

Come and See: Asking Jesus in John, Pt. 4
Lord, If You Had Been Here
John 11: 1-7; 11b-15; 17-27

**First Presbyterian Church
2023
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Dawson**

March 19, AD

Gerrit Scott



Maybe you know this line, “If you had only been here...” If you had only been here, I wouldn’t have been left with all this mess. If you had only been here, things would have turned out differently. We need people to be here for us. We need God to be here for us. Lord, if you had only been here, it wouldn’t have gone all wrong. This is just the question being asked of Jesus in today’s story. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

This is the story of two sisters named Mary and Martha, and their brother, named Lazarus. They lived in the village of Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. We read that these folks were friends of Jesus. He loved them. They loved him. They must have known each other for quite some time. Perhaps Jesus and his parents had stayed with the Lazarus family on their visits to Jerusalem.

As the story opens, Jesus was not nearby. He was far away across the Jordan River, staying away from the religious authorities who wanted to arrest him. But a messenger found him with the news about Lazarus. “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” Jesus was a healer. He particularly loved Lazarus, Mary and Martha. So you’d expect him to do what we’d do: get up and go. Rush right over. But the Gospel tells us, that when Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed right where he was for two days longer. What? Jesus, why

would you delay? Why do you wait when we are so desperate for you to come?

The two days pass, and no doubt Mary and Martha were wondering why he didn't come. At last, Jesus said it was time to go to Bethany. He told his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." The disciples thought Jesus meant sleep like resting in your bed. That Lazarus would get better from his sickness. So Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died." There it is. Blunt. To the point. Lazarus got sick. I didn't heal him. Lazarus died. Let's go to where the dead man is.

Jesus was very realistic about the reality that things die. Livestock die. Wild animals die. Brothers die. Parents die. Children die. We die. Most people live under the illusion that death will not happen in their lives. We focus just on getting along now, and try not to think about what is to come. But Jesus always reminded us of the reality of death.

That brings us to the great mystery. Where do we go after we die? For that matter, where did we come from before we were born? Who was I before I was me, this Gerrit, here now? Who will I be after this Gerrit stops breathing and returns to the ground? Did I just come into existence at my conception and does my existence cease after my heart stops? Or is there another realm, some kind of eternity? On our own, we just can't know. For we can't go back in time or forward into the future. We can't leave this life and come back. The barrier of death is a great dark, mystery to us.



People have always thought about this. Fifteen centuries ago, there was a counsellor to a king of a tribe in ancient England. Nearly all the people back then were pagans. They believed in local gods of the rivers and sky. But there was a new teaching that was growing popular. The news of Jesus Christ began to intrigue the people of England with its wondrous promises. Well, the story goes that this counsellor to the king wanted him to open his mind to the possibility that

there might be something important in this Jesus person. So one winter day the king and his advisors were gathered around the fire and food in the great mead hall. Outside the wind howled and the darkness deepened. Inside the warmth and good company made everyone feel safe. The counsellor told his king a story.



O King, this is what life on earth seems like to me. We are gathered in this great hall with a blazing fire and much to eat and drink. Outside the chill rain turns freezing. The darkness is deep. But we are warm and safe. Then we see a little sparrow come flying into the hall from outside. It enters through a crack in one door. It flies across our room and goes out a door on the other side. While the bird is inside, the storms of winter cannot touch it. It feels warmth and safety. But after these quick moments of calm, the bird is back outside, going from winter to winter through our hall. That, O King, seems like our lives on earth. For a brief moment we are here. There is life and work. But we do not know what went on before us. We do not know what will come after for us. We only know these fleeting moments when we are awake and alive. The rest is darkness. For all we know we are the sparrow that came from winter into the hall and then, after a few moments, went back out into winter dark. So, if this new teaching about the Christ can offer us something more certain, it might be worth following. If this Jesus turns the darkness of what comes next into light, we might want to see what he shows us.

It is said that very soon the king became a Christian and was baptized, along with his subjects. Christ Jesus offered light in the darkness, a hope for more life to come, a freedom from the fear and tyranny of death. This appeal swept through the land until nearly all England converted. This is the great gift Jesus brought. He had news about what was before us and what comes hereafter.

Jesus had said earlier “for I know where I came from and where I am going...I speak of what I have seen with my Father” (Jn. 8:14, 38). What looks like utter darkness to us is fully lit up for Jesus. He was aware that he had known his Father from eternity. He understood that one day he would return to his Father. Yes, he would pass through death. But death would not break his connection to his Father. Death would not end his life. Jesus would conquer death. So those who put their trust in him could be free of the fear of death. Free from the darkness. Free to see that life and light await us in Christ. Jesus knew what was coming next. The past and future were not dark, but light to him.

That’s the reason Jesus could delay when he heard his friend was sick. That’s why Jesus wasn’t worried for Lazarus. Lazarus would die from this illness. Just like all people who live on earth, the time would come for him to die. But dying could not separate Lazarus from the love of God. Dying could not separate Lazarus from the life Jesus had for him. Jesus knew this confidently. That’s why Jesus could say the words that sound so shocking to us. “Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.” Jesus loved Lazarus. He asked his friend to do something hard. To die. And then return to this world, knowing he would have to die again. Because through the dying and rising of his friend, Jesus would show what awaits all of us who trust in him. Resurrection. Eternal life. Everything made new. Light and spring and glory. Jesus was glad to put his friend through this trial if it would bring people to believe in him. For then they could have more than just coming back to life in this world. They could be eternally connected to God, their true source of joy.

The story goes on. When Jesus arrived, Lazarus had already been in the tomb two days. Lazarus had a lot of family and friends. They had gathered with Mary and Martha to grieve with them. Now when Martha heard that at last Jesus was near, she got up to meet him outside. Her first words were direct, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” It didn’t have to be this way. All these people grieving. Mary’s heart ripped up. My heart broken. Jesus, if you had been here, things would have been different.

Martha speaks for all of us. In so many situations. Jesus, if you had just shown up. If you had done something. You have the power. You could

prevent so much. Why did you delay? Why did you allow this?

How does Jesus answer such questions? For they surely are real questions. Legitimate questions. Usually, usually, Jesus does not answer with explanations. He doesn't unveil the mystery of the interactions between human free will, the reality of the natural world with its laws, the presence of evil and sin, and the providence of God. Those lines come together in regions far above our understanding. And that's not really what we're asking anyway. We're crying out our grief to him. Our pain wrought "Why?" is actually saying, "This hurts! This is not supposed to be this way! Help!" So Jesus replies to Martha with himself.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." Jesus himself is the light that shines in the darkness of death. The sparrow does not fly from this life out into a winter storm of freezing darkness. The sparrow in Christ flies into the realm where God himself shines light. We fly into a world of life and love and connection and joy. This resurrection hope is Jesus himself. Joined to him, we will pass through death to resurrection, just as Jesus did.

Jesus plainly speaks here on *two* levels. The first is natural. Though you die, though your body dies like Lazarus, you will live. You will pass from this world to eternal life in the Triune God. The second level is spiritual. Whoever believes in Jesus shall never die. That doesn't mean we live forever on earth in these mortal bodies. He means that eternal life begins now. We have the life of Christ inside our lives. We receive his Holy Spirit. We get connected to the source. Think of all the ways we've heard Jesus speak of this. We get born anew. We drink living water. It flows from inside us. We eat the bread of life. We become part of his flock and can never be separated from him. For those in Christ, that eternal life begins and grows in us. So that death becomes a mere transition to experiencing more of Christ's life and presence. Our separations are temporary. Our loves are eternal. Our reconciliation to God and each other is certain.

So here's the news so striking it leads unbelievers to convert. The human predicament of illness, suffering, and loss does not perturb Jesus. A sovereign savior does not panic over death. The great physician treats our

critical wounds with calm, unhurried confidence.

From God's view, death is not nearly as big of a problem as unbelief. Distance and time pose no obstacles to the purposes of the Creator who entered his creation. External conditions and events, even death, are not our main dilemmas. The inner darkness, the estrangement from the Father, and the enslavement to sin are the greatest threats to our eternal life.

To the family and disciples, Lazarus seemed irretrievably gone. "But to Jesus, Lazarus had not even come close to leaving the Son's custody or domain." For Jesus has all authority over life and death. Death may seem to steal life from us. But death cannot steal a life from Jesus. Our Christ is greater than death. Only unbelief can separate us from Jesus and his eternal life. That's why he asked Martha that crucial question. "I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?"

Martha replied, "Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Son of God." Once she made the connection, she could discover how her complaint was answered. "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus answered, "I was here. And Lazarus is not dead. He will live again in this world, and, more importantly, in the next. For I am the resurrection and the life."