

“Navigating Your Journey of Grief and Hope”
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; John 14:1-14

These last couple of years I have volunteered to be a facilitator at a grief share group in Jackson. I am the midst in my third one. At times we have had as many as 14 persons in attendance and as little as 4.

We covenant together to listen to each other's grief stories and accompany each other in silence and listening.

As a pastor, it has been one of my unique privileges over the years to be with people who have experienced deep loss. It takes a lot of courage to attend a grief share class. Sometimes people remain silent for three or four sessions before actually speaking.

When Jesus was in the upper room with his disciples, he knew that soon they would be grieving his leaving them. This is the setting of John 14:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God ; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going. (John 14:1-4 NIV)

Jesus knew his disciples were deeply troubled and in trouble. The Greek verb that John, the singular writer of this Gospel, chose is *tarasso*. The verb *ταρασσω* (*tarasso*) is the opposite of being calm and at peace, and means to be stirred or troubled, both in a physical sense (of water, armies, political situations) and a mental sense (agitated, disturbed). It occurs 17 times in the New Testament.

It reflects the inner turmoil the disciples experienced. They were anxious, worried about their future without Jesus. By telling them to not let their hearts be troubled, Christ was providing a reassurance that transcended their immediate fear. Here in John 14:1, the key verbs ("troubled" and "believe") are in the present tense, which in Greek usually implies continuous or habitual action. Many scholars interpret these as imperatives (commands) indicating a directive to "stop letting your hearts be troubled" and to "keep on believing" or "continue to trust".

Sometimes we can get stuck in a deeper level of sadness, depression, and despair, which can be really harmful. When sadness becomes so prolonged that it takes hold of a person, unhealthy patterns can emerge—like avoiding people, skipping gatherings, or carrying a low-grade, simmering anger. These patterns can develop when sadness goes too far or moves in the wrong direction.

However Jesus gently takes us by the hand and says, “let not your hearts be troubled, dear one”.... It is as if he is saying, “Yes, death is real, but my life in you and the one whom you have lost is more real. Death is no longer a “permanent chronic condition”.

Jesus can identify with the darkness of death, loss and grief. Darkness is never your only companion. Jesus is present with you in the darkness.

Rather than focusing on the sadness that isn't lifting, perhaps your darkness needs “another companion. The presence of Christ reframes sadness—not by removing it, but by inhabiting it with his Holy Spirit:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. (John 14:16-17, NIV)

This is an echo of last week's Psalm 23, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4, NIV)

We can be encouraged that even if the darkness continues in this life it is ultimately defeated. Darkness doesn't get the last word. Light does.

You may not feel calm, but that doesn't mean you aren't safe in His care. Fear and anxiety can narrow your attention to perceived dangers, but Christ shifts your attention to His peace: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27, NIV)

You can be surrounded by people, even people who love you, and still feel lonely. Loneliness isn't about being alone—it's about not feeling meaningfully connected to others. After loss, you may feel like the absence of one person has now hollowed out the presence of everyone else. Thankfully, God meets you in this loneliness: The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

So how do we navigate our journey through grief and hope? This journey is different for each of us.

First, know that grief is never your friend. You can not totally master it. You're walking through the grocery store, focused on your list—milk, bread, maybe your loved one's favorite snack—when suddenly, there it is. That item. That memory. That ache. You stop mid-aisle, heart pounding, throat tightening. Tears well up out of nowhere. That's a grief ambush.

Second, grief ambushes are intense waves of sadness or other emotions that catch you by surprise. They often show up long after you thought the worst of the pain had passed. These emotional "sneak attacks" can hit in everyday moments—while driving, shopping, cooking dinner, or scrolling through photos on your phone. Even years after a loved one's death, an ordinary sound, smell, place, or date can stir up emotions that feel as raw as they did in the first few weeks of your loss. You are not going crazy, and you are not back at square one! This is part of what's normal in grief.

Third, make a grief tool kit—Carry small items that help calm and ground you—like:

- A comforting Bible verse on a card—Psalm 34:18 is a good one, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" or Psalm 31:14-16 "But I trust in you, Lord; I say, "You are my God." My times are in your hands"
- A short prayer you can whisper
- A photo or object that brings peace
- A small notebook to journal your feelings
- A poem that touches your inner being like this one by Judah Halevi...

*Tis a fearful thing
to love what death can touch.
A fearful thing
to love, to hope, to dream, to be –
to be, and oh, to lose.*

*A thing for fools, this,
And a holy thing,
a holy thing
to love what death can touch.*

*For your life has lived in me,
your laugh once lifted me,
your word was gift to me.
To remember this brings painful joy.*

*'Tis a human thing, love,
a holy thing, to love
what death has touched.*

Let me close with this... a few chapters earlier in the Gospel of John chapter 11, even Jesus himself is troubled by death, the death of his friend Lazarus. That same Greek verb *tarasso* is used. When Jesus saw her (Mary, the sister of Lazarus) weeping and the Jews weeping who came with her, he groaned in the spirit and was troubled, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They told him, "Lord, come and see." In the next verse we learn that "Jesus wept."

It is very comforting to know that we have a God who weeps with us in our journeys of grief and hope, isn't it?

Reverend Dr. James D. Hegedus
Mason First Presbyterian Church
May 3, 2026