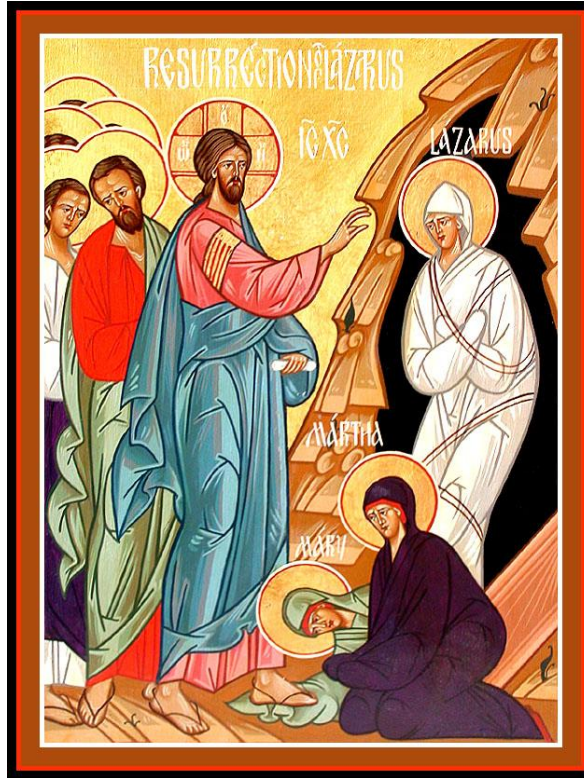


WAITING AND WEeping



John 11:5 "Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then, after this, he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.'"

Today's very long and familiar story of Jesus' raising of Lazarus contains two very puzzling moments for me, one of waiting and one of weeping. First, the waiting. The familiar story begins with the message sent by Lazarus' sisters, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." They didn't even have to say who it was. They were such

close friends that Jesus knew who they were talking about. But this closeness makes what happens next, very hard to understand.

For Jesus waits. He doesn't seem to be moved at all by the information that his good friend Lazarus is ill. He even downplays the importance of the sisters' urgent message, saying "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." That's not the kind of response that would make Lazarus feel any better. The idea that Lazarus' sickness would merely provide a sermon illustration for Jesus must have greatly disappointed Mary and Martha. It was as if Jesus said, "Lazarus is sick. So, what, it's no big deal. It's just something that God will use for his own glory." Then Jesus waited for a full two days more before beginning the two-day journey to Bethany.

This is really rather puzzling behavior. How can Jesus be so callous? How can he pontificate about the illness of his beloved friend? Why in the world does he wait? I must confess to you that I don't have any ready answers for that question. Theologians have speculated and supposed all sorts of things, but in the end when we look closely at this text in John, I don't understand it.

Whatever the reasons were for waiting, we can readily see that the sisters of Lazarus didn't appreciate Jesus' delay. They were looking for Jesus to be the kind of friend who drops

everything to come and stand with them in their pain and concern. They didn't want a theological lecture; they wanted someone to be with them --- someone to help them.

But Jesus didn't drop what he was doing. Jesus didn't respond to their urgent message. He didn't rush to the bedside of his sick friend or to the aid of the concerned sisters. John says, "After having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." Each sister in turn took Jesus to task for his late arrival, when they did see him. They each blurted out the identical words upon seeing Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

While I can't explain the waiting of Jesus, I can certainly identify with the waiting of Martha and Mary. How many times have we waited just like they did? How many times have we wondered just like they did, "Why isn't Jesus here when we need him?" "Why doesn't God hurry up and do something?" We hear their pain, and we share it because in too many of our homes Lazarus has died. In too many of our houses, we are still waiting for Jesus to arrive. --- Where have we prayed, but no answer has come. Where we've pleaded, but God has delayed. Where we've waited, but he hasn't arrived. Where we've held the funeral even, but he didn't attend. Or so it seemed.

We don't know why Jesus waited, and we don't know why God waits. And no amount of theologizing and explaining can satisfy us while we wait. And wait we do. My only conclusion is that something critically important happens to us while we are waiting. Life is lived in the moment while we wait. Faith is proved while we wait. Hope is tested while we wait. Mary and Martha were not the last to wait for Jesus. And sadly, neither will we be the last.

And then comes the moment of weeping. When Mary broke down in tears before Jesus, he asked, "Where have you laid him?" And when he stood in front of the tomb, "Jesus wept." He must have wept out loud and for a long time, because those who saw it were moved to say, "See how he loved him."

Now we know immediately why Martha and Mary were weeping. Their brother had been dead for four days now. Theirs were tears of grief. Those tears we all understand. We, too, have stood like them by a graveside and poured out our heart in great sorrow. We have too cried because we can't help ourselves, as our emotions sometimes take over our bodies and the tear ducts open and the waters flow. But what about that shortest verse in the Bible -- "Jesus wept." Why? Why did he cry if he knew that he would shortly thereafter raise Lazarus from the dead? When we look closely at this text in John, again we find no real explanation for why Jesus

wept. Theologians have again speculated and supposed all sort of reasons, but in the end, I am not sure why Jesus wept knowing what he knew.

Now I believe that Jesus experienced this mortal life just like us. The Epistle to the Hebrews says, "We do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are" (Hebrews 4:15).

In Philippians, Paul writes of "Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Philippians 2:5-7).

So, Jesus cried perhaps, because he cared, because he was human. He cried for the same reason that we cry at funerals. He grieved with Mary and Martha. Jesus loved them and Lazarus. He grieved that Lazarus had died. He identified with their pain and understood their tears. That's what friends do. They cry when we cry.

And I take great comfort in Jesus' tears. It tells me that God still identifies with people who are hurting. When we cry, God cries too, it seems. As a young parent, I remember one afternoon in Oxford when a neighbor boy playing at our house began to cry. One of my children began to walk away and wanted to go back to

playing while the neighbor boy cried on. I firmly reminded my son that we do not walk away from a crying child. "But I didn't make him cry," pleaded my son. "Even so," I said, "we do not walk away from someone who is crying; we comfort them." So, my child dutifully went over and put his arm around the distressed neighbor boy and patted him on the back, telling him that everything was going to be all right. Then my child looked up at me and asked, "How long do I have to comfort him?" "Until he stops crying," I replied. "But what if he never stops crying," he responded. "Don't worry," I said, "people who feel that their pains are heard and are comforted, always stop crying." Isn't that, right?

I believe that simple scriptural verse, "Jesus wept," reveals as much about Jesus as all the other words ever written about him. He weeps for all who pray for God to come, and nothing happens. He weeps for all who face the tragic experiences of this life and thrust their painful, "Why?" toward the heavens. He weeps for those who have hard questions, but no answers. He weeps for those who do not walk quietly to death's dark door. He weeps for those who ask for a miracle and do not get one.

Here is a picture of a God who is not immutable. A God who is not unemotional, unchanging, uninvolved, or unmoveable. Here is a reflection of a God with a grieving heart. Here is the Lord of the universe with tears in his eyes. For me, it is important that

Jesus understands what life is like for us, that he knows our temptations and weaknesses and fears. He knows what it was like to be fully human. He remembers our suffering, our disappointments, our problems, our questions. And more importantly, he not only knows, but he also understands them. He has literally walked in our shoes. And because Jesus knows and cares, then I know that God knows and cares as well.

Suffering has a way all too often of isolating us. When we cry, we so often cry in private, so no one sees, or we cry in public and people distance themselves from us, like my son did in Oxford. Then we think that we are the only ones to ever experience such pain, and we feel alone. We think no one else really understands our grief. But Jesus' tears tell us that he is someone we can lean on for strength, for comfort, for solace. In our confusion and pain, Jesus is there for us. While we wait, he waits with us. When we cry, he cries. In our sorrow, he will hold us up.

Across the street from the bombed out Federal Building in Oklahoma City, where 168 adults and young children died needlessly and senselessly on April 19, 1995, there stands a memorial. At the heart of that memorial is a nine-foot statue of Jesus. But this statue is not one of those with Jesus' arms outstretched as we so often see, like the one in Rio de Janeiro. No, this is a nine-foot statue of Jesus with his face in his hands, turned slightly away

from where the acts of terror took place, and the plaque upon it reads simply, "And Jesus Wept."

For thousands and thousands of mourners and survivors that image of Jesus has brought hope and new life. It is a pillar of comfort for those who pass by. What does God do for us in our tragedies? He sits down beside us and helps us cry. And sometimes that's all we really need. AMEN.