



Roanoke, Virginia

November 3, 2024

“Jesus Wept”

John 11:17-44

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Introduction:

Our passage this Sunday forms the climax of a lengthy narrative in John 11. Before our passage, Jesus received word that his dear friend Lazarus was ill. Rather than rushing to Bethany to help his friend, Jesus stayed where he was for two more days. His delay not only allows Lazarus to die from his illness (11:17), but it also confuses Jesus’ disciples. We arrive at John 11, v 17, when Jesus himself has finally come to Bethany.

John 11:17-44. ¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’ ²³ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ ²⁴ Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ ²⁵ Jesus said to her, ‘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?’ ²⁷ She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’



²⁸ When 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.' ³⁵Jesus 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?'

³⁸ Then 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 for four days.' ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.' ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' ⁴⁴The 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.'

There is a lot happening in John Chapter 11. Jesus' best friends have let him know beloved Lazarus is ill. Knowing how dire the situation is, Jesus dawdles, takes his sweet time. Sure enough, Lazarus dies, yet even then, Jesus doesn't rush to comfort the sisters. The two women, Mary and Martha, are grieving in their own ways, and Jesus shows up too late to do their brother any good.

In the meantime, the community has arrived to console Mary and Martha in their grief. When Jesus finally arrives, Martha goes out to greet him and rage a little bit. Mary stays indoors. I picture her overwhelmed and exhausted, not ready to encounter the one whom she trusted to save her brother.

Grief is a complicated emotion. None of us really know how we will respond when it comes. Sometimes, it can feel like there are social expectations around how to grieve properly or even politely. My mom shared that when her father died (she was 27 years old and pregnant with me), her mother told the three children not to cry. Nana said that they knew their father was with the Lord, there was no reason to outwardly grieve, not even at his funeral. When first lady Mary Todd Lincoln lost her second son to illness at his young age of 11-years-old, she was inconsolable. Abraham Lincoln reportedly drew her to the window and pointed out a "lunatic asylum," telling his wife: "Try to control your grief, or it will drive you mad, and we may have to send you there."²¹



Grief and mourning have always been influenced by and judged according to the social and cultural norms of the time and place.

Dr. Elena Lister, a professor of clinical psychiatry and co-author of “Giving Hope: Conversations With Children About Illness, Death, and Loss,” explains what we know: “Judging others’ grief is a way we try to protect ourselves from it...Grief makes us horribly uncomfortable; to see other people grieving reminds us we are mortal, we could die ourselves or lose people we love...We need to distance ourselves, and one of the ways we distance ourselves from pain is by putting it down, judging —‘you’re grieving too much,’ ‘you’re grieving too little.’ Either way you’re saying, ‘that’s not me.’”ⁱⁱ

The story of Jesus at Lazarus’s tomb is such a portrait of grief. The disciples are in disbelief. Martha is outside and angry. Mary sits behind a closed door. The neighbors have brought the first century version of casseroles and comfort food. And, finally, there’s Jesus, who avoided it all about as long as he could.

And then, finally, Jesus “began to weep.”

We might be surprised at this emotion from Jesus. Is he caught off guard? Doesn’t he know what he’s about to do? In this instance, we see not only Jesus’ presence, but his own experience of grief. Jesus does not ignore or remain detached from the very real suffering Lazarus endured and the grief his community experiences. Instead, Jesus mourns too.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus weeps for the reality of death itself, that he can’t take it away; that he himself will have to face it. At the end of the day, yes, the resurrection will overcome death, but death still has to happen.^{iv} Jesus’ grief is more than just his own. It also acknowledges the reality of the world. In the text, because of Jesus’ delay great confusion ensues. In our reality, we experience a world of confusion, a time when we wait for Jesus to show up and make it all go away (whether it be the death of a hope, an ideal, or a loved one). Whatever that moment is, Jesus weeps. You don’t have to grieve alone.

Deb Thomas writes that when Jesus weeps, he legitimizes our human grief. After all, lament is an important part of the human experience. Yes, resurrection is around the corner, but in this story, the promise of joy doesn’t cancel out the essential work of grief.

- *When Jesus weeps, he honors the complexity of our gains and losses, our sorrows and joys.* In Lazarus’s case, his future would be nothing like his past. He will forever be known as the “One



Who Returned.” Perhaps this will make him a hero; perhaps this will make him a pariah. Either way, things will never be the same.

- *When Jesus weeps, he respects the necessity of silence, the sanctity of the wordless and unsayable.* Sometimes there is nothing to be said in the face of loss; sometimes tears are our best and most honorable language.
- *When Jesus weeps, he honors the nuances of faith.* Mary and Martha believe in resurrection, and still they grieve. Grief and belief can go hand in hand.
- *When Jesus weeps, he acknowledges his own mortality.* He knows that the end is imminent, he knows that his time with his friends is almost over, he knows that it’s nearly time to say goodbye. In crying, he asserts powerfully that it is okay to yearn for life. It’s okay to cling to this beautiful world.
- *And finally, when Jesus weeps, he shows us that sorrow is a powerful catalyst for change.”* In the death of Lazarus, it is his shared lament that leads to transformation. It is because of Jesus’ experience of the devastation of death that he recognizes the immediate need to restore life. His heartbreak leads to resurrection.

One thing is for certain in this gospel of good news: we were not made for the grave. Something in us, something Jesus fully recognizes and understands, is that we were created for life. This is why Jesus chooses resurrection – for Lazarus, for himself, and for us.

This is a truth we proclaim every Sunday, but it’s a truth with perhaps even more meaning on All Saints Sunday. Consider the crowd in John’s story. They witnessed Lazarus’ return to life, they heard Jesus’ command to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Even God’s word of resurrection is not quite complete without our participation. It’s not so much that God needs us to do the work of resurrection, but that God’s work also catches up, impacts, and transforms those of us who witness.

I believe in resurrection. I believe that God is always and everywhere in the business of making us more fully and abundantly alive. I believe in life after our physical deaths. I believe that the great, good news of the Gospel is that *Jesus actually conquered death* — as Deb Thomas writes, all death, every death, Death itself.

In light of God’s resurrection promise, death no longer need terrify us, not the death of the loved ones we remember this day, nor our own. And, just as importantly, because of God’s resurrection promise, the life we share in this world here and now no longer terrifies us either.^{vi} Violence and war, the slaughter of innocents, the rhetoric and politics of fear and division – these



are heartbreaking elements of life in this world, but they are not the truth about this life. They do not have the last word either. Alive in the hope of God’s promise of resurrection, we can stand against them and offer a life of living testimony, rooted in love and grace.

The God who raised Lazarus and Jesus from the dead still loves us, invites us to participate in God’s resurrection work. We have a host of saints who’ve gone on and prepared the way before us. We have a host of saints here and now who sit and stand alongside us.

The good news of the Gospel is that the God who weeps for us and with us is also the God who resurrects. God is not finished yet. May we be instruments of God’s resurrection power and life here and now.

ⁱ Perri Klass, New York Times “We Will All Mourn, We Will All Be Mourned” (May 29, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/29/opinion/why-we-judge-each-others-grief.html?>

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Alicia D. Meyers, “Commentary on John 11:32-44” WorkingPreacher.org, Nov 3, 2024, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/all-saints-day/commentary-on-john-1132-44-6>.

^{iv} Karoline Lewis, Joy J. Moore, and Matt Skinner, Sermon Brainwave Podcast #989: All Saints Sunday (Year B) – Nov 3, 2024, aired Oct 22, 2024.

^v Deb Thomas, “When Jesus Wept,” Journey with Jesus (Mar 19, 2023), <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3547-when-jesus-wept>.

^{vi} David Lose, “All Saints B: Saints Here and Now,” In the Meantime (Oct 30, 2018), <https://www.davidlose.net/2018/10/all-saints-b-saints-here-and-now/>.

