

## Jesus at the Graveside

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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John 11:32-44

After more than 30 years in ministry I've been to my share of graveside services. I usually get there early, often as much as a half hour before everyone else. It gives me time to get my heart ready. I usually do that by walking around among the gravestones. Walking through a cemetery is a unique experience. It's always a sobering place. When you walk through a graveyard you feel the weight of loss, and you feel the frailty of your own existence.

Now that I've been in ministry so long, if I walk through places like Woodlawn cemetery by Kalamazoo and Alger the feelings are particularly acute. I feel like I'm walking amongst old friends. There are many names of people who I know. At Woodlawn, many of the gravestones conjure up memories of particularly painful graveside services: Scott Sharda, David Danhof, Dianne Quist, Mike VanderHart, and many, many, more. I can remember the pain on the faces of the people there. I can remember the tears. Which makes me wonder wonder: How many tears have fallen in Woodlawn cemetery over the years. What's the tear count in that place? It must be in an unbearable number.

That's why I find it encouraging to think that Jesus visited a graveyard. It's encouraging to think that Jesus went to the graveside service of his friend Lazarus. I'm glad to see Jesus in this place where we frail children have shed so many tears. Tonight as we watch Jesus come to the gravesite of his friend, I want to point out three things that Jesus does. Two of these things are things he shares with us. Two of these things are things he does with us and beside us. And one of these things is something he does by himself.

First, at the graveside of his friend, Jesus shares our anger. He shares it, because Mary gives it to him. Mary sees Jesus for the first time, she sets her jaw, she marches right up to him and says, "Jesus if you'd been here my brother would not have died!" That's harsh. That's angry. Jesus absorbs her anger.

For many of us, deaths of our loved ones are surrounded with a lot of anger, anger at the situation, and anger at God. 'Lord this death makes no sense.' 'Lord I needed this person.' 'Lord this person was doing your work and doing so much good.' 'Lord, why did my loved one have to go through so much pain?!' 'Lord if you'd been here, my loved one wouldn't have died.' Jesus absorbs our anger too. Part of what he comes to this world for is for us to throw our pain at him.

Once he absorbs our anger he also shares it in another sense. Right after Mary unloads on Jesus, the Bible says that Jesus was 'deeply moved in spirit and troubled.' The Greek word there signifies both sorrow and anger. When you picture Jesus becoming deeply moved in spirit and troubled you should picture him clenching his fists and gritting his teeth. You should picture his face getting red with a rising fury. Jesus is furious at death. He's furious about what death is doing to his friends. Jesus is here not only to absorb our anger; he shares it with us.

Jesus also shares our grief. As we think about that, here's an interesting question: who decided the arrangement of the verses in the New Testament? Who decided what would be verse 1 and what would be verse 2 and what would be verse 3, etc., etc., etc.? Till this week, I didn't know the answer to that. I found out that it was done in the 1500s by a Calvinist. A Calvinist named Robert Estienne. He was a printer and publisher. He lived in Geneva at the time of John Calvin. He actually published an addition of Calvin's Institutes.

Whoever Robert Estienne was you can tell by the way he arranged verse 35, he must have been a man who was acquainted with grief. And he must have had a poetic sensibility. In verse 35, Estienne created the shortest verse in the Bible, and when he did he put a little frame around something that is so important to all our hearts. "Jesus wept." Jesus wept with Mary and Martha and all his friends. Estienne seems to understand that these are so weighty, they need a verse to themselves.

When we weep, Jesus weeps. When grief sweeps over us like a heavy flood, Jesus knows what that feels like. That verse is so important to every grieving person. It may be the shortest verse in the Bible, but it contains so much. When I think about how many tears have been shed at a place like Woodlawn cemetery, I also find myself thinking, how hard it must be for Jesus to share all those tears, and bear the weight of those tears. It makes me realize that he truly is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. When you stand by the graveside of a loved one and shed tears Jesus weeps with you.

Those are the two things Jesus shares with us, the last thing Jesus does in this passage he does on his own. Full of grief and anger, Jesus springs into action. He stomps down to the graveside. He demands that the stone be removed. His friends try to stop him, 'Lord what about the smell?' "Never mind the smell," he says, "move the stone." Then he lifts his face to heaven and prays for God's power and blessing. And then he cries out in a loud voice, a voice loud enough to crack the pillars of hell, a voice loud enough to Make death take a few steps back, he cries, "Lazarus come out!" And Lazarus does come out. He comes out stumbling into the light and then Jesus says the most beautiful words of all; words that I feel we shall all hear someday in some form: "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

This is work that only the Living God can do. And it will cost Jesus everything. At first it seems to cost Jesus nothing, but as the following verses indicate, it is precisely this act that leads the powers that be to decide on Jesus crucifixion. A crucifixion that at first seems like death's victory, but turns out to be death's defeat.

Tonight we will remember our loved ones. We will remember these people who are so important in our life and help make us who we are. We will do so with gratitude to the God who gave us these people and gave us the gift of love through them. We will also do that with hope. As we remember our loved ones, let us see Jesus tears and be comforted, and let us hear him say 'take off the grave clothes and let him go' knowing that because of Jesus, death will not hold any of us.

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