

"Jesus wept."

Two words that say so very much.

Two words that say so very much about our God.

Jesus wept. He cried. He grieved. He mourned.

We are given the image of tears streaming down Jesus' face . . . and maybe they were still glistening on His cheeks when He prayed to God and commanded Lazarus to come out of the tomb.

Jesus wept, which means that God wept.

Jesus wept, which means that we have a God who is moved by what happens in our lives, a God who aches with us, a God who cares deeply about what we experience, and a God who moves to help us.

This is particularly noteworthy because at the beginning of this narrative, Jesus didn't seem very compassionate at all.

The Scriptures describe it this way . . . "So when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, Jesus stayed where He was two more days."

I don't know about you but this does not sound like the response of a caring friend, let alone a caring God.

If we send for help, we want it right away.

We don't want someone to linger for two days.

When we pray, we want answers immediately.

And yet, this delay reminds us that Jesus will always be on His own timeline and following His own schedule.

It is often a schedule that does not make sense to us.

It is often a timeline that involves waiting — which we humans don't like and aren't very good at.

It is a schedule that can include for pain and prompt doubts.

It is also a timeline that can yield the unexpected — the marvelously unexpected — at just the right time.

When we are waiting for God and when we don't understand what God is about, our responses are often like that of Martha and Mary.

Did you notice that each one said the exact same thing to Jesus . . . "if you had been here, my brother would not have died."<sup>1</sup>

"If only . . ."

Two words that say so very much.

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<sup>1</sup> John 11:21,32

Two words that say so very much about the human experience in a broken world.

"If only . . . "

Each of us has our own list of "if only's."

If only, I hadn't said what I said . . .

If only, she hadn't gotten sick . . .

If only, he hadn't walked out . . .

If only, the right president would be elected . . .

"If only."

The theologian N. T. Wright<sup>2</sup> describes "if only" as "the sickening sense of wanting to turn the clock back.... It's a kind of nostalgia, not for the past as it was, but for the present that could've been, if only the past had been just a little bit different."<sup>3</sup>

When Jesus comes at last to Bethany and to the sisters, it appears that He is simply too late to make any difference.

Each sister declares her "if only," and we think that is the end of it.

And yet, each sister gets an important response from Jesus.

In His conversation with Martha, Jesus explains more deeply who He is.

"I am the resurrection and the life."

Although Martha does not fully understand the power that Jesus has, she is given the gift of recognizing Jesus for who He is.

In His conversation with Mary, Jesus demonstrates the compassion and love of God.

It is after Mary's "if only," that Jesus weeps.

There is something so wonderful about these two tender responses.

Jesus could have been defensive about the accusations imbedded in the sisters' greetings.

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<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone: Part Two*, 5-8

<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone: Part Two*, 6.

Jesus could have marched in smugly with the knowledge of what He would do for Lazarus.

Jesus could have showed up with a triumphant air that held no room for the grief that was present.

Instead, Jesus reminded them who He was, and He wept.

And then Jesus demonstrated who He was, by bringing resurrection and life.

N. T. Wright calls this the shift from “if only” to “if Jesus.”<sup>4</sup>

The sisters go to Jesus with their “if only” and they are met by Jesus.

This is true for us as well. I cannot tell you how Jesus will come or when He will come, but that He will come and in a way that is always surprising and always personal.<sup>5</sup>

You see . . . “if only” is a place where we can get stuck.

It is a place where we can build an altar and worship what might have been.

Jesus invites us to push through with Him into new life . . .

It is important to remember that Jesus will have His own time of “if only.”

Jesus will pray in the Garden of Gethsemane and ask that His journey go a different way.

And then He will model for us the turning to God in trust and the walking through the suffering in front of us into new life and new possibilities.

One of the best descriptions of the cross that I have heard is that it is ore like a door, than a dead-end.

Jesus does not belittle our grief and bitter tears in the face of death and loss and pain. Instead, He goes to the cross with us and then opens a door into the possibility of new life and new possibilities beyond the suffering and pain . . . both in this life time and beyond.

Long ago, Jesus called out to Lazarus and invited him back into a life that would forever be new. Lazarus would never ever be the same . . . shaped by both death and by Jesus.

Jesus commanded that Lazarus be “unbound.”

And we too pray that we might be unbound from our personal “if only’s” and have the courage to walk into the newness that awaits us — even if there are tears still glistening on our cheeks as we go.

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<sup>4</sup> N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone: Part Two*, 7-8..

<sup>5</sup> Jan Richardson, *Circle of Grace*, “How the Light Comes.”