

Mary Wept Too

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 25, 2007

Isa. 43: 16-21; Ps. 126; Phil. 3: 4b-14; John 12: 1-8

Today in the 10: 15 forum hour we come to the concluding session of our Lenten series on loss, grieving, and death. And today, by coincidence, the Gospel reading is redolent of loss, grieving and death.

The story told in the Gospel is a prelude to the events of Holy Week, which will begin next Sunday. It can also be a lens for us through which we are shown our own limits and the exquisite fragility of human life. I hope to consider both facets of the story, so let's take a look at it.

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Martha, Mary, Lazarus, brother and sisters, three of Jesus' closest friends. Just a short time before this dinner is held in – we presume – their house in Bethany, itself just a short distance from Jerusalem. Just a short while ago this same Lazarus who is now at table with Jesus fell ill and died. You recall, I'm sure, that the sisters sent a message to Jesus when Lazarus lay ill, and Jesus started out to go to them. But Jesus did not arrive until Lazarus lay in the tomb. In the shortest sentence in all Holy Scripture, we can read his response to Lazarus's death and his friends' mourning and grief, "Jesus wept." He blessed grief and mourning with his own tears. Grief and mourning are holy occupations.

What happened next astonished everyone and scandalized some – Jesus restored Lazarus to life. That act caused a number of the people who had come to mourn with Mary and Martha to turn to Jesus, believe him. But the scandalized few took themselves directly to Jesus' adversaries. And from that day on, the text tells us, the adversaries plotted to take Jesus' life. Jesus and his disciples left Bethany and went to a small town on the edge of a wilderness region to lie low for a while.

But the time of the great Passover Celebration came. The annual observance of the time when God brought the people out of bondage in Egypt. It was a great celebration, when folks from all over the Mediterranean Basin flocked to Jerusalem, not only for the temple rituals, but also to eat a symbolic meal in rooms rented for that purpose all over the city. Faithful Jews could not fail to take part in the great feast. Jesus and his disciples could not stay away. He and at least some of his disciples stopped at Bethany on their way to Jerusalem. The gathering we hear about today was held there in his honor.

I imagine that it as a sad gathering, a tense gathering. The people present are very aware of the mortal danger – the valley of the shadow of death – in which Jesus walks. They are there for him and with him until he has to journey on.

Lazarus is there, the man whose life was restored; whose life would one day end... again. [We all know people in this era of sophisticated medical interventions whose lives have been restored to them. Frequently, I have found, there is in them and those close to them a heightened appreciation for the exquisite fragility of human life, and a heightened sense of gratitude for small miracles, such things as waking to each new day. Was Lazarus one of them? What must it have been like for him to share the meal with Jesus and hear of him speak of his own impending death. "You will not always have me," he says – What must it have been like for him to contemplate death, his own and that of his friend? As difficult for him as it is for us?]

There is Martha, attending to serving dinner. [At her brother's tomb she and Jesus held a remarkable conversation. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? She said, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who was to come into the world." She knows a lot, this Martha. Unlike the frazzled woman we meet in Luke's Gospel, John's Martha is firmly, faithfully, even serenely, if sadly at this point, one who serves, one who does what needs to be done. We all know women and men such as Martha. Thank God they are quietly, assuredly among us. I see many of you here this morning. The rest of us need to be there for you, as steadily as you are here for us. In a community of God's love it is never a matter of bearing a burden alone, of being alone in our loss and grief. It is a matter of being there for one another, doing what needs to be done. It's a matter of sustained presence to one another. Forget about what we're to say. Let's just be there. The opportunity for giving to one another and receiving from one another is one of the marks of the community of Christ's love. Martha is the icon for that in today's story. Quietly there, Martha served.]

At the center of this dinner, as he is at the center of our life, is Jesus. He knows the decision to kill him has been made. What he doesn't know is that even as this meal takes place, word has gotten out that he has returned to Bethany. A large crowd of people are on the way to see him and Lazarus. He also doesn't know that when the chief priests hear what an attraction the two of them are, they decide to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus. So the shadow of death deepens for Jesus as the meal continues and once more falls over Lazarus.

When Jesus speaks, it is to defend Mary against Judas' counterfeit concern for the poor and to assert that there are occasions on which what is most needed is to put aside everything else in order to observe and mark the holiness of major life-events. [How many of us are tempted to hide (or try to) from the upheaval and sting of milestone events by burying ourselves in work or good works rather than pausing to take care of ourselves and those who need us at such times?]

Judas is there: my colleague Bill Rich pointed out to me last week that Judas doesn't honor what is happening in that room at that dinner. He just has to lob something else into what is already taking place. That was a welcome insight for me, gratefully received: In a preview of his role as Jesus' betrayer, Judas is somehow compelled to

insert a jarring note of disdain for Mary. He tries to deflect attention from her act of love for Jesus. To restore the integrity of the moment, Jesus speaks. [I won't speculate on what impels Judas to do what he does. But I would remind us all once more of the "let's get on with it" attitude that frequently intrudes on the holy process of grieving. Grieving unfolds at its own tempo. To honor the integrity of the holy process one has to attend to it. Let it happen. That's what Jesus is doing for Mary and for himself.]

And finally, we come to Mary: Mary weeps. She weeps for him. She weeps for her own loss. She bathes his feet in precious oil, anointing them. Nothing is too good for Jesus. She spends her treasure, her tears and her dignity in her act of utter devotion to him. Only days from now, on that last night when he is betrayed, Jesus himself will wash the feet of his disciples. He will tell them that he expects **from** them such an act of love as he performs **for** them. Now, Mary's act of love is a foretaste of the one he will teach his followers. It is also the overture to his burial – anointing was the last step before burial, but not for executed criminals. There is no waste here at all, Judas; Jesus is given what his executioners will hope to deny him. And she weeps. She weeps for him and for her own loss. The tears are her gift to him. In her weeping she honors all that they mean to one another. They are the outward and visible sign of her own God-given capacity to love him, Jesus, as he loves us. [Let the tears come. They are God's gift to us. In a book entitled *Dying We Live* - which I hope is still in print, but I'm not at all sure is – Edward S. (Ted) Gleason, writes, "Loss is the pervasive and prevailing fact of human existence, and at that moment (the moment of loss), more than any other, we are searched and known and found." and ... "Even in the midst of loss, especially in the midst of loss, God is present."

I'd like to suggest spending time with this passage from the Gospel of John in the coming week. I hope we can pray with it and call upon it to introduce us to Holy Week. The shadow of death is in it and so is the holy perfume of the love God places in all our hearts. And as it shows us both death and love in its own moment of time, perhaps it can serve us in our own moment of time not only as the prelude to holy week but also as our guide when we encounter death and loss and grief. Remember Jesus wept. Mary wept too. Remember too, as the psalmist says, "Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes with the morning." Amen.