

Jesus Promises

The scripture reading this morning is a story of suffering—deep, heart-wrenching suffering. It’s about a tightly-knit family with deep love for each other—two sisters & a brother—Martha & Mary & Lazarus. This family lived in Bethany, a little town just outside Jerusalem. And they were close friends with Jesus. Jesus had, no doubt, stayed at their home on numerous occasions, enjoying good food and deep conversations. They wished that Jesus could spend more time with them, but most of his ministry had been in the villages in the northern part of Israel, in Galilee. And that’s where Jesus is when Lazarus becomes seriously ill. Martha & Mary are worried about their brother—things don’t look good—and they send someone to travel north and try to find Jesus and pass on the message about Lazarus’ condition. However, Jesus is delayed, and by the time he gets to Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for 4 days. His sisters’ grief and suffering is inconsolable.

And we can understand. We’ve experienced that kind of grief & suffering. It’s happened in many ways. Sometimes, it is the death of a close family member or friend after a long and difficult illness. Sometimes, it is a sudden death that comes crashing down upon us. It could be an unexpected health crisis or a painful chronic illness. It could be news which destroys our world as we knew it. We may be devastated by something that happens at work or within the family. But whatever the cause, our lives are filled with the deepest pain.

The Bible offers hope. As we look closely at the story of Lazarus, we see 4 specific ways that Jesus brings hope in the midst of Martha & Mary’s suffering—4 specific ways that he brings hope in our suffering as well.

First of all, Jesus comes. Jesus comes to Martha & Mary, to their home in Bethany. He is there with them... listening, speaking, grieving with them. (Do you remember the shortest verse in the Bible? It’s right here, John 11: 35: “Jesus wept.”) Jesus comes, with empathy, caring, and love.

And here’s the amazing promise this holds for us—Jesus comes to us, each one of us, in the midst of our suffering. He finds us where we are—just as he found Martha in the street outside her home. Jesus comes and weeps with us, and listens to the pain that fills our hearts. He understands our emptiness, our anger, our regrets, our confusion. And he reaches out to us with caring and with love.

Do you remember what Martha did? When she heard he was coming, she went out to meet him. That must have taken a lot of fortitude. In that day and age, if you were grieving, you stayed at home. People came

to you. But Martha, gathered all her reserves of energy & inner strength, and went out to wait for Jesus—peering down the road, searching the faces of travelers as they came into sight around that far bend, until at last she saw Jesus. That’s an important reminder to us. In times of need, in times of suffering, it helps to be looking for Jesus, to be listening for his voice... to expect that Jesus will come and speak to our heart, just as he promised when he said “I will be with you always, even until the end of the world.” (Matthew 28: 20)

However, there’s a problem with Jesus’ coming to Bethany—or at least Martha & Mary (and all those with them) are struggling with this problem—Jesus doesn’t get there in time. If only he had gotten there earlier... if only... If only he had come right away, when he got the message, Lazarus would still be living and Jesus could have healed him, restoring him to health. But now it’s too late, Lazarus is dead. Jesus responds, not by getting caught up in the regrets of the past, but by making a bold promise for the future: “Your brother will rise again.”

We can relate to Martha & Mary here. So often, we have been praying for God to intervene—for God to come and heal our loved one, for God to remove a burden from our lives, for God to fix a problem we are facing. Yet sometimes, it doesn’t happen the way we hope it will. And we struggle with why God hasn’t answered our prayers. We are left confused and hurting. Yet this scripture points us to the future: “Your brother will rise again.” And for us, God points us to the future—God has a future plan for us. Remember the words of Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV): For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

And this leads us to the 2nd aspect of this account of the raising of Lazarus. Jesus now makes two promises. In verse 25, we read his words to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Let’s look at each one of these promises in more detail. First of all, Jesus promises that he is the resurrection. What does he mean by this? Resurrection is defined as coming back to life. Jesus is promising that he has the power to make the dead alive again. He continues in verse 25: “He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” And Jesus proves he has this power, by resurrecting Lazarus. Lazarus has been dead and buried for 4 days, but Jesus speaks with the power & authority of God: “Lazarus, come out” and Lazarus is restored to life. You can imagine the total amazement & joy of Martha & Mary, when their brother comes back to life. Nothing like that has ever happened before! They rejoice in the power of God at work!

It is only a few weeks later when Jesus was arrested by the authorities, condemned to death, and crucified. And once again, it seemed that the forces of evil & death were victorious. But, God raised Jesus on Easter morning, and Jesus' promise, "I am the resurrection" took on new meaning. It wasn't just about Lazarus. It was about each one of us. Death is not the end. God is stronger than death. At the end of our life on earth, God will raise us to new life in heaven.

This is a promise for us in the midst of our struggles, in the midst of our grief. From a human perspective, our lives are torn apart when someone we love dies, but because of Jesus' promise, we live in hope, knowing that we will be reunited again in heaven.

There is a second promise here as well: Jesus says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the life"—what does he mean by that? He goes on to say, "whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11: 26). Now this is puzzling, because we know that every human being will die. So Jesus must not be talking about physical death & physical life. Instead, he's talking about spiritual life. In the previous chapter of John, in John 10:10 we read Jesus' promise, "I came that [you] might have life, and have it abundantly." That's what Jesus means by life: abundant life—life that is meaningful, and fulfilling, and good. And Jesus promises he is the source of that kind of life. Jesus invites us to live in him... connected with him.

Now, that sounds easy enough, but most of us find it challenging to maintain our focus on Jesus, to truly live connected to him. We get distracted by all the tasks & responsibilities of our daily life. Our problems & struggles pull us away from him. We can find ourselves feeling very much alone, with an emptiness inside our hearts. But Jesus promises he will give us abundant life, when we live in him.

So what do we need to do to live in Jesus, to live close to him? The path is different for each of us. It might be prayer... or worship... or meditation... or Bible reading... or music... or time outdoors surrounded by creation... or photography... or service projects... that connect you most strongly with Jesus. Probably some mix of a number of these... Think about it, what is your personal recipe for the ingredients of a life with Jesus?

The key thing is to make Jesus a priority in our lives. It won't happen unless we make a commitment to getting connected to Jesus and then make a commitment to staying connected with Jesus. And it's a gradual

process. Slowly, little by little, we open ourselves more and more to Jesus' presence in our daily lives. Moreover, we can expect ups & downs along the way. For most people, it's not like our relationship with Jesus just goes smoothly, effortlessly, from amazing, to more amazing, to truly amazing. No, usually just when things seem to be going along pretty well, we hit a speed bump and suddenly we're feeling just as low as when we began... maybe even lower. That's when we're tempted to give up. But if we persevere, if we plod ahead, one foot in front of the other, sometimes even just going through the motions... eventually we'll get to the other side of this desert place we're in and rediscover abundant life in Jesus.

That's the promise of this scripture reading about the raising of Lazarus. In the midst of the problems & suffering of life, Jesus comes to us. Jesus promises that he is the resurrection. Jesus promises that he is the source of abundant life. And then, one more thing, and this is the 4th aspect of hope. Jesus invites us to believe in him.

Do you remember how that happened in Jesus' conversation with Martha? After Jesus says to her, "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." ...after he makes this amazing promise, Jesus continues, "Do you believe this?"

Wow! I wasn't expecting such a direct question there—a question that goes right to the heart of the matter: "Do you believe this?" Now, Jesus isn't asking about Martha's list of religious beliefs. He's asking something far deeper: Does she believe in him?

And Jesus asks this same question of us: "Do you believe in me?"

Think about it... who are the people you have believed in during your life? maybe a parent or grandparent or spouse or family member... maybe a teacher or mentor or coach... maybe a counselor or a role model or even a famous person...

Why is it that we believe in them? And how do we grow in our belief in them? Think what it's like to spend time with them, to learn from the way they do things, to try to copy the parts of their life that are exemplary, to trust in them, to turn to them, enjoying the richness of life together.

That's what Jesus is inviting us to. To turn to him. To believe in him.

And so, I think back to the song that today's worship service began with. The opening words could have been written for Martha & Mary... and they could have been written for us:

In this time of desperation, when all we know is doubt & fear, there is only One foundation...

And Jesus comes to us, and Jesus promises he is the resurrection, and Jesus promises he is the source of abundant life, and Jesus asks: "Do you believe?"

"Do you believe?"