

Jesus wept
John 11:17-37
March 25, 2007

I wept openly at my father's funeral, and of that I am not ashamed.

I wept as we sang the hymn:

*By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered,
and confidently waiting come what may,
we know that God is with us night and morning,
and never fails to greet us each new day.*

*And when this cup you give is filled to brimming
with bitter sorrow, hard to understand,
we take it thankfully and without trembling,
out of so good and so beloved a hand.*

And I wept as I watched my father's dear friends -- from Blue Hill, Maine, and from Topsfield, Massachusetts, and from Alexandria, Virginia -- walk to the front of the church and kneel at the communion rail. I was seated at the front of the church with Lynne and our children, with my mother and my brother and sister, where we could not see who was seated behind us. But as they came forward to kneel and to receive communion, I could see them all, and I was deeply moved to see all these dear friends who had come out of love for my father.

I wept, but, as you can see, not merely out of self-pity. Grief is a very complicated emotion! I wept because I was moved by others, by their grief and by their friendship. I wept because I was moved by pride and by gratitude, for what my father had meant to so many people and for what my father had meant to me. I wept because I was moved by my father's faith and by my own faith, and by the palpable sense of the presence of God with us, tears of grief mixed with joy and confidence and hope.

And, yes, I wept for myself, for my loss, for the loss of the father who had been with me for a lifetime, sharing with me wisdom and faith and gentleness and eagerness for life, but now with me no more, for the loss of the goodness of what had been, and for the loss of what now could never be.

My tears were about love. I wept for the love of my father for me and for the love of other people for my father and for the love of my father for God. But, most of all, I wept simply because I loved my father, and because I missed him.

Jesus wept. He asked where his dear friend, Lazarus, was buried and when they said, "Come and see," Jesus wept. That's it! Jesus wept. It's the shortest verse in the Bible, just two words: "Jesus wept," but it says enough, no further explanations are necessary. There is no need to wonder if Jesus was weeping for the lack of faith among Lazarus' neighbors and family, or if Jesus was weeping simply out of empathy for their grief. Jesus wept! They knew why! We know why! For the same reasons we do. "See how much he loved him!"

If it's OK for Jesus, it's OK for me! Friends, it's OK to cry. Let the tears flow. Don't hold them in. Let grief run its course. Tears are not a sign of weakness, not a character flaw, not evidence of a lack of faith.

On the contrary! Jesus' own behavior makes it clear that a firm belief in resurrection and real grief are not incompatible. Those who saw Jesus weeping and said, "Could he not have kept Lazarus from dying?," did not understand Jesus' tears. These were not tears of regret ("If only I had come sooner!"). These were not tears of despair ("Lazarus is lost!"). Jesus had already told Martha that Lazarus was not lost: "Your brother will rise to life."

These were tears of grief. Jesus loved Lazarus and Lazarus had been claimed by death. For Jesus, genuine faith and genuine grief are not mutually exclusive ... nor for us. In fact, I believe that as our own faith grows deeper and stronger, two things will be equally true: 1) we will fear death less, and; 2) we will grieve death more!

We fear death less because we believe the witness of Jesus. Death is not final. Death is not absolute. Death is not the end of the story. Death is surely real and no illusion. When we die, we die, and whatever it is that we are is no more. And the sting of death is surely real and no illusion. The absence of the one we love leaves with us an ache that lodges in the core of our being and never goes away.

But death is not the end of the story. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says, "those who believe in me will live, even though they die." They will live! We will live! We need not fear the nullifying power of death because we know One whose power is greater!

But Jesus is not just talking about life after death. When Martha declares, "I know that he will rise to life on the last day," Jesus responds, "I am the resurrection and the life ... I am the resurrection and the life." Believing in life some day, at the end of days, is not all that difficult, because it cannot be checked out. This kind of resurrection faith may simply be a way of pushing away our fear of death by avoiding it. But Jesus offers life here and now ... and he raises Lazarus as the proof! Lazarus will still die one day and Jesus does not go on to raise people from their graves wherever he goes, but he raises Lazarus to show that he can and does give life, here and now.

Jesus can and will raise to life what is dead in you -- one day and now -- so you need not fear death, in any of its forms and disguises. Death is real, it is not an illusion. Jesus does not say that death is nothing, or that death is a momentary blip in the continuum of eternity, or that death is simply a gateway to another life. Death is real and death is an enemy of life, and therefore an enemy of what God desires for his people. And that is why we grieve. We do not fear death, but we grieve it.

As believers, we grieve death more because we are so much in love with life! Jesus wept and so do we, because life is God's desire for us, for all of us, not death, because life, even as worn down and torn down and messed up as it may become, still reflects something of the glory God puts into it by design. Jesus' grief and our grief offers testimony that life matters, that life is good, that death always robs us of something most precious. Our grief shows not how much we fear death, not how much we feel sorry for ourselves, but how much we value life and how acutely we feel its loss.

As believers, we love life, life that will be ours one day and life that is ours now. We do not despise this life, anxious only to get on to the next. We are eager for eternal life because we are already tasting its goodness now! So even while we fear death all the less, we grieve death all the more, because it is life that we desire, for ourselves, for those we love, and, indeed, for all humanity.

But there is one concern left to address. We say that as believers we grieve death so much because life is so good, but what do we say to the person for whom life is anything but good, the person for whom death might seem at times a more desirable option? This is what I say: listen to the words of Jesus!

"I am the resurrection and the life!"

Jesus is in the business of bringing things to life, of bringing life out of death, not just some day, but right now! Jesus said he came "in order that [we] might have life, life in all its fullness."

So what is preventing you from enjoying life in all its fullness? Is it your own failures? Jesus forgives all your sins, understands all your weaknesses, loves you as you are. There is nothing you need do to make yourself any more desirable to Jesus than you already are, and there is everything he will do to make you into the lovely creature God has made you to be.

Is it the disdain and cruelty of others? Jesus will protect you and defend you. Jesus is your advocate and your friend. Jesus is the champion of justice. No one can take from you anything that God will return not to you in abundance: not dignity, not honor, not true wealth, not life itself.

Is it despair? Have you given up on yourself, on the future, on this world? "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says ... to you! "Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and those who live and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this? Believe it ... and live!