

And Jesus stayed two days longer.

There are a lot of important phrases in this passage: *I know God will give you whatever you ask of him. I am the resurrection and the life. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.* But that one sticks out most for me: *and Jesus stayed two days longer.*

Why?

Why, Jesus, why would you stay *two days longer*? Your friends needed you. They needed you to be with them. They were scared, and sad, and hurting. Lazarus was the *one whom you love*. Why wouldn't you go to him? Why would you leave his sisters there hoping that every time the door opened you would walk in and make everything all right? How could you delay?

I read this part of the story and I get a little bit angry. I feel the hurt and bitterness that spills out of Mary and Martha when Jesus finally arrives. It's almost a week after they sent for him. Their brother has been dead for four days Jesus didn't get there in time to do anything. Their disappointment is evident and their words sting: *If you had been here, Lord, you could have saved him.* Their unspoken accusation: *but you didn't.*

Have you even felt disappointed by God? I'm guessing you have. We've all had prayers that went unanswered, dreams that didn't come true. We can get disappointed in God when a loved one dies; when natural disasters claim innocent lives; when things don't turn out the way we think they should. And if we're honest, there's a little part of us that holds God responsible. If God can do anything – why didn't he do this?

Grant McGarry was a lively 11-year-old boy in my last congregation. He was a handful – spunky and smart-alecky, with a smile that could light up a room. One day after school Grant was out riding his bike. He wiped out and broke his leg. For some reason it didn't heal like it should. It turns out he had a tumor -- bone cancer. Grant spent the next year in and out of the hospital. He endured one surgery after another. In between there were horrible treatments that made him miserably sick. His mother prayed and prayed that something would work, that her little boy would be okay. But God didn't say yes to those prayers. Shortly before his 13th birthday, Grant died. If there was ever a time to be disappointed with God, that was it. Young men aren't supposed to die. Why didn't God heal Grant like he healed Lazarus?

At times like these sometimes people say it helps to believe that everything happens for a reason. The danger in this text is that it seems to support that belief. At first it seems out of character that Jesus ignored Mary and Martha's plea. But then we get an explanation for why Jesus waited: he wanted to point to God's glory. He needed the disciples to know that he was truly the Messiah. What better way than to show them that he had power even over the grave? Raising Lazarus from the dead would get people's attention so they would come to believe that Jesus was God's son. It may have been hard for Mary and Martha, but clearly there was some higher plan going on.

But the problem with thinking that everything happens for a reason is that sometimes things just happen. Sometimes little boys just get cancer and young men die. Sometimes tornadoes and tsunami wipe out entire towns in an instant. It's not fair, but it's life. Every day is filled with risk and opportunity. We can't possibly understand why things happen the way they do. We see through a glass dimly, Paul says, because

as humans our point of view is limited. It's always centered around what we want, what we think is right, how we think justice should be meted out. And so when God fails to meet those expectations, we feel disappointed, bitter, angry, hurt.

It's tricky: we cling to the promise that God is always there, ready to listen and holding us in the palm of his hand. But that doesn't mean that God will take our pain away. It doesn't mean that he'll prevent bad things from happening. Just because God raised Lazarus doesn't mean he will bring back the ones we love. We're human. Death happens. Life isn't always fair.

Maybe it helps to think of what you do expect of God in times of trial. We asked that question as we read the Text Message during devotions at the visioning team meeting last Tuesday. One person said they want confidence that God is near. Another said strength to get through the moment. A third mentioned a sense of comfort, solace and peace. Not one person said they expected God to prevent such crises from happening. That's good, because they will. Isaiah 43 reads *when you walk through the water, I will be with you*. Not if – when. Human life will bring pain, sorrow, unmet expectations, grief. If you expect God to act like Santa Claus, giving you whatever you ask for, you will be disappointed. But if you ask God guide you as you face each day, you will never be alone.

When I get angry thinking about Jesus staying for two more days, I need to remember that's not where the story stops. Jesus does come. He meets Martha and Mary. He listens and holds their pain. He weeps. And the linchpin of this story for me isn't that Lazarus comes out of the grave. It's that even before that Jesus reassures Martha that no matter what he is her savior. He promises that there is something

beyond death. Belief in the resurrection means trusting that in the face of the worst this world has to offer there is something more.

And belief that Jesus offers meaning and strength in this life means that there is nothing you cannot endure, no challenge you will face, no night so dark that God is not there to bring you light. Even when he doesn't give answers or explanations, he does give us the promise of resurrection. That promise means that when we face sorrow and even death it is not the last word. Do you believe this?

Back to Lazarus: we don't know why Jesus stayed where he was for two more days. But we do know this: even after Lazarus' miraculous return from the grave some day he was going to die again. He needed Jesus' promise of the resurrection just as much as any of us. Ultimately, we don't know what the future holds. But we trust that it is God who holds our future. Amen.