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I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?

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Which part? What does it even mean? I'm confused – must be John's gospel. It's perplexing on so many levels. For one thing, I feel like it's a complete give-away to the end of the book. John blows the punch line in the second act, why even bother with the rest of the gospel? Another resurrection? Yawn. You know, some of us are going to have to preach on this again in two weeks. Cut us a break, will you?

I don't get why Jesus says that people who believe in him will not die ... right on the heels of acknowledging that Lazarus is dead. He first says it allegorically or something, and the disciples were like, "Oh, he's sleeping? Excellent, so everything will be alright." And then he says it plain, "No, I meant he's dead. Lazarus is dead, and we're going to Bethany. Oh, and people who believe in me won't die." So does that mean that Lazarus did not believe? Does it mean that he didn't really die?

But Lazarus did die. In fact, he was very dead. The text is nearly emphatic about saying he's been dead and buried four days, and I think there were a couple of reasons for that. I have to believe that one of them is to let Jesus off the hook for waiting two days to leave. Jesus lingered two days, but Lazarus was dead four, so in any case Jesus would have missed him. We don't know why Jesus waited two days. I've imagined everything, from the thirteen of them just sitting in a room looking at each other, to Jesus having a two-day line formed already for healings and exorcisms. You know, like how at the grocery store when a clerk wants to close the lane, everybody already in line still gets to check out... I think this is at least part of why John says how much Jesus loved Lazarus and his family a couple times, lest we think Jesus delayed leaving because he was indifferent to them.

Another reason for emphasizing four days dead is probably that in Jewish tradition the soul lingered after death for three days, and only after that period of time was the life truly ended. I don't entirely understand this either, what difference it might have made had Jesus arrived while Lazarus was dead but the soul still lingered. But I think that the ultimate objective is to establish that Lazarus is unquestionably dead. The soul has departed. He has begun to decompose; his body was breaking down and rotting. There was a stench. I'm sorry. That is graphic and unpleasant, and the point is that Lazarus is completely beyond help. Like Ezekiel's great host of dry bones in a gully. There is nothing left of living tissue, only dust and bone. A great defeat. Beyond help. Utterly, hopelessly dead.

That is not our lives in total – we know laughter and love and silliness and delight – and we know this death, too; we encounter it periodically, sometimes in cycles, sometimes relentlessly, too long. Death is inevitable, it is part of our journeys, it is woven inextricably into the fabric. Some of us face it now. Broken relationships. Broken spirits. Sickness. Addiction. Death.

One of our kids, 15 years old, was shot in the head by a schoolmate he asked to be his Valentine. This could have been a sweet moment, something out of the end of Beautiful Thing. Two boys, two women dancing to

Cass Elliot in the playground. It could have been sad and poignant, we've all been there: a kid rejected. But instead we lost our kid, shot dead. We lost that schoolmate, too, who learned in his young life that it was okay to kill one of our kids, better to kill than to be thought even for a moment to be queer.

Some of us have lost souls very dear to us. They are sick. They are dead. They are losing their sensibility, losing control of their faculties, losing their dignity. We're struggling right now with uncertainty about ourselves, our families, our careers. Where will we be in two years? Where will we be in two weeks?

Not always, not all the time, thank God, but we know this death. We know it.

And then Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. And maybe we're confused by this.

Something else that doesn't make any sense: People in this story keep saying to Jesus, if only you had come in time. They mean, If you had come *before* he died you could have kept him from dying. This is another mystery. When did Jesus ever keep anyone from dying? Saving people on the brink of death is not really his forte. He made a lot of sick people well, people who had long-term conditions that they'd lived with for years, for whole lives. Leprosy and hemorrhaging and disabilities; people who were unable to walk, unable to see; people who were possessed. When did Jesus ever keep anyone from dying, except twice or so in the hordes of healings throughout the gospels? The Roman centurion's lover, the ruler's son, but even then Jesus doesn't go to the boy, he only says to the man, "Go your way, the boy lives." Jesus didn't need to be there at all, he didn't need to come at all.

If only you had come in time.

There's a hopelessness in the sentiment. Things might have been okay under different circumstances, but now all is lost. There's a bit of shaming in the sentiment. Things might have been okay had you gotten here sooner, had you left right away and arrived while the soul still hovered, had you come without being called, had you done something different.

And there's a defeat in it. Nothing can be done *now*. In this state of hopelessness, the best Martha can manage is religious resignation. She makes an incredible statement of who Jesus is, one that rivals Peter's confession. She says, You are the anointed, the Child of God, the One. And yet it means next to nothing to her, right now. If you had come *in time*, things would be different. But as things stand, we can only await the final resurrection at the last day. Hers is a rote faith, a mechanical faith. One that speaks of a future that is distant and disconnected from anything real. A future so much future that it has no bearing on today, on this moment. Our modern versions are similar. We can only wait and see. It'll even out in the end. He did not die in vain. He was too good for *this* world. It's part of God's ultimate plan.

Nonsense.

I'm sorry. These are beautiful, kind expressions intending to give comfort. But remember? however elegant and curled the blossom, however fragrant the blossom, more precious was the light in their eyes than all the roses in the world. And God's plan has nothing to do with death. And God's plan is about change for us here and now. Do you believe *this*?

It's hard to understand this story. It being John doesn't help. I don't know that the story has a single meaning, John's gospel is notorious for its layers and innuendoes, so people say lots of different things. Some people say the story is about how Martha and Mary were dependent upon Lazarus for their economic and physical safety, and that resurrecting Lazarus was a metaphor for a foundational change in community to one that valued and protected women, widows, orphans. Some say it is about resurrecting hope, that like Ezekiel's dry bones Lazarus represents a people brought back to figurative life through renewed promise. The name Lazarus means "God helps." Some say that the story has resonance for our people, that Jesus calls to us to "Come out!" We say out of the closet, John said out of our tombs. Jesus says to us, shouts, that is, "Come out!" And to the rest of the people, Jesus says, "Loose them, stop choking them with death cloths and let them go."

Each of these meanings lends something to our lives. Each is useful. Certainly we still have work to do against sexism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia. Certainly, in the face of the deaths we've lived, the deaths we know, we need reminders that hope is not lost. That this moment holds all possibilities. This moment. This moment. Each a new beginning. Certainly we benefit greatly from a call to come out, to be free of fear and self-loathing.

And still, I want to take this story literally. I want it to mean something immediate, something for right now. Not later, not in the end times or on the last day. I think we're not really *getting* it, we're missing out on something vital if we don't. Martha's statement of faith was profound, and limited. Jesus, you are the anointed. You are the Child of God. You are the One. It's too bad you didn't come sooner.

Mary is full of emotion and passion. When she hears that Jesus wants her she jumps up and runs to him. She falls exhausted at his feet. She makes no profound statement of faith, but she demonstrates with her body and her tears who Jesus is to her. And her words to him: It's too bad you didn't come sooner.

And the people who follow Mary have seen Jesus do a number of signs and miracles. Turning water into wine. Healing the aforementioned ruler's son. Healing the man at the Pool of Bethesda on the sabbath. Feeding the five thousand. Walking on water. Healing the man born blind at the Pool of Siloam on the sabbath. With spit. Walking on water, for pity's sake. The people who follow Mary know that Jesus can do some awfully impressive stuff. The stuff of miracles. And *they* mutter, It's too bad you didn't come sooner.

I think our challenge is that we *must* take this story literally, because all of these people who knew Jesus, who loved Jesus, who hated him, they all knew what he could do – Martha even gets really close to expressing exactly who the gospel writer understands Jesus to be – and still they all absolutely, completely *believe* that he is too late.

We have to believe that Lazarus didn't die in real story-time, because everyone in this story already believed he doesn't die when the roll is called up yonder. We have to believe that Jesus brought Lazarus back to walking, talking, eating, breathing life (even if Lazarus doesn't *do* any of that in the story, doesn't so much as say Thank-you or What just happened?) because *that* is what nobody in the text can wrap their minds around. That is what is impossible for them.

They believe that Jesus is too late. They believe his power to create change for the family he loved so much depended utterly on arriving in time. They believe that death is final. They believe that death is the end. That death wins. It's the ace of spades. It's the super-delegate.

But when Jesus says I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, though they die, will live. When he says, *I am* the resurrection and life. Those who believe in me... Jesus is saying that we have to believe resurrection and life are immediate. Do you believe in me, standing right here in front of you now? *That* is resurrection and life. It's for today. Jesus is saying that life is more powerful, more compelling, more enduring, more *present* than death.

I don't know what that means for us. I'm sorry to be so inexact, so un-prescriptive. But, again, I think resurrection may look differently to each of us in the deaths we know. What does it mean for your death that resurrection is here, now, and literal? What does that mean for the relationship that ended months ago, years ago, badly? What does it mean for the passion that has died, the "being in love with" that you haven't felt and think you never will again? What does it mean for the addiction that you haven't even acknowledged yet? The addiction you feel bested by? The dead-end job? For the emptiness, the way that you hate yourself, the hate you've felt all your life from family, from strangers? For the anger that consumes you, the apathy, the indifference, the depression?

And, what does it mean for the friend who has died? What does that resurrection look like right now? What is the color and shape of life in these situations, it's smell and texture? Imagine it, see it, believe it.

It's going to require a colossal mind bend to believe. If this was easy, we wouldn't have spent roughly 1900 years allegorizing John's gospel and interpreting Jesus' I Am statements as dogma and doctrine. It's going to require a level of insight, a grace, a willingness to see possibility where we saw only extinction. It means understanding time in a new way, understanding "in time" in a whole new way. It will mean more than knowing the words, knowing the names and titles and language of our hope. It will mean believing in our salvation coming, the kind of believing that knows it as already come.

Take the story. Believe. It's yours.

Peace.