

Emotionally At Risk

John 11:1-44

Introduction

RESURRECTION MEANS THAT THE WORST THING IS NEVER THE LAST THING.

—Fred Buechner

Today, we continue our series of sermons about people At Risk. This morning, we think about people who are **Emotionally At Risk**—which is all of us. This is not a sermon about the details of emotional problems or their treatment, which is a complicated area of life with so many factors. We will tread humbly and carefully this morning as we point to the True Foundation for peace and stability for ourselves and for the ones we love and want to reach with the love of Jesus—those in and on the margins.

Being **Emotionally at Risk** can be related to a variety of factors, including:

- ▶ Family history of mental health problems
- ▶ Low self-esteem, perfectionism, or stress
- ▶ Emotions unaddressed, unexpressed, or suppressed
- ▶ Social isolation, poverty, or discrimination
- ▶ Traumatic events, such as abuse, neglect, or death
- ▶ News consumption that consumes you—the current state of the world weighs heavily on us all

Being emotionally at risk can show up with signs and symptoms like feeling overwhelmed or stressed, feeling lonely, isolated, hopeless, or depressed. It can lead to:

- ▶ Withdrawing from people and things
- ▶ Engaging in risky or self-destructive behaviors
- ▶ Having thoughts of suicide or murder

I think a general term that captures so much of this is **Anxiety**. Anxiety is apprehension, worry, nervousness, or unease about real or perceived threats regarding people or things. It's rooted in uncertainty. It's pervasive throughout our culture, and I think, ultimately, it's tied to our fear of dying.

There is nothing wrong, in fact, everything is right about seeking help for anxiety—all the way from simple friendships to licensed professionals. I believe, ultimately, God is the answer. Today, let's look at the Big Picture and Firm Foundation on which we can build our emotional health.

Recently, I attended the funeral of two children, ages 1 and 3, who lost their lives at the hands of their mother. I know and love that family well. Walking in and seeing those children and the loving family surrounding them weeping really got to me. That whole horrible situation, I believe, has anxiety at its root—anxiety that grew and finally ended in death for two innocent ones.

On the day of that funeral for those two children—first thing in the morning—I was doing my usual Bible readings. These are pre-selected; I don't choose them. That morning my reading plan opened with this:

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation.

—1 Peter 1:3 NLT

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The family of those children have embraced the Resurrected Jesus and have great expectations for a time and place where what they experienced will never take place. In the meantime, they have the God of peace and the peace of God.

Discussion

It's interesting that on that sad and emotional funeral day, my morning readings went from Peter's proclamation about resurrection and hope to Psalm 42 which includes these words:

*Why am I discouraged?
Why is my heart so sad?*

Psalm 42 wrestles with the reality of living in a painfully anxious world. Sometimes, too many times, the incomprehensible and indescribable happens. It's heart-breaking and soul-shaking and puts us at risk emotionally. From the depths of our anxious pain, we call out to the depths of God.

*Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.*

In the mystery of suffering there is a deep desperate longing—a longing for peace and God's presence.

*As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.*

In the midst of the mystery of it all—life, death, and suffering—we can find and choose faith.

*Why am I discouraged?
Why is my heart so sad?
I will put my hope in God!
I will praise him again—
my Savior and my God!*

Faith—the essence of which trusts God with unanswered questions—leads to hope which for us is rooted in the Resurrection—the Resurrection of Jesus and our resurrection. The God of peace provides us with the peace of God which transcends all understanding.

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One day, Jesus receives word that his good friend Lazarus is very sick. Martha and Mary—the sisters of Lazarus—want Jesus to come to their house in Bethany, believing Jesus can make Lazarus well. They've seen Jesus heal people. He can surely do it for them.

Jesus tells his disciples about the situation, and he says to them, *This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.* Then Jesus does something that is confusing: He doesn't go to see Lazarus immediately; he delays for days. While Jesus delays, Lazarus dies.

Jesus then says something even more confusing. He tells the disciples, *Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. Let's go to him.*

Bethany is less than 2 miles from Jerusalem so there is a large group of people who have made their way to support Martha and Mary. Their brother Lazarus has now been dead for four days. Martha hears that Jesus is getting close, so she goes to the outskirts of the village to meet him. Mary stays at home.

Somewhere on a dusty path just outside of Bethany, Martha and Jesus see each other. I imagine they move quickly to embrace. As Martha holds on to him, Jesus gently pats her on the back. As they let go, Martha, through tears, looks at Jesus and speaks with a painful if not an accusatory tone.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

—John 11:21-26 NIV

Martha says, "Yes, I believe, and I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God." After Martha confesses, she goes back home to find Mary, her little sister, telling her that Jesus is nearby and asking to see her. Mary gets up and quickly makes her way to Jesus. He's still in the same place just outside the village.

Mary sees Jesus, falls at his feet, and says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

—John 11:33-37 NIV

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

—John 11:38-40 NIV

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

—John 11:41-44 NIV

Jesus wept.

Why? Doesn't he know that in a matter of moments, there is going to be a celebration of resurrected life—a party like no other? Lazarus is going to walk out of that tomb to live a new life! It's going to be amazing!

Yet, on this side on that, Jesus weeps. He is deeply moved in spirit. He's troubled; he groans. Why? It's because he identifies with our suffering. He enters our emotions. He hurts with Martha and Mary; he weeps with them. He's a sympathizing, empathizing Savior.

There's probably more to his tears. A lot of people believe these are also tears of anger. Is Jesus angry at death and the problems and the grief that it brings? Is Jesus angry at how death and suffering distort the goodness of creation and mangle the lives of humans? I think so.

I think it's all there. And to me, that's so encouraging. Jesus understands our pain, suffering, grief, and anxiety related to this life and to death. And he does something about it! He takes the promise of future resurrection and makes it available in the present through faith in him. Note his words from John 5:

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

The resurrection of Lazarus is an expression of the new reality that Jesus brings and offers to those who believe. Jesus is performing his words of John 5 and the promise of eternal life beginning now. Jesus is bringing the future into the present.

The resurrection of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of the Resurrection of Jesus where Jesus defeats death, both in the future and in the present. Death has no power to separate a person from God, and so Jesus can say, that in a sense, his followers do not die. Eternal life begins now, and physical death is reduced to a transition.

“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

If we believe this—and make no mistake, it’s full of mystery—then we have a platform accessed by faith on which to stand, and from that platform, we can deal with anxiety and an anxious world. The platform on which we stand is found inside an Empty Tomb. It’s rooted in the Resurrection.

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So, you may be wondering how this works in “the real world.” I believe a practical expression of application is found in Philippians 4:6-9 NLT.

Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.

These are promises rooted in Resurrection! These are promises realized from the Empty Tomb! We have the God of peace inviting us to speak to him about our anxiety. He promises to listen as we turn our cares into prayers. He promises to guard our hearts and minds as we seek to control our thoughts. The God of peace will provide the peace of God.

Conclusion

None of this is easy. But I truly believe—empowered by God’s Spirit—we can live peaceful and peace-filled lives. We can be a non-anxious presence in this anxious world. The key, I believe, is standing in the Empty Tomb and knowing that we have the same power living within us that raised Lazarus from the dead and raised Jesus from the dead. It is the power that allows us to move from death to eternal life even in this life.

I certainly have to battle anxious thoughts daily like everyone else. While I am not always successful, I have found that controlling my thoughts—choosing what I think about, choosing what I consume in news and music—makes a huge difference. It allows the God of peace to give me the peace of God. It’s even true during the worst of times. From the Empty Tomb, I remember:

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Communion

As we prepare to commune with Christ and with each other, let's take to heart these words of Hebrews 2. They tell us a lot of things, but the main things are these:

1. Jesus died to take away our sins. It was a terrible, horrible death that demonstrates just how much God loves us. Of course, following death, there was Resurrection.
2. We have a Savior who has identified with us. He understands our pain, our suffering, our grief and everything else about being human.

Listen carefully.

Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.

We also know that the Son did not come to help angels; he came to help the descendants of Abraham. Therefore, it was necessary for him to be made in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. Then he could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people. Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested.

—Hebrews 2:14-18 NLT