

2025 Lenten Devotional

# Grieving Change and Loss:

The unpredictable, non-linear,  
faith-filled journey toward  
resurrection



**THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK**

# 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

# Day 5: Sunday, Introduction of Denial

## Grief, The Emotional Buffer of Denial

*“It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of everyone, and the living will lay it to heart.”—Ecclesiastes 7:2*

Denial of death can take many forms. For the person diagnosed with a terminal illness, the stage of denial may include rejection of reality and facts. The person may go searching for a second, third or fourth medical opinion or might turn to alternative modes of healing to bolster their disbelief of the terminal diagnosis.

To the grieving, denial can feel like as if they are living a dream, or as if a big mistake has been made that will soon be corrected. Joan Didion’s 2007 book *A Year of Magical Thinking* describes the year after her husband’s unexpected death. She writes the details of the day he died, trying to convince herself that it actually happened. Describing the year after his death, she continues to write of waking up in bed wondering why she was alone, wondering why other people thought her husband was dead, wondering – fearing! – that she had allowed her husband to be buried alive.

Denial serves an emotional purpose in the grief process. In *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross writes about denial acting as an emotional “buffer,” giving the grieving person time to collect themselves and, in that time, to build the psychological strength to withstand the pain that comes with deep loss. Denial is a mode of survival: our biological means of allowing only as much pain as we can handle. In this way, denial can be understood as a form of grace.

As we reflect on grief's stage of denial this week, contemplate the way this stage serves as grace. What pain have you experienced that was simply too much to bear? What pain have you needed to deny in order to survive? When have you witnessed others experiencing denial to protect themselves from painful truths?

*Prayer: Merciful God, we all experience loss. We all grieve life's limits. We praise you for subtle grace, the gifts that keep us afloat while awash in grief. Amen.*

Teri

## Day 6: Monday

### Letting It All Out

*"All who believed were together and had all things in common."—Acts 2:44*

At a large conference, I was seated at a table with confident, sharp professionals. One of them was a woman who shared with a couple of us, just before the workshop began, "I feel like I want to go to my room, curl into the fetal position and sob." Her eyes drew down. "I'm realizing my whole job is going to change . . ." She trailed off, eventually explaining that the conference was making clear to her that she was on the cusp of a big transition.

Hers was the grief of a shifting season, a beloved season that now needed to evolve. And she felt she had nowhere to go. Sobbing in public would be unheard of. Sobbing in her room was to be avoided, too, because *that's not how professionals work through things*.

I don't think she's alone.

Society exerts an unspoken pressure to keep it together. Unless our grief feels especially acute, who are we to need space to sob over a change in seasons, a move or the end of a beloved Sunday school?

How naturally we can isolate ourselves as we hold to society's party line: *Chin up. Keep smiling.*

The truth is that seasons of change are seasons of grief, and these seasons need honest, communal processing.

Fortunately, this woman risked just enough honesty to tell a bunch of put-together professionals, "I really need to cry."

She went ahead and let it all out. And we teared up too.

I no longer remember the workshop details, but I will never forget the time when a few professionals chose to drop their guard and discover the kind of shared healing only ever known when keeping-it-together is set aside for vulnerable love.

*Prayer: Merciful God, thank you for receiving me just as I am. Help me receive those around me in the same way — and may love multiply because of what you do in that space. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.*

Bobby

## Day 7: Tuesday

### Tears That Mean Love

*"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."—Matthew 5:4*

A speaker challenged our Toastmasters gathering to give an impromptu speech based on a prompt: If you could go back in time to any place and time, when and where would you go?

He looked in my direction. "Bobby, give it a try."

My response hit me as clear as pain.

"To 1975. In Cincinnati, Ohio. That's the year my parents were seniors in high school — and they lived in Cincinnati." Then I pivoted. "I'd hope to see the Big Red Machine play a baseball game. To this day their legacy shapes the city."

I meant it — I really would love to see those Reds. But I was also using sports as avoidance. Eventually, though, my heart released: “And . . . I would want to see my parents together in high school. I’d like to see a glimpse of the love that was lost.”

I stopped, about to sob with grief echoing from their divorce a quarter-century before. I managed to hold the flood within, though my voice cracked as I spoke the final sentence: “I don’t know what I would see, but I’d really like to go to 1975.”

Grief, it seems, plays by the same rules as impromptu Toastmasters speeches. It arrives with no warning, provides us with no preparation for its wave and calls forth waters we had no idea still shaped the cityscape of our soul so profoundly.

In these moments, we find it tempting to pivot toward the glory or mess that is our sports team or the weather.

Yet what is the only real way forward into a healed future?

Receive grief’s messy invitation. Somewhere amid it all, remind yourself that where there are tears, there is love.

And somehow, oddly and painfully, take comfort in that.

*Prayer: Merciful God, I give thanks for the tears that remind me of love. And may your living water flood the cityscape of my soul with your comfort, healing and new life. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.*

Bobby

## Day 8: Wednesday

### Living the Gift of This Day

*“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”—Psalm 118:24*

A week after her death from lung cancer, my friend Elizabeth declined my calendar invite for our writing group’s weekly Thursday meeting.

On the morning I woke up to this notification on my phone, sent mysteriously at 1:23, I sat staring at this message from the great beyond, confused and rattled. Grief grabbed my heart and squeezed. *No*, I reminded myself again, *she really is gone*. This notification was likely a family member or friend cleaning up Elizabeth’s calendar, or perhaps her computer was automatically sending last notifications before it went offline for good.

I called my dog and grabbed his leash to go for a walk. I needed a minute.

Elizabeth loved her morning walks, the only exercise she could do with her diminished lung capacity. As her cancer progressed, she complained about how slow she had to walk, how difficult it was for her to breathe. I spent the night at her place once and was in her kitchen when she came home from a walk gasping for air, her chest wheezing. She kept walking, though. Eventually, she needed the support of a rolling walker.

Denial is easy to slip into because death doesn’t feel real. How could someone be here walking her neighborhood one day and be gone the next? But the reminders of this natural cycle are everywhere. Friends and loved ones live and die. Flowers bloom and wilt. The leaves turn from green to red and gold each fall. Life is fragile, limited and precious. Every created thing has an expiration date.

Our faith reminds us of our mortality as well as our hope in Jesus Christ. Jesus died so we could live. This isn’t just an eternal promise. It’s also the gift of this very day, and it’s a blueprint for how to live it. In the wake of Elizabeth’s death I ask myself, How will I live the gift of this day? When I wake up each morning, I wonder what I might do with this next beautiful stretch of 12 whole hours. Who can I love? What good can I start and spread? How can I honor the precious yet fragile gift of life God has given?

*Prayer: O God, our Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end, wake us to the beauty and opportunity of this day, so we can honor its gift as well as its Giver. Amen.*

Teri



# Day 9: Thursday

## Help for Our Unbelief

*"I believe; help my unbelief!" — Mark 9:24*

"Life changes in the instant. The ordinary instant."

Didion wrote these words in January 2004, days after her husband died of a sudden, massive heart attack. Writing was Didion's way of making sense of the reality she experienced. But she couldn't make sense of this tragedy. These two lines waited in a Word document on her computer for four months before she could add anything more.

It was the ordinary of the instant when her husband died that left Didion so baffled. In *The Year of Magical Thinking* she writes about how

we all focus on how unremarkable the circumstances were in which the unthinkable occurred, the clear blue sky from which the plane fell, the routine errand that ended on the shoulder with the car in flames, the swings where the children were playing as usual when the rattlesnake struck from the ivy.

In 1966, Didion interviewed witnesses of the attack on Pearl Harbor, noting how often they said it was "an ordinary Sunday morning." Didion's husband died at the table where they'd just sat down for an ordinary evening meal.

Denial includes the belief (or disbelief) that such remarkable tragedies aren't supposed to happen during unremarkable moments. Shouldn't clouds threaten in the sky when a plane crashes? Shouldn't a heated argument, where threats of divorce are hurled, take place before one spouse succumbs to a heart attack? Life can pull the rug from under our feet so fast it leaves us wondering if we were ever standing on carpet at all.

In such moments of grief, faith reminds us that there is much we will never understand. "I believe; help my unbelief," we pray along with the father who asked Jesus to heal his son in Mark's Gospel. We, too, pray for healing, believing that God understands what we cannot and loves us through the grief.

***Prayer: God who is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine, heal us and help us when the unthinkable happens. Guide us by your wisdom. Love us in your grace. Amen.***

Teri

# Day 10: Friday

## Trust the Process

*"They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." — Jeremiah 6:14*

Real talk: I'm a little surprised to find out that quote originated not with Patrick Henry but with the prophet Jeremiah. Regardless, the sentiment resonates. To practice denial is to treat a wound carelessly.

We have reasons to deny, of course. When something seems unbearable, we find it so much easier to look the other way. In many instances, denial is a natural coping mechanism. But the longer we treat a wound carelessly, the more likely it is to fester.

From the outside, denial looks a lot like gaslighting. It is infuriating when those around us deny what we know to be true. Maybe someone diminishes the reality of our loss. Maybe a politician calls opposing viewpoints "fake news." Maybe someone bright-sides our suffering, insisting on finding a silver lining in a tragic situation. "They're in a better place." "This will make you stronger." "At least . . ." (The first rule of grief: any sentence that starts with "at least" should be outlawed.)

Denial seeks comfort in the face of the utterly uncomfortable. It is a subconscious effort to fix what can never be made right.

In the immediate aftermath of a tragedy or trauma, denial is a protective strategy. It keeps us from having to face it all at once. We allow in exactly as much of the horrible truth as we can bear and save the rest for another day.



But we cannot stay in denial. As time goes on and reality sinks in, saying “peace” when there is no peace does more harm than good. It betrays our soul.

When we are in the thick of denial, we can trust the process. Eventually, as Jesus promises, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).

*Prayer: God, give us the courage to face the truth in ourselves and in one another. When that truth is too much to bear, hold it with us. Amen.*

Ginna

## Day 11: Saturday

### Finding Grief’s Place in God’s Story

*“She said to them, ‘Call me no longer Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.’”—Ruth 1:20-21*

After I lost my pregnancy, I spent a month reading every piece of miscarriage literature I could find. On some level, I needed to know that what happened to me was real. I needed to learn that other people had experienced the same things I had: the shock, the contractions, the numbness, the shortness of breath, the emptiness you rediscover in the pit of your stomach every time you wake up and remember your baby is dead.

One piece I came across was a series of emails between two writers for Slate magazine. The year before, the two women had worked side by side through their respective miscarriages, neither saying a word to the other about what she was going through. Both suffered in silence. Sadly, this is how we do grief sometimes. We draw into ourselves and miss the resources around us — sometimes a resource sitting at literally the next desk.

One of the women, Emily Bazelon, tells the story of a rabbi friend who called her when he heard she’d miscarried. He pointed her to Ruth, chapter 1, when Naomi returns to Bethlehem after the death of her husband and two sons. When the women of the town greet Naomi, she gives herself a new name: Mara, which means “bitter.” “I went away full,” she tells them, “But the Lord has brought me back empty.”

When I read this text, I put down the book and wept. Yes, that was exactly it. A week ago, I had been full; now I was empty. These words held all my loss.

It is healing to recognize ourselves in the pages of Scripture. Even the worst moments of our stories have a place in God’s story.

*Prayer: God, when we feel alone, send us your Spirit, send us your Word and send us one another. Amen.*

Ginna

## Day 12: Sunday, Introduction of Anger

### Raging Against Loss

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—Psalm 22:1*

Strong emotions surface in grief, such as sadness, panic, hurt and loneliness. But anger is the strong emotion that is most important to name as natural and necessary, because it’s the feeling we most often negate.

Anger can be scary, a raging fire that we fear will get out of control. As Kübler-Ross and Kessler write in *On Grief and Grieving*, anger “has no limits. It can extend not only to your friends, the doctors, your family, yourself, and your loved one who died, but also to God.” We often tell ourselves we shouldn’t feel this anger, particularly when we turn our anger against our loved one who has died: How could you leave me? Or against God: How could you take this life? We also don’t know how to respond to the dying when they express their anger.

In *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross said a mistake people often make when caring for the dying is to take their anger personally. But a dying patient who lashes out at their caregiver or raises their voice and makes demands of their family

is more likely angry over the fact that they are dying than they are at the people around her. Underneath anger lies pain, and a person's anger can serve them emotionally by giving them strength, a bridge over the sea of grief — a structure to the absence and nothingness of loss. Understanding the necessary role that anger plays in the stages of grief can lead caregivers to be more understanding and patient with the dying, and it can help the dying to be more patient and forgiving with themselves.

*Prayer: O God, our Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end, hear our prayers for those who rage against the loss that comes with death. Grant them the comfort and strength of knowing that nothing – in life or death – can separate them from your love. Amen.*

Teri

## Day 13: Monday

### Melted and Molded by Love

*“[These trials have come] so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”—1 Peter 1:7*

Years ago, I visited a shop in Bethlehem selling beautiful glass Christmas ornaments.

Their tags explained how the Israeli Defense Force's 2002 siege of the Church of the Nativity – located in Bethlehem in the West Bank – left a lot of shattered glass lying around.

A group of Bethlehem Lutherans decided to pick it up. They put the glass through a firing process that softened the jagged edges and refashioned the shards into Christmas ornaments.

What they envisioned was a day when these ornaments could go on trees as a symbol of surprising friendship among those who once shot bullets at each other. I myself now have one of these ornaments, and it serves as an annual reminder about a different kind of peace.

To be sure, ornament hanging is easy. With all that we currently hold and face, many of us may not be in a place where we can channel anger into creative redemption and hope.

At the same time – as we remember afresh where the road of long-harbored anger eventually leads – perhaps we can at least consider a few questions.

What if we chose to look afresh upon the Jesus who went to the cross to take jagged, rough-edged and broken people . . . and we forgave them?

What if we let ourselves receive afresh the embrace of this Jesus, who chooses to love us unto a surprising transformation?

How can we place our anger before God's refining fire?

One day yet, we may discover that our hands cannot help but fashion beauty from the rubble. For always – eventually – this is what the hands of Christ are about.

*Prayer: Forgiving God, take my pain, my anger and all the hard places within. Let love melt me and mold me. May the fire that comes through my life be bold, redemptive and enemy-loving. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.*

Bobby

# Day 14: Tuesday

## Meeting Anger with Empathy

*“As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things.”—Mark 6:34*

One morning a congregant arrived at my office and demanded, “Who’s in charge of that new sign out front?”

“Buildings and Grounds put it up to advertise our worship services,” I said.

“Oh, pass the buck, huh!” he exclaimed, throwing up his hands. “Well, then you must have noticed it looks terrible.”

He raised his voice for the entire office to hear. “Does no one here care how this church looks to other people? Apparently the pastor is too important to do lowly tasks like straightening a sign!”

He then left.

A young pastor at the time, I was deeply shaken. I went to a mentor of mine, and when I tried to tell the story I simply began sobbing. What had I done? What had I not done? What is wrong with our sign?

“Bobby,” this mentor said as I eventually quieted. “Do you think he blew into your office with that level of anger . . . over one sign?”

The questions invited a new thought: What if the anger was really grief? What if this long-time member who had poured his heart into the church was wondering whether anyone would carry the church after he was gone? What if – with his ailing wife at home – he wondered whether anyone was noticing *him* any longer?

I reconciled with the congregant a week later. It was not easy. It was also quite powerful.

But reconciliation wouldn’t have happened without my mentor drawing me from a place of stunned righteousness into a place of empathetic humility.

What if the anger is grief?

***Prayer: Patient God, thank you for meeting my anger and frustration with love. Help me meet the anger and frustration of those around me with that same empathy and embrace. In Christ’s name I pray. Amen.***

Bobby

# Day 15: Wednesday

## Being Honest About Pain

*“My complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him.”—Job 23:2-3*

In the back of Kate Bowler’s book *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved*, she includes a helpful appendix listing things people shouldn’t say to someone suffering with cancer or any other terminal disease.

“Everything happens for a reason” is at the top of Bowler’s restricted list:

The only thing worse than saying this is pretending that you know the reason. I’ve had hundreds of people tell me the reason for my cancer. Because of my sin. Because of my unfaithfulness. Because God is fair. Because God is unfair. Because of my aversion to Brussels sprouts. . . . When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.

Oftentimes, when people say things like “everything happens for a reason” to someone who is dying or grieving, the idea arises out of their own discomfort with the other person’s suffering — and with the anger that suffering ignites.



Bowler's honesty is refreshing and necessary. We trivialize suffering with shallow clichés. Only when we are honest about our pain, only when we give ourselves and others the freedom to feel all the emotions that come with pain – including anger – are we able to progress to acceptance.

Suffering is on full display in the book of Job, suffering and anger. Job rails against God and against his unjust suffering. He demands an audience with God to answer all his questions about why. God doesn't answer Job's questions, but neither does God back away from his anger. Job is not placated or denied — which in itself is healing. This biblical text gives us permission to be honest with God. Job reveals a God who doesn't back off, grow uncomfortable or seek to avoid. God loves us, no matter what.

*Prayer: O God who hears our complaints and cries, we praise you for the ways you show up for us in love, guiding us to healing and hope. Amen.*

Teri

## Day 16: Thursday

### God Hears Our Cries

*"I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish."—Philippians 3:8*

When my friend Elizabeth's cancer returned, she was angry — so upset by the news and the battle against a disease that just wouldn't stop taking so much from her . . . her energy, her breath, the morning walks she cherished with her dog, Pepper. In the face of her rage, I struggled to find ways to respond. Elizabeth's anger was completely understandable, but also uncomfortable. It felt like a raging house fire that I instinctively wanted to put out, douse with water, to save my friend from this inferno.

I fought this instinct. I held back the platitudes rising to my lips: *There, there, Elizabeth, don't be angry, everything will be okay.*

Everything was not going to be okay.

Elizabeth, an Episcopal priest, was a champion curser. Better than a sailor. When I invited her to join my writing group of women ministers, she asked, "Would this group be okay with a little cursing?" I laughed and said yes. Little did I know what "a little cursing" actually meant.

As Elizabeth's cancer progressed, and with it her anger over her approaching death, our writer's group accompanied our friend in her cursing. What the cancer, go to and leave our friend alone. Our text threads and emails turned into litanies of foul, angry curses against the disease that was stealing our friend.

I remember my New Testament professor's mischievous grin as he taught us that the Greek word in Philippians 3:8 that is usually translated as "rubbish" would more accurately be translated as the stronger, less polite "crap" or worse. Paul's call to follow Christ cost him economically, socially, politically—even physically, as he was imprisoned and beaten. I imagine Paul grieved these losses angrily, cursing them as rubbish. But no loss could surpass all he gained through Christ.

My dear friend Elizabeth's cancer was rubbish. But God did not abandon her in her pain. And I can't imagine God, angered by all injustice, put off by my friend's cursing of cancer. Now she rests in Christ's embrace, a gift of unsurpassed value.

*Prayer: God who rages against unjust suffering, hear the angry cries and cursing of your grieving people. In the warmth of Christ's embrace, help us heal from loss. Amen.*

Teri

# Day 17: Friday

## Sitting with Discomfort

*“[Job’s friends] sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.”—Job 2:13*

When I lost my first pregnancy, well-meaning people said all sorts of horrible things:

“Don’t worry, you can have more children.”

“It’s for the best, something was obviously wrong with it.”

“God had another plan for that baby.”

“Lots of people live meaningful lives without children.”

“I guess it wasn’t meant to be.”

And of course, the classic: “Everything happens for a reason.” (If you have seriously never read Kate Bowler’s *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved*, see Teri’s reflection from this past Wednesday.)

Listening to one of my many rants about the things people say, a friend pointed me to Job, chapter 2. “You know,” she said, “Job’s friends got it right, for the first seven days. And then they opened their mouths.”

It’s true. We are uncomfortable with silence, especially silence in the face of unfathomable loss. Witnessing the suffering of someone we love makes us uncomfortable, so we open our mouths and try to resolve the discomfort. Spoiler alert: Trying to resolve someone’s discomfort when they are in the thick of grief is always a bad decision.

Job’s expression of anger at God is what made his friends feel compelled to speak. For me, it was my people’s responses to my loss that propelled me into my anger phase. In both cases – all cases – the righteous protest against God unsettles our collective emotional equilibrium. Grief disabuses us of our illusions of control.

We need great courage to sit in the silence of discomfort and let anger be. Our anger, our loved one’s anger, God’s anger. Let’s give it a try.

**Prayer: God who accepts us just as we are, help me hold and bear witness to anger — my own and that of the people around me. Free me from the compulsion to justify and fix. Help me listen to what anger might teach me. Amen.**

Ginna

# Day 18: Saturday

## Channeling Anger

*“Hear this, you who trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, . . . buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals.”—Amos 8:4, 6*

Sometimes our anger is just there to be felt. At other times, anger is a message about what God is calling us to do.

I am uncomfortable with how often Scripture talks about God’s anger, but I cannot deny its presence. In the biblical tradition, God’s anger is an energetic force, responding to injustice and drawing the world today ever closer to the world God intended.

My miscarriage was not simple, medically speaking. Few are. For me, follow-up care required multiple surgical and medical interventions. Even as the medical process prolonged the grief, I was profoundly grateful to live in New Mexico, a state where I could receive the care I needed without legal limitations or repercussions.

Then my gratitude turned to anger. Anger that I had access to health care that my friends in other states did not. Anger

that women's reproductive health has been turned into a political talking point rather than the sacred process of creating new life that it always has been. Anger because I could not stop the suffering.

Sometimes God speaks to us through our anger. On one of those nights when my anger woke me at 3 a.m., I remembered a faith-based nonprofit in New Mexico that offers rides and accompaniment to people who come from out of state to receive emergency reproductive health care. The organization is always looking for drivers, volunteers and ministers to offer support.

Here was my opportunity. My grief and trauma uniquely equipped me for this work. God reached me through my anger and issued me a call.

What in your life and community has you riled up? Feel that energy, teeming within you. What in it is holy? Where might it be channeled?

*Prayer: "Spirit, Spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness, wind, wind on the sea" (Glory to God, no. 291).*

Ginna

## Day 19: Sunday, Introduction of Bargaining Making Deals with God

*"Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking,' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.'" —Genesis 32:26*

What can we do to change our fate or the fate of a loved one who is dying? What deal can we strike that might save us? What sin can we confess that will reverse death's painful course?

In *On Grief and Grieving*, Kübler-Ross and Kessler tell the story of Howard, who lost his beloved wife, Millie, in a tragic car accident. While Howard sat in the hospital, waiting to hear from the doctors whether Millie would survive, he repeated, "Please, God, let her live . . . I'll be a better person . . . I'll volunteer . . . I'll devote my life to you."

Bargaining with God may not seem like a helpful stage of grief, but it serves a purpose. It gives the grieving person something to do, distracting them from the pain. Kübler-Ross and Kessler also say bargaining changes over the course of grief. At first Howard bargained to save Millie. After she died, Howard's bargaining turned to "if onlys."

"Guilt is often bargaining's companion," write Kübler-Ross and Kessler. *If only we could go back in time, the grieving person thinks, saying and praying things like I'd take a different road. I wouldn't have caused that distraction. I wouldn't have left the house.*

Inevitably, grievors move through the bargaining stage, coming to accept the sad reality of their loss. Bargaining helps us get from one stage of grief to the next.

*Prayer: Patient and wise God, you know how difficult it is to lose someone we love. Thank you for listening and attending to us in our grief, for receiving our bargaining with grace. Amen.*

Teri

## Day 20: Monday God Never Lets God

*"[Nothing] in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." —Romans 8:39*

"Daddy, where is that hole?"

"Daddy, what happens if we fall into that hole?"

"Daddy, can they cover up that hole?"



My then-five-year-old asked this litany of questions as we watched Pixar's *Soul* (2020) for the first time. The questions arose 10 minutes into the movie when Joe Gardner, a middle-school music teacher and jazz musician, falls into an open sewer hole in New York City, dies and finds himself heading to "The Great Beyond."

In our society, where we often find it quite tempting to avoid acknowledging the "hole" truth, I find it striking and even refreshing how several recent children's movies have chosen not to escape into fantasy but rather to lean directly into death's reality and the hard questions that accompany it.

It's also one reason I appreciate that the church has seasons like Lent.

Lent is a journey that begins with the whole, ashen truth marked clearly upon our forehead. It continues toward the cross and then ends before the empty tomb and the promise that we are held by a Savior who has gone before us into the depths.

And although walking that journey does not mean we can suddenly answer every question about what happens once someone "goes in," it does mean we can say to our children with full confidence: "Yes, everyone does go into the hole at some point or another. And the one thing we know for sure is this: You know how we you hold close with all our love? Well, God is holding us like that right now. And God never lets go — even when we go into the hole."

*Prayer: God of life and life eternal, we give thanks that we are held in your eternal embrace. Your gracious gift steadies us, strengthens us and inspires us. In our words and actions, may our lives give expression to this kind of love. Amen.*

Bobby

## Day 21: Tuesday

### Trust God to Figure It Out

*"I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you." —2 Timothy 1:5*

*My mom would love this place* was my thought, over and over, as I walked through an eclectic Saturday-afternoon market lined with trinkets and antiques.

At one point I reached for a postcard, which felt inexplicable because I had no intention of buying anything.

*What am I even doing?* I wondered.

And then my body told me.

A lump arrived in my rapidly heating throat, and tears fell without invitation. I was suddenly consumed with the idea that I'd love to buy this postcard, write a few notes about this market and then mail it my mom — perhaps hinting at all the Christmas gifts I'd found for her there.

"Wait till you see some of the treasures here, Mom! Right up your alley."

But my quiet tears made me newly aware that such a mailing has not been possible for nearly five years now.

The truth is that colorful trinkets and distractions line the aisles of life today — and frequently we welcome their easy diversion. Even so, the body always eventually speaks.

A lump in the throat. A tear upon the cheek. A sigh from our depths.

And while these are never easy to receive, they do reground us.

My tears invited me to think of my mom and a few other saints who have come before me. I sent my love in the form of a grateful prayer, trusting — as always — that God will figure out the delivery system.

*Prayer: God of all generations, thank you for the faithfulness of those who have gone before us. Thank you, too, for your faithfulness, which abided even in their wandering, and abides in my wandering. Draw me away from the many distractions, and help me honor the gifts you and they have given me. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.*

Bobby

## Day 22: Wednesday

### Resting from Bargaining

*“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?”—1 Corinthians 6:19*

As I grow older, I grieve the loss of my younger body. I grieve the metabolism of my 20s and my ability to drink a beer without worrying about expanding my waistline. I grieve knees that don't grow sore if I eat too much sugar and a lower back that doesn't cramp while bending over to bathe the dog. I grieve the strength of legs that could run me around a track faster than the other girls.

I'm not okay with this loss.

I am in constant negotiations to turn the clock back. If I apply this eye cream, my tired bags and wrinkles will magically disappear. If I stick to this six-day cleanse and eat nothing but soup for a week, I will lose the weight collecting around my waist. If I rub this expensive magnesium oil (filtered from the organic soil of a remote Australian village) on the soles of my feet, then I will stop grinding my teeth while I sleep and eliminate my sugar cravings.

I visited a natural cemetery near my home in Virginia on a writing assignment. I'm claustrophobic and have never liked the thought of my body being buried in a casket. At the natural cemetery, the body is wrapped in a biodegradable shroud before burying. Renewable plots conserve space; 75 years after the deceased has returned to the earth, the cemetery offers the lot to another. This 75-year term extends far beyond the time a body takes to return to its natural elements in the earth.

Touring this natural cemetery in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley, I recalled the *Book of Common Worship's* words of committal at the graveside: “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, says the Spirit. They rest from their labors, and their works follow them.”

Rest. Rest from labor. Rest from constant bargaining, constant negotiating of loss. This is what God desires for us. This is where our aging process leads us, a gift to my body and yours.

*Prayer: Eternal God, help us accept our bodies as you created them. Help us enjoy the ride that is this life until it is time to rest. Amen.*

Teri

## Day 23: Thursday

### God's heart Is the first to break

*“[Abraham] said, ‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?’”—Genesis 18:23-24*

When we try to make deals with God, everybody loses.

In Genesis, God makes a plan to destroy Sodom. When God shares this news with Abraham, Abraham tries to talk God down. Would you spare Sodom for 50 righteous people? How about 45? Or 30? Abraham eventually negotiates God down to sparing Sodom if 10 righteous people can be found in the city.

Of course, Sodom is still destroyed. The story is horrifying, as it describes attempted sexual assault on travelers and a father who offers his daughters in their place. (What?) When we try to make deals with God, everybody loses.

It's even worse in Judges, chapter 11. Jephthah, Judge of Israel, is supposed to be wise and discerning. But he makes a

foolish vow that if God helps him defeat the Ammonites, he will sacrifice the first creature to come out of his house to greet him when he returns home. Of course, when he returns home victorious, the one who first greets him is his daughter. He fulfills his vow anyway and sacrifices her to the Lord. (What is it about our willingness to sacrifice our daughters?)

When we try to make deals with God, everyone loses. Still, we try. Bargaining is a natural impulse in grief, but it is utterly counterproductive.

I wonder if we bargain with God in grief because we have stopped trusting God to be good. The unthinkable has happened. All is lost. We try to convince God to get back on our side.

Our faith affirms that God is always working for good. Unspeakably awful things will happen, but God's love and goodness remain. The cross teaches us that when the unimaginable happens, God's heart is the first to break.

*Prayer: God, help me trust your goodness, even and especially when I cannot see it. Amen.*

Ginna

## Day 24: Friday

### Jesus Bargained Too

*“And going a little farther, [Jesus] threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.”—Mark 14:35*

If we're feeling bad about our tendency to bargain, let's remember that Jesus does it too.

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays three times to be spared the ordeal that lies ahead. Let that sink in for a second. In the eleventh hour, Jesus wanted out! Just because he ends by saying, “Not my will, but thy will be done,” it doesn't negate the fact that he asks three times if there might be another way.

We focus so often on Jesus' divinity that we forget the gift of his humanity. In Jesus, God knows what it feels like to be terrified and look for an escape route. God knows what it feels like to beg and plead for things to be different than they are. God knows what it's like to make deals with the heavens, even while recognizing that it is all to no avail.

Jesus doesn't get what he wants when he bargains with God, and likely neither will we. Maybe we find comfort in trying to assert our agency, to get a foothold of power in a situation completely beyond our control.

Many people who are grieving would give anything to have their loved one back. God knows what this feels like, too. The calculus of the Trinity means that God knows what it feels like to lose God's own child.

Eventually, our futile efforts at bargaining give way to surrender. In the economy of God's grace, we do not need to strike any deals.

*Prayer: Sovereign God, it is so hard to say, “Thy will be done.” As I incorporate the reality of new grief into my worldview, help me to rely on your grace. Amen.*

Ginna

## Day 25: Saturday

### Bargaining as Control

*“Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’”—Genesis 32:26*

Bargaining is about control. In a place of grief and shock, we seek to regain some semblance of the control we've lost — or some illusion of the control we never had to begin with.

I do most of my bargaining with knowledge and information. If I can just learn everything there is to learn about something — the disease my loved one has, the medical procedure I'll undergo, even the grief process itself — then I can do



everything within my power to influence the outcome.

Knowledge is a beautiful thing, and sometimes it really helps the process. But what I'm really looking for isn't knowledge. It's security: a guarantee that I can keep my loved ones and myself out of harm's way. I'm asking God and the universe to promise me that I won't lose anything or anyone else. That assurance never comes.

I wonder what Jacob is really looking for the night he wrestles with God. Safety and prosperity for his family? Victory over his brother Esau, whom he will meet the next day? Forgiveness from God (and perhaps from Esau, too) for his earlier betrayal?

What Jacob gets is a new name and a limp.

Jacob gets a new name because grief changes us. We will never be the same people that we were before the loss. What we have been through takes up residence in our body and soul; our identity is not quite what it was before. And Jacob receives a limp because wrestling with God takes its toll. We all bear the scars of our attempts to wrest control from the hands of the universe.

Yet Jacob receives one more thing – a blessing – because through the struggle, he refuses to let go of God. Perhaps therein lies the lesson for us when we wrestle in the present day.

*Prayer: God, as I walk through this tumultuous time, do not let go of me until I have received your blessing. Amen.*

Ginna

## Day 26: Sunday, Introduction of Depression God Carries Us

*“The Lord is near to the to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”—Psalm 34:18*

Characterized by feelings of emptiness, intense sadness and hopelessness, the depression stage of grief gives us the impression that it will last forever. In this stage people withdraw from life and live as if they are in a fog. We find no good reason to get out of bed in the morning, no desire to do the things that once gave us joy. Our body feels heavy and lethargic, and life itself feels pointless.

For someone coming to terms with their own death, this depressive stage creates space for the sorrow of loss and allows the one who is dying to more easily reach a place of acceptance. People attending to those who are dying do well to sit with the sadness, express empathy and care, and avoid saying things like “Don’t be sad.” Kübler-Ross writes that visitors who try to interfere with this depressive stage – people who try to cheer up the dying person – actually hinder the person’s emotional process.

Depression as a stage of grief should be understood as a normal and necessary emotional stage in our journey of accepting and learning to cope with loss. Feeling sad – even overwhelmingly sad – is a natural reaction to a deeply painful loss. But people shouldn’t feel ashamed to seek help for depression. Counseling coupled with antidepressant medication can help people through this stage. In *On Grief and Grieving*, Kübler-Ross and Kessler affirm that antidepressants do not inhibit the processing of grief and can serve as helpful support by putting a floor in the bottomless feeling of despair.

*Prayer: God, hold our grief in your loving embrace. Carry us when the weight of loss grows too heavy. Amen.*

Teri

# Day 27: Monday

## Giving Ourselves Grace

*“The truth will make you free.”—John 8:32*

I began serving in a new call one November a few years back — a time always flooded with new excitement, new people and a steep learning curve. I was eager to meet the moment with Holy Spirit-filled energy, imagination, intelligence and love.

But this time was different. On the very first day of the call, my mom died of cancer.

I fell to the floor and wept.

Eventually, sometime during that first day without my mom, I did something I would never have counseled: I tried to put myself together and find the wherewithal to be present, energized and ready to go for this new call, especially on the cusp of Advent!

Fortunately, God’s grace intervened in the form of an email from a member of the church’s pastor nominating committee.

“Bobby,” he wrote. “Be easy on yourself and when you feel ‘off’ on a day and you can’t explain it, just give yourself some grace, will ya? Take care of yourself, lean on your family and we will be here for you guys now and in the future.”

No need to push through. No need to rally.

It was an invitation to *just be* — and it felt like a massive weight being removed. I slumped over and allowed myself to feel the sorrow, slowness and uncertainty — and also the freedom that came from being honest with myself.

The next day I found the energy to get some preaching coverage for my first Sundays with the church.

The situation was not how I imagined beginning a new call, but to this day I give great thanks for a church community that knew how to honor grief’s timeline, even if it meant setting aside the flood of anticipation for a flood of tears.

***Prayer: God of all truth and love, thank you for calling me just as I am, in every season of life. May your grace renew me and transform me and show me the ways I can extend this same grace to another today. Amen.***

*Bobby*

# Day 28: Tuesday

## The Ministry of Presence

*“The Word became flesh and lived among us.”—John 1:14*

Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin’” was going strong over the speakers, and the inviting aroma of freshly roasted beans filled the crowded coffee shop that morning. “Here!” I said, waving to a young man I was scheduled to meet for the first time. “Let me get you a drink!”

He sauntered over. “I’m fine,” he flatly replied and then stared at the ground.

Technically, we were there to have a career coaching conversation, but that topic was clearly not on the table. Finally, he glanced at me and said, “I gotta be honest. I don’t think I should be here. I got a lot going on.” He looked shell-shocked.

“Look, forget the coaching conversation,” I said. “Instead, if you’re up for it, I’d welcome hearing more about you and your story. Human to human—nothing more.”

“Yeah, okay,” he said. And he shared. Often his energy was muted. Occasionally a brief spark of life shone through. Mainly, his sentences trailed off.

I'd like to tell you that we ended the conversation feeling mutually grateful and newly enthused. But that is not how depression works. There are no Journey riffs, coffee shop kicks or perfect conversation partners who can jolt someone out of depression's unrelenting drag.

For those of us in it, often the best we can do is risk saying "yeah, okay" to those who offer their presence (certainly including the presence of a therapist). Because the fundamental road to healing is known through a truth that sits at the center of our faith: The Word became flesh and lived among us.

Jesus heals and transforms us by . . . dwelling. Abiding.

Being with and for us.

For as long as it takes. And then some. Until we all are raised.

*Prayer: Loving God, thank you for the people who have been your presence of love, faithfulness and light in my life. Show me where and how I can be that same presence for others. In Christ's holy name, I pray. Amen.*

Bobby

## Day 29: Wednesday

### The "Dull Sorrow" of Grief

*"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."—1 John 4:16*

After her younger brother died of AIDS-related causes, Marie Howe struggled to write the poetry that had earned her a career teaching at St. Lawrence College as well as four books, numerous awards, honors and fellowships.

Howe's poetry always speaks to me. She has a way of stringing words together about death and life, grief and loss, that are bodily and just right. In her poem "Menses," she described her melancholy as "a sure dull sorrow, / and a sense of skittering on the very / edge of things."

I imagine this same "dull sorrow" overcoming her after her brother's death. Howe needed to write, to create, to find her way through the grief. But depression kept her stuck. In an NPR interview with Terry Gross, she said she eventually decided to quit trying and just began writing her brother a letter. What came was the poem "What the Living Do": "Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some utensil probably fell down there. / And the Drano won't work but smells dangerous, and the crusty dishes have piled up / waiting for the plumber I still haven't called."

Her brother was 11 years younger than her, but they were very close. She often referred to him as her spiritual teacher. Howe described his death to Gross as a loss so terrible it changed her life. She didn't know how to keep living. The crusty dishes pile up. A bag of groceries breaks in her arms, dropping all its contents in the street. She spills coffee down her shirt. All this she reports to John in her poem: her inability to get anything right. Her inability to live. But then, at the end of the poem, she catches her reflection in a shop window and is suddenly "gripped by a cherishing so deep."

Eventually, Howe said to Gross, you find a way. You just find a way to keep living.

*Prayer: For all those struggling to live today, O God, we pray that they are gripped by your deep cherishing. Amen.*

Teri

## Day 30: Thursday

### The Gift of Vulnerable Friendship

*"A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity."—Proverbs 17:17*

"We call this 'Stick Season,'" a coaching client said, glancing out her window during our Zoom session.

She had just shared about the end of her seven-year business, a difficult and weighty chapter. Turning her laptop to



show me her view, she revealed a snowy forest scattered with bare sticks and fallen leaves.

I expected her to lament how bleak it all felt. Winter, after all, would be an easy metaphor to describe the emptiness that had felt so real for her in recent months.

But her next words surprised me.

“I think Stick Season is becoming one of my favorite times of year,” she said.

“Really?” I asked.

“It’s the only time I can see through everything,” she explained. “I can finally see the horizon. It feels less claustrophobic. Open. Fresh. Even free.”

“Are you talking about what you see out your window or how you are feeling about where you are with your business ending?”

“Both,” she said, and smiled.

How was it that the personal landscape she once would have described as heavy, barren and empty was now clear, fresh and free?

In a word? Community.

In recent weeks, she had taken small but intentional steps to invite people back into her life.

Nothing dramatic.

Nothing instant.

But through their presence, things shifted. The desolation gave way to new lightness and a fresh, inviting horizon.

*Prayer: Loving God, help us see the barren and heavy realities through the lens of your resurrection hope. And grant us the courage to offer and receive the gift of vulnerable friendship. In Christ’s holy name, we pray. Amen.*

*Bobby*

## Day 31: Friday

### Refusing to Be Consoled

*“Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.” — Jeremiah 31:15*

I appreciate that Rachel refuses to be consoled in the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah describes the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonian Empire. The city is destroyed; the people are killed and taken into exile. Even in Jeremiah, chapter 31, one of few chapters that contains prophecies of restoration and hope, we hear Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, for “they are no more.”

The Gospel writer Matthew takes up this text again in chapter 2 to describe the massacre of the innocents, when King Herod kills all the boys in Bethlehem younger than two years, trying to get rid of the one “born king of the Jews.” Here again, through the distraught and bereaved women of Bethlehem who cry out for their children, Rachel weeps.

I appreciate that Rachel refuses to be consoled. In a culture that doesn’t know what to do with grief, that is impatient for us to get over it and be “okay” again, perhaps there is something holy about being inconsolable. Someone has been lost. Something has been broken. Who or what was lost deserves the attention of our sorrow and tears.

Rachel will move through her grief, eventually. But now is the time to weep.

*Prayer: God who weeps when those who weep, do not leave us or abandon us. When we are beyond consolation, be with us in our tears. Amen.*

Ginna

## Day 32: Saturday

### Complain in Faith to God

*“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.” — Lamentations 1:12*

In her book *A is for Alabaster: 52 Reflections on the Stories of Scripture*, Anna Carter Florence writes that our spiritual ancestors would be shocked at modern American knee-jerk responses to grief: avoid, suppress and soothe. The Hebrew people tended their grief with the spiritual response of lament. Florence commends to her readers the practice of lamentation.

To lament is to publicly declare our sorrow in the presence of God and the community. It is to complain, in faith, to God. It is to acknowledge our suffering and call upon those around us to bear witness to it.

In deepest grief, I can identify with the author of Lamentations: “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.” But I have been taught that to express such sentiments is bad manners; it’s feeling sorry for myself. Maybe you learned that growing up as well.

In contrast, the ancient Hebrews taught their children how to lament. Florence calls lament one of the least-tapped spiritual resources available to us for our life of faith. If we seek guidance in our practice of lamentation, the first place to look might be the biblical book that bears its name.

“Lament needs some kind of structure,” Florence writes, “a rhythm we can enter into, a holding vessel like the community itself — to gently guide us toward speech and God, when the wilderness of grief has taken both.” Complaining in faith to God is neither whining nor a failure of gratitude. It is a tradition of our spiritual ancestors and a commitment to honesty in our relationship with God.

*Prayer: God, I trust you to listen as I pour myself out in sorrow. (Take a few minutes to journal or speak aloud to God about what is breaking your heart.)*

Ginna

## Day 33: Sunday, Introduction of Acceptance

### Accepting Reality

*“It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil, for he gives sleep to his beloved.” — Psalm 127:2*

Acceptance should not be confused with superficial happiness or the idea that the grieving person is okay with their own or a loved one’s death. According to Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying*, acceptance is a stage that is almost devoid of feeling. The struggle to live has ended for the dying. The fight to keep a loved one alive is surrendered. The reality of death is accepted, and it is time to rest.

In this stage, the dying loved one will need to sleep a lot. Kübler-Ross likens it to the sleep needs of a newborn child, just reversed. Sleeping is not an avoidance of death like in the stage of depression. Rather, the dying loved one is exhausted and weak and needs the rest.

For those grieving the death of a loved one, acceptance is a process of withdrawing energy from the loss, ruminating on it and reliving it, while beginning to invest energy in living again. Acceptance may just mean having more good days than bad, according to Kessler and Kübler-Ross in *On Grief and Grieving*. And during the good days, guilt may arise, the feeling that we are betraying our loved one by enjoying life. This is life’s natural process, though. What’s lost cannot

be replaced. But new relationships, new experiences, new joys, new sorrows await the living. Grief demands its time. Then we need to live again.

*Prayer: God of grace, tend to the needs of the grieving, guiding them to a place of acceptance and rest. Remind us of your comforting presence. Remind us that we are not isolated or alone when the fight for life concludes and we are ready for what comes next. Amen.*

Teri

## Day 34: Monday

### Why Can't I Just ...?

*"But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."—Luke 15:20*

On the very first pitch of a city-league softball game, a ball came sailing my way. I dove like I would have in my teenage years — and it became apparent that the late-20s version of me didn't quite have "it" anymore.

I missed the ball. Instead, my body crashed atop my left hand, immediately crushing multiple bones.

The injury was horribly painful in the moment, but I also figured that – like everything else in my life up to that point – it would heal up like nothing had happened.

But it never did.

Even with physical therapy, scar-reducing cream and my can-do attitude, my left hand remains weaker than it used to be. It cramps when bad weather is coming. And the scars remain visible.

For a while, this outcome proved difficult to accept. Why can't I just have my old hand back?

I imagine many of us have known this lament for things far more significant: *Why can't I just have my [fill in the blank] back?*

A couple years later, I was sitting with my mom when she quietly took my left hand into her hands and rubbed my scars. Somehow, as her hands of love held my scars, something within me released. It was quiet, but it was also deep and real. I experienced within myself a new level of acceptance about my hand, and it felt like hope.

My experience relates to one reason why the father embraces the son on that prodigal path. Our pain, shame and can't-be-undones must know love's embrace before we can live freely and fully into the new chapter before us.

*Prayer: Gracious God, may our every wound, ache and injury know your fresh embrace. Transform them into quiet scars that tell a story of pain — and also of love, healing and redemption. Amen.*

Bobby

## Day 35: Tuesday

### Joy amid Weeping

*"The people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping." — Ezra 3:13*

The book of Ezra recounts how the people of God were invited out of exile and back to Jerusalem, where they were granted permission to rebuild the Temple.

The rebuilding moment is festive. As builders laid the foundation, the priests wore their vestments and played trumpets and cymbals, and all the people gave a great shout of praise!

Well, a lot of them anyway.

Many of the older priests and family heads wept aloud. They were the ones who could recall the grandeur and glory of

Solomon's Temple, and this new one simply did not compare.

And so it was: joy and weeping. A singular, indistinguishable reality.

The truth is that the mixture of joy and weeping is the paradoxical sound of God's people, who are ever participating in God's Kingdom-building work.

If our gatherings are only ever happy, glad and hopeful about how great everything is, then we are denying a critical truth that needs space. Sorrow, grief and brokenness are inevitable parts of our journey.

If our gatherings are only ever sorrowful, down and dejected, filled with complaints about how things will never be like they used to be, then we are denying a critical hope that needs space. Joy, gladness and living hope are central to the journey of faith.

A faithful church fully accepts that joy and weeping are our true sound — at least until Christ comes again. Until then, we give thanks for both the joy and weeping, all of which unfolds upon the sure and eternal foundation of Jesus himself.

*Prayer: God of joy and grief, thank you for making room for it all. When our joy turns superficial, call us back to you and your care for the things that break your heart. When our sorrow turns to cynicism, call us back to you and your care for the things that gladden your heart. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

Bobby

## Day 36: Wednesday

### What's Next?

*"Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." — Isaiah 40:31*

My first track workout in high school was running intervals with a group of older girls who had been running for a few years. At that age, I was shy, anxious and awkward, confident I would fail at everything I tried. I told myself I'd just try to keep up. But my legs surprised me, wanting, needing to go faster. I pulled away from the pack and for the first time in my life took the lead, a pace and a position I didn't realize I had in me.

When you discover you have athletic gifts in a culture that supremely prizes those gifts, your sport can become an obsession, even in the face of slim chances. I dreamed of "going pro," pictured myself waving from the Olympic podium, fell asleep each night beneath posters of my heroes: Florence Griffith Joyner, Joan Benoit Samuelson, Jackie Joyner-Kersey. I prayed, *God, give me the strength to win. God, make my dreams come true.*

When I hit my ceiling in college – no Olympics, no going pro, even my dream of qualifying for nationals was dashed – I grieved the loss of competing in a sport I loved. "Athlete" was not just what I did but who I was.

Grieving this loss of identity, I floundered, until God came calling again.

*Chariots of Fire*, my favorite running movie, includes a scene where Eric Liddel, Scotland's fastest man, explains to his sister Jenny why he needs to compete in the Olympics before following his call to missionary work in China: "I believe God made me for a purpose. For China. But he also made me fast." Liddel's emphasis on "fast" still gives me goosebumps. But now, in my 50s, my running days outrun, I prefer to emphasize the word "also." Yes, God made Liddel fast. But God also called him to missionary work. God claims us and calls us to the "also" of a faithful life—a life where we can grieve and accept the loss of one call because God is already calling us to what is next.

*Prayer: God who claims and calls us by name, help us accept our identity as your beloved people, embracing the meaningful lives to which you lead. Amen.*

Teri



# Day 37: Thursday

## Serenity, Courage, Wisdom

*“If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.”*  
— James 1:5

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

I first learned the Serenity Prayer in the rooms of a 12-step program. It was presented like this: As we seek to turn our wills and our lives over to God, we ask the God of our understanding to help us discern between the things we can change and the things over which we are powerless. As we stop trying to be bigger, more powerful and more important than we are, we find freedom and relief from our addictions and compulsions.

I was surprised, years later, to learn that the prayer was written by Reformed theologian and Christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr in the years leading up to World War II.

This fact caught me off guard because it revealed to me that I had unknowingly limited my acceptance of the things I cannot change to private, personal piety. I can accept that I can't control a loved one's drinking, I can accept the traffic on my way into work. I cannot accept larger systemic evils like racism, colonialism and misogyny.

But this prayer comes from the pen of Niebuhr, who was never one to constrain himself to private and personal piety. Niebuhr's words and works pertain to the public square.

Perhaps as we approach Holy Week, we would do well to be reminded that acceptance is not the same thing as endorsement. What does it mean to accept unjust realities, the crucifixions of our world? Can we accept something even as we actively work to change it?

**Prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.**

Ginna

# Day 38: Friday

## Pursuing What Is Good

*“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”*  
— Romans 8:28

Romans 8:28 is a one of those passages that is read wrong more often than it is read right.

This misreading is largely because of how the King James Version translates this verse: “And we know that all things work together for good for them that love God.” But that's not what the Greek text actually says. The Revised Standard Version gets a little closer: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love” God.

The result is two possible readings of Romans 8:28 that are different, and the difference is not subtle. In the first possible reading, God is in control of all things. If we believe God to be good, we must trust that anything that happens is good and right, even when everything inside us tells us otherwise. In the second possible reading, God does not have control of all events but is persistently at work in the world, bringing light out of darkness and hope out of hopelessness.

The verb translated as “works for” might better be translated “works with” or “cooperates with.” God cooperates in the world alongside every other force of reality. God is the force that is working for good.

God's cooperative action in Romans 8:28 gives us a model for how our own acceptance might look. Perhaps acceptance means saying: *Given that this is reality – that I have lost what I thought I could not live without – I will follow in God's footsteps and pursue what is good. I will cooperate for the sake of good, even in the face of evil.*

Maybe what Romans 8:28 is really trying to say is that God never gives up on hope.

*Prayer: Persistent God, help me to accept and acknowledge reality for what it is without giving up on hope. Allow me to cooperate with you in the struggle for good. Amen.*

Ginna

## Day 39: Saturday

### The Choice to Continue Living

*“Job answered the Lord: . . . ‘I had heard of you by hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.’” — Job 42:1, 5-6*

Everyone loves God’s speech from the whirlwind in Job, chapter 38. It’s beautiful poetry. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” God asks, “when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” (vv. 4, 7).

Everyone loves the speech; no one knows quite what to make of Job’s response in chapter 42. “I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

Is Job’s answer penitent or defiant? Does Job repent *in* dust and ashes, as a sign of humility and mourning? Or does he repent *of* dust and ashes, shaking the dust off his feet at the unjust absurdity of this existence, in which we (and worse, those we love) suffer and die, and neither rhyme nor reason can be found.

Reading through the lens of grief, I wonder if Job’s answer is just plain acceptance. I wonder whether Job is doing the same thing so many of us have done after a loss: choosing to go on living because we have no satisfying alternative. I wonder if Job chooses to continue in relationship with God, not because God has provided a satisfying answer (let’s be honest — God hasn’t!), but because God has listened to Job’s complaint and not run away from the depths of his sorrow and anger.

In terms of theodicy, Job’s is not a satisfying answer. But it’s an honest one.

Remember, acceptance is not endorsement. It is the choice to continue living, even and especially when living feels like the hardest thing to do.

*Prayer: God, help me to keep putting one foot in front of the other and to make the way by walking. Amen.*

Ginna

## Day 40: Sunday, Introduction of Meaning

### Making Meaning

*“See, the home of God is among mortals. . . . he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”—Revelation 21:3-4*

Through his work on the five stages of grief with Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying*, Kessler recognized that people reached an unintended finality, a culmination of the grieving process, in the fifth stage. To the five stages, then, Kessler added a sixth: meaning. In this crucial sixth stage, grief transforms into something else, something that gives the grieving an empowering path forward.

In his book *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, Kessler illustrates this stage with stories like that of Candy Lightner, who founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Lightner’s daughter, Cari, was killed by someone who had been repeatedly stopped for drunk driving. Kessler writes that for Lightner, “nothing was worth the cost of losing her daughter, but the ability to create something good from that death helped give her the sense that her daughter’s life as well as her own had meaning.”

Finding meaning in your grief doesn’t have to happen on a scale as large as Lightner’s founding of MADD. Meaning

can also be found in small moments, experiences that can be transformed with intention and care to honor the person we are grieving. Kessler illustrates this with the story of a woman, Marcy, who was grieving her deceased father. Her father's favorite TV personality was Danny Thomas. One day, buying stamps at the post office, she discovered they sold sheets of Forever stamps with Danny Thomas's image. She bought several sheets and used them to remember her father every time she mailed a letter or paid a bill.

Grief never ends. We will never regain what death has made us lose. We will never stop missing a loved one who has died. But the shape of grief changes. When we find meaning in our grief, that meaning prevents us from getting stuck in our pain and gives us a reason to keep living. It's one more step on the path of healing from the pain of loss.

*Prayer: God, help us transform the emptiness of death into a path of purpose. Help us remember the saints that have gone before us, honoring them with intentionality and a life well lived. Amen.*

Teri

## Day 41: Monday

### Honoring the Gift

*"One generation shall extol your works to another and shall declare your mighty acts."—Psalm 145:4*

At my mom's funeral, numerous people came up to share the exact same sentiment. Oftentimes, these people did not know one another. Even so, the words were the same: "Your mom was such a breath of fresh air."

This experience so many shared about my mom struck me deeply because those were the exact words I had heard congregants tell me about myself over the years of my pastoral ministry. I don't share this as a pat on the back because, honestly, for many years I dismissed the congregants' sentiment, thinking, *Well, yes, I guess a young pastor would bring that kind of energy.*

At the funeral, however, I saw for the first time just how much people notice and value joyful energy as a truly unique gift. And just as powerfully, I saw that this gift was not an accident of my youth. Rather, it was a central trait that God saw fit to pass from my mom to me.

Amid the many seasons of grief over my mom's death, this awareness brought about my deep gratitude. Because now, when I share the breath-of-fresh-air energy through my life and work, I understand it to be a fundamental way in which I honor and pass along the gift of my mom.

When you consider your loved ones who now stand among the great cloud of witnesses, in what ways did the grace of God flow into your life from them?

What gifts of theirs now come through you?

And what does it feel like to honor one of those gifts today?

*Prayer: Gracious God of saints present and eternal, we give you thanks for your faithfulness from one generation to the next. Help us see, claim and live the gifts you have bestowed upon us through those who have gone before us. In Christ's name, Amen.*

Bobby

## Day 42: Tuesday

### Discovering Our Purpose

*"We also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."—Romans 5:3-5*

I have a friend who had never run a marathon until his wife died of epilepsy. Now he runs them to raise funds to find a cure for epilepsy.

Another friend rarely wrote during his adult years, and then his young son experienced a near-death injury that required months of healing and life-altering circumstances. Now this father has a rapidly growing newsletter, in which he writes regularly and vulnerably about the depths of grief, the surprising joys and the ways to move forward when one's entire paradigm for parenting changes.

I myself carry an old wound from my parent's divorce. I no longer blame them, and I even see how things worked out far better for everyone. The grace of it all amazes me.

Even so, the wound of that break inspired my lifelong mission to facilitate healing and connection, in hopes that people might experience deep belonging across and even amid difference and disagreement. Indeed, one of the great joys in life lies in cultivating and facilitating the space where surprising friendships might emerge or renew.

The point is this: Frequently, the space of our greatest pains is where we discover a deep sense of purpose.

Where has the pain been real for you? How is it quite real today?

And how is God calling you amid this pain?

*Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for calling us to follow you. As we experience the hardships, griefs and pains of this lifetime, help us see how you are shaping us through them. Moreover, help us see whether or how this pain calls us into purposeful action for you and your Kingdom's sake. Amen.*

Bobby

## Day 43: Holy Wednesday

### God's Love Is Stronger

*"[He] executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and . . . loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing."  
—Deuteronomy 10:18*

Only twice during the three and a half hours of *Schindler's List* do we glimpse color. The first happens at the outset of the film, as a family lights a candle and offers a Sabbath prayer for peace. Then the candle flickers and goes out. The other time is when Oskar Schindler sees a young girl in a red coat standing outside a Jewish ghetto being cleared by Nazis. Her innocent vulnerability changes Schindler from a man captivated by Nazi power to a man who commits himself to protecting the Jewish people.

The story of *Schindler's List* memorably declares the power of vulnerable love. And it echoes the cross-shaped truth that sits at the heart of our faith, namely, that the love of God is stronger than the worst humanity can do.

And thanks be to God that this love is still on the move.

In 2022, Oliwia Dabrowska was photographed as she stood on the Polish-Ukrainian border helping Ukrainian refugees a month after Russia invaded.

"I can't tell you everything I saw there, because I don't have righth [sic] words in my mind," Dabrowska wrote in a social media post. "Nobody, who have never seen this, can't imagine this nightmare in eyes of those people." At age three, Dabrowska had played the girl wearing the red coat in *Schindler's List*.

When the darkness is real, when the fear rises and the grief grows, perhaps our most essential calling is to give witness that the Gospel is not confined to the past or to cinematic performance. It's a real hope, known most powerfully when it is lived vulnerably among a sea of enemies, children and people simply trying to get home.

*Prayer: Loving God, amid the pains, injustices and deep griefs that this world knows, we thank you for remaining faithful. Show us the surprising places in this world and within our hearts where your love is bringing healing and hope this day. And grant us courage that our lives may witness to your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Bobby



# Day 44: Maundy Thursday

## Forward, in Hope and Faith

*“Do this in remembrance of me.”—1 Corinthians 11:24*

Twelve clergy officiated the funeral of my friend Elizabeth, an Episcopal priest. All wore white albs; I was the only Presbyterian in Geneva black. To serve Communion as one of Elizabeth’s 12, to offer the bread and cup to those touched by her life, reminded me of my call, and ours.

Gary, her husband, made T-shirts for everyone to wear at the service, showing a big picture of my dear friend on the shirt’s front. He chose a photo of Elizabeth, giddy with joy, holding up her second published book, *Irreverent Prayers*.

I took my officiant duties seriously, looking in the eyes of each person who came for Communion, whispering to each the sacrament’s words of life, even in the midst of death. “The bread of life. The cup of salvation.” Only a few precious souls were left in line when I finally recognized my friend. Elizabeth was in each approaching person: her eyes, her smile, her humor, her passion, her love emanated from the front of each person’s tee. It was as if I were serving Elizabeth Communion again and again, her hands outstretched, grasping for the life Christ provides.

When Jesus gathered for one last supper with his chosen 12, he did so to fortify them for the road ahead. Theirs would be a painful road marked with grief. But at the table he reminded them, and us, that we do not travel this road alone. Saints gather at the table with us — those who have finished their journey yet remain here to cheer us on. There is Christ himself, in the bread and the cup, in the Spirit who fills and fortifies us as we partake.

There will be days – perhaps today is one of them – when this journey feels impossible, when death is the loudest force knocking on our door, when no other opportunities feel open to pursue and life itself feels too much to bear.

In such moments Christ calls us to remember.

As I remember Elizabeth, I am called to live and love and serve as she would have, given the choice. As I remember Christ, gathering around the table with his 12, I am called to live with Easter hope. The sun will rise tomorrow. A new day will dawn. This road leads to death, yes, but also to a new life.

*Prayer: Fortify us, dear Jesus, for the final days of this Easter journey. The cross of death looms large. Our anticipatory grief is too painful. Guide us forward in hope and faith, remembering that we are an Easter people. Amen.*

Teri

# Day 45: Good Friday

## Leaning into Grief

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”—Matthew 11:28*

Holy Week is a good time to lean into our grief.

Years ago, my mentor Rob taught me this lesson. A church member was upset with me over something relatively minor. And boy was she livid! She sent me letters, she sent session letters, and she requested a meeting with the clerk of session to air her grievances in person. And on what day did she want to meet with the clerk? Good Friday.

I was relatively new to ministry, and I was naturally concerned. I’d upset her, and now she wanted me gone. What to do?

When I shared the situation with Rob, he smiled and shook his head.

“You’ll learn,” he said, “that over the course of your ministry, during Holy Week, people lean into grief and all its accompanying symptoms: denial, anger, bargaining, etc. You and your parishioners both will be more irritable. Things will feel bigger than they felt last week or will feel next week. This is the effect the liturgical calendar has on us.”

In the years since, what Rob said has proven true. The liturgical calendar brings us in touch with those deep feelings that linger at the back of our consciousness. One of the gifts of Holy Week is the chance to express our sorrow and outrage. This is a week to let our grief show.

What are you grieving, in the back of your mind or heart, that you could let come to the forefront this week? Where might the liturgical calendar be taking you this Good Friday?

Whatever you are feeling, today there is room for it. The God who is both crucified Savior and grieving parent is in that space with you. There is rest for your soul.

*Prayer: God, in this week of larger-than-life emotions, please take me exactly as I am. Help me remember that you've been here too. Amen.*

Ginna

## Day 46: Holy Saturday

### The Uncomfortable Middle Ground

*"May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy."—Psalm 126:5*

The work of grief and the work of faith are both about the sacred practice of remembering.

Psalm 126 remembers a time when God brought blessing to God's people and they rejoiced. "May we who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy," the psalmist writes. The people remember that God has been faithful in the past, so they call upon God to be faithful again.

The people's tears are not just an expression of grief; they are an essential piece of God's formula of salvation. In verse 4, the psalmist calls upon God to send rain down to water the soil. But in verse 5, as Southern Methodist University Professor Mark W. Stamm notes in a "Feasting on the Word" commentary, God waters the soil not with rain but with the very tears of God's weeping people.

These are not polite tears. When the rain comes in the Negeb, it is a downpour. We're talking about unstoppable weeping. It comforts me to know that God can make use of an ugly cry.

God uses our tears themselves to water and nourish the seeds we are planting. That is not the same thing as saying that we suffer just so that those seeds can be watered. Rather, God does not let our tears go to waste. Even our tears are water for the soil of what is to come. Even the worst experience can be composted for the good of the Kingdom. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God of resurrection.

But that's tomorrow. Today is Holy Saturday, the space between death and resurrection. Today, we sit in the uncomfortable middle ground. We hold space for what was lost. We remember how God brought joy out of tears in the past. And we call upon God, trusting that God can – and will – do it again.

*Prayer: God, we weep. Weep with us. Hold us in this space of holy in-between, until the time for joy comes again. Amen.*

Ginna

## Day 47: Easter Sunday

### We Have Life Abundant

*"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."—John 10:10*

On July 4, 2015, Elizabeth Acadia was born and placed in the arms of her father, neurosurgeon and author Paul Kalanithi. Holding his newborn while gripping the hand of his wife, Lucy, Kalanithi contemplated his daughter's future: "a blank page on which I would go on."

Eight months later, Kalanithi died of stage-four lung cancer. He was 37 years old. In his book, *When Breath Becomes Air*, Kalanithi recounted the final years of his life, the way his cancer brought clarity to his values and his sense of purpose as a doctor, spouse, father and friend. His trusted oncologist, Emma, frequently offered him wisdom for his

journey. When a new growth appeared after a long stretch of his cancer being stable, Paul and Lucy are devastated. To this new setback, Emma responds, "This is not the end, or even the beginning of the end. This is just the end of the beginning."

On this Easter Sunday, as we celebrate the resurrection of Christ our Savior, we praise God for the gift of life after death and for the gift of new life that we can find around every corner of our human journey. It is painful, enraging, depressing to face our mortality and that of those we love. But death also illumines the meaning to be found in God's gift of abundant life.

In a final letter to his baby girl, Paul wrote:

When you come to one of the many moments in life where you must give an account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been, and done, and meant to the world, do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man's days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more but rests, satisfied.

This Easter, let us not discount our lives, the joy we offer others, the joy others offer us, the gift we have to live, breathe and believe. We have life. By the grace of God, we have life abundant.

*Prayer: To our God of resurrection, of life-giving abundance, of today's joy and tomorrow's hope, be all honor and glory and thanksgiving and power, now and forevermore. Amen.*

Teri

# Writers

## Grieving Change and Loss:

The unpredictable, non-linear, faith-filled journey toward resurrection



Teri McDowell Ott is the editor and publisher of the *Presbyterian Outlook*.



Dr. Bobby Hulme-Lippert is a leadership coach, keynote speaker and author of *Small Stories about Big Things*. During his two decades in professional ministry, Bobby pastored diverse congregations in Decatur, Georgia, Richmond, Virginia, Georgetown, Texas, and he served in the U.S. Army Chaplaincy. Visit him at [bhl.coach](http://bhl.coach).



Rev. Ginna Bairby is the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Taos, New Mexico. She is a lover of mountains, music and good food, and firmly believes that one can be both a cat and dog person.