

## SERMON

John 11: 32 - 44

A few years ago, I was undergoing a course called Clinical Pastoral Education and one of the most challenging things for me to do was to be with someone who was crying. Tears made me very uncomfortable. I wanted to change the subject, offer a tissue and break the silence, or say something funny; and do whatever I could to cheer them up, to make the tears stop.

With much practise and training, I have changed, at least in that way. I have now learned to 'sit in the awkward' and become comfortable with tears, because there are a lot of things that happen that cause them, and it is a privilege in Pastoral Care to be with people in many of those circumstances.

And so, I have learned not just to become *comfortable* with those tears, but even to *welcome* them, when I am with someone facing sadness or grief. Because tears are an important way to show our emotions, and showing our emotions is an important way to stay emotionally healthy, especially when we are going through a difficult time.

### Tears in Today's Scripture Readings

Tears are featured in all three of today's appointed scripture readings.

In Isaiah, we are told that there will come a day when "*the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces*" (*Isaiah 25:8*)

In Revelation, we are told something similar. When the holy city descends from heaven, and God makes his home among us, God "*will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more*" (*Revelation 21:4*). All things will be made new, and tears will no longer be needed.

Today's gospel reading (*John 11:32-44*) also features tears, but in a very different way. It is Jesus himself who is in tears. Not Jesus only. Mary and Martha and all of their friends and family are also in tears, because Lazarus has died. And Jesus was not there to save him. Lazarus was laid in a tomb, four days ago, and they are still grieving. And Jesus coming to them has only deepened their grief. If he had only come sooner, after all, Lazarus would not have died.

Jesus saw them all weeping, and was greatly disturbed. And he wept. Jesus did not wipe away their tears, or remind them of the promise in Isaiah. Not yet. First, he wept with them. And that makes this a very different story, and a very important story. The Son of God weeps. I think this is one of the most powerful moments in scripture. And I want to start there this morning...wondering why Jesus weeps.

## Jesus Wept, but Why?

I can think of several reasons. The first and most obvious reason why Jesus wept is because his friend has died, and he wasn't there to save him. Jesus is sad. He is grieving. He may even feel a little guilty. He has put Mary and Martha – and Lazarus – through a lot, simply by delaying his coming to them. It is all part of the divine plan, but that doesn't make it easy. For them, or for him. And so, he wept. And by doing so, he gave all who follow him the permission and freedom to weep, too, whenever and wherever sadness finds us.

But I think that there is more behind Jesus' tears than simply giving permission to others to grieve and to weep. And more, I think, than simply grief over Lazarus' death. I think that Jesus is weeping for all who have ever died. In fact, I think that he is weeping that there is death in the world at all. I think that he is weeping for our loved ones who have died. And he is weeping for all who will still suffer the cruel fate of death. He is weeping for everyone who has had to let go of someone they love. Death, after all, is the last great enemy, according to Scripture. And it is a terrible enemy, indeed. And Jesus knows it. He has come to fight this enemy, and to defeat it. But first, he must weep.

Part of the reason Jesus weeps in the face of death is surely because death was not necessary. It is the consequence of sin. You might remember that Adam and Eve – in God's original design – were not created to face death. It was their sin that brought death into the world. And it is our sin that keeps death in the world. So, when Jesus weeps for his good friend, Lazarus, I think that he is weeping that there is death in the world at all. Weeping that there is sin in our world. And weeping that sin continues to hold so many people captive in so many different ways.

But there are still more reasons why Jesus may be weeping. He may also be weeping because he knows the price he will have to pay to raise Lazarus. He knows that the defeat of the great enemy of death will come only at great cost. He knows that the only way to defeat this great enemy is by his own sacrificial death. In fact, his raising of Lazarus is the miracle that tips the scales, and angers the religious leaders enough that they begin to get serious about their plot to kill Jesus.

Jesus is not afraid of death. He knows it will not be permanent. But it will still be hard. For him, for his mother, for his disciples, and for all who put their trust in him. It will test them, like nothing else had. And this, too, may be behind his tears.

And then, there is one other reason why Jesus may be weeping. Perhaps it is in part because Jesus knows what his friend, Lazarus, will face after Jesus raises him from the dead. Much of the world will not be happy about this miracle. Just as the religious leaders begin seriously plotting to kill Jesus, they also begin plotting to kill Lazarus. To some, Lazarus is probably something of a freak show. The guy that lay dead in a tomb for four days before being raised. For others, he is a symbol of how dangerous Jesus is. And so, Lazarus might have preferred to be left alone rather than be brought back by Jesus. And, in fact, there is an ancient tradition in the church which tells us that Lazarus never smiled again after he was raised from the dead. So perhaps, then, Jesus is weeping in part because he knows that he is getting ready to bring his friend Lazarus back into a sinful, broken world.

### **Wiping Away Our Tears**

There are many reasons for Jesus to weep as he stands outside the tomb of his good friend, Lazarus. And, in truth, there are many reasons for us to weep with him. I do not want to minimize our grief or sadness in the face of the great enemy of our world, death. But if I stop there, I will not have proclaimed the full story. If I stop there, I will have denied the central promise of the gospel. And I will have ignored the greatest event in the history of our world: The miracle of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Jesus was raised from the dead. He appeared to many. And He ascended into heaven. There is no burial place for Jesus. His body was never found, even by those who desperately wanted to deny the claims of the first Christians. The evidence that Jesus was raised from the dead is overwhelming to all who have seriously studied it. Jesus *was* raised from the dead. Which means that he *defeated* the last great enemy, death.

But not only that, Jesus clearly has power over death for us, too. He demonstrated that when he raised Lazarus from the dead. And he promises us that one day everyone will be raised from the dead. Jesus shows us this promise through the vision that John shared in today's second reading from Revelation:

*I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." – Revelation 21:2-4*

It will be a wondrous day. It is not here yet, but it is coming. There will be a day when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. And death and mourning and crying will be no more.

### **The Tomb of Lazarus**

I have done some research recently and apparently, the Tomb of Lazarus is not easy to find these days. It is off the beaten path of most Holy Land tourists, for mostly political reasons. And a dangerous place to visit now I would imagine!

I read that the descent is steep and then stepping down into the very tomb where Jesus' dear friend lay for four days before being raised to life. There is a sign posted at the entrance to this ancient tomb, with two sayings. The first was a verse from First Corinthians:

*“Death is followed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”*

The second was not from scripture, but offered a very powerful reminder of what this tomb symbolizes for all who share our faith:

*“The glory of God shall be seen by those who put their faith in Jesus in times of greatest distress and hopelessness; they are certain that He is greater than any distress, even greater than death itself.”*

Isn't that a powerful statement? To put it just a little differently, the glory of God is seen by those who put their faith in Jesus even in the midst of their tears. We weep, we cry, but we never give up believing that Jesus is greater than any distress. We never give up believing that the Son of God, who weeps with us and who weeps for us, also promises to one day wipe away those tears. That is the hope and the promise of the gospel.

### **Closing**

One day, we will all see this glory for ourselves. We will be invited out of our tombs, and into the light of everlasting life. We will hear Jesus call our name, and we will receive the gift that he died to give us, the gift of eternal life. All of our tears will be wiped away forever. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. But until that glorious day, each challenge that we face in life offers us an opportunity to bear witness to our faith, to trust in Jesus even as we weep, and by doing so, to show to all the glory of God.

*“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”* Jesus says before raising Lazarus from the dead. And so, he says to us this day and we say, Yes, Lord, we believe. Show us your glory. Amen.