Many of you know that I lost my dad to cancer last year. I remember when he first felt the lump in his neck, the swelling of a lymph node that just wouldn’t go away, and I remember the pit in my stomach when, the day of his first appointment with the ENT doctor, he and my stepmom texted me in the middle of choir practice to ask if I could skype with them that night.

For three years, he received treatment: radiation, chemo, even immunotherapy. All the while I kept praying, and this congregation kept praying, and my parents’ congregation kept praying… he had so many people praying for him. And I remember that through the whole thing, I tried to be hopeful, tried to be optimistic, but somewhere in my heart I knew that this was what was going to kill him.

I knew because I’d seen it before. My mother died of cancer 26 years earlier. She had a much shorter and much rougher illness than my dad did, and we both thought about that a lot. After his initial diagnosis, Dad said he didn’t want to even consider chemo because he didn’t want to go through what Mom had gone through. He knew how that ended, and he didn’t think the benefit was worth the cost.

We all have stories of medical miracles, of people who somehow recovered against all odds. Those stories give us hope when another person we know falls ill to cancer or MS or whatever. But they also fill us with doubt. “If that person got well, why didn’t this one?” we ask. We come up with all sorts of ways to explain it. We blame failure on the doctors, or we believe it has to do with not catching it soon enough, or we blame the choices the person made. For years, I believed that my mother’s cancer was due to the fact that she smoked, even though it was never in her lungs. The most ugly thing we do is blame the victim for not having enough faith.

When Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, Mary and Martha blamed him. Each of them separately confronts him with the same words: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” We see death as unnatural, as something that, given the proper resources, we can avoid. Especially in our country, with its advanced medical technology and wealth of resources, we can stick death in the corner and ignore it. It rears its head every so often, but after the funeral or the divorce or the trial, we go back to pretending it isn’t there, that it doesn’t bother us.

I think this is why Jesus weeps at the tomb. He weeps for his friend Lazarus, to be sure, but he does not weep as Lazarus’ own sisters and the crowd of mourners weep. John’s Gospel uses two different words to describe the weeping of Jesus and the weeping that everybody else does.

I think Jesus weeps because of what Lazarus’ death has done to this community, and to Jesus’ friends. They have become bitter, hopeless, even hostile. The crowd of mourners John describes as “Judeans,” the same people who, less than a chapter ago, wanted to stone Jesus in Jerusalem. Even his dear friends accuse him of being responsible for Lazarus’ death.

They want to know what we all want to know, what I want to know: When so many others have been made well, why not this one? “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man kept this man from dying?” they ask?

But the sad fact is that death is a part of life. The best we can hope for is to die peacefully in our beds at a ripe, old age. If cancer doesn’t kill us, if we don’t die in a car accident or from depression or heart disease, it’ll just be something else. Every death we experience reminds us of this: every funeral we attend, every job that is lost, every hope that is shattered reminds us that death is still sitting quietly in the corner, biding its time.

And sometimes it isn’t. Right now, death is standing against the window, casting its long, dark shadow over the whole house. So far, most of us are still fine, still just trying to adjust to a life where we don’t leave our houses, but underneath that amusement or frustration or boredom is the realization that, before this is over, death will have touched all of us in a very real way. We are all likely to know someone who will die from this pandemic. Even if we ourselves come through this, we will not come through unchanged.

This story doesn’t deny the reality of death. It doesn’t deny the fact that each of us will one day rest in our own tomb or urn or grave. The miracle of this story is not that Lazarus was raised from the dead; he eventually died again--the only man in history to have two tombs. His resurrection is a sign that points to the greater thing that God is doing. When Martha confronts Jesus, she says what we still believe: “I know that my brother will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” That is a promise, a fact that gives us comfort; but it is not what this sign is pointing to.

When Martha makes her statement of fact, Jesus counters with a question of faith, of trust. “I AM the resurrection,” he says. “I AM the life which is the light of all people. Do you believe me? Do you trust me more than you trust that tomb to hold your brother?” We tend to think like Martha; that the resurrection is a thing that will happen to us or for us, an event for which we wait. Jesus shows us with this sign that resurrection is not a thing or an event, it is a person, a relationship. Death may separate us, may make us bitter and angry and sad and despairing, but Jesus unites us, gives us hope.

The real miracle of this story is foreshadowed in that single sentence toward the beginning describing Mary, “the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair.” Mary, who was so distraught, so broken by the death of her brother that the only words she had for her dear friend were words of angry accusation, finds herself so filled with love and gratitude that she pours out an entire pound of costly, imported perfume over Jesus’ feet; that she lets down her hair in public (which was highly improper and even risque) to wash his feet--a task so demeaning even a slave would never be asked to do it.

In chapter 10, Jesus states his purpose: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Mary has experienced that abundant life, and responds with abundance: a pound of perfume, the best there is, and an abject act of service. Her act of love is seen only one other time in John’s Gospel: when, on the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus removes his coat, wraps a towel around his waist, and washes his disciples’ feet. He does this to show them the depth of his love for them before he goes to lay down his life for them.

This is the miracle: that even standing in the shadow of death, in Christ we are able to experience abundant life. This doesn’t mean that is no longer real, or painful, or permanent, but it does mean that it is not the last word. Growth and beauty and healing are always possible when we abide in Jesus, because in him, we abide in the Father, the Source of All Life, and the Father abides in us.

Jesus came for one reason and one reason only: to reveal the Father to us. This is how God is revealed: the light which is the life of all people has come into the world to give us the power to become children of God, born not of blood or the will of the flesh or the will of a man, but of God. That light shines in the darkness, showing us the Father, and the darkness of death and sin cannot overcome it.

Death wounds us, it tears us apart from God and one another, it deforms and corrupts us, but Jesus heals us like the paralytic at Bethesda; he opens our eyes like the man born blind in Jerusalem so that we might see how God is hidden even in our suffering, bringing healing and wholeness in the midst of the worst that life has to throw at us. We carry the scars of the world’s pain with us wherever we go, but like the nail marks on the hands of the risen Christ, it is not the scars that define us, but the healing.

So where is God at work in this pandemic? Where is God when this one is healed and that one is not? Where is God in a world in which some live in the lap of luxury while others are driven from their homes to flee violence or live in tents beneath overpasses? I think God is beside us, weeping over the ugliness and the inhumanity of it all. I think God is broken and scarred by pain and death, just as we are. But I also think that God is not destroyed by those things; and I think that when we abide in God and God in us, neither are we.

I still hurt from my parents’ deaths. I still ache for my father. I miss working in the garage with him and asking his advice on house projects. I hate that I couldn’t have a beer with him on my birthday. I miss my Mom, I wish that she could have watched me grow up and that I could have gotten to know her. I hate that my niece will never know her grandparents. But I also know that I will survive; that although this pain will never go away, it will become a part of me that I never want to live without. I know that I will see them again someday; but in the meantime I trust that though they have died, they live in Christ, and that in Christ, they abide in me, and I in them, because we all abide in God.