

March 2023

## IF ONLY

John 11: 1-45

Shortly after I got my first job, I was approached by an insurance salesman trying to sell me insurance. As part of his sales pitch, he pointed out that the letters in the middle of the word LIFE, are “I” and “F” which spell “If”. And he went on to say that many persons have had reasons to use the word “if” as they express regrets over things that they did not do, including buying insurance. That was his sales pitch.

Whatever we may think of that sales pitch, there is truth in it, for we can look back at our lives with regret about some of the things we did not do, as well as regret for some of the things we have done. I have had reasons on several occasions to say about myself: “if only”. If only I had done things differently.

And over my many years in ministry, I have heard many persons, especially as they face situations of disappointment, setback or loss, say “if only”. If only I had acted sooner, if only she had listened, if only he had taken greater care of himself, if only I had paid attention, If only they had said no, if only I had known.

We all have had reasons to use the word “if” in that context - about ourselves, about others, and sometimes even about God.

In our Gospel reading, we hear both Mary and Martha using that word in reference to Jesus and the death of their brother Lazarus.

Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha were among Jesus’ closest friends; they provided hospitality for Jesus, and he stayed at their home and shared meals with them. So when Lazarus became seriously ill, the sisters sent word to their friend Jesus, “Lord, the one whom you love is sick.” Please come. We need your help.

Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus, yet, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was for two more days. By the time he gets to Lazarus’ home, Lazarus has already died and has been in his tomb for four days.

As Mary and Martha came out to meet Jesus, they said to Him “Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died.”

What were Mary and Martha expressing in that “if”? Were they upset with Jesus? Were they disappointed that he did not respond promptly to their plea for help? Were they blaming Jesus for their brother’s death?

I don’t know, but what I do know, is that they were making an immensely important and deeply profound admission, maybe without even realizing it. They were admitting that Jesus can and does make a difference: a difference between hope and despair, between that which is life-destroying and that which is life-giving.

*“Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died.”* If you had been here, the outcome of our brother’s illness would have been different. This would have been an occasion for merriment rather than mourning; a moment of gladness rather than grief.

Jesus in his reply to Mary and Martha invites them to focus, not on the past, not on what could have been, but rather to focus on the future and what is possible. Yes, If I had been here, your brother would not have died, but that does not matter now, what matters is that I am here now, and I am here as the resurrection and the life. New life is possible, if you just believe.

As we try to deal with the setbacks, disappointments, losses and hurts in our lives and in our world, we often have cause to use the word “if”. And like Mary and Martha, our “Ifs” take us back to the past. We look back, often with sadness and regret, and we say, “if only”. We can look back and beat up on ourselves, and at times get angry with others, but that will not change anything. Instead, Jesus asks us to believe – believe in him – believe in God.

Over and over in this encounter, Jesus calls on Mary and Martha to believe – in fact, he does so eight times.

When Martha was lamenting the death of her brother Jesus said to her: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”*

And again, when Jesus asked that the stone sealing the entrance of the tomb be removed, Martha was cynical, she said to Jesus *‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.’* In other words, it’s pointless, it’s too late; nothing can be done now. Jesus said to her, *‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’*

When battered by the setbacks and pain of life, it is easy to give up, to become cynical, and to think that nothing will change.

But Jesus says to believe - believe in him, believe in God!

### **What does it mean to believe in Jesus/God?**

For some, it simply means to believe that there is a God. That somewhere, in some form, there exists a superior being.

When we look at ourselves and the world around us, the intricacy, the complexity, the beauty, the order, the mystery, it is inconceivable for some that all of that just happened by itself, there must be some intelligent being behind it all – there must be a God, by whatever name, somewhere.

But believing in God goes beyond simply acknowledging that God exists; that God set things in motion and then retreated, leaving the world to run its course.

To believe in Jesus/God is to trust and have confidence that God is who God says God is.

It is to have the trust and confidence that God is present and intimately engaged in all of life, including our personal lives.

It is to have the trust and confidence that God can make things right. That God can reverse, renew, recreate, resurrect.

It is to have the trust and confidence that God is good, gracious, compassionate and loving.

When we believe in God - when we have trust and confidence in the love, power, goodness and grace of God, we open ourselves to see and receive the many life-giving, life-enriching resurrection moments that come to us in so many ways, and at times when we least expect them.

When battered by the setbacks and pains of life, Jesus asks us to believe in him and in God.

### **Jesus also invites us to participate in his redemptive work.**

After calling on Lazarus to come out of the tomb, Jesus says to the waiting crowd “unbind him and let him go.” The community, gathered around Lazarus, is invited to participate in God’s redemptive work.

Jesus could have raised Lazarus any way he wanted to, instead, he chose to ask others to roll the stone away. He chose to resurrect Lazarus with his grave clothes on, and then he asked others to help take them off.

God seems to be like that, always inviting us to participate, to do something - something essential and meaningful and important in order to bring God's action to its desired outcome.

Jesus asks us to believe, but to believe involves participating in God's work. We are invited to join God in God's work of redemption - to be part of his church and help roll stones away and remove grave clothes from people in this world who are entombed in fear, failure, loneliness, resentment, hurt, greed. We don't raise people to new life, but God lets us help. That is the privilege and purpose he gives us.

As a part of God's Church, we are called to join our gifts and abilities in ministry and to commit to a life of service in all of life. We are invited to join something bigger than ourselves and greater than what's going on in our own lives. We are asked to roll the stones of hindrances away and take off each other's entangling grave clothes, and then joyfully and faithfully do the same for others in the world, as we witness life come from death. And there is where we find true joy and meaning in life.

But we cannot do that if we are constantly looking back with regret or anger at what could have been. Instead, Jesus invites us to look ahead and to believe that new hope, new joy, new life is possible, and to do our part to help bring that about.

*"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

Rev. Sydney Elias