

“TEARS OF SORROW, TEARS OF JOY”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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All Saints' Sunday

Revelation 21:1-6a

John 11:32-44

Lazarus might have been Jesus' best friend. When we read in the Gospels about Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha, frequently their names are described by the words, “friends of Jesus.” We know that he liked to spend time with them, and often dined at their home. While so many others in scripture journeyed with Jesus, only a few were labeled “friends.”

And so it was, that Jesus, when we see him in this morning's Gospel lesson, has a broken heart, because his friend Lazarus has died. He stands, where so many of you in this room have stood this year, next to the body of his loved one who has struggled and died. And his heart is broken. No more will he enjoy the company of dear Lazarus. No more will he sit down at meal with him, or talk over life with him. The one with whom he shared such a deep friendship is gone, and Jesus does what all of us have done when our hearts are broken over the loss of a loved one – he wept.

One writer said it so beautifully, that in that moment when Jesus wept - “there it is, the full heart of God is on bold display.” (On-line, “Ministry Matters”)

The full heart of God that loves utterly and completely, that rejoices when we rejoice and mourns when we mourn. And oh, how we have needed to lean on that full heart of God, the full love of God this year because we have mourned a lot – we mourned the passing of fourteen members of our church this year, and countless others in all of our collective lives.

Jesus wept with us when we had to say goodbye to some very special people in our church family. One teddy bear of a man who took his beloved dog to nursing homes. One wonderful friend who took extra special care of the students on the school bus she drove for so many years. A couple of others who gave years of their lives in volunteer service to places like the Help Center and the Fire Company. Still a couple of others who loved to travel and took others along for the ride. Sadly, this year two sisters, and unbelievably sadly, a mother and her three children. Grief beyond words. And then there was a Marine, turned evangelist who drew others to Christ through his story.

They were all special, each one, and we, like Jesus, wept when they died, and sometimes still weep, over their loss.

Yet, the story doesn't end there. It didn't end there for Lazarus, and it didn't end there for our loved ones. Jesus stood at the grave of his friend, and called him out, telling others to "unbind him and let him go."

And when our loved ones drew their last breath, they too were unbound and let go into the arms of the God who created them. They were unbound from all of their sadness and sorrow, all of their struggles and pain, and entered the gates of heaven, where there is perfect love and peace.

So, though our hearts were broken over their deaths, and we wept tears of sorrow, we also wept, as followers of Christ, tears of joy over their entrance into eternal life. Writer David Lose has written that, "It is from the light of Easter dawn that we confront the darkness of death. And it is from the other side of Christ's resurrection that we gain the courage, not to deny death, but to defy it, to defy its ability to overshadow and distort our lives, for the Risen Christ has promised us that death does not have the final word."

He continues: "Death no longer terrifies us. Promised a share in Christ's resurrection, we can look even death in the eye and not blink. For this reason, while we mourn the death of our loved ones, we also celebrate their triumph, their victory, as they now rest from their labors and live with Christ in glory." (On-line, "Look Twice," David Lose, textweek.com)

All of these whom we have loved and who have died have now seen Jesus face to face. Their pain is gone, their struggle is over. They know peace and joy such as we'll never know until we join them in the kingdom of heaven.

So today, tears of sorrow we weep for ourselves, because of the tremendous hole in our lives that their leaving left, are mingled in with tears of joy for them, as they revel in eternal life in heaven with God and all the saints who went before them.

Today, we thank God for Jesus, who knows our sorrows and our joys, and walks with us through them all; but most of all, we thank God for these saints – named and unnamed – whose lives have touched us in ways that will never be forgotten. We entrust them to God's care and keeping for all the days to come.

In a moment we'll see a video remembering the lives of our church members who have died in the past year. Following that, we will pray the prayer in the bulletin together. And then, we'll sing the wonderful "Hymn of Promise," during which you can bring your flowers forward to the vases and remember, through your tears of sorrow and tears of joy, the loved ones you have lost.

So now, let us remember the saints of our church who left us this year.