

We weep

As you've heard already in the service, this is the 5th Sunday of Lent.
That means that next Sunday is Palm Sunday, which is the beginning of Holy Week.

I hope we will go into this Holy Week
with hearts that are grateful for what might seem ordinary.
I hope we will savour the services,
after the past few years
of being unable to gather during Holy Week,
or uncertain of gathering.

As we turn toward those celebrations and observances,
we are taking a look at a portion of the story of Lazarus.

In John's Gospel, the stories we know and love often take a whole chapter to tell.
That's the case with Lazarus' story.

So we only read a portion of the story today.

And it began like this:

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

When Jesus arrives, it's already been four days since Lazarus was entombed.
This is significant because there was a commonly held belief at the time,
that the soul would stay near the grave for three days,
hoping to return to the body.

After four days, any hope of resurrection would have been lost entirely.
I believe it was Jesus' intent
that there would be no other explanation for Lazarus' resurrection.
These who witnessed it would have to admit
that Jesus was the one who accomplished the miracle.

And there were many witnesses.
It was typical in those days,
that a crowd would accompany the body as it was entombed,
and then they would stay for several days afterward,
to take part in the mourning.

The stage has been set for Jesus to do something extraordinary,
and to have it witnessed by many.

But first, Jesus speaks with Martha who has come out to meet him,
while Mary has stayed in the house, immobilized by her grief.

John tells us:

21 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

I love how honest Martha is.
She doesn't shy away from expressing her disappointment that Jesus
had not come while Lazarus was still alive, grappling with illness.

She believed that Jesus was able to heal her brother while he was sick yet still alive.
It's possible that she didn't even consider
that Jesus was able to raise Lazarus from the dead now.

Yet, despite her disappointment she continues to put her faith in Jesus.

Martha was not confident that Jesus would raise her brother.
Instead, she said that she would still trust Jesus despite this disappointment.
This was a remarkable demonstration of faith,
one that should be taken as an example.

She chooses to trust Jesus “even now” as her brother is decomposing in the grave.
Despite impossible circumstances and overwhelming disappointment,
she puts her faith in Him.

John writes:
23 Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

24 Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Jesus tells her what he is about to do,
but it is as though Martha doesn’t hear him.

It’s kind of like how we might say to someone who has lost a loved one:
“You’ll see them again.”
It is meant as comfort, and can be a comforting thought,
but we don’t mean they will see the person again IMMEDIATELY.
We mean that reunion will take place in the afterlife.

That is how Martha interprets what Jesus is saying.
Martha is saying:
Yes, I know he’ll rise again on the last day,
but that doesn’t help me NOW.

But Jesus responds to her:
“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives
by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” 27 “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the
Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

Jesus did not claim to have resurrection and life,
or understand secrets about resurrection and life.
Instead Jesus dramatically said that He IS the resurrection and the life.
To know Jesus is to know resurrection and life;
to have Jesus is to have resurrection and life.

This is also one of the “I AM” statements in John’s Gospel.
Every time Jesus says I AM -
I AM the Good Shepherd,
I AM the way, the truth and the life,
I AM the light of the world -
he is claiming his divinity.

Which is significant - he claims his divinity,
he states that he IS the resurrection and the life,
and then he will go on to exercise that power,
calling Lazarus out of the grave.

Jesus asks Martha if she believes that he is the resurrection and the life,
and that those who believe in him will not die.

He challenges Martha not to debate or intellectual assent, but to belief.
She must believe Jesus is who He says He is
and that He can do what He said He can do.

And so she makes her confession: that she believes he is the Messiah, the Son of God.
She puts her trust fully in him, and it’s beautiful.

In preparing this passage, one of the notes I read in a commentary
asked whether the miracle hinged on Martha's belief.
In other words, if she had answered differently,
would Jesus have gone on to raise Lazarus or not?

The commentator reminded his readers that Jesus
had already determined to 'wake Lazarus from his sleep' -
a euphemism for death -
before he left Perea to come to Bethany.

Either way, Jesus was going to prove that he is the resurrection and the life,
but how wonderful it is that Martha believed before the miracle.

John tells us;

28 After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." 29 When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

32 When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Martha told Mary that Jesus was asking for her.
To Mary, this was equivalent to a command to come.
Mary wasted no time in going to Jesus.

When she meets Jesus, she says just what her sister had said earlier;
If you'd been here, my brother would not have died.

This is one of the places in the Bible
where we wish we could hear the tone of voice
and see the expressions on the face.
This could have been a noble statement of faith,
saying that if Jesus was there they have no doubt at all
that He would have healed Lazarus.
On the other hand,
it could also be seen as a criticism
of what seemed to be
the tardiness of Jesus.

Either way, it strikes me how strong their relationship would have been,
that she and her sister could speak so plainly to him.

John writes:

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 34 "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

The grief and tears of Mary and Martha moved Jesus.
God sees the tears of the grief stricken and is moved with compassion.

God sees our tears.
God is touched by our tears.
God remembers our tears.
God acts to dry our tears.

Andrew Peterson, my favourite Christian singer/songwriter, has a song called "after the last tear falls"
He sings "After the last tear falls, there is love. Love, love, love."

The song calls to mind a day when there will be no more tears,
we will be at home with our Lord, and as Andrew puts it:
“we’ll look back at these tears as old tales.”
I believe that day will come.

But in the meantime,
as we struggle in world that seems overwhelmed by grief right now,
there is great comfort in knowing that God is with us in our grief.

The last verse of this passage is my favourite:
35 Jesus wept.

So often we want to rush to the miracle of Lazarus being raised from death.
But I chose to end the reading here because it’s important to recognize
that even Jesus wept.
Knowing what he knew,
knowing that he is able and will in moments,
raise Lazarus.
Still, he wept.

He doesn’t skip over the grief,
but allows it to wash over him and allows others to see him weeping.

Susan Cain, in her book: Bittersweet: how sorrow and longing make us whole, writes:
We live in a culture that only wants to talk about what’s going well.
Anything that’s not going well is positioned as a detour from the main road.
The truth is that pain is not a detour from the main road.
Pain is part of the road we walk as human beings.

You see, grief is part of our humanity.
And if we long for restoration, we can’t set aside parts of our humanity
that might be uncomfortable for us.

Jesus shows us this when he weeps.
He has claimed his divinity, and then in almost the next breath,
we see the depth of his humanity.
Both are necessary for him,
because we need a saviour who is supernatural,
but also deeply rooted in the human experience.

We know Jesus goes on to call Lazarus from the tomb.
That would have been an easy note to end the sermon on.

But, I think, as we turn towards Holy Week,
it’s better that we know Jesus wept, too.
It’s better that we consider
how to embrace the whole of our human experience,
even the ugly bits.
It’s better to recognize that our God is not far off,
but with us in our pain,
weeping alongside us.

Let us pray.