

Jesus: Through the Eyes of Martha and Mary (...and two Brian Davids);

“What if?”

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-6, 17-45

April 2, 2017

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What if?

In October 1981, in Overlook Hospital in Summit, New Jersey, two tiny cute baby boys were born on the same day. They were delivered nearly at the same time and they came to occupy neighboring beds in the same little nursery. Though conceived by different parents, they yet shared identical first and middle names. And so it was that on that fateful day, there was also born a running joke in my family: that my parents had mistakenly brought home the wrong Brian David.

...What if?

Honestly, I sometimes wonder about that other Brian David. Like, what if he is an accountant somewhere, and his parents co-pastors of some church... hmm. Just maybe, like Jacob did Esau, I stole his rightful blessing in that shared nursery. Maybe he was the one who was supposed to be called to this pulpit, and me working the books at Ernst and Young? And if so, perhaps this twin-in-name, would be of better service to you. For maybe, unlike me, he would be able to just preach it straight, by the book, leaving you with a feel-good sermon and a hearty Amen. Saying, “Ah, hear the good news, you who were once dry bones in the valley will indeed be restored to life, for through Christ, all those who have perished will be raised hereafter. So let us celebrate, for light has come from darkness, and happiness from tears, for where o death is your victory, oh where, is your sting?”

I mean, wouldn't it be nice for me to just say that? For you to hear that?

But as it stands, it seems you and I are both stuck with this version, this Brian David who seems wholly incapable of just playing it safe and preaching it right; and so over into the deep end we go with sermons about pornography and white bears and made up words like Bibleish and fables about fictional Johns and Saras. Perhaps it's because, like the disciple Thomas, I have been ensnared not so much by assurances but rather by questions, and thereby, have been coerced to be skeptical of virtually everything we have been told. And honestly, I don't think I can confess that that's necessarily a good thing. But I know at least it's an honest thing. An honest will to believe.

And so honestly, when this Brian David is tasked, as I have been this Sunday to see Jesus through eyes of Martha and Mary, I must admit, I'm sorely afraid, that I don't see Jesus as I probably ought. As my twin might. As our savior shining bright with his halo. No... instead, here in these texts, I kind of see a version of Jesus, that at least at first glance, I really don't want either you or me to see at all... For I see a guy that is very much like a lot of other guys out of our own world. Out of 2017. Talking down to women. Becoming easily agitated. And who, by the looks of it, is attempting to accomplish a great deal but also nothing at once.

On that last point, consider for a moment how most of us find ourselves these days. Busy and overworked. And even for those who are underworked and relatively free, it seems even we yet try to create the illusion that we too are busy. Because nothing in our society is valued more than appearing to work hard at life. Moreover, it's as if we've been infected with this virus that prevents us from ever living presently in the here and now, and so we keep dear Siri nearby, just in case something of greater entertainment or perceived importance may come into the purview of our puny limits of attention.

And it's out of this fabric, strangely, that our Jesus today seems to be cut. For he is plainly told that his presence is needed and immediately so, as his friend, and Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus is dying. He is dying!! But, does he drop everything and run over there as quickly as possible? No... instead he intentionally delays his arrival for two days, plus! two more on top for good measure because – and get this -- he's got some roaming to do around the countryside and apparently that's of greater import to him. Just savage.

And so in those 96 long hours, Martha and Mary suffer and needlessly so. They grieve in agony. And their mourning is punctuated by Jesus' stunning and deliberate act to do nothing at all. No texts. No snapchats. Nothing. Just 96 hours of pain, misery, and uncertainty.

I can only guess then at what those woman must have been thinking during that time... though similar it was, I imagine, to what we ourselves have thought in the midst of our own experiences with sudden and unbearable loss:

If only Jesus had come!

“if only I had called that morning...”

What if he had simply answered our message?

“what if I had made more time for her...”¹

Why would he ignore us?

“if I had just said I love you one more time...”

¹ This phrase indented, as well as the one that precedes it, come from “The Women of Easter: Encounter the Savior with Mary of Bethany, Mary of Nazareth, and Mary Magdalene” by Liz Curtis Higgs

What was so important that it kept him detained?

“what was so important that it kept God detained...”

...Apparently, sadly, nothing. Well, nothing but a divine decision to allow for suffering so that in the end God’s glory could be made known through his son (?). I don’t know, man. Does that sound like a good enough reason to you all? Honestly, it seems like these poor woman, and maybe even some of us, have been made to suffer for an interminable amount of time just so God’s ego can be stroked. Forgive me, but even if it’s not as crude as that, or wasn’t only about that, but also say about foreshadowing Jesus’ coming death and resurrection, well honestly, I can probably think of a less dramatic and painful way to go about it all. And so when Jesus finally shows up and Martha and Mary hear of said news, Martha quickly runs out to meet Jesus but Mary chooses to stay behind. Which I think puts me squarely on team-Mary. I mean really dude, you show up, like 100 hours late and I’m supposed to run out and edify you. Jesus, please!

When Martha runs out to him she says: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Which I think is rather incredible and noteworthy, especially that second clause. Because not only does that statement show a remarkable faith in the face of utter despair, but also, as we’ll see in just a second, Mary chooses to white it out entirely. It’s true. While she repeats Martha’s first line verbatim, she completely swallows the second. For unlike Martha, it’s as if Mary simply doesn’t have the will to glorify Jesus, at least, at least at this particular time. And who can blame her?

As Liz Curtis Higgs points out: “these are the only words spoken by Mary of Bethany that are recorded in Scripture, and they are fraught with emotion and perhaps a faint thread of guilt.”²

And you know what, I think Jesus, now seeing himself through his own eyes reflected in Mary’s, comes quickly to feel the same way. For when she drops to her knees at his feet and starts weeping, he... weeps. Out of the depths of her soul, she cries to her Lord. And there, in her sad presence, he understands there is no better answer that would suffice. No eloquent statement about God’s glory to be revealed. No silver linings. Just heavenly tears. And so in an instant, opposed to divine glory, a most beautiful and perfect humanity is unmasked.

And in that moment of humanity, I think we have the first bit of good news this morning. That instead of trying to dream up some pat, complicated, or unhelpful theological response when we find ourselves or our neighbors in mourning, what if we are released from that, and instead comforted and compelled by the knowledge that God only weeps with those who suffer. That God weeps with us. That God weeps with you. With the Fraziers. With the Tasmans. With the Gays. With Julianne, and Nancy, and all of you who have suffered loss or pain or have heard devastating news and bleak reports, God weeps...

Now, in our text, shortly after he weeps, it is said that Jesus becomes disturbed, or even, agitated. Some commentaries suggest that he is angry with death itself. Others argue that he is angry with the wailing people for not trusting in his or God’s power. Personally I like to imagine that he’s simply angry with himself. Overcome with remorse and regret at realizing that this was the place he should have been all along, and if only he had come earlier, a whole lot of pain and suffering could have been allayed.

And I think in that, we have our second proclamation of the gospel this day, a teaching moment from the life of Jesus himself: Simply, to stop messing around. Wasting time. Doing a great deal and yet nothing at once. But, simplify. Be here now. With those you love, and those who need you most. Because who knows when the unexpected will come. We only have one opportunity with this gift of life. So make it count. Make it matter. For unlike Jesus, we are simply not endowed with the power to go backwards and reverse the course of history.

And therein that reversal, our third and final proclamation: so witnessed and remembered at this table of life, from which we sing, “O soft self-wounding Pelican! Whose breast weeps, balm for wounded man!”³ whose voice commands: Lazarus, come out of that grave!

Oh, I can just hear my twin now: “what if death, you have no sting. For where, o death, is your victory?”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

² Ibid.

³ Lifted from our anthem today, “Lo the Full, Final Sacrifice”