

**“What to Do About Lazarus”**  
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*When other helpers fail, and comforts flee, help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.*

It's a very human trait: we pray most easily when we're at the end of our rope. We need something or someone to abide with us. When we've tried 3 different surgeries and the fourth one looks dodgy, and we don't know what else to do. We pray: God let this one work. When we've been out of work for longer than we ever imagined we would be, we pray: God, please let this interview be a success. God, let the judge be lenient with my sentence. It's natural to pray this way, even if our rational selves believe otherwise. Even when we don't normally think that God answers specific prayers to make specific things happen, that he – or she - would pull strings for us, when we are desperate enough, we pray anyway. I've heard people say they pray, even when they're not sure they really believe in God at all. They pray for what they need. It's a human response.

Mary and Martha are just this human. They are praying for the healing of their brother, Lazarus. They have seen Jesus heal hundreds of other people, and they want his help, too. But there is something unusual about them. Mary, Martha and Lazarus are unusual characters in the gospels. They're not disciples – at least not the 12 officially recognized disciples. So they don't have claim to him as their master, one who is obligated to lead them and care for them. They're not members of Jesus' family – Mary, Joseph, his younger brothers, James and Joseph, his cousin, John. They have no family claims on him. He has no official business with them. They're not part of the power structures he's trying to subvert – like the priestly system, or the brutal Roman empire. They're not even people in the crowd whom he is called to teach and heal and feed. Their claim is more tenuous, more personal than this. They are his friends.

In fact, when we first meet Mary and Martha, they are feeding HIM. If you remember the scene, they're in Martha's house – odd that a woman would own property in those times, especially when her brother is still alive – but it says so right in the text. It's Martha's house, and she's responsible, the host. And Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to his teachings along with everyone else. Completely accepted. She's excited to be there, she's having a good time. And Martha has a few issues with this. She's got a houseful, and she's getting drinks for everyone, cooking, showing people where the bathroom is, having cleaned the bathroom, thank you very much, all by herself. She's so mad she can't even stand in the kitchen door and hiss, *Will-you-please-get-in-here-and-help-me?* This sounds so familiar to me. My sister would probably have done anything to get my nose out of my book and into the kitchen to help her.

Martha tries to pull Jesus onto her side, to get him to tell Mary to help her. And Jesus simply says, “Leave her alone. Mary has taken the better part.” It's at this point where I think the Bible would benefit from some stage directions. Something like, *Jesus, laughing his head off, says, 'Martha, chill out. Don't drag me into this – ask her, yourself.'* Not the answer she was hoping for, I'd wager. But appropriate, perhaps, from very young rabbi, in love with teaching and ideas, someone who doesn't get just how much work is involved in hospitality. Martha stews by herself in the kitchen. And decides that she likes him anyway. This is a personal relationship; these are real friends.

So what to do, when their brother falls ill, and they don't know where to turn? What are they going to do about Lazarus? They summon Jesus. Who summons Jesus in these stories, anyway? Who feels they have that right? Friends. People with some kind of personal claim on him. When they summon him, they say, “Lazarus whom you love, is ill.” That's a strange thing to say. Doesn't Jesus love everybody? That's what I was taught in Sunday School. I can still belt out “Jesus loves the little church of the world – red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world.” So this means everybody, equal, no exceptions. But they add this personal bit - perhaps to remind him of their friendship, to cut to the head of the line.

This story is also strange for the Gospel of John, where Jesus is most clearly and obviously presented as a symbol for God, and people's relationship with God. John has all the famous “I am” statements – I am the light of the world, I am the bread of life. All of these statements portray a very cosmic Jesus, and not terribly human. In our story today he says, “I am the resurrection and the life. All who believe in me shall never die.” A little hard for most Unitarian Universalists to take, I'd wager. How many of you flinched at that part of our ancient reading today? Just a little flinch? What are we to make of this story? Especially if we don't agree with the formula for belief that has come down through the centuries based on it? Believe in this Jesus, that is, agree with the claim that he is God's only son, or God himself, and you will live forever, you will go to heaven when you die. Is there anything for us in the story if we don't believe in this way? I believe, or I wouldn't be spending a Sunday morning talking about this story, that we Unitarian Universalists do have a claim on this story. As a part of Western civilization, it is one of our collective stories, and so it belongs to us, too. We are free to find meaning in it, as people who live in a modern, scientific age. That is what our Unitarian and Universalist forbears have done for centuries.

So here's what I think. For Mary and Martha, summoning this god-like Jesus to come and heal their brother is a form of prayer. If we want to feel what Mary and Martha were feeling, we should just imagine an intensive care unit, imagine a hospital

bedside, with a family gathered around a young man critically injured in a car accident. Waiting for the specialist to arrive. Their prayers go out – to God, to the doctor en route, and perhaps the distinction between God and the doctor gets a little blurred in their minds. Please help us, someone.

I meet Mary and Martha all the time. I meet them in the woman whose husband who keeps sliding down, down, down despite all the surgeries, all her tender efforts. She gives out her summons, she prays, God, he whom you love, he whom I love, is ill. Won't somebody come? I meet them in the man whose wife is leaving him. He summons God, he says, She whom I love is gone. God, please bring her back. I meet them in the mother whose son's mind is poisoned with a deadly anger. He cannot control his actions, he hurts himself, again and again. She prays, God, he whom I love is ill. If you exist, if you care for us, please do something. And they wait.

What happens when God doesn't come when called? What if God doesn't do what we ask? I think that is probably the biggest reason so many of us stopped praying. How can we, when all we feel is this absence, this brutal silence? What happens?

In the gospel, when Jesus gets this letter from his friends to come quickly, he does a strange thing – a strangely human thing. He drags his feet. He delays – Lazarus is just ill. He delays – well, if I wait a little while, the miracle will be more spectacular, and more people will believe. He delays - the disciples anxiously remind Jesus that Bethany is where people stoned him the last time he visited – maybe he should, you know, say a prayer for his friend from HERE, and hope for the best. The writer of John comes up with lots of reasons for not coming – not one of them very convincing. I wonder if the human Jesus was just scared. If he couldn't face illness when it was so personal – “*Lazarus, whom I have loved*”? *How can I bear it?*

Has this ever happened to you? I think of the play, *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner, filled with people helplessly watching loved ones die of AIDS. How hard it is to face up to. A young man, Louis, finds out that his lover, Prior, has the disease, and he panics. He decides to run away. He turns to a rabbi for absolution, or maybe just compassion for what he is about to do. He says, “Rabbi, what does the Holy Writ say about someone who abandons someone he loves at a time of great need?” The rabbi says, “Why would a person do such a thing?” Louis answers, “Because he has to. Maybe because this person's sense of the world,... maybe this person can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go, maybe... he isn't so good with death.” The rabbi offers no comfort. “The Holy Scriptures,” he says, “have nothing to say about such a person.” (Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*)

I would argue with that statement. Not that I feel like a scholarly equal with most rabbis, real or fictional, but I would argue with that. I think the holy scriptures, both the Jewish and Christian scriptures, are full of people who equivocate, chicken out, bail out on those they love. Jacob tricked his brother Esau from his birthright and ran away. Abraham told Pharaoh that his wife, Sarah was his sister to avoid being killed, himself, and effectively pushed her into his harem. Joseph's brothers left him in a ditch to die because he was their father's favorite. Over and over, we screw up, lose our nerve, do the wrong thing, I think these stories tell us. And we are still worthy of love. We have a chance at redemption.

When Jesus finally arrives in Bethany, he learns that he's too late – Lazarus is dead. And not only is he dead, it has been four days, in which time, people believed, the spirit has left the body. Martha goes out to meet him. She says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” *Yet I know*, she says, like a nice Midwestern girl, trying not to look too angry, still hoping Jesus will like her, *I know you can still save him. Just say the word. I believe.* She and Jesus have a dialogue about resurrection. Traditional Jewish belief at the time claimed that all would be judged and raised up at the end of the world. Jesus says, *No, I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this? Do you believe in me?* And she says *yes*. Good girl.

She goes back to Mary, and tells her that the Teacher has asked to see her. He hasn't, by the way, but it would be nice if he had, so that's what she says. He goes to see Mary, and she says the same thing. Now whenever you see a repetition in the Bible, the literary critical approach says, when you see the same line repeated in a short time, you know to pay attention. There's something important here. Mary says just what her sister says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” The narrative says that she sinks down to his feet and weeps. But my stage directions would be different. As I picture Mary, she is furious. I imagine her lighting into him. *Lazarus – whom you love – is dead – and it's your fault.* He feels the full freight of her anger and suffering. He has no theological points to make here. He has nothing to say about himself, or God, or the afterlife. The shortest verse in the Bible is this: “Jesus wept.” He weeps with them, has the courage to go with all the mourners to the cave where Lazarus is buried. He goes with all the people – his admirers who exclaim over how much he loved him, and his critics, who blame him for not doing his job better and healing him in the first place. He just goes with them. He faces them, his guilt, and all their pain.

If you asked me where this story should end, it's right here. If we can get this right, if we can hang in there with people, even when we're afraid, we'll be doing the most important thing we can do in this world. If we can return to people, even after we've hurt them or left them, and ask forgiveness, we have a chance.

So I might end the story there, but it doesn't end there. Jesus goes to the tomb, which has been sealed already, all the proper rituals done. Martha, who just told him how much she believed he could do, even she doesn't want him to mess with things. The stench will be horrible, she says. But Jesus doesn't care. He has them roll away the stone. He calls out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And it happens. Quite a bit worse for wear, I imagine, but he comes out, blinking, stumbling, startled at how this could be.

Do I think this literally happened? Probably not. But I do think it tells us a lot about what God is like, what we are like, and what love is like. We pray, against our better judgment for things that we don't rationally believe. And something happens. Does God literally keep a person from dying because we prayed? Does God influence a judge to lighten a sentence because we have prayed? Does God clear up a young person's mental illness, or cause one medication or another to be effective? Who can tell? And what happens to our faith when they die, or if there is a harsh, maximum sentence, or if a young person lives wounded and suffering and separated from their family? Was it wrong to have prayed? But something, I am convinced, something of love does abide. It doesn't matter what the words are, it doesn't matter – when we reach out, something happens. Something shows us that love is stronger than death. There are people we meet and situations that happen that convince us of this with amazing force.

This week, someone in our congregation told me a story about someone like this. I asked her permission to share it with you. It seems her aunt, I'll call her Judy, goes to a homeless shelter and soup kitchen every week with people from her church. They do something like what we do with Emmanuel Dining Room – they prepare meals for the guests there, and serve them. Judy and a friend prepare each week to personally care for people. Judy goes up to each person and asks them what their prayer requests are. They sit down with her and pour out their troubles. She writes the prayer requests down. Then she takes them to her prayer circle during the week, and asks the people there to pray for them with her. And then she returns to the shelter and counsels each person again. Over and over, week after week.

For most of us, touching this kind of suffering, not just once, but every week, in such an intimate way, is hard to imagine. For me, saying prayers for people, and then returning to hear the same prayer requests, the same problems, week after week, would certainly wear down my patience – my patience with humanity, and my patience with God. And yet Judy and her friend don't see it that way. They see their job as representing God's love, making it real to the people, abiding with them, not letting them go. Something can abide.

I don't know if it *works* or doesn't *work* to pray – in terms of asking God to do something specific for us. I don't know if we can summon such help. There are studies that examine the recovery of people who are ill when people pray for them. There is a group of people who were prayed for, and people who weren't. And even at a distance, the people who were prayed for, even at a distance, did better than people who weren't. I'm not sure what I make of those studies, but I think they kind of miss the point. And the point is that we must not keep our distance, we must show up for each other.

If you've seen the play, *Angels in America*, you know that Louis does return to his lover, finally. He vanishes for months, drags his feet, can't face him and the illness, but he does, in the end, return. Prior even forgives him, after a fashion, even though it's clear they can't continue as before. Louis says, *"I really failed you. But... this is hard. Failing in love isn't the same thing as not loving. It doesn't let you off the hook, it doesn't mean... you're free to not love."* Something abides in him, some kind of love that will not let him go. He becomes a mensch, a real human being. Love is stronger, he finds, and we are stronger, than we ever imagined we could be.

We have a personal claim on one another. We do have a right to expect help, to expect love when we are ill and in trouble, we should be able to expect someone to show up for us. And I believe it is up to us to show up when we're called. If God is love, God can only love through us. In personal friendship, in fearless love.

There is a love at the center of our being, a love that will not let us go, even when we are down to our last broken heart. Something happens, something comes alive when everything looks dead. When everything in fact has died. And something abides. Love abides. May we abide with one another. May we be faithful to the love that is faithful to us. Amen.