

When the Savior Wept

William Stell

April 2, 2017

John 11:1-44

This is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. It's dramatic, touching, confusing, even bizarre, deeply profound, and beautiful. I'm not going to try and tackle all of the story, because then I would be speaking here for at least an hour. I did want you to hear the whole thing, though (or almost the whole thing), just because the themes of this story are so relevant to the season of Lent that we are in right now. And as we get further and further into Lent, and closer and closer to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, these themes become all the more important: waiting, worry, grief, trust, anger, despair, death, and life miraculously bursting out of death. This morning, I want to focus on just one small piece of this story: Jesus crying. I want us to reflect together on his tears, as well as on our own.

One of the first times in my life that I vividly remember crying was when I was six or seven years old, and I witnessed a teenage boy getting picked on. He had bumped into something and made a bit of a mess, and some other boys made him feel badly about it, made him feel like a loser. A minute or two later, I started to cry as I witnessed the boy trying to comfort himself, rebuilding his self-confidence. "I will find my way," he said. "I can go the distance." ... Well, he didn't actually *say* those words; he *sung* them. His name was Hercules, and...he was in a Disney movie. Kind of a cartoonish fellow, I now realize. My dad actually had to take me out of the movie theater — I was so distraught watching this kid get bullied, and I was moved by both his sensitivity and his resilience.

Several years later, when I was about 11 years old, I had one of the weirdest and most baffling experiences of my life. It was a normal, unremarkable evening at home. I don't remember anything that had happened earlier that day. All I remember is that I was sad — terribly and inexplicably sad. I was crying, *weeping*, for no apparent reason, and everyone in my family, all of us were baffled by it. My mom managed to calm me down enough to bring me over to the kitchen table for dinner. I maintained my composure for a few minutes there, but then I felt it — whatever it was — start to swell up again. And suddenly, I burst into tears once more. My parents took me out to the front porch, away from my sisters, and I remember saying to them over and over again, through my tears, "I don't know why! I don't know why!" After a while of sitting there on the front porch with my parents, my dad said to me, "You know, Bud, some people in the world are very, very sad, and sometimes that sadness feels unbearable to them. Maybe, sometimes, there's a person in the world who is feeling so unbearably sad that God decides to take some of the sadness off of that person and put it onto someone else instead. Maybe you are feeling someone else's sadness, just for a bit, so that they can feel a little better for a few minutes." And somehow, my dad's words brought me comfort. I was still very sad, but I was no longer weeping. My tears slowed down for the rest of that night.

Crying is a funny thing, isn't it? All of us do it, of course, some more than others, and all of us have done it for a wide variety of reasons — we can be happy, sad, angry, hurt, confused, ecstatic, and on and on. Sometimes, it feels good to cry, and other times, it feels awful. Sometimes, we can sense the tears coming, and we know exactly why we are crying. Other times, we are caught off guard by our tears, and we may not fully understand where all they are coming from.

I can't help but wonder if that is the case with Jesus in our story. I think it's quite possible that he is caught off guard by his own tears. For starters, let's look at the placement of his crying in this chapter. It's a bit of an odd place, I think. He doesn't start crying when he first meets all of the other people crying, though that would be an understandable stimulus for his tears. Nor does he start crying when he arrives at the tomb of Lazarus and comes face-to-face with the death of his dear friend. No, as the story goes, Jesus asks the weeping crowd where the body is laid, and they say, "Come and see." And *then*, as the crowd begins walking to the cave that is the tomb, Jesus begins to weep. It feels to me like it's in between the action of the story. The timing just feels a bit off — as if the tears were unexpected even for Jesus, as if the emotions crept in and took a sudden hold of him.

And then, there's the question of why Jesus is crying *at all* if he is about to raise Lazarus from the dead! Back in verse 11, in our first reading, before Jesus goes to meet Mary and Martha in Bethany, he says to his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." We might ask Jesus, "Well, if you say that he's just 'asleep,' why do you bother weeping?" Was Jesus feeling the pain of the crowd? Was he moved by their love? Did he just have a poignant moment of missing Lazarus? Was he upset that people were doubting him? We don't know. All we know is that Jesus wept.

You may have heard someone say before, "Don't cry — it's not all that bad," or "Don't cry — it'll all work out in the end," or "Don't cry — you should be grateful for what you've got." I say, "Don't listen to them," because Jesus cried in a seemingly random moment over someone who was just "asleep." Jesus knew that it would all work out in the end for Lazarus. Perhaps he also knew that his impending death would work out in the end for the world. But that doesn't mean he didn't feel sad, or angry, or despairing, or any of the other harsh feelings that we ourselves feel. And it's okay to feel them, for others and for ourselves. That's part of what it means to be human, part of what it means to be like Christ. Amen.