

I remember as a child on road trips we would recite Bible verses, and the first one we jumped at was verse 35 in this text, often translated “Jesus wept.” Two words: “Jesus wept.” As I reflected on this text, I realized that in addition to weeping almost every emotion is expressed in this story because it deals with what many human beings fear the most: death.

Lazarus is loved not only by his sisters, Mary and Martha, but by Jesus. Lazarus is also a friend to the disciples. Perhaps the disciples were relieved when at first Jesus says “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,” but Jesus then makes it clear that “Lazarus is dead.” Denial is often a part of facing down death. Upon hearing that Jesus is on the way, Martha, the “problem solver” of the sisters, goes out quickly to meet Jesus believing that he can solve this problem at a moments notice and the quicker the better. Can’t you just see Martha ever so politely implying that if Jesus had been where he should have been instead of dilly dallying around for two days, her brother would not have died. But she then insists that even now, it’s not too late; God will give Jesus whatever he asks.

Then Martha seems confused by Jesus’ response: “Your brother will rise again.” She thinks Jesus is just going to wait until Lazarus is resurrected with everyone else sometime later on. But Jesus says resurrection is going to happen now! At this point Martha decides she better run home for backup, and she tells Mary, a woman dear to Jesus heart, that “the Teacher is calling for you.” Mary is totally distraught at her brother’s death, but when she hears Jesus is calling for her, she runs out to him. I imagine her weeping, hardly able to talk, yet falling at Jesus feet, and like her sister, saying “if only you’d been here....” Then Jesus weeps.

Another emotion in this story is anger. While Jesus is trying to console Mary, there are some in the group who say, “Well, if he made a blind man see, couldn’t he have kept this man from dying.” In this lengthy passage (which I shortened for our readers today) there are implications that Jesus is both sorrowful about his friend’s death and angry because some in the crowd are unaware and accusatory of his motives. “What kind of miracle worker is this Jesus?” “If he can heal blind men, can’t he keep sick folks from dying?” As a pastor I have empathy for Jesus who is trying to address all these spiritual needs simultaneously: sorrow, anger, misunderstanding, denial, hope beyond hope. “Do something Jesus!” When we face down death, many emotions comes to the forefront.

So Jesus goes to the tomb and asks that the stone lying against it be removed. And then of all things, Martha, who just a little earlier almost demanded Jesus solve the problem of her brother’s death says: “wait a minute, it’s going to smell bad.” When we face down death, it usually does metaphorically smell bad. But Jesus is not thwarted by this; he prays and then proclaims: “Lazarus, come out!” Now Lazarus is bound up in strips of cloth. I picture this mummy-like figure barely able to move; his walk must be like that of a penguin taking baby steps. And then Jesus says, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

At a Western Regional Youth Event in Tacoma, Washington about 8 years ago, I saw this text dramatized. As the words of Jesus were repeated again and again, “Unbind him and let him go.” the strips of cloth were gradually removed, until finally the youth was free of the bondage of death. Jesus faces down death with the words: “Unbind him and let him go.” So the question for us is this: How do we face down death, not just the final death of our bodies, but all the little deaths between our birth and our dying.

How do we allow ourselves to be free so that we can truly live? We human beings have highly tuned coping mechanisms. We're great at avoidance, denial, distraction, especially if deep down we are afraid of what facing down death might mean. We might have to live! You've probably heard about folks who seem to be afraid of success; they're accustomed to failure and they know how to do failure. But when they get close to succeeding, they get so afraid, they retreat; they just don't know how to live!

This story comes as Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem to face down death for the last time. He's already in a heap of trouble and even the disciples know it by now. In the middle of this lengthy passage is verse 16 which I left out of the reading, but it is a pivotal verse that we will come back to. Here Thomas (later given the bad rap of being called "doubting Thomas"), says to the disciples: "Let us also go to Jerusalem, so that we may die with him." What courage he shows to face down death! It is this verse, that we will revisit on Maundy Thursday.

As a pastor I've been privileged and honored to be with families as they face down the death of their loved ones. I've seen the inconsolable weeping in the face of death. I've witnessed anger at the doctors, perhaps unspoken, but nevertheless there, "if only you'd been here on time." I've watched as families "problem solve" the illness and the circumstances with dedication and love. I've seen hopes for healing rise and fall. I've wept and I've waited with them. It is a holy sacrament.

But I've also been privileged and honored to be with people as they "face down" the little deaths of everyday living: feeling like they can't go on living because of divorce or abandonment, struggling to let go of the incapacitating fear of failure, losing a job (perhaps being unemployed for a long time), the relinquishing of the emotions that bind us up and keep us from joy, the deathlike exhaustion of a parent who somehow finds enough energy to face tomorrow. We move through life experiencing "little deaths," that threaten to overtake us; yet, God gives us people along the way, to help unbind all that restrains our living fully and faithfully and joyfully into God's future.

And even when the naysayers tell us: might as well let those dead parts of us stay dead because if we open them up, it's going to stink, Jesus says: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

Friday night I officiated at a memorial service for Sharla Ann U'ilani DuCommun, 43 years old. Sharla's two sisters, Sandra and Shari, planned an extraordinary celebration of their sister's life. Sharla had been born with a genetic disorder and given only a five year life expectancy; every day of her life she faced down death with courage, humor, and loving family and friends who would not allow her to be bound up with the clothing of death. The service included a video montage to the song "I Made It Through the Rain" and Sharla did just that. She would not be bound by fear of death; she was consumed by life. The family celebrated Sharla's life with their Hawaiian heritage of music, dance, poetry, and tribute. The final song was "I'll Remember You" sung by Sharla's cousin. I didn't personally know Sharla, but I will remember her as a shining example of facing down death.

We're moving towards Easter. But before then, in the following two weeks we have an opportunity to walk with Jesus and to face down death. We may try hard to avoid it; we may prefer to skip over death to Easter eggs and bunnies. But if we have Sharla's courage, we will walk through the rain, we will allow for personal introspection and relinquishment; we will face the powers that want to control us and this world rather than allow God's creation to be beautiful, and when Easter does finally come, God will call us forth from whatever entombs us, and we will arise to the glorious sunrise of new life and new beginnings. AMEN