

If you had been here

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I was a little girl, sitting near the front row of the church. My legs could not touch the floor, and I had to hold my hands laced in my lap so that I could remain still. I stared at the coffin before me. It was hard to imagine that the box held Brian. It didn't have any breathing holes, like my insect boxes did. Plus, the polished varnish casket looked nothing like what I had seen on television. It was far too short to contain a body.

Brian had been a friend. The thing I recall the most about playing with him was the sweet, musty smell of his home--the scent of baking bread, dirt, and moss. I first detected it as Brian and I amused ourselves with endless hide and seek among his parent's furniture. We remained hidden, holding our breath to stifle giggles, even as we were called for dinner.

The scent never quite faded, even as we emerged from our hiding places and sat at the table. His mother's elaborate meals always included multiple wine glasses, lined up before each plate.

Then the odor lingered, months later, far after Brian could duck behind the sofas or hold his breath in coat closets. I would still visit, even after I found out that Brian had stage IV cancer. But I was no longer allowed to play with him. He had become a fragile thing, sleeping in an awkwardly placed bed among the living-room furniture. There was no more counting and laughing among the end tables, only grown-ups gathered in strained, whispered voices.

Then when Brian died, I sat through the funeral, completely unaware of the preacher's words. The box became hungry for all of my attention. As I stared at it, I could almost smell Brian's home. My prayers veered away from the liturgy and willed Brian to rise. I knew my Sunday school lessons. I knew the story of Lazarus. I knew that dry bones could take on brown flesh and that our faith hinged on resurrection. If it was true in the Bible, I reasoned, then it ought to be true in the present.

In my child's mind, the moment became a sort of litmus test of God's power--and I fully expected the lid to swing open, as if Brian had been playing the ultimate game of hide and seek. I imagined this because if there was a God, then surely children would not be allowed to die.

It was a child's fantasy, of course. I continued it for months after the funeral, as I held elaborate conversations with Brian. He came to me in those groggy moments between waking and sleeping, when I began loosening my grasp on my conscious mind.

Though the hope for resurrection in that moment was impossible, there was something ageless about my sense of injustice. It was a longing that many of us carry throughout our lives.

"If you had been here, my brother would not have died." These words fall out of Mary in a tumble of exhaustion, weeping, gratitude, and anger--that swirl of emotions when death overtakes someone we love. It is the same thing I felt as a small child. And it is the frustrating thing I have heard as a pastor, so many times, directed toward God.

*God has abandoned me in my grief. If God were real, I would not have had the miscarriage. How could a loving God allow this to occur?*

Of course, we know that people have to die. It's the way our earth works, with our limited resources: in order for others to be born, we must be mortal. And yet, death still surprises us. We long for vitality, and we are sure that our days ought to be long on the earth. The years feel like our right, and any shortage feels unjust. We become greedy for more shared mornings, more long conversations, more hours rich with laughter. It's a testament to the beauty of life that we want more of it, for ourselves and for those we love.

There is a bit of that little girl still left in me, even as I am now the pastor, echoing ancient liturgies. I still look at the coffins and long for the impossible hope of resurrection, and I repeat Mary's words. I even join her in weeping, as I demand Christ's presence in the midst of sorrow.