

Jesus Wept
John 11:17-45

Where was Jesus? Why didn't He show up in time? Doesn't He know what's going on? Doesn't He care? It's easy to ask questions like this when tragedy stares us in the face, isn't it? It's so easy to think that God was somehow helpless to have prevented it, that God's power is thus limited to grieving along with us, to comforting us in the midst of our sorrow.

Yes, sometimes that's the way we interpret Jesus' tears in verse 35 - tears of frustration and disappointment. Perhaps, in the midst of our sorrow and disappointment, we sometimes imagine that Jesus' tears somehow spring from weakness.

Lazarus' sister Mary seems to have been moving in this direction. The only thing she says to Jesus in the entire passage is recorded in verse 32: "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." Mary thus strikes a note of finality, of resignation to the reality of her grief.

Oh, make no mistake. Along with Mary's sadness goes an element of faith, a confidence that Jesus could in fact have done something to help Lazarus if only He had been present. Along with many others in the crowd, Mary knew that, just like the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Elisha, Jesus could heal even those who were the most desperately sick. But now Lazarus was dead. Now, Mary and the rest of her friends thought it was too late even for Jesus to help Lazarus.

I wonder if we fall into this kind of thinking sometimes. I wonder if we also sometimes put limits on what we think God can do. Perhaps it's a bad habit or besetting sin that we just don't think God can help us move past. Or perhaps we hedge our bets when we pray for our loved ones, confining our requests to whatever is normal or natural or to be expected. Instead of praying for transformation, for release, for victory, instead of praying for miracles, and waiting expectantly for our prayers to be answered with joyful anticipation, do we, like the crowd around Lazarus' tomb, go on weeping because we really don't think Jesus is up to solving our particular problems?

If that's where we are in our spiritual journey, let's take a closer look at what Jesus does in this passage. For there is a great source of comfort for all of us here, no matter who we think Jesus is, no matter how much power we think Jesus has. We find it in verse 17 and it is simply this: Jesus came. Jesus came to Mary and Martha in their time of deepest sorrow. Jesus came to them when they were confused and overwhelmed. He didn't leave them alone in their grief – He came to them.

And that simple truth lies close to the heart of the gospel. For Jesus could have stayed up in Heaven, enjoying all the joys and pleasures of being in a perfect love relationship with the Father. But He didn't. He left the ivory palaces and entered our world of woe. He chose to be born in a stable, to walk our dusty roads, to experience hunger and thirst, pain and suffering. He chose to be with us. And He is still with us today, even when things don't make sense, even when our hearts are breaking. The good news is that even when the

problems of life overwhelm us, we are never alone. Jesus has come to us. And perhaps that truth alone gave Mary some comfort as she grieved the loss of her brother.

But Martha was open to a greater truth, and thus a greater comfort. Oh, perhaps she started off in the same place as Mary – after all, her first words to Jesus in verse 21 are the same as Mary’s words in verse 32. But upon further reflection, she seems to have gone further in her faith. Rejecting the despair and discouragement that is so common today, she boldly says that even at this point in the story, even after Lazarus had already died, and had been dead for four days, God could still answer Jesus’ prayers. She thus believed that somehow by the power of God Jesus would be able to raise the dead.

Why did she believe that? Because she knew that Jesus was much more than a prophet. In verse 27, she confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

And that’s what we modern Christians know as well. We know that Jesus didn’t just come to be with us in our suffering. For we know that Jesus really is Who He says He is in verse 25: He is the resurrection and the life. We know that is true because Jesus walked out of His own tomb on the third day after His own death. We know that He has gained the victory over death forever.

So it’s no wonder that we rejoice with Paul in the words we read responsively this morning, words which he himself was quoting from the prophet Hosea: O Death, where is thy victory? O death where is thy sting? Because Jesus rose again from the dead, we can know that all His people will one day rise from our own graves. Indeed, in this very passage Jesus promises that “He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.” Jesus promises us that “Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.”

But even that wonderful truth can leave us a bit cold, especially in our times of greatest grief and heartache. Sure, Jesus has come to be with us. And sure, Jesus has given us the promise of the resurrection someday. But when we’re grieving, when we’re hurting, we still need something more right here, right now, something to transform our sorrow into dancing, something to transform the night of weeping into the joy of morning.

And we find that something in verse 35. We’ve already taken comfort in verse 17, in the fact that Jesus has come to us. We’ve already taken comfort in verse 25, in the fact that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. But now we can also take comfort that Jesus wept.

So, why would Jesus’ tears be comforting? It is of course true that these are not tears of despair. After all, He knew about the general resurrection at the end of time when He would see Lazarus again. Martha was looking forward to the same great event in verse 24, comforting herself in her grief the same way that we so often do. And it is a great comfort to know that, for Christians, the family circle will once again be unbroken on that great day when Jesus comes again.

And we’ve already seen that these are not tears of frustration, of weakness. After all, Jesus had already said back in verse 11 that He was planning to raise Lazarus from the dead. He knew He was going to see Lazarus again, not at the end of time, but only in a matter of

minutes. So why would Jesus weep at the tomb of Lazarus? And why are His tears so comforting for us?

In the first place, we can take comfort that Jesus wept for Himself. Yes, we Christians know that one day verses 25 and 26 will come true. We know that one day all our crying will be turned into laughter as all our goodbyes turn into hellos, when we see our loved ones again. We know one day all our mourning will be turned into dancing as all our wounds are healed. We know that all those who believe in Jesus will live forever when He comes again.

But we Christians also know the reason that all those who trust in Christ will one day gain the ultimate victory over sin and death: it's because of what would happen to Jesus on the cross.

But what would that cross cost Jesus? It would cost Him His life. Oh, make no mistake. Jesus knew just as we know that His death would only be temporary. Back in chapter 10, Jesus made it very clear that just as He would lay down His life for His sheep, He also had the power to take it up again. In fact, way back in chapter 2, Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." He knew He would walk out of his own tomb on the third day, just as Lazarus walked out of his tomb in verse 44.

But Jesus' death would involve much more than ours do. For He would not only have His spirit separated from His body – He would somehow be forsaken by God the Father, a separation that was necessary if He was going to receive the just punishment for all our sins. And the other gospel writers affirm the horror of this rejection in the Garden of Gethsemane. For there, Jesus would weep again. There, Jesus would cry out to God that this cup of suffering and death, this separation from God the Father could somehow be taken away from Him.

Oh yes, He would be willing to go through it all, the shame, the spitting, the beating, the blood, the nails, the spear, death itself. But as He anticipated the terrible price He would have to pay, as He contemplated that it would require His own death to release all who trust in Him from the bonds of death, He would weep again in the Garden.

Now, John's gospel doesn't record this scene. Instead, and perhaps to illustrate the same point, John records Jesus' agony at the tomb of Lazarus.

And yet there is a connection between these two agonizing moments for Jesus. For on both occasions, at the tomb of Lazarus and in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus wept over the terrible consequences that sin has brought into this world. And on both occasions, Jesus wept for Himself, knowing what it would cost Him to bring life to the dead.

And yet, knowing the price He would have to pay, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus cried out through His tears, "Not my will, but Thine be done." Just so, knowing that He would have to be carried into a tomb in order that Lazarus might be called out of a tomb, Jesus cried out through His tears, "Lazarus, come forth."

Brothers and sisters, Jesus wept to show us just how devastating are the consequences of sin. And Jesus wept so that all our tears might one day be wiped away.

So much is clear. But where is the comfort in Jesus' tears? The answer is perhaps the greatest comfort we can find in this passage. For if, in the midst of our sorrow we can take comfort that Jesus is with us, and if when our hearts are heavy we can take comfort in the promise of the resurrection someday, and if we know the amazing truth that Jesus was willing to suffer the pain of death and the separation from the Father so that we might be saved, we can also look at verse 36. We can meditate on the other reason that Jesus wept. And that reason was obvious to everyone standing around the tomb of Lazarus. They all said, "Behold how He loved him!"

And that is the precious truth for all of us today. No matter who we are, no matter what we've done, no matter what has happened to us, Jesus loves us. That's why Jesus came to be with us in our times of greatest heartache. That's why Jesus made it possible for us to live with Him forever. That's even why Jesus was willing to endure the cross. Jesus loved Lazarus enough to weep for him. And Jesus loves us, in spite of our doubts and fears, in spite of our guilt and shame, Jesus loves us enough not only to weep for us, but to die for us.

No, life doesn't always make sense. No, we can't always explain why bad things happen. But even in the midst of our confusion and pain, can't we trust a God Who loves us this much? Even if we can't understand it all, can't we love Him too?