

“Does Jesus Cry for You?” John 11:1-44

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When I was a kid growing up in the Baptist Church, we had various contests to encourage us to read, study, and memorize the scriptures. In one of these games, we lined up and each of us had to recite a Bible verse from memory (from the King James Version, of course!). And you couldn't use any verses that someone else had already used! A favorite verse in these contests was John 11:35, because it is the shortest verse in the Bible- “Jesus wept.” That's it! But you'd get full credit for it, because it was the whole verse, and anyone could remember that one! Although we didn't think about it at the time, it turns out that that brief verse raises some important questions!

Why did Jesus cry? Did he do that often? What other emotions did Jesus have? Does Jesus cry for you? (which is the title of today's sermon.) This little verse is contained in our scripture lesson for this morning, and we'll try to answer some of those questions, but we've got a few verses to cover before we get there! We begin reading in John 11:1.

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's

glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. (John 11:1-6)

This story is one of the most powerful in John’s gospel; some would say it’s one of the most powerful stories in the whole Bible! It begins with three very close friends of Jesus- the siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who lived just outside of Jerusalem. Jesus often stayed with them when he visited the city. Does it surprise you that Jesus had close friends? Well, he did! He was just as human as you or me. Anyhow, one of these dear friends, Lazarus, became very ill, and his sisters sent word to Jesus. They had seen Jesus heal before and probably expected that he would rush to Bethany to heal his friend. But Jesus does a strange thing. He stays put for two more days! What is that about? Let’s continue the story.

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.”⁸The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?”⁹Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world.¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.”¹¹After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken

him.”¹²The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.”¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep.¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead.¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

(John 11:7-16)

You may recall that at the end of chapter 10, Jesus barely escaped Jerusalem with his life, as the religious leaders wanted to put him to death for the sin of blasphemy! Now he wants to go back to that area, and his disciples are understandably reluctant. Jesus responds with a proverb about walking in the day and night, which seems to mean that the time to act won't last forever, and although acting might be dangerous, Jesus will be with them. Then there is a conversation which is typical in John's gospel, where the listeners misunderstand what Jesus is saying, so he has to try to explain everything again. He tells them flat out that Lazarus is dead, but that he is glad it happened! And, it is Thomas, who gets a bad rap for later doubting Jesus' resurrection, who has the courage to call the other disciples to follow Jesus, even if it means their death. Here's what happened next.

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” (John 11:17-27)

Jesus arrives in Bethany. Lazarus is dead, and Jesus is greeted by his sister, Martha. Her comment, “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,*” may contain some reproach on her part, regarding Jesus’ delayed arrival, but it also contains faith in his ability to heal. She responds to Jesus’ comment that Lazarus will rise again by affirming the belief of many Jews of that day that when the time is right, God will raise everyone from the grave in order to face judgment and rewards. By the

way, this has also been the Christian view regarding death and resurrection since earliest times.

But Jesus wants to say something new here, doesn't he? He says, "*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,*²⁶*and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?* (John 11:25-26)

Here, Jesus is asserting that he has power over death itself, and, that he can give life! He said the same thing a couple times earlier in John's gospel, but it seems especially poignant and relevant in this situation! The first part of his claim, although bold, is fairly easy to understand, "*Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live...*" Death doesn't get the final word for those who follow Jesus. He has power and authority to raise them to new life after death, and will do so! I often use this verse at funerals because of the hope it gives us regarding the death of those we care about. I wouldn't be at all surprised if someone uses it at Aretha Franklin's funeral coming up.

The second part of the statement, "*...and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die,*" is a little more difficult to understand. I think Jesus is talking here about spiritual death- that those who trust in Jesus will never be separated from God. Jesus talks about life and about death in both spiritual and physical terms, and sometimes does so in confusing

ways, as he does here. But don't forget what comes next. He asks Martha if she believes this. She hedges a little bit with her answer, but confesses her belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. This is the strongest statement about Jesus' identity thus far in John's gospel. But the story isn't over!

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" (John 11:28-37)

Now Jesus interacts with Mary. Let's picture the scene. Palestinian custom dictated that anyone who knew Lazarus and his family would come to pay their respects during this first week of mourning. So there would have been a crowd there wailing loudly and even shrieking, as can still be heard at Middle Eastern funerals today. Families even hired professional mourners and musicians as a way to give greater honor to the departed! So it was a loud, chaotic scene when Mary comes to Jesus. And then we learn something very important about Jesus.

He was moved with compassion by the weeping of Mary and her friends. The Greek word we translate as "greatly disturbed" also contains a sense of anger, perhaps anger over the power of death in our fallen world. But we learn from observing Jesus that God is not a distant, remote, unfeeling God, as the Greeks believed God was. God, as revealed in his Son, Jesus, is a God who understands our pain and sorrows and cares about them! Yes, Jesus cries for you! That gives us hope and a sense of security as we navigate the tragedies of life. And for that, we give thanks to God! Let's read the end of the story.

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I

not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me.⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” (John 11:38-44)

This is the most astonishing miracle recorded in any of the gospels. The Jews believed that the spirit of a person hung around for three days after death, hoping to be reunited with the body. The fact that Lazarus had been dead four days meant that he was really dead, with no hope of resuscitation! He wasn't "mostly dead," like Wesley in "The Princess Bride." He was dead dead. In fact, practical Martha expresses concern that he has decayed so much in that hot climate that they shouldn't open the tomb. As the King James version so eloquently expresses it, "He stinketh!" Jesus isn't deterred. He orders the tomb opened, and prays aloud so that everyone will know that God is doing this miracle through him, and then calls Lazarus out of the grave.

What a scene that must have been! Lazarus, bound with cloths, shuffling his way out of the tomb like some kind of mummy. People,

mouths agape, crying, shouting, laughing, praying. Imagine the conversations between the now lively Lazarus and his friends! There's more to the story, but that will have to wait for next week. For now, we can reflect and rejoice in the fact that God understands our sorrows as well as our joys, and has the power to bring new beginnings out of the most dire of circumstances- even your circumstances!