

Lent V – March 22, 2026

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalms 130

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45



“Jesus Wept”

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA.*

As I was preparing for retirement a few years back, I tried to spend at least a couple of hours every week in my office going through books and files that I had accumulated over 35 years, since I started seminary in 1988. During that excavation, I found the final project from my very first theology class. The assignment was to do a spiritual reflection about our understanding of who God is for us in our lives. My project was a series of reflections, with written and visual illustrations on the theme of “faces.” The reflections had titles such as “Face in the Mirror,” “Facelessness,” “The Face only a Mother Can Love,” “My Cat’s Face,” “The Face of Suffering,” and “The Face of the Earth.” At the time I was revisiting this project, I was also thinking about the story of Jesus weeping over the death of his friend Lazarus in preparation for the upcoming Sunday’s sermon. My reflection entitled “The Face of Death” jumped out at me. It was an account of one of many experiences I had had working as a cardiovascular technologist in critical care units. The reflection goes like this:

“The attempted resuscitation is over. Equipment is removed from the room. Syringes, medication vials, and bits of paper that had been strewn on the bed, the bedside table, and the floor are collected and disposed of. The heart monitor is shut off and a nurse proceeds to remove the endotracheal tube and I.V.s. A few last-minute notes are made to complete the chart record before the family is called in to view the body. I am the only one remaining and, before I leave to carry on my work, I take one last look at a face that just a short time ago was alive. Not more than an hour ago, there were playful noises and occasional expression of discomfort emanating from this room as this lively but aching patient was looking forward to going home.

The reflection ends:

As I look into the profound stillness of this lifeless face, time stands still.”

For my reflection on death, I included the illustration “Lamentation over the Dead Christ” by the late 15th century Italian painter Andrea Mantegna in which the viewer gazes upon Jesus’ lifeless body as if standing at the foot of a hospital bed.

In the presence of death and loss... time stands still. Words are rarely helpful. When Jesus met Mary weeping over the death of her brother Lazarus, he fell silent... and tears began to flow. We cannot know exactly what Jesus felt. Was it his own pain over losing a friend? Was it Mary's grief? Was it both? What we do know is that Jesus was not immune to any of the vast array experiences that humans can know. Jesus knew feelings of pain and loss. Jesus knew the experience of grief that most everyone who has ever walked the earth has known and felt. We know, from John's telling of the story, that Jesus cried tears of love and loss.



What comes to mind when you hear the word “grief?” When I think about grief, I feel it in my body. The bodily sensation comes first... and then the memory. Grief is the emotional response to loss... be it the death of a loved one, a family member, a friend, a pet... or the loss of a job, a home, a relationship, an ability, or a way of life. Grief is about the pain of loss. Life should come with a warning label that says: “Beware! If you are alive, pain is involved!” Akriah Robinson puts it this way:

“Life is a mysterious mix of beautiful, challenging, and painful experiences. No one can predict how it will unfold and we don't always understand why it unfolds the way it does.”

Tears speak... what words cannot.

We know, too, that grief will take its own course, in its own time. There is no one right way to grieve. Though people grieve in different ways, one thing is true: grief is a journey. It is a journey with no short cuts. One must walk the valley of grief, one step at a time. Eventually, the journey becomes more light-filled as the one who grieves emerges from the valley forever changed by the experience. Scars of grief are badges of life that we collect over time. They are evidence that we have known both blessings and loss.

The greatest loss I have known happened a week before Palm Sunday over a quarter of a century ago. The pain of learning that my marriage was over was like getting hit by a Mac truck. The vision of the future that I had hoped for and trusted in... vanished in a split second. I carried the raw pain of loss with me as I was preparing to enter Holy Week, and as I was beginning work on my sermon for the Great Vigil of Easter. The focus of the sermon was Ezekiel's story of the Valley of Dry Bones... in which the prophet shows us a barren landscape strewn with sun-bleached bones that are scattered across a valley floor like thousands upon thousands of puzzle pieces that have been mixed, tossed, and abandoned. There was no life in that valley. The story mirrored my inner experience. The prophet asks: “Can these bones live?” The dry bones represent the harsh experience that the Israelites were experiencing in their captivity in Babylon. The 137th Psalm speaks of the people's experience of exile:

*By the rivers of Babylon –
 There we sat down and there we wept
 When we remembered Zion.
 We hung our harps.
 For there our captors
 Asked us for songs,
 And our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
 ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’
 How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*

God tells Ezekiel to prophesy. God says, ‘speak to the dead lifeless bones.’ Ezekiel’s voice then booms and echoes through the valley: “Hear the Word of God that you may live.” From the depths of stillness, the bones began coming together, with sinews curling, winding around, and connecting the bones together as multitudes of human frames rise up... draped with new flesh, and new skin. Breath then enters the once dead bodies, bringing them to life.

Lazarus had been dead four long days. Stench was in the air. Jesus ordered the tomb to be opened, and then “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.’”

Lazarus is brought to life, but only for a time. On another day, Lazarus will, again, take a last breath. Death is inevitable. Jesus’ own death is on the horizon. We know that on Easter Sunday Jesus will rise from the dead... yet in this story... the raising of Lazarus happens on this side of Good Friday. This is Easter before Easter, showing us that Jesus is calling the dead to life here and now... in the midst of life... in the presence of death and grief. This is a story of hope. Jesus is calling us to participate in resurrection by acknowledging painful realities... by praying our laments... by weeping for ourselves, for others, and for the world... and by being servants who help to unbind and set free... the once dead... that they... and we... may be welcomed back to the land of the living.

Jesus never promises that our journeys will be easy. What he shows us is that death will never be the last word, nor will the powers and principalities that seek to tear down and destroy. It is for Jesus’ resurrection of Lazarus, and for all his other brazen affront to the “powers that be”... that Jesus’ death warrant is in the works... as the journey of Holy Week prepares to unfold before us. There are no short cuts to Easter. Next Sunday we will celebrate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem with our palms and our ‘hosannas.’ We will then walk with Jesus in his last days that will turn into a journey of sorrow. Together we will stand at the foot of a cross where our hearts will break, and our hopes will be shattered.

Yet our journey does not end with Good Friday.

We will continue moving forward...

because

we know

that the story is far from over...