

March 29, 2020

5th Sunday of Lent

John 11: 1-46

Prayer: Dear Lord, We pray that you open our eyes to the miracles that occur even today. Help us to see the signs that point to you. In the name you wore while living among us, Amen.

Jesus, Weeping

My grandfather was born in 1908 and grew up on a farm in northeast Georgia. I am tempted to say it was a kinder, gentler time.

But the fact is it was just six years before the beginning of World War I, 10 years before the pandemic known as the Spanish flu. That flu infected one third of the entire globe, and killed 50 million people.

We have traveled this road before.

My grandfather started school in 1914. And his elementary teacher in that rural Georgia school required her students to recite a Bible verse every day. Granddaddy always responded, **“Jesus wept.”**

That was the shortest verse in the King James Bible. Granddaddy and I thought that was hilarious.

But in many ways, that verse – “**Jesus wept**” -- is also one of the most profound verses in the Bible. It comes in the middle of a long story that is unique to the gospel of John – the raising of Jesus’ friend, Lazarus.

The story of Lazarus comes on this fifth Sunday of Lent, which means we are still marking Jesus’s wilderness experience. We’ve kind of lost Lent this year, though I heard one person say, “I never thought I’d give up this month for Lent.”

At the beginning of this Lenten season, most of us were contemplating giving up ice cream or chocolate or television, those little treats that we deny ourselves to align with Jesus’s starvation experience in the desert.

But this season has turned into something else, a true wilderness experience, with lost jobs, threatened businesses, frightened people. But

I'm a big believer that there are still truths to be found in our holy Scriptures, in our ancient communal stories.

At the point of today's Scripture reading about the raising of Lazarus, Jesus and his disciples were on their walk to the cross, though the disciples didn't realize it.

John didn't use the word "miracle." He used the word "sign."

His gospel is built around seven "signs" performed by Jesus. These signs were not celebrated as miracles so much as they were used to point to something else.

That's what signs do: They point to something -- something we need to know.

Furman University, this exit.

Covid 19 testing. This lane.

New store hours, 8 AM-8 PM.

Here are the seven signs that Jesus performed in John's gospel:

Turning water into wine at Cana.

Healing the son of a royal official.

Healing an invalid by a pool in Jerusalem.

Feeding the 5,000.

Walking on water.

Healing a man blind since birth.

And the seventh sign, the greatest sign, was the raising of his friend, Lazarus.

Now John didn't hit a story and run the way Matthew, Mark and Luke sometimes did. He dove into a story and he stayed there. He gave us detail and dialogue and ponderings. He gave us character development.

If Mark was the Cliff Notes gospel writer, John was the novelist.

So we won't read all of chapter 11 today, because like so many of John's stories, it is very long. I'll just tell the first part.

As Jesus and the disciples traveled, they received word that their friend, Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, was sick in Bethany, just two miles from Jerusalem. Upon hearing of Lazarus' illness, Jesus

responded that his friend would not die; this would be an opportunity to display God's glory. So he deliberately stayed two days longer before even starting off for Bethany.

When they finally arrived, they found that Lazarus had already died and had been in his tomb for four days. His sister Martha ran out to meet Jesus, crying, **“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”**

A little while later, her sister Mary came out and said the very same thing.

We'll pick up there. If you'd like to read along, I'm reading from **John 11: 33-44.**

³³When Jesus saw (Mary) weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.'

³⁵Jesus began to weep. (*Or "Jesus wept."*)

³⁶So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' ³⁷But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

³⁹Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.'

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.'

⁴⁰Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?'

⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.'

⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

The big mystery that has haunted this story for 2,000 years is: *Why did Jesus wait two days before heading to Bethany? Why did he wait?*

N.T. Wright is one of the world's leading New Testament scholars. You can't get through seminary without reading N.T. Wright. But he also writes very accessible Bible commentaries under the name Tom Wright.

And what Tom Wright says is that during those two days that Jesus *didn't* rush to Bethany, he was ... praying. *He was praying.*

When he watched Lazarus's friends roll away the stone, he looked heavenward, and said, **“Father, I thank you for having heard me.”**

That's why Tom Wright thinks Jesus was praying during those two days.

“I thank you for having heard me.”

Because I'm reluctant to read too much on this video, I skipped an important conversation in this story. It occurred when Jesus was speaking to Martha. **“I am the resurrection and the life,”** he told her.

Back in the days before the printing press, scribes copied Scripture over and over. That's how it was preserved for us.

In some of our ancient manuscripts of this passage, the scribes copied **“I am the resurrection”** and left out Jesus' last three words -- **“and the life.”** They edited him to read simply, **“I am the resurrection.”**

Scholars surmise that the scribes thought Jesus was repeating himself, and so they “corrected” him.

But maybe he wasn't repeating himself. Maybe "**I am the resurrection**" means one thing, and "**I am the life**" means something else.

I am the resurrection may have meaning for our future salvation, for what we refer to as the afterlife.

I am the life may have meaning right here and right now, as Martha's brother lay dead in the tomb.

Right here and right now, as we go about our lives so impacted by this global pandemic. Right here and right now, as we are living in an isolated wilderness like one I've never known.

Jesus was trying to make Martha understand that he was also the life right there, right then. And he performed a sign to point her that way.

He called her brother from the tomb. On his way to his own death, Jesus showed us what new life could look like.

But not everyone would embrace that new life. After the section we read, the chief priests and Pharisees were undone at this seventh sign by Jesus. They called a council meeting.

“If we let him go on like this,” they said, **“everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.”** (John 11: 48)

And so they set out to murder both Jesus and his sign, Lazarus.

Ultimately, I think that is where we find the cause of Jesus’s tears. Not that he was grieving over his friend, for he was about to wake that friend up.

Not that he was fearful over his upcoming death, though that was certainly bad enough.

But that he could draw a friend out of the tomb, that he could offer exciting new life, and the response of those charged with religious leadership was ... murder.

The response to new life was murder.

Jesus had spent 33 years among these feckless humans. I think he wept out of frustration and grief and anger and loneliness in the midst of crowds who simply didn't understand. Who vowed to kill that which they didn't understand.

Unfortunately, we can do the same thing today. I don't want to be cavalier, but this pandemic will pass.

And we will be left with the issues we faced before. With economic inequalities and unfair workplace practices and mass incarceration. With putdowns and discouragement and arrogance toward marginalized citizens. With gossip and abuse and ugly political discourse.

I think we still have the power to make Jesus weep.

Granddaddy, we still have the power to make Jesus weep.

Amen.