

This transcript is an accessibility tool to help you get the most from your audio retreat experience. If you are able to, we recommend listening to this retreat [by visiting the YouTube page for this episode](#) or [by downloading the audio file](#).

Episode transcript

Week 5 | “The Wilderness of Grief”

“This week sees the beginning of the church season of Passion Tide. Now we start to turn our eyes forwards to Palm Sunday and Holy Week, and perhaps beyond it too to Easter and our emergence from the wilderness of Lent.

It may seem strange to be thinking about the end of Lent when we still have to celebrate Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and recall the events of his last week: the foot washing and shared Last Supper with his disciples, the betrayal in the garden and arrest, the condemnation and flogging, and the last agonising walk to Calvary. There is such a lot to remember and mourn. But the rapidity of events also makes us painfully aware of how quickly things can change. How the acclamation will turn to jeers and the hands lifted in celebration will become fists raised in anger.

In the space of less than a week, Jesus’ followers will be plunged into a wilderness of grief and mourning. The emptiness of Holy Saturday will gape before them, the first full day of life without Jesus. This wilderness of grief is one that many have experienced, when even the well-known surroundings of home appear unfamiliar and have to be learned all over again in the face of a loved one's death. And although sometimes we might know it's coming and steel ourselves for the moment, at other times it can thrust itself upon us suddenly and unexpectedly.

But however grief arrives, it plunges us straight into a sense of loss and bewilderment. Routine actions feel meaningless and pointless. Life is parched and dry. Looking ahead, is like looking through a fog. This was the wilderness Mary Magdalene found herself trying to negotiate that Sunday morning. This was the wilderness of the disciples in the upper room bolted in an attempt to keep out reality. This was the wilderness of the travellers packing their bags to journey back to Emmaus.

A wilderness of emptiness, of pointlessness, a wilderness of grief.

As we move through the busyness of our lives, it's easy to forget how elastic time can sometimes feel. Even before we walk the stations of the cross on Good Friday, we are planning our Easter celebrations, knowing how the story ends. Not so for the disciples, for whom the evening of Good Friday and Saturday must have seemed interminable, as they wondered how they would ever find a way of escaping their pain and bewilderment.

For Mary Magdalene, alone in the garden by the tomb on Sunday morning, the lushness of her surroundings must have seemed a mockery. The early morning dew glistening on the rich and verdant foliage, a stark contrast to the aridity of life stretching before her.

How could the birds sing so sweetly to greet the rising sun, when the only sound she wanted to hear was a voice that was gone forever, and an empty silence stretched ahead of her. How could the grass grow, the olive trees flourish, the fig tree still bear fruit, when the purpose of her life was gone? How could the work of the gardeners continue when the world she knew had come to an end?

Of course, we know the answer to these questions. She did hear the voice she thought she would never hear again, just her name. And that was enough for her to know that she was not alone, for the flowers to bloom in the desert of her grieving heart. And it was enough for her to run and share this good news, to shout to others in this wilderness that it was wilderness no more, that the water of life had sprung up with the light of the new dawn.

For the couple preparing for a journey to Emmaus, the road out of the wilderness was not found in a single word, a sudden moment, but as they trudged along lamenting, they were joined by another who listened to their stories, heard and gave space for their grieving, and walked the way with them. One whose conversation and teaching made the dusty road more bearable, one to whom they wanted to reach out, one in whose company they felt less alone, less abandoned.

And in the end, it was not a word, but a gesture that revealed him to them. In his breaking of the bread, their sense of wilderness shattered. They were no longer existing in a reality that felt strangely dislocated and empty of meaning, but suddenly filled with the light and joy of understanding. And again, they felt the need to share with others for their experience to rescue others, even as they had been rescued from the pain of their loss.

I wonder how you have experienced rescue from the wildernesses of your life. Throughout this Lent, we've heard how God has met others in so many different ways, at so many points

of need. From the cake of bread and jug of water in the desert, giving strength to continue, to the still, small voice at the heart of the tumult.

From the unseen mysteries of Jacob's wrestling and the hidden workings of God amid the isolation of Esther's Persian palace, to the very human, outstretched hand of Christ, welcoming the wanderer and the exile back to the heart of community. Which of these has been your experience? I wonder also how you have drawn others from their wildernesses.

It might be hard to see ourselves in those mysterious encounters with God that we hear of in the Hebrew scriptures. But perhaps there have still been times when you have been the provider of what's necessary to sustain life. When you've been the one to hang in there, grappling with the torment and self-doubt of someone, who in their wrestling, cannot let you go.

For the God of those encounters is the same as the God of the Gospels; the God who reaches out a hand in the person of Jesus to the outcast and the stranger. The God who speaks a name, who breaks open a loaf, and in doing so turns the world of wilderness on its head. And it's because of this God that we can be confident there will always be an end to our wildernesses.

The voice that brought hope to Mary in the garden that Easter morning, is a voice that we too can hear. Like Mary, we may not recognise it at first, but as we listen, we will hear our name and know it as the sound of streams in the desert, the scent of flowers blooming in the dry air, the light of the sun creeping over the horizon.

Similarly, the breaking of bread that revealed the risen Jesus to the Emmaus travellers gives us too the promise of sharing that meal; not just here in this life with its sorrows and wildernesses, but in God's eternal kingdom with those who have gone before us and will come after us.

Wherever you are as Lent draws to a close and breaks into the celebrations of Easter, may you know the transformative power of God in your encounters, so that as Easter people, with this knowledge and hope in your hearts, you may be ready to call out to others, to offer them the hand of friendship, and to break bread with them, so that they too may encounter God, and their wildernesses too may blossom with the joy of God's promise and the peace of God's presence.”