

## Jesus Wept

Jesus wept.

I must tell you, that those words struck a nerve in me more than anything else in this gospel reading today. This is more than mere emotionalism or shallow sentimentality – it is a reminder that Jesus cares and that Jesus carries our burdens.

It is also a true sign of the humanity that was possessed by this holiest of human beings. We all know how we feel when we weep in sadness. It reaches down deep into our soul, and for me to understand that Jesus could and did feel that emptiness was just amazing to me.

There are three times in Scripture that Jesus wept, in John 11:35 from today; as he approached Jerusalem on the donkey in Luke 19:41; and when he offered up prayers with cries and tears in Hebrews 5:7-9.

Jesus has completed his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. The triumphal entry into the city is already fading from everyone's memory. We've jumped from Matthew's gospel to John's for this celebration of All Saints Sunday, so the timeline might seem a little crooked. But the path of the story is the same: Jesus is getting closer to the Cross.

Since arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus has managed to make just about everyone angry at him. The shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" have given way to accusations of blasphemy, and threats of stoning. It was quite a transformation of emotions.

Jesus has gone back across the Jordan River to the place where John the Baptist was baptizing at the beginning of the story. While he is there, Mary and Martha send word to him that their brother Lazarus is sick. They ask him to come immediately, but he decides to stay a couple more days right where he is.

We can feel the tension building, even if Jesus seems not to be bothered.

Finally, he tells the disciples it's time to head back to the city.

The disciples shout out in disbelief, “Are you crazy? They were just trying to kill you!” I think we can all understand how the disciples were feeling at this absurd decision being made by Jesus.

But Jesus goes on to explain that Lazarus has died, and he’s going back.

Thomas – you know, the one we call “doubting” Thomas, says, “we might as well go, too, so we can die with him, if that’s what he wants.”

Once again, Thomas has said something that is much more profound than he even realizes. Dying with Jesus is exactly what Jesus has been telling them all along, that they will need to be ready to do.

This section of the Gospel according to John is often called the “Book of Signs.” John only writes about seven miracles, and these miracles, or ‘signs’ all point to one thing: Jesus is the Son of God. He has come to Jerusalem for only one purpose: to die for the sins of the world. Before he can do that though, there’s one more miraculous sign he needs to perform. And this miraculous sign outdoes all the others.

“Where have you laid him?” Jesus asked Mary.

During Easter, another Mary asks this same question as she investigates an empty tomb. She will weep as Jesus does now. Today’s reading is the very end of a longer passage – the full story of Lazarus takes the whole eleventh chapter of John.

But why did Jesus weep? Those around him assumed it was for sorrow at the loss of his friend Lazarus. Normally, I would have probably thought the same thing, but I think it was something much greater than that.

Jesus knew before he ever headed out to Bethany that he would be raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus wept, not because he had lost a friend, but because the scene around him was full of chaos, full of the very suffering he had come to eliminate once and for all. Hope for resurrection had been displaced by the havoc of sin and death.

Those who accompanied Jesus to the tomb didn’t understand that Jesus wasn’t weeping for Lazarus; he was weeping for them.

Normally, most of us don't think of death as a time for happy celebration. There's no getting around it, death isn't usually something we feel joyful about.

But we need to remember that death is not the end of this story. This story is really about the hope of resurrection. Imagine what it would be like to be Lazarus, to be completely dead, and then to come alive again!

Imagine waking up in that cave, wrapped tightly in cloth, unable to pull the covering off your own face, because your hands are still bound. It's dark, and it doesn't smell nice in there.

And you hear a familiar voice, muffled, but easy to recognize. Your dearest friend is calling to you to come out. You don't even know which direction the door is, or how to get to it, but you manage to get up, and you inch your way up toward the light. As you trip over yourself, struggling to get free, there is a gasp from the crowd that has gathered outside this cave. They are just as surprised to see you as you are to be there.

And then you must decide. Do you fall back into the tomb, or do you step out into the unknown? Because what lies ahead is completely new territory. No one has ever done this before. No one has ever been completely, unquestionably dead, and then been called back to life after being buried in a tomb for four days.

But here you are. As you stumble forward, that voice you love says, "Unbind him. Let them go." And the bandages come off, and you can see Jesus standing there, tears streaming down his face, welcoming you back to life.

We know that there isn't any way to get around our eventual death. But here's the thing: we can't experience resurrection until we experience death. We can't accept new life in Christ until we allow our old, sinful lives to end.

What do we need to let die, so that we can come out of our tombs? What binds us, and prevents us from living abundantly and fully as a new creation?

Our resurrection hope is not just tied to the future. We aren't just looking forward to the end of time when all things are made new.

When Jesus wept, he signaled that deliverance was about to come. And boy did he deliver Lazarus. Not only did he raise him and give him new life. He set him free. "Unbind him and let him go."

Death's grip was stripped for a life of freedom, and it all began with the spiritual practice of weeping. When God weeps, it is the beginning of the death of death. When God weeps, watch out! New life is on the horizon.

The story of Lazarus is here to remind us that we experience resurrection now. We participate in God's miraculous saving work now.

We can live amid fear with courage because God's promise of resurrection gives us the confidence to resist the power of death over us.

Death doesn't get the last word, for Lazarus or for us. Jesus is calling to you, "Come out of there!"

And then you must decide. Do you fall back into the tomb, or do you step out into the unknown? Because what lies ahead is completely new territory.

In baptism, we are reminded that we have died to sin, and have been raised to new life, just like Lazarus. And just like Lazarus, we head into unknown territory when we walk out of the tomb.

But you don't have to go there alone. When Lazarus stepped out of that tomb, there were friends at hand to help him get out of his grave clothes, to support him and love him. That's what this community of faith is for. To help each of us get unbound.

You see, Jesus could have made those strips of cloth fall right off from Lazarus. But he didn't. He called to the others standing there, and invited them into the miracle. "Unbind him, and let him go," he said.

Jesus didn't need their help, but by inviting the friends and family of Lazarus to participate in the miracle of resurrection, he draws them – and us – into God's transformative work.

The Gospel of John only includes seven “signs” before the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Raising Lazarus from the dead was the final “sign,” the final clue that Jesus was the one they’d been waiting for.

The world is still looking for a sign that Jesus is the one, that there is reason to hope in resurrection. I’m here to tell you, that all you Saints doing the faithful work of Christ, are the sign. May we accept God’s blessing upon each and every one of us, today, tomorrow and for all the days to come.

Amen.