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TAKE HEART

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I was devastated when my first pet died. His name was Joshua. He was a blue heeler border collie cross and very loyal. We spent hours walking around the farm together, fishing in the damn, and feeding the cows.

Playing with Joshua after school and on weekends were the best times. He was a great friend.

Josh was also a great working dog. I used to train him and he was arguably the best cattle dog we ever had. He was brilliant. We could drop him off at the paddock gate and he would round up all the cows by himself and usher them back to the dairy.

But he also liked barking at and chasing the trucks that drove past our place. We tried tying Josh up overnight but one morning as we were leaving for school we looked down the road to discover that he'd been run over during the night.

My heart sank. Josh and I had a special bond and now he wouldn't be there when I got home from school anymore. Sadness and grief took over. Obviously growing up on a farm I had seen dead animals, but this was different. My friend had died.

People can talk about grief and try to explain it but until you go through an experience where someone close to you dies, grief is difficult to understand. You feel alone in it and it's hard to find comfort.

Knowing that Jesus experienced grief has helped me.

One day when Jesus was having a meal with his disciples, the message came that his close friend, Lazarus, about two days travel away, was very sick. Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha sent the message. They were also like family to Jesus and knew he was a great healer. If anyone was going to help Lazarus get better, it had to be Jesus.

Lazarus' health deteriorated quickly and he died before Jesus could get to him. By the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been in the tomb for 4 days.

As Jesus was approaching the town, Martha ran out to greet Jesus to let him know what had happened. Mary followed soon after along with many others who were grieving in support of the two sisters.

When Mary saw Jesus she confronted him and said, "If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died."

Jesus saw their grief and sadness and was also moved to tears. Jesus' close friend, an adopted family member, his brother, had died.

Hearing that Jesus also felt grief and cried over the loss of someone he loved helps me because it tells me I'm not alone. It's ok to cry and feel lost in the sadness.

But what else could Jesus do now? He was too late, very late. Surely he could do nothing more about Lazarus and their grief now.

When I was a young pastor, a grandparent approached me to visit her daughter who had just given birth to twins. Sadly, one of the twins died shortly after being born. I had never been confronted with that level of grief before. What were the parents feeling? How were they coping – if at all? What was I going to say or do that would make it any better?

Soon after the request, I drove around to their home. Sitting in the car. About to meet them for the first time. I was terrified.

I walked up to the door and was confronted by the father. He was curious to who I was and why I was there. I introduced myself and to my relief, he invited me in.

Walking into their house, you could feel the grief and sadness in the air. They had a lot of questions, especially about why would this happen.

I stayed there for over 2 hours. During this time we talked, cried, and sat in silence. They shared their pregnancy journey and what happened during and after the birth, and how they'd come to be at this point in their lives.

I didn't have all the answers for them, no one does. But we began working through the grief and sadness that envelopes us, when someone close to us dies.

Jesus worked through this same thing with Mary and Martha over the death of their brother, Lazarus.

But along with the sadness and grief, Jesus could also offer them hope.

See, Jesus had something planned from the very beginning. When Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, he was teaching his disciples about who he truly was and what he was going to do. Jesus wanted the disciples to see what he was capable of.

So Jesus took his time to arrive at Lazarus' tomb and arrived 4 days after Lazarus had been buried. When he arrived the pain of death still touched Jesus, hence his compassion, grief, and tears. Especially as he met with Mary and Martha.

But Jesus had greater plans for Lazarus.

Jesus asked for the tomb to be opened. Mary, rightly so, suggested that because Lazarus had already been in there for 4 days, the stench would be unbearable.

Jesus reassured them that he knew what he was doing, so they opened the tomb.

Then Jesus did something extraordinary. After praying and thanking God he shouted to Lazarus, "Lazarus, come out!"

To everyone's astonishment, Lazarus, still wrapped up in burial cloth, walked out of the tomb. Unbelievable! I can only imagine their shock at what they were seeing.

I have never seen someone rise from the dead. I've heard of stories about it, but the rising of Lazarus from the dead is something else. Even the enemies of Jesus reported that this had happened so it wasn't just some trumped up story by Jesus friends.

Jesus had raised Lazarus back to life.

By raising Lazarus to life, Jesus showed the people there, and us today, that death is not the end. God has defeated death.

Jesus goes on to prove this by his own resurrection, three days after being crucified to death on the cross.

Lazarus' death is a pointer for us that death as we know and experience it, is not the end. And through Jesus' death and resurrection, we can all experience life after death.

This is what the young parents I visited that day came to believe and be comforted by after the death of their baby. Jesus gave them hope that death in this world is not the end. That because of Jesus we have hope that there is life after death.

This doesn't take away the grief, loss and sadness that we feel when someone close to us dies. Jesus still went through these emotions over Lazarus, even though he knew what the outcome was going to be.

So just like Mary and Martha, and the young couple discovered, Jesus shows us it's ok to be sad and to grieve. And it's ok to believe in him and the life he offers.

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