

Jesus meets Mary on his way to Bethany just after he has spoken to Martha of their brother Lazarus' death. When he sees Mary weeping, he is "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." When he is invited to the tomb, he "[begins] to weep."

In ancient Greek, there is a verb tense that indicates an "action begun and continued." This is the tense used in today's gospel lesson to describe Jesus' weeping on his way to Lazarus' tomb. In some versions of this account, the translation is, simply, "Jesus wept." This is the verse that Judy Lorkowski chose as her confirmation verse. Can you guess why? Because it's the shortest verse in the Bible! I hate to disappoint Judy, but that's no longer true. Recently, translators have sought more precise language. As they searched for a phrase more faithful to the ancient Greek, they settled upon this translation: "Jesus began to weep." That is to say, "Jesus began weeping—and continued to weep."

Jesus began to weep at the tears of his friends Mary and Martha—and at his own grief over Lazarus' death. Arriving at Lazarus' tomb, he continued weeping. Experiencing the loss of his friend—and beholding Mary and Martha's loss, Jesus began to weep—and continued weeping.

Jesus begins to weep whenever God's people are weeping. He weeps when you weep, over a love gone wrong, a lost job, an unpayable mortgage, a cancer diagnosis, the death of a parent or spouse or friend, worry about a child. Jesus began to weep at the tragedy of 1200 Jewish deaths on October 7, 2023, and he has continued weeping at the loss of deaths of Palestinians since then—Al Jazeera reporting nearly 44,000, ABC 41,000. Conservative estimates count the loss of life in Sudan in the same period due to violence and hunger at 110,000, with 26 million people currently experiencing acute food insecurity. In other words, 26 million don't know where their next meal will come from.

Jesus began to weep over the deep divides in our own country—and he continues to weep. He began to weep—and continues weeping—with those suffering from 24 climate disaster events in the U.S. so far this year. Jesus begins to weep—and continues weeping—whenever someone is suffering. He weeps with those who are mourning. He weeps with those who have lost their homes or their livelihoods. He weeps with those who bear the scars of racial or gender or economic injustice, with those who are hungry or homeless or angry or lonely or cold. Jesus continues weeping, whenever people encounter suffering.

When does Jesus weep with you, my friend? In the loss of a child, a parent, a partner, a friend? In the devastation of a fire or a flood? At the bad news you received at the doctor's office? In your longing to have a child? As you let go of your house of five decades? In the countless rejections you have endured in your job search? In your fears about your child's safety at college, or your own safety in your neighborhood? In the depression or anxiety that claims your loved one—or that haunts you? Jesus begins to weep, my friends, when the bad news comes or the pain returns or the fear starts or the depression settles in, and Jesus continues to weep with you.

Elie Wiesel, a Hungarian Jew who survived the Holocaust, writes about his boyhood experiences in three concentration camps: Auschwitz, Buna, and Buchenwald. In his novel, Night, he tells of being forced to watch the hanging of a child, whose slight build prolonged his dying. Wiesel writes, “For more than half an hour [the boy] stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes.... Behind me, I heard a man asking, “Where is God? Where is He now?” And I heard a voice within me answer him: “Where is he? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows....”

Maybe Weisel is saying, “A God who would allow such a thing to happen is no God; He must be a dead God, impotent, weak, helpless.” When I read his story, I think: “Where is God? God is here, hanging on this gallows, stooping to suffer with this child—and his parents—and those who watch him die. God, in Jesus, is here, with us, entering into our human struggles, weeping with us when we weep. God is here, with us, enduring our troubles with us. God is here, with us, weeping with us.”

That, my friends, is the good news of God in Jesus Christ. God, in Jesus, hangs on the gallows for us; he hung on the cross to give us eternal life, and God, in Jesus, hangs around you and me. God enters our human lot. If you are financially stable, God hangs around with you, and if you are struggling to make ends meet, God hangs around with you. God hangs around with you if you are well, and if you are ill, if you are scheduled for surgery or recovering or awaiting test results or living with pain. God stays with you if your mortgage is paid off—or if you can’t pay your rent. God stays with you if you are morally upright—or if you have sinned, even grievously. God stays with you if you are single or happily married or getting divorced or longing for an intimate relationship. God stays with you if you keep your finances organized—or if you fail miserably. Along the way, when you are sad or worried or grieving or distraught or afraid, God begins weeping—and continues weeping—with you.

God doesn’t promise that life will always be easy or that you’re guaranteed a regular income or an always-happy marriage or perfect children or a stress-free job or a clutter-free house. No. God promises, instead, that God will always be with you, that God will hang around with you, no matter what happens to you, no matter how you feel, no matter how well you are coping—or not. God is always near, ready to endure your suffering, to bear your struggles, to celebrate your joys, to be present in the midst of your fears. And whenever you are weeping, for whatever reason, God in Jesus begins to weep with you—and God continues to weep with you, as long as you weep. AMEN