

**“If Only...”**  
April 6, 2014

John 11:1-45

Today’s gospel lesson is one of the most poignant, most memorable, most referenced passages in all of scripture. It is used to talk about eternal life, about God’s power over death.

So often we hear the words of Jesus, “I am the resurrection and the life.....” at funerals. When I preached my mother-in law’s funeral, I used this entire chapter as a basis.

We’ve talked about this story at some length recently in our Wednesday evening Bible study, particularly with emphasis on why Jesus wept.

And I admit that I was tempted to use that line of thinking as the basis for this morning’s sermon.

But instead, today I want to focus on a portion of the text that is not singled out nearly as much as other parts – the words of Mary to Jesus when she ran out to meet him: “If only you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

No doubt many of you remember the series of movies titled “Back to the Future.” There were three of them.

In the first one, young teenager Marty McFly has a chance to go back in time due to the invention of his friend Doc Ement Brown.

While in the past he has the chance to change things and make his future a better one by encouraging his father to act in a better way.

Then in the second movie he travels to the future and his wife laments that if only he’d avoided getting in to a car accident his life would have been so much better.

And so in the third movie he does of course get the chance to avoid the accident by not giving in to the charge of being a chicken when dared to do something stupid.

Well, of course, that’s fiction and fantasy. In real life we don’t get to go back and change things that we’ve done, or change things that have happened.

But so often we allow ourselves to fall into “if only” thinking

John Greenleaf Whittier once wrote, "For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: ‘It might have been!’" Those famous words have a fascinating appeal for most of us. Somewhere in each of our lives is an "if only."

A famous writer said that his most unusual rejection notice was from an editor who simply said, "If only I'd received this article last week. It would have been perfect in the issue I just sent to press."

Arguably, one of the most important inventions in history was the telephone. In 1875, while experimenting with the idea of transmitting speech by electrical means, Alexander Graham Bell discovered the basic principle that made the telephone possible.

The next year, on March 7, 1876, Elisha Gray of Oberlin, Ohio, applied for a patent for a telephone – two hours after Bell patented his invention! If only.

If only insurance executive Walter Kaye had not arranged for a White House internship for a young woman named Monica Lewinsky.

If only skipper Joseph Hazelwood had been paying attention when his tanker, the Exxon Valdez, entered Prince William Sound.

If only John F. Parker, the bodyguard assigned to Abraham Lincoln during a performance of "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theater had stayed at his post instead of slipping out to a saloon and leaving the president unprotected.

It is something we often think about, isn't it. If only. We have regrets or second thoughts about the past. If only I hadn't done so and so, or if only I had done so and so.

If only I could go back and do things differently. If only I could change the past then everything would be all right now and in the future.

If only. A question asked by many in the story we read this morning. Martha is the first to ask the question. The two sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus were well known to Jesus although we have not yet come across them in the gospel. From this story it is obvious that Jesus knew them well and liked them.

The place they came from, Bethany, was just 2 miles from Jerusalem, less than half an hour's walk from the city.

The name literally meant the house of the poor and it probably was, an area just outside Jerusalem where a lot of the poor stayed. Given the rest of the gospels it is probable that the house of Mary,

Martha and Lazarus was where Jesus and his disciples stayed when they visited Jerusalem.

Jesus was a good friend of Lazarus, in fact the message that is sent to Jesus does not even mention Lazarus by name but merely refers to him as the one you love.

Jesus hears that Lazarus is sick and he in fact knows that he is going to die but at least to first appearances he does nothing. He stays where is.

So when he finally shows up Lazarus is dead. And Martha responds with “if only you had been here.” And then Jesus meets Mary, who also throws the accusation at Jesus “If only you had been here my brother would not have died.”

It is a very common complaint from the lips of Christians and non Christians alike. If only ... We look at the present and think what could have been if only something different had happened in the past. If only ...

For Mary and Martha, the “if only” was one which we, too, often wish. If only God....

God had the power to cure Lazarus, to prevent his death, to intervene in this situation, to stop it from happening. If only God had done something.

It's a very common question and in most cases a very reasonable question.

We believe in an all powerful God. He has the power to do anything. So why doesn't he intervene on our behalf? Where is God when we need him the most?

It is easy to sympathize with Martha and Mary. We know God could act if he chose to and so often we want to know why he doesn't choose to.

We feel alone and abandoned and feel like flinging the words “If only you had done something ...” into God's face. “If only ...”

Said with bitter regret or fierce anger, the intent is the same. We would not be in the situation or mess that we are in if only God....

Sometimes it is a case of “if only God.....” There was nothing the sisters could do for Lazarus, for example. Jesus was their only hope of avoiding the situation they found themselves in.

Sometimes that is the case. There clearly are situations we as humans simply can't do anything about.

But sometimes there is another case as well, we shouldn't really be saying “if only God.....,” but “if only I....”

I'm sure there are many things in life that have caused you to think "if only I ... ." If only I had had more courage, if only I had taken that job, if only I had known then what I knew later. If only I hadn't messed it all up. If only I ... .

Maybe you look back at your life and it is filled with "if only I...". And the thing about this story in our gospel lesson is that it holds the answer for you too.

But - Jesus gives us an answer different from the one we might expect. Note that he gives reasons to his disciples for not going to see Lazarus when he first hears about it. But he doesn't tell the sisters that. Nor does he even give the very true excuse that doing the math gives us.

Jesus delays two days but when he arrives Lazarus has already been in the tomb for 4 days, even if he had left immediately he would not have been in time to stop Lazarus dying.

No, the answer he gives to Mary and Martha is not so much an answer but another question - what if?

But before we look at this question, why did Jesus stay where he was, why didn't he go to Mary and Martha's sooner?

From a normal, human perspective it is easy to see why. The gospels tell us that Jesus was accused of being a sinner and those who followed him were thrown out of the synagogue.

He was accused of being demon possessed and on more than one occasion they tried to stone him. It shouldn't be surprising that he wouldn't want to go anywhere near Jerusalem.

Indeed, while we might sympathize with the two sisters making a desperate effort for their dying brother, you might ask why they were asking their friend back to a place which he had to flee because people were wanting to kill him.

Was Jesus just a little afraid of going back? We know that Jesus was not immune from hoping to avoid his death from the accounts of the Garden of Gethsemane.

On the other hand, Jesus has said repeatedly that his time had not yet come and he appears to have been able to avoid the death attempts quite easily up to till now.

No, there was something else going on here. He says that it will help the faith of his followers if he stayed where he was. He was going to do something great when he got there.

Look at the answers he gives to Mary and Martha. He talks about the resurrection and Lazarus rising again.

Belief in a resurrection was not something alien to Jewish thought. It pointed to the future, to the time when all would be raised to participate in the Kingdom of Heaven.

But the message Jesus has come to bring is that the future is breaking through into the present. The Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God, they are interchangeable, is here, it is now. Jesus says if you believe then you will see God's glory.

"If only," at least the way we are looking at it, is a question all about the past. We look back at our mistakes in the past and wish to erase or change them. "If only" thinking is counter-productive in so many ways.

"If only" keeps us tied to the past that we can't change "If only" keeps us from learning from the past. "If only" keeps us from moving on to a productive future. "If only" is fantasy thinking that only makes us miserable, and makes nothing better.

"If only" thinking keeps us blaming things we have no control over, and keeps us from taking the blame for things we are responsible for.

But Jesus encourages us to look not at the past with regret but at the future with hope and optimism. Jesus replies to "if only" about the past by asking "what if" with regards to the future. "If only" is a cry of despair. "What if" raises possibilities.

If you believe, amazing things can happen. And this is exactly what happens. Lazarus is raised from the dead.

Remember, last week we looked at Jesus giving sight to a man who had been born blind. But he is not content with that.

Now, he raises someone from the dead, and it is not someone who has just died but someone who has been in the tomb for 4 days.

This, the penultimate sign which points to the greatest of them all, Jesus resurrection, is pretty great itself.

Remember all the fuss that was created when Jesus heals the blind man? That's nothing compared to the fuss that is created when he raises Lazarus from the dead.

This is the point of the story. Whatever our situation at the moment, Jesus invites us not to look at the past with regrets but to look to the future in faith.

Instead of looking to the past and seeing what went wrong. Jesus invites us to look to the future with faith in him - to look beyond the present and think what if?

What difference can Jesus make in our lives now and in the future. Even if the past and/or the present might not be very good, Jesus invites us to look to the future and see what he can do if we have faith.

And in so doing, we need to understand and believe that God has not been absent from the past.

We might not be able to see what he's been up to and to be honest he might not have been doing what we thought we wanted him to be doing. Maybe there were times when we thought God wasn't doing anything at all.

But he is there and he is working and interceding on our behalf.

I can't promise you that everything will work out the way you want. I can't even tell you that everything will be spectacular. I can promise that God will be in it and that if we have faith we can face the "what if" of the future with confidence.

Famed pianist Artur Rubinstein, celebrating his 84th birthday, said:

"As long as we have what we have inside, the capacity to love, to work, to hear music, to see a flower, to look at the world as it is, nothing can stop us from being happy...but one thing you must take seriously. You must get rid of the "ifs" of life. Many people tell you, 'I would be happy—if I had a certain job, or if I were better looking, or if a certain person would marry me.' There isn't any such thing. You must live your life unconditionally, without the "ifs."

And I would add - believe and live as though you believe that God is greater than the "if only's" of life.