

## **“Big Feelings”**

John 11:17-44 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 5, 2023  
All Saints Memorial Sunday

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might find solace in knowing the depth of your heart and passion for us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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I'm wondering how you're feeling about your feelings today? Did you bring them to church with you? Have you checked in with them lately? Are they too big? Are they stuffed into a tiny pocket of your heart? Are you aware of what you were taught about feelings? How has that served you?

I ask because our scripture readings today are full of Big Feelings, and I think that means something important for how we deal with feelings in church. Somehow, despite the witness of our holy scriptures, we have often been under the impression that the only feelings allowed at church are faith, love, hope, gratitude, and good cheer. You know, the positive ones. But if that were true, it would mean that we're not welcome to bring our whole selves and our full experiences of life into this holy space, and that can't possibly be the case, given what we know about Jesus. We've done that to ourselves, not because scripture said we should. Feelings, especially Big Feelings, can be scary. They can make us feel out of control, and control is one of our favorite idolatries. But today's story invites us into a different way of living, one that is much more life-giving and affirming of the sacredness of our full humanity.

Often, when we have Bible stories with Big Feelings in them, it's everyone else having them. This story from John 11 is so precious because Jesus is having Big Feelings alongside everyone else. But let's identify them in the order they arise. There is an assumption of grief, of course, given that this story is about the death of Martha and Mary's brother. We think of grief as sadness or sorrow. But this story immediately bumps into one of grief's less appreciated companions: anger. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Martha's accusation is repeated just a bit later by Mary. Anger, blame, lashing out at anyone and anything around, because our sorrow has no place else to go. So often, we only give ourselves room to be sad when we're experiencing loss, and don't make space for the anger that comes along with it. Think back and consider what you were taught about anger growing up. Was it a scary thing in your family? Was it a forbidden indulgence? Was it seen as a sign of weakness or loss of control, something that disrupted the decorum required of you, even as a child?

Can you imagine expressing anger at Jesus, straight to his face? How safe would you have to feel with him to do that? It seems to me that Martha dared say such a thing precisely because of the closeness of their relationship. In the next verses, it becomes clear that her faith in him is so strong that she can lay this blame, precisely because she deeply believes it's true. If Jesus had been there, he could have healed Lazarus from his terminal condition. But it's not clear yet that she understands what Jesus is going to do. When he promises her that Lazarus will rise again, she

hears it in the context of the Last Day and affirms only what she knows about Jesus, that he is the Messiah, the Son of God coming into the world. She hasn't yet been able to imagine that Jesus will restore her brother to her that very day.

And this is also something that happens with Big Feelings. Sometimes, they can connect us to Big Truths we couldn't see before. But sometimes, they block our capacity to imagine the world being any different than the way we're experiencing it right now. Sometimes, we need help navigating our way around and through Big Feelings, so that they don't trap us somewhere we were only supposed to be for a moment. Therapy is good for this. But wouldn't it be a blessing if church could help with that too? If this could be a place, where we remind those going through difficulty that we, too, have been through hard times that seemed like they would never end, but then, somehow, one day, they did?

At any rate, Martha's anger and her sorrow and her hope and faithfulness are all jumbled up here, and what's beautiful is that she pours them out all over Jesus and he embraces that flood of emotion. When the scene repeats itself with Mary, who has come out to meet Jesus next, we see the impact of this grieving on Jesus' own heart. He was "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved," it says. That can sound very sentimental, like it's just about deep compassion, but the Greek verbs used there usually communicate agitation and indignation. Grief, even for Jesus, has an edge of anger. And then there are the tears, the infamous "Jesus wept." This moment may be the greatest example of God meeting us right where we are in all of scripture. It is the

heart of the Incarnation. God may have the capacity to solve all of our problems, but before that and more important than that, God will sit with us in those troubles and weep alongside us. In Jesus, God isn't just soothing our ragged emotions; God is sharing in them with us. The Incarnation is the ultimate act of solidarity, and in this scene, it is brought into conversation with the greatest challenge of our lives, namely, death. Jesus' beloved friend has died, and so he weeps. Because that is what we do when our loved ones die. He sees Mary weeping and all those gathered to console her, and his loving, human heart cannot help but join them. Big Feelings are meant to be shared. Weeping with those who weep is a central part of our calling as church. And here is Jesus demonstrating how to do it.

But sometimes, all that emotion makes us uncomfortable and we try to distract ourselves. Martha, who moments ago had been sad and mad and hopeful and wondering and needy, by the time they arrive at the tomb, has reverted back into "practical" mode, from which she can no longer see the possibilities that might be present with Jesus there. "You can't open that tomb; he's been dead for four days; it will smell to the high heavens!" She's stuffed those feelings back down and is trying to regain control. If even Jesus is falling apart, someone has to be sensible, right?

Have you had this moment? We might not recognize it as another Big Feeling, but it's just as powerful. Our primary feelings scare us sometimes, so we conjure up these other ones that feel more respectable. We make ourselves busy with the tasks of grieving or just "normal" life, so that we don't have time to feel the emotions

swimming under the surface. As a coping method, this distraction approach has its place. But it's not a healthier place to get stuck than any other Big Feeling. And it might have more potential to cut us off from the presence of God than some of our other emotions. When Martha brings up the stench, Jesus prods her to remember that she can see a different way the world could be, because she believes in him. She's just forgotten for a moment. And that reminding is quite possibly one of the most important things we can do for one another as church. There are so many forces out there trying to keep us from seeing the world that God desires for us. Grief and loss, yes, but so many other things too. Financial strain, violence, discrimination, exhaustion – there are many forces that ignite Big Feelings but also steal from us the space we need to feel them. And when it comes down to it, that constitutes a process of dehumanization. Because our Big Feelings are an essential part of what makes us human. The Big Feelings Jesus has in this passage from John are why this is such a good example of the Word become flesh. And not just flesh, but human flesh.

The world needs us to proclaim the good news that Big Feelings are welcome at church. Because what we're proclaiming when we say that is that people matter to God, in all our complexity and emotional messiness. That the central message of our faith is that our preciousness is because of our feelings, not in spite of them. That God cared so much about us that God joined us in this mess. The grief, the anger, the indignation, the hope, the sympathy, the tears – God is with us in all of it. If we pretend that some of it isn't there, we cut off the presence of God in our lives. If we

refuse to make space for it, here in this holy space, we're telling Jesus he's not needed. Some of us may need to re-learn how to relate to our Big Feelings, because those who taught us about them may not have been given the space they needed to be fully human either. But when we learn to share our Big Feelings here, together, when we truly learn to weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh, we will join in the work of re-humanizing one another, restoring the wholeness God desires for us. When we help each other avoid getting stuck in either a pit of Big Feeling or a trap of avoiding Big Feelings, our eyes are opened to the new possibilities God is creating right in front of us. This is the life the gospel calls us into. This is why Jesus came to walk alongside us. This is what it means to follow Jesus. May we live the gospel with hope and faithfulness and feeling. Hallelujah and Amen.