**IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE #3**  *MM O/L*

**We’ve spent the last couple of weeks in the graveyard with Martha and Mary at the tomb of their brother, Lazarus. I do hope you haven’t found it morbid. A graveyard *can* be a place of hope, you know. Dawn and I sometimes visit them and we always find them to be places of peace….and sometimes even laughter. There was that gravestone of a cartoonist in Prague that made us laugh out loud – but, as it was rude, I can’t describe it here! But there was one gravestone I saw at Culford in Suffolk when I was speaking at an Easter youth weekend. I forget whose it was, but, as usual, it gave the date he was born, but, the next line didn’t mention death, it gave the date he was “born again”. *That’s* hope!**

**So I hope our visits to Bethany cemetery have been hopeful for you. We’ve thought how Jesus hadn’t been negligent in Lazarus’s death, but, rather, He’d been aware of all the circumstances. And we’ve looked at how He addressed their emotions, whether anger or grief. And, gloriously, of course, we’ve seen how He called Lazarus out of the tomb!**

**Do you remember how both sisters said separately to Jesus,** ***If you had been here, my brother would not have died (Jn. 11:21, 32)*? When Lazarus fell sick, Jesus had been across the Jordan (10:40) and the sisters had sent Him a message (11:3), but Jesus had stayed there for an extra two days (v. 6), so that, by the time He arrived, Lazarus had been four days buried (v. 17). So, *If you had been here, my brother would not have died,* they said.**

**I wonder whether that’s true. Jesus didn’t deny it, but neither did He confirm it. He said that Lazarus’s sickness *is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it (v. 4)* and, just before they opened the tomb, He told them that they *would see the glory of God (v. 40).* So, surely, that glory which they would see would be Lazarus’s resurrection….and a resurrection can only ever follow a death. Is it true to say that, if Jesus had been there, Lazarus would not have died? It is certainly a more glorious miracle to raise the dead (after four days!) than to heal the sick who are still alive. The sick are often healed: the decomposing dead (v. 39) are never raised!**

**We reflected that this famous story took place before Pentecost. Since that day when the Holy Spirit of Jesus fell on all people (Ac. 2:17), it has been impossible for any believer to say to Jesus, *If you had been here.* By His Spirit, He has come to stay in us, so that, wherever we are, He is there, too! That’s why the promise of Hebrews 13 v. 5, *Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you,* is always true. Among His last words to His disciples before He left the earth was the promise, *I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Mt. 28:20)* and, as we’re still here, this age hasn’t finished, so His promise remains.**

**So, can we pray, *Lord, because You are here, my brother/sister/partner/friend/whoever will not die*? Well, we can certainly *pray* it and ask Him to heal the one we love. Often He does….but not always. And a moment’s reflection shows that that must be so. You love babies, don’t you? If every person prayed for in the last two thousand years had recovered, there’d certainly be no room for new babies, would there? The world would be full of grumpy old people clinging on to life and the baby’s cry would be banished! No, one generation *must* pass in order to make way for the next. It was ever thus and ever will be until *the end of the age.***

**You see, death looks different to Jesus. To us, as Basil Fawlty said, *It’s so final, isn’t it?* As the coffin sinks into the grave or as the curtains close around it, our loved one disappears from sight. But what did Jesus say to the dying thief? *Today, you will be with me in paradise (Lk. 23:43).* The word He used – *paradise –* means a beautiful garden. As the thief closed his eyes on the horrors of Golgotha, he opened them on the beauties of another Eden – and a better Eden, one where there will be no possibility for death to re-enter (Rev. 21:4).**

**The psalmist must have caught a glimpse of that paradise when he sang, *Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints (Ps. 116:15*). *In the* *sight of the LORD –* He sees us coming and, when Jesus saw Stephen coming as he died under a hail of stones, He *rose* to meet him (Ac. 7:56). You see, the grave has a back door, invisible from this side, and we pass through it and find ourselves at home (Jn. 14:2). So pray for the sick, won’t you? James says that *the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well and the Lord will raise him up (Jas. 5:15),* although I think he’s being deliberately ambiguous when he says, *raise him up*! Pray for the sick, but don’t wish the dead back, will you? God can do anything, but it’s not usually His way nowadays to raise the dead.**

**I wonder how grateful Lazarus was to be restored to this world of sorrow and strife. In the next chapter, ch. 12, John tells us,**

***Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him (vv. 1-2).***

**Mary anoints Jesus and John goes on to say in v. 9,**

***Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well [as Jesus 11:53], for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him (vv. 9-11).***

**As the Book of Common Prayer says, *In the midst of life we are in death.* Most of us aren’t threatened by assassins, but there are many other dangers surrounding us. Recently, an old lady in Bow was killed when a crane fell on her house – who could have predicted that? She escaped COVID to be hit by a crane! No, whether they got him or not, Lazarus as a human being would have to go through the whole inconvenience of dying again and being reburied. The first time, he heard Jesus call out his name – *Lazarus, come out (11:43)!* This time….? Well, exactly the same, actually: Jesus said, *I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live (Jn. 5:25).***

**We who believe are all Lazaruses. We can’t say to Jesus, *If you had been here, So-and-so would not have died,* because He *is* here and people *do* die, whether through disease, malice, negligence or old age. Remember, He weeps with those who mourn (Jn. 11:35). But we must never grieve as those without hope (1 Thess. 4:13) because no-one’s deaf in the grave and we will hear His voice calling our names.**

**So, comfort those who mourn and, if you are mourning, be comforted. *If you had been here,* we say: *Here I am,* He replies (Rev. 3:20).**