



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON NANCY ROSS, CANON FOR CATHEDRAL RELATIONS
THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 29, 2020
EZEKIEL 37:1-14; PSALM 130; ROMANS 8:6-11; JOHN 11:1-45

JESUS' TEARS

Like you, I'm stuck in the house! Today – coming out to preach, from a safe social distance from my colleagues here – it's like Disneyland, folks! And it's only been two weeks. I'm trying to develop the good habits that are recommended all over the internet. And I'm a priest, so imagine my Facebook feed. Good things, like create a monastery-like schedule for yourself, morning prayer, and taking a walk, and focusing on your work with mindfulness, and giving media and news only barest necessary prescribed time... But frankly, I'm more resonating with the memes out there about Lord of the Flies – and my children are grown ups!

And, yes, lots of it is funny, and that's helpful, cathartic. But I'm nervous. And I'm sad. And I'm unmotivated. And I have stuff to do... but I don't know what to do with myself! And, yet, you know what? I KNOW this feeling. I recognize it, from a place deep inside of me, inside my heart, where it lives as a companion. There are nuances, sure – but this is grief. These times we're in bring and activate grief.

And I *know* grief. You don't get to be of such advanced age that leaders unabashedly say out loud that your life should be forfeit for the sake of the ECONOMY, without having suffered great loss. And if you heard that as a crack, know that I'm serious, and I'm not pulling any punches

at the pulpit today, here on the fifth Sunday of the holy season Lent, on the way to the *cross*, in the midst of a pandemic, standing next to Martha and Mary and the weeping Jesus outside Lazarus's tomb.

My heart is weeping, too. Lazarus isn't the only one in the tomb. My mother has been in the tomb for 24 years, my Dad for nearly ten, my SON, Patrick, for a dozen. And yet Jesus has the audacity to weep, when he knows he's about to shout, "Lazarus, come out!" and HIS friend Lazarus WILL. What about Patrick? And what about the dying people still waiting for the bespoke ventilators and protective gear? Will they get to come back out?

Grief wants to know!

Grief is personal. Grief is unmoored, and it's honest. And honestly, sometimes grief gets angry at Scripture readings like this. Mine is surely not the only grieving heart that hears this gospel of Lazarus coming out of the tomb and feels that pinch inside of: "That's great. But what about **my** friend, my child, mother, father, partner?" And mine is surely not the only heart in this pandemic nation worrying, "Is one of my loved ones going to die for want of testing and ventilators and foresight? Jesus, what about the pain and injustice in the world NOW?"

But then, I imagine Jesus standing here next to my agitated self, as he was on the dusty road next to Martha as she cries, “Where WERE you, Jesus? I thought you loved us!” And he is responding not to Martha, but to *me*: “Nancy, do you believe?” And in these fraught times, my knee-jerk answer is the same hands-in-the-air I picture Ezekiel having as he stared at the dry bones this morning, saying: “Oh Lord God, YOU know. I don’t know.”

I answer with distress, because I am a human being with all my frailty, and this life is hard on the heart. But I **do** know, because I am a Christian. And when, like Martha, I have wailed my lament for God to hear and hold, Jesus is no longer **weeping** at the tomb. He has **opened** that tomb, not just to have his one friend back, but for all of us to take heart in the depth of his divine and HUMAN compassion, solidarity, and love for us. And his triumph over death! Because on Easter Sunday, Jesus himself comes out of the tomb for US. That I know. On this coming-soon, home-bound-to-be, projected-peak-of-the-coronavirus-in-Washington-state EASTER SUNDAY – and every day – Jesus is RISEN.

Resurrection is *transformation*. Do you think Lazarus was unchanged by being the man who died and was brought back to life? Just imagine being Lazarus! And we are Resurrection people, people! If we Christians stake our faith on Christ’s Resurrection, we **MUST** be as transformed by it as Lazarus! If Jesus vanquishes death, then he **DOES** vanquish it for me, and for you, and for our loved ones who have died before us. *How could we not be changed by that?*

Friends, that doesn’t mean grief is vanquished. Grief is the price we pay for love; it is part and parcel of being fully human. That’s why Jesus is weeping at Lazarus’s tomb, tears of grief and anger and loss and frustration! Our gospel version today translates the Greek “ἐμβριμάομαι *embrimáomai*” as he was greatly disturbed and deeply moved.” But elsewhere in Scripture that term is used for “rebuke or “scold”

(Mark 14:5) and “indignation” (Lam. 2:6) and “rage” (Dan. 11:30).¹ **All** of that is in Jesus weeping at Lazarus’s tomb! I know that God can hold the anger and fear that comes up in my grief and can love me through it. Because Jesus already has gone through it and has shown us that.

But with that, are we living as people *transformed* from death to life by what Jesus has done for us? In going to Bethany, back to within two miles of Jerusalem where the authorities are already riled up, Jesus knows what he’s headed toward. John’s Gospel reports the disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” The ever-blunt Thomas says, with some sarcastic resign, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

And then, in raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus was sealing his fate with the authorities, who had more to fear from him now than ever. In the next verses of John, the chief priests and Pharisees clamor, “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.” (John 11:48)

This is what Jesus walked into for us. **We** call it Holy Week. **Jesus** knew he was headed to his death. **AND** Resurrection. This is transformation time for all of us. Holy Week always is. But this year, walking with Jesus to the cross is shadowed with dark circumstances unlike most of us have ever seen. There is a virus running rampant, and we are sequestered at home. We are scared. We are angry. We are grieving.

But if Holy Week is again transformation time for us as Christians, if our faith is for us truly formational – and transformational – then we need to live our call as Christians more faithfully than ever. We grieve – but we don’t despair. We worry – but we don’t countenance even TALK of sacrificing **any** of God’s people for the sake of the mammon, the economy. We yearn for communion – but we don’t endanger the

vulnerable by gathering together to prove we're churchy. Churchiness is not discipleship! Love of neighbor, love of "the least of these" is discipleship!

If this sounds to you political more than Gospel, go back to Matthew 22 and Matthew 25! [Matt. 22:36-40; Matt. 25:45] How do we live into and live out our faith, our love for the resurrected Jesus, who in Holy Week, is, for love of us, going to walk through hell to get to his Resurrection for **our** sake? We live out our love by FOLLOWING HIM. That is not separate from our life in the world; it is tied to our actions.

I am staying home, so I don't unwittingly spread the coronavirus to somebody else. I am writing and calling my legislators to demand action to get aid to the vulnerable and ventilators and resources to our medical personnel NOW, not someday; to ramp up testing even though when you do a lot of testing, you get bigger REAL numbers of infected people. And I am working on my own heart to not harden to friends who are led astray by flashy false prophets claiming that God loves the money more than *any one* of his beloved children.

Yes, we are grieving! And my discipleship in Christ is what gives me strength in grieving,

fearful times to stand up – or stay home as the case may be – and love God and my neighbor. With my whole heart.

If we don't want to follow Jesus, it is not because he hasn't shown us his love, weeping with us, rising for us. It's because we love something else more. If that thing is money, and power, and my own whim and pleasure – and we love that more than the life of any one of these, the least of my people (Matthew 25!), we are not following Jesus to the cross and Resurrection. *I think maybe THAT's Jesus' tears at Lazarus's tomb.*

Jesus stands there beside us, weeping with us and for us, asking, "Do you believe?" I answer, as a human being, "Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief." And grief and doubt part of being human notwithstanding, every time I return my heart to my birthright as God's beloved child, to my redemption through the cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, to my mandate from Jesus' own lips to love my neighbor as myself, I live into my faith as a follower of Jesus.

Our hope is in Jesus. Yes, weeping enters in – but joy cometh in the morning.

¹J. Scott Duvall and Verlyn D. Vergrugge, eds., *Devotions on the Greek New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 2012.

John 11:1-45 *[Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 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." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" 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. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."*

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When

Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

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." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 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. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 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 four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 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."

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

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