

“When life goes wrong”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*John 11:1-45*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Every night, at bedtime, as I kiss Emerson on his head, I whisper: ὁ ἥλιος μου. It’s Greek. It means, “My sun.” Not the *s-o-n* kind but *s-u-n*. As if to say you are my light. And yes, you should pity Emerson; he’s been hearing Greek since he was born. He is doomed!

The Sun—that beaming star in the sky—is so important that it has, in many cultures, including Greek, been considered a god. 4.5 billion years old... 27 million degrees Fahrenheit... the center of our solar system. Its gravity holds everything together. It drives our seasons, our climate, the currents of the ocean, all life on Earth. It comprises 99.8 percent of all mass in the solar system. We even have a medical term for its absence: seasonal affective disorder. It is our everything, much as Emerson is my everything.

Scientists say that in about five or six billion years—so don’t get too worried—the sun will come to an end. All existence, as we know it, will cease. It will literally be a disaster. I say “literally” because the word *disaster* at its root “means a star coming apart.”<sup>1</sup>

Disaster. It’s a good word for what Mary and Martha are facing. Mary and Martha have been faithful disciples. They have sat at the foot of Jesus, listened to his teachings, sworn their lives to the kingdom of God. They have seen him heal others, save them from certain death. And they had this plan, this idea of how their lives would go. But now it’s all wrong. Their brother Lazarus—whose very name means “the one God helps”—has died. Jesus did not come. Jesus did not save him. Their star is coming apart.<sup>2</sup>

Then there’s that awful line as Mary says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And... Jesus weeps.

When I planned this sermon, back before the new year, the world was different. It was Christmas, and there was joy in the air. Most of us hadn’t even heard of coronavirus. It was

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Kalanithi, “When Breath Becomes Air.” In Greek, it literally means “bad star.” Its etymology is better traced to the idea of being “ill-starred” or ill-fated. But the Latin “dis” can mean “apart, asunder,” hence the idea of a star being torn apart.

<sup>2</sup> John writes, “So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’” The word *so* is the Greek conjunction οὖν, meaning “therefore.” In other words, the sisters see a causal link between their faith and the healing of their brother. They expect Jesus to come and heal him. The word for “love” here is from the Greek word φιλία, meaning brotherly love, the kind of love shared between friends. It is an intimate, familiar love, denoting obligation, loyalty, duty.

before our beloved Bill Foresman took his life; before my mother died, before so many deaths. I didn't know then that we would need this sermon so much, but Someone did. Because it feels like our star is coming apart.

The Harvard Business Review recently published an article by Scott Berinato, explaining that what we're feeling—this sense that the world has changed, that we're not safe—is grief. We are grieving the thousands of people who have died from COVID-19, the many more who still will. We are grieving the hospitals that are running out of supplies. We are grieving the isolation that has cut us off from friends and family, from church. We are grieving the thousands of people who are out of work... the teenagers who won't get to go to graduation or prom... the people who are rendered more vulnerable than ever. We are grieving the unknown.

We have never seen anything like this: crashed economies, broken health care systems, empty streets. The world is turned upside down. The star has exploded.

A lot of people have been comparing this to 9/11. For others of us, the comparison might be more personal: a death, a divorce, the loss of a job, a diagnosis or injury, a moment when all our plans fell apart and life as we envisioned it ceased to be.

I remember some of those moments in my own life, and how each time, I was left feeling this void. I remember it when I suddenly had no idea what God wanted me to do with my life. I remember it after break-ups. I remember it after my sons Ezra and Leo died. Void is a good word for it. It's what comes after the disaster, when the star is gone, and there's no light by which to orient.

But, you know, that reminds me of something in Scripture. It's the very first words of the Bible: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep... Then God said, 'Let there be light.'"

The Sun itself, scientists tell us, was formed much in that way. A solar nebula, this giant cloud of gas and dust, collapsed. And from the stuff of that disaster, into that void, the Sun was born.

*Then God said, Let there be light.*

This void is not only the absence of what was. It is that, and all the pain and grief that come with that loss. But it is also the presence of wondrous possibility. It's room for God to enter, to stretch out and dance. Void is a canvas waiting for paint. It is an invitation for creation.

Stars don't just die; they are born, as well.

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things came into being through him... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the*

*light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it”* (John 1).

Just when Mary and Martha feel like their world is collapsing, Jesus shows up. He cries with them; trembles with them. He asks to see the source of their pain.

Jesus comes to the tomb where they have buried Lazarus, a void, a starless night. He says, “Take away the stone.” He cries, “Lazarus, come out! Unbind him, and let him go.” Set him free!

He says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.”

This is the gospel: it is precisely when our plans fall apart, when stars collapse, when we see nothing but the dark, and feel utterly out of control, that is when God shows up, when God surprises us with life we never could have planned.

Jesus comes to us today, just as he did for Mary and Martha, just as he has done for me in every void I have ever known. When I, as a teenager, felt like my purpose in life was gone, when I had no idea how to make my life meaningful, that was when I discovered my call to ministry. When Ezra and Leo died, after four miscarriages, I felt like there was no future, and then, like a blinding light, Emerson came into our lives. He adopted us. God took the death of one star, and created a new one.

The new star did not invalidate the loss of the other; if anything, it more tenderly loved the pain and allowed it to speak, to weep, and dream again. The new star does not heap the old into a pile of clichés telling us not to weep, because it’s all part of God’s master plan. Scripture does not portray God as a puppeteer, pulling the strings. Scripture portrays God as a redeemer, as one who enters the broken void of the world, its rugged crosses and its hospital beds, its cancer and prison cells, its divorces and job losses, its abuse and hunger, and through persistent love wills the birth of hope.

Already there are signs of this hope. The other day, I went for a walk. I saw a father and his adult son playing catch in their front yard. I saw a sign in the window of a house: “We love you, Mom.” I saw sidewalk chalk with rainbows and messages of love. I saw a house with big, yellow letters staked in the ground: “God bless nurses and doctors.” I saw people spending time with family. On my phone, I saw Italians singing and dancing from balconies and windows. I saw satellite imagery over China, where skies are suddenly clear of pollution. I saw people appreciating life, relationships, food, in new ways—definitely parents appreciating teachers more! I saw people walking more, reading more, being outside more. I saw the Hunger Task Force in this community gathering donations from restaurants to feed the hungry. I saw a priest in Italy give up his ventilator so that, even in his death, another might live. I saw members of this church sewing masks to answer the shortage. I saw this church’s Session decide to continue to pay all employees full wages, even if they’re not working. I saw a news story of two New

Yorkers gathering 1,300 volunteers to deliver groceries and medicine in just 72 hours. I saw churches becoming something entirely new. Last week, in worship, we reached more than 900 people!

It is still too soon to know what this new world will be, and ever the forces of callous cynicism beat at our doors, but I believe that God is up to something amazing, even as God weeps with us.

If you don't believe me, maybe you'll believe Paul Kalanithi. Paul was a rising star, loaded with awards and job offers, on the cusp of completing 18 years of education and becoming a world-renown neurosurgeon and scientist, when at the age of 36, Paul was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. And with that, his star fell. He was dying. He saw only a void. But in that void, something happened. The marriage that was falling apart was healed, as Paul and his wife spent time together, talked more openly, and rediscovered their love. Paul started writing—something he had always wanted to do, but had never had the time. They decided to have a child. They named her Elizabeth Acadia, “Cady” for short. As Paul held this newborn child, life opened to him, “not a wasteland,” he says, “but a blank page.” It's a brief new star. Paul dies not two years into his diagnosis. Cady is eight months old. He never finishes the book. His wife comes home, to find it open on his computer, the last words he ever wrote being to his daughter: “When you come to one of the many moments in life where you must give an account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been, and done, and meant to the world, do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man's days with sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more but rests, satisfied.” His book is published, becomes a New York Times bestseller and a finalist for the Pulitzer, titled *When Breath Becomes Air*.

Every void is an invitation for a new star to form, for a Lazarus to rise, for a newborn to be held, for a book to be written, for a game of catch with your son, for clear skies, for acts of kindness, for Jesus Christ to walk into your life and show you resurrection. We do not control this life. There is no day, nor hour, nor plan, guaranteed to us. How easily it all goes wrong. But when it does, and our plans are dashed on the floor, that's when God appears and says, “Let there be light!” **Amen.**