

JOHN 11

Not so long after Jesus gave sight to the man born blind, his credibility was tested again—this time with even more amazing consequences. These two healing narratives, wonderful as they were to the recipients and observers, aroused the anger of the authorities and were instrumental in his condemnation and death.

Ironic, isn't it, that such goodness would be met with such anger? Why? They feared his power, power to win followers who might rise up against them. Fear can twist our minds and make us unjust and brutal people



THE DEATH OF LAZARUS

1-3 A certain man was sick. His name was Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. This was the same Mary who massaged the Lord's feet with aromatic oils and then wiped them with her hair. It was her brother Lazarus who was sick. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Master, the one you love so very much is sick."

Jesus, who famously loved everyone, even and especially the dregs of society, also had special friends. Sometimes it's easier to claim you love humanity in general than to love certain individuals. True universal love, like God's, loves people in their particularity, for themselves. When I feel guilty for liking some people better than others, I remember, Jesus did, too. God puts us next to those we need to learn from—or need to learn to love. Even those we fear.

4 When Jesus got the message, he said, "This sickness is not fatal. It will become an opportunity to show God's glory by glorifying God's Son." 5-7 Even though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was across the Jordan for two more days, then proposed to his disciples, "Let's go back to Judea."

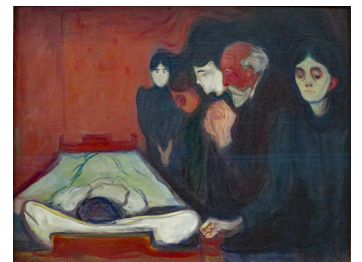
8 They said, "Rabbi, you can't do that. The Jews are out to kill you, and you're going back?" *Once again, "the generic Jews" are a source of threat and fear. Play it safe, the disciples say.*

9-10 Jesus replied, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in daylight doesn't stumble because there's plenty of light from the sun. Walking at night, he might very well stumble because he can't see where he's going."

This time, he doesn't say, "I am the light." By now, we ought to know.

11 He said these things, and then announced, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. I'm going to wake him up." 12-13 The disciples said, "Master, if he's gone to sleep, he'll get a good rest and wake up feeling fine." Jesus was talking about death, while his disciples thought he was talking about the healing sleep that comes when a fever has broken.

We talk about the sleep of death. Children sometimes develop a resistance to going to sleep; they're afraid they won't wake up again. I remember fearing that. But no matter how similar



death and sleep are, there is an immense difference between them. And while we may lose our fear of falling asleep, does a tiny fear of dying always remain?

14-15 “No, Lazarus has died,” Jesus says. “And I am glad for your sakes that I wasn’t there. You’re about to be given a new reason to believe. Now let’s go to him.” *Not them, but him.*

16 That’s when Thomas, the one called the Twin, said to his companions, “Come along. We might as well die with him.” *Jesus may be crazy, but friends don’t let friends die alone. As his special friends, they are co-conspirators in his work and share the top of the most wanted list with him. Even though they yet grasp the life he offers, they are ready to die with him anyway.*

17-20 When Jesus finally got there, he found Lazarus already four days dead. Bethany was near Jerusalem, only a couple of miles away, and many of the Jews were visiting Martha and Mary, sympathizing with them over their brother. *Now we get a different picture of the Jews: no, they aren’t all villains. They are human beings with human sympathy, tender emotions, deep love. In grief, differences can be erased and animosities healed—or at least set aside. And Martha, Mary, and Lazarus—not to mention Jesus and the disciples—are all Jews themselves, possibly even Pharisees. Martha claims to believe in the resurrection, as the Pharisees did. Listen.*



Grieving Martha heard Jesus was coming and went out to meet him. Mary remained in the house. 21-22 Martha said, “Master, if you’d been here, my brother wouldn’t have died. Even now, I know that whatever you ask God he will give you.” 23 Jesus said, “Your brother will be raised up.” 24 Martha replied, “I know that he will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time.” Jesus told her, 25-26 “You don’t have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?”

27 “Yes, Master,” she answered dutifully. “All along I have believed that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who comes into the world.” *He utters the promise we so often hear at funerals: “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” Yes, Master, she responds. I believe. But somehow her words lack conviction. Such a promise is cold comfort, when we have seen with our own eyes the shell of the one we loved and laughed with.*

28 After saying this, she went to her sister Mary and whispered in her ear, “The Teacher is here and is asking for you.”

29-32 The moment she heard that, Mary jumped up and ran out to him. Jesus had not yet entered the town but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When her sympathizing Jewish friends saw Mary run off, they followed her, thinking she was on her way to the tomb to weep there. Mary came to where Jesus was waiting and fell at his feet, saying, “Master, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Notice she echoes Martha's first words. Are they an accusation? Prayer doesn't always yield the results we want, or the answers we look for. Do we blame God?

33-34 When Jesus saw her sobbing and the Jews with her sobbing, he was deeply distressed and anger welled up within him. He said, "Where did you put him?"

34-35 "Master, come and see," they said.

Jesus wept.

The shortest verse in the Bible.

And one of the most significant.

Jesus wept.

Did he weep because his friends Mary and Martha were?

Did he weep because the others were sobbing, too?

Was it sympathetic, contagious grief?

Or was it pure personal emotion welling up from his own love and sorrow?

Or all of the above? Does it matter?

"Jesus wept" shows us in an instant the utter humanity of the Son of Man, the Son of God who came into this world through a woman's body. Why wouldn't he feel what we feel?



Let's pause here for a moment. What does weeping signify? What does the sight of someone weeping do to us? I turned 13 in 1964. At that age, we start becoming aware of a world broader than our safe childhood space. The civil rights movement was then churning up feelings that touched even little white Pipestone, Minnesota. That summer, my family visited the New York World's Fair. I remember two exhibits clearly: one, standing in line for hours in the hot sun to gain entry to the fair's crowning exhibit: the General Motors Futurama show. I even remember the words to the theme song: "There's a great big beautiful tomorrow, shining at the end of every day. There's a great big beautiful tomorrow, and tomorrow is just a dream away." Glitzy, state of the art at the time, stunningly optimistic.

But here's the other memory: I also wandered alone into an exhibit with very few people at all, a maze of dark walls and spotlit photographs. One black and white image arrested me and held me. It's still engraved on my mind: a portrait of an African American woman, not young, not glamorous, her beautiful strong face knotted with feeling. From her closed eyes ran a single tear. One. That image taught my 13-year-old self more than any words or news clips what it might feel like to be Black in this country. When life is too full of grief, there is no "great big beautiful tomorrow." In the first shock of loss, as Mary and Martha and their friends were, there is no immediate consolation, no instant cure for sorrow. To be told that only mocks our pain. Jesus did something far more empathetic, and far more helpful. He wept.

36 The Jews said, "Look how deeply he loved him."

37 Others among them said, “Well, if he loved him so much, why didn’t he do something to keep him from dying? After all, he opened the eyes of a blind man.”

38-39 Then Jesus, the anger again welling up within him, arrived at the tomb. It was a simple cave in the hillside with a slab of stone laid against it. Jesus said, “Remove the stone.” The sister of the dead man, Martha, said, “Master, by this time there’s a stench. He’s been dead four days!” 40 Jesus looked her in the eye. “Didn’t I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

“Believe and you will see.” Isn’t that backwards? Not in Jesus’ faith system.

41-42 Then, to the others, “Go ahead, take away the stone.”

They removed the stone. Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and prayed, “Father, I’m grateful that you have listened to me. I know you always do listen, but on account of this crowd standing here I’ve spoken so that they might believe that you sent me.”

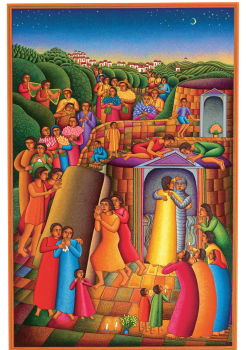
43-44 Then he shouted, “Lazarus, come out!” And he came out, a cadaver, wrapped from head to toe, and with a kerchief over his face. Jesus told them, “Unbind him and let him loose.” *Not only alive and walking, but soon to be free. Free to speak, free to touch and hug and join them in weeping, this time for joy. Jesus’ empathy extends beyond tears. It is so vast that all life and death are held within it. And now we know for certain how infinitely powerful is God’s love.*

45-48 That was a turning point for many of the Jews who were with Mary. They saw what Jesus did, and believed in him. *Yes, they had to see to believe, as we often do. Our faith relies on proof. What will we accept as proof, though? This is the end of the reading, but not the end of the story.*

One of our devotional readings emphasizes the crowd gathered at Bethany. Not only Jews but also Samaritans and Gentiles would have joined Mary and Martha to mourn with them. Yesterday, we held a funeral in this space. I’m sure there were people of every political persuasion, and every faith and no faith at all, joined in sorrow and sympathy because they loved Alex, or love the Hall family and needed to be here to share their loss. All of us wept together. Our common woes are more likely to unite us than our individual prosperity.

Our world faces common woes too numerous to mention and within those greater tragedies lie countless individual tragedies, countless grieving parents and ruined towns. This spring also sees an un-common constellation of faith observances. In the first week of April, Muslims will be midway through Ramadan, during which they purify their intentions, words and actions. Next Sunday, many Christians will celebrate Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week leading up to Jesus’ resurrection on Easter Sunday. On April 5th, Jews will remember their liberation from bondage during the feast of Passover.

Can we take this opportunity to address our deepest concerns about the soul of our nation and our collective grief? Can we, as Jewish, Christian and Muslims, pray together in sorrow, in hope, and in solidarity with one another?



Jesus entered fully into the depths of human tragedy—and transformed it, not only through great love, but through his own great suffering. Can we follow his example in empathy? Can we look for his coming with hope?

As we at CPC ask ourselves once again, “Can these bones—this congregation—live?” we understand that our life is only a tiny piece of our greater life in community with all those God loves. But to God, every life matters as though it were the only life. Universal love loves in particular. Rest assured: God loves you, and resurrection and life begin now.

Prayers:

Tender God, you weep when we weep. Your heart breaks when we forget our connection to one another and to you. Fear erodes our faith and we hide from the troubles of others, or learn to hate those who are different. If we cannot believe until we see, then show us proof of your love. We humbly ask this. God our savior, hear our prayer



Vincent van Gogh, 1853-1890.

Raising of Lazarus, 1890. Van Gogh focused on human suffering and gave Lazarus a red beard like his own.

Other image credits:

At the Deathbed, Edvard Munch

Weeping Woman, Pablo Picasso

Raising of Lazarus, James Tissot

Take Away the Stone, John August Swanson