

March 29, 2020 5th Sunday in Lent

Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Zoom/Live Stream

[Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus posted on 3-22-20, Jesus Wept.]

Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

I am so glad we can gather in this way for worship.

Of course, I yearn for the day we'll be together in person.

In the meantime, this physical separation is important, quite literally lifesaving.

So, if you can, when you can, stay home.

And as you can, stay connected.

This is the third Sunday doing worship in a virtual way.

If you joined us virtually the other weeks, you could tell just a few of us were in the Sanctuary at University Lutheran Church of Hope, by the U of M, in Minneapolis.

It was from there that we livestreamed our service.

We heard all sorts of reports: sometimes it worked well, other times the audio and video were a challenge.

The other challenge, though, was the human connection.

Quite honestly, we worship leaders missed you, we needed you.

Beautiful and well-used as ours is, the church is not a building.

The church is the people, it's the body of Christ.

We missed the interactive nature of worship, the gathering, the energy of singing, the murmur of prayer.

We missed the laughter, the tears, the hunger, the Spirit's power.

So, today it is lovely to see the faces of many of you who have gathered here for Zoom

You help us know that we are together, that we are, indeed, the church, Christ's body.

Today Zach is in northeast at his place, I'm in north Minneapolis at my dining room table, you are all over—
south Minneapolis, SE, St. Paul, Roseville...even Germany and New Zealand and Portland.

And together we are Christ's body.

Together we are watching the world lurch and sway, watching the unthinkable transpire:

Medical folks in need of equipment,

Sewing machines stitching facemasks,

Ethical questions before us,

Businesses and stores closed or reduced,
The roads strangely quiet,
Students a bit stir-crazy,
Jobs shifting,
The economy uncertain,
Grief, so much grief, and the prediction that more grief is yet to come.

In our gospel today Jesus is face to face with Mary and Martha, their anger, their grief.

Their brother Lazarus has died.

Why was Jesus so pokey coming to them?

Why does he let this suffering happen?

Why can't Jesus face up to the hard questions of Martha, "If only you'd been here..."?

Why does Lazarus get raised and not others?

There is plenty unsettling about this gospel, sometimes all this mystery makes me cranky.

This time, though, this week: I love it. It connects, and deeply.

Jesus wept.

He cried.

He grieved.

He stood with his community. He stooped at the grave of his friend. And he wept.

He let the grief that was all around him, the grief that was within him, lead.

This is Jesus who conquers death,

Jesus who just verses earlier reminded them "I am the resurrection and the life,"

Jesus who with *this* public display of power stirs up the ire of the religious leaders,

Jesus who is on the way to the cross, to his own death, to his own resurrection.

It's this Jesus, who is so full of life that even the grave can't stop him...who pauses today to weep, to grieve.

Jesus embodies this tension that we know all too well: grief and life, dust and beauty.

Jesus embodies it, he owns it, he feels it.

Jesus weeps.

This week I was once again helped by writer Debie Thomas.

She says, "When Jesus weeps, he legitimizes human grief."

Too often the church-y talk of resurrection has made us feel like there isn't a place for our very real grief.

But when Jesus weeps, when Jesus cries,
he makes a space for Mary and Marth's grief, their pain, their anger.
He makes a space for our grief.
Jesus lifts up, as Debie Thomas calls it, "the holy vocation of empathy...and lamentation."

God knows we know a thing or two about grief, with its complexity, its layers.

Think for a moment about the grief you are witnessing, you are experiencing... (space)

The grief before us is incredible.

There is grief for those with sickness and death,

And there is a web of grief that is interconnected and real:

Folks of all ages grieving the loss of social contact, our usual ways of interacting or working,

students grieving the traditional milestones—grad ceremonies and musicals and field trips,

employees at every level grieving job loss or change,

many grieving a sense of innocence,

people grieving their shifting identity or feelings of competence, or routine,

others grieving for loved ones, or relationships, or possibilities.

so many of us grieving our sense of control, face to face with mortality.

There is something important in Jesus' simple tears: no need for words, no need for niceties.

Rather his tears make a space for silence, a space for loss, a space for faithfulness.

Here's the thing: when Jesus weeps, transformation begins.

Lament—at its best—meets us where we are, and it takes us where we need to go.

It seems to me that it's because of Jesus' real grief, that he is so intent on making life.

It was last Sunday in worship when I got in touch with my grief, my exhaustion, in this time of pandemic.

It didn't stop me from leading, but my tears reminded me, connected me, to what we're facing.

I know many of you can point to your moments when it connected for you:

when the tears came and the grief was real,

when your heart broke,

when sorrow found a voice.

Thank you for letting grace make that space of grief in you—that's a gift of God.

We could harden our hearts.

We could clench our fists in fear.

We could shut out the grief that we and everyone is experiencing.

...Or we can follow Jesus.

We can let loss make us more human, more tender.

We can notice the vulnerabilities in our systems of health care and economics,
vulnerabilities that have long been there, but now are exposed.

And we can take this time to dream, to imagine new ways, to birth resilience,
to name what it is that we value, what we hold dear,
and then shape a community that reflects this.

Kerri Miller on MPR on Friday commented something like:

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if this were a call to greater community.”

After Jesus weeps, he raises his friend Lazarus from the dead.

Remember what he says to the community? Powerful words!

Jesus tells them: “Unbind him, let him go.”

While Jesus gives people life (Amen),

it is the community’s role—our call—to unbind one another, to free another.

We do this best, when we are in touch with our own sense of grief, when we know how to weep.

Think for a moment about the ways you and others, whole systems, are in need of unbinding, in need of
freedom... (pause)

Dear friends in Christ, let us follow Jesus.

Let us make a space for weeping and for grief, for it is real, Jesus shows us that.

And let us keep watch for life and resurrection,

for all that needs unbinding,

for Jesus’ grace.

Grace enough to carry us through these days.

Amen.