



Sunday November 7, 2021
John 12:28-34 (All Saints Sunday)

Pastor Tony Acompanado

I'd like to start off this morning with a confession – for a number of reasons, today's gospel is a really difficult one for me. A few weeks ago, when I first looked at this gospel and began to think about how to preach this sermon, I wondered, “why God...why does it have to be this story of the raising of Lazarus for All Saints Day?”

Maybe this is difficult for me because my family and I are in the throes of walking the difficult end of life journey with my mom as her cancer gradually and callously takes her life. We have planned, prepared, arranged, and claimed every possible remaining moment gifted to us, and yet, none of it seems to make this whole thing any easier. But I recognize that this isn't unique to me – because for each one of us, it doesn't really matter what the circumstances are, the reality is – the death of someone we love is never easy.

So today as we prepare to venture into this well-known gospel story of Lazarus, Mary, Martha, and Jesus I think we could all benefit from taking a moment to honor the reality of the pain and grief that is both in today's Gospel, but also in so many of our own lives.

The names that we read, those we light candles for, and those we only have the strength to name in our hearts represent for all of us, the deep and agonizing voids of loved ones lost during this past year and throughout our lives. Perhaps, for you like it does for me, the gospel for today illustrates death's very real and painful sting.

Today's Gospel from John gathers us at the foot of a newly occupied tomb, one that is surrounded by the typical mix of grief and loss, accusation, and anger, and I'll admit right now...I don't understand it. I don't understand why Jesus delays when he first receives word of Lazarus's illness. I don't understand why he tells his disciples that Lazarus is “asleep” rather than dead. And I don't understand why he chooses to bring Lazarus back at all – I mean, does this guy who's been dead for four days even want to come back?

And then we're told that Jesus tells Martha that she will see the glory of God. For anyone who's ever lost a loved one, including those we name and honor today, we may also be wondering where it is that we are to see God's glory especially in a procession that ends in death. Amid the grief that follows their absence, we're far more likely to question Jesus with disbelief, “Where Jesus, where is this so-called glimpse of God's glory?” But here it is, “The dead man came out.” I don't know about you, but it's difficult for me to imagine a more unbelievable sentence. This is entirely beyond our imagination. And even though we've been given plenty of hints earlier in the chapter about what will happen, we may still be shocked by the man shuffling out of the tomb, unexpectedly alive. Surely a miracle such as this is where the glory of God would become obvious.

Except things don't play out that way. In later verses we'll find that the people at the funeral are divided about Jesus. Some affirm his love; others criticize him for not doing more for Lazarus. The reaction is divided but it's more deadly after Lazarus stumbles his way back into the light of the living. Jesus ensures freedom for Lazarus, and although some believe because of what they saw, others begin to plan how to kill both Jesus and Lazarus, and stop the outrageous behavior of the one who calls the dead back to life, and of the dead who have the audacity to obey.

Perhaps one of the most puzzling aspects of this gospel is the profound emotional responses of Jesus. He's “greatly disturbed,” a word that commonly suggests he's angry. He's “deeply moved” – meaning he weeps. What is this all about? Is it a sign of the human grief felt by Jesus? Is he upset because the crowd's grief is hypocritical? Is he angry at people's continued inability or unwillingness to believe? Or is he upset because his own death and tomb are approaching?

This emotional Jesus is intriguing, especially since all these suggestions seem reasonable within John's gospel. Unfortunately, John doesn't seem interested in clarifying the reasons for Jesus' emotions. But whatever the trigger is, it's worth noticing that Jesus does not remain unmoved in the presence of this death and grief.

“Jesus began to weep.” For me, this is where it all begins to take shape – that grief takes a hold of him and breaks him down. That Jesus – the very revelation of God's self in our midst, stands at the grave of someone he loves, and cries.



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It's taken me a long time though to appreciate Jesus' tears in this story. When I was a kid, I didn't understand why Jesus cried when he knew that Lazarus was about to come back to life. As a young adult struggling in my faith, I didn't understand why Jesus cried after intentionally staying away during Lazarus's illness. And like some bystanders in the story, I responded to Jesus's grief with cynicism and contempt – "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind have kept this man from dying?"

Over time though, I've come to treasure the tears that Jesus sheds, and maybe even more than the miracle that follows them. And here's why:

When Jesus weeps, he legitimizes human grief. Sure, resurrection is right around the corner, but in this story the promise of joy doesn't cancel out the essential work of grief. When Jesus cries, he assures Mary not only that her brother is worth crying for, but also that she is worth crying for. Through his tears, Jesus calls all of us into the compassionate work of empathy.

When Jesus cries, he honors the complexity of our losses and our sorrows. Raising Lazarus wouldn't cancel out the pain of his illness, the memory of saying goodbye to a life he loved, or the gaping absence his sisters felt when he died. Jesus' tears honor the reality of human change and he grieves because things will never be the same again.

When Jesus cries, he honors the nuances of faith. He recognizes that belief and trust come with emotional baggage. Martha expresses deep resentment and anger at Jesus's delay, and in the next breath voices her trust in his power. Mary blames Jesus for Lazarus's death, but she does so on her knees, in a posture of belief and submission. Similarly, Jesus's face is wet with tears when he prays to God and resurrects his friend. This is what real faith looks like; it embraces the full spectrum of what it means to place ourselves into the hands of God.

When Jesus weeps, he acknowledges his own mortality. In John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus is the event that leads to Jesus's own arrest and crucifixion. When word spreads about the miracle in Bethany, the authorities decide that enough is enough; Jesus must be stopped.

So essentially, Jesus trades his life for his friend's. He knows that the end is imminent, he knows that his time with his friends is almost over, he knows that it's nearly time to say goodbye to those he loves. In crying, he affirms that it's okay to yearn for life. It's okay to feel a sense of wrongness and injustice in the face of death. It's okay to mourn the loss of strength, of relationship, of longevity. And it's okay to love and cherish the gift of life.

My friends, today's gospel is not simply about how Jesus will raise us on the last day. This was Martha's confession, and though true, it wasn't enough. Jesus calls Lazarus out, like the good shepherd who calls his sheep and gives them life. This is what Jesus does for all who believe in him. Jesus has the power to give life here and now, because Jesus is the very presence of God with us.

Jesus raising Lazarus reveals that he is the one in whom there is life, the one who even now calls us out of all the dark and binding places of death. When we grieve, we don't simply want to know that Jesus is powerful enough to raise the dead, because we'd question why Jesus didn't do more to help our loved one, or to stop death from marching through our world. What we must come to understand is that Jesus is life itself. Jesus himself is resurrection's defeat of death. Jesus is the place where death ends, and everlasting life begins.

This is what All Saints Day is for – not just to remember those from long ago or those whose deaths are still painfully near to us, and not just to point ahead to the promise of resurrection – even though all of these are important pieces of this day.

This day is about a promise that God extends to all God's people – that here and now there is no death or grief or fear so deep and dark that the voice of Jesus cannot reach into it, call us out, and give us life. Thanks be to God. Amen.