

Introduction

As I was concluding a year-long internship in campus ministry, my supervisor gifted me a copy of Roy Oswald's *Running Through the Thistles: Terminating a Ministerial Relationship with a Parish*. Reading this guide taught me that grief is not isolated to death; we experience grief whenever we say goodbye. Whether we take leave of a dying person, a community that has influenced and shaped us or a child going off to kindergarten or the first year of college, grief is in the emotional mix.

As Bobby, Ginna and I discussed the theme for this Lenten devotional, we recognized we personally have much to grieve, and Lent is an appropriate time to ponder this somber mix of emotions. Each of us is grieving a death in our personal lives. But we also have grieved friendships lost after a move, health lost when we were sick, the loss of childhood and the innocence left behind. In today's divisive political climate, we grieve the loss of civil dialogue and debate, as well as the loss of the progress that our divisiveness impedes. Taking a break from my writing desk to walk my dog and breathe fresh air, I grieve the destruction of our natural world and the earth that is our home.

The wilderness of Lent, this 40-day journey with Jesus, is a journey of grief. We prepare ourselves to lose Jesus on the cross. We boldly lean into the pain of this loss to remind us of our love for Christ and of God's love for us. But the hope of Christ's death rests in the new life it offers. Resurrection is the gift that reminds us that death is not the end, that we journey toward healing and hope.

Through these next six weeks, Bobby, Ginna and I will reflect on the six stages of grief identified by experts Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler in *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*. Each Sunday's devotion serves to introduce each week's stage and theme, followed by our daily reflections, which include Scripture and prayer.

The stages of grief are not linear — grief comes in waves, and any wave can break and hit the shore at any time. Emotions aren't neat and clean. They don't have precise boundaries. One person's loss is not the same as another's. Each stage responds to a feeling and can last for minutes, hours, months or years. Kübler-Ross and Kessler write that the stages of grief they have mapped are "not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order." Rather, the stages describe grief's terrain, the emotional landscape we travel as we make our way through loss. Knowledge of what we might encounter as we move through grief can serve as stepping stones to support and equip us for the journey.

Our human condition is awash in grief because we are mortal. Yet we are a resurrection people. There is life to be lived both within the grief and beyond it — a horizon of hope toward which we cast our eyes.

- Teri Ott

Day 1: Ash Wednesday

The Gift of Ashes

“You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”—Genesis 3:19

Every pastor has their own way of applying ashes to the tender skin of their parishioners' foreheads. Some add oil to the palm ash, but I don't. Enough oil is produced from the skin-to-skin touch, and from the sweat of this intimacy, that the ashes always stick — two dark lines smeared in the form of a cross. I use my thumb, so my other four fingers are free to gently brush bangs aside, centering the cross above the eyebrows. “Remember,” I say, as my thumb touches the forehead, adding the person's name if I know them, “that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

This marking on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent, is poignant and heavy with meaning. It reminds me, as a pastor, that everyone I touch will die and return to dust. Only God knows when and how. But our fate is the same.

I always teared up as my children came forward to receive their ashes from me. My husband as well. Not my beloveds, God — you'll take them, too? It's hard enough to contemplate our own bodies being reduced to dust, let alone the bodies of those we have helped to create, nurture and shape.

As stark as the reminder is, I welcome the gift of this Ash Wednesday. It's the perfect beginning to Lent, this reminder that we don't have forever, that we are mortal, that we and those we love will die. It's the perfect prompt to return us to God, to Godly living, to cherishing life as a precious, fragile gift.

The *Book of Common Worship* includes an “Invitation to Observe a Holy Lent” in its Ash Wednesday liturgy. Reflect on this sacred invitation today, as you prepare yourself for this journey with Christ:

We begin our journey to Easter with the sign of ashes. This ancient sign speaks of the frailty and uncertainty of human life, and marks the penitence of this community. I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and penitence, by prayer and fasting, by works of love, and by meditating on God's word.

Prayer: Holy One, prepare us for death as you prepare us for life. Mold us with care, nurture us with love, help us live lives worthy of your grace. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Teri

Day 2: Thursday

The Shock of Finality

“The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.”—Isaiah 40:8

As I was preparing to write this devotional, my dear friend, Elizabeth Felicetti, died of lung cancer. Her death shocked me. Although she'd been battling cancer since we were first introduced, I'd thought — expected — we'd have more time.

Why do the living always assume we have more time? Why do we neglect our mortality and forget that we wither like the grass and fade like the flower?

I invited Elizabeth to join my writing group of women clergy, knowing she would fit right in. Elizabeth was an Episcopal priest, a book lover and a writer. She endeared herself to our group, who gave her mad props for the creativity of her cursing. I have two copies of her 2024 book, *Irreverent Prayers: Talking to God When You're Seriously Sick*, on my shelf — one for myself and one ready to give away, because her words and her life should be so honored.

Elizabeth came home from the hospital to hospice care on a Friday. She texted us that she'd see us on Zoom for the following Thursday's writing group. She died on Saturday.

Death is shocking in its finality. One minute someone is alive and breathing and texting, and the next minute they are

gone. Elizabeth's text thread still dangles in my phone, waiting for her to reply, to somehow send our group a message from beyond, something about how irritated she is by the angels who raise their eyebrows whenever she drops the F-bomb.

Elizabeth was 56 years old when she died of lung cancer, four years older than me. Her death made me hit pause on my life — a gift, really, to remember that we don't have endless time, that I should hug my kids and my husband, that I should love my life and breathe deeply with my healthy lungs and stop every once in a while to appreciate what I have in here and now, including friends like Elizabeth. She's been with me as I wrote these devotions. Bobby, Ginna and I decided on the theme a year ago. Little did I know then how personal this series would become for me, how close I was to experiencing the sharp, stabbing pain of grief myself.

Prayer: Turn us to your Word this Lent, O God, and to the solace we find in your everlasting truths. As we contemplate the shocking finality of death, may we bask in the truth of your eternal love. Amen.

Teri

Day 3: Friday

Change Brings Loss

*"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ."
—Philippians 1:6*

When I began in ministry at the start of the 21st century, everybody I met was talking about change.

Bobby, the church isn't like it used to be. Bobby, society is changing. Bobby, it's change or die.

When I was a young seminarian, this change motivated me. I saw myself as a change agent who could help the church forge a new future in the 21st-century wilderness! What I did not anticipate once I got into pastoral work was how . . .

- Trying new things also brought about unexpected resistance.
- Retiring a decades-old tradition that very few people attended was a decision that required strenuous session debate.
- Completing a building renovation felt, for some members, like a funeral.

For a time, I stewed about the pushback, anger and complaining that emerged amid the changes.

Eventually, I was humbled to realize that I'd completely missed a central truth: with any change – even good change – something is always lost. And so there is grief.

Put another way, if change is happening, grief is happening.

And this is why I was eager to work on this grief-focused devotional. Change unfolds at an impossibly fast pace all around us, within us and even through us. That means, these days, there's a lot of grief among us.

And unless we have space to name it, walk it and work it, it will fester in resistance, anger and apathy.

My hope, then, is that this devotional allows you to engage grief in whatever forms or stages you are experiencing grief right now — and through that engagement, to discover how your grief may also be part of a new thing God is doing in our midst.

Prayer: God of healing and transformation, help us grieve what is passing, honor what you have given us this day and anticipate what you will yet do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Bobby

Day 4: Saturday

Grief, Common Yet Complicated

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”—1 Corinthians 12:26

Like you, I’ve experienced my share of daily griefs: deaths of loved ones in old age, dreams disappointed, loves and friendships lost. However, two major grief events in my life have knocked me off my feet. In 2019, after a long struggle with the family disease of addiction, my spouse and I divorced. Second, in the summer of 2024, while writing this devotional, I miscarried a long-awaited and dearly beloved daughter.

If daily griefs are stabs and pangs, these experiences were body-and-soul seizures. These experiences fundamentally changed my identity and worldview.

You’ll hear me reference the miscarriage often over these 40 days — the divorce, not so much. One is my story to tell; the other belongs to two people. But if you have been through one or the other (or both!), I want to share what I bring to the table, as I’ve sought to connect my personal experience of grief with the communal grief that our larger Christian narrative observes during Lent.

These griefs are as common as they are complicated. One in two marriages ends in divorce, and one in four pregnancies ends in a miscarriage. Commonness does not make them any easier. The banality of grief only adds insult to injury. Yet the gift of commonplace grief is connection. You and I may never have met, but we have both lost people we love. That tiny piece of overlapping experience changes everything. Worlds are opened, and my grief becomes meaningful for you, just as yours becomes meaningful to me.

Thank you for joining me on this journey through Lent. It is a joy and an honor to walk beside you along this road to the cross.

Prayer: Wandering God, walk with us on the journey through these 40 days of Lent. Help us find your truth and your love in one another. Amen.

Ginna