

Lazarus Dying, Jesus Weeping, and Resurrection Living
John 11:17-44

Jesus wept. It's the shortest verse in Scripture, and perhaps the most misunderstood. . . And it is all tied in with Jesus' earth-shattering declaration: I am the Resurrection and the the Life. To begin with, Jesus wept. Why do we cry? Many reasons.

Babies cry when their world isn't right. They cry if scared or hungry or wet or tired. Adults have learned to control their tears a little better. Tears are reserved for times of intense emotion. Some years ago a young lady that I had dated for a little while and I decided not to see each other any more. She told her mother. Her mother began to cry. . . .Tears of joy.

And there are tears of sadness, tears of sorrow. Tears of loss, tears of frustration. We cry tears of sorrow at funerals and athletes cry when they lose and sometimes even when they win. Tears stay with us. They haunt us, they etch deep into our souls. Because they express deep feeling.

And today, in our Scripture, a simple verse: Jesus wept. The only time that John allows us to see this intimately into the heart of Jesus, and so we know it is important. But the question is, why? What caused Jesus to cry, to weep?

It all seems so simple, because this is a very familiar story, this story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Lazarus was Jesus' friend. He was dead. Jesus was sad. So he cried. End of story. Except that it is a little more complicated than that.

For whatever they are, these are not typical tears of sadness, for you see, if we had started our Scripture at the beginning of the 11th chapter, we would have found out that Jesus already knows that he is going to bring Lazarus back to life. In fact, he stays where he is an extra two days, and when he finally arrives at Bethany it is now four days after Lazarus has died. That's significant, for it was believed back then that the soul left the body after three days. Jesus has immeasurable power, to go beyond all our self-imposed cultural and spiritual limits.

And just to make sure we know these are not typical tears of sadness, John quotes the Jews as saying, "see how he loved him." Now, you have to know something about how John uses the Jews in his Gospel.

We all know that all the earliest followers of Jesus were Jews. But by the time John is writing, the decisive split has occurred between the Jewish and Christian believers, so John uses "Jews" as shorthand for those who do not understand Jesus. The Jews we encounter in our Scripture this morning are not bad people, in fact, they are filled with compassion and seek to comfort. They just don't get it.

But they are symbols of those who fail to understand who Jesus really is. They are the ones who always manage to get it wrong. For those of you old enough to remember The Andy Griffith Show, the Jews are for John like Barney Fife, always getting it wrong.

If one man in the choir is off-key, it is Barney Fife. If Barney takes out his one bullet to shoot his

pistol, we know already it will be his own foot that is shot. If Barney is in charge of a prisoner, you already know that the prisoner is going to go free and Barney is going to end up behind bars.

So, when the Jews see Jesus crying and say, "Look how sad he is," we know that they have gotten it wrong. But why are they wrong? And what is the reason Jesus wept?

Frustration. And frustration not at the Jews, but at the believers. For they still could not see who he really is.

Situation: his earthly ministry is drawing to a close.

In John, a central part of Jesus' ministry: to help us believe in the glorious and risen life that God can give. But his time is drawing to a close. In fact, Thomas half expected that if they went to Bethany to see Mary and Martha, that they would be arrested and executed.

So they go to Bethany. Martha meets him and chastises him, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." And here is where the frustration begins. Because Martha is believing that all of God's activity is confined to the here and now, to this side of the grave. My brother died. God must have failed. You could have prevented it.

But you see, Jesus invites us to a deeper walk with God. A walk so deep that not even death can

destroy the relationship between humanity and God. But Martha is having none of that. So Jesus explains, "Your brother will rise again." Martha responds with some vague concept about some sort of resurrection on some last day.

Jesus tries again, "I am the resurrection and I am the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live." This is at the very heart of our faith. That what looks like death or defeat to the world, is actually life and victory. It's what keeps us going.

To know when you look at your brother and he dies that God is still involved and there will be goodness and blessing in God's own way in God's own power. It's why this church made such a response after Katrina. In Jesus is the power to make new, to rebuild. Martha, Jesus says, I am the Resurrection and the life. Can you believe it. Do you believe it?"

Her words say yes but her heart says no. Do you believe I am the Resurrection? Well, I believe you are the Messiah, the one coming into the world. But nothing at all that in Jesus is Resurrection.

Resurrection which speaks both of life the other side of the grave, and life this side as well. In Jesus, we don't have to die to experience new life, new hope, new promises, new beginnings. Because Jesus is on earth, so is new life, Godly life, blessed life, life which is fulfilled in eternity. But Martha can't grasp any of this.

When she goes to her sister Mary, she doesn't tell her that the Lord or even the Messiah, and certainly not the resurrection is in town. She merely says, "the teacher is here." Faced with Jesus, the Resurrection, the one who tears down those barriers of life and death, she sees none of that. He's just a teacher. Who came too late.

So Mary comes out and chastises Jesus the way Martha had, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." The Bible then tells us that Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. The original Greek uses a word that expresses ultimate frustration, chair-kicking frustration. And you can imagine why. Time is running short and people still do not understand. And it is not just the Jews who do not understand, but Jesus' own followers, his very own friends. To them, life is just what you see. And if Lazarus is dead, then God has failed.

And this frustration is now expressed in these famous tears that Jesus wept. Because his followers could not see that God was acting in Jesus. That God was acting even in the face of death. And now the crowd gets into the act. They sniff, "Couldn't this guy who made the blind man see have prevented this?" And Jesus' frustration wells again.

Let's go to the tomb. Jesus is resurrection, but Martha still will have none of it. Take away the stone. But it's already been four days. In the poetry of KJV: "He stinketh." And besides, after three days and this now the fourth, what life can there be?

And Jesus, resigned, frustrated, tries again, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

And he prays to God, for the sake of the crowd, that "they may believe that you have sent me."

And Lazarus comes out, alive. And Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go."

Now, we could say Jesus did Lazarus no favor. For Lazarus has already entered into eternity, into heaven. And gets called back. But you see, to say Jesus is Resurrection and Life is to proclaim that Jesus is Lord both of life, this life, and heaven, resurrected life. To live this life, with Jesus, despite its challenges and difficulties, still brings blessing.

Otherwise, to restore Lazarus to life this side of heaven is just a mean trick, if you think about it.

And what happens to Lazarus? We are never told, because now the focus shifts again to Jesus.

Some come to believe in Jesus because Lazarus is alive. And others go to tell on Jesus. And those whose belief system is so entrenched decide that Jesus is too dangerous, and plot his death.

And you and I are asked again to decide what we think about Jesus. Is there Resurrection power in him? Do we believe in the possibility of new life, no matter what the situation?

Some people let the death of a loved one or some other terrible event shape the rest of their lives. God allows us to grieve, but I don't think God wants for grief to become the defining event of our lives.

Others:

Give up on marriages. Give up on children. But Jesus invites us to live in hope and to seek God's renewing presence even in the worst of situations. GREG JENKS. A hope made real for one day when he raised Lazarus from the dead. A hope made real for eternity when Jesus himself rose from death to life on Easter Day.

So what about us? What do our lives say about our faith in Jesus, The Resurrection and the Life? Do we believe Jesus' power to transform, to make new, is greater than any challenge, any sadness, any problem we face? Do we believe in Jesus is the power to raise us to new life, both in this life and the next?

I am the resurrection and the life, Jesus said. Dare we believe it? Amen.