

“Divine Tears”
John 11:1-45

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It was a regular occurrence for the junior high to fill the choir loft during some of the worship services in my home church.

We would sing an anthem and lead the congregation during the hymns.

When the preacher started the sermon, we knew that we had better stay awake and attentive.

In part, we were always told that we were worship leaders throughout the service. We understood that as people watched us, they needed to observe people who were interacting with the sermon, reading along in their Bibles, and generally were model worshipers for the rest of the congregation.

To insure that we continue to stay alert during the sermon, our pastor would occasionally call on us to provide an answer to some question, usually based on something in the sermon that he had just said.

On one occasion, our pastor asked the congregation to quote a favorite Bible verse. After several responses, a hand shot up from the choir loft.

One of the youth had a beloved passage that he wanted to recite. Before I go any further, you have to understand that this kid was the class clown.

That is why I couldn't quite figure out why he would raise his hand to answer this question.

Perhaps that is also why our pastor seemed hesitant to call on him.

But when given the floor, this young person boldly proclaimed, *“Jesus wept” (John 11:35)*.

I laughed; because being in junior high, everything that the older youth did was funny. Apparently, not everyone in the room thought the same way.

As I remember, our pastor responded with a further question: *“Why do you think Jesus wept?”*

The kid in the choir looked like he wanted to weep at that point.

Why do you think Jesus wept? The question still haunts me.

Why did Jesus weep?

The question began to trouble me more when I started preaching funeral sermons. If the Gospel is true as I was presenting it, why would Jesus weep?

If faith is as assuring as I wanted the grieving family to believe, and as I wanted to believe myself, then how could Jesus weep?

Doesn't the fact that Jesus wept at a death diminish the hope that our Lord gives us?

I invite us to explore that dilemma together this morning.

There were many emotions that day in Bethany, and many of them we could certainly understand.

They are emotions that we share in our own losses today.

Tears of Regret?

As soon as Jesus got to the edge of town, Martha, Lazarus' sister, ran out to meet Him with a painful accusation: "*Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died*" (John 11:21).

In her grief, she is rewinding all the things that she wished had been done differently. One of her first regrets is that she wished that Jesus had arrived sooner.

John informs us that Lazarus had already been dead for four days by the time that Jesus arrived.

More than likely, Lazarus died shortly after the messengers left to tell Jesus that he was sick.

They traveled for one day to get to Jesus. Then, Jesus stayed where he was for two more days, and finally he traveled to Bethany for a day.

It appears that Lazarus was probably dead when Jesus first heard about his illness.

However, Martha wishes things had been done differently, even if they could not have happened any other way.

I am sure that she shed tears, not only about Jesus' delayed arrival, but about all the things that she wished she had done differently throughout her lifetime with her brother.

Martha was the one who was always working, preparing the meals for the guests. She is often contrasted with her sister Mary who apparently thought talking to Jesus was more important than making sure the roast didn't get too done.

Mary and Martha attend every one of your holiday feasts in your family, don't they?

Martha never sits down to have a conversation with anyone. Mary, on the other hand, sits and talks to every person and decides that the dirty dishes will keep, even if they don't get cleaned until the next holiday.

From where I normally sit in the room of grief, I have never heard a person say, "*I wish I had spent more time in the kitchen.*"

I might here, "*I wish I had attended church with her more often.*"

Or "*I wish we had taken more walks together.*"

Regrets, they are a painful part of the journey. I encourage you today to make one decision in one relationship that will eliminate at least one regret.

I am sure that part of Martha's tears was tears of regret.

But let's go back to that youth event in the choir loft and re-ask the question: why did Jesus weep?

Certainly he was not weeping because of regret.

He intentionally chose to delay coming to Bethany for a couple of days; and as we have already considered, I don't think that Jesus would have seen Lazarus alive anyway.

Regret may be a large part of our grief, but it is not consistent with the actions of Jesus that day.

So, if the tears of Jesus were not tears of regret, why did Jesus weep?

Tears of Companionship?

Martha's sister Mary eventually reached Jesus. She too was crying.

John tells us that when Jesus saw how upset she was, Jesus was "*deeply moved in spirit and troubled*" (John 11:33).

The words that the Gospel writer uses connote Mary's crying as a loud wail, while Jesus' being "*deeply moved*" is a loud groan.

Since the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was a retreat for Jesus, He stayed there often when He came to Jerusalem.

The Holy City was only about two miles from their home, so Jesus was able to return there at night for rest and fellowship.

He became very close to the three of them, particularly Mary and Lazarus, who seemed to value time with Him more important than getting things in proper order for Him, as their busy sister did.

In fact, the reason that Mary did not accompany Martha to meet Jesus is that she stayed in the house with some of her friends who had come to comfort her.

Mary was all about relationships and quality time with friends. She valued companionship highly.

Mary's tears were probably shed, not so much because of regretful missed opportunities to spend time with her brother, but rather over the good times that they will not have together in the future.

I can hear her saying, "*I know he is better off there, but selfishly I want him here.*"

Who of us has not shed those tears? We believe all the words about eternity and heaven. We know that heaven is a place where there is no more pain, no more grieving, and no more dying.

In heaven, God "*will wipe every tear from their eyes*" (Revelation 21:4).

All of those comforting images notwithstanding, death brings a hole to our hearts that even those promises have a difficult time filling.

Tears come because we are simply going to miss that companion. We know that he is "better off," but we selfishly want him back, if for no other reason than because we will miss him.

Mary must have shed large tears over the pain of companionship loss.

We can relate to Mary very well. Her tears are our tears.

But why did Jesus weep? That question is made even more difficult because we believe the assurances of eternity.

How could the Son of God weep, in light of all that He preached about life in the Father's house?

Certainly, Jesus did not weep at Lazarus' death over the loss of companionship, because in just a few days, Jesus is going to be placed in a tomb very similar to the one in which Lazarus lies now.

If Jesus wants companionship, He might ought to yell to Lazarus in the tomb, "*Wait there just a little while longer. I am coming behind you. Then, we will spend forever together.*"

The tears of Jesus were not tears of regret, nor were they tears of companionship. Why did Jesus weep?

Tears of Empathy?

Certainly, many of the tears that day were tears of empathy. They were tears that were shed over the pain that was being experienced by someone else.

Mary is crying because Martha is crying. Martha is crying because Mary is crying. The friends are crying because both sisters are crying.

I had a pastoral ministry professor claim that ministers must always keep their composure at a funeral.

I agree with what he meant, but my experience disagrees with what he said.

The well-meaning teacher meant that the minister needs to be a stronghold for those who grieve, instead of becoming another burden for the family to lift.

The deeper cause for his admonition was more theological than pastoral. He believed that since the minister was the one who should project solid belief in the Christian assurance of the future, then the preacher's emotional displays would discredit his beliefs.

In other words, the teacher suggested that a minister could not proclaim that all will be better "by and by," while he is simultaneously crying over the loss.

I understand what the professor meant. He was stressing the pastoral role of the minister.

Yet, my experience tells me that tears of empathy do not diminish any of our roles as care givers, but rather they may increase our ability to minister.

Don't worry that while you stand in line at the mortuary, waiting to greet the family of your close friend, and tears begin to flow.

I have heard people say, "*She needs me to be strong.*" Sure, but when did tears not make a person strong?

We have just concluded our study of the book of Job. Remember Job's three friends?

Their idea of helping Job was to try to get him to confess what he must have done to make God so angry.

They were defending God and accusing Job.

In the end, God became furious with the friends for their lack of empathy and praised Job for his honesty.

There were many tears of empathy offered that day in Bethany, enough to go around for everyone.

Caring filled the air.

Did Jesus cry tears of empathy? Many people think so.

They think that Jesus cried because He saw Mary and Martha crying.

It is extremely possible that this is why Jesus wept, but it still does not complete the picture.

By all accounts, Jesus knew what He was about to do. He told His disciples before they left for Bethany that He was going there to perform a miracle on His dead friend.

While He may have cried when He saw the emotion of Mary and Martha, I think His reaction might have been more of joy over what He was about to accomplish.

Wouldn't He be smiling over the upcoming resurrection instead of crying over the recent death?

It just does not fit together that Jesus would have cried over their loss. He was about to usher in the greatest moment of joy into their lives.

The tears were flowing that day in Bethany. The story of Lazarus is one with which we find connection because we can relate to those tears.

I hope what you have heard me say so far is that it is okay to shed those tears.

We still cry buckets of regret. It does not diminish our experiences to wish we might have done some things differently.

Instead, such thoughts may encourage us to start treating the living differently right now.

We still shed tears of companionship. Even though we know the person is "in a better place," we miss them.

It is not selfish to wish that the person were still with us. Instead, it emphasizes how much we loved that individual.

We still shed tears of empathy. We hurt because other people hurt.

It is not a sign of weakness to cry when we share the pain of other people who have suffered loss.

Instead, it may be the greatest way to help them through their pain.

But why did Jesus weep? His weeping must have something to do with faith.

There must be something in His experience that helps us in ours.

Why did Jesus weep? Jesus wept because they did not understand why He had come. He wept when He entered Jerusalem on His triumphal entry for the same reason. Tears rolled down His face because even His closest friends did not understand His purpose, nor did they understand their purpose.

Right after Jesus wept He asked them to show Him where Lazarus was buried. He knows that when Lazarus comes out of the tomb, it will set in motion the final steps toward His own death.

When Lazarus comes back to life, Jesus will begin His last days to death.

But Jesus also knows that the religious leaders will set their sights on killing Lazarus as well, because of His popularity after his own resurrection.

Jesus knows full well that when Lazarus walks out of that grave, His death and Lazarus' second death are just around the corner.

But that is exactly the reason that Jesus calls Lazarus out. He calls the man out to die again.

He brings Lazarus to life so that the world will have one more chance to understand how to die.

This next time, Lazarus will not die at the hands of an illness, or old age, or because of an accident.

This next time, he will die at the cause of following Christ.

I can hear Jesus calling into the tomb, "*Lazarus come out, so that you can go die with Me!*"¹

Jesus had said this same thing so many times and in so many ways over the years.

"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24-25).

"If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25).

He even said as He arrived in Bethany, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die" (John 11:25-26).*

Jesus wept, not because Lazarus was dead. He wept, because people did not understand the life that comes to those who die.

Let's not discount their faith. They knew that eternal life comes to those who believe on the resurrection day.

Martha said that through her tears.

¹ See Frederick Niedner, "Reflections on the Lectionary," Christian Century, February 26, 2008, Vo. 125, No. 4, p. 21.

What neither she nor the others could comprehend is that real life comes to everyone today, who is willing to let their own agendas, desires, wants, and selfishness die.

If we die to self, we can then live for Christ. But we cannot live for self and live for Christ simultaneously.

It is one or the other.

Jesus had planned to raise old Lazarus from the grave all along. He wept because He realized that they would not understand why He was bringing Lazarus back.

He was not resurrecting His friend so that Martha could do things better this time around, or so that Mary could have the companionship of her brother back, or so that the friends could rejoice that the sisters' pain was gone

Jesus was bringing Lazarus back to life so that the world could see what it was like to die with Christ.

Jesus wept because He was not sure that even we, 2000 years later, would understand.

“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die” (John 11:25-26).