

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; John 11:1-45
April 10, 2011
David H. Teschner

Many if not all of us have experienced the powerful loss of a loved one. This story connects us to those emotions pretty easily. We know Jesus has feelings; after all, he's human, but he's a man. Men control their emotions, sometimes so much so that they lose track of them altogether, except the occasional outburst of anger.

Weeping or crying uncontrollably is not a pretty sight. Shoulders heave, noses run, eyes swell and redden, heads slump. In John's gospel we're told, "Jesus began to weep." The King James translation says, "Jesus wept," the shortest verse in the Bible. The original Greek was three words.

The only other mention of Jesus weeping is Luke's gospel when Jesus wept over Jerusalem after the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. There, he grieves the destruction that will come upon the people of the city by the Roman armies because they don't know what makes for peace.

Here, after arriving late in Bethany to find Lazarus four days dead and Martha and Mary grief stricken beyond consolation, Jesus himself breaks down.

Most of us could probably count on one hand the number of times we've sobbed. It's not a good feeling. The cavernous well of emptiness is scary. Ezekiel's valley of dry bones perhaps symbolizes the pain one feels. "Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are completely cut off," begins to describe the bottomless pit of despair as we groan in an otherworldly way.

Yet weeping seems to be a coping mechanism. It is both awful and strangely healing. It is a release of deep poisons that threaten to kill us, and thus it weakens us but also restores us to health.

I have wept for different reasons. Loss of a parent more often, but also from realizing the depth of harm I've done to another. Weeping for my complicity in sin or for our collective complicity in sin against a group of people.

At those moments, I wanted to be alone or least invisible. Jesus weeps for all to see.

I sometimes wonder if Jesus' emotional outburst is due to the profound regret he feels for not healing Lazarus when he was sick or for not coming immediately to Bethany when he first heard of the illness. His delay added to the length of his friend's great sadness. By the way, the Jewish custom at that time was for seven days of intense mourning followed

by twenty-three more days of curtailed and restrained sorrow. Did Jesus decide he came too late? Probably not.

The best explanation for his own deep sadness is that he loved Martha and Mary and entered directly into their pain when he encountered them. His heart and entire being went out to them. Before he could relieve them of their grief, he first had to share in it with them.

The question I have is, "Could that have been enough?" If Jesus hadn't brought Lazarus back from death, would his identification with Martha's and Mary's pain have been enough? Would it have been comforting and healing without the final miracle of life from death?

I ask that because today when a loved one suffers or dies, Jesus doesn't always restore him or her to perfect health and never back from death. Where is God then?

A 49-year-old mother of two teenagers is dying as I speak at Southside Regional Medical Center in the I.C.U. There is no further treatment available. All the doctors and nurses can do is to keep her as comfortable as possible. If one of the children were to ask me, "Where is God now?" or "Why does God let this happen?" all I could say is, "God is crying with you. God shares your pain and wishes this weren't happening to your mother, your father or you."

Does it help to know we are not alone in our grief and darkest hours? Jesus weeps; God weeps. God's heart breaks with that of all God's children. Our pain is God's pain, too.

I do think that knowledge can be helpful. God is not absent. That would be the greatest tragedy of all. God doesn't make everything better or right as we might wish, but God is present even if only to hold us and sob along with us. Sometimes our grief is so deep, we think it must be God's as well.

In this story from John, however, Jesus does do more than weep. He states plainly that he is the resurrection and the life. Then he proceeds to demonstrate it by calling Lazarus back among the living after four days in death. Jesus is informing us that we don't have to wait until we are physically dead to begin resurrection life. Lazarus literally or figuratively had his old clothing removed, his burial cloths, and would put on new clothes – resurrection garments. Lazarus would die again, but he started a new, enhanced life from this day forward.

For all of us, Jesus is saying, "Resurrection life begins now, today." We can live without fear of death. From now on, there is no death that will last. We can survive and pass through suffering and the death of loved ones because death is no longer. Jesus' presence is forever, and he will see us through, come what may.

We have victory, we have joy, we have perseverance and we have eternal life when we know that God's presence is ultimately what really matters. Amen.

