

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9

Psalm 24

Revelation 21: 1-6a

John 11: 32-44

The Rev. Laura Palmer

Church of St. Martin in-the-Fields

November 3rd, 2024

The Feast of All Souls

Jesus Began to Weep

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Is there a more tender, more human moment in scripture than the words, "Jesus began to weep?" Confronting the finality of death at the cold hard reality of the tomb, Jesus breaks down and cries.

His dear friend, Lazarus, has been dead and in the tomb for four days. Jesus waited for two days before coming to him after hearing he was sick. His heartbroken sisters, Mary and Martha, are angry, plagued by the "if onlys," grief's bitter sentries.

Mary kneels before Jesus in a reverence cloaked with pain: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Her tears and blame cut into him. Those who had come are also weeping and pointedly ask: Why *did* he wait for two days to come? Surely there had to be a way to prevent this and make it end differently.

"Take me to where you have laid him." And there, it hits him. Jesus begins to weep.

True to form, Martha minces no words when Jesus orders the stone removed from the tomb: "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." What a waste of time.

Time is running out for Jesus. He has spoken openly to his disciples about his imminent death and knows crucifixion is just over the horizon. He has every reason to be careful, protective. But love compels him to act.

In John's telling of the gospel, this is the miracle that seals Jesus' fate. It proves his powers are divine and no match for Pilate who can't conquer Jesus' armies, seize his territory or trash his palaces. How

could prison bars contain someone who can raise the dead? Those who fear him actively begin plotting to kill him.

“Jesus begins to weep.” Weeping for his friend but I believe, also for himself. Resurrecting Lazarus will cost him his life and he knows it. But perhaps it will solidify his followers into believing in him.

He asks Martha what happened to her faith: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" But it's too late. Her grief has already smashed the scaffolding of her faith.

When the stone is removed Jesus raises his head to the heavens: “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”

Then he calls for Lazarus to come out.

And he does, drenched in the rotting stench of death, his hands and feet bound, his face still covered by a burial shroud. He is a walking, gruesome, ghoulish miracle.

When Jesus was overwhelmed by grief, he wept. There were no cheap platitudes like “He’s in a better place.” Jesus spoke through the truth of his tears and the power of this cannot be underestimated:

Writes author and theologian Debie Thomas:

When Jesus weeps, he legitimizes human grief. His brokenness in the face of Mary’s sorrow negates all forms of Christian triumphalism that leave no room for lament.

Yes, resurrection is 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 beloved brother is worth crying for, but also that she is worth crying with. Through his tears, Jesus calls all of us into the holy vocation of empathy.[1]

In this service tonight, we are responding to “holy vocation of empathy.” We honor the sacred need to lament, to remember, and to mourn. It is slow and hard.

No one came here tonight alone; we carry a grief that is as singular to each of us as our fingerprints. For some of you here this evening, grief is carved in a granite stone in the Columbarium with a name (or names) and the dates that define the beginning and end of a life that is no more.

Our service began in the Columbarium-- a sacred altar of our parish's communal grief and a vivid reminder of how in life we are also never far from death.

The Columbarium holds the graves of toddlers and children, soldiers, mothers and fathers, siblings and grandparents, neighbors and friends. Some died suddenly, others after interminable illnesses, and several by suicide, a shattering and sudden act of self-destruction.

Our church was consecrated in 1889 to Edith Atlee Houston, who died 11 days after giving birth to her third child and only son who was killed 23 years later in World War I. Grief and loss were consecrated with St. Martin's and honor who we are as we continually honor them.

Throughout the year, we celebrate the living and serve those in our community and the world. But on this day, the Feast of All Souls, we remember those we loved who have gone before us but shaped who we have become. The legacy of their lives lives in our love.

Brother Joseph, a monk at the Holy Cross Monastery where I was on retreat this week said these three days—from All Saints on Friday to All Souls on Sunday are a second Tridium, like the three days we celebrate from Good Friday to Easter. Spring is filled with resurrection energy and new life as leaves burst from barren branches and flowers blossom and bloom.

It's different now. The days are shorter and darker. Leaves fall, flowers wither as we turn inward. But these three days reverberate with the same truth: there are no shortcuts. We will all pass from death into new life. The grave holds the key to our eternal life.

Other Gods may cry for us, but Jesus is the only one who weeps with us. The triumph of the resurrection was born from his tears. Jesus wept for Lazarus and he weeps with you and me. AMEN

[1] Thomas, Debie, "Journey with Jesus," A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church, October 28, 2018