April 5 - 6, 2014
FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

“Jesus wept.” Just two words: *Jesus wept.* Of the 31,317 verses in the Bible, (thank God for Goggle!) …this verse is the shortest in the whole of Scripture. It might be the *shortest* verse in the Bible, but it may also be the most profound.

Saint John tells the story of the raising of Lazarus, a story only in his Gospel, but a *crucial story* in Jesus life. After being urgently summoned to the bedside of his dear friend, Lazarus, Jesus delayed several days. In the meantime, Lazarus died. So by the time Jesus does get there, Lazarus had been dead four days. Both sisters lamented: “If you had been here, our brother would not have died.” Jesus, went to the tomb with his disciples, mourners, and the sisters… *Jesus wept.*

“How did he weep?”
The most obvious interpretation of his tears is that he was moved by his own grief and love for Lazarus. That might be the normal spin of a homily from this passage today or when read at funerals. There is certainly deep truth in this interpretation. Jesus did love Lazarus. It is a great comfort to us, especially in our times of grief, to know that our Lord feels our broken hearts, and that he shares our sorrows.

This can hardly be the full meaning of the briefest of verses, because the Jews standing nearby, witnessing the tears of Jesus said: “See how Jesus loved Lazarus!” A careful reader of John’s Gospel will know that the Jews are never portrayed having an accurate interpretation of the sayings or actions of Jesus. The Jews are characters used by John to demonstrate misunderstanding, usually taking a literal or earthbound meaning, when Jesus intended a double entendre, or a higher spiritual meaning. So although Jesus does share our suffering, and weeps with us when we are weeping, that cannot be the full meaning of our Lord’s tears at the tomb of Lazarus.
So, what other meaning might we read into the weeping of Jesus?

There is a clue in the phrase “deeply moved”. The word used here carries a hint of anger or frustration. **Could it be that a part of the meaning in Jesus’ tears is that his spirit is troubled over the unbelief of his people**, and even the stinging implication of rebuke from his friends, Martha and Mary?

Surely it hurt Jesus to hear, not one, but both of these sisters accuse him of being so uncaring to wait several days before coming to their aid, as if blaming him for the death of their brother. Time and again in John’s Gospel, Jesus shows that he will not allow the urgency of others to set his clock—whether the request came from his mother to make wine at Cana, his family when they wanted him to carry his miracles to Judea, or his best friends Mary and Martha. And then there was the accusatory whisper circulating in the crowd, “Could not this man who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”
But Jesus had come to bring life eternal, not just a resuscitation from the dead, and not just a resurrection of the righteous at the last days. The life Jesus brings begins here and now, in this life, and extends through death into the life eternal. It is not just extended life, counted by additional days and years, either here or hereafter. The abundant life found in Christ is measured by depth, not length; by intimacy with God sharing in His Kingdom. As Jesus would say: “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”. We have heard the stories over and over…Do we get it?

But Jesus was (or should I say is) surrounded by people, even those close to him, who did not grasp the deeper level of life he offered, their minds were captured in old established ways of thinking. (“We never did it that way before”… or “in the good old days…”). Perhaps that lack of understanding troubles him, even frustrates him? His tears may have had a trace of loneliness, as he continually held out a gift that
no one seemed to appreciate or understand. Are we standing in the crowd around that tomb?

There may be even more to the tears of Jesus here. A clue is found in looking at the place of this story in the total John’s Gospel. John makes it clear that the raising of Lazarus was the pivotal event leading to the deadly plot to kill Jesus.

This event was the “straw that broke the camel’s back” of the ruling authority’s patience. As the rulers said, “What are we doing here? If we allow this man to keep performing miracles like this, everyone will believe in him.” So from that day on they plotted to take his life. In the other Gospels, the final straw was the Triumphant Entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and the debates with the ruling religious authorities in the Temple during the week that followed. But, for John this event, the raising of Lazarus, the point of no return in the plot leading directly to the death of Jesus on the cross.
With the shadow of his death in view, we can see several other clues in this account that point to Jerusalem. Here was a tomb, a cave with a stone rolled over the door, and a man inside wrapped in linen burial shrouds. It is interesting that the verse, “Jesus wept,” occurs just as he stands in front of the tomb. Could it be that the deep anguish, and the troubled spirit that accompanied the tears of Jesus, are John’s equivalent to the Garden of Gethsemane in the other Gospel accounts?

Jesus calls Lazarus out the tomb, not only to free his friend from the grip of death temporarily, but to show the glory and power of God who gives life stronger than death. But Jesus also calls Lazarus out the tomb, so that he can enter it. Standing in front of this cave tomb, with the stone sealed over the door, and knowing that a dead man is wrapped in linen burial garments inside, it is as if Jesus is staring at his own grave.
Luke’s Gospel tells us that in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus was staring down his death, his prayers were “anguished” (the very same Greek word John uses for the emotions of Jesus standing in front of the tomb of Lazarus). We see the same emotions, the same anguish, the same tears, here at the tomb of Lazarus. Jesus wept—for his love of Lazarus, yes, and in solidarity with those who mourned for him… but perhaps Jesus also wept for himself, as he felt the full weight of his own death closing in on him.

On this very day, the high priest, Caiaphas, will say, “It is better that one man die for the people, than the whole nation perish”. He was more right than he knew. But the irony is, as the High Priest set in motion the plot to kill Jesus, he was performing the one thing he was ordained to do, to offer the Passover sacrifice in Jerusalem of an unblemished Lamb, intended to spare the entire people of God from their sins. And…. that is exactly what Caiaphas would do in just a
matter of days, without even knowing it, as Jesus died on a hill outside the city gates.

It’s no wonder Jesus wept.