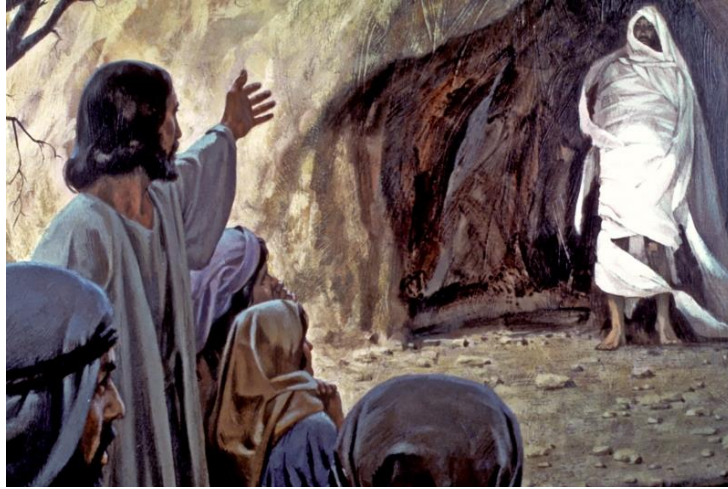


Sermon – March 26, 2023  
“Jesus Wept”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: John 11:1-45

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come and visit, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that continues our transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right, here right now. Amen*

Good morning! Let me announce that we are planning to gather for a called Church Conference tomorrow evening (March 27<sup>th</sup>) at 5:30 pm at Fairfields and at 6:30 pm at Afton. We are waiting for our District Superintendent, Dr. Bates, to confirm that he will be present for Afton. Fairfields is confirmed. If our plan changes, we will work to get the update out as quickly as possible. Please continue to keep this upcoming Church Conference in your prayers. Please keep the Good News Club meeting planned for Wednesday in your prayers as well. Wednesday is the last of our Good News Club meetings this semester. We have been greatly blessed by the children this semester and will miss the time we get to spend with them greatly. We are planning to gather for prayer this afternoon at 4:00 pm at Fairfields UMC. Please come and join in a time of prayer for the transformation of our hearts, homes, churches, and community.

Let me provide background that might help place the account of Lazarus into its context in John's Gospel. Jesus has moved from Jerusalem to Bethany across the Jordan River after the

Jews have attempted to stone him at the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus and his disciples have moved there to be out of the Jews' immediate reach and, while there, Jesus has been in ministry to those who have come to him. Lazarus, Martha, and Mary live in another town also called Bethany, a small village just over the top of the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem, a distance of about two miles. Lazarus has become ill, very ill, and his sisters are concerned that he will die from the illness. They do the only thing they know to do in a time of need. They reach out to Jesus by sending a message to him in the place where he is at work. They do not ask Jesus to come, but simply send a message to Jesus telling him, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."<sup>i</sup> Jesus' response to the message from the sisters is not to pack up immediately and go to them at Bethany. Instead, he remains where he is across the Jordan. Those who have brought Jesus the message about Lazarus hear Jesus' response to the disciples when he tells them, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."<sup>ii</sup> We should note that the time of Lazarus' death is probably about the time of this exchange. We assume the messengers leave Jesus and return to the sisters and share with them Jesus' response.

Now to those of us who care deeply for our friends and loved ones, Jesus' response to the news of Lazarus's illness seems strange. John makes the point that Jesus loves Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, yet he remains two more days where he is across the Jordan. We want to keep the idea that Jesus loves Martha, Mary, and Lazarus as we encounter Jesus' actions throughout today's text. We need to keep Jesus' love in the forefront of our thoughts when he remains two more days in Bethany across the Jordan. Jesus' remaining two more days is the same response we see when there is a ripe harvest in Sychar. There, Jesus remains with the people of Sychar for two days sharing the Good News and building up the faith of those who have come to believe in him. The sisters are concerned and urgent in their hope that Jesus will come and heal Lazarus before he dies or even speak the word and heal him from a distance, but Jesus is not concerned about Lazarus dying. Jesus is focused on giving God glory. He has told the messengers and his disciples that this illness does not lead to death and goes about the work he needs to complete across the Jordan before he leaves.

After two more days, Jesus tells the disciples it is time to go to Judea again. The disciples' response to Jesus' statement is to remind Jesus that in Judea await the Jews who want to kill him and who may also want to kill them. In response to their concern, Jesus assures his

disciples that he is the light and while the light is with them, they do not need to fear, but night is coming when the light will be gone, and they will be exposed to the world's darkness. They are safe while they are with Jesus. They leave and go to Bethany.

Jesus does not go immediately to Lazarus' home in Bethany when he arrives. The Jews, those who are seeking to kill Jesus, are there with Mary and Martha. Instead, he waits outside of the town. Martha hears that he has arrived, and she comes to Jesus. We will find in some form her words of greeting to Jesus three times in this text. When she comes to the place where Jesus is waiting, there is no exchange of the normal welcoming expressions we expect such as "so glad you could come." Martha's greeting to Jesus is a statement of her faith in who Jesus is: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died"<sup>iii</sup> These are the words of one who is grieving the loss of a loved one and not words of criticism of Jesus. They are words that speak to Martha's faith in Jesus. She speaks as one who recognizes who Jesus is with an awareness of God working through him to heal. Martha even goes beyond Jesus' ability to heal those who are sick and seems to open the door to other possibilities as she tells Jesus she knows God will give him whatever he requests. Jesus' response to Martha is "Your brother will rise again."<sup>iv</sup> What Jesus means by the idea of rising is not clear to Martha or to us. We know Jesus has come to awaken Lazarus. Martha, as a Jew, takes Jesus' response as confirmation of what the Jews held about resurrection, that there would be a general resurrection at the end of time and that Jesus' words are assurance that her brother would be part of that resurrection.

Jesus needs to change that understanding and gives to Martha and to the Church another "I Am" statement, a statement that points forward to something new that Jesus in his love will do. Jesus' love for us will transform our understanding of the idea of a general resurrection. We would do well to underline this "I Am" statement in our Bibles and to keep it as a promise to help us understand Jesus. Jesus tells Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."<sup>v</sup> Jesus then asks Martha a question that we should ask ourselves: "Do you believe this?"<sup>vi</sup> Jesus has told Martha that he is the resurrection and the life and that all who believe in him, even if they die, they will live and that those who believe and live in him will never die. There is an aspect in Jesus' "I Am" statement that speaks to the now of our lives. We who are in Christ are alive in him now, not at the end of time but in the now of our daily lives. We who believe in Jesus begin to live now in a new manner. We live as those who will never die. Eternal

life, even if we die, begins with our belief in Jesus. When we believe in Jesus, we become alive now in a way that lets us live as transformed people, people who are alive in Christ. We begin to become our true selves in Christ. Martha's response to Jesus is a great confession of who Jesus is. Earlier, Peter made a similar confession. Here, in response to Jesus' "I Am" statement, Martha also confesses Jesus as Lord, Messiah, Son of God, and the one coming into the world. Martha believes in Jesus, and she has stated her belief to him. Martha does not stay with Jesus after she makes her confession, but goes to one she loves, Mary, and shares the news privately that the Teacher has come. Belief in Jesus is to be shared with all whom we love. Sharing Jesus' love is one of the examples we can and should duplicate from Martha's response to Jesus.

Mary hears the news from Martha that Jesus is close, and she gets up and quickly goes to him. The Jews who have come from Jerusalem to comfort the sisters also go with her as they think she has suddenly left to go and weep at the tomb. They do not know where she is going but follow to grieve with her. When Mary arrives at the place where Jesus is waiting, she greets Jesus with the same words Martha used for her greeting: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." <sup>vii</sup> except Mary speaks these words after having fallen at Jesus' feet. We expect the same exchange between Mary and Jesus as he had with Martha, but Mary's weeping and the presence of the Jews and their weeping may keep Jesus from a private moment and possible continued revelation of who he is and instead move Jesus in a very different direction. The NRSV uses the words "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" <sup>viii</sup> to describe Jesus' response to the arrival of Mary and the Jews. Translators have made some decisions about what Jesus is doing that may not guide us well. The Greek word used by John that they translate as "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" <sup>ix</sup> is the Greek word for anger. Anger is a deep move in Jesus' spirit, but his response is not sadness but anger. We have to decide what might be the source of Jesus' anger. He may be angry with the Jews who keep him from ministering to Mary as he did Martha. Mary's confession of who Jesus is will be her worship of him as she has fallen at his feet, but he may have anger for not being able to have a private moment with Mary. Jesus may have become angry with the grief that Mary and the Jews are showing as they weep over the death of Lazarus, a situation Jesus has come to change. Another possibility is that Jesus becomes angry over death that comes to those he loves due to sin. For the moment, we are left to ponder the source of Jesus' anger. Whatever the source, the text tells us Jesus asks where Lazarus is laid to rest and then Jesus begins to weep. Now the weeping of Jesus would be better

described as “Jesus tears up,” especially when contrasted with the loud wailing and lamenting that Mary and the Jews are doing when they weep. The custom of the Jews was to mourn their dead for seven days and they are in day four of that time.

Jesus is then led to the tomb where Lazarus’ body has been placed. When he arrives, we find the second occurrence of his being deeply moved in his spirit or the emergence of anger. The situation at the tomb brings forth anger from Jesus when he arrives. Present are the Jews who mourn, present is Mary who has come to Jesus and worshiped at his feet, and we discover that Martha must have been with Mary as Martha is now present to talk with Jesus at the tomb. We have no missing private moment of exchange to credit Jesus’ anger to, but we do have the Jews who are mourning and more importantly, we have the death of Lazarus who is in the tomb, whom Jesus loves. Death would seem to be the focus of Jesus’ anger and his struggle to free those he loves from its bondage.

Many of us will know this part of the account of Lazarus well. Jesus asks for the stone that has been placed over the entrance to the tomb to be removed. Martha speaks up and reminds Jesus that this is the fourth day since her brother’s death and the body of her brother is already rotting. The smell from the tomb gives witness to her words. She may have confessed Jesus as Lord, Messiah, Son of God, and the one coming into the world, but that he has the ability to bring the dead back to life is not something she yet thinks possible. Jesus reminds her that with her belief in him she would see the glory of God. The stone is taken away. Jesus prays to his Father and then Jesus in a very loud voice commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb, and out comes Lazarus wrapped in burial clothes, alive, and raised from the dead. Jesus has power over our common enemy, death. Where Jesus goes, he brings life. All gathered at the tomb see the glory of God. They see God raise the dead through Jesus. Those at the tomb catch a new glimpse of who Jesus is, one who can bring life to those who are dead. Lazarus will yet die; he is not brought back in a resurrected body but a restored earthly body. There is more to God’s plan yet to be revealed. But for now, Jesus has worked the seventh and greatest of his signs in the Gospel of John; he has raised Lazarus from the dead.

The account of Lazarus being raised from the dead points us to a tomb with a stone that will be rolled away in the future. A tomb where only grave clothes will remain behind. A tomb that on Easter morning will be empty. A tomb that will hold Jesus’ body for three days after his death on a cross. The presence of the Jews at this sign has the same effect that all of Jesus’ signs

in John's Gospel have: some who are present believe in Jesus and some do not. Those who believe go and tell all they know what they witnessed God do through Jesus at the tomb in Bethany. They go into Jerusalem and tell others there is a man called Jesus who raised Lazarus from the dead. Their testimony will help bring the crowds to the top of the Mount of Olives to welcome Jesus on his return to Jerusalem with cries of "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna!" The group of Jews who do not believe will share what they have seen with the leaders of the temple, and Lazarus' restored life will be the last straw that leads the leaders to have Jesus put to death, a death that brings life to all who believe in Jesus. Jesus loves Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Jesus' love for each of us is reflected in the loving acts of our Lord, Messiah, the Son of God, and one who has come into the world in what he does for Lazarus, Mary, and Martha when Jesus awakens Lazarus from sleep. Jesus's love for us will take him to the cross where he will shed his blood that we might be washed clean, where he will give his life that we might be reconciled to God, and where days later he will be resurrected so that we might live in certain hope of resurrection from the dead. Jesus' love for us will in death allow all who believe in him, even though we die, to live. Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Jesus loves all of us as well. Jesus loves us enough to die that we might live. Do we believe this?

*Pray with me: Lord, we are quick to send for you to heal us when we are ill, yet when we believe, you do so much more. You die for us so that even though we die, we will live. Jesus, open our hearts to your love for us and help us to so love you that we will love others as you love us. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> NRSV John 11:3

<sup>ii</sup> NRSV John 11:4

<sup>iii</sup> NRSV John 11:21

<sup>iv</sup> NRSV John 11:23

<sup>v</sup> NRSV 11:25-26

<sup>vi</sup> NRSV 11:26

<sup>vii</sup> NRSV John 11:32

<sup>viii</sup> NRSV John 11:33

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid