

The Day God Wept

John 11:17-37

April 23, 2017

Introduction

Last Sunday was Easter. That's one of the high points of the year, isn't it? It's so good to celebrate Jesus, his resurrection, and the promise of life we receive through him. This morning we will still be focusing on Jesus. We will also talk about the resurrection, and the promise of life. But today we are going to be coming down off that mountain-peak of Easter excitement and descending into a valley. We are going to be thinking about the subject of death.

I realize that death is not necessarily a topic of polite conversation. In fact, it's a subject which perhaps most of us would rather avoid. And yet, death cannot be avoided. Would you please raise your hand if you have ever lost a loved one? Yes, that's what I thought. Even if you haven't lost a loved one to death, eventually you will. One of the few certainties of life in this world is that it comes to an end. One of the great tasks we all face in life is to come to terms with our own mortality. Death—both our own death, and that of our loved ones—is perhaps the greatest problem we face as humans. When we face this great problem of death, and the accompanying issues of suffering, sorrow, and grief, where do we turn?

The answer to this problem, of course, is Jesus. We've been thinking about that a lot this Easter season. It is through his death and resurrection that we have hope for eternal life with God. This morning we are going to be thinking about how Jesus helps us face the problem of death, but we are going to be looking at it from a slightly different angle: from Jesus' encounter with death not in his own life, but in the life of his beloved friend Lazarus.

The Story

Would you please turn with me to John chapter 11? Let's take a quick a look at background to the Scripture which was just read (John 11:17-34). Starting in John 11:1-6:

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

Notice that Mary and Martha don't even call Lazarus by name. They simply call him "the one you love", knowing Jesus will understand who they are referring to. Obviously, Jesus loved Lazarus! *When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. (Words which are soon to be questioned!) No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."*⁵ *Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.* ⁶ *So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he left that very minute to go heal him.*

Wait a minute! It doesn't say that, does it? That's the response we might have expected. It's the response the disciples were probably expecting, and it certainly was the response Martha and Mary were hoping for. Instead, Jesus deliberately delays for two days, and only then travels to Bethany. He had something greater planned.

Let's just summarize what happens in the next few verses (7-16). Jesus' disciples warn Jesus about returning to Judea because they know that there are people there who want to kill him. Jesus gives a somewhat mysterious response about how it is safe to travel during daylight. Basically, Jesus means that he knows what he is doing. They don't need to be afraid, because he has the situation

under control.¹ Jesus then goes on to explain to his disciples that Lazarus has fallen asleep (by which he means that he has died) and that he is going to raise him.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, the funeral is already underway, and he does what is usually done at funerals: he meets with the family. Let's take a look at the conversations Jesus has with Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary.

Jesus and Martha

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. "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." (20-22)

There's a note of accusation in Martha's words, isn't there? It's as though she saying "You've blown it here, Jesus! If you had been here, this wouldn't have happened! You could have prevented this—why didn't you? But look, it's not too late to make it right. You can still fix this. Do you have a plan?"

Jesus responds very simply: "*Your brother will rise again.*" (23) However, this doesn't seem to give Martha quite as much information as she was hoping to receive. She says "*I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.*" (24) In other words, Martha knows her theology. She is aware that there will be a resurrection in the end times when all those who die in the Lord will rise and live forever with him. But it would seem that she wants to know the details of plan for the short term. That's not what Jesus gives her, though! He says:

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die, and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord." she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." (25-27)

Do you see what Jesus has done here? He has taken Martha's implied question about what he has planned to fix this situation, and has directed it toward his own identity and the crucial issue of what Martha believes about him. Jesus does affirm to Martha that there is a good plan underway, but he doesn't give her the details. Instead, he reminds her to trust him personally.

This is relevant for us, isn't it? So often, when tragedy strikes, or when we are puzzled by the suffering and evil we see in the world around us, we want to know what the plan is. And in the large sense God tells us exactly what the plan is: there is going to be a resurrection. Jesus will return, set everything right, and raise us to live with him forever. But in the meantime, God doesn't give us the details of the plan. He doesn't answer all of our "why" questions. But he does invite us to know him and walk with him by faith, knowing that Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life. We have confidence not because we know the plan in all its details, but because we know the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus and Mary

After Jesus has this theological conversation with Martha, he has a different kind of meeting with Mary. Let's skip ahead to verse 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."

Does Mary's statement sound familiar? It is word-for-word for what her sister Martha said, although Mary doesn't add on the part about how "Even now, God will give you whatever you ask."

¹ See John 8:12, in which Jesus identifies himself as the light and says that whoever follows him will never walk in darkness. Perhaps what Jesus says here is reflecting back to that statement. The disciples will not walk in darkness if they are walking with Jesus. Again, the point is that Jesus knows exactly what he is doing.

And yet, Jesus responds to Mary in a totally different way, and this tells us that there is something different behind Mary's statement. I think that she is simply speaking out of her grief—and perhaps she was hurt because Jesus delayed in coming to heal her brother. I think it's likely that behind Mary's statement is the question "Jesus, do you really care about us?"

See how Jesus responds: he doesn't respond by entering into a theological conversation with her, as he did with Martha. In fact, Jesus doesn't really say anything at all. Instead, he does what is probably the best thing any of us can do when comfort those who are grieving: he is simply present with her and grieves alongside her. The text says:

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. (33-35)

That last verse, "*Jesus wept*" is a striking statement. It's the shortest verse in our Bible, and it was just as abrupt in the original Greek, too. It's just one little sentence! It's as though John, the writer, wants his readers to stop and ponder the significance of that statement. So that's what we are going to do.

Jesus Wept

Why did Jesus weep? In view of the rest of the story, this seems like a strange thing for him to do. Let's review: Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus was sick and was going to die. Jesus deliberately waited until Lazarus died to leave because he something better planned: he was going to perform a spectacular resurrection! Jesus had the situation totally under control. He knew that his friend Lazarus was about to live again. And yet, even though he knew that, Jesus took the time to sit down and weep. Why did he do that? I think there are two main reasons.

The first demonstrates an important message for all of us: that it is possible to believe in God's promises mentally and spiritually, but still hurt emotionally. Jesus understood better than anyone else possibly could that this story was about to have a happy ending. Yet he still felt the ordinary emotions of grief and sorrow that all of us feel when a loved one dies.

As Christians, it seems that we sometimes think that if we have genuine faith and hope we will not be afflicted by difficult emotions such as sorrow or fear or anger. I don't think that's realistic. It's also not what Jesus demonstrates here. We could put it this way: it's okay not to be okay with things that happen in our world. Read through the Psalms, and you will see that many of them have message that boils down to this: "My life is not okay, God! Oh yes, I trust you, but my life is not okay!" God understands that. In fact, God agrees! Our world is not okay. That's why we need a savior. It's okay to hurt emotionally even while we believe God's promises mentally and spiritually.

There's a second and related reason why Jesus weeps, which is both simple and profound: Jesus wept for his friend because he loved him. Think about the last time you wept over someone. Think about the sorrow we experience when someone we love passes away. Why do we grieve? Because that person meant a great deal to us. When that person died, we lost something of great value to us; a relationship was severed by death. Our grief is a reflection of the value that we place on another person and the relationship that we had with that person. We could say that grief is the bitter side of love. We would like to be safe from grief, but the only way to guarantee that we will never grieve; that we will never weep over another person, is never to love. To love is to be vulnerable to grief.²

²C.S. Lewis: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will be will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your

So, when Jesus wept, it tell us something significant: that he loved Lazarus with that kind of vulnerable love. Let that sink in for a moment. The God of the universe, revealed in Jesus Christ, made himself vulnerable. He experienced grief. He made himself vulnerable to the pangs of loss that we all feel.

As we think about our own experience of grief then, we realize that to love to the point of vulnerability is, in some small measure, to share in God's sorrow for a broken world. If we want to love like God loves, we will take the risk of making ourselves vulnerable to loss. And when we weep over someone or lament the pain and tragedy of death in our world, we know that God himself feels the pain with us, because God wept first. There's a line from the stage musical *Les Miserables*: "To love another person is to see the face of God." That puts it rather dramatically, but there's some truth to that, isn't there? To grieve the evils of death and suffering is to enter into a sacred space. It is to synchronize our heartbeat with that of God, who looks down on his lost and broken world, grieves for it, and has a wonderful plan to redeem it through Jesus.

But to look at sorrow and suffering this way—as something in which God joins us, or perhaps something in which we join him—requires a choice on our part. See how different people respond when Jesus weeps. Some of them say "See how he loved him!" (36) They saw the heart of God. But others said "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" They only saw human weakness.

When we encounter sorrow or suffering, we often ask the same question: "If God is so powerful or so loving, why doesn't he do something about these problems?" That's a valid question! But if we never move past that question, we miss out on seeing the heart of God, who not only is able to put things right and has a plan to do so, but who also shares in our pain and loves us more than we can even imagine.³

Conclusion

So what have we learned from this passage about facing the problem of suffering, death, and grief? We've learned that there is a plan. Death will not have the final word. As Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death." (4) Those who put their trust in Jesus do not have a story which ends in death, but in eternal life with God. That does not remove our grief, but it does transform it.⁴ Jesus will return, defeat all the powers of evil, and raise us to live in glory with him forever. And God's victory will be all the more glorious because of the pain we now endure.⁵

But that day has not yet arrived. While we have seen the glimmer of Easter morning, our world still waits in the long shadow of Good Friday. We still suffer and die, and Lazarus, in a manner of speaking, is still in the tomb. So where do we turn for comfort and strength in meantime? Where do we turn when we are grieved by death, or puzzled by the pain and suffering in our world?

We turn to our savior who is the resurrection and the life. Even though we do not always know the details of the plan, we do know Jesus, and we are given the opportunity to trust him daily. We must turn to the God who is strong enough to defeat our sorrows (and has promised to do so), but who is also loving enough to weep with us in the midst of them.

selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable." (C.S. Lewis, *the Four Loves*, 111).

³ Eph. 3:17b-19 "And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love which surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

⁴ 1 Thess. 4:13-14 "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him."

⁵ 2 Cor. 4:17 "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

In one sense, that sounds like an easy answer. As Christians, of course we know that we should turn to God in the midst of our suffering and sorrow. And yet, so often, there are other “gods” to which we turn. Many of us have the tendency to fill our lives with distractions, busyness, and amusements—noise which often drowns out the cries of the world around us and of our own aching hearts. Or we turn to addictions—to substances, sex, or even food—to try to take the edge off the pain. If you turn on your television, flip through the channels, and see the commercials, you will hear the voices of a thousand idols crying out “We have what it takes to make you happy! We can make you feel better in this hurt-filled world!” And yet none of these things can offer us hope of eternal salvation. None of them can raise the dead, and none of them will weep with us in our dark nights of the soul. But there is One who will. It is to Him we must turn.

What does it actually look like for us to turn to God when facing death and grief? I would like to invite my sister, Heidi Hopkins, to come and share her story about losing her baby son, Stevie, and how she has encountered the love of God in the midst of her sorrow.

Heidi's Story

In just two weeks, my family and I will be remembering my son, Stevie's, birthday. He would be turning 2 years old. Not a single day has gone by that I have not thought about my son and missed him so much that it hurts. My husband, Tim, and I had prayed for this child for 8 years. He was much longed for and loved the moment we learned that we were expecting.

At 21 weeks into the pregnancy, we had a routine appointment and ultrasound. We were so excited to see our sweet baby! However, just a few minutes into the scan we knew that something was wrong when the ultrasound tech went to get our doctor. But nothing could have prepared us to hear the words, “I am so sorry, there is no heartbeat.” I think that we both went numb. I don't think I really understood what the doctor was saying. It was not possible! This was the child God had given us, the one God had protected and saved when I almost miscarried at 12 weeks. The doctor must be wrong. I couldn't think. I couldn't breathe. I needed to get out of that room, but I couldn't move. We learned that we would have to come back to the hospital later that week. I would have to labor and deliver my sweet baby; that we would have to say hello and good-bye in the same breath. I told God that I couldn't do it, to please not ask me to do this. I screamed and cried and asked God to make some other way. I prayed that He would bring life back to my baby. I prayed that hard, and I believed that God could do it, if He chose to. Then, I prayed that God would give me strength to do what He was asking of me.

God could have healed my son, kept him safe. He could have breathed life back into him. He could have. But He didn't. Instead, He drew close and held me through some of the most painful days I have ever experienced. I felt His peace and presence when Stevie was born. I felt his comfort when I had to bury my son's tiny body.

I discovered that there is a tenderness of God's mercy and a sweetness of His love that can only be found at the deepest place of grief. When you try to pray, but the anguish of your heart stifles the words, and all you can do is cry, and even when all the tears have been spent and you fall in exhausted sorrow at the feet of Jesus, it is then that you feel His gentle hands holding and sustaining you, when you can feel His tears for your pain. When you understand how much He truly loves you and how much your grief matters to Him. And you know that he understands.

We are never promised that any of our lives will be free of pain, disappointment, suffering, and grief. We are not promised that God is going to answer our prayers the way that we want Him to, that He will bring the healing, the reconciling, and ease our discomfort. God CAN bring the healing. But sometimes God's plans are bigger than we can see from our earthly perspective. It does not make sense to us that a Good God would allow suffering and pain and loss. But there is always a purpose to suffering. God never allows His children to endure pain without there being a beautiful redemption. Sometimes we get to see this plan unfold, and sometimes not. But we have to trust that God is good,

even when terrible things happen. We have to know that God is loving, even in the middle of deep hurt.

What we are promised is this: no matter where you are, who you are, or how you are hurting, Jesus will never leave you. He is closer than you can possibly imagine. He is not immune to our pain and suffering. What is hurting me—what is hurting you—is hurting the heart of Jesus. We are told that our tears are precious to Him, He collects each one. But not only does He see our pain and tears, He is right beside us shedding tears of His own. He knows what suffering is. He has endured it all. He has known loss, grief, betrayal, more physical pain than most of us can even imagine. He is a God who sees us, He knows our hurts and He carries and comforts us in and through our suffering. As a parent, when our children are hurting, we feel their pain. God is our father and when we, His Children, are suffering, He feels all our sorrow. He draws so very near to us, and He weeps with us. I will always miss Stevie. I will always wonder what color his eyes would have been. What his laugh would have sounded like. What his first word would have been. I think about how he would be running around now, exploring the world with the enthusiasm of a toddler. How he would feel snuggled up in my lap, his soft cheeks resting on my chest. The pain of this loss will always be with me. It is a hurt that only heaven can heal, and I look forward with great joy to one day being with my sweet little boy in the presence of Jesus.

But while I wait for that day, I can rest in knowing that God is good, all the time. I can take strength in knowing that God is loving, in all things. And when my grief feels overwhelming, God draws near and comforts me as His tears mingle with my own.

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