

# LIFE WATERED WITH TEARS

John 11:32-44

Sunday, November 1, 2009 – All Saints Day

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We enter this life crying and many of us will leave it the same way. In the decades that separate our birth and death, we will cry some more. Life is a joyous wonder, and life is also a “Vale of Tears.” This phrase, Vale of Tears, is taken the Catholic prayer Salve Regina, a prayer for help to the Virgin Mary. It reads, in part: "To you do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears." And lest this sound too maudlin to a bunch of Protestants, I would remind you that on this All Saints Day, every one of the lessons we heard read speaks of human pain and human tears – a vale of tears.

We hurt and we cry. Some researchers suggest that the body doesn't really differentiate between emotional and physical pain. It just experiences pain and the response is the same. We cry.

Isn't it strange that tears embarrass us or that we teach our children that tears are a sign of weakness when in actuality tears are a necessary mechanism to help us deal with our pain. When we cry, hormones are released that calm us down and clear our minds. Tears are a gift. Like rain, they refresh us.

When I was a kid in Sunday School, I remember being fascinated when the teacher told us that the shortest verse in the Bible was John 11:35. In the King James Version, it simply reads: "Jesus wept." I liked the trivia, but I liked the idea more. *Jesus* wept. I was one of those sensitive little boys who cried sometimes, and was often embarrassed by it. But imagining a Jesus who cried made him dearer to me; made him like a friend, made him human. Jesus wept, and he did so because his heart was shattered by the untimely death of a friend.

This story actually begins in verse 1 of the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, so let me fill you in on some of the details. Mary and Martha and Lazarus were adult siblings who lived together. Apparently none of them married. Lazarus, therefore, was very important in his sisters' lives, not just because he was their brother, but also because single women were particularly vulnerable to starvation and abuse without a man. Lazarus was his sisters' social security. And for some reason never explained, Jesus really loved these three. They were kindred spirits.

One day Lazarus became very ill. And panic-stricken, the sisters sent a message to Jesus imploring him to come immediately. He was only two miles away. But he didn't come. Instead he made a strange statement to his disciples about this illness not leading to death.

Days passed. And when he finally did journey to Bethany, Martha heard that he was on his way. And so she ran out of the house to meet him. I think she really ran, powered by the adrenaline of grief and rage. Her brother had been dead for four days and her friend Jesus had not come. When she met him the words came pouring out of her mouth: "Lord if you had only come my brother would not have died." And in response Jesus makes one of his more famous statements: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."

Martha ran back to tell Mary that Jesus was coming and Mary's response was the same. She got up and ran out of the house to meet him. This time the mourners followed her, thinking she was going to the cemetery to weep. When she found Jesus she fell on her knees, either out of honor or crushed by grief. And she made the same accusation: "If you had only come when we asked you, Lazarus would not have died." And then she broke down in sobs.

This caused the mourners to cry. And all of this grief touched Jesus so deeply that he began to weep. I doubt very much that it was the dignified crying we expect from our own leaders; a gentle wiping away of a tear. I suspect that Jesus grieved like we do when no one is looking; that kind of grieving that makes your stomach feel like it will come up through your throat.

So all of these weeping people went to the tomb. And when they got there, and when Jesus saw the reality of the grave, he was once again greatly disturbed. He ordered that the stone be removed from the mouth of the tomb, but Martha protested: "No Lord, it's been four days. It will stink." Jesus said something confounding about seeing the glory of God, and once again ordered the stone away. This time the family relented. He looked up to heaven and prayed. And then in a voice that woke the dead, he cried: "Lazarus, come out!" And to the utter shock of the crowd, out he came, still wrapped in his grave clothes. "Somebody unbind him and let him go", Jesus said.

I love this story for many reasons, but most of all I love it because it's our story. We all know what it feels like to bury someone you love. We all know something of the aching emptiness of grief. We know the waves of pain that sometimes surprise us, causing tears to flow. And many of us have called out

to God for help only to suffer what seems an interminable delay. This is our story.

But what of the way the story ends? Have any of our dead been returned to us? Have any of us ever prayed for sick loved one to recover, only to find ourselves in a graveyard, burying them along with a piece of our faith?

My maternal grandmother died when my mother was eleven years old. Her illness would have been treatable if she had had better doctors. But they were poor coal miners in Kentucky and so she died. My grandfather, a devoutly religious man, was left with the care of 8 children. And in his crushing grief, he lost his faith. It's hardly surprising. He too had asked for Jesus to come, but his wife died and he was left alone with 8 children, and a lot of bitterness.

Today we will read the names of people we have dearly loved. Perhaps we prayed for some of them to recover, but still they died. Can the Lazarus story speak to us at all? Was it cruel for the lectionary editors to assign this text to the day when we so formally mark the permanence of our losses?

Well I think this story does have a lot to say to us who mourn. But it is not a conventional message about an all-powerful God who rescues us from pain.

This is the story of God in the midst of the pain.

Rev. Phyllis Kersten writes that because of what we have been taught about a God who is all-powerful and therefore removed our human situation, we are blinded from ... “seeing the most important reality of the Bethany graveyard – (and that is) the presence there of the One who weeps unashamedly out of love for Lazarus and for us, and who acts on our behalf.” When Jesus wept, it was a proclamation about the essential nature of God; a God who stands in the ashes of our ruined lives, who stands beside us when we bury those we love; who stands among the suffering of the world and weeps.

But Rev. Kersten doesn't just speak of a weeping God, and neither does St. John. Both claim that God also acts on our behalf. After he had wept, Jesus cried out with a loud voice and called life out of death – “Lazarus, come forth!” And those words, spoken in the face of death, would forever change the lives of all of Jesus' friends.

Now I have never seen anyone I love raised from the dead. And I have certainly wept over the graves of people I didn't think I could live without. But even in those moments, somehow I was not swallowed up by despair because I too heard the word of Jesus in the face of death. It was not a shout, but more like an insistent whisper that seemed to rise from someplace very deep: love is stronger than death; love is stronger than death.

And that word, dear friends, is also what makes this story our story. It is the life-giving word of Jesus, whispering in our souls; tugging at our spirits, even as we stand among the tombs: love is stronger than death; love is stronger than death. And to hear that word, and to believe that word standing in a graveyard, is just as much a miracle as Lazarus bounding out of his tomb. And with Mary and Martha, we stand amazed at the Resurrection and the Life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.