



Jesus is With You

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 19, 2021

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

The only survivor of a shipwreck washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He prayed to exhaustion for God to rescue him, and every day he scanned the horizon for help, but none seemed forthcoming. Exhausted he eventually managed to build a little hut out of driftwood to protect him from the elements, and to store his few possessions. But then one day, after scavenging for food, he arrived home to find his little hut in flames, the smoke rolling up the sky. The worst had happened; everything was lost. He was stung with grief and anger. "God, how could you do this to me!" he cried. Early the next day, however, he was awakened by the sound of a ship that was approaching the island. It had come to rescue him. "How did you know I was here?" asked the weary man of his rescuers. "We saw your smoke signal," they replied.

The news comes by way of a messenger. "Lord, the one you love is sick." Oddly, Jesus doesn't rush to his bedside. Not because he is too busy. Or because he doesn't care. But because the Father is orchestrating an incredible moment and needs time to set the stage. And since a corpse must be center stage before this drama can begin, Jesus must wait until Lazarus dies before he can make his entrance.

But Mary and Martha can't see backstage in heaven. All they can see is an expansive, black curtain drawn across their lives. They sit at home, despondent, as in an empty theatre, their tearful prayers returning to them like hollow echoes off indifferent walls. It has been four days since their brother has died, but a mountain of grief still looms before them. It is a steep climb for the two sisters, and they feel they will never get over it. As Jesus approaches the outskirts of the city, a disillusioned Martha rushes out to greet him. "Lord, if you have been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus meets her on the crumbling ledge of her grief. He steadies her with the assurance that he is in control. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." The words provide a foothold for her. At the request of Jesus, Martha goes to call her sister. Mary comes, her eyes puffy and bloodshot. The flood of emotions is still swift and chaotic.

She falls before the Lord like a pottery vessel dropped to the ground, her heart shattered, her tears spilling over her feet. "Lord, if you have been here, my brother would not have died." Both sisters approached Jesus with the identical words. But where Martha said them to Jesus' face, Mary cried them at his feet. Maybe that is why the one evokes only a theological truth, which the other evokes Jesus' tears. Twice the Bible tends the tears of our Lord. On a hill overlooking Jerusalem, as he weeps for a nation. And on the way to a friend's grave, as he weeps for those who grieve.

What an incredible Savior. Weeping not just for us in our sin but with us in our suffering. Bending down to share the burden of grief that rests on our shoulders. But how do the tears Jesus shares with Mary fit with the theological truth he shared with Martha? Who can reconcile the words "Jesus wept" with "I am the resurrection and the life"? So strange that one with such absolute power would surrender so quickly to so small an army of tears. But Jesus does.

And for a beautifully tender moment we are given the privilege to glimpse one of the most provocative embraces between the divine and human in all the Bible. On our way to Lazarus' tomb, we stumble on still another question. Jesus approaches the gravesite with the full assurance that he will raise his friend from the dead. Why then does the sight of the tomb trouble him? Maybe the tomb in the garden is too graphic a reminder of Eden gone to seed. Of paradise lost. And of the cold, dark tomb he would have entered to regain it. In any case, it is remarkable that our suffering could trouble Jesus's spirit; that our pain could summon Jesus' tears.

The raising of Lazarus is the most daring and dramatic of all the Savior's healings. He courageously went into a place where hostility raged against him to snatch a friend from the jaws of death. It was an



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incredible moment. It revealed that Jesus was who he said he was – the resurrection and the life. But it revealed something else. The tears of God. And who's to say which is more incredible - a man who raises the dead...or a God who weeps? The words of author Ken Gire.

Let us pray...Lord Jesus, thank you for tears cried so openly. You have given not only dignity to our grief but freedom to our emotions. Thank you for the beautiful tribute that tears are to the dead, telling them they were loved and will be missed. Help us to realize that if the death of a loved one was difficult for you – the resurrection and the life – then I need never be ashamed when it is difficult for me. That you that you know what it is like to lose someone you love. And for the assurance that when we come to you in our grief, you know how we feel. Thank you for reminding us that our tears can evoke your own. Help us to follow the trail of tears you left behind on the way to Lazarus' tomb so that we may learn to weep with those who weep. Help us to feel the pain they feel...the uncertainty...the fear...the heaviness...the regret...the despair.

We pray for all who grieve the loss of a loved one: for the one who has lost a parent, for the one who has lost a child, for the one who has lost a grandparent, for the one who has lost a sister, for the one who has lost a brother, for the one who has lost a friend. We pray for healing holy One – for your healing touch that can calm our fears, divide our worries, mend our broken relationships, cover our failings, release our regrets, heal our sorrows, soften our hard heartedness, free us from our anger, and bring faith to our doubt. It is by your grace alone that we come to you this day and every day. Amen.

And it is that grace that we need brought to us by a messenger this day – and every day. So, wherever you are this day. Jesus is with you. Whatever brought you here. Jesus is with you. Whatever you are going through in this moment. Jesus is with you. Jesus is with you. Sharing your tears and raising the dead. And who's to say which is more incredible – a God who weeps by your side...or a man who raises the dead? Today I will hold on to the promise of God that all will be well – that tears will be wiped away – and the promise of eternal life is made real in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Savior of the world. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.