

3-22-26 sermon

John 11.1-45

When was the last time you said, “If only...”?

“If only I hadn’t waited to go see the doctor...”

“If only I’d taken just a bit more time on that...”

“If only I hadn’t taken the first job offer I got...”

“If only I *had* taken that phone call...”

“If only I’d listened a bit closer to what they were trying to tell me...”

“If only I had been there...”

There are whole worlds of pain and grief contained in those two little words

“If only.”

“If only you’d been here Jesus, my brother would not have died.” This is one of the more challenging stories in the gospels. Jesus’ friends, Mary and Martha, send word to Jesus that their brother is deathly ill. Presumably they don’t come themselves in case Lazarus should die, they just send someone with a short message: “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” Jesus’ response? “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” John then tells us that even though Jesus does indeed love these three siblings, he delays going to go to them for two days. If this is the first time we’re hearing this story, at this point we might think, “Well, clearly Jesus knows he’s going to heal him, which is why he said the illness does not lead to death. Maybe he just has important things to do before going.” But when he tells the disciples its time to go, he tells them bluntly: “Lazarus is dead.” “Wait, what? You said this illness *wouldn’t* lead to death. And how do you *know* he’s dead?” “Well,” Jesus says, “for your sake, I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” And off they go.

When they arrive in Bethany, Jesus learns that Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. Which raises all kinds of questions about the timing of all this, which we’ll save for another day! When Martha hears that Jesus is coming, she goes out to meet him, “while Mary stayed at home.” I’m curious why Mary stayed home. I can project all kinds of feelings onto her. Is she angry that Jesus didn’t come and heal her brother – whom he loves? So angry she can’t face him? Is she so grief-stricken she can’t face *anyone*? We have no way of knowing, but grief is accompanied by all manner of emotions, and often the strongest emotions we feel. But Martha goes to meet Jesus, and says, “Lord, *if only* you had been here, my brother would not have died.” I wish we could hear the tone of her voice. Which words she emphasized. Is this an accusation? “Why didn’t you come sooner?” Is it a lament? Is it resignation? Again, we have no way of knowing.

But I’m convinced there’s a desperate plea in her *next* words: “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” “Please – can’t you do something? This hurts so bad.” Some of us are very familiar with that prayer. Some of us have also said something like that

to friends, in the face of our own pain, looking for reassurance, or at least empathy. But Jesus' response to Martha's plea is vague at best, trite theology at worst: "Your brother will rise again." "Yes, I know he will rise again. In the resurrection. On the last day."

"Not exactly what I'm asking for here though, Jesus. Looking for some *immediate* hope that things aren't as awful as they are. Not a future hope. Wanting my brother back. Here. Now."

Again, many of us know that feeling all too well. How does Jesus respond to Martha? With the words that are part of the funeral liturgy of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Words that I spoke at my mother's funeral two weeks ago:

"*I am* the resurrection, and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

"Do you believe this?"

I wonder how long it took Martha to respond? Was she tempted to say, "Well, Jesus, my *brother* believed in you. And he's dead. And what do you mean, 'even though they die, will live'?" I get the impression that she avoids answering Jesus' question about death and life and resurrection – "do you believe this?" – "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God." And then she leaves.

She goes back to her sister, and says, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' Not, "Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God is here." Just, "The Teacher." Which makes me wonder what Martha really believes in the face of her brother's death. Has her faith in Jesus been shaken by the death of her brother? By Jesus's – apparent – lack of concern for him, evidenced by his delay in coming *and* his vague answer to her cry of pain? I wonder how many of us have had *our* faith shaken in similar fashion? I wonder how many of us have felt the kind of pain that these sisters did? Have cried out to God in our own way, "Where were you?"

"Why didn't you do something?"

"Why didn't you save them?"

I've sat with lots of people who ask those kinds of questions. I've asked them myself. And – to be honest – if all I have to lean on is those words about resurrection and life, a central doctrine of the church – but a concept, an idea, some kind of future fact – then that has not always been a great source of comfort. Even knowing – or believing – that resurrection isn't just a doctrine, it's a *person* – the one who said, "*I am* the resurrection and the life" – in the face of loss and grief and pain, that belief often isn't enough in itself. Because, as I said at my mum's funeral, we don't grieve for where that person is.

We grieve for where that person *isn't*.

Here. With us. With the people who still need them. Who need more time with them. Who find the thought of a world without them almost too much to bear. And talk of "the resurrection of the dead" just doesn't cut it. We need more. So much more.

Well, if those two little words, “If only...” can contain whole worlds of pain, then there are two other words in this story that might just be able to offer some balm, some comfort to that pain:

“Jesus wept.”

When Mary comes to Jesus, she kneels at his feet, possibly clenching her hands, pleading, and says exactly what her sister had: “Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And then the story takes a sharp turn. Because Jesus does not respond to Mary in the same way he did Martha: “Your brother will rise again.” No. John tells us, “When Jesus saw her weeping and the Judaeans who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”

“Where have you laid him?” he says. “Take me to your pain.”

They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”

Jesus wept.

Not at the tomb – he hasn’t gone to see yet. No, he sees Mary and those who came with her weeping, and he weeps. Even though he apparently has known for days that he is going to bring Lazarus back to life, he sees the grief of his friend, Mary, and the grief of her friends and he is deeply moved. And weeps. This is the Word made flesh. With tears running down his face. How very human. And – apparently – how very divine. I was holding my own at my mum’s funeral, until I looked up to see one of my nieces weeping. I eventually pulled myself together, but then a few minutes later one of my uncles lost it, when I read those words from John’s gospel, and I stumbled again.

“When he saw her weeping, he was deeply disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”

Jesus doesn’t chastise them for their lack of faith in him, or rub his hands together smugly and say, “Just you watch this!” No. He sees their grief.

And he enters it.

“Surely,” the prophet Isaiah said, “he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.” Or, as Ray Anderson at Fuller seminary once remarked, “We have seen the face of God in Jesus. And it is a face streaked with tears.”

“Where have you laid him?”

“Take me to your pain.” Then Jesus wept. With them. For them. Perhaps even for himself. For he had lost a friend. Even though he knew he was about to raise him, it would only be for Lazarus to die *again*, one day. Mary’s companions see Jesus’ tears and remark, “See how he loved him.” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of a blind man have kept this man from dying?” A question which prepares us for what will happen just a few weeks after this. For what happens on Good Friday, when people will ask, “Could not the one who saved so many have saved himself?” Jesus came to the tomb, and as we heard,

they roll away the stone, and Jesus calls forth Lazarus. And this man, dead four days, comes forth. The raising of Lazarus.

“Where have you laid him?” Jesus asks.

We can draw a straight line between those words and the words Mary Magdalene will speak in the garden in her own grief at the loss of Jesus: “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they’ve laid him.” They respond to Jesus’ question, “Come and see.” Those three words go to the heart of our faith. “Come and see,” we say to Jesus, as we lead him, in tears, to the place of *our* deepest sorrow and grief. The grief that comes with all our losses: the loss of a loved one; the loss of our health; the loss of a marriage; the loss of a career we loved; the loss of our sense of self; the loss of hope for a better tomorrow. When we bring Jesus to that place of sorrow and grief, what do we need from Jesus in that place?

“There, there. It’ll all be OK. Your brother will rise again.”

Now, for some of us, that *is* enough. But for many of us, I suspect it isn’t. What we need, when we lead Jesus to our deepest pain, all our “if only…”s, what we need are those other two words:

“Jesus wept.”

Yes, I believe in the resurrection of the dead, the life everlasting. But I *need* the God who weeps in the meantime. The one who isn’t above it all, but the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Intimately.

Jesus wept.

“Come and see,” we say to Jesus. “Come and see my pain. My sorrow. My grief.” And *when* he comes, he weeps. It’s only then that we might be able to hear Jesus’ invitation to *us*, “Come and see.” Come and see that this pain. This sorrow. This grief will *not* have the last word. Because I *am* the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” And if that’s still too abstract, then perhaps hear Jesus’ invitation to his disciples at the very end of John’s Gospel. The invitation to Peter, who must be thinking, “If only I hadn’t said I didn’t even know him…” To the others, who must have been thinking, “If only I hadn’t deserted him, leaving him all alone in that garden…” Those who saw someone on the shore after a fruitless night’s fishing, someone who called out,

“Come and have breakfast.”

The new day is dawning. Yes, the night can be long and bleak, the tears bitter, the “If only…”s hanging heavy on our hearts, the grief overwhelming. But when we come to God with tear-streaked faces, we don’t just get theological doctrine. We find something else.

A tear-streaked face like our own. Jesus wept.

Thanks be to God.