

TWO CHRISTS
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

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John 11:1-44

It is a perfectly good English sentence. It has a subject and it has a verb, which is the minimum that any sentence needs. But it is the minimum: the subject is one word, and the verb is one word. It is the shortest verse in the Bible, and you know it: the Gospel of John, chapter eleven, verse thirty-five—“Jesus wept.”¹

Of course the subject of this shortest verse is Jesus. Jesus is the one around whom the whole gospel story revolves. Jesus is our Lord. So Jesus is the subject of this sentence.

It is the verb that brings us up short. We can imagine any number of verbs that might be applied to Jesus: Jesus rejoiced; Jesus healed; Jesus prayed. But the word is different, and unexpected: Jesus wept. What does it mean for us that Jesus wept?

To be fair, there is plenty of weeping in this story, for it is a story of death. Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, has died. So of course there is grief and weeping. That is really all we need to say: someone has died, so there are tears.

We read that Jesus wept. But at the beginning of this story he does not weep. In fact, at the beginning of this story he seems not even to be sad. He seems somehow immune to the grief, as if the death of this friend really doesn't affect him. When the word comes that Lazarus is sick, Jesus says: “This sickness is not unto death, but for God's glory.” And then, as if to prove his point, he stays where he is for two more days. His friend is sick, and he deliberately stays away. It seems almost uncaring.

¹ The NRSV has “Jesus began to weep,” which, while grammatically permissible, vitiates the simplicity the older, more familiar translation. In this sermon I'll stick with “Jesus wept.”

When Jesus does finally arrive, it is too late. Lazarus is dead. The delicate euphemisms that we use to speak of death are absent here: Martha says, “Lord, by now there is a stench—he’s been dead four days.” The story does not hide the reality of death.

Each sister in turn offers a gentle complaint to Jesus, using exactly the same words each time: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” If you had been here. But Jesus was not there. He deliberately had stayed away. Doesn’t he care?

They move to the tomb, passing by others who are weeping in grief. And as they do so, Jesus begins to reveal that in fact he cares, and cares deeply. The words pile up: “Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved . . . Jesus was again greatly disturbed . . . Jesus wept.” Jesus does feel, and feels deeply, as any human being feels when a friend has died. Jesus wept.

But unlike the others, Jesus is not powerless. Jesus goes to the tomb, and shouts with a loud voice: “Lazarus, come out.” The dead man appears, still wrapped in the clothes of death. Jesus says simply: “Unbind him, and let him go.”

It is almost as if there are two Christ in this story. The one is powerful and in control, the one who waits to make a theological point rather than go to his friend, the one who proclaims himself to be the resurrection and the life, the one who knows from the first that he has the power to raise Lazarus from the grave as evidence of God’s glory. That is one Christ.

But there is the other Christ, the one who is deeply moved, the one who is overcome by emotion, the one who weeps, as any human being weeps in the face of death.

Suppose Jesus were only one way or the other, but not both. Suppose he were only human, grieving in the death of his friend, shedding tears like us, but only like us. Suppose he were only human, powerless before death’s dominant darkness. He would care, but he would have no power.

Or suppose Jesus were the other way, all power but no passion, all strength but no sensitivity. Suppose he brought God’s power to earth, but did it in a way that was aloof, austere, removed.

The prevailing theologies of the Roman Empire thought of God in that way—aloof, uncaring, uninvolved in our world. Isn’t that the way God is supposed to be? If God gets

all involved in our world, if God starts caring, if God starts feeling our emotions, then, the reasoning went, God would no longer be God. A God who cares about what goes on in our world, a God who feels, a God who weeps—they had never heard of anything like that.

There are people in our world like that. They are the ones who tells us that it wouldn't be so bad if we'd just get a grip on ourselves, or tough it out, or look on the bright side. We may admire people like that for their discipline and iron will. But we would probably feel that such people could not understand our times of pain. Suppose Jesus were only like that?

Which sort of Jesus do we want, one who is in control or one who feels emotion, one who is strong or one who is compassionate?

A few weeks ago, in the middle of our unending national campaign to pick the next president of the United States, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton got a little teary. It was, as I remember it, up in New Hampshire. In response to a question about her motives for seeking the presidency, she started talking about her passion for this country, and she teared up, and her voice got a little shaky.

Unless you were on Mars, you probably saw the incident played and replayed on TV. It got all the pundits to pontificating. Do we want a president who shows emotion like that? We don't want a president who gets all soft and gooshey on us, do we? Doesn't the president need to be tough and strong when standing up against those other world leaders who stand against us?

But on the other hand, don't we want a president who cares, and who can articulate our emotions? Don't we want a leader who can express what we feel when the crisis comes—the Oklahoma City bombing, the crash of the space shuttle, 9/11. We don't want a leader in those times who is aloof, who tells us to buck up. We want one who cares.

No human candidate for president, in fact, no human being, does it perfectly. Sometimes we hide behind a tough façade when others need compassion, and other times we need to be strong, but dissolve in a puddle of emotion.

But then there is Jesus. He is strong, but he is also compassionate. He weeps, but he also has the power to overcome death. There are not two Christs, but one. The one who

weeps is the Lord. The Lord is the one who weeps. He is deeply troubled over the power of death, as we all are, but he has the power over death as none of us do.

Jesus weeps because he is with us, one of us. “His weeping with us means he is fighting for us.”² He grieves for his friend, as we do, and then he steps to the tomb and calls him out, and none of us can do that.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” he tells Martha. He means not just a resurrection that will begin at the last day. That’s how Martha sees it. But Jesus offers a life that begins here and now. Just today, we can believe in Jesus Christ, and begin to live the life that he intends for us all.

“Do you believe it?” he asks Martha. How about it—do you believe it? Jesus as Lord. Jesus as the resurrection and the life. You know what? You’re here today because, yes, you do believe it. You’ve been buffeted by the winds of this world, assaulted by the powers of death. And yet you’re here, because in some way, partial and imperfect, you do believe that Jesus is the Christ, the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in him, though they die, yet shall they live, and those who live and believe in this Christ will never die. You’re here because you believe that.

And so the one who weeps for his friend goes finally to where Lazarus is entombed, and cries out in all the anguish and power he possesses. He shouts with every ounce of love within him. “Lazarus, come out.” It is a loud shout, an enormous shout. Why, it is a shout that would wake the dead.³✠

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV. 2, p. 227.

³ K. C. Ptomey, “To Weep for Life.” Sermon at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN, March 21, 1999. K.C. is quoting Patrick Willson.