

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
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Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
Jesus weeps his way to a win

—John 11:17-45

The question gets asked: Why are there so few images of Jesus smiling and laughing? Why do so many artists' paintings through the centuries and so many modern renderings of Jesus make him look so serious? Can't we lighten up and project a happier, more cheerful Jesus? Have you ever wondered this? Certainly Jesus did smile and laugh, considering he is all the human being that you and I are, though the gospels never make a point of mentioning that. The gospels do, however, make a point of mentioning on more than one occasion that Jesus cried. And not tears of joy. But tears caused by sadness. Jesus truly was, as the prophet Isaiah predicted, "a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering." Jesus "took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows." He didn't come so much to laugh with us as he came to cry with us, and to do something about all the weeping that comes with this earthly life. Think about it: if everyone around you is dying because of their sin and everyone who does not believe is dying in their sin, and it's your assigned task to save them, how much laughing can there be?

Jesus wept. That passage stares us in the face today. That is the graphic image of Jesus which the gospel projects into our mind's eye. *Jesus wept.* Jesus was weeping with those who were weeping. And he was weeping all right. But he wasn't just weeping. Jesus was weeping his way to a win.

So Lazarus died. He got sick and he died. The death of Lazarus brought tears to his family, to his sister Mary and his sister Martha. His death brought tears to the community of Jews in Bethany who arrived at the family's home to grieve with the sisters. There was a burial. Lazarus' dead body was placed in a grave in a cave, a stone was rolled in front, and that was it. The sisters now had a grieving process ahead of them, no doubt with many more tears to come, as they learned to live life without their brother there.

Lazarus, Mary, and Martha were all dear friends of Jesus. They loved him, and he loved them. I am sure they had shared some smiles and laughter together, and serious conversations, too. That's what friends do. Yet Jesus, who certainly had the power to heal the sick, did not intervene in Lazarus' sickness. In the words of Jesus, Lazarus "fell asleep." Jesus allows his friend to die, and then after the death Jesus goes to visit the surviving sisters. Notice he goes to the sisters, not with his face shining in glory like the sun as on the Mount of Transfiguration, but with his normal everyday appearance by which anyone can mistake him for being a mere man. He arrives to face his friend's death like any of us does.

Jesus' first contact is with Martha. "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" Can you hear the pain behind her words? Maybe there is a slight accusation in her words that Jesus was not there, and yet, her words seem to be more an expression of her love for her Lord and an acknowledgement that he certainly can prevent death. "*But,*" Martha continues, "*I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.*" She has great confidence in her Lord Jesus, and probably is doing more than suggesting that Jesus might do something to change the sad circumstances. She gets an answer from Jesus: "*Your brother will rise again.*" It's a definite promise, but the timing is left indefinite. Martha puts a definite time on it. "*I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.*" Now where would she get that kind of faith? She got it from Jesus. She got it from listening to Jesus. In the same gospel of John, chapter six, Jesus had made a promise: "My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." Now, in chapter eleven, remember this beautiful confession of faith which Martha makes in her grief just days after Lazarus' death: "*I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.*"

"*I am the resurrection and the life,*" Jesus said to her. Resurrection is coming back from the dead. Life is not being dead at all. Jesus says he is those things. They are only found in him. They come only from him. He makes them happen. He explains "*I am the resurrection*" by saying, "*Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies.*" Yes, it is true, when a believer in Christ dies, the separation means the body dies and the soul goes to be with Christ. But Jesus is saying more than that. He is the resurrection. Your dead body will come back to life and be reunited with your soul. You, body and soul, will be alive again. Jesus explains "*I am the life*" by saying, "*Whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*" He says it very emphatically, "Everyone who lives, that is, believes in me, will surely never die forever." At no point does the believer in Christ really die. Oh yes, body and soul most certainly separate and the body turns to dust for a time, but the soul is with Christ. At death the believer "falls asleep," just as Jesus first described the death of his friend Lazarus. Plus, because there is a resurrection of the body coming at the last day, there is no real death for the believer, not in the sense of a separation from God or a punishment for sin. There is only an eternal life to look forward to after the last day of the present creation. An eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth which God will create. An eternal life with all fellow believers in Christ. An eternal life with God himself.

Jesus' powerful words produce faith. After being asked by Jesus, "*Do you believe this?*", Martha gives yet another beautiful confession of faith. "*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.*" Martha believed that before, and even though her brother is now over there in the grave, she still believes it.

Martha gets Mary, and when Mary approaches Jesus, she falls at his feet and says the same thing her sister did: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" Can you hear the pain behind her words? Jesus sees her tears, and the tears of all the other mourners, and it starts to get to him. He gets to the gravesite, and then it really gets to him. You know, you can hear of someone's death, and that's one thing. But then you see the deceased, or you see the grave of the deceased for the first time, and that's another thing altogether. *Jesus wept.*

Let's talk about Jesus' emotional reaction to his friend's death. The description of his emotions is challenging, but then again, it can be challenging to describe emotions. *Deeply moved in spirit. Troubled. Weeping.* There's a tinge of anger in there. Anger at death and what death does to people. There's a ton of love there. Love for people saddened by death. There's an unsettled feeling in Jesus as well. A little shaken up by the whole scene. Undoubtedly there is just the deep sadness that comes when someone you love has lost their life. All these emotions and more wrapped into one, and it all comes out with weeping and tears. And we are not talking about turning away and trying to stifle a sniffle. If you were there, you could see it in Jesus' face and down his cheeks. You could hear him crying. Mixed as emotions can be, so people's judgments of another person's emotions can be mixed, too. Some observed Jesus' weeping as a mark of his love for Lazarus. Certainly, that was part of the reason. Others observed Jesus' weeping as an apparent mark of helplessness. "I mean, if he loved Lazarus so much, and he made the blind see, couldn't he have done something to prevent Lazarus' death?" But those kinds of critics really did not understand Jesus. Because Jesus didn't show up just to weep. He came to win.

"*Take away the stone,*" he says. Martha, who just gave such a beautiful confession of faith, now lets her reason get in the way, suggesting that the stone should stay where it is because the grave is going to stink. Jesus rebukes her reason and appeals to her faith: "*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*" The stone gets removed from the cave. And with a wide open grave in front of him, with a dead man's body inside, Jesus prays to his Father. He knows the Father will give him whatever he asks, just like Martha had confessed earlier. But Jesus makes it clear that he is speaking out loud like this for the benefit of the people at this gravesite, that they may believe that God sent him. And then, all that anger and love and uneasiness and sadness and all his power and authority well up in the words, "*Lazarus—now remember, he is speaking to a dead corpse in there—Lazarus, come out!*" *The dead man, the man who had died, came out. "Take off the grave clothes and let him go," says Jesus.*

We die because we are sinners and we sin against God. You can't say it any simpler than that. Even worse than the physical separation of death—the separation of body and soul—is the threat of eternal death, separation from God's goodness and love forever. Everybody is going to hear the voice of God's Son and be raised from the dead on the last day, believer and unbeliever alike. For the unbeliever, it will be a resurrection to judgment and condemnation. For the believer in Christ, it will be a resurrection to life. Jesus tells us today the same thing he told Martha: "*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*" And he asks each of us the same question: "*Do you believe this?*" May each of us respond for himself or herself as Martha did: "*Yes, Lord, I believe.*"

It would not be long after his weeping at the grave of Lazarus when our Lord Jesus would be weeping again at the thought of another death: his own. "A man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering," Jesus Christ took up our greatest infirmity and carried our greatest sorrow by going to the cross just a couple miles away from where he raised Lazarus from the dead. On the cross Jesus took away the sin of the world. He died in our sins; he died an eternal death for every sinner during those few hours on the cross. And then he brought himself back to life on the third day. That's why he can say, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Jesus wept his way to a win. At the grave of Lazarus. Looking ahead at his own cross and his own grave. There is a pattern he established there for all of us. As believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, we too weep our way to winning. We still cry some tears over the death of a loved one in Christ. We still have our own personal difficulties that unsettle us and shake us up. As long as we have more time on earth, there are more sorrows to go through. All of them calling us to repentance and to deeper faith in Jesus Christ. But we are not here just to weep. We are here to win in Christ, who has already defeated our sin and our death. "Though we sow in tears of sorrow, we shall reap with heav'nly joy, and the fears that now annoy shall be laughter on the morrow. Christ, I suffer here with thee; there, oh, share thy joy with me" (CW 452:2). Our loved ones in Christ will rise again in the resurrection at the last day. We will, too. Then there will be no more weeping ever. Amen.