

## A Storytelling Commentary on John 11:32-44

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

This is one of the most graphically ambiguous stories in regard to Jesus' identity in the whole of the gospel tradition. Jesus here is supremely human and at the same time, in his raising of Lazarus, demonstrates the power of God. So this is a particularly rich story in relation to the characterization of Jesus and that's where I would suggest that you especially pay attention.

Now Mary begins this story. She comes to where Jesus was, sees him, and kneels at his feet and says the same thing that Martha said to him when she came and met him earlier in the story: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." Whenever there's a repetition of exact words like this in the biblical narrative, it is in order to make contrasts. In this case my sense is that Martha's question has an edge of critique to it. Martha is standing and speaks with a tone of judgment or criticism. Mary's response is to kneel at Jesus' feet and to weep. Hers is more an expression of grief.

The description that follows is an inside view of Mary's grief, of the grief of the Jews who came with her, and of Jesus' grief. I don't like the translation "greatly disturbed" because disturbed in English has the connotations of being a little wacko or of being out of sync or out of control. Jesus is troubled in spirit, he is grieving in spirit. A number of other translations are possible. Probably troubled is best, but whatever conveys his deep grief and his being deeply moved—overcome with emotion beyond his control—that's what you want to convey.

The most important thing is the tone or the emotion that you convey. This is an inside view of Jesus seeing Mary weeping, seeing the Jews who came with her also weeping, and of his being deeply moved and joining them in their grief. That's the tone of his question, "Where have you laid him?" It's the tone of their reply, "Lord come and see." And it's the tone to use for "Jesus wept." Now in the NRSV, the translation reads, "began to weep" which is a very literal translation of the verb. It's not inaccurate, but and is unnecessary. The sentence is stronger if it's simply two words: "Jesus wept."

The response of the Jews is a response of recognition about seeing how much Jesus loved Lazarus. Others are cynical and have a more detached response. This is an expression of two of the possible responses in John's audience. Some of them would recognize Jesus' statement as a sign of his love, but others might be more cynical and wonder whether he couldn't have kept this man from dying.

Jesus is still greatly moved in spirit and came to the tomb. His command is both strong and direct, "Take away the stone." But it also may have some of the tone of his overcoming grief. You'll find it as you work with telling it.

Martha again has a somewhat critical role in the story and says, "Lord, don't roll away the stone. There will already be a stench because he's been dead for four days." Jesus' response to her is both a response of critique but also simply a statement of fact, "Didn't I say to you that if you believed you would see the glory of God."

Jesus' prayer to God is a prayer that is expressed by the storyteller, perhaps with eyes lifted, but it is clearly addressed to those who are present: the crowd that Jesus is addressing. The address to the crowd is the address to the audience to whom you are speaking as the storyteller. It may be that you will want to gesture to them and to include them and to make explicit that identification of their being addressed as the ones who were present when Jesus spoke this prayer.

Jesus' command to Lazarus is in a loud voice, so be sure to do it loudly. You can focus this by thinking of Lazarus in the tomb. He's got to hear this clearly. You're calling to Lazarus. The description of his coming out is a combination of wonder and amazement at his coming back to life. Jesus' concluding statement is a statement of freedom, "Let him go! Unbind him and let him go!" It is a declaration of liberation from being bound by the power of death.

This story is full of intrigue, intimacy, conflict, and amazing power. Tell it with the spirit of the resurrection.