

“Martha in Mourning”

John 11:17-22 Lent5A 4-2-17

Think back to the day, or week, in which you lost someone close to you in death. Whether suddenly due to accident or crime, or slowly due to illness. Perhaps a spouse, parent, child, or a sibling like Lazarus. What feelings did you have, or still have today? Think about how you might imagine if would feel.

Now go back to the town of Bethany when Jesus lived, at the home of Martha and Mary. They have just lost Lazarus their brother to some illness. While he was sick you knew your family friend Jesus was capable of healing him. “If only he had been there”, they wondered to each other.

In tragedy the driver involved in a fatal crash might wonder, “What if ” I had not been texting; what if I had seen the stop light; “What if” goes with “I wish I had.” “I wish I had said, ‘I love you’ more often”. “I wish my last words had not been in anger”. “I wish I had shared my faith”. Martha wished for more time with Lazarus. If only Jesus had been here.

The “what if’s” and “wish I had’s” are painful because death feels final. We don’t get that person back. “What if” has no answer. “I wish I had” mourns lost opportunity.

However, if you are Martha, you don’t mourn without hope. Your friend is the Son of God. You firmly believe that he can do anything. When He tells you that anyone who believes in Him, will live, even after he dies, you believe Him. While you always believed in the resurrection, however, you don’t expect Lazarus to rise today.

Martha was familiar with today’s Psalm and prayed, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord”. “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.” She had heard the synagogue teacher talk about Ezekiel’s prophecy where God caused breath to enter dry and dead bones and make them live. She would not yet know Paul’s encouragement to the Romans that the Spirit of God that lived in Lazarus would give life to his mortal body.

But we know those promises. We know Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God, who can do anything he decides to do. Yet, loss still distresses us. It is hard to face death, which will separate us for what seems like forever. We know Jesus feels our sorrow because the Bible’s shortest verse says so much about him: Jesus wept.

Yet another emotion of Jesus that gives more encouragement. John says twice that Jesus was “deeply moved”. This is a visible yet controlled reaction of indignation. The word applies to the “snorting of a horse” reacting to something unpleasant. It is anger, disgust, and exasperation. You might show it when you suddenly slap the steering wheel, stomp your foot, or let out an inarticulate grunt or groan. The best guess is that Jesus expressed anger at death itself and people’s response of hopeless sorrow.

But as his weeping is not hopeless wailing, neither is his groaning. Rather, it stirs him to do what he came to do for Lazarus. He waited to make sure Lazarus was dead, wrapped in burial cloths, and entombed behind a solid stone door. For if he is good and dead, so then making him good and alive will give all glory to God.

Martha’s mourning reminds us that in the bleakest circumstance, in the most hopeless of situations, we don’t have to see God act first for us to believe. What did she know then of Jesus’ cross and resurrection? What did she know of his absolute power to make happen then what she only expected on the Last Day?

She didn’t know then what we know now. Yet she believed, because she trusted in the word of Christ who said, “I am the resurrection and the life” and that as the Son of God that he had the power to do anything.

If she believed so much with so little evidence, how much more can we, with so much more proof of God’s power, believe that death is not final! How much less should we fear death, for such fear is a fruit of sin!

We who do have Paul’s testimony can know that for those believing in the atoning death and resurrection of Christ, there is no condemnation. We don’t fear death because for there is no punishment awaiting us, only life. There will be no more sorrow, or tears, or mourning.

If death and loss upset us, know it deeply moves our Lord as well. He knows our sorrows, but he has the power to overcome death. He did it for Lazarus out of human compassion for his sisters. He did it for Lazarus as a divine demonstration to all people of his absolute power over death.

And He conquered death, the greatest enemy, to show that He is able to overcome the enemies we face now. He can heal relationships, break the power of addictions, revive churches, restore faith, and convert atheists, skeptics and idolaters to true faith.

When Martha mourned, she did so with faith. When we mourn, may it be with faith that such sorrow is temporary. May we boldly confess that because Christ lives we too will live. As to the “what ifs” and “I wish I had’s” they are forgiven and forgotten. We stand, as the Psalmist says, for the Lord does not mark iniquities.

And one more thing: we are not alone. The dry bones of Ezekiel’s vision was a whole army of believers. God’s promise is not just for you, but for all who die in the faith. Martha and so many millions more, mourn no longer. Amen.