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St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Services of Holy Eucharist
The Fifth Sunday in Lent– April 2, 2017

“Why the Tears?”

Scripture: John 11:1-45; 5 Lent A

After years of thought and consideration, years of study, having experienced this story time and again since childhood, hearing and telling, re-telling and re-hearing, dreaming and thinking and preaching, seeking understanding, I am left with but one simple yet utterly inexorable question; one question that does not leave me: *Why?*

Now I recognize that this simple question may apply to a dozen or more circumstances in this story: *Why did Lazarus die? Why would Jesus ever delay in coming to his sick friend? Why would God so opportunistically toy with Lazarus' life and the feelings of his family? Why would Jesus so glibly suggest to his disciples that Lazarus only “slept”? Why can't the disciples ever understand what Jesus is saying? Why? Why? Why?*

But in the end it is none of these questions that truly vex me. I sort of understand them in the flow of this story: *God uses a miracle to bring sort of dense people to believe. This was a banner moment for Jesus, a big revelation of power, that sort of thing.* But I am not satisfied. There still remains for me the question, and it is this: *Why did Jesus cry?*

So, if he is so knowledgeable of what is happening around him, so confident in his relationship with God, so in control of the situation, why the tears? *You seem to know, Jesus, what is going on with Lazarus. You deliberately avoid the trip to Bethany. Apparently you already have your plan; you must know that Lazarus has not come to his ultimate end. You even say: "This illness does not lead to death, rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of man may be glorified through it."* It was all in the plans all along. Lazarus would grow ill; you would wait him out; he would die; you would go to his grave; and then you would so gloriously bring him back to life right there in front of everybody. Ta-da! No harm, no foul.

So, what happened? Why the tears? Why the tears, if all this dying was just a set-up to reveal the glory of God?

Here is something I have taken from this story over the years, something I have learned: that when we forget the humanity of Jesus ---when we make him for us solely the divine miracle worker, the all-powerful God on earth, the ultimate spiritual crutch, the one who is supposed to miraculously takes care of everything for us--- we do so at our own peril. And maybe on this day so long ago in Bethany, Jesus learned something of the same lesson. He is the resurrection and the life; he commands the powers of the Creation; he foretells the will of God for humankind; he reveals the strength of the Creator, all these things, yes! And yet, for all the things for which he

may have been prepared on that day, there is, perhaps, one for which he was not entirely prepared.

Let me say it this way... For all Jesus' bravado, for all his assuredness that Lazarus' death wasn't to be the end, it would appear that what Jesus may not have expected that day was something you and I likely experience all the time... Jesus had mixed feelings. Even after "This illness doesn't lead to death" and "Let's go to Bethany to awaken Lazarus"; "Your brother will rise again"; "I am the resurrection and the life." Even after all these assured and confident remarks, when Jesus is confronted with the death of a friend, someone he loves, when Jesus goes to the tomb, and when he experiences the deep grief, the *agony* of loss, felt by Lazarus' family and friends, he does something so marvelously powerful and yet so utterly human: ...he cries. He cries for his friends, and, I think, he cries for himself.

You see, it isn't only Jesus' power over death that is revealed that day, but also his compassionate experience of the difficulties of this life; that while love binds us together, it also makes us acutely aware when we are separated. Jesus came to Bethany to reveal to the people there the glory of the power of God, and in doing so he also experienced first-hand that mixture of deep sorrow and sublime joy that collides in what we call *love*. Jesus did reveal the true power of God, not only by raising Lazarus from the dead; he revealed the power of God by his tears.

Look, I don't always find this story of the raising of Lazarus to be particularly comforting. It is utterly amazing. Practically speaking, in our age of science and the need for empirical truths, it is unbelievable, and at best for me, it is hard to receive. Nevertheless, I do find it to be authentic and, most of all, very hopeful. The experiences are real; the feelings are real. Nearly all of us here have lost loved ones to death, or we have been close to someone who has, and we know the feeling of separation, of confusion and loss, of longing for renewed relationship with the ones who have gone before us. Thank God... so does God. In this brief glimpse of death's demise before the life-giving power of God's love, we are given tears, not bravado. And I don't expect that Lazarus and family went riding off into any Hollywood sunset to live happily ever after. The scriptures say that some sought to kill him to remove his witness to Jesus' power over death. And as far as we know, the day came when Lazarus once again entered the grave just like the rest of us do. What this story of Lazarus reveals is the experience of being human, compassion and grief among friends, the depth of Jesus' humanity, a real assurance of the love of the Creator, the joyous and the tearful compassion and understanding of a savior, and a foreshadowing of the promise of Resurrection to new life that comes only in God's good time.

Why the tears? Because the tears tell the truth about life, about loss, about love, and... hope.