

JESUS WEPT John 11:30-35

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 26, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 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. 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.’

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said,

‘Where have you laid him?’

They said to him,

‘Lord, come and see.’

Jesus began to weep.

I.

An American folk hymn sung beautifully and hauntingly during Lent is entitled “Jesus Walked This Lonely Valley.”¹ It begins with a picture of Jesus facing his impending death *alone, silent, almost stoic*:

Jesus walked this lonesome valley;
He had to walk it by himself.
Oh, nobody else could walk it for him;
He had to walk it by himself.

The spiritual then jumps to a moral application for us, *collectively*:

We must walk this lonesome valley;
We have to walk it by ourselves.
Oh, nobody else can walk it for us;
We have to walk it by ourselves.

Then for us, *individually*:

You must go and stand your trial;
You have to stand it by yourself.
Oh, nobody else can stand it for you;
You have to stand it by yourself.

¹ Eileen M. Johnson, “Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley.”

The message is so haunting that whenever we use this spiritual in worship, we try to balance it with an *equally true* message that when we walk our lonesome valley, we are not alone, for Christ walks at least *ahead of us*, if not *with us*. But Christ does so as one who has walked the lonesome valley himself: *strong, silent, stoic*. While the spiritual makes us want to reach out and support him as he walks, he is so focused on the path ahead for him that almost *no* human being can approach him.

*Jesus walked this lonesome valley;
He had to walk it by himself.*

Strong, silent, stoic.

II.

The raising of Lazarus from the dead is one of the longest stories in scripture: forty-four verses of Chapter 11 of the Gospel of John. One of the first sermons I ever preached was from this text. It was the summer of 1977 at the Union Church of Bay Ridge in Brooklyn, near the Verrazano Bridge. I was working in the church as a youth pastor while in seminary. The church was located in the section of Brooklyn *about* which and *in* which the John Travolta movie *Saturday Night Fever* was filmed. It was released the year I was working there. There were kids in my youth group who were walk-ons in that movie.

When I preached the raising of Lazarus it was a hot summer Sunday morning in August. The minister had headed the cooler climes upstate for the month. The sanctuary was a beautiful, Gothic, building with Tiffany windows. But it had never been air-conditioned.

I can say that among the handful of people gathered for worship that morning *nobody* was dancing, and it wasn't just because of the heat. My sermon on the raising of Lazarus was the biggest bomb I have ever preached in my life. It went on and on and on just like the text. I am sure people were thinking to themselves, "If we don't hurry up and get poor Lazarus out of the grave, I'm going to leave this service early and go on to the beach." I don't think I have ever preached the text since.

III.

When we read all forty-four verses of this story, we cannot help but see a certain *imperviousness* in Jesus: *strong, silent, stoic*. We didn't read this part of the story, so follow me along here:

Lazarus of Bethany is ill.

He is the brother of Martha and Mary. Lazarus and Martha and Mary and Jesus know one another well. So much so that when Lazarus falls ill at home, about two miles from where Jesus is in Jerusalem, his two sisters immediately send a message: "Lord, he whom you *love* is ill." They don't even have to say his name. "He whom you love."

Yet when Jesus receives the message, it is as if he takes the paper, folds it over, puts it in his pocket to deal with later, and returns to what he is doing.

"This illness is not to death," he says to those around him. *"Rather, it is for God's glory."*

Jesus waits two days to deal with the news that "he whom he loves" is ill. Plus, it takes two *more* days to travel to Bethany.

So when Jesus and his disciples arrive at the home of these three people with whom Jesus is close – Mary, Martha, and Lazarus – they find that Lazarus has indeed died. And his body has been in a tomb for four days.

Both Mary and Martha say to Jesus, separately, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would *not* have died.”

We cannot help but identify with them.

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At this point, Jesus seems to reverse his impervious course and orders the stone that has been rolled in front of Lazarus’ tomb to be removed. The tomb is opened, and Jesus commands: “Lazarus, come out.”

Lazarus comes out. His body is wrapped in grave clothes; his feet are tied; his face is covered in cloth; he is accompanied by the odor of death. The King James Version reads “he stinketh.”

Jesus then commands: “Loose him, and let him go.”

And Lazarus is freed – at least for a season – from the bondage of death.

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It would be possible to chalk Jesus’ delay and seeming imperviousness up a simple misjudgment. But even though he knew God was going to use Lazarus’ raising for God’s own purposes, Jesus still seems stubborn and unapproachable in his response.

This “doing it *his* way, on *his* timetable” is not a one-time occurrence for Jesus in John’s Gospel.

- In the Wedding Feast at Cana, Jesus’ mother came to him and said the party was about to run out of wine. He blew her off: “My hour has not yet come.” Yet a few minutes later, he reversed course and turned water into wine so the wedding could continue.²
- A few chapters later, his brothers practically demand that Jesus go to Jerusalem and perform miracles he has been performing in the countryside. They want people to know who he is, and they themselves, not being entirely convinced, want to see more as well, want to see how he is received by the larger public. But Jesus says to them, “Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to *this* festival, because *my time* has not yet fully come.”³
- Even more dramatic is the *solitary strength* and *focus* Jesus shows as he faces his own death on the cross:
 - “I lay down my life in order to take it up again.”
 - “*No one* takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”
 - “I have power to lay it down and *I* have power to take it up again.”⁴

² John 2.

³ John 7:12.

⁴ John 10:17-18.

These are claims of *utter* and *absolute* strength. No shadow of turning here. They make Jesus a bit *untouchable* for us mortals.

Even from the cross itself...

- Jesus has the presence of mind to entrust his mother to the disciple he loves (which may or may not be Lazarus) and the disciple to his mother: “Woman, behold your son” and “Behold your mother.”⁵
- And his last words spoken from the cross – “It is *finished*” – echo the concluding words to the Creation Story in Genesis: “...on the seventh day, God *finished* the work he had done...”⁶ Jesus thus links the creation of the world with his own death and resurrection – as two major pillars of God’s activity. Creation and Redemption. Creation and Rectification. Creation and Christ. In all this, Jesus can seem *untouchable*. “*He walks this lonesome valley; he walks it by himself.*”

From this survey, it is apparent that nothing his mother, his brothers, Martha, Mary, Pilate, soldiers arresting him or carrying out his crucifixion can lead Jesus to *change* his *focus*, his *direction*, or his *timing*. Jesus knows *what* he is going to do, *when* he is going to do it, and *why* he is going to do it. That is a major part of who he is in the Gospel of John. “The Father and I are one,” he says.⁷ *Strong. Solitary. Stoic.* “*He walks this lonely valley; he walks it by himself.*” And we wonder if we can walk with him.

IV.

But if you noticed the sermon title, and if you listened to the reading of the text, you know by now that I have not been completely honest in this sermon. I have yet told the full story, or as Jacob alluded to last week, “the rest of the story.”

You see there is a place in the raising of Lazarus where we who are mere mortals can *relate* to Christ rather than simply *admire* his impenetrable strength.

- It comes in the form of two words that constitute the shortest verse in the Bible (at least in the RSV translation on which I grew up). Those two words – say them with me: “Jesus wept.”
- These two words form the entirety of Verse 34. They are a great answer to a trivia question: “What is the shortest verse in the Bible?” “Jesus wept.”

When Jesus finally arrives at Bethany, Martha comes out first, and they have an exchange about the resurrection and Lazarus’ fate. Then Mary comes and kneels before him just as she will do when she anoints him with oil in the next chapter.

Jesus *sees* Mary weeping.

He *sees* mourners with her weeping.

And he becomes “*greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.*”

⁵ John 19:26-27.

⁶ Genesis 2:2

⁷ John 10:10.

He asks: "Where have you laid him?"

They say: "*Come and see.*" These are the exact words Jesus had used in calling Andrew to be his first disciple, and the phrase Philip had used in issuing that same invitation to Nathanael.⁸

When Jesus hears these very words *spoken to him* – "*Come and see*" "*Come and see*" "*Come and see*" – he breaks down and weeps.

"*Jesus weeps.*" (Two words. Shortest verse in the Bible.)

His strength, his imperviousness, his absolute and solitary focus melt in the face of the *death* of his friend and its *impact* on others. Even though he knows he is about to raise Lazarus from the dead, "*Jesus weeps.*"

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And this – good people of Westminster – is a *point of contact* we have with Jesus *in* and *beyond* this story:

Sometimes it helps to know that this strong Son of God – in whom we place our trust and to whom we seek to give our responsible obedience in situation after situation we face – that this Son of God, this Christ, this Savior, this Word who has become flesh and dwelt among us is as it turns out *capable of weeping*.

"*Jesus weeps.*" And finally, finally, we can touch *him* because *his* heart goes out to us.

V.

There is a rendition of "Jesus Walks This Lonely Valley" that is combined with another spiritual entitled "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen."⁹ I want to close by reciting the words others sing so well.

Jesus walked this lonesome valley;
He had to walk it by himself.
Oh, nobody else could walk it for him;
He had to walk it by himself.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Nobody knows but Jesus.
Nobody knows the sorrow I've seen
Nobody knows but Jesus.

Sometimes I'm up
Sometimes I'm down
Sometimes I'm almost to the ground
Nobody knows but Jesus.

We must walk this lonesome valley;
We have to walk it by ourselves.

⁸ John 1:35-42.

⁹ There is a terrific You Tube video of one of the choirs of the Riverside Church in New York presenting it: "Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley / Nobody Knows," The Riverside Inspirational Choir, arrangement by Lowell Everson and W. Mark Howell, February 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jQJeu0N9XQ>.

Oh, nobody else can walk it for us;
We have to walk it by ourselves.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Nobody knows but Jesus.

This *shortest* verse in the Bible in one of the *longest* stories in the Bible. "*Jesus weeps.*"

Because *he* weeps, *we* can walk this lonesome valley, even *during* those times when we must walk it *by ourselves*.

Amen.