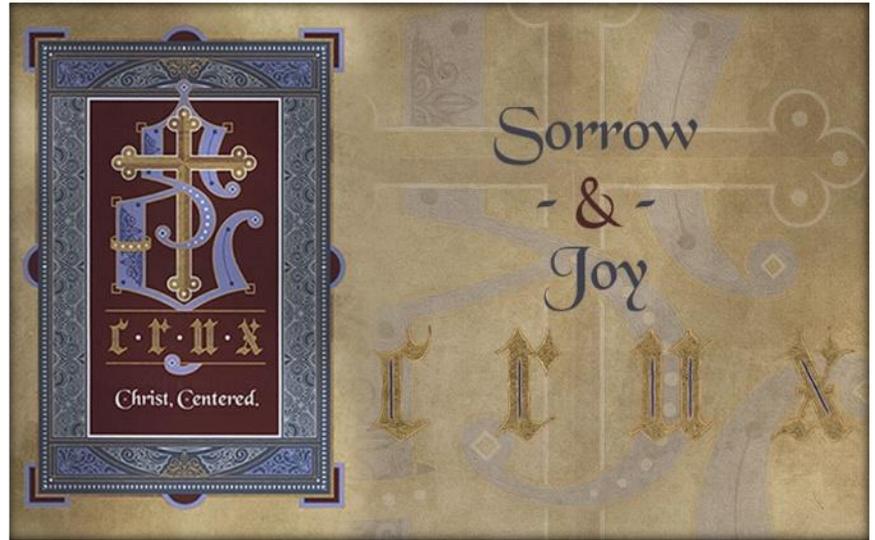


“Sorrow & Joy”

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8; John 11:32–43

Suffer in Christ?

If you do an internet search for images of the Christian Faith, you will find a long list of keywords and, hence, images that nearly all are about victory, triumph, joy, happiness, peace, and so on. Almost none are about suffering, pain, loss, or even sin. It might be surprising, but the search reflects a problem in many circles of present-day American Christianity. For too many, it is all about the joy, never the sorrow. It is as if coming to faith in Jesus means that one would be spared hurt and loss and pain.



Rick Warren founded a huge church in California and authored the best-selling book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Here is part of what he had to say on the subject:

This past year has been the greatest year of my life but also the toughest, with my wife, Kay, getting cancer. I used to think that life was hills and valleys - you go through a dark time, then you got to the mountaintop, back and forth. I don't believe that anymore. Rather than life being hills and valleys, I believe that it's kind of like two rails on a railroad track, and at all times you have something good and something bad in your life. No matter how good things are in your life, there is always something bad that needs to be worked on. And no matter how bad things are in your life, there is always something good you can thank God for. You can focus on your purposes, or . . . you can focus on your problems. If you focus on your problems, you're going into self-centeredness, which is “my problem, my issues, my pain.” But one of the easiest ways to get rid of pain is to get your focus off yourself and onto God and others. We discovered quickly that in spite of the prayers of hundreds of thousands of people, God was not going to heal Kay or make it easy for her. It has been very difficult for her, and yet God has strengthened her character, given her a ministry of helping other people, given her a testimony, drawn her closer to Him and to people.

Joy and sorrow – two tracks that run through our lives, even as believers. If Jesus suffered, why should we think we would be spared the difficulties of this world? Paul wore his sufferings like a badge of honor that bound him ever tighter to his Lord. The writer of *Ecclesiastes* (and the *Byrds*) gets it right. There are seasons in our lives. Some long, some short. And often, they seem to happen all at the same time—a bit like the four seasons in Tennessee. Jesus was spared none of this.

The story of Lazarus

Jesus and his disciples have gone to the eastern side of the Jordan River. It is about four days from the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, in Bethany, a town very near Jerusalem. The family is very close to Jesus and he loved them.

Jesus receives a message from the sisters that Lazarus has fallen seriously ill. When Jesus gets the message, he says to those around him that Lazarus will not die. This event too, will work for the glorification of God and God's son.

Jesus does not yet leave for Bethany and a couple of days later he learns, by seemingly supernatural insight, that Lazarus has died. But Jesus tells his disciples that they can set out for Bethany so that Jesus can “awaken” Lazarus. It will be a journey of several days.¹

When they arrive, Jesus is met by Martha, who expresses her regret that Jesus had not been there when her brother had died, for she believes that Jesus would have cured him and, even now, she places her hope in Jesus and the unique relationship he has with the Father.

When Jesus says to her, “Your brother will rise again,” Martha naturally assumes that Jesus is speaking of the great resurrection of the dead that will happen when the Day of the Lord arrives. But then Jesus takes her to a place she never would have suspected, saying to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (v. 25-26). When he asks her if she really does have faith in him, she confesses her confidence that Jesus is “Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

When Jesus makes this astounding claim, “I am the resurrection and the life,” he is making three points. First, this is one of seven “I am” statements in John’s gospel. By invoking the name of God given to Moses at the burning bush, “I am,” Jesus is making a dramatic claim as to his true identity. In the next two claims (in verses 25b and 26a) Jesus makes clear that he isn’t using “resurrection” and “life” as synonyms for emphasis. Gail O’Day helps us to see this “hinge point,” as she calls it. “Resurrection” and “life” refer to the two phrases that immediately follow in 25b and 26a:

the one who believes in me and dies → yet lives [resurrection]

the one who lives and believes in me → never dies [life]

The first phrase speaks to our new life after our death (the future). The second phrase speaks to our life in Christ now.

Dead man walking

As Jesus speaks to Martha, he spends time comforting Mary and all those who loved Lazarus. They weep and Jesus weeps as they come to the tomb where Lazarus body was laid out, as was the Jewish burial custom at the time.²

Jesus then asks that the round stone blocking the entrance to the tomb be rolled away. Martha, the ever-practical sister, points out that the odor of Lazarus’ decaying body will be awful. He has been dead four days, after all. But Jesus reminds her to have faith; she is about to behold the glory of God.

Jesus then raises his voice to the Father and prays aloud so that all those gathered around can hear. Then, in the still silence, Jesus yells out “Lazarus, come out!”

And he did...

¹ The four days is important. We know, from a rabbinical commentary called *Leviticus Rabbah*, that by a slightly later date, there was a rabbinic belief that after a person seemed dead to all observers, the soul hovered around for three days, waiting to depart until decomposition began. At that point, death was certain. If this was a belief held by any Jews in Jesus’ day or even amongst John’s readers, the four days makes it clear that Lazarus is dead. Given the difficulties of ascertaining genuine death in the ancient world, this is not as crazy a way to think about it as it might seem.

² The body would be laid in a tomb, wrapped in burial cloths, and left until the flesh had decomposed, leaving only the bones. The family would then collect the bones and put them in an ossuary, a bone box.

Resurrected or Resuscitated?

Sometimes people mistakenly think of Jesus' resurrection as merely some sort of resuscitation. But it was not. Jesus was not brought back from death to life but passed through death to life-after-death and then to the newly embodied life *after* life-after-death.

But when Jesus brought Lazarus back to life (John 11), it was a "resuscitation," not a resurrection. Lazarus was brought back to life as he had known it and went on to die just like everyone else. In contrast, Jesus was not restored to the life and to the body he had known before his death. Rather, Jesus passed through death to new life and a new physicality. Jesus no longer had a "soulish" body (*soma psychikon* in the original Greek), such as we all do now, but a "Spirit-animated body" (*soma pneumatikon*, see 1 Cor 15:44), just as we all will one day.

Here is an analogy that might help. Lazarus' raising was akin to someone who dies on the operating table but then is brought back to life. That person has not defeated death, just merely been brought back and will have to face death a second time. Jesus, on the other hand, dies on the cross, goes from death to a life-after-death and, finally, to the "life after life-after-death" of resurrection. There would be no going back for Jesus. Jesus' resurrection represented a victory over death that Lazarus' resuscitation did not.

In their stories about the risen Christ, the Gospel writers do not try to explain all this, they simply tell what happened. Jesus was recognizable, though his appearance was slightly altered. He ate but seemed to just appear inside a locked and unopened door. When we recite the Apostles Creed, proclaiming the "resurrection of the body," we look forward to the day when we too, like Jesus, will receive a transformed and glorified, yet material, body.

The resuscitation of Lazarus—bringing him back to life—was a sign pointing to Jesus' resurrection, but only that and no more. Lazarus' raising was a powerful witness to the power and the glory of God, but its deeper meaning lies in what lay ahead, Jesus' resurrection and the arrival of God's kingdom. The accompanying text box will help you see that Lazarus was only resuscitated, not resurrected.

It is Jesus who *is* the resurrection and the life, the embodiment of the promise that though we will die, we will yet live, that our death will not be our end. This is the promise that one day we will be resurrected just as Jesus was resurrected. We affirm this promise every time we recite the Apostles' Creed, asserting our belief in "the resurrection of the body."

Thus, the sufferings and sorrow of this world have to be lived in the full knowledge that even death can never hold us, the one who lives and believes in Jesus will never truly die. We are not spared pain, Jesus wasn't. But pain and loss and death will not win. Jesus wins!

Daily Bible Readings *More on sorrow and joy*

Monday	Ruth 1:1-18	Naomi loses everything but gains Ruth's love.
Tuesday	1 Samuel 18:1-16	Even as Jonathan and David make a covenant of deep friendship, Saul tries to kill David.
Wednesday	1 Kings 18:20-19:10	Elijah triumphs at Mt. Carmel but then has to flee for his life and is nearly broken.
Thursday	2 Kings 22	The Book of the Law is found but that also means it had been lost.
Friday	Luke 2:21-38	Mary brings her baby to be redeemed and is told that one day a sword would pierce her soul.
Saturday	2 Corinthians 11:16-33	Paul recounts his many sufferings in the service of Christ.