

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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An Unkempt Dancing Partner
Ezekiel 37.1-14; John 11.1-45
Russ Dean, March 9, 2008



“Jesus began to weep...” Why? Why Jesus?

I understand weeping. (You know me!¹) I understand Mary and Martha weeping. They have lost their brother. And though we do not know the cause of death, the way this story is narrated leads us to presume that his death is premature, unexpected – not the natural death of one who has lived a lengthy, full life. I understand the weeping of their friends, “*the Jews*” mentioned in this text – for they are experiencing, vicariously through their dear friends, the pain of grief. I would even understand the Jesus of Mark’s Gospel weeping. You see, Mark presents us a more “human” Jesus. Though Mark begins his Gospel with the theological affirmation, “*The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,*” Mark’s Gospel does not share the fully developed Christology of later writings. Mark presents an amazing Jesus: a teacher with extraordinary authority, a healer with unparalleled power, a spiritual sage with unprecedented insight, a mystic, uniquely in touch with the divine. Yet despite Mark’s affirmations of this “*Son of God,*” his Jesus is free of the doctrinal pronouncements of other scripture, pronouncements which find their zenith in the prologue of John’s story. When we read, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word... was... God...*” (John 1) we are not reading of Mark’s Jesus. In the three decades between approximately 70 CE (forty years after Jesus’ death, when Mark wrote) and 100 CE (the time of John’s narrative²), a full-blown high-Christology has developed, at least within a segment of the Church which would come to represent the orthodox view.³ Though the seeds may be present in

¹ My congregation has grown accustomed to their male pastor’s not-infrequent battle to control his emotions in the pulpit!

² Though all scholars do not agree, there is virtual consensus that Mark’s gospel was written first, followed by Matthew and Luke, and that John’s gospel, which is completely different in tone from the other, “synoptic gospels,” was completed around the end of the first century, CE.

³ I am sensitive to the fact that some scholars now highlight the variety of interpretations or Christologies that were present, even from the earliest days of the Christian church.

Mark's writing, it is only with John that we can hear of a pre-existent "*Logos*," a "*Word*" made present in the world when it "*becomes flesh and [dwells] among us...*" in Jesus (John 1.14).

What I'm saying is that once we have read that "*in him were all things made that were made...*" once John has affirmed that Jesus "*was life... [and] the light of [all people]...*" (John 1.3-4), once John has set us on such a high plane to begin his Gospel, when we come to the story of Lazarus, what surprise could possibly await us as a conclusion to this story? Every reader of this text (whether a believer in this divine Jesus or not) knows how this story is going to end. The story is told, the full narrative plot and context provided only, it seems to me, to develop a kind of necessary literary foreshadowing to the obvious ending, an obligatory theological set-up for an already-affirmed theology. By the time Martha can say, "*If you had been here, my brother would not have died...*" the die has already been cast. There is no way to be incredulous of the ending that is to come. The incarnation of the eternal God can certainly call forth the dead Lazarus! Who could doubt how John will have this story end?

So why would this Jesus *weep*? Surely, if you knew without a doubt you could resolve the greatest grief of your loved ones, you wouldn't weep! If his life was casually within your power to control, his death in your hands to restore, surely you wouldn't weep! Oh, you might feel a pang of emotion, because of their temporary pain. You might shed a sympathetic tear. But your true emotion might even be to laugh a kind of paternalistic chuckle, "There now children, don't cry Mary and Martha... everything is going to be all right. I know it!" If you knew for sure – if you were as confident as an eternally pre-existent *Word-Made-Flesh* would surely have to be – is full-blown weeping in character? It just doesn't seem to fit this story?

I hope you hear what I am asking. And I hope you understand that I am not, here, calling into question John's presentation of Jesus. We can have our theological discussions later if you'd like – whether or not we should affirm such a claim about the son of Mary and Joseph. I'm just saying that this phrase should strike our ears oddly – given who John claims Jesus to be. Is that fair enough?

That “*Jesus wept*” – that John’s Jesus wept at the death of a dear friend – must alert us that something extraordinary is being said. First, I think it tells us something of his true humanity. Even set within the high Christology of John’s Gospel – the Jesus we meet here is fully human.

Do you hate to see a man cry? I do hope not! Compassion, grief, and pain, are a part of the deepest human experience, and tears are a baptism of this experience, a cleansing that we need to allow, to celebrate – even in a “man’s kind of man.” *Jesus wept* to reveal to us his real, human heart. Given the claims of John, this is a bold revelation, indeed – for it tells us, also, of the nature of God. The God of John is hardly the absolute deity, remote, removed, and hardened to the pain and suffering of this world. No, John’s God, must be a God who sheds tears with us, when we are grieving. *Jesus wept...* to show us his humanity, and the heart of God!

But I think there is more that we need to learn from this, the shortest verse in the Bible. It is a word about hope. Yes, I think the tears of John’s Jesus should alert us to something about the presence and the reality of Hope. What is hope? Biblical hope is not some pie-in-the-sky-everything’s-just-going-to-be-fine-don’t-worry-be-happy flippant promise of wish-fulfillment. No, that kind of cheery optimism cannot feel deeply enough to shed real tears, is not grounded enough in the hardscrabble stuff of life – the good and the bad, the bitter and the sweet, the friendship of our Lazaruses – and their untimely deaths – to know the pain of hope.⁴ Yes, I said that right... the pain of hope. Optimism is simple, one dimensional, free from the vicissitudes of life and the reality of death. But hope weeps because it is grounded in the inevitability of deep heart-ache – which gives hope its power – and yet it claims that nothing, even death, can separate us from... tomorrow.

Hope dares to tell us that there will never be no tomorrow. But such a daring promise cannot, will not, take away the pain of today, so even a divine Jesus feels the depth of that hurt, and experiences with

⁴ The first meditation in today’s bulletin was the following quotation from Christopher Lasch: “Hope doesn’t demand progress; it demands justice, a conviction that wrongs will be made right, that the underlying order of things is not flouted with impunity. Hope appears absurd to those who lack it. We can see why hope serves us better than optimism. Not that it prevents us from expecting the worst; the worst is what the hopeful are prepared for. A blind faith that things will somehow work out for the best furnishes a poor substitute for the disposition to see things through even when they don’t.”

us, for us, the ambiguity of hope. How could he live among us and not know it? How could we proclaim Incarnation, how could we ever trust a God who claimed to walk among us, if that God did not know a pain-ridden hope? Hope, our friend Ken Sehested claims, “often shows up at the dance with uncombed hair, scuffed shoes and shirt tails partially tucked.” She is An Unkempt Dancing Partner.

The first girl I can remember naming “girlfriend,” was a little blonde beauty at Huguenot Academy in Powhatan, Virginia. Her name was Debbie Bonifant, and I thought of her when I read Ken’s description of hope. I say she was a blond beauty because the vaguest hint of a glimpse I can still draw from my five-year-old consciousness paints her as a kind of mermaid – the girl that kindergarten dreams are made of! But my parents will tell you a different story. Even then, I suppose, as all parents, they were looking for the kind of girl you want to bring home to mama – and my little mermaid wasn’t making the cut. Those golden locks they tell me were actually always stringy and dirty – more like something you’d find on the head of a mop than a model. The “scuffed shoes,” and “shirt tails partially tucked,” ring true to their description as well. And to top it off, they say she always had a dirty face and a runny nose (which may have led to the dirty face and the stringy, golden locks to begin with!) I wonder where she is now, my little Unkempt Dancing Partner?

If you were not with us on Wednesday night, I am sorry. And count yourself fortunate. We had a guest for our Wednesday night meal and program. He is an African Pastor from the West African country of Sierra Leone, a visitor to a meeting of the Baptist World Alliance, regarding an upcoming World Youth Congress, and a guest of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. I was looking forward to hosting Brickson Sam, who was a guest in the home of Tom and LeDayne McLeese Polaski for a week. I was looking forward to hearing about his work with the young people of Sierra Leone, and with youth across that large, dark continent.

Brickson began his presentation by showing a brief clip of the atrocities of the eleven-year civil war which decimated his country. I think it is safe to say that unless you have been in the heart of armed

conflict, none of us has ever experienced anything so brutal and inhumane. And, it is my guess that most armed conflict is more civil, if it's possible to suggest such irony, than what we saw in those tortured moments. The quality of the scenes, made with a hand-held home video camera, provided a gruesome, stomach-churning experience of the phrase, "war is hell."

We suffered through eleven minutes. Brickson and the people of his country endured eleven unimaginable years. An entire generation of children was born into the helpless hopelessness of such a nightmare. What does hope mean to Sierra Leone? What possible context could the children of the last decade have to understand that word?

I cannot imagine – I mean, literally, I cannot imagine not giving up hope after seeing such sights with my own eyes, knowing the pain and the fear and the desperation and the hopelessness he described to me – running, for a decade, from one town to another – just trying to escape the careless injustice, the ungodly suffering of that war – simply trying to survive for one more day. Day after day.

Hope, for Brickson Sam, and the people, mostly young people, of the Victory Baptist Church is no picturesque beauty queen. Such dreams have been forever vanquished from their minds. But she is there, nonetheless. Tenacious. Real. Struggling to survive. She is there – *hope, that will not disappoint them* (Romans 5). She is really all they have, and she is born of God. I can imagine no other way that such a life-giving force can survive amid the demonic that ruled in chaos for so long. When Brickson began his talk, he stood and said in his thick African accent, "Praise the Lord." He explained that this is a common salutation for African gatherings, in which the congregation is to respond: "*For God's mercy endures forever*" (Psalm 100.5). Maybe it is a good thing he asked us to respond before showing the video. God's mercy endures... forever? In Sierra Leone?

Such an affirmation is either a hopeless escape from reality, as the skeptics claim, or it is the expression of the reality of our deepest hope, which at some point in hopeless lives becomes all we can cling to. She is an unkempt dancing partner, free of the trite platitudes of an unthinking faith, who always shows us when there is nothing left – even if she is a little ragged, and wearing the tears of a suffering God.

Jesus embodies that hope for us. And the heart of the miracle of the healing of Lazarus is not the resuscitation of a dead body. For we need to be reminded what happened to the raised Lazarus: eventually he died again. The heart of the miracle of the healing of Lazarus lies in the *resurrection and life* which Jesus stands for, and which he offers to all who will trust. *I am the resurrection and life... whoever believes in me will never die.* Even in Sierra Leone.

In this season of confession, it may be our deepest failure. “Forgive me God, but I have given up hope.” For such an admission is nothing short of a denial of God, altogether. For even if she comes, unkempt, She always comes.

When we stop hoping... that as a congregation we’ll figure out our annual budget woes, or how to get more people to participate, visit, join us in our fellowship and mission... we have lost the game. When we stop hoping... that our struggling marriage will survive... it will fail. When we stop hoping... for peace – internal peace, when we stop hoping for peace – world peace, as audacious and outrageous is such a claim – we have just buried the last possibility for such a reality in the grave of the dead-again Lazarus.

She may lack the light heartedness of wishful day-dreaming. She may not know the eloquence of an easy doctrine. She may not pay her respects until tragedy strikes. But when you need her most, she comes. She always comes. As Wayne Oates once said, “In an age when despair, discouragement, and disillusionment are the predominant emotional dynamics, it becomes increasingly necessary for the Christian faith to unmask, refurbish, and communicate its belief in hope.” Even if she comes with stringy hair, a dirt-streaked face, wearing a bedraggled dress, and weeping with Jesus.

May it be so!

Pastoral Prayer [sung]

“Dance, then, wherever you may be,
For I am the Lord of the dance said [she].
And I’ll lead you on, wherever you may be,
And I’ll lead you on, to the dance, said [she]!”

