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## Lamenting together


by Sarah S. Scherschligt

I lived in a rural village in Malawi, East Africa, as a Peace Corps volunteer in the late 90s. There, I experienced the power of communal lament. When someone died, the women in the community would stop everything and start to wail. They would bawl for hours. Neighboring villagers could hear the grief-stricken sound from far away and join the mourning.

For some, it had little to do with a natural expression of grief. It was more performative, like joining a song in progress. Sometimes, to my ears, the cries seemed artificial and manufactured. I came to realize there was great wisdom in it. Taking on an outward, physical manifestation of grief helped people move through it. It cued emotional release. It was cathartic.

As Jesus approached Jerusalem, knowing it had become a disobedient and fractured community, he lamented. (Matthew 23:37).

A month ago, as we approached the first anniversary of the coronavirus outbreaks, I felt a strong, physical urge to grieve out loud and with other people. I have cried plenty of private tears through this covid year and have had days of numbness too. I've even released my primal screams into the void when I think no one's listening.



Still, I missed the communal, in-person funeral for the losses of a year. I wanted to sing mourner's songs and grieve as a body among other bodies. I wanted to join a chorus in proclaiming, "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." I longed to hear other people's wailing help me tap into my sorrow so that I could let it out and make space for something new.

As a pastor, I've learned to trust that if I need something spiritually, other people do too. I started thinking, "how could we gather to lament?" I thought of having a spaced drum circle where we could wear masks and make music together in safety. We would gather to lament.

On the anniversary of the coronavirus shut down—the day that I announced that the church building would close indefinitely—a group of 20 people gathered for a drum circle outside our church's narthex.

For an hour, our leader encouraged us to put our emotions onto the surface of the drum. She taught us a heartbeat rhythm and invited us to speak names and losses into the space between beats. Tha-thump (Peggy). Tha-thump (Jerry). Tha-thump. She said, "Don't worry if you lose the beat, we've got you."

She kept it going. Some of us novice drummers couldn't name names and keep a beat. If we got lost, we could always find the rhythm again. Tha-thump. Tha-thump. I could let go, trusting the drumbeat held me. Somewhere along the line, I realized I was being gathered in by God.

The noise grew, and we started to jam. We fed off one another, and while I could tell what sounds I was making, I also could hear the sounds were part of a cacophony of expression. At one point, tears poured out of me, along with grief, sorrow, anger, and pain.

As I learned from mourners in rural Malawi, something important happens when we gather to grieve. After the drumming, I thought of Jesus crying with a desire to gather his people. I knew that we had released something important. Jesus did gather us together, and our sorrow would not remain forever. There was lament. There was catharsis. And then, there was peace.

### **Discussion questions:**

1. Lament means to express sorrow. What do you lament about the past year?
2. In what communal forms of mourning have you participated? How have they helped you?
3. Is there something you need to grieve that you are resisting? How would it feel to let God gather you fully?
4. Describe when you have been surprised on the other side of grief to find new joy or peace?

## Closing prayer:

Dear God, you lament for your children in all the losses we experience. Help us trust you with our sorrow in things large and small. Gather us in communities where we can express our grief together and help our communal lament lead us toward a deeper joy. Amen.

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# Easter Lament

by Ralen M. Robinson

“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb.” (John 20:11)

Easter lilies adorn the sanctuary, the paraments are white, the eggs are dyed and hidden, and the baskets are ready. At Easter, we celebrate the resurrection of Christ. But this year, it looks different, and celebrations dimmed.

In the past year, we have had events canceled. People said, “This is going to look different,” and we have heard this saying time and again. We have lived this saying. We have changed the way we have been living for over a year. We have shuffled our calendars, pushed back celebrations, postponed trips, and even canceled holidays. We have celebrated through a screen, greeted with joy through a window, and cried over the phone. All that was to protect our siblings in Christ during this pandemic.

We have altered our lives while repeating this saying, “This will look different,” so often that we’ve ingrained it in our being. Life is different, and the events and celebrations are not the same. The milestones and holidays are unfamiliar to what we knew and held dear. It is true for Easter and the celebration of the resurrection of Christ.

This year Easter looks different. We celebrate it through a screen or physically distanced seating on pews. The words we rejoice in, Jesus Christ is Risen! are muffled through a mask. Many congregations canceled Easter egg hunts. The sweet fragrance of the Easter lilies no longer fills our nostrils. And the frilly dresses are still hanging in the department stores.

This year Easter is different, and it is okay to name that, sit with that, and hold that. The festivities are not the same, and the feelings sparked are unfamiliar. The joy of Easter has dimmed, and its celebration seems like a hum, and we lament these feelings. We mourn the loss of the vibrant colors, the fragrance, and the egg hunts.

You are not alone experiencing these feelings. We share them with our friends and family today, but also with biblical people. In the book of Mark we read, “so they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Like our biblical ancestors, we recognize that the resurrection is full of feelings: gladness, sorrow, grief, and uncertainty.

These feelings are okay. These times of uncertainty and frustration go back to Mary, Peter, and the disciples. For they rejoiced that Jesus rose but were sad and full of sorrow that he was no longer present.

It is okay to be sad today that life's not back to normal; it's okay to feel alone and frustrated. For this time will pass. Easter is more than joy, egg hunts, and celebration. It is a time where we grapple with what Jesus endured for us. It's a time when we sit with that sacrifice and pain because there is gladness through the heartache.

So, as we peer through the screens or sit physically distanced, let's remember Mary Magdalene's weeping, Peter's fear of not knowing what comes next, and every disciple's uncertainty.

This Easter, the floral dresses may still be on the rack at the department stores, services may be online, egg hunts postponed, and celebrations physically distanced. But this does not take away from the joy that God bestowed upon us for a new tomorrow. It does not eliminate the unyielding love given through the promise Jesus made to his people. As long as we celebrate that promise, this Easter may not be so different after all.

### **Closing prayer:**

Holy God, all we pray this day is that you hold and uplift your children who are feeling sad, frustrated, and alone this Easter season. We know that we are never alone but wrapped in your unyielding love and grace that you, God, bestowed upon us when you raised your son from the shackles of death and brought him anew in your kingdom. This year is different, but even in the difference, allow us to see the brightness in the resurrection of your son Jesus Christ and let us know the love in the fulfillment of the promise. For we learn as we celebrate, grieve, and feel indifferent, we are not alone. So, grant us peace, healing, and joy this Easter season.

### **Discussion questions:**

1. How are you celebrating Easter this year?
2. Where are you finding joy and sorrow this Easter season?
3. What are you doing to connect with your loved ones?

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