

“We Weep . . . Like Jesus”

Over the past fifty-plus years of ministry, I have been asked to stand up front at hundreds of funerals. Often these were funerals for people I had known, ministered to, grown to care for. On many occasions, however, I wound up in front at a funeral home or graveside because of a call from the funeral director looking for “a Lutheran pastor” to take care of a family that had to deal with the death of a loved one. Then, on less frequent occasions, I wound up officiating at a funeral for someone I barely knew, but had been thrust into a relationship [such times do make me both to give recognition to, and rebel at, the hand of God at work].

One such occasion, which took place in about the fifth year of my ministry, was the funeral for a man who was the neighbor of a member of my church; he was in the hospital with some very serious health issues. At her request, I visited him in the hospital a few times, and some weeks after he was released I got a phone call from my member that he was doing very badly; could I come see him? I went to his home, and in visiting him I was reintroduced to his wife and met his teenage daughter for the first time. He was gravely ill; I stayed by him as the doctor came to the home, decided he should be readmitted. I even made the trip with the family to the hospital that afternoon and was in the room when he was declared dead.

During the entire time I was in that home and then with the family at the hospital, the daughter was completely silent. I mean completely silent. I would go so far as to say she was practically catatonic. No emotion showed of any kind; no tears, no anger, no “he had it coming.” Nothing.

A few days later, at the visitation of the funeral home, she was the same — just totally locked up inside. The next day, at the funeral, I focused on the story that is today’s Gospel. I had not ever used that entire narrative in a funeral before, and with the daughter clearly in mind, I focused on John 11:35, what has been identified as “the shortest verse in the Bible” (at least it was in the King James Version), *“Jesus wept.”*

It had struck me before this that the weeping Jesus made little sense. He had just conveyed to Martha that he was himself ***“the resurrection and the life.”*** He knew that he was just about to demonstrate that by summoning Lazarus, who had been dead long enough for his body to already be ripe with the stench of death. Why was he weeping? I asked that question at this funeral: *“Why are we weeping today?”* Everybody there knew the answer — a husband, a father, a neighbor, a friend, a co-worker was dead! They all knew they had to weep on such an occasion.

But not the daughter. It was like she could not weep. It turned out that she would not allow herself to weep. At the close of the service, people filed past the casket to “pay their final respects,” family members were the last to stand by the coffin, and the funeral director asked them to move to the hallways while they closed the casket. As she walked from the room, the daughter was almost out the door, when she stopped, turned around, ran back to casket and threw herself on it just sobbing.

As we drove to the cemetery, the funeral director said to me, *“I had to be out of the room during your service, so I don’t know what you said, but I’m very glad you said it. That young lady was going to be very sick if she had held it in much longer.”*

Why did Jesus weep? The crowd in Bethany understood almost immediately: ***“See how he loved him!”*** When someone you love is suddenly and irrevocably taken from you, you are bound to weep. There is a gaping hole in your life where there was just moments before a solid presence. It’s like having your guts torn out. It hurts!

In 1963, a pastor and counselor by the name of Granger Westbrook wrote a book entitled, Good Grief. In it he addressed the ten stages of grief which had been identified by the pioneering work of psychologist, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her book, On Death and Dying. Many books have since been published that focus on the distinctly “American way of death” — which is often death-denying.

Both Kubler-Ross and Granger Westbrook aided many, many people to

understand death, its process, and how our thinking and emotions get caught up in that process. This young daughter of my member's neighbor had not read any of those books, so she didn't know that weeping is actually a healthy way to respond to death. Once I had (in a sense) "given her permission" to let it out, she was letting it all out . . . to her betterment.

I do rather wish I could take credit for what transpired in that funeral home that morning. I am a realist enough to know that, inasmuch as words did come out of my mouth, I was a tool in the betterment process. But the real agent for change was the Word from God that cut through the fog of despair in her life and allowed her to come to realize the answer to my question: "*Why did Jesus weep?*" For the very simply reason that our Lord was fully (let me underscore that) fully human.

Yes, he had identified himself to Martha as "*the resurrection and the life*" By the way, if it were up to me (which most assuredly it is not), I would take out the definite articles "the" before both those key words. I think they disembody the concept from Jesus; I'm not sure it would help most people all that much, but I think "I am resurrection and life" does precisely embody into Jesus and by him into us the promise. But it is enough for us now to affirm that Jesus made that claim just before he wept.

And yes, he did in fact know that he was going to summon Lazarus forth from that burial spot [note how careful I was in that choice of words; what we know of burial customs in First Century Judea would lead us to surmise that Lazarus's body was in a burial cave; but the best we can do is surmise; we cannot confirm] — How do we know that's what Jesus knew? Jesus told us (in a roundabout way): when he asked Mary, "*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*" and had previously affirmed that he did only what he saw what the Father was doing.

So given all that, what would make Jesus weep? Here's where I think we contemporary Christians often get ourselves into trouble: We want to ask,

“What would I have done under those circumstances?” More to the case, we hold on to the conceit that we know the answer.

If I knew I had the power and promise that Jesus had, and if I was assured that Lazarus was going to trot out of the place he was buried, I would be so elated that weeping would be the furthest thing from my mind. But we know neither of those things, because we’re not Jesus. That’s the dilemma; we need to turn this around. The issue should not be knowing what Jesus knew in that moment; the issue should be: *“Can we see the full humanity of Jesus in that moment?”*

Can we come to the realization that the Father is (not just “could be,” but “is”) at work in us bringing forth His glory? Can we seriously entertain the notion that in us resides resurrection and life? I think we have been conditioned to think just the opposite, so that we conclude that our reaction would have to be what we project onto Jesus, not the other way around. What does Jesus project onto us?

In 1977, I attended the National Youth Workers Convention in Atlanta, Georgia. One of the primary speakers at that event was Robert Farrar Capon, an Episcopal priest I had never heard of, but who would become one of my favorite authors. He was speaker at three of the plenary sessions and led a small-group interest session, which I attended. It was at that small-group encounter that I just became enthralled with his insights into the witness of the Bible. Chief among those insights was this pronouncement, which I heard that once and committed to memory.

Father Capon said, *“For most people the Gospel sounds something like this: ‘We are stuck in our automobile in a raging blizzard. Jesus makes his way to the heavenly garage, where he warms up the divine tow truck, places a thermos full of hot cocoa on the seat next to him, forges his way through the blizzard, hooks up our car to the divine tow truck, places us up in the front seat with him, offers us the hot cocoa to soothe us, and delivers us safe and warm back to the heavenly garage.’ That is not the Gospel. This is the Gospel, ‘We are stuck in our cars in the raging blizzard; Jesus walks through the storm, climbs into the front seat with*

us, and we both die together.’’

I know that some (maybe all) of you may ask me (or yourselves), “*How is that good news?*” Jesus and me both die? Where’s the good news in that? It’s to be found in Jesus’ words to Martha: “***I am resurrection and life.***” We die with the one who is the embodiment of resurrection life. Father Capon would go on to say, “... *and isn’t it amazing, that God has chosen the one thing we cannot avoid to be the means by which we come to him?*”

If it were up to us, we would just prefer not have to go through the whole “death and dying” piece at all. Let’s just all go up to heaven to be with the Lord. St. Paul told us why not in today’s Second Lesson: “...***the body is dead because of sin ...***” From the moment you came into this world, you entered into a death march “because of sin” (don’t you just love Lent with this message of gloom?). But that is precisely why we need the season of Lent, why we need to walk through this time of remembrance that death is our journey’s destination.

Why then the weeping? We told ourselves that when we sang together these words on the last Sunday before Lent: “*Alleluia cannot always be our song while here below; alleluia our transgressions make us for a while forgo; for the solemn time is coming when our tears for sin shall flow.*” We weep throughout the year (not just during Lent) when the pain of absence is felt, when the fear of loss is realized, when hope is narrowed, when the weight of our sin is heavy.

John told us why Jesus wept: “***When Jesus saw her (Mary) weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.***”

And so we weep . . . with our fellow humans who are beat down and broken . . . with the family of a woman who walked out of her home ten days ago and was found in the woods nearby a week later . . . with a community where a boy shot up his school and was himself dead a day later in the woods . . . with a friend who has gone through multiple

surgeries and the pain will not subside . . .over a woman who walked with the Lord for 90+ years and went quietly in her sleep . . . with the family of a child who dies for no apparent reason.

And yes, we weep . . . over the prospects of our final days . . . in anticipation of losing others close to us . . . in fear that the end will not come quickly, or painlessly, or with any peace.

We weep, like Jesus. And that is the hope. We weep not just *like* Jesus; we weep *with* Jesus, who sits in the car with us as we both die together.

Jesus, who is resurrection and life.

Amen.