

*Face-to-Face With Jesus: Why Did Jesus Weep?*

*John 11: 1-36*

*March 9, 2008*

The song is entitled “Cavatina” and this arrangement was featured in the 1978 blockbuster movie, “The Deer Hunter.” Over the gentle strings of a classical guitar the collective cry of a nation torn apart by the Vietnam War can be heard. The story is very intense but a simple one, and filled with deeper meaning. It is essentially a story of friendship. Mike and Nick are the best of friends, growing up in the mountainous region around Pittsburgh, PA and its steel mills. Along with other friends in that town they are drafted into the Vietnam War. On the eve of their departure Nick makes Mike promise that he won’t leave him in Vietnam to die alone. They are separated in different army units but reunited after an intense firefight, only to be held by cruel captors who force them to play the deadly game of Russian roulette. Somehow they escape, but are soon separated again in the streets of Saigon. The sensitive Nick is crushed emotionally and psychologically by the horrors of war and what his gentle spirit is confronted with. He escapes into an underworld of gambling with his life for large sums of money in Russian roulette. Mike returns to Pennsylvania with several wounded friends, but feels a strong calling to return to Vietnam to find his best friend. In the final, intense scene of the movie, he finds his friend Nick, now just a shadow of his former self. He is horribly hooked on heroin and no longer recognizes his lifelong friend. Mike enters a game of Russian roulette with his friend, begging him to return home with him. “Please, Nicky, come home with me!” Finally there is a glimpse of recognition as he reminds

Nick of their hunting days. A loud shot rings out as Nick shoots himself in the head, finally running out of luck. Sobbing, Mike holds Nick in his arms for what seems to be an eternity as he mourns the loss of his fallen friend. As he dies in his arms, there is this sense of unremitting loss, and the question for the viewer is “what if Mike could have arrived earlier? Could he have saved his friend?”

This same kind of intense love existed between Jesus, Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha in our gospel lesson today. Jesus arrives too late to save his friend Lazarus from a serious illness. Both of his sisters plead with Jesus, “if only you had arrived sooner you could have saved our brother!” It is an intensely emotional scene with crying and the wailing of mourners. The gospel of John has always bothered me a bit for the normally impassive nature of Jesus in most of this gospel. For John presents us with the highest Christology which means we often see Jesus as his most divine self. He always knows his divine purpose, speaks at a metaphorical level that most others in those conversations don’t seem to understand, and seems just a little bit aloof to me. Instead of telling us homey parables about the “kingdom of Heaven” he gives us these “I am” statements like “I am the resurrection and the life.” In John we have no infancy narrative, no gritty stables, and very few scenes of emotional outbursts. For you see that John writes to a Greek audience. William Barclay notes that in the Greek culture one of the basic attributes of God was *apatheia* (from which we get apathy). It claims that God is emotionless and passionless. The argument is that if a being can feel sorrow or joy, someone of something has an effect and a power over us. God as first mover would be incapable of being moved by something else. So in our scene where we witness Jesus’ most

impressive miracle we see Jesus at his most human in the depth of his emotions. To say that God wept would be unthinkable to the Greek. It would have shocked that audience that this God-Man would weep at the loss of his friend. It shocks us for many reasons as well. Didn't Jesus say at the beginning of the story that this sickness would not end in death? Didn't he wait two days before he left for Bethany? Didn't he tell Martha that Lazarus would rise? Right after this scene of his weeping, didn't he work the miracle of raising his dear friend?

So why did Jesus weep?

- 1. *Maybe Jesus cried for the disciples and others who still didn't understand what his ministry was all about.*** His disciples tried to keep him from going to Jerusalem for they feared for his life. Thomas thought he was being a martyr by returning to Jerusalem. They still did not get it that Jesus must be a suffering servant for the sake of the world. This mass confusion saddened Jesus.
- 2. *Maybe He was crying for Lazarus, who had now tasted the glory of the afterlife now dragged back into the finite world.*** Jesus would later tell his disciples that he goes to prepare a place for them, mansions in heavenly places. Just as Lazarus went to taste just exquisite heaven was to be, he would be pulled back to the grittiness of the earth. Maybe this is why Jesus wept.
- 3. *Maybe He cried for himself, knowing that this miracle was a prefiguration of what God would do in raising him from the dead.*** Jesus

was fully human but also divine. He knew by what method he would die. He sweated blood in the garden of Gethsemane in his pleading with God to let the cup pass. Have you ever cried when considering your own death and what impact your passing would have on the people who would miss you?

**4. Or just maybe the emotions of Mary and the mourners were transferred to him in compassionate mercy – “see how much he loved him!”** This scene with Mary, Martha and the mourners was intensely emotional. Imagine the pain of the loss that all of these people were feeling. The crowd was right: “See how much he loved him!” But also see the depths of compassion that Jesus had for all of humanity in their moment of need. Despite the fact that he would work something supernatural, maybe Jesus was caught up in the extreme pathos of the moment?

Many of you have been in the role of the pastor at the bedside of a dying friend, lover, or parent. Remember the ambivalence at the moment of prayer for that person. Do I pray for healing in situations where nothing less than a miracle will heal this beloved one? Do I pray that this loved will simply feel no pain and be able to be received into the loving arms of my Creator? Do I share the good news that death is not the final answer, but that we all are reunited in the Kingdom of Heaven? These are the questions that you have faced and I have faced as a pastor. If you pay close attention, Jesus is faced with these same options as he approaches the grave of his friend, Lazarus. Martha says first to him, “Jesus, Lord, where were you?” But then she says, “I know that God will give you anything you ask...that my brother Lazarus will rise at the great resurrection.”

Martha is looking for the encouragement of the afterlife, of the hope of all faithful. Jesus gives her just what she needs as he says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will never die." Mary approaches Jesus with a different need. She is overcome with loss and grief. What Mary needs is for someone just to be silent with her and share her tears? Her grief needs the validation of one who knows her loss and just how profound that loss is. At the moment of Jesus' greatest sign of divinity, he also shows us the completeness of his humanity.

None of us can raise a person from the dead. We can only respond from our sense of humanity. We can only respond to the need directly in front of us. And in a curious way the resurrection we can affect is the hope that refills those dry bones of despair and of loneliness. We can reconnect the sinews that connect us to another person, even in the final moments of life. Know that when you weep in whatever situation you find yourself, Jesus weeps with you. Know that when you cannot find the words that can provide comfort, Jesus is silent alongside you. Know that when the feelings of human inadequacy seem to overwhelm you, that you can lean totally on Christ's presence and power. I want to play *Cavatina* for you again, this time in its entirety. This time listen to the lyrics as if Jesus, the lover of your soul, sings directly to you. This time listen as if Christ sings to his beloved church.