

In the Bethany graveyard: John 11:32-44; Revelation 21:1-6a

by [Phyllis Kersten](#) in the [October 20, 2009](#) issue

We can scarcely imagine life without tears. We come into the world crying, and when we are hungry or wet or not held enough—no matter how old we are—we cry. Tears come unbidden to us when we are moved by beauty or by someone’s kindness to us. I often cry when a good book or movie has a sad ending, and I cry at a happy ending too. I even cry at Hallmark TV ads.

Most of our tears are not tears of joy. We cry because we mourn the death of loved ones or because we’ve heard a diagnosis of a life-threatening illness. We cry out of regret, out of our “if onlys” or “should haves,” or out of frustration with the direction our life is heading. At other times it’s as if our tear ducts are blocked. We wish we could have a good cry, we say, but for some reason we can’t.

Weddings are also occasions for tears. We cry with happiness at seeing a young couple starting out together. We shed bittersweet tears at “losing” a son or daughter, especially if the marriage partner is not one we would choose for our child. For some, wedding tears are triggered by memories of their own weddings and of their own experiences of “for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.” Still others at a wedding shed a tear for a spouse who has died, or for a marriage in which the love has died.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus is at a funeral in a graveyard, and there are more than enough tears to go around. Mary and Martha are weeping, their grief new and raw at the death of their beloved brother Lazarus. It seems the whole town is reduced to tears.

And Jesus? John tells us that Jesus sees their tears and is “greatly disturbed in spirit” and “deeply moved” and begins to weep. What we see in Jesus in John’s Gospel is a reflection of the one Jesus calls Father. Jesus’ tears and “tortured emotions” reflect God’s agony and anger and tears at “the ravaging of humanity by pain and death.” As Robert Kysar notes, we see in Jesus the God who suffers when God’s creation suffers (*Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: John*).

Jesus acts. Stone and stench cannot deter him, or keep Lazarus a prisoner in the cave of death. “Come out of that dark cave,” Jesus says, and out Lazarus comes, trailing his grave clothes behind him.

In John’s Gospel this funeral story is a sign that the last day, the day of resurrection, has already come to earth in Jesus Christ. Some in the cemetery that day read this sign rightly and believe that in Jesus one can find resurrection and new life. Others find only one more reason why Jesus should be put to death. In the end, Jesus’ act of cheating death out of one more victim puts the final nail in his own coffin. We know that this is not the end of the story. The Father who joins Jesus in raising Lazarus from the dead raises Jesus as well, so that once and for all the shroud that casts its long shadow over all nations is destroyed, and death is no more.

If we’re honest, however, much of this life on earth is still lived in the graveyard. In Revelation we have the promise of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven as a bride, but the old Jerusalem is still very much with us. We can’t smell the stench of death through our television sets and newspapers, but we see and read about the mounting body counts in Afghanistan and about the drive-by shootings of innocent children in our cities.

In our own lives we mourn our dead, and experience all kinds of little deaths. Like Mary and Martha, who blamed Lazarus’s death on Jesus’ late arrival, we sometimes blame God for our losses, or blame others or even ourselves for doing too little too late. But in the process of blaming we miss seeing the most important reality of the Bethany graveyard—the presence there of the one who weeps unashamedly out of love for Lazarus and for us, and who acts on our behalf.

How do we go about living with all kinds of grave clothes still clinging to us? For one thing, we need not be afraid. I suspect that dying a second time was not as fearful for Lazarus since he’d experienced rescue from the grave. Dying need not be frightening for us either, since we’ve already died and risen with Christ in baptism. Jesus uses his own tears to wash us in baptismal waters and make all things new, including us. We live this All Saints Day in the promise of the day when our grave clothes will be exchanged for wedding garments, when God “will wipe every tear from [our] eyes.”