

What the Grave Cannot Hold by Holly C. W. Aastuen
John 11:32-44 November 1, 2009

When my sister was going through her breast cancer treatment five years ago, I came across this poem which I copied out in bright colors and sent to her. The poem reads, in part:

Cancer is so limited...
It cannot cripple love
It cannot shatter hope
It cannot corrode faith...
It cannot silence courage
It cannot invade the soul
It cannot steal eternal life...

There are so many things that cancer cannot do, and though my sister is currently in remission, at the time of her diagnosis I found it comforting to think about those things that are eternal in the face of being reminded of my sister's mortality.

As we remember on this day the people that we dearly loved who have passed on, it is comforting to know that there are some things that death cannot claim, that death cannot make die.

That was what Mary and Martha hoped when their brother was dying. They initially hoped that their friend Jesus would come and heal their brother. But when that hope was dashed, they still held out hope that Jesus would bring them something that would outlast Lazarus' death.

They sent a message, a desperate message for Jesus to come when Lazarus got so deathly ill. But when he didn't come and Lazarus died, they still held out hope Jesus would at least come for the funeral. But Jesus didn't come and he didn't come. And they grew impatient and not a little angry.

When they heard that he was finally near, Martha, with anger in her heart, went out to meet him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." But even her anger was tempered with hope as she continued, "And even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of God."

As they approached Lazarus' tomb, the sound of the mourners grew louder. A great number of people had already arrived and were at the height of their grief. The normal period of intense grief for Jews in first century Palestine was a full week. Though to modern eyes and ears, all their mourning and wailing and loud cries would seem a little contrived, to the first century Palestinian, our reserved behavior at funerals would be considered a sign of disrespect for the dead. All their tears and mourning were their way of doing honor to the deceased.

Despite these differences, some things are consistent throughout the centuries, namely the practice of gathering family and friends for support and reassurance.

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The gathered community is our resource for coping with grief. They are the visible signs of God's grace. And that is another thing that death cannot kill—it cannot kill love, of God for us and of us for one another. Even though our loved one has died, the love that holds us, that sustains us in dark times, that love remains.

God's love remains no matter what. As we are reminded in the 8th chapter of Romans: For there is nothing—neither life nor death, nor angels nor principalities, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation that can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus.

That isn't to say we don't grieve. Death of a loved one is still an incredible blow to those who are left behind.

But when we cry out from the depths of our hearts, God hears. Sometimes the response of God is slow in coming, sometimes we feel all alone. And even when we feel that Jesus is slow in coming, he is coming nonetheless. Jesus arrives just in time—just in time to give us rest, just in time to give us comfort, just in time to heal our hearts.

The Jesus who raised Lazarus from the dead gives us life as well.

As we emerge from our tombs of despair, we are sustained by faith—faith that the death of this dear friend isn't the end of our meaningful lives, faith that somehow in some way life for us will go on, faith that God will abide with us and we may abide in God forever.

There are some things that even the grave cannot hold: our faith in God, our love for others, our hope in Christ's redemption of the world. These are the things that never cease. Even death cannot stop them.