My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God who reveals truths to our Spirits and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.
 We all know that in our theology that Jesus is both human and divine. His divinity is on full display in the Gospel of John: Chapters 1-9 are called the “Book of Signs” for a reason. But what about his humanity? What are some biblical examples of Jesus being one of us? (take all answers). For my 2 cents, “Jesus wept” is pretty convincing evidence of his humanity—Jesus experiences sadness and grief. It’s good to know that the man cried. He’s one of us.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany after Lazarus dies, he weeps. Some neighbors say, “See how he loved him!” (11:36). I’ve no doubt that Jesus loved his friend. He seems to have spent time dining in the home of these three siblings, maybe just hanging out for a while in a setting where he could let his hair down. He knows Mary, Martha, and their brother better than many other characters described in the Gospels.

As a pastor, I’ve done about 30 funerals by now at the small churches I’ve served. None of them are easy, because they all involve folks that I love deeply. And the closer those deaths are to our bloodline, the more they can afflict us with lingering grief. Some deaths affect us more than others, don’t they? See how he loved him, our Gospel says. Bethany literally means “house of affliction.” Jesus was constantly walking into various states of affliction, and we’re not always talking lepers here. And they say Jesus wept. But why?

Our Gospel asks the question we would have asked if we’d been alive back then. They ask, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (11:37). It’s a fair question that echoes over millennia, not to mention on the lips of my own agnostic friends. If God is all-powerful, God would not allow the kinds of suffering we see, whether it’s personal or global, they say. If Jesus has it in him to bring storms on a sea to a standstill, explain the recent earthquake in Turkey, or the tsunamis in Japan and Indonesia that accounted for so much suffering? If he fed 5,000 with a little boy’s little lunch, why does anyone anywhere in the world go to bed hungry at night? If he healed that blind guy in the town down the road, why doesn’t he show up here in Bethany and work his magic?

We seek God’s goodness in the face of so much want and death and suffering in the world. The technical term for this is theodicy, and the Book of Job addresses this one head on. But we’re not talking about Job today, we’re here at Bethany wondering why Jesus was late. Neighbors echo the grieving sisters, repeated word-for-word by each: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21, 32). In the immediate aftermath of a death, is there any explanation that satisfies?

No explanation is ever offered for Jesus’ taking his time getting to Lazarus. He lingers “two days longer in the place where he was” after hearing the news Lazarus was ill (11:6) and finally shows up four days after the funeral (11:17). But did we notice that as this episode unfolds, Jesus says something odd to his disciples: “This illness will not end in death” (11:4). Either this statement is a classic misdiagnosis—like the tears, a missed social cue perhaps strengthens Jesus’ humanity—or something else is going on below the surface. In John’s Gospel, something else is always going on below the surface.

If we’d been here, ask the sisters, and what person of faith hasn’t wanted certainty of explanation while living with tragedy? Congregationalists like to talk about new life and new hope in God in all kinds of scenarios and life situations; but for the right here, right now, in the agonies of death, does that work? Martha is hurting and searching. And Jesus counters with a mini-lecture about the resurrection and questioning whether she really believes it (11:25–26, and again at the tomb in 11:40). We can’t go back, we can’t have our earthly loved one again. That may be all that there is, all that we have.

These details—a late arrival, a terse response, a prayer aimed at impertinent neighbors—all kind of leave us thinking whether Jesus’ tears are misinterpreted. Notice how Jesus is “greatly disturbed” on either side of his weeping (11:33, 38). The Greek verb in both instances, means literally “to snort with anger.” You might imagine a horse pawing the earth and snorting before busting loose. Men do that, don’t they, and to me that’s more of the human Jesus coming out.

We’ve all been angry at death before, most all of us tearfully angry at the injustice of it all. But this old story implies that Jesus’ tears are more than just tears of human grief for an old family friend who died prematurely. Jesus seems to be weeping on the way to Lazarus’s tomb not only from sorrow but also because he himself is largely misunderstood, and he is not all that happy about it.

Wherever we are—even here in Greenland—none are spared. We all live in towns called “house of affliction,” filled with innocents who die unfairly. Just read the plaques on the walls of our sanctuary, and the tears will flow, I guarantee it. And we’ve all heard from relatives, strangers and friends who say, “If your God has the power to change things and can’t or won’t, then I choose not to believe.” The neighbors of Lazarus from this old story still call out on every corner of every town even today and ask why. The God who once upon a time opened a man’s eyes couldn’t be bothered to prevent this tragedy. This question is a small step away from another: Well, what’s he good for, anyway?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

The hopeless and tardy Jesus walks straight into the tomb of Lazarus. Both his absence (perceived by the sisters) and his confounding uselessness (by the neighbors) are given fresh perspective with six powerful words: “Unbind him, and let him go”.

Tears that won’t seem to stop often accompany crippling sorrow for those we especially love. Inevitable questions about Jesus and his purpose stir into the messy mix of conflicting emotions. But this old story offers another perspective. Jesus weeps, but he refuses to be jerked around by death’s timetable. He talks back to death and boldly walks right toward it—and not only into the tomb of Lazarus. Bethany is just two miles from Jerusalem, and he knows his time is short.

All that we have is to know that we cannot control everything, that we have to trust to get through, not around, not over or under, events in our lives that leave us leveled. We come here to see that following where Jesus leads the way, his disciples are slowly liberated from death’s great and paralyzing fear because they know that even in death there are questions of life. “Where have you laid him”, asks Jesus. “Come and See” says Mary. Do we see the reversal in our grief? Do we understand that in just a few days, those questions are asked again, but the answers are profoundly different?

As we face the tombs of others, not to mention our own, this is exactly what Jesus is good for—eclipsing even the expectation of a possible miracle. Our bindings and expectations are so strong. Help us, Lord, to know differently as we read your word this day and each day and bring it into our lives. Unbind us, Lord. Let us go.

Thanks be to God, Amen.