



"Jesus Was Late"

John 11:1-6, 17-44
 The Fifth Sunday in Lent
 March 9, 2008

"Jesus wept." The shortest verse in the Bible and the one, strangely enough, that produces a good bit of laughter.

I was a guest years ago at a monthly women's meeting. I got there early so I had to listen to all the business stuff. They did a curious thing; they had a biblical roll call. Each member had committed to memorize a verse of the Bible each month and when the President read down the list of names alphabetically, each woman was to stand and recite the verse she had memorized. It was actually quite amazing.

Adams: "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house into the land I will show you.'"

Carlyle: "Now if you be unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your father served or the gods of the Amorites...; but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord."

On and on it went, each woman contributing something to this rich tapestry of scripture. Finally, the President came to the person at the end of the list; her name began with a Y. She was the only one in the room who had forgotten her assignment. With a red face and a shaky voice she stood up and recited that great scriptural ace in the hole, "Jesus wept." Everybody laughed.

But the verse is not about laughter; and beneath what's funny about it, if we think for even an instant, we grasp its power. "Jesus wept." It's an easy verse for us to understand. We don't need a library full of Bible commentaries to figure out this verse. We know about weeping. And we appreciate the testimony from John's gospel 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 do not know. 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 remember that Jesus did too.

But before Jesus wept, Jesus was late for a funeral. John writes that, while Lazarus was at death's door back in Bethany, his sisters Mary and Martha dial in a 911 to Jesus. "Lord, **he** whom you love is ill." Apparently, Lazarus was so dear to Jesus 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 seems 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." Well, maybe so, but is this the time to wax philosophical about death—especially of a good friend?

And you can understand Martha and Mary's dismay can't you? When it's your loved one breathing their last you're not looking for some timeless truth about death. You don't want a telegram that explains it all. It may be you're not even looking for someone who can change things. What you are looking for is someone who is willing to drop everything to get there and make the coffee and answer the phone, and greet the guests, and, in a host of other simple ways, to stand with you and shoulder the pain with you **and—most importantly—suffer with you.**

Jesus received the **CODE BLUE** on Lazarus and 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 hearing that Lazarus was ill, he stayed about two days longer in the place where he was."

When Jesus finally did decide to go to Bethany, he was late. Real late. Lazarus was dead, 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."

Nonetheless, when Jesus asked them to show him to Lazarus' tomb, it was then that Jesus wept. The bystanders said, "See how he loved him." And of course that's one reason Jesus weeps. 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 wish that love could do that, could be that powerful. We weep for ourselves and for what we have lost. "See how he loved him," the bystanders said as they watched Jesus weep.

They saw that Jesus wept and concluded the obvious—that he wept for his old friend. But maybe, beneath the obvious, there was another reason for his weeping. This is the Gospel of John after all; things are never what they seem.

John reminds us that Jesus and his disciples knew that going to Bethany to see Lazarus was dangerous. He had enemies there. Thomas was the only one who seemed to get it. Thomas said, "Let us go with him that we may die with him." The drumbeat drawing Jesus toward

Jerusalem, and his last conflict with the authorities, was getting louder and louder. Jesus was on his way to death—not just Lazarus' death, but his own death.

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 characterized by breathing and displaying vital signs, not just the sort of life which our consumer culture thrusts upon us—but **real life**, 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.

This scene is the Gospel of John's Gethsemane—Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus.

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 sits in sharp contrast to the exhilarating height and beauty of the cathedral. 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 he said, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but thine be done." The cup is the cup of suffering, the cup of sacrifice.

The interesting thing about the 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 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 or because you ask for it, but rather because, in life's mystery, that cup is thrust upon you. Someone you loved is taken from you before 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 what it means to face the awesome power of death and all of Death's little surrogates in the 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 he would soon give up was to be given up not just for Lazarus but for the whole world—even for you and me. And because he gave it, and gave it willingly, Lazarus has been a reminder...

...**not** of hopes defeated and dreams crushed;
...**not** of life snuffed out before its time;
but rather of the bold Christian proclamation that, through Jesus Christ our Lord, neither death nor the cup of suffering is the last word.
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 time.
It was a scream loud enough to wake the dead.

Amen.