

“God always comes on time.” Have you heard this before? This is a reassuring phrase, which I’ve heard often. **And yet**, there are times when it doesn’t seem to be true; times when we wait and wait for God to show up and help us or guide us; times when we are still waiting, well past what we think is “on time.”

And this doesn’t seem fair, because waiting is hard. When we’re waiting, we’re not in control; we may feel like we’re wasting time; many of us get anxious or even angry. And it’s especially hard when what we’re waiting for is serious—a diagnosis, a job, a cure, recovery, reconciliation. Or worse, when we’ve waited so long that we don’t even know what we’re waiting for anymore.

Our Gospel reading speaks to us about these times when God doesn’t seem to come on time, and leaves us waiting. Wondering. Ready to give up hope.

Mary and Martha are Jesus’ faithful friends and disciples. So, when they send word that their brother Lazarus is ill—Lazarus, whom Jesus loves--, we expect Jesus to drop what he’s doing and rush to his friends’ side, to come when they ask for him, to comfort them, to somehow make everything right, immediately.

But he doesn’t. Confident that “this illness doesn’t lead to death,” he seems to blow off the sisters’ urgent plea. And then takes his sweet time getting to Bethany. Ouch. That’s no way to treat a friend, let alone a faithful disciple.

When Jesus finally arrives, it seems that it’s too late. Lazarus has been in the tomb for **4 days** already. Jewish belief at the time held that the soul would linger around a deceased body for 3 days only. On the **fourth** day, the soul would give up and depart. And the death would be final.

And every faithful Jew knew the importance of three days: the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for **three days** before God provided water; Jonah spent 3 days in a whale’s belly, before being belched up. And then there’s Jesus, who’s been quite clear that he’ll be killed, but will be raised again--on the third day.

But Jesus doesn’t come to Mary and Martha on the third day, the day that they still have an ounce of hope. He comes **after the fourth day**, when death has settled in.

Martha sees him first, and greets him with reproach: “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*” But, then, perhaps regretting her

accusation, or clinging to hope anyway, she adds, *“But--even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.”*

Jesus’ response is strange: *“Your brother will rise again.”* Assuming that Jesus is just reciting doctrine (*not really what she needs right now*), Martha replies in kind: *“Yes, yes. I know. He’ll rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”*

But Jesus isn’t talking doctrinal generalities. He’s proclaiming something new, and particular: *“No, no. I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.”* Jesus is pointing her to the resurrection and life that are available right now, in the midst of death. He wants her to know that there is eternal life, now--that she doesn’t have to wait for a miracle, because **the miracle is already here.**

And Martha wants to believe, and she tries to believe. But she’s not quite there, because when they get to the tomb, and Jesus calls for it to be opened, she reminds him, again, that it’s been not three, but four days; that he’s too late; that there’s nothing he can do anymore.

Now, before we move on with the story, let’s go back for a moment to Mary. We left her at the house, grieving, and waiting for Jesus. Sharing her sister’s disappointment, she greets Jesus with the same words: *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”*

Jesus doesn’t answer her with words, or with a quick fix, but with weeping. He shares her pain and weeps with her.

Now, what’s going on? Just who is this guy, after all? The sisters wanted him to come on time, on *their* time, and fix Lazarus. They expected him to make their worry and grief go away. But, he doesn’t. Instead, he comes too late. Instead, he tells them that they already have life, in him. Instead, he weeps, with them, and for them.

And then, he surprises them again: when it’s too late for any reasonable hope, he raises Lazarus from the dead. He brings life out of death. Jesus shows up, alright! And what he does, and who he is, is beyond anything anyone could have imagined.

A question for you: do you wait like Mary and Martha did? Cautiously, with boundaries and expectations?

I do. My sense of hope is often tied to my demands and time-line. I usually have an internal clock that determines how long I'll wait—my own metaphorical three days. I tend to give God ultimatums, without even realizing it. “Here’s what I need from you, God, and here’s when I need it: **If** you’re going to show up, it needs to be at this test, or this doctor’s appointment, or at this hearing, or at this deathbed. And it’s going to have to look like this: a good grade (preferably an A+), a good prognosis, a favorable judgment, or a miraculous last-minute recovery.

But when the waiting stretches on, and on, and on--when I fail the test, or hear the bad diagnosis; when an appeal is denied, or a loved one dies, my hope wanes, and doubt and fear set in.

But our Gospel today **calls us to hope**, even in the middle of waiting and doubting and not knowing.

Our Gospel today **meets us in our waiting, and affirms** that it is hard, especially when we’re waiting through suffering. Our Gospel recognizes that sometimes it seems like Jesus doesn’t hear our prayer, and doesn’t come on time, or isn’t going to come at all.

Our Gospel today encourages us, in times like this, to take our frustration and fear and doubt, and even anger, to Jesus. Just like Mary and Martha. To cry out to the Lord from the depths, just like the Psalmist. To pray, honest prayers from the heart—“*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Where the hell are you?*”

Prayer defies hopelessness; prayer stands up to despair. Reaching out to God, crying out to God, even when you can’t see or hear God with you, even when it seems too late—that is an act of hope.

And our Gospel invites us to choose hope. Hope in Christ—in the Word of God--, which is not just a good, warm feeling, or a blind optimism, or the demand for a perfect, neat, happy ending.

No. This hope is **stubborn**: it persists against all odds and through long waiting and lack of understanding. It calls out to God, even when we fear that God isn’t listening.

This hope is **audacious**: it takes the reality of death seriously, and still looks for eternal life. It looks suffering and evil squarely in the eye, and says “even you cannot separate me from the love of God.” It *expects* God to show up.

This hope is **open**--open-ended, open to surprise and discovery. It's not bound by our time-lines and desired outcomes, or by our expectations and limited imaginations, but rather stays open to encountering God afresh, because it trusts that God is not bound, either.

When God doesn't show up when and how we expect, we have the chance to get to know him in a new way. We discover a new face of God—we discover that God offers us eternal life, now; that God weeps; and that there is nothing out of which God cannot bring life.

We also may discover that it's not God that we're waiting for, after all. Rather, what we are usually waiting for is the grace to recognize that God is already with us, and has been with us all along, and has been reaching out to us and growing us through our waiting.

So as we wait, *may we* choose hope. May we turn to Jesus in prayer and look for God with us; may we discover God anew. And may we share our hope and our stories of resurrection with those who need them.

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says. "And I'm here now. Believe in me, trust in me, wait for me."