

Jesus Wept

*A sermon by the Rev. Louise Kalemkerian
at St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk, CT*

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT: MARCH 26, 2023

EZEKIEL 37:1-14 | PSALM 130 | ROMANS 8:6-11 | JOHN 11:1-45

*May God's word only be spoken and heard here.
In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Thank you for your patience and fortitude. [*Laughter*] Standing through that long Gospel.

You may wonder why we substituted “the people” for “the Jews” in this Gospel reading, because in your bulletin it is written “the Jews.” John's Gospel regularly describes Jesus' opponents simply as “the Jews,” and John's Gospel is more consistently hostile to the Jewish religious authorities and Jewish community than any other New Testament writing. While scholars recognize that this reflects the divisions that existed between the early followers of Jesus and the Jewish community at the end of the first century when this text was written, Christians throughout the centuries have used these and other references to justify Jewish persecution, including the Holocaust.

We made this change to raise our awareness of how bias and prejudice are insidious. Antisemitism is the oldest prejudice in the world. We need to stand with our Jewish brothers and sisters and speak out and oppose it whenever we encounter it, even in the church. Jesus never coerced or strong-armed anyone. He always spoke words of invitation and love.

Can a person really be raised from the dead? Did this event actually happen? Is it metaphor? Did Lazarus really come back to life to die again? Before we get to Lazarus, I know that there are people who have died and come back to life. They call these near-death experiences and some (those who've undergone these near-death experiences) have said that this has transformed their whole life perspective. They no longer fear death. There's a recent book I read entitled *After* by psychiatrist Bruce Grayson, who recounts numerous of these experiences and what they mean. Then there's been other titles through the years, such as *Poof of Heaven* and *Heaven is for Real*, of examples of people who have died and then come back to tell about it.

The last four weeks' Gospel texts have been of Jesus revealing himself as the Christ, as the Messiah: first to Nicodemus, then we heard the Samaritan woman, then to the man born blind, and now today to the community of Lazarus. In each of these accounts and encounters, lives were changed and transformed; in his story, not only Lazarus's life, but that of his faith, family, and community.

The Gospel tells us almost nothing about Lazarus, yet he's the centerpiece, the focal point, of Jesus' most powerful and unsettling miracle. We were told he lived in Bethany outside Jerusalem and that he and his sisters were among Jesus' closest friends. We hear that he suffered some illness and died unexpectedly, from which we might surmise that he was some

young man, and that he made a journey into death and back into life, only to die at a ripe old age.

He's inspired numerous works of literature and art, yet the only scene in which he appears - he appears bound in cloth, grave cloths, four days dead. The story of Lazarus is the church talking to us over the centuries about faith and life and death. Which says to me, that for the early Christian community that told and retold the Jesus stories before they were written down, Lazarus's sisters were hugely important - their lives and their witness to the Gospel mattered as much as the miracles that Jesus performed.

Preaching this Gospel is a huge personal challenge: my life has changed dramatically since the last time I preached it. Mary and Martha and Lazarus have become real to me in a way that they never were before. Like Martha and Mary, I expected an exception to death would've been granted in my case or in my husband's case, "Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died." said Martha. I've said those words over and over these past months. If only Jesus had shown up in time, if only we had realized how serious my husband's heart condition was. "If only..." I practiced magical thinking.

At his death, all the things I knew about grief and grieving went out the window. All the things I had spoken to others now seemed like empty words. The spiritual director suggested to me that I imagine a conversation with Martha and Mary, what would I say to them if I were their pastor after they had buried their brother? I replied that I'd probably just sit and weep with them, knowing that God weeps with all of us in our personal tragedies, as my friends and family wept with me, as Jesus wept at the death of his friend.

I now know the sisters' pain as I had never known it before. Jesus' weeping, I think, is one of the keys to this text: when Jesus experienced the sisters' sorrow, he began to weep. I don't think Jesus was just crying for his friend's death. I think his tears were about the fragility of life - the loss of any loved one, any time, any place. In that moment 2,000 years ago, we see the utter humanity of the Son of God weeping for Lazarus and for any whose lives ended in death. Paradoxically, in the Gospel that most emphasizes Jesus' divinity, this text displays his true participation in our humanness, in our humanity. Jesus is touched by human suffering and shows the depth of his own humanness.

Weeping comes from empathy and grief. Twice in this passage, we are told that Jesus is deeply moved or disturbed in his spirit. Jesus is not some all-seeing, distant, stoic god, our God is a feeling, empathizing God. Jesus acts out of this empathy, out of this "co-feeling," which is the literal translation of empathy.

I think Jesus wept for all creation that lives and dies. I think Jesus continues to weep for all who are suffering in any way: for those with any illness or those enduring poverty or homelessness or despair or hunger, for those marginalized or suffering any diminishment.

I think Jesus weeps because we can bail out banks and we can't extend SNAP benefits for children. I think Jesus weeps because we wouldn't extend the child tax credit. Jesus weeps because we make war more easily than we make peace. Jesus weeps for Lazarus, for Mary, and Martha in their pain, and for all of us in our hurts and losses and disappointments.

Because Jesus' name is love: Jesus is the human face of God, and God is love. The texts we hear today confront us with the mystery of life and death. While they speak to the promise of

life to come, resurrection, eternal life, the continuation of life in a way that we don't exactly know - I think that they speak more about life on this side of the grave and how we're called to live more fully and generously.

The most difficult thing we're asked to believe may not be that Jesus raised Lazarus, or that God raised Jesus, or that life continues after death (however differently). The most difficult thing we are asked to believe may be that God loves us so much, with all of our warts and failings, that God wants to resurrect our lives *right now*, and adjust them from an old way of life to a new way of life - literally from life to life.

What the raising of Lazarus means for us is that God offers life not only for the future, but for now - for the here and now. Jesus came to make life abundant, full, generous. If this story is to have any meaning for us, we need to ask ourselves: Do we really believe in God's love as a power that can raise us up?

We may be inclined to think that the most potent words in this passage are found in the roaring command of Jesus, "Lazarus come out!" I don't think so. I think the most powerful words that we hear in this text are "Unbind him and let him go." These are words meant for living, for the living - for us. They were addressed to the bystanders and all of his friends, to everybody there, and they're addressed 2,000 years later to us.

What binds you or inhibits you or obstructs you and encumbers you? The resurrection of Lazarus is evidence that Jesus moves among us to give us life, to untie and release us, and unshackle us from whatever is binding us and keeping us locked up and constrained. We are all Lazarus, and the dream and promise of God is that we have life in all of its abundance - in all of its fullness.

The dream of God, that promise of Jesus, isn't for another time or place some way off in the distant future. It is a promise for now. It is a promise for every single one of us. May we embrace it today.