

Lent 5 A 2011    Ezekiel 37:1-14    Psalm 130    John 11:1-45

Boys don't cry! Girls don't cry! A thoughtless and cruel thing to say to anyone of any age,  
in any language!

Try that out on Mary and Martha of Bethany, sisters of Lazarus.

Tell that to Jesus, friend of Lazarus.

Out of the depths of their beings they cried:

“Jesus, if you had been here our brother would be full of breath and still living among us.”

With a heart full of grief and agitation and anger, **Jesus wept bitterly**. His spirit deeply moved, **Jesus sobbed**. This and a whole lot more we find in our gospel story this morning.

It is a **strange and disturbing story**. Lazarus' death was untimely. He was a young man.

Jesus was a friend of the whole family and loved each one.

Still, when he received the news about Lazarus' death he did not drop every thing and hurry to his friend's side, for whatever reason.

His disciples discouraged Jesus' traveling into Judea. The authorities there were a present danger. Maybe that was the cause of his delay. Plus Lazarus' is merely sick; no reason to hurry.

Two days later Jesus arrived in Bethany to find that his friend was dead, four days dead, and in the tomb. Really, really dead.

Certainly there was confusion, bitterness, disappointment and a lot of grief. The official mourners had taken up their moaning and wailing. **Death was prevailing.**

His death was unexpected and sudden, and there was a lot of weeping on the part of those not ready to let him go.

The response of Jesus is **profound**. John says that he was **deeply moved**, but the original language means more than that. It suggests that he was not only moved, **but angry**, full of wrath and ready to explode.

The Bible commentators provide various speculations about Jesus' troubled and angry spirit that set loose his tears.

We know from John that Jesus did not mouth any **pious clichés** about what a merciful release it was for Lazarus. No, **Jesus wept.**

It is my wild guess that he was **crying for the whole world**, for all of us, and filled with equal measures of **anger and sadness.**

Weeping for Mary and Martha and for the **very real death of Lazarus**, for the loss of his friend.

Tears for **the frailty of life**, and the seeming randomness of a life being snuffed out.

They might have been tears over the **fear and finality** of the death that was devastating those around him.

Possibly tears because no one seemed **to understand what he was about**, nor believe in his life mission. Maybe his tears were over knowing how alone he was in this mission and destiny.

So Martha and Mary lead Jesus to the tomb of Lazarus. And here we have no narrative to inform us about what Jesus did, except for the briefest of detail.

We are left to our **imagination**s. Were there actual witnesses? How might witnesses have described it?

*Possibly Jesus at first just stared at the tomb of Lazarus and the stone blocking its entrance.*

*Maybe it was the kind of hard stare that you would not have wanted turned on you.*

*Could it be that his whole body started to tremble and shake with the effort going on within him, veins in his neck bulging like ropes, his face darkened, the air crackling around him, just before he opened his mouth and bellowed like a bull, "Lazarus, come out!"*

*And then, a never-before-heard sound was present, coming from the tomb, unearthly, like the life of someone being torn open. No one would have wanted to be in the way of Jesus at that moment.*

*We could imagine that Lazarus came forth from his tomb stumbling on his loosening linen bandages, his face covered by a cloth.*

"Unbind him," Jesus says, "and let him go," is what John **does** tell us.

And that is all we know about Lazarus. Having been hauled from the grasp of death, he disappears from the scene. Did anyone ask him **what this was like for him**, or to testify to the power and glory of God, or to visit the sick and console the dying? Unlikely. **We do not know.**

Playwrights, poets, and novelists have used **their imaginations** to give us pictures of Lazarus' life thereafter; sitting in his dark house with the smell of earth and incense on him, and twigs and grass in his hair.

People come to ask about his experience and ask favors from him, offering him food and wine, according to some imaginations.

But he is silent and emaciated, and they wonder with him if he realizes that after being pulled back into life he must sooner or later **be carried back to his tomb.**

It is hard to resist trying to complete this story of Lazarus, with his life again, and his second death.

However, most of us **do not** need poets or novelists to kindle in us **intimations** of the **death** of those we love, nor even the death of ourselves.

Finally, **each of like Lazarus must die.** And does not this knowledge reach unbidden into our thoughts and dreams with its mystery and fear?

We pray for healing and long life, and as glad as we are on the occasions when those prayers seem granted, we must all finally die, and it is the **darkest mystery each of us must face.**

There are times when we are especially aware of death, or the threat of death; aware of its stark reality.

Death has been with us so heavily in recent days. We have lost members of the St. Andrew's community, and members have lost loved ones.

I had aerial pictures on my computer this week from the NYT that allowed me to scroll through the before and after conditions of the great tsunami in Japan. The death and destruction is devastating. We all know that.

There is death in our homes and on our streets and in North Africa, in Syria, and in the Ivory Coast.

There are some of us who at this very time are **watching for death to overtake someone** we love – or living with the sadness and fear that it will.

I have been on that sacred journey with a best friend, for eighteen months now. Maybe you are walking that same path, hand in hand, with a dear one, or anticipating that you will be.

And we do not know when that 'final visitor' will come, but **we already cry** for their death, just as we cry for that of **ourselves**.

Because in that waiting there are moments when we realize that there will come a time when those we love will be **on such a watch for us**.

Like Martha and Mary, we appeal for some power that will protect us, and those we love from it.

Like Jesus we weep with the enormity of our sadness and anger at it.

Like Lazarus, we find no words that make sense if it.

And at those moments we want nothing more than to somehow **make sense of it!**

We want to know why and when and how we die, at times above anything we can think of asking.

**Can we have some trustworthy word that death fits into what God in God's mercy has in store for us, that on the other side of the darkness there is a brightness that brings most if not all of our questions into some sort of resolution, into some kind of sense?**

The deepest cry of our hearts when we are angry and afraid is "Why? Why me? Why now?"

As if **understanding something** would make the pain recede and take away our fear! We hope that **knowing something** will return some control and provide some security.

"Please, God, give us **something** that we can work with, something to hold onto!"

*"Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died," Martha cried out.*

It is the oldest, most ancient **cry of the human heart**. It is our question when we feel forsaken and fearful and angry, and the patriarchs and prophets and even Jesus himself **join us.**

*“Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord; Lord hear my voice; let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication,”* we sang just moments ago.

**In the face of it all, to have faith in God, to trust that we are in good hands, to have that bright confidence that even though we do not come close to fully understanding it, our life in this cosmos makes sense...that is the hardest choice any of must ever make.**

To trust that it is all **true**, to trust that our deepest hopes in God are finally **trustworthy**, is, as one writer has put it, *“to step out into the air without a net, because we have no proof, no evidence, nothing but the adamant witness of our own hearts that it is so.”*

I have no idea whether the Evangelist John and his community had some bittersweet awareness of these questions we have raised, or somehow knew how desperate and longing was our need.

But they gave us this story of Jesus and Lazarus, deeply embedded in our Scripture, and held high in the tradition of the Church, and in the wonder of God, **I want to believe that they knew what they were doing, knew the gift they were giving us.**

For **the heart** of this story is the **response of Jesus** to Martha’s soulful cry, *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”*

*“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.’*

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For us it is to **give up the illusion** that we are in control of either our life or our death and with trust to step out into the air **without a net**.

We sometimes can trust God with our lives, and now this gospel is asking us to **trust God with our death**.

What scripture offers us, is an invitation to die to our so-called control, if not to our sense of invincibility, so that something **new can be born in us**, something that overcomes death.

We find by **losing**. We **hold fast** by letting go. We become something new by ceasing to be something old. In death, all may be lost, **but at the same time, all is found**.

This is so close to the **heart of faith's mystery**, not knowing very much at all about the far side of death, which is the last letting go of all.

Beginning to know that we do not **need to know** and do not need to be angry or fearful of not knowing.

**It depends on whom we trust and whether we trust at all.**

This morning we have Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones **taking flesh and life once more**, for one thing, and the story of **Lazarus** for another.

We have the words of **Jesus** about living **now in his resurrection**.

And soon as we enter into Holy Week will have **Jesus' final letting go**, facing his death with struggle and fear, but finally stepping out into the air without a net... in **confidence of the One who holds both life and death in loving hands.**

The invitation is to **live toward resurrection**, to live **towards life** rather than towards death...so that as our Collect for today has it, "*among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found.*"

Just yesterday I discovered in a book from the past the service leaflet from the memorial service in 1985 for a young man, a best friend of one of my sons, who had died from a fall in the Grand Canyon.

I do not know why, but on it I had simply written:

**"Safe, although all safety's lost."**

**"Safe, although all safety's lost."**

**Yes, indeed!**