

“Jesus Wept”
Based on John 11: 1-45
by Rev. Meghan Davis
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It seems odd that we would be having these texts in Lent, as we draw near to Holy Week and Easter. I would think these stories of life out of death would be more appropriate for Easter season, the Sundays falling between Easter Sunday and Pentecost. But here they are, smack in the middle of Lent, reminding us that the story of life out of death is not only the resurrection story, it's not only a story we hear and tell and re-tell on Easter Sunday—indeed life out of death is *the* story told time and time again throughout the Bible. From the creation story of God making the world out of a formless void, to the childless and past-their-prime Abraham and Sarah being promised as many descendents as numerous as the stars, the Exodus of the Israelites out of the slavery of Egypt, and Jesus' many healings, just to name a few.

Perhaps one reason we find it here, as we approach Easter, is that this story, told only in John, serves as a transition, a bridge between Jesus' and public ministry and the events leading up to his death and resurrection. Additionally, the events of Lazarus' death foreshadow the Jesus' resurrection by mirroring John's telling of the Easter story. With Jesus asking the women where Lazarus was laid, just as Mary Magdalene asks the man she presumes to be a gardener where Jesus was laid. Both are laid in tombs whose rocks must be removed and both involve the burial cloths—death still clinging to Lazarus by the cloths binding him while Jesus will leave death behind with cloths neatly left in the tomb.

But there's so much more to this story than foreshadowing. This story is profoundly powerful. Why is this story so powerful for us today? Perhaps part of it is that “Jesus wept.” Many of us memorized this, the shortest verse in the Bible as children. (I have to admit that I learned it from the game Trivial Pursuit...) The NRSV translates it, “Jesus began to weep.” Probably more accurate translation with this the connotation of beginning to weep rather than the vague “wept.” But “Jesus began to weep,” Just doesn't have the same ring to it. It loses the sparse poetry of, “Jesus wept.”

Jesus wept and in doing so displays his humanity in a manner uncommon to the Gospel of John which usually portrays Jesus as somewhat other-worldly, almost aloof, stressing his divinity over his humanity. Soon he will show his divinity by bringing life out of death but first he weeps. Reminding us that sometimes, in the face a great loss, sometimes all we can do is weep.

Upon seeing Jesus weep, people remark, “See how he loved him!” As one commentator notes, “This is a telling choice of vocabulary, inasmuch as the Greek word for “love” used here is not the verb form of the expected *agape*—selfless, self-giving love of which Johanne corpus is so fond. Rather, Jesus' love for his friend Lazarus is *philia*, the common, everyday Greek word for ‘friendship,’ ‘human affection,’ or ‘deep

feeling,’ that ordinary human love we have for our friends.”¹ Again, the human side of Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus “was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” The original Greek carries a connotation of anger and distress. Is Jesus disturbed and moved solely by one friend’s death and other friends’ mourning? Is he fully aware that he soon will also be facing death? Is he distressed over the human condition?

Now, as then, there is plenty about the human condition to cause us to be disturbed, deeply moved, angry and distressed, isn’t there? Veronice Miles, a professor at Wake Forest School of Divinity writes, “Amid painful circumstances and death-dealing social realities, we yearn for resurrection and the *unbinding* that releases us to dream beyond the boundaries and experience life anew. To dream beyond the boundaries is to imagine a world in which wholeness, well-being, health, and prosperity are normative expressions of human existence and to partner with the God of life in making that dream a reality.”²

Vedran Smailović was surviving the most painful of circumstances and death-dealing social realities. It was May 27, 1992. Sarajevo was under siege. The city was enduring all the hardships of civil war: the cold, food and water shortages, the constant bombings and sniper fire in the street. The proprietors of a bakery, somehow, miraculously were able to obtain some flour and began to bake bread. A long line of people queued up. Waiting for the bread to finish baking. Waiting for the all-too-rare opportunity to buy bread. But they never got their bread. Because a mortar shell flew in, instantly killing twenty-two men, women and children. Jesus wept.

Up until this time, Smailović had done nothing about the war. For one thing, he never in his wildest imagination believed that Sarajevo would come to this. But even so, what could he do? He was not a politician. He was not a soldier. He was just a musician. A cellist with a very respectable résumé, granted, but still, what could a musician possibly do? Looking down from his apartment at the horror of the death and destruction heaped on what had been the neighborhood bakery, like Jesus, “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved;” like Jesus, angry and distressed, Smailović decided to act.

So the next day, Smailović put on his tuxedo, the same attire he wore for playing with the Sarajevo Opera, the Sarajevo String Quartet, the Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra, or any other of major companies he’d played with, and he took his cello down to the bombed out bakery and sitting on a battered camp stool began to play Albinoni’s Adagio in G minor.

He played every day for twenty-two days in honor of the twenty-two who died that day. For twenty-two days he played, putting his own life at risk in the midst of gunfire. His defiant act of beauty and art in the face of brutality and horror, was a symbol of God’s life out of death. He considered his music his prayer for peace. When asked by

¹ John Rollefson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 143.

² Veronice Miles, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 140.

a journalist whether he was not crazy doing what he was doing, Smailović replied: “You ask me am I crazy for playing the cello, why do you not ask if they are not crazy for shelling?”

The beautifully haunting piece he played, Albinoni’s Adagio in G minor, also has a history of life out of death. In the ruins of post-World War II Dresden, musicologist Remo Giazotto discovered a remnant of a piece written by Tomaso Albinoni, an 18th-century Venetian composer. From that remnant Giazotto composed the piece. Beauty out of war. Life out of death.

Smailović continued his prayers for peace throughout the city at graveyards, buildings destroyed by the war, and he played at funerals despite the likelihood that they would draw the gunfire of snipers. He played without compensation.

When Jesus tells Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha responds, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” But Jesus isn’t talking about life out of death on the last day, as he tells her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” Jesus isn’t talking about life out of death on the last day as he *shows* her by bringing Lazarus back from death. Scholar Karoline Lewis poses the question, “Do we too quickly jump to the security of eternal life, imagining our future residence in heaven rather than the provision of life in the present?... [she continues] Like Martha, we encapsulate resurrection as only future salvific existence and not as the possibility of life right here, and now, with Jesus.”³

When Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life” he isn’t only talking about some far off time in the future on the last day. He’s talking about here and now. We are called to live that resurrection and life here and now, not just bide our time waiting for the last day. We are called to “dream beyond the boundaries...to imagine a world in which wholeness, well-being, health, and prosperity are normative expressions of human existence and to partner with the God of life in making that dream a reality.”⁴ Jesus did the “heavy lifting” of calling Lazarus from the tomb, but he had help. He asked where Lazarus was buried and he was led there. Someone helped move the stone away from the tomb. Lazarus walked out. Jesus told others to unbind him from his burial cloths. Bringing life out of death is God’s work. We are called to help.

[After the sermon, I played Albinoni’s Adagio in G minor. I invite you to take some time to listen to the piece now. There are multiple versions available on YouTube. Here’s one: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spBOZa87xIY&feature=related>

Amen.]

³ Karoline Lewis, “Living By The Word,” *The Christian Century*, April 5, 2011, p. 22.

⁴ Veronice Miles, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 140.