

Where's Johnny?
Psalm 121:5-8
Revelation 21:3-4

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Recently, some in our congregation have suffered from the loss of someone dear to them. Sometimes it was a two-legged someone; sometimes the dear one happened to have four legs. But the loss still tears at our hearts, because we miss them so. This is a sermon I've given before, prompted by another occasion, but that still attempts to give a word of hope to guide us on the rocky path through the "valley of the shadow of death." And, in this coronavirus season of many griefs, it is in that hope that I offer it today.

It was almost quitting time. It had been a rough, long day, full of sadness and death. Slowly, wearily, the pastor pulled a book from her shelf. A funeral manual.

There was a tiny knock on the door.

"Come in," she said, laboring to keep the fatigue from her voice.

"It's me," said a small voice, burdened by sorrow.

"Oh, Ben. C'mon over here." She sat down and patted her leg. He climbed onto it, threw his arms around her neck, and sobbed fiercely into her shoulder. "Where is he? Where's Johnny?"

"He died, Ben. He's gone and he's not coming back. I still can't believe it, either."

The tears burst again, coming from somewhere deep down, shaking his whole frame.

"I know, it hurts. It's like somebody just tore a piece out of you, and left a ragged hole. It hurts, and when anything hurts that badly, we cry. Sometimes for a long time."

She held him as he sobbed, stroking his hair softly. Presently he drew back, looked at her through liquid eyes, and whispered, "Why? Why did it happen?"

"I wish I knew, honey. I do know that God didn't kill Johnny. That would be a horrible thing to do, and God isn't like that. And it's not your fault, either, Ben. I know that sometimes you might feel that there had to be *something* you could have done. But you did all you could. So did the doctors. But the damage was just too great.

"Why did it happen? I guess somebody wasn't careful enough. When people aren't careful enough, others can get hurt. And sometimes they die. I know that might not be much help. . . ."

They both sat in silence for a while. Then Ben asked softly, "What will happen next?"

"We'll have a funeral, day after tomorrow. That's when we can all say goodbye to Johnny. A lot of people will come, and they'll probably cry a lot. And so will you, and both your Mommies." She paused and continued gently, "and I probably will, too. But that's okay. It means that we loved Johnny a lot, and we're going to miss him a bunch. Crying is a part of saying goodbye."

And so he did cry, quietly now. At last he whispered, "Where's Johnny now?"

"He's with God. When we die, God takes us home – a new home, to live with God forever."

A ghost of a smile flickered across his face.

"Johnny is together with God."

"What do you think he's doing?"

“Well, honey, I don’t know for sure. But when you’re back home with God, you just know that everything has got to be okay.”

He looked her straight in the eye for a moment, and, with that painful honesty only an eight-year-old can possess, asked, “Will I ever see him again?”

“Of course, honey!” She hugged him tight. “And that’s a promise straight from God. Here, look.” She drew a Bible from the lazy clutter of her desk. “At the very end of the Bible, God said something just for people like you and me who already miss Johnny so much that we cry. See? Right here. ‘I heard a loud voice speaking . . . “Now God’s home is with people! God will live with them, and they will be God’s people. . . . God will wipe away every tear from their eyes”’” — and she wiped away one of Ben’s tears — “just like that. ““There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain.”’ There. See?” She looked straight at Ben, hiding nothing. “God knows you. God knows me. God knows everybody, and how much we hurt sometimes. And God is going to make sure that we don’t hurt anymore. You will see Johnny again; and the two of you, and the rest of your family, will be together again forever.”

“Are you sure?” Ben asked doubtfully.

“As sure as I can *be!* God’s going to make sure we’re happy forever. Because that’s the way God wants it to be.”

“Then why can’t I go be with him now?” he asked, his chin quivering again. She was rescued by the beep of her phone.

“Hello? Oh, hi. Yes, he’s here with me. We’ve been talking. Oh, don’t worry, I’ll bring him home, and then we’ll talk some more. . . . You’re welcome. ‘Bye.’”

She turned to Ben with sudden inspiration. “Why can’t you go to join Johnny now? Because your Mommies are hurting, too. They need you to help them. They want to see you grow up and make them proud of you. And so do I! Why, if *you* went away, I’d be twice as sad! Together, we’ll cry for a while, and talk, and pray. Slowly, we’ll get over the hurting, and then we’ll remember the good times we had with Johnny. Like that time he blew a bubble so big that when it popped, the gum stuck all over his face and hair. Remember?”

Ben flashed a brief, teary smile.

“But we all need you, Ben, to help us get through these sad days. And we’ll help you, too. Okay?”

He nodded, and a tiny smile poked through the tears again.

“And there’s someone else whose help we’re going to need an awful lot. Can you guess who?”

He nodded solemnly.

“Would you like to ask for God’s help with me?”

He nodded again and took her hand. They closed their eyes and put their heads together.

“Dear God, right now it hurts so terribly. We miss Johnny so. Help Ben and his family get through this tragedy. Give them freely of Your comfort and love. Help us all to support them through their grief. Show them that peace can come back, and that life can go on. Be present with them, and with all who are hurting, every minute of every day, so that one day they will be able to smile again.

“In Jesus’ name we ask it, Amen.”

They raised their heads and Ben reached up and wiped a tear from *her* eye. She hugged him tight, and then said, “Now, do you think you can help me find my car?” Amen.