***LAZARUS***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

March 26, 2023

Text: John 11:1-53

Was Lazarus the first zombie – you know, one of the walking dead that stagger across the screen in those horror movies with titles like *Let Sleeping Corpses Lie* or *Day of the Dead*? That question may or may not have crossed your mind as we heard John’s account of Lazarus, still wrapped in burial rags, staggering out of the tomb at Jesus’ command, but the image itself is not far from it. That scene is one of the more chilling moments in Scripture – friends gathered at the tomb still mourning Lazarus’ death, the stone rolled away, fear of the stench of his decomposing body, then Jesus’ cry, “Lazarus, come out!” And in that moment, every eye was trained on the mouth of the tomb, wondering what would happen next. No one expected anything to happen – dead men don’t come walking back to life, except in zombie movies – and yet, there was still a fearful hope or perhaps more appropriately a hopeful fear that a miracle might take place and Lazarus might return from the dead. But if he did, what would that mean? Would he be more than a zombie – more than a walking corpse?

John goes to great lengths to tell us that Lazarus is in fact dead – not mostly dead as was Wesley in *The Princess Bride*, but dead dead, four-days dead and buried. In that day there was a myth that the spirit of the dead hovered over the body for three days; by emphasizing that it was four days since Lazarus had been buried, John confirms that his spirit is long gone. This is not a resuscitation of one whose heart has stopped; this is not a revival of one who is at death’s door. This is the raising of a man who has walked through death’s door and is long gone, a man who was Jesus’ dear friend, a man over whom Jesus wept.

John 11:35 is the shortest verse in the Bible – *Jesus wept*. With his dear friends Mary and Martha mourning the death of their brother and other close friends and neighbors shedding tears, Jesus began to weep with them. If there was any question about the full humanity of Jesus, it was answered there among his friends with those tears. In Jesus, God feels our pain, experiences our grief, and knows our sorrows intimately as one of us. As Fred Craddock eloquently notes:

*“Jesus wept” is as strong a commentary on “and the Word became flesh:” as can be found….Is there any place where this text does not fit? Spray paint it on the gray walls of the inner city: “Jesus wept.” Scrawl it with a crayon on the hallway of an orphanage: “Jesus wept.” Embroider it on every pillow in the nursing home: “Jesus wept.” Nail it on posts along a refugee road leading out of East Timor: “Jesus wept.” Flash it in blinking neon at the bus station where the homeless are draped over pitiless benches: “Jesus wept.” Carve it over the door of a mountain cabin at which a fifteen-year-old girl stands with a crying child: “Jesus wept.” Skywrite it over every greed raped landscape: “Jesus wept.”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Today we might add: *Etch it into the concrete of the bombed out high-rise in Kyiv: “Jesus wept.” Write it on the pavement upon which George Floyd was killed: “Jesus wept.”* There is comfort in those two little words that so poignantly connect heaven and earth, the divine and the human, God and us, as a universal balm to the pain of the world. In the words of the hymn: *Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.* In those two words, “*Jesus wept,*” is the assurance of “God with us”: with us in sorrow, with us in tragedy, with us in death. Yet there remains some mystery about this verse and Jesus’ tears; as Dr. Craddock goes on to write:

*There seems no place where this text does not fit. None, that is, except the one where it is found: John 11.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Now why would he say such a thing? The words fit all those contexts as God’s self-identification with the pain of the world. Is it not obvious that they are rooted in Jesus’ grief at the loss of his friend, obvious not only to us but also to those gathered with him who whispered, “*See how he loved him!*”? Surely the tears shed by Jesus were tears of grief shed for the loss of a dear friend! John tells us Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He says that upon seeing Mary weeping and repeating Martha’s charge, “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*,” Jesus was deeply moved and disturbed in spirit. It wasn’t until he saw *them* weeping that he began to weep. We mourn with those who mourn and weep with those who weep – that is who we are as a family and a family of faith. We feel one another’s pain, and clearly Jesus felt the pain and grief poured out in tears by these sisters and friends for the brother and friend whom they loved. “*See how he loved him!*” said some in the crowd.

Yet there were those there who wondered, “*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?*” There were those who felt as Mary and Martha did, that had Jesus been there in time, Lazarus might have been healed. Surely Jesus knew that he could heal Lazarus, yet when he heard Lazarus was ill, Jesus did not rush to his side. He delayed coming; he waited until Lazarus was dead. Could one who had the capacity to heal, but purposely delayed coming, shed tears of grief for his friend now dead? Were these perhaps tears of regret at not coming sooner, tears for the pain he could have prevented had he rushed to Lazarus’ side? None of Jesus’ words seem to reflect that regret; only his tears and disturbance in spirit even hint at it. When Jesus wept, did he weep in grief, or with regret at not coming sooner, or for some other reason?

From the moment he heard of Lazarus’ illness, Jesus said that it was not an illness that would lead to death, an odd thing to say since Lazarus then died. Yet, Jesus perceived that putting Lazarus into the tomb was not the end of the story; beyond this death was life. The illness was a prelude to something greater that would lead to God’s glory. Jesus saw a picture bigger than the momentary pain and grief of his friends; he saw the possibility of something divine that surpassed the healing of a sick friend. If from the beginning he understood that through this event God would be glorified, that at the end of this event Lazarus would live, why then would he weep as he stood on the cusp of all the glory evident in that moment when Lazarus walked out of the tomb? Did the overwhelming grief of his adopted family simply surpass the expectation of the miracle yet to come? Or might there be something else that moved Jesus to tears?

Just before he begins to weep, Jesus asks, “*Where have you laid him?*” They reply, “*Lord, come and see!*” It was then that Jesus began to weep. In John’s Gospel these words, *Come and see*, issue a call to discipleship. They are spoken by Jesus to his first disciples when they ask where he is staying. *Come and see.* They are spoken by Philip to Nathaniel when he asks if anything good might come out of Nazareth. *Come and see.* They are spoken by the woman from Samaria with whom Jesus spoke at the well as she told her neighbors of her encounter with him. *Come and see!* Spoken to Jesus they were no doubt intended as an invitation to go to the tomb, but knowing what he knew, they are perhaps also an invitation to follow Lazarus into the tomb. The seeds of Good Friday are sown at the tomb of Lazarus, for it was only after the raising of Lazarus that the chief priests and Pharisees determined to put Jesus to death. Jesus brought life to Lazarus, but in bringing back that life he took the first step on the road to his own death. “*Lord, come and see*!” is the invitation to that journey to the cross and another tomb into which his broken body will be placed, a journey that the disciples had no idea lay ahead, but a journey Jesus anticipated all too well.

Might it be that the tears shed by Jesus were not only for his grief over the death of Lazarus, but also sadness for that first step on the path to the cross that began with the raising of Lazarus? Might it be that Jesus wept, not only for Lazarus, but also for the world that would reject him? We don’t know for sure; what we know is only what John tells us:

*“Where have you laid him?” asked Jesus.*

*“Lord, come and see!” they said.*

*And Jesus wept.*

Then he went and saw where they had laid Lazarus. And I wonder:

Were Jesus’ cheeks still tear-stained when he said, “*Take away the stone*.”?

Were his eyes still teary when he said, “*Father, I thank you for having heard me*.”? Did he have to choke back tears as he cried, “*Lazarus, come out!*”?

Did his heart soar or ache or tremble as Lazarus walked from the tomb

and people swooned

and Mary and Martha gasped

and terrified children ran away

and the chief priests and Pharisees resolved to kill him?

Was Lazarus then a zombie? No. By all accounts Lazarus walked out of that tomb as a living, breathing man who would live to die another day; raising Lazarus sparked faith for many of those who witnessed it, faith in Jesus as the Messiah who Martha claimed him to be. And the fact that Lazarus was alive, not a zombie, struck fear in the hearts of Caiphas and the leaders, for they could see that with this miracle the people began to believe and follow Jesus, and the only way they could see to stop him, was to put him to death. So rather than celebrate the miracle, they began to plot Jesus’ death and the death of Lazarus as well, for he was the living proof of the power of God at work in Jesus.

It is a strange story, a great miracle, all rooted in love. For Jesus loved Lazarus enough to weep for him and to ask God to raise him from the dead, despite knowing what that miracle would mean for him. And Jesus loved us enough to ask God to raise Lazarus, knowing that set him on the path to the cross and a tomb of his own. “*Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all,*”[[3]](#endnote-3) writes Isaac Watts. And so it does. So it does. Amen

1. Fred B. Craddock, “Jesus Wept”, Cherry Log Christian Church, Cherry Log, Georgia quoted in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2000, p.36 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Id. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Isaac Watts, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, stanza 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)