

Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-45

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

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## **A Heart That's Overcome**

I am part of several different lectionary groups that share ideas about scripture and preaching. As I was preparing for the sermon today, a pastor colleague who is grieving and had just lost a young child gave some guidance for those of us who would be sharing this story while children were still in the room. She was particularly thinking about her other young daughter, the one who had just lost her sister, and how she might hear this story of the raising of Lazarus. Life after death? Why did Jesus do that for Lazarus and not for her sister? For children (and many adults), death is already hard to understand, but when our sacred stories undo death, it's *very* hard to understand. And so, in case you need to hear this shortened caveat as I begin this sermon as well, we hear about life after death this in sacred stories like this one, but our physical bodies, once they die, cannot live again in the same way Lazarus is raised. And that does not mean that Jesus loves the one that has died any less. It just means that this story is inviting us to wonder. And wondering is sometimes fun and sometimes it's hard work and can make us feel big and complicated feelings. Are we ready to wonder together?

Friends, I'll be honest: the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is both one of my favorite stories in scripture, and also one of the most difficult to preach. There's so much I still do not understand, no matter how much study I do. Why does Jesus not run to Lazarus' home when he hears about his illness? Especially when scripture tells us this is someone he loves? Why does scripture tell us that he does this for the sake of "God's glory?" What's the whole "Lazarus is asleep" part about? Why does he kind of ignore Martha's pointed accusation, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Why is Lazarus never heard from again after this story?

Over the years, I've attempted to answer or engage these questions. But today, on the anniversary month three years after a pandemic shut down the world, as we continue to do things again for the first time and still try to navigate life and the after affects of a global shut down-the things we forgot, the things we now have to deal with, the new realities we face-my attention turns to the shortest verse in all of the Bible. Jesus wept.

And although there is a lot about this story that you and I may not understand, we do understand tears. Jesus began to weep.

This feels powerful to me in these days. The fact that grief takes hold of God in the person of Jesus the Christ, the person who we proclaim is the revelation of an

almighty Creator, the one who feeds thousands, heals the sick, and walks on water...this is the one who stands at the grave of his friend, someone whom he loves, and cries. We see the prince of peace whose heart is overcome, and he does something that we all understand and can relate to doing. He weeps.

We've been navigating encounters with Jesus throughout the gospel of John in this Lenten season, and up to this point, Jesus has been shown to us in a more aloof way. If he has been emotionally affected by the circumstances around him, the writer of John has not really made that apparent until now. This passage shifts to more affective demonstrations by all the characters in the story, well before Jesus weeps at the tomb, and this is significant. You might make the case that there is no other scene in scripture where Jesus is as relationally and emotionally connected to people. And from this chapter on, as we enter into his final holy days, you'll see Jesus shift into a more relational and affectionate role. This raising of Lazarus story is also the turning point where the case against Jesus will be made that will ultimately lead to his death. In performing this particular miraculous act, he goes too far for the religious authorities and it will lead to his arrest soon and very soon.

And so today, I want to focus on Jesus' tears because even as the pinnacle of the story is about the raising of Lazarus, this act of weeping, this act of being overcome by emotion, I believe, tells us a few things about living from the one we are called to follow.

We live in a world where Martha's accusation, "Lord, if you had been here..." is the prayer of lament that many cry out in the midst of grief. Maybe even you have said it and prayed it. In fact, over and over again, I have heard from churchy folk, friends, and from strangers, that grief, particularly sudden grief and loss, is the primary reason why people doubt God, lose their faith in God, or turn away from God. I have been asked countless times, "Where was God, Irene? Where is God in the midst of this? Why is God doing this to me? If God had been there..." Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Martha's accusation rings through time.

And so, in this heart that's overcome, it's important to notice that Jesus weeps because in this act, he makes room for lament and grief. He's giving permission to grieve and to lament and by weeping he reminds us that grief and lament are not acts of faithlessness, but an act of faithfulness. In this story, we know that resurrection is around the corner, but the promise of joy does not cancel out the essential work of grief. Jesus' tears reassures Mary and Martha that not only is their brother worth crying for, but they and the community around them are worth crying with. I read somewhere that through these tears, Jesus calls all of us into the holy vocation of empathy, co-suffering, and lamentation.

In this heart that's overcome, when Jesus weeps, he also makes room for silence. When we read that verse, it is others around him that begin to speak, but Jesus does not. The tropes that many of us try to give in times of grief in an attempt to "comfort" are not always necessary. In fact, sometimes it can be more harmful than helpful. Scholar Kate Bowler writes about this eloquently in her book "Everything Happens for a Reason: And other lies I've loved". She shares her wrestling with her diagnosis of stage 4 cancer at the age of 35 and being told she only has months to live. She writes about all the things people try to say to bring what they believe is comfort but makes it more difficult. Simply put, she writes, "cliches can't help you live." Sometimes there is nothing that can be said in the face of loss and shared tears are enough. Sometimes, silence is love.

In this heart that's overcome, when Jesus weeps, we see his full humanity. That's what's so beautiful about it. But I also believe in this act, he is coming to terms with his full mortality as well. Even with our own lives, we go from being invincible, believing we will live forever, going cliff jumping and sky diving and then one day we wake up and throw out our back because we sneezed too hard. 😊 But all of us hit a point or moment in our lives where we know our days are numbered. Whether that's because of the grace of old age or because we receive an uncertain diagnosis, the knowledge and reality throws us into new patterns of living and being. And so I believe this happens to Jesus too. In his tears, he knows that this moment, the glory that is about to be revealed, will also be the final catalyst for his own pending death. He knows that his time is coming quickly to an end.

With this knowledge, theologian Debie Thomas writes that in crying, "he (Jesus) asserts powerfully that it is okay to yearn for life. It's okay to cling to this beautiful world. It's okay to feel a sense of wrongness and injustice in the face of death — death *is* the enemy, the aberration, the thief. It is okay to mourn the loss of vitality, of intimacy, of longevity. It is okay to love and cherish the gift of life here and now."

Finally, in this heart that's overcome, Jesus shows us that grief and sorrow can be a powerful catalyst for change. Again, Thomas makes the argument here that it is because Jesus experiences the devastation of death that he recognizes the need to restore life. It's his own pain, his own heart that's overcome with sorrow that leads to resurrection. And so maybe this realization can lead us to be transformed and to act in similar ways. Thomas asks, "What breaks our hearts? What splits us open in sorrow? What enrages us to the point of breakdown? Can we mobilize into those very spaces? Can we work for transformation in our places of devastation? Can our sorrow lead us to justice?"

Church, in focusing on Jesus' tears today, I am not trying to ignore the good news of the raising of the dead, the unbinding of the bound up. I am a pastor and a Christian

because I believe in resurrection life. I believe that God will breathe new life into dry bones, to bring back to life all that has been forgotten and buried, old hurts and wounds and anything that prevents us from life abundant. Symbolically and metaphorically, I believe in resurrection power, coming alive to ourselves, to our neighbor, to creation, to love.

But I also believe in more than just that. And although our physical bodies in this world cannot come back to life, I do believe in literal resurrection. I believe in life after our physical deaths. I believe the good news of the gospel is that Jesus actually conquered death. Because I believe that the just and merciful and loving God that we serve will make right all the wrongs humanity has endured. Friends, we were not made for the grave, we were made for life. Death will NOT have the last word. We get to proclaim through Christ, "Oh death, where is your sting?" And as we enter into the 5<sup>th</sup> week of Lent and approach Holy Week, we come into the part of the story where we hold the dual realities of uncertainty, sorrow, the stench of death and tears with the promise of breath, light, hope, and resurrection power. Our hearts will be overcome. We will weep. But friends, our journey is not TO the grave, but THROUGH it.

And so today, in this heart that's overcome, may Jesus' tears keep us open, humble, tender, generous and brave. May his authentic expression of sorrow with his community give you and give me the permission we might need to do our own work of grief and healing and lament, but also to move with compassion with justice for a world that desperately needs it. If your heart is overcome this day, remember that we serve a God who can overcome a heart that's overcome. If you feel stuck behind dark walls of death, just listen for God's voice calling you to life. We serve a God who weeps alongside us and then calls us out and calls us to life. Friends, may you believe and trust that this day.

And so with hope, with prayer, with tears, we pray-Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup>Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' <sup>4</sup>But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' <sup>5</sup>Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup>after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

<sup>7</sup> Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' <sup>8</sup>The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' <sup>9</sup>Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. <sup>10</sup>But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' <sup>11</sup>After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' <sup>12</sup>The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' <sup>13</sup>Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. <sup>14</sup>Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. <sup>15</sup>For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' <sup>16</sup>Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

<sup>17</sup> When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. <sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup>and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup>Martha said to

Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' <sup>27</sup>She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

<sup>28</sup> When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' <sup>29</sup>And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup>The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. <sup>32</sup>When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' <sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' <sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>Jesus 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.' <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>I 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.' <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' <sup>44</sup>The 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.'

<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

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