

“Jesus Weeps”

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Text: John 11:1-45

As a child, I visited my grandfather’s home near Goose Creek, South Carolina. It was spring, and the azaleas bloomed in these amazing displays of color—bursts of pinks and purples everywhere. I hung out with my cousins and was having a great time, riding horses, roaming in the woods. I loved the swamps and forest, that seemed so different than the beach I grew up on. And then, a bee stung me. I cried, and I cried, and I cried.

My brother, who was nine years older than me, came up, and gently took my arm where the bee sting was, and said, “Look at that sting. It’s red and swollen. It hurts doesn’t it? It’s kind of hot when I touch it. That pain is there because your arm is trying to alert your brain that something has gone horribly wrong. That is what pain is for—to alert your brain, so your brain can send out your body’s fighters to that spot. Now you know that there is something wrong. You know that the bee sting is there, so you can tell your brain that you already know. It’s okay! You don’t need the pain to remind you any longer.”

The approach was weirdly effective. I don’t know why. I don’t know if there any science exists behind telling your brain “thank you, but the pain is now dismissed.” All I know is that I felt the sting, I acknowledged the pain, then I thanked my brain for the message, and ran off to play again. It was so effective that I used it for most of my life.

I had learned to numb myself from physical pain, and I had learned to numb myself from emotional pain too. That same year, my grandfather died. When I cried at his funeral, my uncle took me aside and told me that if I believed in the Jesus, then I wouldn’t be crying. My grandfather was in heaven, so I should be happy. I swallowed my tears because I thought it was what Jesus wanted from me.

I know I’m not alone. I’m sure that most of us have stories like this. Our loved ones cannot bear to see us crying. They hate to see us hurt. They know they cannot get rid of the bee sting, or the pain of grief, and so they teach us ways to minimize our emotions. They might shame us:

“What are you crying for? You’re a man! Toughen up!”

“Don’t be such a baby!”

“Really? You’re crying? Women are SO emotional.”

“Don’t be such a drama queen.”

We may have learned to hold in our tears on the field, playing sports. We mastered the skill of clenching our fists, or channeling all that emotion into anger, because anger was more

acceptable. Or we may have learned to hide in the bathroom of our work, trying to wipe the mascara off the bottom of our eyes with toilet paper. Because it didn't matter if you found out your best friend just got diagnosed with Stage Four cancer, your corporate culture demanded that you must never cry in the workplace.

That's why it is so stunning to read the words in this story in the gospels.

Jesus finds out that Lazarus is ill. When he hears the news, Jesus seems to brush it off, saying that Lazarus is not going to die. He doesn't visit him. He keeps telling his friends that it's all going to work out fine. When Jesus finally does go to see Lazarus, Lazarus had died. His sisters, Mary and Martha had wrapped his body in spices. They have covered him with bands of cloth. They placed their beloved brother in the tomb.

All of this time, it seemed like Jesus had been ignoring the devastation. Blowing off the importance of this. He told people that Lazarus was going to be resurrected. That there was going to be a happy ending to this story.

And yet, when he saw Mary and Martha, Jesus weeps. I don't know exactly what it was. Perhaps Jesus felt the emotional and physical exhaustion of working for days. Or seeing the sorrow of his dear friends overwhelmed him. He traveled to an area where he was almost stoned. His life is in danger. Throughout all of these stories, there seems to be a foreshadowing, as Jesus knows this is going to happen to him too. Perhaps all of these stressful things wash over him until it's too much, and Jesus weeps. **This man who is fully human and fully God, who teaches us how to be human, weeps.**

I take comfort in that fact, because I feel like a lot of us may be in that moment. We have been isolating ourselves. We have been keeping a safe social distance from one another. And yet, we have endured the loss of dear friends. We might know of people who are infected and cannot get tests. We hear the constant stream of news reports—the overcrowded hospitals, short supply of masks, and the need for ventilators. Ordinarily, we have tools to relieve our stress. We gather with friends, we go to the gym, we work, we travel, we lose ourselves in art or music, but so many of those options are no longer available to us. And so our emotions bubble up.

We know the end of this story. We know that other countries have contained the virus, and we will too. We know that we endured a recession, and we built our businesses back. We know the end of this story, because we have been through 9-11, we have seen hardship, and we know how to rebuild.

And yet, there are moments when we will become overwhelmed. Whether it is exhaustion or grief or fear or remorse—at some point it may be too much. And we will weep. Or stomp our feet. Or scream.

And it's okay. Jesus teaches us something here. From the very beginning, Jesus knew that there was going to be a happy ending to the story. He knew Lazarus would walk out of his tomb. He knew that he would be resurrected. But Jesus did not ignore his emotions.

We can do unhealthy things with all of our stress. We can try to numb it, with alcohol. We can deny ourselves the reality of it. We pretend that we are the stoic people who never cry. We can use all sorts of tactics of avoidance and lying to ourselves. But I want to let you know that sometimes you just need to have that emotional release.

How does it happen for you? Is it when you go on a good, long run? Is it when you watch a sad movie? Is it when you listen to particular music? Is it when you work in the garden? Is there a friend you can speak with, someone with whom you can utterly fall apart? Because I want you to be a baby. I give you permission to be a drama queen. Be emotional. Cry at work. Just turn off the Zoom camera and mute yourself and let yourself fall apart. Because that's the way our bodies work. There are certain emotions—like anger and sadness—that we must feel in order to have peace. They are core emotions. And sometimes we need to walk through the dark valleys to get to the green pastures.

You are holding it together. You have stocked up on food, you're getting your affairs in order, and you are amazing. Now, tend to emotions this week. If they wash over you, just find a safe space to feel them. Just as much as you have attended to your clean hands, your safety, and your isolation. You need that grief and sorrow. The pain. You will feel so much better after you fall apart.

Friends, there is a happy ending to our story. I have no doubt in my mind. The virus will run its course, we will find a cure, we will develop a vaccine. But right now, we are in the midst of it, we can feel it. And it's okay. Even Jesus wept at the grave at his friend. Even Jesus sweated blood when he knew he was about to be executed. Give yourself that same space and freedom.

To the glory of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Nurturer. Amen.