

Lament, the Prelude to Resurrection

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[0 : 00] Hello, my name is Anthony. I have gotten to serve as one of the pastors here at the table for three years. So if we haven't met yet, hello, it's good to see you.

Let me get a couple things out of the way before we get to the sermon proper. So number one, can we give it up for our tech and worship and experience and for some questions?

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. I'm really grateful that they've been incredibly accommodating and kind and helpful. So thank you to Capital City for their hospitality.

We'll peel back the curtain a little bit and say we're in conversation with like, should we keep meeting here, but we don't have anything to announce. Yeah, okay.

[1 : 16] Everybody in favor. No, no, no, no, no. Actually, but if you do have feedback, if there are things that you notice or observe, then please, you can email myself or Pastor Tanetta, anthony at thetablechurch.org or tanetta at thetablechurch.org and let us know some of your thoughts and feelings on that.

But yes, don't forget, we're back downtown 5 o'clock next week. Okay, one more sort of sermon before the sermon. Jesus has this parable about some day workers.

And they go and they meet like the master of the project. And the master of the project hires some people at like 6 in the morning. And then he hires some people at noon.

And then he hires some people at like 4 o'clock, 5 o'clock, like an hour before the workday ends.

And then they all come to the master of the project. And the person pays them all the same.

And some of the folks who are there at like 6 a.m. are like, why did the person who works one hour get paid the same amount as the person who worked 12 hours? And the master says like, look, did you not agree to this?

[2 : 24] I am also mercy to who I show mercy to. And so I bring this up on a day like today because I know, I know, a little bit of an elephant in the room. There are some folks that they show up Christmas, Easter, that's it.

And that's in the entirety of their church experience. But I want you to know that I and I believe God is just as glad that you're here as the person who shows up every week. That you are just as invited into the presence of God.

That there is nothing less than about you. That if there is just one day a year that you make it into a church service and that one day is enough, God is with you. God is for you. All right? All right.

All right. Sorry for the sermon. For the sermon here now is the sermon. Some of you know a bit of my life story, but I'm going to retell some of it.

When I was seven years old, my biological mother, Toni, and I were on a drive to Cairo, Egypt. We lived in northern Indiana, and my biological mother suffered from mental illness, paranoia, schizophrenia, and decided one day that she was going to move to Cairo, Egypt to become a nurse.

[3 : 34] Why? I do not know. That's how mental illness works sometimes. And so we packed up everything we had into a recently inherited car from a recently dead grandmother and started this drive all the way out to Cairo, Egypt.

And we went up through Highway 1 up the western coast of Canada, ended up in Seward, Alaska, which is this coastal town on the southern shores of Alaska.

And we were unable to make it any further because, if you don't know, there's a bit of an ocean between here and the rest of the world. And so we were living out of a car.

My biological mom, Toni, had made some mistakes about how to care for that car, and that car died. And that car gets impounded with everything that we own in it. So we end up at this little small town city hall, and they observe what's going on. There's me, seven years old. I'm very sort of emaciated and small.

[4 : 31] There's my mom, who is acting erratically and clearly, you know, literally out of her mind. And so I have this very clear memory of standing there in this room and an older woman coming and asking for me by name and me being put into a car with a brand new foster family.

That being the last time I ever saw my biological mom. Now, I knew, I had some inklings anyway, that my biological mom was sick and that there were some things wrong with her.

But she was also my mom. And so that day was one of the worst days of my life. One of my worst days sitting in a car, sobbing, going home with strangers.

Like the one thing you tell a kid never to do, right? And there I was, and this was supposed to be my new life and my new reality. Now, I lived with this foster family up in Alaska for about a month.

And they realized that there were clearly some things wrong with me as well. I would walk a few paces and have to squat down and sort of pant for breath. And my fingertips would turn blue. And they took me to Anchorage and I'd get some tests done.

[5 : 39] And they realized that I have a congenital heart condition that most kids have repaired by the time they're one, two at max. And by the time that you're seven, most kids who have this congenital heart condition have died already if it's not repaired.

Something called tetralogy of flow. Tetralogy meaning four. Four big problems with my heart which were causing my body not to get the oxygen that it needed. So they do these scans.

They realize that I am living way past my expected lifetime for this particular heart condition that's not been repaired. And so they fly me down to live with a new family, my blood relatives in Indianapolis, to have heart surgery.

Now I tell all of this story which is just a small bit of my own story because what it means is that the worst moment of my life became the doorway to my life literally being saved.

The worst moment of my life being taken away from my biological mother, the one caretaker I had ever known, even though she was sick, even though she was ill. She was the one person who had cared for me from birth through seven years old.

[6 : 38] She was my mom and I was basically ripped out of her arms. Worst day of my life was the thing that led to my life being saved. Because if I had lived with her much longer, that heart would have eventually given out.

Over the past six weeks, we've been in a series about lament. It's been the season of Lent, these 46 days that lead up to Easter. And Lent in the church calendar is a season where we recall our mortality.

It's a season where we recall our need for a savior. That there is something broken and bent in the world and it seems to have affected ourselves as well.

And so we've been studying the book of Lamentations. This really, really interesting book written by a grieving community that lost their city and their nation after the destruction of Jerusalem.

And it's this raw, honest book where God doesn't speak. And the poets and the prophets who write these five lament songs and lamentations, they are brutally honest about how they feel failed by God, abandoned by God, as if God, God's self, was their abuser.

[7 : 53] It's a raw, honest account of what grief and what a really, really bad day can look like. Now, as a pastor, I've learned over the years, and it's taken me, unfortunately, some time to learn this, that whenever you get a group of people together this size and any given Sunday, there's going to be somebody in here who's also having one of the worst days of their lives.

And it's a hard thing to remember because it's Easter. We're supposed to be celebratory and happy, and we raise our hands and we clap and we cheer. And that's all good because some of us in here are having a great day. But in any given room, on any given Sunday, somebody here is ready to write their own book of lamentations.

And so we get all of these jumbled up emotions in one room, one place together. It's like a clown showing up at a funeral, right? Or the opposite.

It's like a griever, a public lamenter showing up to a kid's birthday party. Woe to you, oh little Timmy. Like, no. That's what a Sunday can feel like to any given person on any particular week.

Now, here's a lie I think we've been told about lament and grief and sadness. It's that the more sad, the angrier, the more filled with doubt you are, the further away from God you must be.

[9 : 19] That sadness or grief or despair or depression or anger, that those are barriers to you encountering the divine. That if you would just take care of all those negative emotions, you get those, you know, kind of whipped in the shape.

Find a therapist, you know, find some affirmative thinking. Engage in some positive thoughts. If you could just get that taken care of, please. Well, then your encounter with God can begin.

And I don't think anything can be further from the truth. This church, the table church, is filled with folks who have been hurt and wounded and neglected and abused.

They've had life happen to them where it's nobody's particular fault. It's just the fallenness of our world crashing into their lives. And they've had people happen to them where it is somebody's fault and there is somebody to blame.

And they've been made a victim of someone else's hatred. And we can name all of those things, be it patriarchy or racism, homophobia and transphobia. Christian nationalism and xenophobia.

[10 : 24] All of the things that push people away. All the ways that men are told that they have to be men and push their emotions down. All the ways that women are told that they have to be women and they have to perform a certain way for the world.

All the ways that LGBTQ people have been told that, yeah, you don't actually belong here. Like, you can participate, you can give, but please don't lead us, don't teach us. All of those different ways show up and they hurt and they wound.

And I know that it's a lie that the more hurt, wounded, sad, depressed, angrier you are, the further you are away from God.

I know that's a lie because I have encountered God at this church. I've encountered some really sad, angry, hurt people. And it's through their lives that I have met the divine.

I have met God. Now, I'm going to take a look at some of the resurrection stories that happened on Easter many, many years ago. And you see examples of this sort of thing, of people's hard emotions not being a barrier to their encounter with God, but rather being a doorway to encountering the divine.

[11 : 32] So, take a look at chapter 28. You see, sorry, Matthew chapter 28. Matthew chapter 28 says, After the Sabbath, Saturday, at dawn on the first day of the week, Sunday, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

And so, the resurrection stories don't begin with like Jesus in the tomb waking up and being like, Booyah, suckers. It begins with the women of Jesus' day doing the task that women were assigned, which was to go and care for the dead body that had been laid in the tomb.

It begins with the story of people going to a grave, of confronting their grief head on. They're not going expecting a resurrected Savior.

They don't know the end of the story. They're going expecting a dead body. And then, when they're told that Jesus is gone, and keep reading, Their response, yes, there's some joy, but there's also some fear.

And Mark chapter 16 actually puts us a little bit more bluntly. You're going to be flipping through a lot of scripture today, just FYI. Mark chapter 16 puts it like this. Don't be alarmed.

[13 : 06] The angel said, You're looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is risen. Verse 8, The women, trembling and bewildered, went out, fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were terrified. That's how their story starts.

Now, Luke 24, going flipping again, continues the story. They came back from the tomb. They told these things to the eleven and to all the others.

And it tells us who it was. There was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary, the mother of James, and the others with him who told this to the apostles. And listen to the apostles, the men's reaction.

Verse 11, But they did not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Never happens today, does it? So listen to how these stories all begin. Going to a tomb to confront what they assume is going to be a dead body, doing the work of grief and public lament.

They hear the story that Jesus has resurrected. They're afraid. They're in awe. They're in wonder.

They go back to tell the men who are walked away in a room somewhere, not doing the work. And the men's response is like, Yeah, but you're women.

[14 : 15] We don't believe you. That's nonsense. These are all the preludes to what's going to be an encounter with the divine. In every one of these stories, the part that I didn't read, it's then that Jesus shows up.

Oh, you're doing the work of grief. It's then that Jesus shows up. Oh, you don't believe. You're filled with doubt. It's then that Jesus shows up. Oh, you're calling these women nonsensical. Oh, it's then that Jesus shows up.

Now, further in Luke 24, we get this story. On the same day, two disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, which is about a seven-mile walk from Jerusalem.

Now, it takes a while to walk seven miles. Anybody know how long? I didn't do the math. I don't know. About four hours. Thank you. That's like a voice of experience there. Okay. So about a four-hour walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

They were talking with each other about everything that had happened, and as they walked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along them, but they were kept from recognizing Jesus. And so Jesus asked, what are you talking about as you walk along?

[15 : 23] They stopped walking, and their faces were downcast, which is the biblical way of saying they look really sad. And so then Jesus walks with them.

And begins to explain the scriptures to them. Well, don't you know that these are the things that must happen to the Son of Man and the Son of God? Which means that Jesus spends the majority of his first day resurrected with a couple sad people, a couple people filled with doubt.

Jesus spends the majority of his time, Resurrection Sunday, number one, first annual, with two disciples who didn't understand what was happening.

Their faces were downcast, and they were filled with doubt. That's who Jesus spends his time with. Flipping ahead once more into John chapter 20.

Verse one, So she runs back.

[16 : 37] She comes running to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple, who we believe is John, the one Jesus loved, and said, they've taken the Lord out of the tomb, we don't know where they put him. And so Peter and John, they have this foot race to the tomb, and John, the beloved disciple, who's really petty, describes how he got there first.

You can read that another time. We'll skip ahead to verse 11. Now Mary stood outside the tomb, crying. Now she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb.

She saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head, and the other at the foot. I'll pause just a second for my folks in my Ezekiel class and for those who know something about the Old Testament.

In the Holy of Holy place, in the temple, you had the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant, on top of it, you had two cherubim, two angels with long wings over the center of the Ark, where it is believed that the divine presence found its very center.

And here, John is describing a similar thing, where you have two angels sitting at head and foot where Jesus' body was, where in the middle was the very divine presence of God. And they asked her, Woman, why are you crying?

[17 : 55] They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they have put him. At this, she turned around and she saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't realize yet that it was Jesus. Notice the progression of the story.

She goes to the tomb. She's doing the work of grief. She has no prior belief that there's going to be a resurrected Savior there. It is just grief that drives her to the tomb.

She sees that it's empty and she stands outside the tomb crying. And then she turns around and sees Jesus. This right here, I believe, is the core of the transcendent, divine experience of meeting God.

How many of us have stood at tombs and wept? Sometimes literal tombs, literal graves where we have lost loved ones too early or maybe what the world calls just the right time, but either way, we stand at graves and we weep.

It's right there when we turn around that we might meet Jesus. Those might be some metaphorical tombs, dreams that we have said goodbye to and laid to rest, relationships that we thought were going to look a certain way and then are no more.

[19 : 11] Tombs of what we thought our lives would look like and are now gone and we stand outside the tomb and weep. And the lie is that, well, that's a lack of faith.

That's doubt. That's fear. That's dread. That's anxiety. That's depression. That's going to drive you away from God. No, it's right. She turns around and sees Jesus.

It is in those hard moments where I believe that we can meet with God. She didn't yet recognize him.

And he, Jesus, asked Mary, woman, this is a term of respect, woman, why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for? And thinking that Jesus was the gardener.

Pause there for just a second. Gardeners were among the poorest of the poor. If you had some means, you probably had your own farm, you had the ability to provide for yourself. Maybe you had a business like Peter and Andrew and John and James were fishermen and so they could provide for themselves that way.

[20 : 18] So you had merchants, you had farmers, and then you had gardeners, which means they did not have their own land. They tended for the land of others. And so I think there's something to pay attention to, a different sermon for a different day, that Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener.

There's something there about the way that Jesus comes back. Isn't to go to Caesar's palace and gamble? No, wrong Caesar's palace. Isn't, isn't to go to Pontius Pilate.

Isn't to go to the high priest. Isn't to go and make like a vindication tour. It's rather to put her around in a garden and be mistaken for the poorest of the poor and meet a grieving woman there.

Thinking that Jesus was the gardener, Mary said, Sir, if you've carried him away, just tell me where you've put him and I'll get him. And Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, which means it's a term of endearment, my teacher.

Jesus has said earlier in the book of John, those who know me know my voice and all Jesus has to say is her name and she knows it's him.

[21 : 41] It's in her grief, it's in her lack of understanding, even in her lack of even knowing that God is there. She listens to the voice that calls her by name and then she knows.

I believe that it's in some of our dark moments, our hard moments, those hard emotions where we can find God. Now, I don't mean this metaphorically.

Imagine adding the phrase, like metaphorically speaking, to like important things that you said. I was thinking about this, like the tale of my wife Emily and I's relationship.

The first time we say we love each other, Emily, I love you, metaphorically speaking. It wouldn't work as well, right?

To have and to hold, richer and poorer, till death do us part, I make these vows to you, metaphorically speaking. I tell my kids, Wesley, Audrey, I love you, I want to protect you, I would die for you.

[22 : 50] So, metaphorically speaking. Now, I know in this room we've got a variety of feelings about the resurrection, about what actually happened at a tomb, you know, 2,000 some years ago.

I understand that there's a variety of feelings on that. And some of us do believe in something really happened, that the grave was really empty and that people really saw Jesus and some of us are not so sure about that.

And so, I can't do anything about that, like I don't have the security camera footage, nobody does. What I can tell you is that I'm pretty darn sure that what the first generations of Christians believed is that they were not talking about a metaphor.

The first generations of Christians did not die for a metaphor. They didn't die for a metaphorical resurrection. They didn't die for a mass hallucination. They died because they believed that they had met the living God.

And so, this sermon is not about a metaphor. In your darkest and deepest moments, you can meet the divine metaphorically speaking. That is not what I'm saying. I believe that even in our dark and deep, sad, hard, angry, doubting moments, that we can really meet Jesus.

[24 : 06] That God will show up in our lives and make us new and make things new again. And maybe it won't be today and maybe it won't be tomorrow, but that is what we put our hope on.

I believe that we can really meet Jesus, that we can really have an encounter with God, that our dead loved ones really will rise again, that the ashes and the shambles of our life really will be put back together again.

The resurrection of hope is more than just a fairy tale that we can have a little, you know, a little tear rolled down our eyes about, but rather that the resurrection is the big bang of the new creation which is making its way across the cosmos and setting people free.

And I know that's true because I've seen some of you all become free because of Jesus. So how do we respond to a story like this?

Because it's easy to then close the book and be like, well, that was great for Mary. But what about me? And so I think the response is to one, we've got to get comfy in our uncomfy feelings.

[25 : 20] When we try to push them away, when we try to have a life which is all about getting rid of the negativity and not really admitting that we're angry or not really admitting that we're sad or not really admitting that we're grieving, I think we're short-circuiting our ability to meet with God.

So that's the first step. We've got to get comfy with our uncomfy feelings. And secondly, we've got to show up in places where we think God might be. Which, to be clear, isn't necessarily a church service in a really nice auditorium.

It may be alongside the grieving in the graveyard. It may be alongside the poor in the streets. It may be alongside the rejected who have been pushed out of really nice auditoriums, if you understand my meaning.

we have a better chance of encountering God, not just on like the high Sundays with the good music and the decent preaching.

We have a better chance of encountering the divine God when we get comfy with those uncomfy feelings, and when we get more comfortable being with those who are also uncomfortable.

[26 : 30] And then I think we might just see Jesus. Because that's what Jesus said. As much as you have done it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, those who are in prison, and those who are hungry, and those who are naked, and those who have encountered famine, and sword, and all of those hard things, as much as you have done it to those, you have done it to me.

Jesus is found in the grieving. Jesus is found in those who are upset, those who have been pushed to the margins.

And if you are that person, you are that person who has been pushed to the margins, and I believe that the very center of God's existence finds its home in you.

Which again is what scripture has always said, that in God's people, God will place God's presence, that we are the very temple of God's Holy Spirit. This ain't new or radical, this is like 2,000 year old stuff.

God is with us, and God is among us. So resurrection necessarily comes after death.

[27 : 45] Encountering God, I think, necessarily comes after encountering our own grief and anger and doubt.

And it's in those encounters with the really hard parts of life that I think God meets us, we turn around, and he calls us by name.

Would you pray with me? loving God, loving God, I know that in my own life, it was in those hard moments where I knew you were close by.

It was in those really, really tough moments that I knew that I was not alone. crying in a car with strangers after the death of loved ones.

It was then, God, that I knew that you were close. And so, God, right now, for my friends, my family in front of me, I pray that you would, as we sang earlier, break every chain, everything that holds them back from encountering, experiencing you, God.

[29 : 11] Would you break those chains by the power of your spirit in this room? Would you open people's eyes that they may see you? May you open their ears that they may hear you, God. And may their hearts be, in the words of Wesley, strangely warm to know that you are close by, that you are a God of love, a God who sets people free.

May we, as a people, grow more comfortable with those uncomfortable feelings, more comfortable with the people who make us uncomfortable. May we be a people who are known for our honesty and our rawness and our realness and our authenticity, so that we may find you in the midst.

God, we pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.