

## **Sermon for November 6, 2021**

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When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved...Jesus began to weep.

Our God chooses to reveal Godself by coming in human flesh to dwell beside us – simultaneously fully God and fully human. Maybe no where else in all of scripture is Jesus' full humanity as tangible as it is in today's scripture reading. Jesus, God in the flesh, enters the presence of human grief and is deeply moved. Jesus, God in the flesh, weeps. Our Triune God experiences grief and sheds tears.

This past sixth months as I have stood with families beside hospice hospital beds, at funeral services remembering their loved ones, at cemetery gravesites as we committed their family member to God's eternal care, I spoke these words over and over again "Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing can separate us from Christ Jesus our Lord...our God who comes to dwell beside us, experiences our grief and knows our tears.

There has been a lot to grieve these past few years. Yet we live in a culture that tends to push us past grief. We often praise those who are strong, able to muscle through and continue life with little disruption. We have a tendency to fight against tears, to choke back our sobs, to stifle the disruption in our spirits and build walls to shield us from being too deeply moved. It is a rare individual who stops and allows their full grief to rise to the surface, providing time and space necessary to experience and process the fullness of their human emotions. There is a powerful invitation in today's scripture text. For if Jesus, God in human flesh, allows himself to be greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved by grief - if Jesus, God in human flesh allows himself to weep, is this not an example for us? In Jesus' display of human grief are we encouraged to allow our own flesh and spirit time to feel disturbed, to be deeply moved, to weep?

Did you know that tears of grief are chemically different than any other tears shed from your eyes? Tears of grief allow for the release of unique chemicals and toxins from your system. This is why you get such a headache if you fight to keep your tears from flowing down your cheeks. Your body actually needs to cry out some things. Tears of grief are an important part of your human system recovering from extreme loss. We have been created for times of tears. And today's scripture reading reminds us that our God has experienced such times and therefore can receive these emotions as they pour out of our flesh. "Nothing can separate you from the love of Christ Jesus our Lord" – you are held in your full humanity.

But our story today does not end with tears on the hillside outside of the tomb. Death and grief are indeed still part of our earthly flesh. But in today's reading we are reminded that, while God works within our flesh, God also works beyond it. And we too have a role beyond our tears.

I just recently attended an Addiction and Faith Training, in which this text was used to teach about the importance of congregational involvement in recovery ministry. The presenter spoke

of the varied roles the people play in bringing about new life in this text. First, she stressed that there were bystanders. We read of the Jews crying alongside Mary, who yell out “See how he loved him!” The bystanders serve as witnesses. They watch as the scene unfolds and then in verse 45, which follows our reading today, it says they believed in Jesus and went and told others what they had witnessed. We are called in our tears to witness.

As Jesus stands disturbed outside of the tomb, he says “Take away the stone.” The tomb is a large cave with a stone rolled in front of the entrance. For anyone to go in and heal or for the dead to rise and come out, first the stone, this large obstacle must be moved out of the way. Jesus calls for some people to step forward and be stone rollers, individuals who actively remove obstacles standing in the way of the work of God and new life in Christ. Some are called beyond their tears to be stone rollers, obstacle removers. Where are big boulders standing in the way of God’s work and new life today? Are you being called in your grief to stone rolling? Martha, with the voice of realism, says to Jesus, “Lord there is already a stench?” It has been too long, hope is beyond reach. The stone rollers are urged to act beyond realism, believing in hope that exceeds reality.

After the stone has been removed and Jesus has lifted his voice to God, giving thanks for God’s constant listening and presence, he cries out “Lazarus, Come out!” The dead man comes out bound in strips of cloth and Jesus speaks another invitation to the people “Unbind him and let him go!” Some of the people are asked to move to action, unbinding the bound. Most certainly Martha was right – the stench would have been awful, the sight quite frightening. But Jesus invites some individuals to touch Lazarus, the one who had experienced death, to approach the unclean and uncomfortable, and provide the care that will unbind him so that he may live into new life. Are you being called from within the crowd to approach one who needs unbinding – who needs to be touched and cared for?

In the story we encounter our God who dwells among us, experiences our grief and tears alongside of us, invites us into the fullness of grief and then provides opportunities to live into new life in Christ. Where do we witness grief and pain and see all that God is doing to bring about new life? How are we being called to be witnesses who share the story? Where is God calling us to be stone rollers, removing obstacles to new life? Who is God calling us to touch and unbind that they may know the newness of life God desires for them?

We grieve, we allow our tears, we witness, we stone roll, we unbind. And God in Christ, come in human flesh, stands alongside us, experiences our humanity and works beyond it bringing about the promise of new and eternal life.

“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” Jesus says to the people - and then to God Jesus prays “May they believe that you sent me.” May we believe that God sent Jesus and therefore “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Nothing, neither life, nor death, nor anything in all creation...for God has experienced our flesh and acted beyond it. Thanks be to God!