

# A Lenten Journey Through Grief

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If there was ever a season designed to help us move through grief after a loved one's death, that season would be Lent. Just like the stages of grief we all must go through, Lent involves a series of passages: From darkness to light, loss to gain, fear to trust, sorrow to joy, and ultimately from death to life.

## WORKING YOUR WAY THROUGH

Grief is not easy in any season of the year nor of life. Even with a death that is expected, peaceful, filled with reconciliations and heartfelt good-byes, there is always a sense of loss and sorrow. In fact, the deeper and wider our love, the deeper and wider our grief.

Thankfully, Lent is a season that is deep and wide with passages that can help us walk through our grief. We'll look more closely at some of those passages and see how they help us move through this time of bereavement.

## MOVING FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

Lent begins in ashes, usually in the dead of winter for those in the northern hemisphere. Days are short and nights are long and cold. We are reminded of our mortality on Ash Wednesday and encouraged to respond in humility to our own incompleteness. In a similar way, a loved one's death confronts us with our own mortality and the fleeting nature of our lives.

Perhaps this might cause us sorrow, even depression. But many spiritual guides have pointed out that it is the fleeting nature of life that makes it so precious. A flower in bloom is beautiful in part because we know its beauty is passing – lush today and faded tomorrow.

Jesus teaches this lesson in his famous words on the beautifully adorned lilies of the field, here one day and thrown into the fire next (Matthew 6:25-30). Death is the ultimate reminder of our impermanence. But along with Ash Wednesday, Lent holds the promise of resurrection, the Easter Sunday promise.

While it may seem far away as Lent begins, and far removed from the depths of grief, the hope and the faith that there is more than this earthly life, that death does not have the final word, does bring light into our darkness as we move through this season. Look toward the light and hold on in hope!

## MOVING FROM LOSS TO GAIN

Right now you may find yourself in a "Good Friday moment" with your grief – feeling nothing but the desolation of your loss. Perhaps you feel abandoned, left behind, lost without your loved one. You may feel the pain of knowing that in this life, you will no longer be able to enjoy a simple conversation or a shared laugh with your loved one.

Even relationships that were problematic or unpleasant in life bring grief at death. There is the sense of not having been reconciled, perhaps of having said or done some things we now regret.

Lent helps us channel our sense of loss, because we can share our experiences of loss with others. We hear the Good Friday stories of how the disciples lost their leader and teacher as he was nailed to the cross, and how Mary grieved for her fallen son.

But on Easter Sunday, Jesus' followers gained a savior. And you will find in every religious tradition stories of redemption and hope, of life after death, of God's embracing love in which all are held. We can trust confidently that nothing and no one is ever lost, all will remain in the heart and hands of God. We should also remember that the measure of our loss is the measure of our love, the measure of our pain is also the measure of our gain, in the sense that our grief reveals to us the many ways our life has

been blessed by the gifts and presence of our loved one. Grief affirms not only what is lost but also what remains – the love, the gratitude, the memories, and the hopes.

#### MOVING FROM FEAR TO TRUST

So many fears can arise during a time of deep grief. Perhaps your sleep is troubled as you wonder how to carry on without your loved one in your life. You may fear you will never be able to move beyond this great loss and find meaning and happiness again. Perhaps the death has left you with economic debts or an uncertain financial future. Or you simply find the prospect of being alone terrifying.

Even the prominent Christian author, C.S. Lewis felt this fear.. He wrote in his classic, *A Grief Observed*, “No one ever told me that felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness...”

When you feel caught in the grip of fear or anxiety because of your loved one’s death, remember that Jesus too had his night of great fear and anxiety, his night of anguish in the garden of Gethsemane. Perhaps remembering his response – entrusting himself completely to God’s care – can show you the path to take with your own fear.

You might also make it a practice each day of Lent to “give up” your fear, in the sense of turning it over to God’s care. Let fear be what you give up this year for Lent!

#### MOVING FROM SORROW TO JOY

In the midst of a sorrowful season, joy may seem out of place, or at least premature. Yet many Christian churches celebrate joy the fourth Sunday of Lent – Gaudete Sunday – from the Latin word for “rejoice.” Faith reminds us that joy is available even in the midst of our grief and loss because in God’s hands, nothing and no one is ever lost. Separated from us for a time yes, but not lost.

Perhaps even the thought of smiling, much less laughing or rejoicing, seems inappropriate, even disrespectful at this time of grief, but pause to consider what your loved one would want for you. Would they not wish happiness, peace, a life with meaning and purpose and direction? Our ability to be at peace and to learn to enjoy life again despite our great loss is a testament to our faith and trust. It is an affirmation that at bottom, despite its pains and sorrows, life is indeed good.

Turn to those friends and loved ones who can bring out the best in you at this difficult time. There is no need to suffer alone. As the saying goes, a sorrow shared is a sorrow halved, a joy shared is a joy doubled. Take your cue from the wisdom of Gaudete Sunday – you can smile and laugh, even in the midst of tear. It is healthy and it is healing.

#### TAKE HEART

Ultimately, Lent affirms both our human passage from life to death and our immortal passage from death to life in the Divine presence. Just as each winter we trust in the promise of another spring each Ash Wednesday we know that “from dust to dust” is not the end of the story.

When we walk through this season with the support of loved ones, spiritual resources to nourish us, and an abiding trust in the goodness of God, we will indeed reach our own Easter Sunday of healing and wholeness. Though we may start our season of grief in ashes, it will be completed by our rising to new life.