

“Jesus Wept,” a sermon based on John 11:1-45
Preached by the Rev. Elizabeth Smith-Bartlett
March 29, 2020

I.

These past few weeks have felt like an awfully long year, haven't they?

Today was supposed to be Youth Sunday. Our youth were creating a worship experience around the theme of growth and development, around lifelong learning, around reflecting and refining and transformation. I am hopeful that we will be able to worship again together before the end of the school year and that they will have the opportunity to lead us in worship in our sanctuary...but if it looks like that might not be the case, we will make a way for them to lead us in worship here, in this virtual space.

So while I don't want to steal their thunder, this theme of growth and transformation has been on my mind this week. And just as much on my mind this week, as it was for you as well, is all that is happening in the world as a result of the pandemic spread of covid-19.

A leadership coach I worked with several years ago told me to “never waste a good crisis.” It was a little tongue-in-cheek, sure, but the wisdom is there. Never waste a good crisis. There is growth and transformation even and especially there...even and especially here in these days of anxiety and uncertainty.

And as much as I believe that intellectually...my soul is so tired right now. Is yours, too? I don't know about you, but my attention span is pretty short right now. My brain is a bit foggy. When it's finally time for my head to hit the pillow at night, I find my mind unable to rest even though my body is bone tired.

I listened to emotions researcher Brene Brown speak about our current situation on her podcast the other day,¹ and she said that the adrenaline rush that got us through the initial shock of the covid-19 crisis is starting to wear off and now we are settling into this collective weariness. And as soon as she said it, I felt this deep wave of yes come over me. Yes. That's what I feel deep in my bones. Weariness. Confusion. Grief.

The story of Jesus and Lazarus is a story about weariness, and confusion, and grief. The story of Jesus and Lazarus is also a story about hope, and trust, and resurrection. The story of Jesus and Lazarus is just what we need right now. But it is long. And it is wordy. And our brains are a little foggy. So I've boiled it down to three reasons why we need this story right now. There are many more, I'm sure...but I think three is enough for today.

II.

¹ <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-on-comparative-suffering-the-50-50-myth-and-settling-the-ball/>

The first reason why we need the story of Jesus and Lazarus right now is that this story gives us images of real, authentic faith.

Martha and Mary and Lazarus are Jesus' dear friends. In another familiar story, Jesus arrives at their house and finds Martha busy with all her many tasks of ministry. Mary will go on to anoint Jesus with perfume before his death. John tells us three times that Jesus loves Lazarus. These three are dear friends, and perhaps three of the ones who understand Jesus best. And so when Martha and Mary send word to Jesus that their brother is sick, they expect him to show up. And he doesn't. And they are mad. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Martha calls him out. Mary can't even greet Jesus when he first arrives.

Real, authentic faith doesn't shy away from anger and grief...it embraces them. It knows that they are part of the journey, and not a sign of weakness or separation. They can co-exist. Martha and Mary can be mad at Jesus and still welcome him when he shows up. They can be in deep despair that things didn't turn out the way they had hoped they would and still put their trust in Jesus' ability to make something out of even this.

Real, authentic faith doesn't shy away from anger and grief because Jesus doesn't shy away from them either.

III.

And that brings us to the second reason why we need the story of Jesus and Lazarus right now.

The NRSV says that Jesus began to weep; other translations say simply that "Jesus wept". It's the shortest verse in the Bible and one of its most profound statements. Jesus wept. Jesus, Word became flesh, God-with-us, wept...with real human tears and real human grief. Jesus' heart is breaking over the death of his friend, over the anguish of Martha and Mary. God's heart is breaking over the loss of a single human life, over the heartbreak of others.

Jesus shows us the fullness of God's heart--a heart that is big and wide enough to always have more love to give, a heart that is strong enough to break and break and break again but never be broken.

And in these days I need the reminder that Jesus weeps with us...that Jesus weeps and feels and expresses his feelings deeply, in the moment, and it is ok for me to weep and to feel and express my feelings deeply, in the moment, too...that Jesus-as-God weeps with us, weeps with all of us, and that God's heart is able to hold it all, hold us all, and still have love to spare...that in his weeping, Jesus processes what he is feeling--his own pain and grief, as well as the pain and grief that surrounds him--and is not bound by it, but uses it as a catalyst for unbinding, for transformation, for resurrection.

IV.

And that's the third reason why we need the story of Jesus and Lazarus right now: it can help guide us so that we don't waste this crisis.

I am the resurrection and the life, says Jesus to Martha. I am the one who can bring life from death. I am God, right here, in your midst, and I am loving you with God's heart, right here, in your midst. I am the fullness of what it means to be abundantly alive, right here, right now. And then he asks, "Do you believe this?"

We tend to think of belief these days as intellectual assent--we believe in what we can rationalize, verify, measure, prove. But this isn't what Jesus is asking Martha, is asking us. Rather, he asks, do you trust this? Do you find hope in this? Do you live towards this? Do you point your life in this direction?

The list of what is breaking my heart these days is long. I'm sure yours is too. It feels like so much has been taken away, has died. It is good and right to grieve this.

But we can also use this heartbreak to refocus our lives around what actually matters.

We can use this sorrow to point us towards the joy that is also in our midst.

We can use this suffering to fuel our work for justice for all people--*on earth as it is in heaven*.

Life can come out of death--beloved, that is our story.

May we reorient our lives and make it so.

V.

Real, authentic faith that doesn't shy away from anger and grief. A God who deeply grieves with us and for us. The ever present reality of resurrection, available in every moment.

May these truths remain with us in our homes and in our lives this week and in the weeks to come; may they live deep within us, deep down in our bones; and may we manifest them in the world in creative and healing ways.

Beloved, you are blessed; go be a blessing. Amen.