

November 1, All Saints B (John 11:32-44)

## **What does it mean that Jesus weeps, when he knows Lazarus will be raised from the dead?**

by [Tito Madrazo](#) in the [October 10, 2018](#) issue

The time had finally come. I had been dreading this day for weeks but could not put it off any longer. Our old faithful dog, Waco—named for the city where my wife and I met—had suffered long enough. As I drove to the animal hospital, I reflected on the 11 years that had passed since we rescued her. Waco weighed only 20 pounds, but she had at least 100 pounds of personality. She intimidated all the bigger dogs in the neighborhood with her intensity and high-pitched barking, but with our young children, she was always patient and gentle.

Now, Waco—struggling to breathe and barely able to rise—needed the final mercy we could offer her. As I drove down the country highway, I lowered the window so she could enjoy the breeze one last time. To my surprise, she rose unsteadily, leaned forward, and extended her nose into the wind. She closed her eyes as her ears flapped back, and a hot stream of tears began running down my cheeks.

I was an emotional wreck by the time we arrived. Our veterinarian was an older man who did not typically show much emotion, but on that day he reached out, placed his hand on mine, and assured me that “it was time.” I looked up at him and was startled to see tears in his eyes as well.

His tears somehow were comforting to me. Here was a professional who had euthanized thousands of beloved pets, but he was still grieving with me over the loss of our Waco. In that moment, I felt less foolish over my tears and less alone in my sorrow.

I have always imagined that the tears of Jesus must have had a similar effect on Mary. Some who see Jesus weeping implicitly question his sincerity as they critique him for not preventing Lazarus’s death; others recognize his tears as a sign of his love for Lazarus. For Mary, the tears of Jesus communicate that her brother is worth

grieving for and that she is worth grieving with. The tears Jesus sheds on that day are perhaps the most tangible proof in scripture of the affirmation in Psalm 34:18 that “the Lord is near to the brokenhearted.” God is not only the one who collects our tears in a bottle (Ps. 56:8); in Christ, God also sheds tears on our behalf.

What John’s Gospel never reveals is how Mary and the others present on that day interpret the tears of Jesus later, in hindsight, after Lazarus has been raised from the dead. What does it mean that Jesus weeps for Lazarus and with Mary even though he knows that, within just a few moments, the death of Lazarus will be reversed, and Mary will receive the oil of gladness instead of mourning?

Having used this text in dozens of funerals over years of ministry, I believe that the tears of Jesus are a reminder of the importance of lament. As a minister, I am called to preach the hope of resurrection—but not to rush there so quickly that I neglect the essential work of grieving for the deceased and with the bereaved. Too often, we ministers want to jump to the good news, to preach gospel without law or to proclaim the joy of Easter without passing through the agony of Good Friday. We want to provide the comfort of the promise that “to be absent from the body” is “to be present with the Lord,” without sitting in mourning with the family and reflecting on the gaping reality of that absence.

But what we see in the example of Jesus is that there truly is a season for everything—a time to weep and to laugh, a time to mourn and to dance. As I have shared in the lives of so many who have journeyed through the valley of the shadow of death, I have grown to believe that laughter becomes richer for those who have wept, that dancing is more exhilarating for those who have mourned.

Furthermore, we are reminded at All Saints of the interconnectedness of God’s family and the incredible value each of its members possesses. The loss of any one of them from our earthly gatherings is an occasion for lament. And none of those we name as sisters and brothers should have to tread the path of grief alone.

Like Jesus, those of us who would minister to others are called to lament even though hope is on the horizon. Like my veterinarian, we have avoided becoming so professionalized that we insulate ourselves from empathy with those who are grieving even now. We must instead reach out, place our hands on theirs, and assure them that “it is time”—time to lament the loss of those they have loved.

There, from that position of shared lament, we may affirm that we are not hopeless in our grief. From beneath our sackcloth, we remind one another that those who believe will yet see the glory of God. We point to a future beyond the ashes of today—the time described in the reading from Revelation when “death will be no more” and “mourning and crying and pain” will have passed away. We long for a day when God “will wipe every tear from their eyes.” We lament now—not only for what has happened, but because things are not yet what they are meant to be.