

Tears and Shouts – John 11:32-44

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This gospel narrative in John is not without mystery or questions. The story of Lazarus, Mary, Martha, and Jesus begins with some unknowns.

As the story begins, death has already taken Lazarus; Jesus, however, had not been there when he died. In fact, Jesus delayed his arrival when informed that Lazarus had died. It was only until later when Jesus showed up that he was confronted by Mary and Martha as to his absence.

So why would Jesus bother to show up now? Shouldn't Martha and Mary be upset that Jesus took so long to get here? Perhaps their repeated words are tinged with anger? And the crowd of fellow Jews who have faithfully come to the aid of this grieving family certainly speak truth both when some say, "Look how he loved him!" and when others respond, "Isn't the one who opened the eyes of a blind person also able to keep this one from dying?" (11:36–37). In other words, if he loved Lazarus so much, why on earth didn't Jesus show up sooner?

Yet, all these emotions are only implied in this passage; John has left them ambiguous and open to our interpretations. The only person whose emotions are **explicitly** narrated are those of Jesus. And more than his emotions, his actions are clear when the subtleties of the story are unclear.

At the sight of Mary and the other Jews weeping, Jesus we are told by John is "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (11:33). When he follows Mary's summons to her brother's tomb, Jesus cries (11:35).

We might be surprised at all this emotion from Jesus; after all, doesn't he already know what he's about to do? We see here a sympathetic and empathetic Jesus, a human being who mourns **for** loved ones who have died and **along with** other loved ones who remain. Even though something bigger is coming for Lazarus, Jesus does not ignore or remain detached from the very real suffering Lazarus endured and the grief his community experiences. Instead, Jesus mourns too.

When there are no explanations to the tragedies and injustices of the world, this is partly all we have to go on. In Jesus weeping with Mary, Martha, and the others, we see this amazing solidarity and presence he has with those who suffer.

We can't help, then, but conclude that Jesus today is weeping with those who have suffered greatly from natural disasters, disease, or war and violence.

And when Jesus weeps, we know that we have license to weep, too.

Some of you may weep regularly. Others of you may hardly weep. Whatever your pattern, remember what happens when you weep: You cry because you have been moved in a profound way that ordinary moments can't capture.

Someone once said that tears in a time of loss represent love that has nowhere else to go. In weeping, we are moved with an emotion that identifies this love and connection we have to someone or something dear.

In Jesus' weeping, he portrayed a love for Lazarus, Mary, and Martha that expressed itself in the raw emotion of tears.

And when we experience loss or another kind of pain, we know of a love so deep on Jesus' part that he would cry with us.

In this story today, we don't have to analyze and make assumptions about Jesus' emotions. John tells us that he cried. It is profound and it is our comfort when all seems hopeless.

The second thing Jesus did was even more incredible. With a shout, he raised Lazarus from the dead. He compliments the solidarity we find in his tears with the hope that reveals a new life that is to come. Death is not the final word. Life is.

As we remember the saints today, we celebrate that they have experienced the joy of new life in Christ. For they have been "unbound and let go" from their suffering, much like Lazarus was.

So too is it for us as we continue our journey on earth. We can be unbound and let go of the human constraints we experience today. There is hope for something better to come, there is hope that good can overcome evil, there is hope that the world can find greater justice and peace for all.

No matter the outcome of this Tuesday's elections, whether you're pleased with the results or not, the same will be true for us then as it is today: the possibility still exists that the world will be better because of our common call to love God and love our neighbor.

This possibility exists because God in Jesus Christ, as we see in his resurrection of Lazarus, is big enough and powerful enough to make miracles.

Todd Billings, on the faculty at Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan, some years ago contracted multiple myeloma, a serious cancer of the bone marrow that is often fatal. This was his account of his experience:

"Get well soon! Jesus loves you! God is bigger than cancer!"

My tears started to flow as I read these words. They were from a 15-year-old girl with Down syndrome in my congregation. Less than a week earlier, the doctor spoke the diagnosis to me, about which he had no doubt: multiple myeloma — an incurable cancer, a fatal disease. I had been in a fog ever since. How was I to face each day when my future — which had seemed wide open — had suddenly narrowed? My “world” seemed to be caving in on itself with fog in each direction I turned, so that no light could shine in.

While I had received many cards in the previous days, this one was different. “God is bigger than cancer!” Yes. She did not say, “God will cure you of this cancer,” or “God will suffer with you.” God is bigger than cancer. The fog is thick, but God is bigger. My cancer story was already developing its own sense of drama. The sky was closing in, enveloping my whole world so that nothing else could creep in. But God’s story, the drama of God’s action in the world, was bigger. The girl in my church wasn’t denying the fog or the loss but testifying to a God who was greater, the God made known in Jesus Christ, who shows us that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5). ...

I included the following words from Question and Answer 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism: “What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but that I belong — in body and soul, in life and in death — to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” Like the note from the 15-year-old girl in my church, it breaks through the fog of “terminal” and “incurable” and “cancer” by pointing us to the bedrock of what matters: that I belong, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ. My life is not my own.

Yes, God is bigger than cancer. God is bigger than death. In the tears that he sheds in John 11 and in his shouts that led to a resurrection, we don’t have to guess where Jesus stands. He’s one

who loves in solidarity and one who promises that death will not have the final word.

Glory be to him!