

*‘Jesus began to weep.’* John 11:1-45

There are several misunderstandings and assumptions in this story. Emotions are high; hopes fail, only to be revived. The characters are well-known to one another. Jesus is with his disciples and his good friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They all know each other well. And perhaps this is why they share and speak so freely to each other.

When Jesus first learns of Lazarus’ illness, he decides to wait two days before going to see him. When he arrives, Lazarus has been dead for four days. Was Lazarus alive when the messenger first reached Jesus? The timing is close enough that we are left to wonder.

Jesus says plainly to his disciples, “Lazarus is dead. We are going NOW so that you will believe.”

The frank discussions of emotions and disappointments continue when Jesus arrives. Martha greets him, accusing him of being too late: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Mary, weeping and kneeling at Jesus’ feet, greets him with the same words. Jesus, too, begins to weep. This is a sad time. Losing a beloved friend, a family member, a brother, is sad. It moves us to anguish, to tears, and it leaves us with unanswered questions. Death brings a sense of unfinished business. Jesus, the Son of God is “disturbed and deeply moved.” The other mourners, who are there with Mary, begin to ask questions. Jesus saved a blind man, why didn’t he save his friend? Jesus healed the Roman official’s dying son from a distance. He has healed others who were dying and infirmed, why not Lazarus? Isn’t he the bringer of eternal life? Even in her despair Martha testifies that Jesus is the Messiah.

So why let Lazarus die? So that many might come to believe.

In Lazarus' death, we are given permission by God to ask questions, to feel emotions like sadness, doubt, and even anger. We are given divine permission because Jesus, the Son of God, experiences these raw emotions with us. This story demonstrates that God wants to know how we are feeling, even when we cry out in anguish. We are allowed, even encouraged to ask: God, where have you been? Why did you let this happen?

These days of adapting for the health of one another are shaping an existence that impacts all of us. Social distancing is a choice we make to slow transmission of the virus to those who might be at greater risk. We are shaping our existence. We are making choices for the benefit of all life guided by the light of God as modeled by Jesus. As we disrupt our usual patterns of community and closeness, emotions are sure to be stirred up. That's okay. God loves us and understands everything we may be feeling. We know this is true, because Jesus does not walk away when Mary and Martha mourn that he is too late. Instead, God stays with us in our vulnerability and isolation. God reveals to us anew the promise of a new day where death does not have the last word.

As believers, may we embrace not just the hope of spring renewal, but the promise of resurrection to new and transformed life that comes on Easter morning. May we continue to do our part for a healthy community and more equitable civilization for all.