

## DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?

You can sense the tension, and even anger, in Martha's voice as she addressed Jesus. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Listen again.

"Lord, if you had been here," Martha said. Translation: "You weren't here. You were AWOL. You were asleep on the job. You let us down completely. You totally abandoned Lazarus and my sister and me in our time of greatest need and deepest despair. You allowed someone to die whom you claimed to have loved dearly."

And the sharpest, most cutting question of all begged to be asked: "So, Lord, where were you?"

I can't help but wonder, if Martha had dared to ask Jesus where the heck he had been as her dear brother and his close friend Lazarus lay dying; if she could have garnered the courage, the *chutzpah* to enquire as to why Jesus hadn't come right away when he got the news that Lazarus was gravely ill, instead of dallying and allowing him to grow sicker and weaker and ultimately give up the ghost, what would Jesus' response have been?

Would Jesus have gazed at Martha, looked into her eyes that were red and swollen from two days of weeping, and confessed to her, "When I heard that Lazarus was sick, I decided to stay where I was for two more days"?

Perhaps Jesus would have added, "But Martha, that doesn't mean I didn't love Lazarus, because I did love him a great deal. Absolutely."

I wonder if Martha would have been convinced.

"Lord, if you had been here. . . ."

Have you ever asked or wanted to ask God that question when something went terribly wrong in your life? "Lord, where were you?" Have you ever asked or wanted to ask God that question after you experienced a horrible tragedy, a heartbreaking, calamitous experience?

I know someone who went to the eye doctor and discovered she had cataracts. No more contact lenses, at least for a while. Now she has to wear eyeglasses. She's not a candidate for cataract surgery yet because they're not bad enough. Or, to use optometrist vernacular, the cataracts aren't "ripe" yet.

Is that what happened with Jesus?

Jesus knew that Lazarus was sick, but maybe he wasn't sick for enough for Jesus. Not yet. The time wasn't "ripe" to bring about the degree of belief, the level of faith that Jesus was determined to inspire. For that to happen, Lazarus would have to die first.

"Lord, if you had been here . . . . Where were you?"

I think people of faith do ask such questions when bad things happen and Jesus seems to be a no-show. And Jesus' answer seems to be, "I was waiting for the right time, the correct moment, the necessary condition so that when I finally do show up on the scene you will come to believe that God sent me."

Unfortunately, that means things might get very bad, very painful, very dark and ominous and frightening while we're waiting, before Jesus decides he's stayed away long enough and it's time to come to us.

According to this story of the raising of Lazarus, Jesus is perfectly fine; he's very patient and accepting of our need to express our frustration and anger with him for making us wait and go through hell. Jesus knows all about human emotion, and he will listen to us with compassion as we pour out our pain, grief and distress, the way he listened compassionately to Martha and her sister Mary share their pain grief and distress over the death of their brother. So, it's okay for us to let it out, to wail and cry out in prayer to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here it wouldn't have happened . . .," and to ask him in exasperation and disillusionment, "Where were you when I needed you most? Why didn't you come to me?"

It's okay with Jesus if we ask him such questions. He won't take it personally or get defensive or hold it against us if we interrogate him and search for answers and try to understand why he, at least as far as we can tell, didn't come through. Of course, we shouldn't be surprised or caught off guard if Jesus asks us a question or two in response, just as he did to Martha.

This means, as we're looking for answers from Jesus, Jesus will most likely be looking for answers from us. And in response to our questions, "Where were you" and "Why didn't you come?" Jesus may respond, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Which is, of course, the central question of our faith.

"Do you believe?"

Do you believe in Jesus?

Do you believe he is "the resurrection and the life"?

Do you believe that your brother, your sister, your mother, your father, your son or daughter, and you yourself, will rise again, as Christ told you?

Are we able to say to Jesus, along with Martha, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world,” and genuinely mean it?

Some years ago, the Rev. Joanna Adams prepared a sermon for a funeral for two members of her congregation—a 31-year-old man who suffered from severe mental illness and refused to take his medication, and his 65-year-old father who, convinced that his son was a danger to others, shot and killed his son and then took his own life.

Rev. Adams knew that the trauma of this terrible set of circumstances raised at least two aching but terribly important theological questions: “Why did this happen?” and “Can God still be trusted?” She addressed the “why” question, acknowledging its importance and power but avoiding giving an easy, simplistic explanation.

“Because we’re human, we want to know why. But because we’re human, we cannot know why. The Scripture promises that someday we will know why, but that day is not today. God knows that what we truly need today isn’t an explanation; what we need today is faith.”

Rev. Adams then turned to the trustworthiness of God, telling her listeners that we “are not dealing today with a God who comes around only when things are rosy and the birds are singing. There is a cross up there! . . . The God we know in Jesus Christ gets to the valley of death, of loss, of grief, before we do, so that he can get ready to catch us when we fall blindly in.”

Adams closed the sermon by telling of visiting the grieving family and meeting Lauren, the three-year-old daughter of the deceased father. “She was sitting on her grandmother’s knee, wearing a bib with a duck on it and a smile. ‘Tell Joanna what you say before you have your supper,’ her grandmother prompted.

“‘God is great,’ Lauren said. ‘God is good.’ she said. And Rev. Adams said to those attending the funeral, “Suddenly I couldn’t wait to come to church today, so that I could tell you what Lauren said and what the Scripture promises and what faith knows even when the pain is piercing and the shadows fall. ‘God is still great. God is still good. It’s true!’”

And really, that’s exactly what Jesus was trying to get across to Martha; it’s what our Lord was trying to communicate to her when the pain of her brother Lazarus’s death was piercing her heart and the shadow of grief fell over her life. He was saying to her, Lazarus is dead, it’s true. And you’re sad, you’re angry, and it hurts so much you feel like your life has shattered into a million pieces. But even so, Martha, God is still great. God is still good. And I am the

resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?"

And if we listen carefully, my dear friends, in the midst of our own personal times of grief and tears and fear and pain and anger, Jesus tells us the very same thing, and asks us the very same question.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

My prayer is that we have strong enough faith, or, if not, we will somehow find the faith to be able to respond, "Yes, Lord, I believe." Amen.