

When I was pregnant with my first child, Sam, I was not at all sure that my pregnancy would not result in a miscarriage. Many of you know some of my story with infertility and miscarriage and some do not. Before the birth of Sam, I had two miscarriages and struggles with infertility.

I was not attending church at that point in my life and had little knowledge of God and less knowledge of Jesus. I prayed but only in the most general of terms. At that time in my life my prayers ran something like - why are you doing this to me? And, please, please let this child be born.

At the time, my mother worked for a woman whose father was a pastor. How is that for a game of telephone? My mother's, boss's, father. He was a baptist pastor in Southern California and I was an agnostic woman living in Olympia WA. He knew about my story through the chain of connection, me to my mom, to my mom's boss, to her father the pastor.

Through that chain of connection, when he learned that I was once again pregnant, he asked if he could pray for me. I honestly didn't really believe it would matter much at all one way or another, but said yes because I was desperate and figured prayer wouldn't hurt even if it didn't help.

Twenty three years later I stand here telling you this story as that child I was carrying is getting ready to graduate from college in June. During that whole pregnancy my mom would report to me that the baptist pastor would find himself praying for me at all times of day. He would wake up in the middle of the night to pray, as he went about his daily routine, in church on Sundays.

I never met him and he never laid eyes on the child he so faithfully prayed over. I can't tell you that Sam was born because of those prayers. I just don't know. The birth of my son Sam and God's role in it raises more questions than answers for me.

I had other miscarriages after Sam and another child, Ben, born to me so there is almost nothing I can say for sure except this:

Those prayers held me throughout the worry and anxiety of that pregnancy. They made a difference if only to my well-being and to this day I have trouble recalling the love and generosity that was embodied through those prayers without tearing up. When that pastor offered to pray for me he

didn't ask about my faith or my beliefs. Those prayers were not dependent on whether or not I thought God could or would work in my life. And while he respectfully asked me if he could pray for me, his prayers were completely grounded in his faith, not mine.

Our story today, of Jesus raising Lazarus is as mysterious as the prayers that surrounded me during my pregnancy and raises just as many questions for me. We see that Jesus' role in the story is shrouded in questions, many raised by Martha. Why did Jesus wait to come? Why does he grieve Lazarus' death when he is going to raise him? Why does he say that Lazarus is sleeping when he is really dead? Does Martha actually believe that Jesus is the messiah, the son of God? Does her belief matter to the raising of Lazarus from the dead? What does resurrection mean? When will it happen? Who is Jesus?

As a pastor, I rarely like to raise questions I can not answer. Answers provide comfort, reassurances, and they feel pastoral. But Martha's questions in this story, that Jesus rarely answers directly, are a reminder that we live in the messiness of life where issues of life and death, and faith, and miracles, and belief are rarely concrete and etched in stone.

There is a tradition in the Jewish faith of wrestling with holy texts, which is inherent in the name of the Jewish people, Israel, which means wrestles with God. It is in the wrestling that the holiness of the text takes hold of us and begins to live and breathe for us.

And what we see here, what we have seen from the beginning of this sermon series both in our practice of questioning and the texts themselves is a wrestling. The snake asks will you really die if you eat of the fruit? We might read that to mean - what is the nature of death that God warns against? Or Nicodemus - what does it mean to be born from above? Or the Samaritan Woman - do you, Jesus, consider yourself greater than our ancestor Jacob? And then, he can't be the messiah, can he? Or last week - who sinned the blind man or his parents?

All of these questions are faith questions, people trying to wrestle with Jesus, his message, what they have been taught and the real life circumstances that are a challenge to that faith.

Our story today is no different. Martha questions Jesus from the very beginning. While she uses declarative sentences, she is inviting a response from Jesus, challenging him to explain himself.

Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But, I know that God will do anything you ask him.

Can't you almost hear Martha's challenge here. Jesus, can you save him? Can you raise him? Could you have cured him? Will you cure him?

And then Jesus, Your brother will rise from the dead.

Martha responds with another declarative statement, I know he will rise from the dead on the last day.

Again, Martha is offering a challenge to Jesus. Yes, she is saying, I know the teachings of our faith about resurrection at the end of time. But is that really all you have to offer me?

And then we get the declarative sentence from Jesus that reveals to Martha, to anyone listening, to us, who Jesus is.

I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me though they will die will live. Do you believe this?

Out of Martha's questioning, her challenges, we get one of the clearest declarations of Jesus' identity. It is an I AM statement, tracing back to God's I am statement in Exodus when Moses questions who is sending Moses to set the Israelites free from Pharaoh.

In this story, the I AM statement from Jesus is declaring that he will set anyone who believes free from death, a foreshadowing of both the raising of Lazarus and the resurrection of Jesus.

This cannot be undervalued. Out of Martha's questions emerges the revelation of Jesus as one who will bring resurrection. When we are tempted to think that our questions are unacceptable to God, that what God asks of us is blind devotion without giving voice to our wonderings, our

questions, our doubts. Let us return to this Scripture again and again where Martha's wrestlings with Jesus prompt this revelation.

Jesus will return the questioning to Martha, asking her, do you believe this of me?

Martha responds with perhaps the most definitive Christological affirmation in all of the gospels,

**“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”**

As a side note, in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke Peter is the one who makes this affirmation of Jesus' identity as the Christ. Here, we find this declaration in the mouth of a woman, following the Samaritan woman at the well who introduced the idea in John chapter 4 by asking, he isn't the messiah, is he?

Martha, no longer questioning, declares that Jesus is the Christ, the messiah, the One that the people have long awaited. Rather than sowing doubts in her faith, her challenging and questioning leads her to this affirmation.

Questioning our faith has the potential and power to lead us closer to God. We have seen this over the last few weeks - first Nicodemus, then the Samaritan Woman at the Well, the Blind Man from last week, and now Marth.

All three wonder about Jesus, ask him questions, and then make a faith decision of some kind. Nicodemus walks away, but we know that he comes back after Jesus' death to bury his body, an act of devotion. The Woman at the Well, after her piercing theological debate with Jesus ends up saying, he can't be the Messiah, the one we are waiting for, can he? The blind man, questioned by the Pharisees, says at first that Jesus is a prophet. As the Pharisees continue to question him, the man finally says, He comes from God.

And today, Martha, asking Jesus why he waited to come attend to her brother, pronounces Jesus to be the Son of God.

What if we allowed our questions to be a normal part of our faith conversation? What if we allowed ourselves to sometimes say - I don't know all of the answers about Jesus but here is what I do know, and then continue to ask open ended and open hearted questions to see where they might lead?

I don't always like faith questions, especially when I do not have the answers. I want to present assurance, certainty, an unwavering conviction. But the truth is that none of us has all the answers about God. It is impossible if God is transcendent, rises above us and our human knowledge, that any of us could understand everything there is to know about God.

So questions, the act of saying to God, I wonder, or how?, or why?, is actually a profound confession of faith. It is humbling ourselves before the One who is greater than us.

When that preacher man prayed for me so many years ago, I did not know if it would make any difference at all. At the very least, I didn't want to make God angry by turning down prayer. I now know God a bit better than I did back then and understand that God would not be angry if I had declined that offer.

I said yes to those prayers and entered in a mystery I still don't fully comprehend today. But here is what I do know. Those prayers were a constant source of comfort to me. I didn't need to understand them for them to be a tangible source of comfort to me.

Those prayers were an act of love, that held me through a difficult and frightening time in my life. Those prayers were an invitation that I wasn't ready to answer but someday would. Those prayers were with me in the delivery room when I held my newborn baby boy for the first time and those prayers have walked with me every step of my faith journey ever since.

Those prayers were not dependent on my unwavering proclamation of certainty regarding God. Those prayers were a gift given to me by a person of faith and by God.

Those prayers eventually were a part of what led me to church, to God, to Jesus but not because I understood everything about exactly how they worked. They led me to God because they were real for me even when I did not yet believe.

Martha, who proclaims, You are the Son of God, just a few short moments later, as they approach Lazarus' tomb, says - Lord, he has been dead four days. The smell!

You are the Son of God, the messiah, and you will not be able to overcome the ravages of death.

She believes and she doubts, all in the same breath.

Yes, please pray for me, will it really matter anyway?

There is so much good news in this story - a man is raised from the dead! Perhaps in the miracle we might lose track of this good news - the miracle of resurrection was not dependent on Martha's unwavering faith or her ability to understand what it means that Jesus is the Son of God.

The miracle happens even as Martha is wondering if it can. I want us to sit with this for a moment. The miracle happens even while Martha is wondering if it can.

Our doubts, wonderings, questions do not stop God from working in the world. Or even in our lives.

When we let go of the need to be certain suddenly so much opens up to us. We can be in conversation, relationship even, with the God we know in Jesus while we still wonder. Maybe there is actually no other way.

So, as we sit with this resurrection story, as we move towards Easter and the resurrection of Jesus, as we venture into the Eastertide season after Easter where we begin to explore what resurrection might look like in our own lives, let us go with a sense of wonder, hope, doubt, faith, trust, and disbelief. God will meet us where we are and work even as we wonder if that is possible. Amen.