

Tears

Texts: John 11: 1-41

Date: 03/29/2020

As more than 2000 Americans have now died of Coronavirus, up from 1000 just 48 hours ago, this is a time of tears. The Bible is no stranger to tears, nor is Jesus.

This morning I want to look at two instances of tears in the Bible. In anticipation of Good Friday, I want to mention the weeping women who followed Jesus to Golgotha, the place of the skull, where the crucifixion was going to take place. And then I want to focus on Jesus' tears at Bethany, where his friend Lazarus had died.

First, a quick reminder of the weeping women. The gospel writer Luke tells us that, as the Romans paraded Jesus through Jerusalem on the way to Golgotha, "A large number of people followed Jesus, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for you children.'"

That is an odd thing for a condemned man to say to women weeping for him, to tell them to weep for themselves. They are safe. He is going to the cross. Strange.

In order to understand the tears of these women, and Jesus' remarks to them, we have to go back in time to a few weeks before Jesus' crucifixion, to the story we heard today, when Jesus went to Bethany after the death of his friend Lazarus. We heard that story a few minutes ago, and it contains the shortest verse in the Bible, John 11:35: "Jesus wept."

It's just two words, but in some ways, the whole story revolves around those two words. It's not the story of the death of Lazarus. It's the story of Jesus and his tears. Why on earth is Jesus weeping at just that moment?

The preachers of the early church, who were great readers of the Scriptures, were very puzzled by this because they noted that Jesus has delayed going to see his sick friend until it was too late, until Lazarus had died.

At first glance you might think that this was because Jesus was afraid of going up to Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem, as everyone knew that the authorities were out to get Jesus, out to find a way to kill him, and that sooner or later they would succeed.

His disciples are so sure of it, in fact, that when Jesus says, at last, let's go up to Bethany to where Lazarus is, Thomas says to the rest of the disciples, "Let's go up, too, so that we may die with Jesus there." They think Jesus' plan is a death sentence.

But Jesus goes up unafraid, so that clearly isn't why he delayed. But then, if he intended to go up all along, why didn't he go up *before* Lazarus had died so that he could do something?

Everyone is sure that Jesus could have done something if only he had gotten there while Lazarus was still sick, before he died.

In fact, the first thing that both of Lazarus' sisters, the famous Mary and Martha, say independently on seeing Jesus is: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." The exact same thing for both of them.

Clearly they had been talking about it while Lazarus was sick, while they were waiting for Jesus: "If only the Lord were here, he could do something, he could heal Lazarus."

And after Lazarus had died, they were saying to each other, "If only Jesus had been here, if only he had arrived in time, if only. Oh, poor Lazarus, if only he could have held on another day or two until Jesus got here, he'd still be alive. If only, if only..."

And other people were talking that way too: if Jesus had gotten here sooner, couldn't he have done something? After all, they said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

So everyone thinks Jesus could have done something if he'd gotten there soon enough, but Jesus purposely delayed coming so he wouldn't be there soon enough. What the heck, Jesus, what's that all about?

But it gets stranger. Jesus is weeping in verse 35, but by verse 43, he has raised Lazarus from the dead. So, if he was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, why was he weeping? What's going on here? Why cry about Lazarus' death if you are about to undo it? That's crazy.

This puzzled people in the early church, too, and they thought of a number of answers. Perhaps Jesus was weeping over the very fact of death, that death was in the world because of sin, and Jesus was thinking about all the pain and suffering that people had to go through because of sin and death. That was one answer they thought of. Another answer was, well, maybe he was weeping because he was only going to raise up Lazarus that day, and not everybody else. Perhaps he was sad that everyone else would have to wait in the tomb until the last day, the day of Judgment, before the resurrection of their bodies.

"One day, every tear will be wiped from every eye," he might have been thinking, but not today. Today only the tears that are shed for Lazarus will be wiped dry.

Still another answer was that there are many reasons for weeping. Perhaps Jesus wasn't sad at all. People don't just weep when they are sad. They weep at weddings, when they are happy, and at homecomings when they see a loved one again after they

have gone far away. Perhaps Jesus is not weeping tears of sadness, but rather tears of joy because he will be able to raise Lazarus up. That is certainly possible, I suppose, but it doesn't seem likely, and the early church didn't think that was it either. But it was a possibility they thought of!

Or, they thought, perhaps Jesus was weeping at the hard hearts of the people there who would not believe in spite of what they were about to see. Perhaps their hardness of heart brought him to tears. The text tells us that many people rejoiced at the raising of Lazarus, but that the leaders of the people just hardened their hearts against Jesus and determined that there was no other course of action for them but to try to kill Jesus.

Or perhaps Jesus wept thinking about the future loss of his friend Lazarus in spite of Lazarus' upcoming resurrection because Lazarus would still have to die again, because his resurrection wasn't permanent, at least not this time, because he would have to die all over again and wait in the tomb just like everyone else. If you knew your friend would have to die twice, that might be something to weep about.

The ancient church didn't know for sure why Jesus was weeping, and we can't either.

All we can know is that his tears came because of the fact of death in the world, a fact that was not about to be changed at that moment but for one person, Lazarus, and that Jesus felt deeply about what was happening.

As we already heard, there are many reasons why people cry, why the tears come. Let us return to the women who were weeping as they followed Jesus to the cross. Jesus tells them not to weep for him, but to weep for themselves.

And that, too, is a strange thing to say. He is, after all, about to go through the worst death that the Romans could think up, as humiliating a death as they could imagine, as painful a death as their savage cruelty could arrange. Surely that was worth a tear or two.

And yet he tells them not to weep for him, but for themselves, because of what is coming. And what is coming is a time when Jesus will not be with them. Yes, he will be resurrected, but his physical presence will not be in the world much longer, not after his ascension to God his Parent.

And that means that the next time that Lazarus dies, Jesus will not be there.

It means that the next time that the widow of Nain's son dies, Jesus won't be in the next village over to be called to raise her son from the dead.

It means that the next time that Jairus the synagogue ruler's daughter dies, Jesus won't be passing by to be called upon for her resurrection.

The tears will come again, and this time they will have to stay. All the children and parents, brothers and sisters, friends and loved ones who die, from that day until this one and beyond, will have to remain in the grave until the Last Day and the great resurrection. Their souls will be with God, but the reunion of soul and body in resurrection in God's new heaven and new earth will have to wait.

Weep, Jesus says to the women, for yourselves and for you children, for the sacrifice that is being made for the sake of your sins is that I will not be here to defeat death immediately; you and all who come after you will have to suffer and grieve about death as from when the world began.

And perhaps that is why Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. Lazarus was to be the last person he would bring back to life before he left the world to die for the forgiveness of our sins.

Perhaps Jesus was weeping, not for Lazarus, but for all of us, who would have to endure death patiently and wait for him in the tomb until the Resurrection of the Last Day.

And that is why he said that we should weep, not for him, but for ourselves as he was on the way to the cross.

Tears.

Amen