

The Resurrection and the Life

There are times when we can't help but ask, "Where is Jesus? If only he had been here." There are times when loss and grief threatens to overwhelm us. As it is overwhelming the family and friends of Amber Schroeder (who died Thursday in a one-car crash west of Newton). Including her church family.

There are times when the darkness is so deep that we are absolutely unable to see—like in a deep dark cave, leaving us desperately groping for a way out. Like in the darkness of depression, or bi-polar disease.

There are times when the God who created us in our mother's womb seems absent.

But the writer of Psalm 139 tells us a different story. She reminds us there is nowhere we can go that God isn't already there. The deepest darkness. The farthest limits of the sea. Heaven. Even Sheol, that ancient domain of death. She might not have been able to feel it at the time, but God was in that car with Amber. Just as God is here with us today.

Mary and Martha loved their brother Lazarus very much. They struggled with him in his illness. His suffering was their suffering. And unfortunately, tragically, there are some illnesses for which there is no cure. Lazarus died. And what made his death feel even more tragic was the thought that it could have been prevented. If only Jesus had been here. He could have kept Amber's car on the road.

But then, Jesus shows up. And Martha bluntly says to him what any of us would have said, at least if we were honest: "Lord, if you had been here, my beloved brother would not have died." Later in the story, Martha's sister Mary says the very same thing. As our text tells us, she had stayed behind at first, when Martha had gone out to meet Jesus. It's a poignant illustration of how we all grieve differently.

And yet ultimately our grief brings us together, as it has today. Ultimately we all share the pain and loss. We know, in our heads, that death is a part of life. That it will happen eventually to all of us and those we love. But did it have to happen now? And where was Jesus? Why wasn't he here? Okay, so maybe he's here now, but why didn't he come sooner?

The thing is, the Jesus we meet in the Gospel of John always knows what he's doing. Sometimes maddeningly so. Which is not to say that Lazarus' death wasn't as profoundly sad for him as it was for Mary and Martha. But Jesus looked upon that death as an opportunity to reveal himself in a new way. He engages Martha in what had to be a painful conversation. "Your brother will rise again," he says to her. Sounds an awful lot like a religious platitude. Like telling someone who is grieving, "She's in a better place." Which doesn't change the reality that She is gone now.

Martha musters the one response she can utter with any honesty. "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Another platitude, perhaps. One which didn't and doesn't ease today's pain. "Who cares about the last day? I want her alive now!"

But then comes Jesus' most unexpected and bewildering response. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says to Martha. "Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"But Jesus," Martha could have easily blurted out, "You're too late. Lazarus is dead." But Martha had been around Jesus just enough, and anyway she had that kind of willing, risk-taking, daring personality, to be able to say, past any platitude, "Yes Lord. I believe. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

What did it mean—what does it mean—for Jesus to say, "I am the resurrection and the life"? Theologians and scholars have been struggling with that for years—I'm certainly not going to break any new ground today. But allow me to state the obvious. The Jesus we meet in the Gospel of John is more than just a man, more than just a teacher or Rabbi [not that teachers aren't already pretty special people! I'm blown away by how many teachers have come today, in support of Tyler]. The Jesus we meet in the Gospel of John is also divine—God in human form. He is our connection, our conduit to the Creator of the universe. The great Love that underlies all that we do and are. We're not always going to understand it, just as Martha didn't fully understand what Jesus was telling her. Sometimes it's enough to simply say—and granted, it takes a fair amount of daring, "Yes, Lord, I believe."

How daring are we today, in the midst of our pain and grief? Daring enough to claim with conviction, amidst our pain and grief, that God is here among us? That death is not final? That despite what we might be feeling right now, our lives, our loved ones, our world, our country are all in good hands?

Come Lord Jesus. Be our resurrection. Be our life. Give us the daring we need, today and every day.

Amen.

Song of Response: "I Am the Resurrection, and the Life"