

Year B, All Saints Sunday

November 4th, 2018

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John 11:32-44 and Revelation 21:1-6a

Disturbed and Offended

Jesus became agitated, disturbed, and maybe even a little angry when he saw Mary weeping. I know that's not how it sounds in the text we just read but that's how it sounds in the original Greek. The translators way back in history didn't like the way that made Jesus sound and so they changed it into what they thought Jesus meant. But they shouldn't have.

Jesus knows that with God there is no death ultimately. As James Alison writes in The Joy of Being Wrong, "We are humans tied into the human reality of death. We need no longer be." Jesus can see that Mary feels hopeless, despairing and sorely tempted to blame Jesus for not coming in time to save her brother but there is no need for that. Jesus is upset that Mary and the people around her were suffering so. She is suffering as one with no hope as though this were the end for her brother.

Instead of telling her that Lazarus lives; he lives with God, under God's care, in God's eternal jurisdiction; he lives by the power of God's love for him, a love that has cut him loose through forgiveness from any movement toward death, he asks, "Where have you laid him." Already he knows what he is going to do. He is going to show them that their brother is quite all right and very much alive.

So he has just said, "Where have you laid him?" and they reply "Lord, come and see" and then Jesus began to weep. This time he is really weeping and not agitated as before. Why weep now? What is going on? The onlookers to this scene also wondered. Some said, "See how he loved him!" but others said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" They had a point. Maybe they knew that when Jesus heard that Lazarus was gravely ill, he lingered where he was for two more days on purpose.

At the time Jesus said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Later Jesus told his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.'" Well, actually he is dead Jesus said plainly. As human's think of it, he is dead. But I am glad I wasn't there to save him. I want you to see and believe that in God, he is very much alive. Let's go and they head to where the dead Lazarus is.

But we have forgotten about the weeping Jesus. We really don't know why Jesus wept. Was he looking ahead to the time, coming very soon, when he would lie in a tomb very much like Lazarus and is grieving what he has to go through to show us that God is a God of love and not wrath? Was he weeping with Mary now, feeling her grief, his own soul so in tune with her soul that tears flowed from his eyes? Was he weeping about how much power we give to death, receiving it as almost like God's wrath and growing out of God's supposed anger when actually it is the door to new life in a place where there are no tears and death will be no more, as it says in the passage from Revelation 21?

Mary and Martha saw Lazarus' death as the end for him but Jesus knew the One on the throne had said "See I am making all things new." And the all things new would include a new body that doesn't wear out and fall apart. The Gospel text provides no clear answer as to why Jesus wept. We are left with a Jesus mysteriously out of our control.

"Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the Tomb." What is happening here? Why is he disturbed again? Maybe we are not meant to know. Maybe his being disturbed disturbs us and pulls us out of our know-it-all lethargy. He is acting in a way we don't understand and that troubles us. The gospels were written to conceal and reveal, to force us to a point of crisis where we must decide whether we are offended by him or believe in him.

"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.'" Makes sense to me! Martha, the practical one who lives in the real world knows how it is. It's the same world you and I live in. You open up that tomb and it's not going to be pleasant. In fact, as we think about it the very idea is offensive. Jesus, do I believe you or am I offended by you. At this point Martha is offended.

In a book by David McCracken entitled The Scandal of the Gospels; Jesus, Story, and Offense, McCracken argues that the choice of faith is not between belief and unbelief, it is between being scandalized by Jesus and believing in Jesus. He also argues that to believe in Jesus you must first be scandalized by him; that belief in him goes through being scandalized. In both Matthew and Luke Jesus says, "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

So Martha finds opening the tomb after four days offensive. She knows the body will already have begun to decompose. In response to Martha being offended, "Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?'" Belief or offense, faith or Jesus as a stumbling block, which will it be?

"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.'" Belief verses offense, these people

could go either way. Jesus prays to God that what he is about to do will move them toward belief.

“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.’” I think Jesus was dramatically cutting him loose from death itself, showing us what God has already done through Christ our Lord and this cutting loose is for all people, the ancient dream of the Messiah fulfilled.

Do we believe this story or are we offended by it? It does defy what we think of as the laws of nature. Maybe our scientific and modern friends will think we are naïve, simple minded and not tough realists who stoically face into the hard fact of human disappearance when our physical body ceases to function. I will not listen to my friends.

No, I have chosen to believe and I have decided not to be offended. That choice has given me hope and even joy. I do believe Jesus shows us the glory of God when Lazarus emerged from that tomb. He was showing us that death is not a reality for God, does not exist for God, and provides no boundary at all, to life. Instead it is a continuing of life saturated in God’s love that last for eternity. That is news almost incomprehensibly good; almost too good to be true. But it is. Thanks be to God. Amen.