

## It's Enough to Make a Grown Man Cry

John 11:17-44

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Jesus wept. In addition to being the shortest verse in the Bible, it is emotionally and theologically suggestive: Jesus experienced that most common, most exquisitely painful, of all human experiences, the death of a loved one. Lazarus's death, and all that entailed, the loss of a treasured friend, a reminder of the brevity and fragility of all human life, a reminder of the inevitability of his own death, which at that very moment was looming on the horizon—it was enough to make a grown man cry.

So, Jesus wept. And so have we all.

In his wonderful memoir, *Credo*, William Sloane Coffin thinks out loud in the last chapter, "The End of Life," about death. His words have an immediacy about them, and as always, they are wise and human and wry and playful.

"Without death, we'd never live," Coffin says. "Consider only the alternative—life without death. Life without death would be interminable—literally, figuratively. We'd take days just to get out of bed, weeks to decide 'what's next?' Students would never graduate; faculty meetings and all kinds of other gatherings would go on for months." For one who has already spent a significant portion of his life sitting in meetings, that image of life without death evolving into an endless church committee meeting sounds, frankly, hellish!

Without death, Coffin suggests, "chances are we'd be bored." So "death cannot be the enemy if it's death that brings us to life." (pp. 167–168).

"Jesus began to weep" is a small detail in a much larger story: the death and raising of Lazarus. In John's Gospel, the trajectory of that larger story is now turning toward Jerusalem and Jesus' betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion.

Word comes to Jesus that his friend Lazarus is ill. Lazarus and his sisters, Martha, and Mary, live in Bethany, a small town near Jerusalem. They are very good friends, the four of them, apparently. There is an easy familiarity between Jesus and the two sisters. Against the advice of his disciples, Jesus decides to go to Lazarus's side. But he waits several days.

When he arrives, Lazarus is already dead. Both Mary and Martha express exasperation that he didn't arrive sooner. The mourners, friends of the family, also wondered what was keeping him and if what people were saying about his miraculous power were true, why he didn't exercise some of it on behalf of his dear friend.

And then Jesus wept. What happened next is difficult for us. Jesus has already told Martha and Mary, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die"—words that we read at every memorial service.

So, in his grief, his eyes still wet from his tears, "greatly disturbed" John says, Jesus orders the stone rolled away, even though practical Martha is fussing, busily objecting to the aesthetics of such a thing. And of all things Jesus shouts into the open grave, "Lazarus, come out of there!" Without comment, the story concludes: "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in cloth. Jesus said to them: 'Unbind him and let him go.'" And that's it.

There were two immediate results. People were astonished; people believed in this one who in the name of God restores life, brings life out of death. And the authorities begin to plan in

earnest how to get rid of him. Apparently, the authority to resist the power of death is a threat to public order and to their own authority.

Jesus wept. Was Lazarus' death the first experience Jesus had with loss as an adult? Typically, not always, but typically, we sail through the first decades of life; we may lose some grandparents and aunts and uncles along the way, and in the fourth or fifth decade our lives crash into the reality of death when someone we dearly love dies. The death of a parent comes out of the blue and stuns us and reverberates in our lives every day thereafter. And life is never quite the same again.

I love something Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his parents on Christmas Eve 1943, from his Nazi prison cell: "Nothing can make up for the absence of someone we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a kind of substitute: we must simply hold out and see it through. This sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap: he doesn't fill it, but on the contrary, he keeps it empty and so helps us keep alive our communion with each other." (*The Christian Century*, 14 December 20)

Susan Vogel is the former dean at St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. Her son died in an automobile accident, and she wrote a book about it. She thanks the friend who sent her a quote from Roger Kahn: "The world is never again as it was before anyone you love has died; never so innocent, never so fixed, never so gentle, never so pliant to your will."

Everything changed for Vogel, including her theology. Like most of us, she never paid much attention to the phrase in the Apostle's Creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." Now, she writes to her old theology professor, "it has to do with the everlasting life of my son, the resurrection of his body to which I first gave birth. It is not now an esoteric exercise in creedal affirmation. It is my fervent mother-hope that my baby, my firstborn child, is not lost forever, is not lost to me forever, is not lost" (*And Then Mark Died: Letters of Grief, Love, and Faith*, p.17).

"Unbind him and let him go," Jesus commanded of Lazarus, and we hear very little of him again. I found myself wondering, as I thought about this text this week, "Go where?" Where did Lazarus go? What did he do? Did he live out the rest of his life differently? He must have. Death teaches us how very precious the gift of life is, the gift of our own lives, teaches us the value of every new day, teaches us gratitude every morning, teaches us to not be wasteful, to make every day count because every day is a gift we did nothing to earn or deserve.

Jane Kenyon was among our most distinguished poets and one of her most beloved poems is "Otherwise":

I got out of bed  
on two strong legs  
It might have been  
otherwise. I ate  
cereal, sweet  
milk, ripe, flawless  
peach. It might  
have been otherwise.

...

All morning I did  
the work I love.

...

We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks.  
It might have been otherwise.

...

I slept in a bed  
in a room with paintings  
on the wall, and  
planned another day  
just like this day.  
But one day, I know  
it will be otherwise.

(from *Otherwise*, Graywolf Press, 1996)

“Before every birth and after every death there is still God,” Bill Coffin writes at the end of his memoir. “The abyss of God’s love is deeper than the abyss of death” (pp. 169–172).

In the meantime, we are free to live fully and gratefully, every day of the life that is ours, and to know that those who have gone before us on this All Saints Sunday are safe in the mercy and love of God.

Amen.