

# The Tears and the Glory

John 11

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on March 29, 2020

---

At the beginning of our Gospel reading, Mary and Martha are in Bethany bracing themselves for tragedy. It feels like we are Mary and Martha right now. Though COVID-19 hasn't brought tragedy itself into the lives of many of us personally, we are bracing ourselves for the possibility.

As we wait, some of us are more inclined towards Mary's approach, with this global pandemic turning us ever more fervently towards God in devotion and prayer. While others of us are more Martha, settings permanently and vigilantly set to in help-mode, even if the best help we can provide at the moment is to arm ourselves with the most up-to-date news, the most up-to-date guidelines, and the most scientifically verifiable predictions. We all know the Bible says Mary has chosen the better part but honestly both of these roles feel completely essential right now and it doesn't seem like an appropriate moment to be making those kinds of value judgments. After all, in this story, Mary and Martha have something much more significant in common: They're both wondering where the heck Jesus is.

The text practically goes out of its way to be sure we know that Jesus, after hearing that his friend Lazarus was gravely ill, waited 2 more days in the place he was before setting off towards Bethany. And when he arrives, he is not treated to a passive-aggressive polite society that avoids the elephant in the room. He is asked directly, point-blank, by both Mary and Martha, "Where were you?!" *If you had been here, my brother would not have died.*

Why does God wait? Why does God not actively intervene to intercept tragedy at every corner? Though the text goes out of its way to tell us of Jesus' delay, it simultaneously refuses to give us any simply satisfactory answer to this most difficult question. We just don't always know, I'm afraid. And that's a hard thing to accept. Especially when you are staring down the barrel of something like we are staring down the barrel of right now.

But just because the text refuses to answer this question does not mean that there aren't other things it is telling us, even things we *can* confidently say about the character and action of God in the face of tragedy and crisis.

The first is this: **Jesus weeps**. The mental picture we have of God when we're asking ourselves questions like "Why does God let bad things happen?" is usually a Zeus-y bearded old white man in the sky playing chess with our lives, sacrificing the white pawn now, which is your aunt's brain disease, so that he can take the black rook later, which is the chemo for your cousin actually working. That's a very different picture of God than the one we get in the Bible generally, and in this story in particular.

The picture we get of God in this story is one of a friend standing and mourning beside us. A friend who says, "I don't know why things like this happen. But I know my heart is breaking with yours." Though of course we long to live in a world where sin and death and tragedy are distant memories, it is worth remembering what would make living in such a world worthwhile: It is being together, being with one another and being with God.

If I told you that heaven was a place where there was no more sin and no more pain and no more death and no more tragedy and where you had everything you needed to live forever but that everyone had to live alone on separate islands never seeing one another—how many of us would choose to go to that heaven? That's not heaven. That's actually hell. The pain and tragedy and death are what's temporary. The being with is what's forever. That's what makes heaven, heaven. And though tinged by pain and suffering, we have the being with already. We live with pictures of heaven now.

This is where God is in our midst. He is by our side weeping. He is saying, Your pain is my pain. What hurts me. I am with you. And nothing can stop me from being with you. This is the gift we're trying to give one another in our community. Overwhelmed by our inability to fix this problem, we are turning our energy instead into making sure everyone knows that that they're not alone. We launched a phone-tree this week within our community, not for the purposes of seeing who in our community needs help with what things—though we're doing that too—but simply to chat, about Tiger King or Lego Masters or what they're making for dinner. We are a community of companions, a community of transformational belonging. A community who, in our best moments, is a foretaste of heaven for the world to see.

The second thing this story tells us we can confidently say about where God is in a crisis is this: Jesus says, you will see the glory of God. What is happening in the world right now is a horrible, scary thing. And I don't believe God is behind it. I don't believe this virus is God's secret mechanism of judgment. I think this virus is a consequence of living in a broken world. In a world so deeply broken by sin that the earth itself is cursed, cursed all the way down to the cellular level, such that even individual atoms are in rebellion against God's good purposes. What we see at the grave of Lazarus is not a God who is secretly pulling the strings of a marionette world for the sake of his own entertainment. What we see is a cosmic confrontation between God and God's enemy—Death. That's the kind of confrontation we are witnessing right now. And when such a confrontation occurs, we see the glory of God.

In the coming weeks and months, we will be confronted with tragedy and death. The scale of it, at least in our part of the world, is uncertain. But even more inevitably, we will also see the glory of God. And the scale of that is cosmic. There is no Death that God can't turn into resurrection. Just because God isn't himself the active agent behind a global pandemic does not mean that God is not active in and around it always and everywhere to bring about his resurrection purposes for the world—to bring about victory and glory.

In the story of Lazarus, I see the glory of God in Thomas. Thomas gets a bad reputation in the Gospels. But in this story he is a hero. The problem with Bethany is that it is next door to Jerusalem, which at this moment in chronology of John's Gospel is the most dangerous place on the planet for Jesus to be. The disciples say, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again." Jesus says yes. And Thomas is the one who articulates what the likely consequences are for him and the disciples of Jesus' decision. He says, "Then let us also go, that we may die with him."

There are many in our community who are on the front line of this crisis: doctors, nurses, grocery store workers, cleaners, caregivers, transportation workers, public servants. They are in the position of the disciples in this story. Most of them couldn't have imagined even a month ago that they would be in the positions they're in. And they've been confronted with the same decision as the disciples. Do we stay and hide or do we go with

Jesus into the fray. Do we sacrifice our own safety so that we can see the glory. For Thomas, the decision was already made before he said anything. What was a given was that he was going to be with Jesus. And I know—and am completely floored by—those in our community who stand with Thomas today. Those for whom their commitment to Jesus has put them in the place of seeing no other option but to follow Jesus into the fray. That is the glory of God.

In the end, whether we see ourselves this morning in Mary, Martha, Thomas, or even one of the bystanders in the crowd, we are all still at the end of the day Lazarus. We are all bound by death. But being so bound, we are every day and even today again being called forth from the grave. To walk in the new life of Christ. To pick up our cross and follow him. If we answer that call, there will almost certainly be tears along the way, but there will most definitely be glory.

Amen.