death. Jesus’ cries show us that it is okay to cry and wail our hearts out whenever and wherever the world tramples on hope’s face with its steel-toed boots. What could God be doing through Jesus’ tears besides showing us that all of our tears are legitimate, and never more so than when someone has died?

The God we meet in Jesus is a God in grief. We are not alone in our grief, because God has a story of grief just like we do. The story of Jesus and Lazarus teaches

us that in our grief, when we, like Mary, ask God to “come and see,” God not only shows up, but God mourns alongside us.

Contrary to expectations, the God of the cross is weak, alone, afraid, misunderstood and dying. And yet when someone says the word “God,” even Christians’ minds don’t run to any of these characteristics. Martin Luther recognized this problem and remarked that most Christians have bought into a “theology of glory” and not a “theology of the cross.” When you realize that we have forgotten all about the weak, lonely, dying and afraid parts of God’s story, it becomes less surprising that in our own stories, we forget the ways in which God accompanies us during the times when we feel the exact same way.

This All Saints Day, do not be ashamed of your tears. Remember that grief is not sinful or wrong, nor is it a sign of lost hope. Instead, grief can signify that we have learned to love God’s people as radically as God loves them—to the point of both anguish and joy. In the words of Jesus, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). 🌿

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DO NOT BE ASHAMED OF YOUR TEARS