

In the Valley of the Shadow

Matthew 5:27-30 (Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

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Jesus wept. (John 11:35)

“Jesus wept.”

Jesus wept. That’s it.

“Jesus wept” is the verse that I’d blurt out when I was asked by my childhood Sunday school teachers to share scripture that I had memorized.

A little smart-alecky, I know, a sad part of my checkered history. And to you children’s Sunday school teachers who are watching, all I can say, is “I’m sorry. And thank you.”

Thank you for your patience and for your service to the church.

Jesus wept.

As a child, I chose that verse to share because, of course, it’s the shortest one in the Bible, at least in English.

But today, as an adult, I find myself thinking about this verse and repeating it to others because I find it to be profoundly comforting.

You see, Mary and Martha had sent Jesus a message saying that his friend Lazarus was very sick.

They were in Bethany, but Jesus was in another town with his disciples.

Jesus lingered for two days before coming to see Lazarus.

By the time he got to Bethany, of course, Lazarus was dead and put in the tomb.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” said Martha when she met Jesus outside of the village.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” said Mary, who was weeping at Jesus’ feet.

“Couldn’t he who opened the eyes of that blind man have kept this man from dying?” said members of the crowd, murmuring amongst themselves.

Have you ever asked that questions like those?

I have.

Where are you, God?

Lord, I’ve called on your help, but I’m still aching for help, for relief.

Why did you allow this to happen? Where were you? Where are you?

Some people get uncomfortable with questions like those,

They think they are evidence of a lack of faith.

It’s just the opposite, I think.

It’s people of faith who ask those questions.

When Jesus saw Mary and those with her weeping,

he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.
Deeply moved by the pain of his friends,
deeply troubled by the power of death and its effect on people's lives.

"Where have you put the body?" Jesus asked.

"Come and see, Lord", they replied.

In the gospel of John, "Come and see" is used repeatedly as a call to discipleship.

That's what Jesus said to his first disciples,

and that's what his disciples repeated to others when they called them to Jesus.

Come and see.

With those words, we are invited to experience true life in Jesus, the source of our greatest joy.

Come and see.

With those words, Jesus is invited to the tomb to see the body of his friend,

to see the reality of death, the source of our deepest grief and our greatest fear.

And Jesus wept.

Jesus wept.

Jesus wept.

You know, these are tender times.

People are anxious. We're anxious.

People are fearful. We're fearful.

People are tired and stressed and worrying about what tomorrow's news will bring. So are we.

We all are grieving to some extent — big losses to little losses.

And so I recite that verse to you, the one that I flippantly blurted out so long ago.

Jesus wept. And Jesus weeps.

Jesus weeps with us at the power of death still at loose in this world.

Jesus is our fullest revelation of God.

And that means that the God who created the universe,

who formed you in your mother's womb, also weeps with you — with us —

in our pain, our fears, and our grief.

This is good news, in case you can't recognize it.

Your God is deeply moved and troubled by your pain,

to the point that God shares it and enters into it, and goes to the tomb for it.

Jesus weeps.

But that's not the end of the story.

Take away the stone, Jesus said.

So they took away the stone.

Jesus looked upward, talking to God the Father,

and then he cried out, "Lazarus, come out!"

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth,

his face all wrapped up.

And Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, let him go."

Unbind him. Let him go.

No, we do not have a God that saves us from pain.
We have a God who accompanies us through our pain, our grief, and calls us out of the tombs.
We have a God who brings comfort in the midst of grief,
 who brings hope in the midst of despair,
 who brings love in the face of loss,
 and who speaks life into our tombs.

That's what God does. And our job?
It's to unbind people from their grave clothes. To set them free.
To make them aware that there is a deeper reality
 than the one we hear in the constant barrage of breaking news.
There is a deeper reality than the growing virus statistics.
How do we do that?

In the name of Christ, we weep with those who weep,
 and then we unwrap each other from the bonds of death
 by welcoming others, by including them,
 by giving food to those who hunger,
 drink to those who thirst, money to those with little, mercy to those who are broken,
 a phone call, an email, a card to those desperate for connection,
 and an invitation to join us in our journey.

For, Yea, though we walk through the shadow of death,
we need not fear evil,
for God leads us.
Yea, though we weep tears of grief,
we need not do so without hope,
for God weeps with us.
And, yea, though we sometimes wonder where God is,
we need to keep listening and watching,
for God will have the last word.

Lazarus, come out!

In the name of Christ, may you hear Christ calling for you.
In the name of Christ, may you echo Christ's words to others.
And in the name of Christ, may we unwrap each other from the bonds of death
 and set each other free, to walk, in Christ, for life.