

Why do you sing? Why do we sing? For many of us, we sing because we are happy, joyful, feeling cheerful. Maybe we sing to express hope. Some may sing the blues to express hurt or sadness, but mostly we sing because we are happy, hopeful, maybe grateful.

When the famous agnostic, Robert Ingersoll, died, the printed funeral program had this solemn instruction. It read: "There will be no singing." Without faith, few feel like singing in the face of death. Running, perhaps. Crying, certainly. But not singing. Not in the face of death. For without faith, death steals our reason to sing. Death takes the song off our lips and leaves in its place stilled tongues and tear-stained cheeks.

We know that is true because we have experienced it. We also see it happening in the gospel reading today. There was no singing at the funeral Jesus attended in Bethany, only mourning and weeping. Only wailing and crying, but no singing. The home of Mary and Martha was more like a prison than a home. People shuffled about aimlessly, their faces downcast, their eyes dulled by death. On their lips was no music or laughter, only the grief that reminded them of their loss. Another prisoner of sickness had been visited by the jailer of death. Another person caught in death's icy grip had been taken from them. Lazarus had died. He was gone.

Mary and Martha faced death that day. Their brother, Lazarus, had been seriously ill. They were among Jesus' closest friends, so they sent for Him. They had witnessed His healing power. They probably felt that their brother would be in no danger if Jesus were near, so they called for Him. We can appreciate those feelings, can't we? Who hasn't called upon the Lord in time of trouble? Who hasn't thought, "If only God would help!"

We are in one of those times as a nation and as nations. Now would be a good time to call upon the Lord for we are certainly in a time of trouble. We're in a time where we are facing death, if not very near us, then in the news we can't seem to drag ourselves away from watching. Now is a good time to pray, even though we cannot do so face to face, which makes all of what's going on feel even worse. Come now Lord! Do something, NOW!

But Jesus didn't come in time. In fact, by the time He made it to Bethany, Lazarus was dead and had already been buried four days. Martha was probably wondering what kind of friend Jesus really was. She had heard he was approaching town, so she went out to meet Him. "*Lord, if you'd only been here.*" If you'd only come sooner, "*my brother would not have died.*" I can imagine a world of feeling in her words! Hurt, frustration, maybe anger and certainly disappointment. The one person who could have really made a difference, didn't! Martha wanted to know why.

And so do we. Perhaps we've done what Martha did — called upon the Lord and sought out healing, asked God for help and looked for Jesus to come. Many, I'm sure are asking just that question. Why? Why Lord? Why this plague of death? Why aren't You doing something about it God?

We can almost hear Martha, can't we? Surely, He will come. Surely, He will help. Didn't He aid the paralytic? Didn't He cure the leper? Didn't He give sight to the blind and help the lame? And they hardly knew Him. Surely He will come. Surely, He will help His friend Lazarus!

But He didn't come. He didn't help. Lazarus got worse and Martha was left to watch and wait. And when Lazarus slipped into unconsciousness, getting weaker and worse, Martha whispered in his ear, "Hold on. Hold on. He will come. He will be here soon." But Jesus didn't come. He didn't help. And finally it was done. Lazarus died and four days later, Jesus came. And Martha was probably beside herself.

We know how she felt, for her words are our words. They have been echoed in the minds of countless people as they make their way to the graveside. "If only you had been here. If only you had helped ... my brother, my husband, my wife, my child, my _____ would have gotten well. If you were doing your part, God, none of this would have happened. If you were doing your part, Lord, we wouldn't be hurting like this."

Like the story today of Mary and Martha, the grave unearths our view of God. Death forces us to look deep within, at that place we consciously avoid. When we come face to face with death, our view of God is challenged, and we are forced to examine our faith in God. When we face death, we are forced to ask, "Where is God?" So often we think that when a person is not healed, that God is not near. Why do we interpret the presence of death with the absence of God?

I don't know of any other answer than because that is how we think. As a result, when God doesn't answer prayers for healing, we think God's not near. As a result, when we experience death and sadness, we think that God doesn't care. It isn't true, but it's very common. Listen to Jesus' conversation with Martha. As Martha rushes out to see Jesus, she says, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now, I know that God will give you whatever you ask.*" And Jesus says to her, "*Your brother will rise again.*" She thinks He is talking about the resurrection on the last day. So Jesus has to clarify for her. He says, "***I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in Me, even though they die, will live. And everyone whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.***" You see, death has never stood in the way of God. God is present even in the presence and reality of death.

Where was God on 9/11? In the twin towers. In the Pentagon. On that plane that crashed in PA. Even on the aircraft that crashed into the towers. And everywhere else where people were who were impacted by what happened that day. Where is God now? In China and Italy and the Middle East and Europe and New York City and the rest of the USA. God is everywhere else where people are, who are being impacted by what is happening on this planet.

If God gave a word to us today, I believe it would be, "Fear not! Do not be afraid for I am with you!" Fear not, do not be afraid. These words and other similar words about not being afraid appear 365 times in the Bible. One time for each day of the year. So, do not be afraid for He is with us. Be cautious! Be careful! Heed the warnings of the president, vice-president and the panel of experts guiding them, but do not panic or be afraid or let your anxiety level be raised! God is with us!

Billy Graham held a crusade in Seattle after the first Persian Gulf War. At the crusade, Shirley Lansing spoke to the crowds about the death of her son. "I come here with a story about my son, Warrant Officer John Morgan." Shirley told the crowd that her son, Jack, had been baptized as a child and had grown up in the church. "I guess he always believed in God, but it didn't seem like a big deal until recently. A few weeks ago, two officers came to our door to inform us that he had been killed when his helicopter was shot down by enemy fire."

The most moving moment of Shirley's story came when she said, "I speak to you only from my heart. Only God can give me the strength to stand here before you and say these words. But it's so important that I speak them and it's so important that you listen. Each of you has the same decision to make that my son made — to believe in God or not. And now is the time for you to decide, for none of us knows how long we've got."

Three weeks before her son had been killed in action half a world away, he had written his family a letter to be opened "just in case." After receiving the devastating news of her son's death, Shirley

and her family gathered together and read that letter. It was filled with John's reassuring words. He ended the letter with these words, "In case you have to open this letter, don't worry. I'm all right and I know something that you do not. I know what heaven is like."

Standing there before the grave of Lazarus, Jesus wept. Perhaps He shed tears of compassion and sadness for the pain that Mary and Martha felt. Maybe He wept for every family who has ever stood or ever will stand at the grave of a loved one and known that loss. Maybe He also sheds tears of frustration: because we do not see beyond the grave, because we refuse to hear His words of comfort and peace, and because we think that death is the final word. It is **not**!!!

To prove once and for all that death has no power where He is present, Jesus cries out, "Lazarus, come out." It took only one call. It took only that one word and Lazarus heard his name. His eyes opened and his life returned. And rising from the grave, he came forth alive and well. And Jesus said to them, "Unbind him and let him go." You see, death cannot triumph where Jesus is present. God has the last word and that word is life!!! Life in Jesus!!!

God wanted them to know and God wants us to know: death cannot triumph where Jesus is present. For where Jesus is, there is life. Isn't that what He says? "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Where Jesus is present, there is life. Where Jesus is present, we are unbound and set free. Where Jesus is present, there is no need to fear. For death has no power over us. Through faith in Christ Jesus, we are set free. For those who have faith in Christ, even at death there can be the singing of celebration for what has been and what is to come.

Fear not, for He is with you!

Amen