

“Lord, if you had only been here, my brother wouldn’t have died”

“Lord, if you had only been here, I would have been kept safe.

“Lord, if you had only been here, I would have done the right thing.

“Lord, if you had only been here, I would have resisted picking up that drink.

“Lord, if you had only been here, my child wouldn’t be sick.

“Lord, if you had only been here, the accident wouldn’t have happened.

... my father wouldn’t have died when I was so young.

... my grandson would have won the battle against addiction.

... I wouldn’t be feeling so alone.

“Lord, if you had only been here, this bad thing would not have happened.

Many of us blame God when bad things happen. We believe that God could have prevented that bad thing and somehow chose not to, as Jesus did in our story, by purposefully waiting to arrive in Bethany until after Lazarus’ death. We often leave the church or religion or our relationship with God because we cannot understand how a God who is good could let bad things happen to good people, and we therefore conclude God that is not good and we want to get as far away from God as we can.

I found myself saying another version of “Lord, if you had only been there”, when, 4 months after my mother died, Sophie, our dog of 14 years died, and the first words on my heart were “What else are you going to take from me, God?” “If you had only been there, my already all-consuming grief would not become additionally overwhelming.

Martha runs out and intercepts Jesus. I can almost imagine her quivering lips and shaking hands as she grabs him by the shoulders and blurts out “Lord, if you had only been here, my brother would not have died!” She restrains the tears from spilling from her eyes, allowing grief to be expressed as red-hot anger, and accuses Jesus for coming too late. She knows he could have healed her brother, the one whom Jesus loved, he surely would have done it for them, for he was close friends with their family. Surely, Jesus would have saved him. And why did he take so long? What could have been more important than hearing her plea for his help. And she knows that, even now, with Lazarus’ body in the darkened tomb, Jesus has a special ear to God and God would do whatever Jesus asks, so hope begins to rise again in her heart that a miracle may still happen. Jesus holds her anger and her anguish, and focuses her attention on the gift of his delay, the glory of God soon to be revealed, as they talk about Lazarus rising again, and she proclaims he will rise again the last day.

It’s helpful here to step aside for a moment to focus in on what the Jews believed at this time about life after death. By the time John’s gospel was written, the belief system of the Pharisees, not the Sadducees, had become entwined with rabbinic Judaism. Judaism was no longer associated with Temple worship, since the temple had been destroyed by the Romans, and the rabbinic Jews believed in the resurrection, in life after death. It was never the focus of their living, for that was obedience to the Torah as an expression of their relationship with God, and resurrection was never seen as a reward for a life well-lived, but they did understand resurrection to be on the last day, the judgment day, not here and now. Martha believed in a

future resurrection, the one we refer to when we sing that uplifting song, “And I will raise you up on the last day.” So, when Jesus tells her he’s the resurrection and life, in the present tense, she isn’t able to shift her thinking, to go beyond the bounds of her current understanding to comprehend what he is saying in this bold statement.

You can almost hear the wall she’s building in her mind, protecting her status quo, preventing her from going into this other place, of something new. She wants to believe that the waiting is over, that the fullness of this eternal life could be felt now, lived now. But the idea is too odd. She shakes her head to free her mind from the confusion settling in, and she turns to find Mary. Mary seems to understand these things that Martha herself cannot. Mary always wants to sit at Jesus’ feet, not doing anything or saying anything, just being there, except that last time, that odd occurrence when Mary actually *did* do something for Jesus, but it was so strange, Martha had quickly dismissed it. Now the image comes flooding back in her mind, Mary lavishly pouring this bottle of oil, of nard, on his feet, embarrassingly wiping the oil with her hair, maybe even kissing his feet. It felt so intimate. Martha immediately went back into the kitchen, for she understood something different was happening that she wouldn’t be able to comprehend. The mundane task of washing up the dinner dishes gave her comfort from her distress.

In our story, Martha searches out Mary, who runs to Jesus, kneels at his feet, and begins to weep. She says the exact same words, “Lord, if you had only been here”. Maybe it’s her humble posture, or the spiritual energy that has always existed between them, but she understands more clearly now what she always knew somehow, that Jesus is more than a healer, more than someone who has the ear of God, that resurrection is not something that will happen later, but is present now, in this person of Jesus. Her words, “Lord, if you had only been here”, express the truth she knows about Jesus’ upcoming death. That was the meaning of her anointing him, she was preparing him for his own death, and now, with these words, “Lord, if you had only been here”, she’s inviting him to become the resurrection and the life – which is only possible by his entering the realm of grief they are experiencing and facing the enormous stone rolled against his friend’s tomb, all of which will prepare him to face his own death.

Mary understands the truth that unless the person of “I am the resurrection and the life” enters into the realm of grief and death, then those who physically die will lose touch with God’s love, for Jesus hasn’t been there yet, into the land of the dead. Their physical death would become also their spiritual death. Mary is part of the plan to change that. She knows that only if Jesus is present to his friends, the ones he will lay down his life for, in grief and death, will they be sustained in God’s love, through the destruction of the body. Jesus is on track now to bring divine love into a place where it had not been before, into the realm of physical death, so that the spiritual connection with God, our eternal life, will be available on both sides of what we can perceive as a thin line between life or death, or as that solid rock blocking the entrance of the tomb, that which separates the living from the dead.

This moment of transformation for Jesus happens when he begins to cry. The Greek translation supports the idea that it’s not just that he sheds a few tears and then he catches himself and regroups. No, this is lament, this is wailing, this is the kind of grief that makes you want to

throw yourself down on the bed and pray you never have to get up again. With Mary's invitation to "Come and see", we realize Jesus was not exempt from the Valley of the Shadow of Death and confronts death's full horror. Theologian Karl Barth says that "this passage is the premier manifestation of God's solidarity with suffering humanity. For Jesus looks death soberly in the face before he banishes it." Jesus understands the apparent domination that death holds over frightened and aching people, and he weeps, and prepares himself to take dominion over life and death, through entering into his own death.

Jesus had to make a very hard choice four days ago: he could have come to Bethany. He wanted to come, he wanted to heal his beloved Lazarus, he wanted to give this family who had taken him in as a brother the gift of health, but he chose the gift of delay, for now. With the death of Lazarus, he entered into grief in a way which means that he knows our depths of grief, and that means everything to us. It is what makes our tears and heartache holy, the fact that Jesus knows it too, and is inseparable from it.

And Jesus is now ready to enter into his own death, for Bethany, the raising of Lazarus, is his last stop before Jerusalem. He does this so we will find him on that side of life too. Now there is nothing, anywhere, that can ever separate us from God. This is the Easter message.

And it means that the same eternal life we are promised to encounter in death is available to us now, in life. That's what Mary understood that Martha didn't. It's not just on the last day that we are raised up. It's every day that we live and believe.

We can live without believing, without that spiritual connection, that touch of eternal life. But if we don't have it in life, our story tells us we won't have after life.

We can believe without really living, without seeking and serving Christ in all persons, without seeing the newness offered to us, by building walls around what our mind can fathom right now.

But we can believe and live, when we know the resurrection is not just a future happening but a present reality. We know that resurrection is present in the Word, is present in the Body and Blood of Christ we will share, is present in our community, in our searching and struggling, in our grief, and in our joy. When we participate in the union of God now, we enter eternal life now, and though physical death will come, spiritual death will not; we will continue to live in a transformed way.

When we speak our version of "Lord, if only you had been here", it can be said as an accusation, as a complaint, as a disappointed believer, and we can walk away from life with God here and now. Or when we speak our version of "Lord, if you had only been here", it can be said as an invitation to Jesus, the Christ, the eternal One, to "come and see", to enter into our experience and make it holy. May we choose the one which leads us to eternal life, experienced in this world and beyond. For that's what Easter is all about. Amen.