

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series entitled Meeting Jesus, in which I am looking at various interactions that Jesus had with people in the gospel of John and what we learn from them about what it means to know and follow Jesus. This morning, we will be looking at Jesus' interaction with Mary and Martha at the tomb of their brother Lazarus:

**John 11:1-45** - Now a man named **Lazarus** was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> This Mary, whose brother **Lazarus** now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." <sup>4</sup> When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." <sup>5</sup> Jesus loved Martha and her sister and **Lazarus**. <sup>6</sup> Yet when he heard that **Lazarus** was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. <sup>7</sup> Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." <sup>8</sup> "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?" <sup>9</sup> Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. <sup>10</sup> It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light." <sup>11</sup> After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend **Lazarus** has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." <sup>12</sup> His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." <sup>13</sup> Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. <sup>14</sup> So then he told them plainly, "**Lazarus** is dead, <sup>15</sup> and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." <sup>16</sup> Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." <sup>17</sup> On his arrival, Jesus found that **Lazarus** had already been in the tomb for four days. <sup>18</sup> Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, <sup>19</sup> and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. <sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup> "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup> Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup> "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." <sup>28</sup> And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." <sup>29</sup> When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place

where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup> When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. <sup>32</sup> When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." <sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. <sup>34</sup> "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. <sup>35</sup> Jesus wept. <sup>36</sup> Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" <sup>37</sup> But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" <sup>38</sup> Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. <sup>39</sup> "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." <sup>40</sup> Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" <sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." <sup>43</sup> When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "**Lazarus**, come out!" <sup>44</sup> The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." <sup>45</sup> Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.

This passage may feel particularly relevant to many of you, especially the words that Mary & Martha both say to Jesus: "**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" Losing a loved one to death is one of the hardest things you can face in life. In fact, many people can trace their falling away from faith to a loss that caused them to either hate God or to conclude that no loving God would ever allow such a tragedy to happen. I hope that as we look at this passage, and particularly at Jesus' interaction with Mary & Martha, we will gain some understanding and a deeper faith in our great and compassionate God.

So, Jesus hears that his friend Lazarus is sick. Instead of leaving for Bethany, he stays two more days, and by the time he arrives, Lazarus is dead. Both sisters come to Jesus and say "**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" It is a familiar complaint, no matter what words you use. Lord, you were powerful enough to save my brother, my son, my spouse, my mother from death. Lord, if you had intervened with your power, they would still be here. But you let them die. Why? The crowd shared that sentiment; as they say in v. 37: *But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from*

*dying?"* Both Mary and Martha show us that it is okay to doubt God's goodness and love, and to give voice to our emotions.

So where is Jesus in their pain? Where is God when we lose a loved one? The first place is found in v. 32-35, in response to Mary:

<sup>32</sup>*When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* <sup>33</sup>*When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.* <sup>34</sup>*"Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied.* <sup>35</sup>*Jesus wept.*

Before going to the tomb, he goes to his friends and weeps with them. In fact, in Greek, the word translated as "wept" carries the connotation of angry bellowing or snorting. Why does he cry when he knows what is going to happen? He knows the purpose of this incident, and he knows that he has power over the situation. He knows that in ten minutes, he will call out to Lazarus, and he will walk out of that grave. So why does he cry? **I believe that Jesus was crying over the grief of death and how it affects the people he loves so dearly.** Jesus is angry at death and the suffering it causes people, because it is wrong. It was never meant to be that way. This pain, this suffering, is part of a world that was never meant to be. And it is tearing apart the people God loves.

You know what Jesus' tears mean? The tragedy that happened to you - it is evil. It's not just something you shrug off. It is a big deal, not just to you, but to God. Death is an enemy - *1 Corinthians 15:26 - The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

When Jesus was confronted with the death of his friend, Lazarus, he did not stand there stoically, saying "why are you grieving? God just needed another angel, that's all! Just be thankful and praise God!" Jesus cried. His tears reveal to us that this is not the way it was meant to be. Suffering and death are a part of living in this broken world, and while God allows it to happen, **it is not the way it was meant to be from the beginning.**

The first place that Jesus is in your suffering is there with you, weeping alongside you at the pain you are being caused. **And this means that we can weep as well.**

One of my favorite books on grief is Nicolas Wolterstorff's *Lament for a Son*, written as he processed the tragic death of his son Eric. In one chapter, he writes: *"I skimmed some books on grief. They offered ways of not looking death and pain in the face, ways of turning away from death out there to one's own inner "grief*

*process” and then, on that, laying the heavy hand of rationality. I will not have it so. I will not look away. I will indeed remind myself that there’s more to life than pain. I will accept joy. But I will not look away from Eric dead. Its demonic awfulness I will not ignore. I owe that – to him and to God.”*

And as he said in another place, *“I lament all that might have been, and now will never be.”*

C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Problem of Pain*, a classic on suffering, as a 42 year-old. That book contains the classic line that I quote often: *“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”* It’s a great line that reminds us of how God can use suffering to wake us up to our impending death, to our need to get right with Him and to live our lives in wisdom. Twenty years later, though, at age 62, Lewis’ wife died, and the next year he published another book on suffering, a collection of his journals in response to his wife’s death called *A Grief Observed*. *A Grief Observed* does not provide the reader with neat and tidy answers and logical explanations the way *The Problem of Pain* did. Consider some of these quotes:

*“Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not, ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.”*

*“What do people mean when they say, ‘I am not afraid of God because I know He is good?’ Have they never even been to a dentist?”*

As even C.S. Lewis found, life becomes a lot less neat and tidy when faced with death, that a loss that profound causes all kinds of questions, doubts, fears, and emotions. And the Bible, including John 11, encourages us not to stuff those down but to cry out to God.

Bernard of Clairvaux – *“O my God, deep calls unto deep. The deep of my profound misery calls to the deep of Your infinite mercy.”*

Cry out to God in your sorrow. And just as Jesus wept with his friends in their pain, Jesus calls us to a ministry of tears. As Paul says in **Romans 12:15** - *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.* You don’t need to give answers to people in pain; just cry with them.

Where is God when we are experiencing tragedy? He is weeping alongside us. As Joe Bayly, a man who had three sons die, wrote in his book *The view from a Hearse*:

*"I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly. He said things I knew were true. I wished he would go away. And he finally did. Another came and sat beside me. He didn't talk. He didn't ask leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour, or more. He listened when I said something. He answered briefly. He prayed simply. And he left. I hated to see him go."*

**Jesus weeps with you in your pain and suffering. But that is not the only place that God is when we are going through tragedy.** If he were only weeping with us, that would be nice, but not enough. Look at how he responds to Martha:

*"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." <sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup> Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

God is not just crying with us. He brings resurrection and life out of death. Martha believes he is speaking of the resurrection on judgment day at the end of time. But he wants to show something greater, and raises Lazarus from the dead in front of their eyes.

Jesus said "I am the resurrection and the life." Death becomes "falling asleep" for those who are in Jesus. **Death, the enemy, becomes a defeated enemy.**

***1 Corinthians 15:54-57*** - *When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." <sup>55</sup> "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" <sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

And so Paul can say in ***1 Thessalonians 4:13*** - *Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.* We grieve and we curse this fallen world and the tragedies that befall us. But we do not grieve like men who have no hope, because He is the resurrection and the life.

Jesus is not just weeping alongside us. He has overcome the grave. And that is what our heart desperately needs, what we are crying out for. As I considered what we would ask for when faced with death, I think there are two requests that come to mind. **The first is that death would not be the end.** Death is such a cruel ending, and there is something in us that won't accept that, that believes that love should be eternal.

**Think about it. When you come to a funeral,** when a loved one dies, do you find yourself at peace with that being the end? Or does something inside you rage against it? Do you know deep down that death is wrong, that it was never meant to be this way? Do you long for life beyond the grave, for reunion, for death to not have the final word? That longing in your heart is not an accident. It is there because he has set eternity in your hearts. You are longing for God, for Jesus, for the glory of the gospel, for life as God intended it to be.

**The second request I believe is that there would be meaning in this tragedy.** That the death would not be meaningless.

In the case of Lazarus, *<sup>4</sup>When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."*

The tragedy of atheism, of a world without a God, is that everything is ultimately objectively meaningless. You can try to create whatever meaning you want, but in the end, death is the ultimate tragedy, because it is the final end of life. And our hearts protest against that. We want, we need for there to be meaning, even in tragedy. And in the gospel, there is.

**Romans 8:28** - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

How can he bring meaning out of even death? Look at the rest of the passage:

**John 11:46-53** - *But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. <sup>47</sup> Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." <sup>49</sup> Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! <sup>50</sup> You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." <sup>51</sup> He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, <sup>52</sup> and not only for that nation but also for the scattered*

*children of God, to bring them together and make them one.* <sup>53</sup> *So from that day on they plotted to take his life.*

As Caiphas prophecies, Jesus will die on the cross for the whole nation, for the people of the world. Through His suffering, He will become the resurrection and the life for us and bring meaning out of even the greatest enemy, death itself.

The first place God is in your suffering is that He is there, weeping with you. But He is not only weeping with you, he is on the cross dying for you, overcoming sin and death, so that he can bring life out of death, both now and forevermore. Jesus died so that you will not have to.

Because God weeps with us and has overcome the grave, we can choose to trust God in our sorrow, to believe that God loves us and is good and is always working for good. We can declare, I will trust you whether you heal or whether you allow my loved one to die. I will trust you whether you heal me or allow me to die. I will trust that death is not the end. I will trust that as long as I have you, I may not understand everything, but I will be okay.

Go back again to the beginning of this story. Remember what he said to the disciples: *So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, <sup>15</sup>and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."*

He waited to go "so that they might believe." There are greater depths of faith. He had already shown them that He could heal; now He was teaching them that He had power over even death. This would only be possible if he delayed. Is it possible that in God's timing, in God's seeming absence, that He wants to teach you something greater, something more meaningful, something that you don't already know?

Can you humble yourself enough to accept this? Can you believe that if God is big enough to create everything, then he is big enough to have a reason for allowing your suffering that you can not understand? Can that help you to trust, knowing that God is perfect in His love, justice, and sovereignty, sees the end from the beginning, and knows what He is doing, even when we can't comprehend it?

*Isaiah 55:8-9* For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. <sup>9</sup> *"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Elisabeth Elliot, who lost two husbands amidst many other inexplicable troubles, learned to trust God no matter what, and put it this way:

*God is God. If He is God, He is worthy of my worship and my service. I will find rest nowhere but in His will, and that will is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to.*

**In the end, Jesus' delay brought more glory to God and increased their faith.** Trust that God can do the same in your experience.

You are not the only one who has dealt with death. God allowed His own Son to die and unjust death in our place, so that for those who believe in Jesus, death will not be the end, but they will live forever.

**Hebrews 2:14-15** - *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- <sup>15</sup> and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their **fear of death.***

Our God is a suffering God, a God who even experienced death, for us.

As Wolterstorff wrote: "Put your hand into my wounds," said the risen Jesus to Thomas, "and you will know who I am." The wounds of Christ are his identity. They tell us who he is. He did not lose them. They went down into the grave with him and they came up with him – visible, tangible, palpable. Rising did not remove them. He who broke the bonds of death kept his wounds... In my living, my son's dying will not be the last word. But as I rise up, I bear the wounds of his death. My rising does not remove them. They mark me. If you want to know who I am, put your hand in.

And so we end with these words:

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-14** - *Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to **grieve** like the rest of men, who have no **hope.** <sup>14</sup> We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*

Amen.