

When Jesus Wept

John 11:1-45

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“Jesus wept.” This is the shortest verse in the Bible; and, amazingly, to begin with, though it’s a verse about weeping, it has produced a good bit of laughter. Someone wants to make a joke, wants to joke about how religious they are, about how much scripture they know; and so, to prove it, they quote this verse. “Jesus wept.”

I once was invited to speak at a monthly women’s meeting. It was not at my church; it wasn’t a Presbyterian church. I arrived at the meeting early, so I sat through the preliminaries—the opening devotion, the treasurer’s report, the offering, the announcements. Then there was a curious thing, the Bible verse roll call. The circle members had all committed to memorize a scripture verse each month, and when the president went down the alphabetized list of names, each woman called was to stand and recite the new verse that she had learned. The Bible verse roll call began, and a vast patchwork quilt of scripture began to emerge. One woman recited this verse: “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’” Somebody else offered these words from Joshua to the tribes of Israel: “Now if you be unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Somebody else shared this verse from a Psalm: “I will sing of thy steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim thy faithfulness to all generations.”

On and on down the roll they went—each woman contributing something new to the rich and colorful patchwork which they were weaving together. There were verses from the gospels, from the epistles, from the Old Testament prophets; and some of the verses were long and involved! Didn’t matter; they had memorized them just for this occasion. And finally, the president came to the end of her list with the one woman in the room whose last name started with a Y. She was also the one woman in the room, apparently, who had forgotten her assignment. So, with a red face and a shaky voice, she stood up and recited that great scriptural ace in the hole: “Jesus wept.” There was good-natured laughter. We often laugh about that verse.

But the verse is not about laughter; and, beneath what’s funny about it, if we think about it even for an instant, we grasp its power. “Jesus wept.” It’s an easy verse for us to understand. It doesn’t take a roomful of commentaries to help us figure out what it means. We know about weeping. And we appreciate this testimony from John’s gospel that assures us that Jesus knew about it, too. Jesus wept because someone had died. And, sometimes surprisingly, we find ourselves weeping, too, even when it’s for someone we didn’t even know.

I’ve been haunted, for example, and I suspect many of you have, about that story which broke in the newspaper almost a month ago now. Someone’s skeletal remains were found in a wooded lot in south DeKalb County. That was about it, at first. But, since then, there have been many more stories as new details have come forth. First

came the news that it was a child, somewhere between five and seven years old. Then it was established that it was a male child, an African-American. Then we learned that the body had been there since last summer or last fall. Then from the faintest of evidence—like the fact that his sneakers were tied in double knots—it was speculated that he came from some kind of home in which he was loved and cared for. Then a forensic artist came and constructed a face and a body which might come close to resembling the child, and the picture of what this child might have looked like has been in the paper. But, as of yet, no one has stepped forward. No connections have been made that might identify this child, that might locate him with a family and a home and a community.

I read the paper again on Friday, and saw the story about the service held in the Methodist church near where he was found. People from different faith traditions came out and prayed for him, and then three religious leaders blessed and poured libations on the grave in which, someday, he may be buried if his body remains unclaimed. The lady who organized the service said, “I feel as if he’s my child.”¹ It was enough to make me weep, sitting there in the sunroom on a Friday morning—thinking about the seven-year-old child whom I had just driven to school. The sadness of anyone’s dying can surprise us with how much it moves us. We know about weeping, and it comforts us, at some level, to be reminded that Jesus did, too.

But before we get to Jesus’s weeping in this story, we notice something that troubles us, as well. It’s near the beginning of our text, where John writes that, while Lazarus was still alive back in Bethany but just barely, his sisters Mary and Martha sent a message to Jesus. “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” Lazarus was so dear to Jesus, so well-known to him, that it wasn’t even necessary to identify him by name, which makes what happens next all the more difficult to understand. As John describes it, Jesus seemed remarkably unmoved by the plight of his good friend. He heard the news and then immediately turned philosophical. “This illness does not lead to death,” he said; “rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” He just blew him off! It may be theologically correct, what he said. There may be some important and timeless lesson to glean from that statement. But, in that moment—when his good friend was dying—it seemed downright callous for Jesus to say such a thing. This one who was able to weep in one moment was also apparently disengaged, in other moments, from the plight of Lazarus— and, to put it more broadly, from the human condition.

You understand Mary’s and Martha’s dismay, don’t you? When it’s your brother gasping for breath on the deathbed—your sister, your husband, your wife, your child, your parent—you’re not looking for some timeless truth about death. You don’t want a telegram that explains it all. It may be that you’re not even looking for someone who can change things, or who has something powerful to say. But what you are looking for is someone who, instinctively, is willing to drop everything to get there and make the coffee and handle the telephone and, in a host of other simple ways, to stand with you and shoulder the pain with you and—most importantly—suffer with you.

Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus, and Jesus seemed remarkably unmoved. He didn’t rush to the bedside—didn’t even send flowers. He just threw off some truth about the glory of God, and, as John puts it, “after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”

He was so blasé about the whole business that, later, when he finally did get good

and ready to go to Bethany, it was too late for Lazarus and he got an earful from Mary and Martha. Each one of them, in turn, said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” They would scarcely have been, in that moment, the best witnesses to testify to how good a pastor Jesus was, or how engaged he was, even, with the human condition in general.

Nonetheless, when Jesus asked them to show him to Lazarus’ tomb, they said, “Lord, come and see.” And when he came and saw, Jesus wept. Jesus wept, John writes, and the bystanders said, “See how he loved him.” What they saw was one doing what one does when one has lost a friend. What they saw in Jesus was what others see in us when we weep over our losses of those we have loved. Who needs to explain that? You love—you can’t help but love—but then comes that season of time when you weep; for love, as powerful as it is, cannot ultimately protect and shield our loved ones from danger or from the limits of life. We would wish that love could do that, could be that powerful. But sometimes, love’s power is expressed not in omnipotence but in the capacity to suffer *with*, and then we weep. We weep for ourselves and for what we have lost; and sometimes our weeping connects us so profoundly not just with our own suffering but with suffering over all that is too soon taken away. We weep until our tears are spent; and, even years later, we discover how easily something triggers, and we are able to weep again. “See how he loved him,” the bystanders said as they watched Jesus weep.

But we have to be careful here, because these bystanders seldom report things correctly in the gospel of John. They are like Kraemer in all those “Seinfeld” reruns—often well-meaning, often all too willing to help, but rarely able to read things just right. So we need to wonder if their interpretation of this moment is the most reliable one. Maybe they saw that Jesus wept, and then concluded the obvious—that he wept for his friend. But maybe, beneath the obvious, there was something very important in his weeping that they missed.

John writes that the setting for this story was dangerous territory for Jesus. It was not far from Jerusalem, where trouble was brewing. The disciples knew that, and reminded Jesus before he went on this visit to Bethany to see about Lazarus that he had enemies there—religious authorities who were so upset with his agenda that they wanted to stone him. And when he finally insisted on going there anyway, they were so aware of how high the stakes were that Thomas put it this way: “Let us also go that we may die with him.” The point was that, at this moment in the gospel of John, the drumbeat drawing Jesus toward Jerusalem, and his last conflict with these authorities, was getting louder and louder; and in that atmosphere of tension, anything redemptive he did in Bethany would cause that conflict to come sooner. Jesus was on his way to death—not just Lazarus’ death, but his own death. That was what that seemingly ill-timed and disengaged statement had meant, earlier in this text, when Jesus first learned of Lazarus’ illness. Listen to it again, and ponder what’s prophetic about it: “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.” All of that was code language for crucifixion. With all of the opposition growing, Jesus knew, somehow, that calling Lazarus from the tomb would be an act so provocative as to hasten his appointment with the tomb.

Jesus wept when he came and saw Lazarus, and when the bystanders said, “See how he loved him,” they only got about half of it—the obvious half. What they didn’t get was that he was also weeping for himself. For to choose life, real life—not just the

sort of life characterized by breathing and displaying all the vital signs, not just the sort of life which our consumeristic society thrusts upon us, but instead the sort of life which is given for others—to choose that kind of life is costly, and the extravagant cost of it is enough to make anyone weep. In his own words elsewhere, “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” No wonder he wept.

There is no reference in the Gospel of John to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, but here is as close as John gets to that particular scene, I suspect—here at the tomb of Lazarus, when Jesus wept.

In England, there’s a cathedral in which, off to one side of the nave, a small chapel sits. It is called the Chapel of Christ in Gethsemane. It’s an almost cave-like space, and thus stands in sharp contrast to the exhilarating height and light of the cathedral itself. Gethsemane means “the place of pressure,” and makes us think of the struggles Jesus had with his impending suffering and death. The focal point in this chapel is the mosaic that covers the wall behind the altar, and what dominates that mosaic is a huge, haunting figure with wings—the Angel of Agony,” it is named. In the center of the mosaic, held in an outstretched hand by that angel, is a cup. It is the cup that Jesus had in mind when, in another gospel, he said, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”² The cup, of course, is the cup of suffering, the cup of sacrifice.

But what’s interesting about that mosaic is that Jesus himself is nowhere to be seen. So the cup the angel of agony offers is extended no longer to him, but to me or to you or to whomever else happens to enter that cave-like space.

I know of so many of you who are in these days accepting that cup, that bitter cup. It’s not because you want it, because you ask for it (who in their right mind would ask for it?); but rather, in life’s mystery, it’s because that cup is thrust upon you. Someone you loved is taken from you before any sense in which it was time, or some extraordinary commitment is required of you that you are not eager to accept but must, or you yourself are aware of some drumbeat or other getting louder and louder. And the cup is extended. Some of you are draining it all the way to the bottom, and you know—more than the rest of us—what it means to face the awesome power of Death and all of Death’s little surrogates in our world.

And maybe when all is said and done, it is the case that when Jesus wept, he wept for that, too. For, after all, in that place of pressure, the life which soon he would give up was to be given not just for Lazarus but for the whole world—even for me and you. And because he gave it, and gave it willingly, Lazarus has become a reminder not of hopes defeated and dreams crushed and life snuffed out before its time, but rather of the bold Christian proclamation that, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Death is not the last word. This means that the cup of suffering is not the last word, either. You who drink the cup will not drink it forever.

A few weeks ago, Bob Waymer, a new member here, gave me a copy of James Weldon Johnson’s famous book *God’s Trombones*. It’s a book that captures the poetry and the drama of African-American preaching and story telling, and I’ve enjoyed reading through this classic of a book. Somewhere in the book there’s a prayer which soars through the heights of heaven with confidence, and then which ends like this:

And now, O Lord—

When I've done drunk my last cup of sorrow—
When I've been called everything but a child of God—
When I'm done travelling up the rough side of the mountain—
O—Mary's Baby—
When I start down the steep and slippery steps of death—
When this old world begins to rock beneath my feet—
Lower me to my dusty grave in peace
To wait for that great gittin' up morning...³

When Jesus was done weeping, he handed his own life to God for safekeeping, and then he shouted into the darkness of the tomb where Lazarus lay. If the truth be known, he didn't just shout but he screamed. He screamed out everything he had to give, and it was a scream which echoes down throughout all of time.

It was a scream loud enough to wake the dead.⁴

Notes

¹ R. Robin McDonald, "Unknown Child Mourned," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 19 March 1999, sec. C1.

² Luke 22:42.

³ James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York: Penguin Books, 1927), 14-15.

⁴ Throughout this sermon, I'm grateful for the exegetical work and sermon approach which the Rev. Patrick J. Willson prepared in a paper presented on this text at the 1999 meeting of the Moveable Feast, in Ann Arbor, Michigan.