

John 11:28-44

“When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying quietly, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Then Mary, when she came where Jesus was and saw him, fell at his feet, saying 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 deeply moved in spirit and troubled; and he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. 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, deeply moved again, came to the tomb; it was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I knew that you hear me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send 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 bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Mary and Martha who lived in Bethany and were some of Jesus’ closest friends. They sent word to Him that their brother Lazarus was desperately ill. “Please come. We need your help. Hurry! He is sinking fast.” But by the time Jesus gets there, Lazarus had died and had been in the grave for four days. Mary and Martha came out to meet Jesus and they expressed their grief: He’s gone. We’ve lost him. *“O Lord, if only you have been here, our brother would not have died.”*

Their family and friends had gathered and were together in deep sorrow, they were crying, or weeping over the loss of their loved one, Lazarus. The heart of Jesus went out to them, and Jesus cried with them. He too loved Lazarus, He loved them, and He shared their pain. Jesus went out to the cave-like tomb and He said to them: *“Roll back that stone!”* Martha, always the realist and ever ready to speak out, protests: *“But Lord, we can’t do that. He has been in the grave for 4 days. By now there will be a terrible odor.”* Jesus said to her: *““Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?”*

So they rolled the stone away, and Jesus cried out in a loud voice:
“*Lazarus, come forth!*” And incredibly, miraculously, amazingly, before their very eyes... Lazarus was resurrected! He came out of the tomb. Lazarus still wrapped in burial clothes came forth. His head and feet were still wrapped with mummy-like bandages. Jesus then turned to the friends and family and said to them, “*Unbind him and let him go. Un-wrap him and set him free.*” Wow!

From this story, I would like for us to focus on three important lessons. Three great truths emerge which can be so helpful to us today. Let’s talk about them:

- Jesus wept or cried with those He loved and He still weeps or cries with us.
- Jesus raised people up and He still raises us up.
- Jesus included others in the healing process, and He still wants to include us.

John 11:35 – it’s the shortest verse in the Bible: “*Jesus wept.*” This little verse, these two simple words have been a topic of discussion between me and people who feel one should memorize as many Scriptures verses as possible. Now wait, you don’t have to understand the Scriptures; you don’t

have to understand the context in which the verses were spoken; you don’t have to understand them at all. You just have to have them memorized.

I would ask “Why memorize Scriptures?” And the reply is, when you are in a time of trial and/or tribulation you have them to fall back on for comfort and/or reassurance. I asked “How can you fall back on something I don’t understand?” Then I said “OK, I am going through a hard time in my life and my whole world is collapsing around me and I go to the Scriptures.” I then recite John 11:35... “*Jesus wept.*” How can that verse help me? How indeed?

I recently read a story about a young seminary student who was working at a church as a summer intern. He went over to their chapel one early Sunday morning to serve Holy Communion. He had never served communion alone and he was scared to death. This church had a communion ritual printed on a laminated card setting on the altar table for whoever facilitated the service. It started with the Invitation to Communion, followed by the Prayer of Confession and then the Prayer of Consecration; and then just before the people would come forward to receive communion, the minister facing the congregation and say, “Hear these words of comfort from

the Scriptures.” The card was then left blank so the minister in charge could, at that point, quote an appropriate verse. When the young man reached this point in the service he said, “Hear these words of comfort from the scriptures ...” And then he went absolutely blank. He did not know what to say his mind went blank. There was a long pause, and then he blurted out the only verse he could think of at the moment: “*Jesus wept.*”

This young seminary student felt awful about his first time serving communion, but then one of the members present came to him after the service and said, “When you quoted that verse, ‘*Jesus wept,*’ that was so meaningful to me because it made me suddenly realize something ... it made me realize Jesus could feel my pain!”

There is another story about a minister serving in Virginia named Al Hanner. Al Hanner tells a powerful story about his early days in the ministry. Al says he came out of seminary ready to single-handedly solve all the problems of the world. He had been seminary trained, he was well prepared, and now as a pastor in a little community in Virginia, he was ready to become “super preacher.” He had all the answers, and he was ready to tell them to the world. Quickly the weeks passed into months and his 1st year.

Then one morning the phone rang. The father of his board chairman had suddenly died. As Al started to their home, it hit him: “I don’t know what to do. I’m their pastor and I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to say to them.” He tried to remember his classes in pastoral care. He tried to recall appropriate scripture passages to quote. He tried to think of some profound theological message to give these people in their hour of need. He plotted his strategy: “I know what I’ll do ... I’ll go in boldly and take charge. I’ll gather all the family in the living room and I’ll lead them in the 23rd Psalm. That’s what I’ll do, that’s the answer.

But there was one thing Al Hanner hadn’t counted on. When he arrived at the home and gathered the family in the living room, he looked at their faces and their pain suddenly became his pain. He suddenly realized how much he loved these people, and his heart broke with them. He was then overcome with emotion. As he tried to quote the 23rd Psalm, all he was able to say was, “*The Lord is my Shepherd*”... and then Al Hanner exploded into tears. He cried so hard that the family had to rush over and minister to him. They helped him with the grief he was feeling; they ended up comforting him.

Al Hanner was so embarrassed, so ashamed. He felt that he had failed them miserably. He felt he let this family down and worse he felt humiliated. Al made it through the funeral and went immediately to his District Superintendent and Bishop and asked to be moved to another church. And shortly after, Al was indeed transferred.

Several years passed and each year at annual conference, Al would hide from that family, since they were Lay delegates. He could not face them, but then one evening he came around a corner and there they were. He couldn’t avoid them. He couldn’t hide anymore. Their faces lit up when they saw Al. They ran to him and hugged him warmly. “Oh, Al,” they said, “We are so glad to see you. Our family loves you so much. We appreciate you so much, and we miss you. We talk about you all the time. We have loved all of our pastors these past years, but you are the one who helped us the most.” “Really?” Al said with genuine surprise. “Yes,” they said, “We’ll never forget how you came and cried with us when Daddy died.”

There’s an important lesson here. When people are in grief, they don’t need and/or want theological pronouncements. They just want someone to come and love them. They just want us to come and cry with them; they just need someone to help them cry.

Jesus cried with those He loved, and He still does. He hurts with us. He feels our pain. We all face suffering and when it comes, one thing we can know for sure is that Jesus is hurting with us, and He will love us through it. He will walk through that valley with us and in time He will bring us out of that valley and once again back to the mountaintop. Jesus cried with those He loved and He still does.

I heard of a minister, Dr. D. L. Dykes, when he was a student pastor just starting out in the ministry, that he really wanted to learn how to do things right. So each time he was called on to do something new, he would go to the Bible and find out how Jesus performed that ministerial task and learn from Him. All went well until he was called on to do his first funeral. Rev. Dykes turned to the New Testament only to discover something he never seen; Jesus never performed any funerals, only resurrections!

Here in John 11, Jesus resurrects Lazarus. He raises him up and brings him out of the tomb. “*Lazarus, come forth,*” He says. See how personal this is! Jesus calls him by name. Now, if you will listen real carefully this morning, you too can hear Him calling your name. Jesus has a resurrection for you. He wants to bring you out of that tomb; whatever tomb that is imprisoning you today. Jesus wants to set you free, and he has the power to do it. If you will listen to His call and respond in faith, He will raise you up and give you a new start, a new chance, a new life. Jesus wept with those he loved, and He still does. Jesus raised people up, and He still does.

Notice what happens next when Lazarus comes out of the tomb. Jesus turns to his family and friends and says, “*Unbind him and let him go. Unwrap him and set him free.*” It’s amazing to me that some people think this small group movement which most mega-churches are using today is a new thing. Small groups, support groups, I tell people John Wesley started them in the 1700’s but truth be told they are as old as the Bible.

Jesus knew how important it is to have our family and our friends helping us, surrounding us with love, supporting us, encouraging us, setting us free in every moment, but especially in those dramatic moments when we are trying to make a new start with our lives.

A number of years ago, a woman went through a great personal tragedy; she is still coming through it with the help of God and with the help of the church, especially her church family. She said, “I was devastated. I was disillusioned and defeated and saw no hope for the future and no relief for my pain. I was so hurt that I was immobilized. All the life had drained out of me, but God has brought me back to life, and the church has been there for me every step of the way. My church family has been so incredible. I don’t know what I would have done without them. I couldn’t have made it without them.”

You know what she was saying, don’t you? She was saying, “God brought me out of the tomb, and my friends helped me, and supported me, and together, by the grace of God, they loved me back to life. Jesus wept with those He loved, and He still does.

Jesus raised people up, and He still does. Jesus included others in the healing process... and He still does. This is the Good News of Easter: Christ is Risen, and He can resurrect us! It’s time for us to get up! It’s time for you to get up! It’s time for all of us to be resurrected.ⁱ

ⁱ Brett Blair and James W. Moore, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2005, 0-000-0000-15