

The Lord Who Weeps

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening, everybody. Evening. Wonderful. It's great to be here. If you're new, welcome to St. John's. Wonderful to have you here. When I was at theological school in our New Testament class, the professor said when you're studying the Gospels, especially the Gospel stories, look for the surprises.

Look for the unexpected. That's where the gold is. So we're going to look at John 11 today, the story of Lazarus, which is a great Easter passage. And we're going to talk about the surprises in the passage.

And there are two. There are two surprises, two shocks. The first surprise, the first surprise are the emotions of Jesus. When he comes to the tomb and he weeps, verse 35.

I mean, you would think the story would make a bit more sense if he came to the tomb with a bit of a swagger. That, you know, it would seem to make more sense if he was a bit more presidential, sort of on the occasion.

Everything's okay, everybody. Don't worry. I've got it all under control. Don't worry about it. That's not what happens, though. He comes to the tomb and he weeps. Why would he weep? It can't be because his friend Lazarus has died, because he's just about to raise him up, right?

[1 : 15] Why does Jesus weep? He weeps because death is awful. He weeps. Death is an intrusion into God's good creation.

And coming to the tomb of his friend, Jesus is confronted by this evil. And I think this emotional reaction of Christ is very helpful to us.

The dominant cultural narrative around death is that it's just part of the circle of life. It's a natural thing. No. No. More recently, with the debates around sort of assisted suicide, death is portrayed as a solution to a difficult problem, an ally, even a friend.

And when death comes on your own terms, they talk about it in terms of dignified, being a dignified thing. Our bishop wrote about this in his Easter letter this year. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. He did not consider death a friend. Death was an enemy. Death is not a solution. Death's the problem. Death is an alien thing in God's creation that needs to be conquered.

[2 : 31] Death is awful. That's why Jesus wept. But, but very importantly, Jesus didn't just weep.

He gets angry. We see that in verse 33 there. He, Jesus, was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. That's a fairly soft translation. The deeply moved words.

You could read that and you sort of think, it sort of sounds like he was really, really sad about this. It's not. It was really sad. No, the literal meaning is that he was furious. That it's, it's, the Greek word is used sometimes to describe the noise an animal would make when it was really angry, like the snorting of a wild horse.

It's one of the strongest words in Greek that's used in the New Testament to express repugnance and indignation. Eugene Peterson, in the message version of the Bible, translate that exact verse there, this.

He says this, he goes, Quaking with rage, Jesus approached the tomb. Jesus was angry at death.

[3 : 45] He was offended by it. And I love that. I love that. I love that Jesus is angry because it tells us he's going to do something.

He's fired up about this. And what is he, what's he going to do? Well, that's the, that's the second surprise of the passage. So the first shock, the first surprise are these emotions of Jesus weeping and rage.

Then the second shock, and we're glad about those emotions. The second shock is this. The focus of this passage that we've just read, the focus of that passage is not the resurrection of Lazarus.

And we know that because there's so little attention given, given to it. I mean, if you were going to make that the focus, if that was the focus of the passage, they'd talk it up a whole lot more. But it's really given, John sort of plays it down. Verse 43 and verse 44, it's just two verses. The man who had died came out. Like he plays it down.

[4 : 47] That's it. That's not the real focus. This raising of Lazarus. You know what it is? The raising of Lazarus is an example of the real focus of the passage.

The real focus of the passage are the tremendous words of verse 25. That's the heartbeat of the passage. It's when Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life.

Now to understand what Jesus is saying, we need a bit of context here. So let's look at the dialogue leading up to that astounding statement. So beginning at verse 21, you see, Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you'd have been here, my brother would not have died.

So both Mary and Martha, they both have the same thing. They're really disappointed in Jesus. And Jesus says to her, your brother will rise again. And Martha says to him, I know he'll rise again in the resurrection of the day. So what do we have here?

Mary and Martha, really disappointed in Jesus, that Jesus took his time getting there. And they communicate that to him again. Jesus says, your brother will rise again. And she says, yeah, I know, I know, I know, I know.

[5 : 50] I know something good will happen maybe in the future at some point. Out there. See, Martha, I think, thinks that Jesus is doing a little bit of lightweight pastoral care.

A little bit of, oh, your brother's out there, there. Bless your heart. It'll be okay. Keep plugging away, you know. She thinks it's a bit of lightweight pastoral care. So she responds with a kind of like a, just sort of a pat answer back.

I know he'll rise again one day. This exposes her heart. This is what I mean. So her heart can only trust in this kind of nebulous idea that it's going to be okay one day, perhaps, maybe in the future. She had what many Christians live with today. This vague and fuzzy optimism that somehow things might work out at some point.

And into that vagueness, into that sort of vagueness there, Jesus says these amazing words, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live.

[7 : 01] And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. This is the heart of our text. Jesus disrupts the flow of her heart and says, you can trust in me. Now, in the midst of this thing that's going on, he doesn't point these grieving women to a miracle.

He points them to himself and says, I am the resurrection. Whoever believes in me. So he's saying, if we trust in him, death can't take us forever.

If we trust in him, we will live forever with him. And then to demonstrate that, he raises Lazarus with just three words.

Lazarus, come out. Because he only needs a few words. Because no authority can stand before the one who is the resurrection and the life.

So Jesus replaces her sort of vague optimism with, and let me quote from the Anglican prayer book funeral service here, he replaces her vague optimism with the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead.

[8 : 16] Now, to finish up, this is a very short sermon. Now to finish up, what does this mean for us here? Well, it means lots of things. You can read them, all about them on the back of the service sheet. I'm just going to pick up on a couple though.

On the subject of death, it means this, it means we can trust Jesus with our death. That's more important to some of you than others right now depending on how old you are perhaps to be honest.

Perhaps you know people that have died, people you loved, if they were believers. We can trust that they are experiencing resurrection life now. That they have a resurrection body and mind, a mind and body they always wanted and all the pain they experienced in this life, all the things that were taken from them in this life, all the things the locusts have eaten have been restored to them. Evil does not win in their life. And folks, this is not some indistinct hope, it's a sure and present one because it's grounded in the work of Jesus who raged at death and then went to the cross and rose again.

And on that Easter morning 2,000 years ago, Jesus broke the power of death and he snapped its neck. But this passage is not just about the conquering of physical death.

[9 : 33] It points to another type of death, the spiritual death that people experience who are separated from God. So go back to verse 25 and 26 again.

It's very interesting if you look really closely at it. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

It sounds like he's saying the same thing twice, right? Who is not? The second half of the verse is not a repetition. I think the first half, verse 25, deals with the bodily resurrection, which we have hope in, which is wonderful.

And the second half I think is about our spiritual resurrection. So he's saying if we believe in him now, we move from a state of spiritual death to life, so that eternal life starts now.

So this passage is not just, it's not just hope that we get into heaven, even though that's a wonderful hope. Although it is that. It's, God's plan is not just to snatch people away from earth to heaven.

[10 : 37] You know, as N.T. Wright says, it's to colonize earth with the life of heaven. And we're reminded of that in the Lord's Prayer.

Isn't that just what the Lord's Prayer is asking? And so Christians, with this new life that we can experience now, because of the risen Jesus, we can serve God, we can go out into the world, we can become communities of contrast, we can be agents of reconciliation and peace, we can live lives of incredible sacrificial love and radical hospitality, we can do that with great confidence, because we have the very life of God in us.

And we do it knowing that it's God's will that eventually he will end all wars and division and poverty and injustice and renew the whole world.

Because he is risen, and we all know unimaginable joy forever, because he is risen, we live lives colonizing earth with the life of heaven.

I'll finish with this, verse 26. And this is a great question to ask yourself at Easter time. Jesus asks Martha a question.

[12 : 06] He says, do you believe this? It's a good question, isn't it? Do you believe this? Well, today, folks, let's be people who can say with her, yes, Lord, I believe.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.