

2025 Lenten Devotional

# Grieving Change and Loss:

The unpredictable, non-linear,  
faith-filled journey toward  
resurrection



**THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK**

# Writers

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The unpredictable, non-linear, faith-filled journey toward resurrection



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# *Introduction*

## **Grieving Change and Loss:**

The unpredictable, non-linear, faith-filled journey toward resurrection

As I was concluding a year-long internship in campus ministry, my supervisor gifted me a copy of Roy Oswald's *Running Through the Thistles: Terminating a Ministerial Relationship with a Parish*. Reading this guide taught me that grief is not isolated to death; we experience grief whenever we say goodbye. Whether we take leave of a dying person, a community that has influenced and shaped us or a child going off to kindergarten or the first year of college, grief is in the emotional mix.

As Bobby, Ginna and I discussed the theme for this Lenten devotional, we recognized we personally have much to grieve, and Lent is an appropriate time to ponder this somber mix of emotions. Each of us is grieving a death in our personal lives. But we also have grieved friendships lost after a move, health lost when we were sick, the loss of childhood and the innocence left behind. In today's divisive political climate, we grieve the loss of civil dialogue and debate, as well as the loss of the progress that our divisiveness impedes. Taking a break from my writing desk to walk my dog and breathe fresh air, I grieve the destruction of our natural world and the earth that is our home.

The wilderness of Lent, this 40-day journey with Jesus, is a journey of grief. We prepare ourselves to lose Jesus on the cross. We boldly lean into the pain of this loss to remind us of our love for Christ and of God's love for us. But the hope of Christ's death rests in the new life it offers. Resurrection is the gift that reminds us that death is not the end, that we journey toward healing and hope.

Through these next six weeks, Bobby, Ginna and I will reflect on the six stages of grief identified by experts Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler in *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*. Each Sunday's devotion serves to introduce each week's stage and theme, followed by our daily reflections, which include Scripture and prayer.

The stages of grief are not linear — grief comes in waves, and any wave can break and hit the shore at any time. Emotions aren't neat and clean. They don't have precise boundaries. One person's loss is not the same as another's. Each stage responds to a feeling and can last for minutes, hours, months or years. Kübler-Ross and Kessler write that the stages of grief they have mapped are “not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order.” Rather, the stages describe grief's terrain, the emotional landscape we travel as we make our way through loss. Knowledge of what we might encounter as we move through grief can serve as stepping stones to support and equip us for the journey.

Our human condition is awash in grief because we are mortal. Yet we are a resurrection people. There is life to be lived both within the grief and beyond it — a horizon of hope toward which we cast our eyes.

# Day 1: Ash Wednesday

## The Gift of Ashes

*“You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” — Genesis 3:19*

Every pastor has their own way of applying ashes to the tender skin of their parishioners’ foreheads. Some add oil to the palm ash, but I don’t. Enough oil is produced from the skin-to-skin touch, and from the sweat of this intimacy, that the ashes always stick — two dark lines smeared in the form of a cross. I use my thumb, so my other four fingers are free to gently brush bangs aside, centering the cross above the eyebrows. “Remember,” I say, as my thumb touches the forehead, adding the person’s name if I know them, “that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

This marking on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent, is poignant and heavy with meaning. It reminds me, as a pastor, that everyone I touch will die and return to dust. Only God knows when and how. But our fate is the same.

I always teared up as my children came forward to receive their ashes from me. My husband as well. Not my beloveds, God — you’ll take them, too? It’s hard enough to contemplate our own bodies being reduced to dust, let alone the bodies of those we have helped to create, nurture and shape.

As stark as the reminder is, I welcome the gift of this Ash Wednesday. It’s the perfect beginning to Lent, this reminder that we don’t have forever, that we are mortal, that we and those we love will die. It’s the perfect prompt to return us to God, to Godly living, to cherishing life as a precious, fragile gift.

The *Book of Common Worship* includes an “Invitation to Observe a Holy Lent” in its Ash Wednesday liturgy. Reflect on this sacred invitation today, as you prepare yourself for this journey with Christ:

We begin our journey to Easter with the sign of ashes. This ancient sign speaks of the frailty and uncertainty of human life, and marks the penitence of this community. I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and penitence, by prayer and fasting, by works of love, and by meditating on God’s word.

**Prayer:** Holy One, prepare us for death as you prepare us for life. Mold us with care, nurture us with love, help us live lives worthy of your grace. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

*Teri*

## Day 2: Thursday

### The Shock of Finality

*“The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.” — Isaiah 40:8*

As I was preparing to write this devotional, my dear friend, Elizabeth Felicetti, died of lung cancer. Her death shocked me. Although she'd been battling cancer since we were first introduced, I'd thought – expected – we'd have more time.

Why do the living always assume we have more time? Why do we neglect our mortality and forget that we wither like the grass and fade like the flower?

I invited Elizabeth to join my writing group of women clergy, knowing she would fit right in. Elizabeth was an Episcopal priest, a book lover and a writer. She endeared herself to our group, who gave her mad props for the creativity of her cursing. I have two copies of her 2024 book, *Irreverent Prayers: Talking to God When You're Seriously Sick*, on my shelf — one for myself and one ready to give away, because her words and her life should be so honored.

Elizabeth came home from the hospital to hospice care on a Friday. She texted us that she'd see us on Zoom for the following Thursday's writing group. She died on Saturday.

Death is shocking in its finality. One minute someone is alive and breathing and texting, and the next minute they are gone. Elizabeth's text thread still dangles in my phone, waiting for her to reply, to somehow send our group a message from beyond, something about how irritated she is by the angels who raise their eyebrows whenever she drops the F-bomb.

Elizabeth was 56 years old when she died of lung cancer, four years older than me. Her death made me hit pause on my life — a gift, really, to remember that we don't have endless time, that I should hug my kids and my husband, that I should love my life and breathe deeply with my healthy lungs and stop every once in a while to appreciate what I have in here and now, including friends like Elizabeth. She's been with me as I wrote these devotions. Bobby, Ginna and I decided on the theme a year ago. Little did I know then how personal this series would become for me, how close I was to experiencing the sharp, stabbing pain of grief myself.

**Prayer:** Turn us to your Word this Lent, O God, and to the solace we find in your everlasting truths. As we contemplate the shocking finality of death, may we bask in the truth of your eternal love. Amen.

*Teri*

## *Day 3: Friday* **Change Brings Loss**

*“I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”—Philippians 1:6*

When I began in ministry at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, everybody I met was talking about change. Bobby, the church isn't like it used to be. Bobby, society is changing. Bobby, it's change or die.

When I was a young seminarian, this change motivated me. I saw myself as a change agent who could help the church forge a new future in the 21st-century wilderness! What I did not anticipate once I got into pastoral work was how . . .

Trying new things also brought about unexpected resistance.

Retiring a decades-old tradition that very few people attended was a decision that required strenuous session debate.

Completing a building renovation felt, for some members, like a funeral.

For a time, I stewed about the pushback, anger and complaining that emerged amid the changes. Eventually, I was humbled to realize that I'd completely missed a central truth: with any change – even good change – something is always lost. And so there is grief.

Put another way, if change is happening, grief is happening.

And this is why I was eager to work on this grief-focused devotional. Change unfolds at an impossibly fast pace all around us, within us and even through us. That means, these days, there's a lot of grief among us.

And unless we have space to name it, walk it and work it, it will fester in resistance, anger and apathy.

My hope, then, is that this devotional allows you to engage grief in whatever forms or stages you are experiencing grief right now — and through that engagement, to discover how your grief may also be part of a new thing God is doing in our midst.

**Prayer:** God of healing and transformation, help us grieve what is passing, honor what you have given us this day and anticipate what you will yet do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

*Bobby*

## *Day 4: Saturday* **Grief, Common Yet Complicated**

*“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”—1 Corinthians 12:26*

Like you, I’ve experienced my share of daily griefs: deaths of loved ones in old age, dreams disappointed, loves and friendships lost. However, two major grief events in my life have knocked me off my feet. In 2019, after a long struggle with the family disease of addiction, my spouse and I divorced. Second, in the summer of 2024, while writing this devotional, I miscarried a long-awaited and dearly beloved daughter.

If daily griefs are stabs and pangs, these experiences were body-and-soul seizures. These experiences fundamentally changed my identity and worldview.

You’ll hear me reference the miscarriage often over these 40 days — the divorce, not so much. One is my story to tell; the other belongs to two people. But if you have been through one or the other (or both!), I want to share what I bring to the table, as I’ve sought to connect my personal experience of grief with the communal grief that our larger Christian narrative observes during Lent.

These griefs are as common as they are complicated. One in two marriages ends in divorce, and one in four pregnancies ends in a miscarriage. Commonness does not make them any easier. The banality of grief only adds insult to injury. Yet the gift of commonplace grief is connection. You and I may never have met, but we have both lost people we love. That tiny piece of overlapping experience changes everything. Worlds are opened, and my grief becomes meaningful for you, just as yours becomes meaningful to me.

Thank you for joining me on this journey through Lent. It is a joy and an honor to walk beside you along this road to the cross.

**Prayer:** Wandering God, walk with us on the journey through these 40 days of Lent. Help us find your truth and your love in one another. Amen.

*Ginna*

# Day 5: Sunday

## Denial: The Emotional Buffer of Denial

*“It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of everyone, and the living will lay it to heart.”—Ecclesiastes 7:2*

Denial of death can take many forms. For the person diagnosed with a terminal illness, the stage of denial may include rejection of reality and facts. The person may go searching for a second, third or fourth medical opinion or might turn to alternative modes of healing to bolster their disbelief of the terminal diagnosis.

To the grieving, denial can feel like as if they are living a dream, or as if a big mistake has been made that will soon be corrected. Joan Didion’s 2007 book *A Year of Magical Thinking* describes the year after her husband’s unexpected death. She writes the details of the day he died, trying to convince herself that it actually happened. Describing the year after his death, she continues to write of waking up in bed wondering why she was alone, wondering why other people thought her husband was dead, wondering – fearing! – that she had allowed her husband to be buried alive.

Denial serves an emotional purpose in the grief process. Kübler-Ross writes about denial acting as an emotional “buffer,” giving the grieving person time to collect themselves and, in that time, to build the psychological strength to withstand the pain that comes with deep loss. Denial is a mode of survival: our biological means of allowing only as much pain as we can handle. In this way, denial can be understood as a form of grace.

As we reflect on grief’s stage of denial this week, contemplate the way this stage serves as grace. What pain have you experienced that was simply too much to bear? What pain have you needed to deny in order to survive? When have you witnessed others experiencing denial to protect themselves from painful truths?

**Prayer:** Merciful God, we all experience loss. We all grieve life’s limits. We praise you for subtle grace, the gifts that keep us afloat while awash in grief. Amen.

*Teri*

## Day 6: Monday

### Denial: Letting It All Out

*“All who believed were together and had all things in common.” — Acts 2:44*

At a large conference, I was seated at a table with confident, sharp professionals. One of them was a woman who shared with a couple of us, just before the workshop began, “I feel like I want to go to my room, curl into the fetal position and sob.” Her eyes drew down. “I’m realizing my whole job is going to change . . .” She trailed off, eventually explaining that the conference was making clear to her that she was on the cusp of a big transition.

Hers was the grief of a shifting season, a beloved season that now needed to evolve. And she felt she had nowhere to go. Sobbing in public would be unheard of. Sobbing in her room was to be avoided, too, because that’s *not how professionals work through things*.

I don’t think she’s alone.

Society exerts an unspoken pressure to keep it together. Unless our grief feels especially acute, who are we to need space to sob over a change in seasons, a move or the end of a beloved Sunday school?

How naturally we can isolate ourselves as we hold to society’s party line: Chin up. Keep smiling.

The truth is that seasons of change are seasons of grief, and these seasons need honest, communal processing.

Fortunately, this woman risked just enough honesty to tell a bunch of put-together professionals, “I really need to cry.”

She went ahead and let it all out. And we teared up too.

I no longer remember the workshop details, but I will never forget the time when a few professionals chose to drop their guard and discover the kind of shared healing only ever known when keeping-it-together is set aside for vulnerable love.

**Prayer:** Merciful God, thank you for receiving me just as I am. Help me receive those around me in the same way — and may love multiply because of what you do in that space. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

*Bobby*

# Day 7: Tuesday

## Denial: Tears That Mean Love

*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” — Matthew 5:4*

A speaker challenged our Toastmasters gathering to give an impromptu speech based on a prompt: If you could go back in time to any place and time, when and where would you go?

He looked in my direction. “Bobby, give it a try.”

My response hit me as clear as pain.

“To 1975. In Cincinnati, Ohio. That’s the year my parents were seniors in high school — and they lived in Cincinnati.” Then I pivoted. “I’d hope to see the Big Red Machine play a baseball game. To this day their legacy shapes the city.”

I meant it — I really would love to see those Reds. But I was also using sports as avoidance. Eventually, though, my heart released: “And . . . I would want to see my parents together in high school. I’d like to see a glimpse of the love that was lost.”

I stopped, about to sob with grief echoing from their divorce a quarter-century before. I managed to hold the flood within, though my voice cracked as I spoke the final sentence: “I don’t know what I would see, but I’d really like to go to 1975.”

Grief, it seems, plays by the same rules as impromptu Toastmasters speeches. It arrives with no warning, provides us with no preparation for its wave and calls forth waters we had no idea still shaped the cityscape of our soul so profoundly.

In these moments, we find it tempting to pivot toward the glory or mess that is our sports team or the weather.

Yet what is the only real way forward into a healed future?

Receive grief’s messy invitation. Somewhere amid it all, remind yourself that where there are tears, there is love.

And somehow, oddly and painfully, take comfort in that.

**Prayer:** Merciful God, I give thanks for the tears that remind me of love. And may your living water flood the cityscape of my soul with your comfort, healing and new life. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

*Bobby*

## Day 8: Wednesday

### Denial: Living the Gift of This Day

*“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” — Psalm 118:24*

A week after her death from lung cancer, my friend Elizabeth declined my calendar invite for our writing group’s weekly Thursday meeting.

On the morning I woke up to this notification on my phone, sent mysteriously at 1:23, I sat staring at this message from the great beyond, confused and rattled. Grief grabbed my heart and squeezed. *No*, I reminded myself again, *she really is gone*. This notification was likely a family member or friend cleaning up Elizabeth’s calendar, or perhaps her computer was automatically sending last notifications before it went offline for good.

I called my dog and grabbed his leash to go for a walk. I needed a minute.

Elizabeth loved her morning walks, the only exercise she could do with her diminished lung capacity. As her cancer progressed, she complained about how slow she had to walk, how difficult it was for her to breathe. I spent the night at her place once and was in her kitchen when she came home from a walk gasping for air, her chest wheezing. She kept walking, though. Eventually, she needed the support of a rolling walker.

Denial is easy to slip into because death doesn’t feel real. How could someone be here walking her neighborhood one day and be gone the next? But the reminders of this natural cycle are everywhere. Friends and loved ones live and die. Flowers bloom and wilt. The leaves turn from green to red and gold each fall. Life is fragile, limited and precious. Every created thing has an expiration date.

Our faith reminds us of our mortality as well as our hope in Jesus Christ. Jesus died so we could live. This isn’t just an eternal promise. It’s also the gift of this very day, and it’s a blueprint for how to live it. In the wake of Elizabeth’s death I ask myself, How will I live the gift of this day? When I wake up each morning, I wonder what I might do with this next beautiful stretch of 12 whole hours. Who can I love? What good can I start and spread? How can I honor the precious yet fragile gift of life God has given?

**Prayer:** O God, our Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end, wake us to the beauty and opportunity of this day, so we can honor its gift as well as its Giver. Amen.

*Teri*