

Don't Look Back!

Ephesians 3:12-16

*Grief over the past is conquered
by faith in the future.*

A sermon preached by
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Fort Smith, Arkansas
January 22, 2023

Several years ago, U2, the rock band from Ireland, was one of the most famous musical acts on the planet. One Halloween during that period, The Edge, U2's guitarist, found himself and his family in L.A.—Los Angeles, not Lower Arkansas. His son wanted to go out trick-or-treating. So The Edge—that's his professional name—went out and got his son a black beanie, black T-shirt, little leather jacket, and a miniature guitar—all the elements of his trademark outfit on stage. Dressed alike, they went out trick-or-treating as, I guess, a “double Edge.” As they walked away from one door, they heard the couple in the house say, “That's a bit sad; that dad doesn't look anything like The Edge.”¹

Sometimes it's hard to recognize what is right in front of you, staring you in the face. That's the sneaky thing about grief; it is often unrecognized or disguised, even when we're in the midst of it. We've been in a period of grief now for about three years. If you're not aware, you haven't been paying attention. As individuals, as families, as a church, and as a community, we have been experiencing grief. Almost three years ago, the coronavirus pandemic hit our country. Soon things were shutting down, including church, people were getting sick and dying, and our beloved country experienced more deaths than anyone: over a million dead in the U. S., almost 7 million worldwide.² COVID is still with us, although life has regained some normalcy, vaccines were developed, and most cases are now mild. But the pandemic changed our world forever, and that's hard.

Before COVID came along, the church—this church and the Christian church as a whole in America—had been in decline for some time. In a study published in October of 2019, just before the pandemic, the Pew organization showed how American adults identifying as Christians had declined in ten years from 77% to 65%, while adults who said they were unaffiliated with any faith group increased from 17% to 26%. In the same period, Christians who attended church at least once a month declined from 52% to 45%--less than half.³ We have seen that in this church. We were averaging about 500 in worship in the fall of 2019, but that was down from about 700 ten years earlier. The pandemic accelerated the loss of attendance in all churches, and we are pretty typical at 50-60% of in-person

worship attendance compared to three years ago, although now we also have 150 or so who watch our online worship at some point during the week.

As if that were not enough grief, the United Methodists decided to go through a divorce. When all is said and done, probably about 20% of United Methodist churches will decide to split off and remain independent or join another denomination. For the churches going through that process, it is extremely painful. Even for churches like us, who are remaining in the United Methodist Church, it is hard. We have lost some people. We know people who have been affected in other churches. The splintering of the connected family is hanging like a dark cloud over all United Methodist Churches. It's the elephant in the room at all our church gatherings.

The book I am using as background for this sermon series was written last fall by Bishop William Willimon, now an emeritus professor at Duke, but formerly a pastor and one of my professors. The book is called *Don't Look Back*, and he begins the book with these words, "Methodism as we have known it is ending, dying from a dozen wounds, some self-inflicted, some wreaked by a world that's God's but hasn't gotten the news."⁴ That, too, breaks my heart.

These are all sources of our corporate grief, along with all the usual sources of personal grief. What are we supposed to do? The first step in overcoming grief is to name our grief, like I just did. Grief can be caused by a loss of any sort, and there are many forms of death: the passing of a loved one, the loss of a marriage through divorce, the ending of a friendship, losing a job, a pet, your belongings due to fire or natural disaster, moving to a new town. Change of any sort can bring a burden of grief. Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross defined the five stages of grief several years ago: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.⁵ We have felt all of these emotions during the last three years. Denial: This is not really happening. The pandemic is a hoax. Everyone will come back to church sooner or later. Anger: Somebody is to blame here! Wear your dang mask! Wait, don't leave! Bargaining: God, if I work harder and do more will you save my life, my marriage, my church? Depression: I'm done. Forget about it. It's no use.

Finally, if you can work through all those stages of grief, you can get to acceptance. You accept the reality of the situation, but you reach out to find purpose and hope, even in your grief. In her later work, Kubler-Ross added "meaning" as a sixth stage of grief. If we do it right and don't get side-tracked, grief can result in deeper faith and understanding and bring us new life.

I saw a great example of this in a movie I saw last week, "A Man Called Otto."⁶ I thought it was a great movie, and I would recommend it, but I can't give any spoilers because it's still in the theaters. I think I can say that it is a movie about a man who is deep in grief over the loss of his wife. In the course of the movie, he moves from bungled attempts at suicide to loving people and living life again. It's a great journey to watch.

How do we take that journey? How do we overcome grief? How can we learn acceptance and find meaning after all the blows we have endured in the last few years? How can we get to loving life again?

The number one rule is, you can't go back. You can't undo what has already happened. You can't resurrect what is already dead—only Jesus did that. You can't bring back the past. I was in a webinar with church leadership guru Tod Bolsinger this week, and he was talking about leadership after all the losses we have endured. He said there are only two

things that we can do wrong in this moment. One is to do nothing, and our church will die. Or we can try to re-create the past, and our church will die quicker.⁷

This is not to say that we don't appreciate our past, our history, or our traditions. Those are very dear to us, and we can learn from the past. But that's different from trying to go back there. Next time you get in your car, notice something. How big is your rear-view mirror? It's a very important piece of equipment, because you need to see where you have been. But it's tiny. Now, how big is your windshield? It's huge, because the most important thing is to have a clear view of where you're headed. It's true in all of life.

In order to find meaning and purpose in our current situation, in order to find resurrection and new life out of a situation of grief, we need to do three things. The first is **FOCUS ON THE MISSION**. We have to remember, celebrate, and dedicate ourselves to the mission God has given us in this place for this time. When Jesus died, his followers were overcome with grief. Three days later, Jesus was raised from the dead. But the resurrection was not the last thing. Jesus then commissioned the disciples to continue his mission, to bring the Kingdom of God to reality in the world. In Matthew, he gathered them on the mountaintop and gave them this order: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"⁸ In Acts, Jesus commissioned the disciples before he ascended in to heaven to "*be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*"⁹ That's the mission.

When John Wesley started the Methodist movement in 18th century England, the society was in turmoil, and the church was becoming irrelevant—sound familiar? He called his lay preachers together in a conference every year to answer the same three questions: "What will we teach? How will we teach? What will we do?" Practical matters. Then he would ask, "What is God's design in raising up the people called Methodist?" The Methodists were God's idea before John Wesley, and God has given us a mission for this time and place. According to Willimon—and everybody else I've read for the last thirty years—the key determinant of church vitality in our current context is an outward focus. We can't just be concerned about our own members and their needs and desires. The mission is the thing, sharing the love of Christ, spreading the gospel to a lost and broken humanity.

The second way to new life is to **REMEMBER OUR HOPE**. We are a people of hope. We should focus on our mission, but our hope for the future does not depend on our ability to perform the mission. Our hope depends on God. Our hope is not based on human effort; it is based on the goodness, the faithfulness, and the steadfast love of God.

Nobody in Scripture had grief any deeper than the prophet Jeremiah. He had seen the destruction of Jerusalem and the nation carried away into Exile. Yet he spoke these words of hope that we hold so dear to our hearts: "*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*"¹⁰

Our hope as followers of Jesus is grounded in his resurrection from the dead. That changes everything. Paul wrote an entire chapter (although it was someone else who made it a chapter) about the resurrection and the implications it had for our faith. He ended the chapter with these words, "*But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*" Then he says, "*Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord*

your labor is not in vain.”¹¹ Nothing is in vain—our mission, our hope, even our grief. It is all a work of God.

Bishop Willimon says, “We have hope amid our present struggles, not because we’ve got certainty about the future, but because we are clear about who God is and what God is up to. We don’t know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future. Our hope is not wishful thinking; it’s reasonable Methodist expectation based upon all we know of God—Jesus Christ.”¹²

Finally, we can find new life out of grief if we **PRESS ON**. Keep going. Don’t quit. Don’t back up. Move ahead. Paul wrote a letter to what might have been his favorite church in Philippi. By the third chapter, he was warning the church to avoid the false teachers who had come among them. Paul encouraged them to pay attention to him, and he gave a long list of his credentials—born a Jew, trained as a rabbi, suffered for the faith, and so forth. But then he said that all those credentials were worthless except for one thing—Jesus Christ. Nothing else meant anything except that Paul had experienced a resurrection in his own spirit through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. So Paul was not going back; he was moving forward: “*this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*”¹³

Following Jesus is like riding a bicycle. There is no reverse gear. Either you move forward, or you fall over. No matter what, keep on pedaling! If you are depressed after the pandemic wreaked havoc in our world, press on. If you are grieving the decline of the church in America, press on. If you are angry, confused, or disheartened over the split in the United Methodist Church, press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Sometimes our grief goes unrecognized. Jesus had that problem, too, particularly after the resurrection. I think his close friends and followers were just so overwhelmed with grief that they couldn’t see who was standing right in front of them. On Easter morning in John’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene knelt weeping at the tomb. Jesus came up behind her and asked who she was looking for. She said, “They have taken my Lord, and I don’t know where they laid him.” Jesus spoke her name, “Mary.” And in an instant, she recognized her risen Savior.

Later that day, two disciples walking to Emmaus were joined on the road by a stranger. Their grief over the events of the last three days was explained by the stranger, who opened up the Scriptures to them. When they sat at table, the stranger took bread, blessed it, and broke it, and suddenly they saw that it had been Jesus all along.

The best way we can deal with the griefs of today is to remember where Jesus is. He has not gone away. He is right here with us. Bishop Willimon says, “Don’t look back. The good old days for Methodism weren’t all that good. With the risen Christ, we have more future than past. Here is indubitable hope for your Methodist congregation, hope that even we can courageously step up to the challenges with [boldness] based on his empowering promise, ‘I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.’

“Or as John Wesley said with his last breath, ‘The best of all, God is with us.’”¹⁴

Have we been through a rough patch lately? Without a doubt. Do these three things: Focus on the mission. Remember our hope. Press on. Don’t look back. God has a great future for First United Methodist Church, and for you!

¹ Gary Millar, “Jesus, Betrayed and Crucified,” *PreachingToday.com* (March, 2014).

² <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

³ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

⁴ William Willimon, *Don't Look Back* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2022), 1.

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_stages_of_grief.

⁶ David Magee, Fredrik Backman, Hannes Holm, “A Man Called Otto,” directed by Marc Forster, Sony Pictures, 2023.

⁷ Tod Bolsinger, “Why Trust and Trying Harder Are Not Enough,” Fresh Expressions webinar, January 17, 2023.

⁸ Matthew 28:19-20.

⁹ Acts 1:8.

¹⁰ Jeremiah 29:11.

¹¹ I Corinthians 15:57-58.

¹² Willimon, 15.

¹³ Philippians 3:13-14.

¹⁴ Willimon, 85.