

Jesus Wept

March 25, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: John 11: 1-45

At our staff meeting this week when we were assigning roles for the service, Kate gratefully shared that she'd be glad to read the passage we just heard but cautioned us all that she might struggle to get through it without tearing up. Maybe some of you can relate having now heard her read it. Thank you, Kate, for sharing it so thoughtfully and powerfully. There's almost too much to hold in mind and heart - the emotions, questions and theological themes this story of the Raising of Lazarus raises for us. Virtually every line, so evocative and provocative of meditation and reflection. "The one whom you love is ill...Lazarus is dead...Lord, if only you were here...Your brother will rise again...and so one. The dramatic tension only deepens and unfolds from there. So where do we begin?

Biblical scholars might start by zooming out and setting this passage into the wider context of John's Gospel, reminding us that this is one of the seven so-called "signs," or miracles in John that reveal Jesus' identity and mission. The turning of water into wine is the first. The raising of Lazarus is the seventh, and many scholars believe it foreshadows what is often considered an eighth sign, the resurrection itself. Think about it. John's writing here may well be an intentional echo of seven days of creation, with the eighth, that so-called "octave of creation" announcing new life, indeed a new creation, that begins at Easter when Christ is risen! Like road signs on a journey, we can imagine these signs mapping out and pointing towards a deeper ever unfolding reality of God's power and love that we might not otherwise see or believe without Jesus to show the way.

I'll come back to this idea of signs. But first, I want us to focus on just one of those powerful almost stand-alone lines that comes after Jesus returns to Bethany and encounters that the one he loves is. Verse 35. The Bible tells us there: Jesus began to weep! In one Syriac translation, it's "And the tears of Jesus came." In the New World Translation: "Jesus gave way to tears." And, the most common, succinct and I think powerful translation appears in the King James Version: Jesus wept! Jesus wept.

I wonder if and would guess this was the part Kate had in mind at staff meeting. It is wrenching, and a bit shocking too. It calls to mind something like a time when a child sees their parent cry despite whatever efforts to shield them!

So vulnerable. So intimate is this image of Jesus weeping. For what's more human than tears? And yet what's more divine than love? And yet here in this scene we see them both equally on display. Jesus wept. If nothing else, take these two words home and sit with them in this fifth week in Lent and see what they stir in you.

For now, I invite us to hear these words by the Methodist poet Steve Garnas-Holmes who puts it in the present tense so as to include us in his reflection and invitation. Garnas Homes writes:

*For Lazarus, for Mary and Martha,
 for Jerusalem, for us—Jesus weeps,
 and invites us into the spiritual discipline of weeping:
 to cede control, to be, after all, a body, baby-weak,
 subject to the sting of love,
 the pangs of our connectedness.
 The rend in the fabric of Oneness
 is made real in the rend in your eyes,
 the crack in the wall, the opening of your flesh.
 You surrender to a current,
 like a river pulled into the ocean,
 deep within you, flowing out,
 a holy out-flowing.
 Tears come when you have gone beyond yourself,
 embodying a divine bond, severed yet still holding.
 Weep; for even if you have not suffered
 you have loved a suffering world.
 Break the seal.
 Feel the aliveness of a good cry.
 For if you can weep you can hope.
 If you can weep you have loved, and will love again.
 You flow with God, who weeps for us in grief,
 and weeps with joy.*

Amen!

Deep water to be sure but let's shift gears and turn for a bit to another kind of deep water. Many of you know I just returned from a 50th birthday trip to the West Coast, to see my son, and some good friends, and to visit the Central Coast. Yes, it rained but somehow we were able to dodge the road closures and electricity outages in our visits to San Francisco, Monterey, Carmel, Big Sur, Cambria and LA! One of my favorite parts of the trip were our coastal roadside stops at a Sea Otter Refuge and at an Elephant Seal Rookery. Spending time, sometimes just a few yards away from these wild sea creatures - the playful sea otter pups rolling and then floating, belly and fins, like a little raft, or the 12 plus foot blubbery sea elephants with their long snouts, watching them slowly but surely muscle their way their up the beach and then collapse into a cozy cuddle pile on the bellies of their colony (that's what you call a group of elephant seals). With the elephant seals especially, occasionally we'd find ourselves staring into each other's eyes. They were mesmerizing. At one point, I may have wondered if they cried but I was on vacation and my mind was not especially set on theological ideas! I was mostly just delighting in their company and the awe and wonder of nature. Well, imagine my surprise and delight when I came home, and last Sunday, on the big day itself, I unwrapped a gift from my friend Melissa Barthomolew who was here to speak about Harriet Jacobs a few weeks ago. It was a small book by Alexis Pauline Gumbs. Melissa had no idea about the nature of my recent travels, yet when I first read the title, I was speechless! This must be a sign, I thought! This must be the spirit at work! How did she know? The book is called "Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals!" I devoured the first few chapters and haven't been able to stop thinking about those elephant seals, or the themes of the book since. Bear with me:

In an interview in the Nation, Gumbs said the following about her work. Check this out. Ready?

“Grief is what had me turn to marine mammals to begin with. My father passed away, and I felt like I was in this ocean of grief. I felt like I was going to drown in my own tears. It felt hyperbolic and big. I had never made any space to learn from a feeling so big for me, unpredictable, consuming. It felt like navigating an ocean, and I was like, “Well, who navigates the ocean? Marine mammals do, and how do they do that?” She goes on to say that “The existence of that grief is the evidence that love, and that stream of love is not stopped, even by death.”¹

In the book, she writes with keen awareness that our oceans are rising, and offers a reflection on breathing, drowning and “undrowning.” She writes about the context we are living in these days - a context of undrowning. “Breathing in unbreathable circumstances,” she says is what we do every day in the chokehold of racial gendered ableist capitalism.” So, she studies the habits of sea creatures and intuitively practical wisdom from the ways they breathe and dive deep, come up for air, rest, huddle and cuddle on shoreline, and cycle through life and thrive in their ever ebbing and flowing oceanic context! She finds there, as I did in California without beginning to understand why, a profound resource in marine mammals and in the ocean itself! The book came as an enormous blessing for never would I have made those connections on my own.

And, friends, it’s true! The oceans are rising. Gumbs is not playing! The news this week of another profoundly alarming climate report to the UN should tell us as much. Our need to learn the survival skills of undrowning, at an emotional and existential level, and at a planetary level is urgent. Along with those marine mammals, we have another teacher, who through miraculous signs of alignment of God’s love and purpose and shows us the way.

Jesus weeps! His tears model an ebb and flow to and from a depth of resource in God’s *power* which is stronger than death, and in God’s *mercy* wider than the ocean! To know in our hearts that Jesus wept, to weep with Jesus, to let our tiny salt streams flow freely into that ocean, is to stay connected to that power and mercy.

As we approach another Holy Week and prepare our hearts to take in once again the story of his crucifixion and resurrection, I wonder how we can better open our eyes to the signs and wonders of the reality of God’s love and power working in our midst. John offers 7 or 8! But I’m finding when we have eyes of faith to see there can be so many more!

When something happens that feels like a “sign from God,” here at First Church or elsewhere, I’ve noticed that I’ve started saying and believing things like: “It must be the Spirit at work.” When I’m with secular friends, I still sometimes revert or translate the feeling by using Carl Jung’s word, “synchronicity,” to describe those moments of intense and almost radical alignment of circumstance and purpose that are beyond rational explanation. But lately I find myself grasping for new and more trusting expressions. I mean if I’m being honest, there’s still something a little dismissive in the tone of “it must be the Holy Spirit.” Can we imagine Jesus saying that, as if with one of those IDK - i dunno - emoji’s! I can’t! That’s not what he said to those gob smacked onlookers at Bethany, at the tomb of Lazarus. Instead, he said: Didn’t I tell ya, if you believe, you will see the glory of God! Right here.

¹ <https://www.thenation.com/article/environment/alexis-pauline-gumbs-interview/>

Right now! Go ahead, trust and yes, cry me and God a river, just like I did, and let's together come to know what it means to let those rivers flow into the brackish waters of God's oceanic love so that weeping may linger for the night, but joy can come with the morning! Let's trust and then come to find new life in the most unexpected places, even and maybe especially where we find ourselves choking on that seemingly unbearable stench of loss and death. What's more, Jesus gives thanks to God before the miracle happens, before the stone is rolled away. Thank you for having heard me cry! I knew that you always hear me, but I say this for the sake of the crowd, so that they believe..." And then he, as if as an afterthought: "Come out, Lazarus! And then unbind him from his graveclothes! Along with it unbind him to and the rest of us from our small-minded earthly expectations. And let him go!

So, I ask us all...not what might be but what are the signs of God's love and power emerging in your life right now, today, tomorrow and every day? Go home and think about where that alignment is happening and if you don't see it yet start looking for it is trusting that it's there! How can we trust and believe in the reality of God's death-defying love before and during our moments of excruciating, tear-jerking pain and loss and fear about the planet's demise? How might our own tears of grief and joy need to pour out such that we can follow their streams to the oceanic courage and compassion we will need to at once dive deep and keep our heads above the water!

Don't get me wrong. I still grow wary, if not weary, when I hear talk of miracles, especially when it relates to parking spaces, or elections, or ending our climate crisis, or some being cured or raised while so many others are still ailing and gone. I'm a realist! I'm a pragmatist! I believe Jesus was too! We can't afford to deny, dismiss or distract ourselves from the depth of the troubles we and our planet are facing. By the same token, I and hope many of you are with me here, can neither afford to deny, dismiss or distract ourselves from the powerful signs emerging all around us, and within us, that God's Spirit is at work, always! 'Didn't I tell you?' Jesus says. Believe and you will see the Glory! How can we not believe God's spirit is already swirling in those oceans of existential grief, even on far coast thousands of miles away where elephant seals right now are molting their skin on the beach and getting ready for another deep dive! She is speaking to us every day, breathing with us, weeping with us, trying to teach us to trust in her undrownable loving and lasting purpose that is bringing new life and new creation wherever we are! For this, let us all say Thanks be to God! Amen.