

“If Only You Had Been Here”
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Second in a series on John 11

John 11:17-27

April 22, 2018

Read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

If only . . .

If Only is the title a novel for preteens by Carole Geithner. Listen to the blurb on the cover:

*If thirteen-year-old Corinna Burdette could have one wish, she knows exactly what it would be. When most girls her age are hoping for new cell phones or prettier hair, Corinna wishes that her mother, Sophie, was alive again.*¹

If only . . .

If only the trajectories of that truck and that bus had not met at that precise moment at that precise intersection. If only one had left just a moment sooner or later, or was travelling just a bit slower or faster.

If only . . .

Tom Wright says “if only” is “the sickening sense of wanting to turn the clock back.”²

If only we could.

“If only you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died.”

II

Jesus gets to the village, but the funeral has ended. Lazarus, his dear friend, has been in the stone-cut tomb for four days. Four days means “really dead.”³

The first day, the day of death: the beloved’s body is washed, wrapped and entombed.

Days two and three, the mourners gather around and even inside the tomb, keeping vigil with grief and prayer.

They believed that the *nepshesh* (the soul, the self) stays nearby for three days. So day

¹ Toronto: Scholastic, 2012. The quote is from the inside book flap.

² N. T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 6.

³ Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 668.

four, it's finished. The stone is set over the entrance. Death is left to its work. In a year's time, the tomb will be opened again. The bones will be gathered and placed with others in an ossuary, a box. They will wait through the ages, until the day of resurrection.⁴

It's day four. Lazarus is gone. The stone is set. Then Jesus arrives.

III

Martha confronts Jesus. *If only you had been here for my brother, your dear friend. If only, Jesus.*

She laments. Lament is faithful. The Psalms, Israel's prayer book, teaches us to cry out to God. *If only! How long! Listen. Answer. Do something! Free! Heal! Rescue! Raise!* Martha's cry to Jesus, her protest to Jesus, her disappointment with Jesus . . . it's faithful.

Then Martha says, *"Even now, I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."* She faithfully laments to Jesus, with faithful trust in Jesus. Does she know what he will do? Can she imagine what he can do? Probably not. Does it matter? She knows Jesus. She knows he will do something. She knows it will be good. Do we really know what God will do? Faithful trust is not about knowing the answer. It is knowing the One who answers.

IV

"Your brother is going to rise," Jesus tells her. *"I know,"* Martha says. What are they talking about?

When God made you, God made you as a soul (*nephesh*) and body knit together. That's you. Your body is who you are. Your soul is who you are. Both are very good together, because God made you well. You are inseparable. Then you die. Your body returns to the earth from which God crafted you.

Your *nephesh*? Can your "you-ness" continue without your flesh and bones? By God's grace, yes. We describe it as "going someplace," though we don't know much what that means. The Jews call it *sheol*. The Greeks call it *hades*. For Persians, it is *paradise*. That means "garden" which is nice. What did Jesus say to the bandit who was crucified beside him? *"Today, you will be in paradise with me."*⁵ Another time, he called it his Father's "house" with many rooms, which he has gotten ready for us.⁶ Though dying, we are not lost to God. We are held in God's presence. It is well with our *nephesh*.

But that is not what Martha is talking about. Or Jesus. They are talking about "resurrection."

⁴ For Jewish burial customs in 1st century Judea, see Craig A. Evans, "The Silence of Burial" in Troy A. Miller, *Jesus, the Final Days* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 43-46.

⁵ Luke 23:43.

⁶ John 14:2.

“Resurrection” is not another way to say “life after death.” Rather, it’s life-after this “life-after death.” God is our Creator, and God will not abandon what God creates, and God made us body-and-soul. So God will raise us. God pursues justice. God will not surrender any part of us to Death’s tyranny, or any of the petty-tyrants of the world. So God will raise us.

God will draw this long-suffering era to its end. God will raise from the old, the New Creation, all finished. God will raise you as part of God’s New Creation. You! In many ways the same as you are, because it will be you. In wonderful ways different from how you are now. All that is you, God will raise. Your body — healed, renewed, restored — God will raise. How? God is the Creator. God can do it! Your *nephesh*-soul — forgiven, renewed, restored — God will raise. God is the Redeemer. God can do it! You, body and soul, God will knit together again and forever. That’s resurrection!

“Your brother is going to rise,” Jesus tells Martha. *“I know,”* she replies. *“He will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”*⁷

V

But then Jesus changes what Martha knows.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” he says.

“Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die,” he says. Jesus the Resurrection claims victory over Death, Death which attacks our bodies. We, these bodies, will rise. Because of Jesus.

“Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die,” he says. Jesus the Life claims victory over Death, Death which attacks our souls. We, these souls, will never die. Because of Jesus.⁸

Of course, in the storyline all of this is pointing to Jesus’ own resurrection. He does what no one was expecting. Before God’s New Creation is born, into this still-torn, still-decaying, still-dying world, resurrection has come early, in Jesus. Resurrected, he is the unexpected preview, the surprising spring of the endless summer that is coming. In Jesus resurrected, we see what we will be.

⁷ Thankfully, N. T. Wright has offered a summary of both Jewish beliefs about life after death, and resurrection, and how Christians modified those because of Jesus. See his chapter, “The Surprise of Resurrection” in Troy A. Miller, Jesus, the Final Days (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 75-107. Wright gives a more extensive account in Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church (London: SPCK, 2007), in particular chapters 3-4 and 10-11. Finally, for an exhaustive analysis of the evidence, see Wright’s, The Resurrection of the Son of God (London: SPCK, 2003).

⁸ For a very helpful unpacking of verses 25-26, see Bruner 677 and 671.

The future promise of resurrection, the future hope of resurrection, Jesus has burst into the present.⁹ The future has leapt into the now. The someday hope has visited today.¹⁰

Resurrection has come in person. In this person, Jesus.

VI

“Do you trust this?”

“Yes,” says Martha. “Lord, I trust that you are the Messiah, God’s Son, the one who is coming into the world.”

How can Martha trust in resurrection? How can she trust something she barely understands? How can any of us? Imagine describing to a caterpillar the butterfly it will become? How much more unimaginable is resurrection to us! Imagine explaining to an about-to-be-born fetus the life she is about to enter into? How much more unimaginable is resurrection!

Martha — or we — cannot hope to trust in resurrection as a concept, an idea, even a promise.

But she trusts Jesus. That’s different. Trusting him . . . that’s what he invites us to do.¹¹

What do we know of *sheol*, or *hades*, or *paradise*, or whatever you call it. Can we know? Or even imagine?

Do we need to?

Martha started off, crying out “if only!” That’s our cry, to change the past that will not change. But her “if only” becomes “if Jesus.”

If Jesus is our future, who has come to meet us. . . .

If Jesus is the Messiah, the one promised, coming into our world of death. . . .

If Jesus is God’s Son, in whom God is personally present. . . .

If Jesus is our resurrection and our life, here with us now. . . .

. . . then we can simply trust him.

Now, there still is this matter of Lazarus. He has been in the tomb for four days.

If only. . . .

⁹ Wright, *John*, 7.

¹⁰ Bruner, 667.

¹¹ Ibid.