

All Saints Day, November 1, 2020

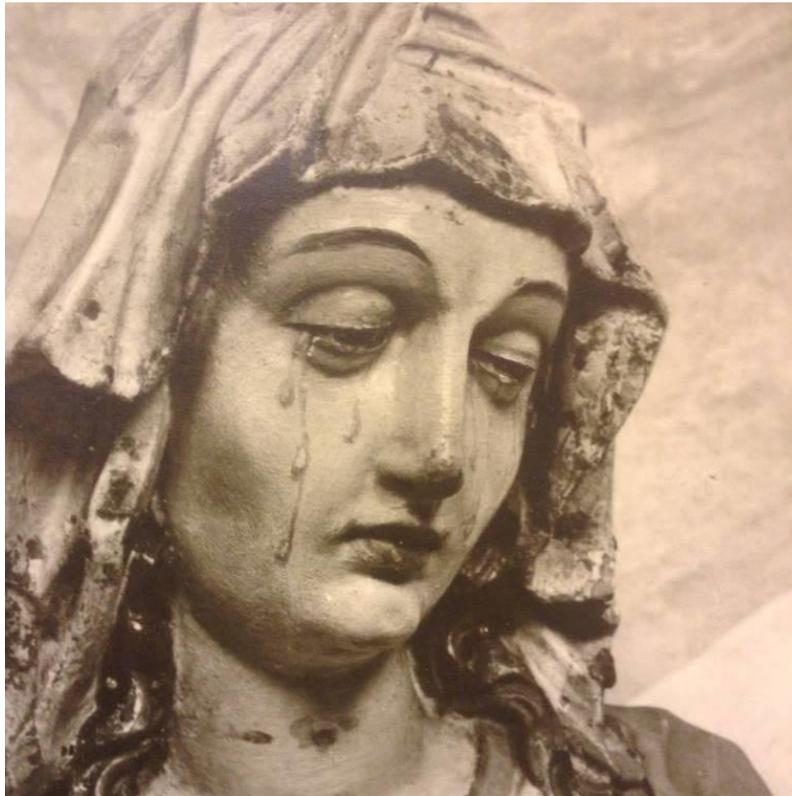
“I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

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Psalm 56:8 (NRSV) ~ *You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?*

John 11:25-26 (NRSV) ~ ²⁵*Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”*



Schmerzhafter Gnadenmutter in Murnau/Obb.

John 11:13; 17-45 (New Revised Standard Version) ~ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ...

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ²⁸When 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." ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The 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. ³²When 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."

³³When Jesus saw her 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. 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?" ³⁸Then 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 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 upward 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."

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

In today's scripture from John 11:13,17-45, which I have chosen for this Sunday when the global church celebrates "All Saints Day," we find ourselves at the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany, some two miles outside Jerusalem. Mary and Martha are grieving the very unexpected death of their brother Lazarus. Just days previously he had been perfectly healthy, and then he died. The sisters had sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was ill. Lazarus was obviously someone very special to Jesus, for the message that the sisters sent to him was, "**Lord, the one you love is sick.**" Common sense seems to dictate that Jesus would drop whatever he was doing when he heard Lazarus was sick and travel immediately to Bethany, where he would heal their brother, as he had healed so many others. Instead, when the bad news came, Jesus "**stayed where he was two more days**" (John 11:6). When Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days. The grief of Mary and Martha was acute. How could Jesus let this happen? How could God take their brother away from them? This story gives us a vivid portrait of the natural grief process and, in it, we see some pointers on how to cope with the death of a loved one.

In our narthex there are a series of excellent pamphlets on the grief process (provided for the church by Billie Burton, in memory of her sister Kaye Tate). One of them is entitled *Five Ways to Get Through the First Year of Loss*. Its author Nancy Stout writes that the first thing we need to do after a loved one dies is to allow ourselves to **feel the pain**. She writes of her own experience with the death of a loved one:

"Rick was just past his 50th birthday when he died suddenly ... All of us who knew and loved Rick were absolutely devastated, and those first few days after his death became a blur of pain, sadness, anger, and confusion as we gathered to mourn, to try to make sense of the loss, and also to remember the wonderful gift that Rick was in all of our lives ... After Rick died, I cried every day. There was this huge hole in my heart, its edges jagged and sharp, where I had held Rick and his friendship before his death. I felt such emptiness, and I was very angry that this wonderful person with so much yet to give our needy world, had been ripped from my life and the lives of all who loved him." (Nancy Stout, *Five Ways to Get Through the First Year of Loss*, Care Notes [St. Meinrad: Abbey Press].)

Anger is a very normal reaction when someone dies. Neil Clark Warren reminds us that "If you pretend you have no anger and try to bury it, it can bury you." (Les Parrott, *Dealing with the Anger That comes With Grief*, Care Notes [St. Meinrad: Abbey Press].)

Our scriptures show that Martha and Mary felt pain and anger and they expressed it. In fact, when Martha sees Jesus she charges: ***“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”*** Then she calls for her sister Mary, who is also hurt and angry, and Mary repeats the same accusation: ***“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”***

The first part of the grieving process is to feel hurt, acute pain and sorrow, anger. That is part of the God-given grieving process. The next step in grieving, Nancy Stout says, is to **reach out to others who share our pain.** She continues: “The day Rick died, I received several phone calls from others who were mutual friends. As one friend put it, ‘I just wanted to reach out to someone else who knew him and was close to him.’ I understood that so well. We wanted to draw together to share our sorrow.” (Nancy Stout, *Five Ways to Get Through the First Year of Loss*, Care Notes [St. Meinrad: Abbey Press].)

The **gathering of community** is so important after a significant loss. We want to hear the statement: ‘You are not alone.’ We want to be with others who understand and are sympathetic to our loss. One of the great tragedies of this pandemic is that we have been prevented from being able to fully be with those who are grieving: to bring food to their homes, to hug them, listen to them, cry with them. We have been prevented from having wakes in homes, sitting shiva, having funerals in our churches and bereavement meals in our fellowship halls. The virus has limited these events and kept us from being fully present to grieve with and comfort others. There is comfort in shared sadness and grief. Being together in community provides essential spiritual and emotional healing.

The Jewish community of Mary and Martha understood the importance of reaching out to share the sorrow of others. They understood the importance of saying, “Mary and Martha, you’re not alone. Your grief matters to us. Your brother mattered to us.” When Jesus arrived, Lazarus had already been dead for four days. The house in Bethany was filled with people sitting shiva. Grieving was so important to the Jewish people that an entire industry had grown up around it. Professional wailers could be hired by the family if there weren’t enough people for a proper period and kind of mourning. But Mary and Martha didn’t have to hire anyone when Lazarus died. The scriptures indicate that they had plenty of mourners! Friends and family flocked in to support the sisters in their grief, even from out of town.

When Martha heard that Jesus was on his way she left the group of mourners, who were busy consoling her, and hurried out to meet Jesus. We recall that she said to Jesus, ***“Lord,” she cried, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”***

Jesus answered her by saying: ***“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”*** How precious Martha’s response must have sounded in Jesus’ ears. ***“Yes, Lord,”*** she told him, ***“I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”*** I believe!

The scripture continues by relating that next Jesus saw Mary weeping, and all of the Jews who were weeping with her. I imagine that there were not just quiet tears rolling down people’s faces but heartfelt sobbing and wailing. One might even see sackcloth and ashes. At seeing this expression of grief from Lazarus’ family and friends, Jesus ***“was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid [Lazarus]?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”*** And then the scriptures go on to say: ***³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”***

Jesus wept. That is how many translate this verse. It is known as the shortest verse in the Bible. Jesus wept. Part of the grief process is to let the tears flow! Crying is good for you! Did you know that only humans cry? (Although there is an amazing documentary film called “The Story of the Weeping Camel” that actually shows a camel crying too.) Did you know that tears of sorrow are different from the tears you shed when you peel an onion?

Jesus wept at the grave of his friend. We too weep over the graves of those we love. We weep when we remember loved ones who have died. On this “All Saints Sunday” we remember not just the great saints in Christian history but also the saints in our own lives. The church sets aside the Sunday closest to November 1 to remember those we love who have died. That remembrance may include sorrow and tears, along with sweet memories. In a separate remembrance service that will both be sent out to the congregation and posted on Facebook Live, we will list family members, community members, and friends important to our congregation who have transitioned over into eternity since Memorial Day 2019. I hope you will take some time to honor their memory as Christians all around the world are remembering their loved ones who died believing in the Lord.

When we remember people who touched our lives while they journeyed with us here on earth, we often are moved to tears just as Mary, Martha, Jesus, and the entire village were when Lazarus died. Our Judeo-Christian teaching is that tears are a gift. According to Jewish folklore, as Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, God's heart was moved with compassion for them. God called them back, giving them a precious gift to take out with them into the world to ease the difficult times ahead: tears.

Jesus knew the healing power of tears. One of his most famous sayings in the Beatitudes goes: ***“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”*** (Lk 6:21)

In the ancient Christian church tears were understood to be “a gift of the Spirit, belonging on [Paul's] list ... in the first letter to the Corinthians. Tears were ... given to some along with wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, prophecy, and the like, for the life of the entire community.” (Wendy M. Wright, ‘Tears of a Greening Heart,’ in *The Gift of Tears, Weavings XV/2*, p. 8.) Some cry easily and frequently and others do not or cannot cry. Some of us have been given the gift of tears and others have not.

The fourth-century desert fathers prized the gift of tears: “Before all else, pray to be given tears, that weeping may soften the savage hardness which is in your soul.” For them, our hard hearts must be split open by tears so that we can be healed and be truly compassionate toward others. (Deborah Smith Douglas, “Wounded and Healed,” in *The Gift of Tears, Weavings XV/2*, p. 23.)

The church fathers even understood tears to be a kind of an ongoing baptism purifying and cleansing us. Following our baptism, our tears continue to wash away our sins and to make us clean. The sixth- to seventh-century monk John Climacus of Sinai wrote that “Baptism washes off those evils that were previously within us, whereas the sins committed after baptism are washed away by tears.” (Wendy Wright, ‘Tears of a Greening Heart,’ *Weavings XV/2*, p. 10.)

Tears heal not only our hearts and souls but also our bodies. Carol Luebering wrote that: “It is unshed tears that make your head and stomach hurt. Falling tears wash out some of the pain and relieve damaging stress. Scientists who study such things have even found in tears certain brain chemicals that are natural pain relievers.” (*Giving Yourself Permission to Grieve*, in *CareNotes* [St. Meinrad: Abbey Press].)

Mary and Martha wept. Their tears were tender and precious drops of remembrance. Those who gathered at their home wept. Jesus wept! Jesus' tears indicated that he experienced real grief. Jesus mourned not just the death of Lazarus but the death of his father, Joseph, and many others whom he loved as well. Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem.

In becoming human, God was and is with us in Jesus in a way that causes God to experience the depths of human pain and loss and suffering. Our God has known that pain firsthand. Our God is not distant and reserved. Our God is close, caring, and compassionate. Our God grieves with us. The Psalmist in Psalm 56:8 even says that our tears are so precious to God that God puts them in a bottle and records them in a book. This means that none of our tears are ever in vain. They are sacred to God. As Flora Slosson Wuellner says: "Pain and sorrow are never wasted when given into God's hands, and their transformation is far beyond our imaginings. The deepest comfort in our mourning is to know that God not only has compassion but actually feels our suffering with us." (*Alive Now*, March/April, p. 17).

We all will face many tragedies during our time on earth. At times our faith might falter and we might be led to cry out with Jesus, who asked on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" We might demand an answer to the question: "Where are you God?" And the emphatic answer is "God is with us!" God has entered into our suffering, our desolation, our feeling forsaken, our pain and sorrow, our grief, the wilderness and barrenness of our lives. God is weeping with us. God wept when our loved one died. God wept when we lost our job. God wept when our best friend betrayed us. God wept when the twin towers fell on Sept. 11. God wept when the flood waters rose following Hurricane Katrina. God wept when Hurricane Maria destroyed large portions of Puerto Rico. God is weeping for all those in Louisiana who have been affected by Hurricane Zeta. God is weeping as fires are sweeping across portions of our nation. God is weeping as Covid-19 sweeps across the globe, leaving loved ones alone in hospital beds. God is weeping during this time of economic and racial unrest. God is right there with us in the tragedies of suffering. God is present with those in pain as one who experienced the depths of human suffering while living among us. We worship a God who weeps with us.

After weeping Jesus asked them to take away the stone in front of Lazarus' tomb. After they did, Jesus prayed and then, in a loud voice, said, ***“Lazarus, come out!”***⁴⁴***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.”***

Believing that God fully knows how it feels to experience the death of a loved one, we can hear more clearly Jesus' call to us to put away the fear of death. Jesus calls “Come Out!” Come out from the grave. Come out from the prison of fear. Come out from your tomb of isolation. In your grief, anchor yourself in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection that comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, ***“Unbind him and let him go,”*** to those around Lazarus, and he says the same to us. We are to be unbound, set free from the power of death. Let us stand on the promises of scripture that love is stronger than death and after this life there is more life!

Jesus said to Martha and he says to us, ***“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”***

Do you believe this?

Closing Prayer: Lord, in this time when our world is faced with death all around us through the coronavirus pandemic that has now even turned our community into a ‘Red Zone,’ and in the aftermath of the deaths of a number of our loved ones, including Theda Farris and Glenda Roos, two pillars of our church, may we know that you are present in our grieving and that our tears are holy. May we, with Martha, be able to confidently proclaim that we believe that your son Jesus is the resurrection and the life, through whom we not only have eternal life but through whom we also have the courage, faith, and hope we need to continue on during times of difficulty in this life. It is in your son Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.