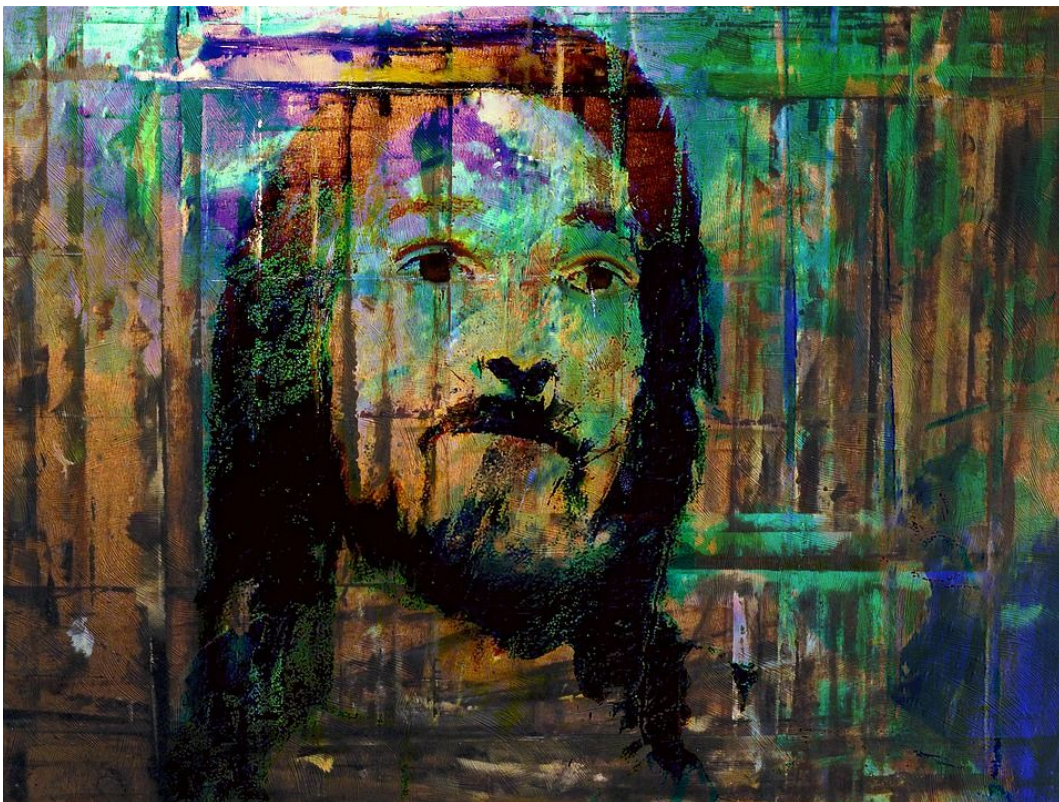




## *Jesus Wept*

*A sermon delivered at the Church of the Holy City in Wilmington, Delaware*

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*Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, "Where have you laid him?"*

*They said to Him, "Lord, come and see."*

*Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how He loved him!"*

*-John 11:33-35<sup>1</sup>*

What a blessing it is, when we experience feelings of grief and sadness then to encounter this compassionate and human Jesus in our text for today\*, knowing that as Jesus weeps for his own dear friends, so also might Jesus weep for us and our own losses.

This Jesus is part of what inspires the Christian call to compassion, a call that is so very needed right now, a potentially unifying force in a world of competing faith claims and us-vs-them thinking. As beautiful and important as this vision of the peaceful, compassionate Jesus is, it is not, however, the whole of the story. Some of the Greek words explaining Jesus' experience of emotion in this episode have a complicated translation history, and create a more interesting, if not more ambiguous, picture of what Jesus was feeling. This more ambiguous picture, I believe, can ultimately be a healing one, communicating the truth about the experience of grief: that it is complicated and all-encompassing and takes us on a journey.

Jesus was close friends with Lazarus and his two sisters Mary and Martha, and the gospel tells us he loved all three of them dearly. Now, Jesus was traveling when he received word that Lazarus was sick. By the time he reached them in Bethany, Lazarus had died. Jesus is greeted by the distraught sisters and, seeing them, experiences his own grief at the loss. After being brought to the grave however, Jesus performs his last great sign in the gospel of John, the raising of Lazarus back into life. In terms of the narrative, this act becomes the grounds for the religious authorities to plot against and eventually kill Jesus. Very soon Jesus will enter Jerusalem for the last time.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New King James Version*. Wheaton, IL: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1985.

The significance of Jesus weeping in v. 35 is closely related to the meaning and use of two verbs appearing slightly earlier in v. 33, both of which have been translated quite variously. The first verb ἐμβριμάομαι, (embrimaomai...em-bree-mah-o-my) which also appears again in v38, has been translated as “groaned in spirit” “deeply moved”, “greatly disturbed”, “bristling within himself”. At its root, the word means “to snort with anger like a horse,” and is used in other contexts to mean being greatly angry or indignant.

We are not told exactly what Jesus is angry about here though, so usually, translations simply emphasize the intensity of the emotion. That does serve, however, to erase a certain dimension of the experience.

The second verb of interest in v. 33 is ἐτάραξεν, (tarassō...ta-rah-so) which generally means to be agitated or troubled. Literally, it means “he stirred himself up,” and I think we all know what it feels like to be agitated or stirred up. In this context, the word has been translated as “deeply moved” “troubled” “showing great agitation”, “visibly distressed”, and “ he shuddered”. Clearly, there is overlap in the meaning of these two words and they reinforce each other.

So, by the time Jesus actually weeps in v.35, because of embrimaomai and tarasso, we recognize that he is not feeling peacefully and gently moved, with a single composed tear running down his cheek. Jesus was angry and indignant. Jesus’ emotions are overflowing from internal agitation; so this weeping would not be genteel, but rather be full-on crying. In this moment, we do not get a window into Jesus own thoughts, instead the text lets the crowd interpret the reason for his tears. They attribute it to his deep love for Lazarus, which the gospel has been clear about. And yet, it seems like there might be something more to it.

As much as we might like to view Jesus as a perfectly composed zen-like figure here, I would posit that the Jesus of this narrative is far more conflicted in how he views the situation. It’s complicated for him. Jesus recognizes clearly how the raising of Lazarus is to be his final and most potent sign, that the Kingdom of God shall be glorified through it, but that does not mean he has to enjoy the whole of the experience as it is happening. He is suffering, Mary and Martha are suffering, Lazarus in his sickness was suffering. The Jesus of John’s gospel is a “big picture” thinker, with the

Kingdom of God constantly before his eyes. But, if we are interested in the experience of the human Jesus, it is important that we should think deeply about the logistics, that the son of God should be glorified through his friend's death, whom he loved. How would we imagine Jesus to feel here? Certainly very conflicted, perhaps some parts angry, some parts hopeful, some parts resigned. As theologian Anne Robertson points out, how very like our own grieving.<sup>2</sup>

We note though, in the midst of the experience of all these complicated emotions, Jesus is told "Come and see" (v.34). In the Gospel of John, the phrase "come and see" is known as a "call to discipleship, the invitation to faith." <sup>2</sup> Jesus had issued the same invitation to many people during his ministry, and now it is his turn to hear it, his turn to be, in the words of Fred Craddock, "invited to identify with us all, struggling to live in faithful obedience under conditions of suffering and death."<sup>3</sup> More than the simple act of weeping itself, it is the movement of emotion from the complicated, agitated, troubled experience of grief, through to the "come and see" moment, and finally culminating in an outpouring of sadness and vulnerability that is the most humanizing event for the Johannine Jesus. A notably stoic, enigmatic and "spiritual" figure in John's gospel, this Jesus is now invited into a resolution of emotion that is at once both universal and personal. Jesus is at once one of us, and also the only one of us who knows God's holy trajectory, at once a human mourning a friend, and God inserting God's self into this moment in history, a moment that will have a vast implication for the spiritual evolution of humankind. And so first, Jesus experiences deep, intense, varying, and perhaps not even justified emotions, and then, in receiving the same invitation that is given to all of us, experiences his own personal moment of surrender and relief.

It seems to me, that it is this resolution of agitation and resistance, and the broadening beyond the tension, that makes Jesus weep. The Buddhist writer Tara Brach speaks of using Father Thomas Keating's words, "I consent," when facing dukka, the suffering in life.<sup>4</sup> The writer Elizabeth Gilbert writes similarly about her own experience of grief:

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Robertson, *John 11:1-53*. Interpretation 58, no. 2 (Ap 2004): 176.

<sup>3</sup> Craddock, Fred. *Jesus Wept*. p.37.

<sup>4</sup> Brach, Tara. *True Refuge: Finding Peace and Freedom in Your Own Awakened Heart*. New York: Bantam Books, 2013, p.7.

“I have learned that Grief is a force of energy that cannot be controlled or predicted. It comes and goes on its own schedule. Grief does not obey your plans, or your wishes. Grief will do whatever it wants to you, whenever it wants to. In that regard, Grief has a lot in common with Love. The only way that I can “handle” Grief, then, is the same way that I “handle” Love — by not “handling” it. By bowing down before its power, in complete humility...(she continues) How do you survive the tsunami of Grief? By being willing to experience it, without resistance. By being willing to feel everything. By being willing to accept the unacceptable. The conversation of Grief, then, is one of prayer- and- response.

Grief says to me: “You will never love anyone the way you loved [her].”

And I reply: “I am willing for that to be true.”

Grief says: “She’s gone, and she’s never coming back.”

I reply: “I am willing for that to be true.”...

Grief says: “You may never recover from this”

And I say: “I am willing.” I am willing, I am willing... I will live on, (she writes) because I am WILLING. I am willing to take this life on God’s terms, not mine. Love’s terms, not mine. Grief’s terms, not mine...This is the job of the living — to be willing to bow down before EVERYTHING that is bigger than you. And nearly everything in this world is bigger than you. Let your willingness be the only big thing about you.”<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, Jesus says “I am willing” to his future. And he weeps. He weeps because he is consenting to the suffering of the cross, he weeps because he knows now that Lazarus will live but he will not, he weeps because he is opening up, learning on a deep emotional and physical level that his

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<sup>5</sup> Gilbert, Elizabeth. Facebook Post, June 6 2018, [https://www.facebook.com/GilbertLiz/posts/1850682221680551?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=K-R](https://www.facebook.com/GilbertLiz/posts/1850682221680551?__tn__=K-R)

willingness is the most divine thing about him. He grieves for his friends, he grieves for the life he will leave, he grieves for humanity and how many of us will turn away, and yet he weeps for the hope and joy of the resurrection to come. He moves through it all, willingly.

If we are looking for a way to resonate with the human Jesus, a compassionate Jesus crying tears of empathy for his friends is a beautiful image, but it is not the whole image given to us by the text today. Jesus was angry, even though it is not clear why, or at whom. But even if it is not clear why Jesus was angry, we intuitively recognize the experience of it, we see ourselves in it. We recognize how it feels to lose someone, or something, that we love deeply, we recognize how anguished we feel in response to the suffering of those we cherish, we recognize how resistant we are to being called to something that feels beyond us, beyond our control, beyond our capability, beyond our desire. Jesus felt all this, as us and for us. And through his tears, through his inner turmoil, he was willing. He stood up, he approached the tomb, took away the stone, and changed death into life.

Our Swedenborg reading today spoke to us about the importance of believing in a God who can be seen, within whom exists what is unseen. I quote: “Faith in a God who can be seen - who is both human and divine at the same time - goes deep within us.”

God wants nothing more than to be conjoined with us, but there cannot be conjunction where there is no recognition. So, God chose to dwell with us, not just within a human body, not just from within human emotion, but also from within human conflictedness. And then out of that indwelling, God brings compassion, God brings surrender, God brings the resurrection of our spirit.

Amen.

## **\*Suggested Readings**

Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;  
he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day,

Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.

This is the Lord for whom we have waited;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

## John 11:32-44

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

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Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christianity* §339

We are to believe or have faith in God our Savior Jesus Christ because this is believing in a God who can be seen, in whom is what cannot be seen. Faith in a God who can be seen—who is both human and divine at the same time—goes deep within us. Although faith is earthly in its form, it is spiritual in its essence. Within us faith becomes both spiritual and earthly, in that everything spiritual has to be received in what is earthly to become anything to us. Something purely spiritual does indeed enter us but we do not accept it.

It is like the ether that flows in and out of us without having any effect. For something to have an effect, we have to be mentally aware of it and open to it. We have no such awareness or openness unless something affects our earthly self. <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel. *True Christianity*. Translated by Jonathan Rose. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.





