

Sermon for Sunday – March 26 – Lent 5

John 11: 1-44

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the wonderings of our minds reveal your wisdom in our time, God of life and light. Amen

I have so many questions.

Like, why are all the readings this Lent so very long?

Why did Jesus dawdle when he receives word of Lazarus's illness.

Why did Jesus tell his disciples that Lazarus is "asleep" rather than dead.

And why did Jesus choose to bring Lazarus back; does a man who's been

dead for four days want to come back? After all, in just a few verses

beyond this lesson in scripture we learn that the chief priests planned to put

Lazarus to death along with Jesus - because Lazarus had been raised and

this was causing many to believe in Jesus the authorities felt he had so go

too. Lazarus's new life - was as a marked man.

And I don't understand why Lazarus virtually disappears from the gospel

story once his grave clothes fall away. Why is he never heard from again?

Did the authorities catch him? Did he have to go into hiding?

Perhaps you have some questions of your own about today's lesson.

Today's story invites so many questions. But there is one thing in this

story that I understand very well. Something I cling to, "Jesus wept". For

me this is the heart of the story: grief takes hold of Jesus and breaks open

his heart. Jesus, the most accurate revelation of the divine, we know,

stands at the grave of his friend and cries.

It has taken me a long time to appreciate Jesus tears in this story.

When I first encountered this story, I didn't understand why Jesus cried

when he knew that Lazarus was about to come back to life. Why mourn

when joy is minutes away? I didn't understand why Jesus cried when he

intentionally staying away from Bethany during Lazarus's illness. Like some

of the onlookers in the story, I responded to Jesus' grief with contempt:

"could not he who opened the eyes of the blind have kept this man from

dying"?

Overtime though I've come to cherish Jesus' tears. Maybe even more than I cherish the miracle that follows them. Here are some of the reasons why:

When Jesus weeps, he validates human grief. His brokenness in the face of Mary's sorrow tosses aside all forms of Christian thought that suggest that grief is simply a sign of weakness or lack of faith. When Jesus cries, he assures Mary not only that her beloved brother is worth crying for, but also that she is worth crying **with**. Through his tears, Jesus calls all of us into the holy work of empathy. We are not faithless when we grieve, we are honest and as faithful as Christ.

It has been interesting to me to experience the shift our society is making in our rituals around death, in particular funeral.

When I first began in ministry, when someone died, within four to five days the funeral would be held. When a family lost a loved one everything stopped and care for the family consumed those close by. In the fresh blush of grief and loss - the community gathered – to stand beside – and to hold the family in a very concrete way. Vacations were delayed, or folks who were away, would make connections when they returned - but funeral plans moved forward. Folks took time away from work in order to be present at the funeral, and others traveled, as they were able. Regardless of the depth of interruption - funeral plans moved forward. At the raw edge of grief and in the full-on depth of pain the community gathered, to hold, to honour, to acknowledge, to be present – to cry.

Funerals are different now, Covid has had a significant impact on our traditions. Those first raw pangs of grief, of loss, and disorientation are now navigated in private. The funeral ritual is postponed or suspended until everyone can make room for it in their lives. Even the church asks families to wait until there is an opening on the church's calendar. The community still comes – to stand beside and hold a family - but they are holding the family at a different place on the complicated road of grief. The tears shed in this place are different than ones shed at the beginning of the journey.

I'm not saying that the old way of doing things was better than it is now but I want us to remember that raw, messy, confusing, loud and stinky - first blush of grief that Jesus walked into with Martha and Mary, it still

needs comforting companions. Perhaps the challenge before us is – as people who walk the way of Jesus – finding new ways of being present to those who cry those deep tears of initial loss. For these are the tears that Jesus, shed and showed up for. It was from this, raw, messy, confusing, loud and stinky place that he brought new life. And we can too.

When Jesus cries, he assures all of us that our beloved ones are worth crying for, and that **we** are worth crying **with**.

Another reason I appreciate Jesus tears is because when Jesus cries, his actions speak to the complexity of faith. At no point does Jesus expect faith to be disembodied, or sanitized, or simple. Martha expresses resentment and anger at Jesus delay and in the next breath voices trust in his power. Mary blames Jesus for Lazarus's death, but she does so on her knees, in a posture of belief and respect. Likewise, Jesus face is wet with tears when he prays to God and resurrects his friend. This is what real faith looks like; it is complex, and it is filled with contradictions - faithfulness is messy. Jesus tears, wash free my attempt to keep my faith neat and tidy. His tears open my fragile, inconsistent, doubt riddled heart – to the possibly of new life.

And finally, when Jesus weeps, he shows us that sorrow is a powerful agent for change. In Lazarus's story, it is shared grief that leads to transformation. Jesus experiences the devastation of death so intensely, that he recognizes the immediate need to restore life. His shattering leads to resurrection. Perhaps Jesus tears can stir us in a similar way.

What breaks our hearts?

What splits us open?

What enrages us to the point of breaking down?

Can we mobilize into those spaces?

Can we work for transformation in our places of devastation?

Can our sorrow lead us to new life?

I hope we can make Jesus tears our guide. I hope his honest expression of sorrow will give us the permission, and the push we need to not only do the work of grief and healing, but also to move with powerful compassion into a world that needs our empathy, our love and our transformative energy.

Thanks be to our God. Amen