I’m not sure why, but for some reason I am not afraid to die. I don’t want to die, I enjoy my life and I have a lot to look forward to, but the thought of dying does not fill me with dread. I suppose it has a lot to do with my faith in God, with the fact that I know there is something next. I’m pretty sure that death is just a transition into something new and better.

There is one thing however, that does fill me with dread. This thing I dread more than anything else comes upon me once in a while and I have to quickly dismiss it because just the thought of it overwhelms me. And this thing I dread more than anything else is the loss of any of my children. I have had moments sitting at the supper table and the thought pops into my head: “What if one of my kids were to die?” Just the mere thought of it absolutely mortifies me. I don’t know how I would handle it. I don’t know that I could. I am certain I would never get over it.

As I have been preparing for this service for the last week and thinking about Jan and her life, what keeps coming to mind for me is that fact that for Jan’s family this is the second loss in less than a year. Jan’s death last week was preceded by her sister Laurie’s death just last August. And so my heart has been going out to this family a great deal this week and especially for you Danika for the loss of your mother and for you, Dick, as I try to imagine the devastation you must feel after losing two children in a matter of months. It’s a very heavy burden and I think I can speak for this whole gathering today that you are very much in our hearts and prayers. We hold you up today and will keep you in our prayers for many days to come.

I suggested this Gospel reading today because there are so many parts of this story that relate to this situation. In this reading Lazarus, a personal friend of Jesus is sick and dying. Someone comes and reports this to Jesus. They had seen what he could do and were sure he could and would save Lazarus’s life. But Jesus says he will wait. He waits three days and then finally goes to see Lazarus. But by then it’s too late, Lazarus is long dead and buried. For three days he has been in the tomb.

When Jesus arrives on the scene Martha, friend of Jesus and brother to Lazarus comes out to Jesus and confronts him. “If you would have been here my brother would not have died.” Can you hear the anger and frustration in that statement? Have you ever felt that way toward God? Wondered why God didn’t intervene and do something?

Jan’s death is a situation that should make us angry at God. Fifty five year old women should not die. People with a loving caring and generous heart should not have to go through what Jan went through. No fiancé should lose his prospective bride before marriage; No daughter should lose her mother; and for God’s sake, no father should lose two children, let alone within months of each other. This is an injustice. This is wrong. It shouldn’t be this way. God, where were you? If you had been here, Jan would not have died.
Jesus assures Martha that Lazarus is not dead but will rise again, and she says, “Yeah, yeah, at the resurrection, so what? I want him alive now.” Have you ever felt that way about God’s promises, that they were not very helpful in the moment?

In my losses of loved ones in the past I have felt like Martha--angry at God for letting bad things happen. Annoyance at God for offering the meager promise of eternal life in place of my loss--yes, there is always heaven, but big deal. When you are in deep pain some future possible heaven seems like hollow. I don’t care about that now. I just want my loved one back right now. Promise of eternal life doesn’t seem to fix anything—right now.

But in fact I have come to learn it actually does fix things. It fixes things more than we can fathom. It doesn’t fix right now, at least not in the way I want right now fixed, but it does fix things in a way that is far more real and far more important than how I want them fixed.

On the way to the grave, we don’t see this in the reading, but on the way Jesus sees and hears the people mourning and he is so moved by their mourning that he himself begins to weep. Why was Jesus weeping? Was he grieving for Lazarus? No, not possible. We know from the beginning of the story that Jesus was planning to raise him from the dead. Jesus knew Lazarus was going to be just fine. So why was he crying? Jesus was crying because he saw how very sad and hopeless they were. These were people who believed in the resurrection and yet they were crying like this was the end of the world. They really didn’t believe in life after death.

It goes to the whole theology of why Jesus came in the first place. The crux of his message, of what he said, but more importantly by what he did by dying and rising again, was to send a message from beyond, a message from God that death is not the end of life. There is more.

Understanding eternal life means raising my vision to understand things from an eternal perspective. If I can begin to understand resurrection and eternal life and live as though I really believe it’s true, then it changes how I view my life and how I live my life and how I handle my losses.

The truth of the Gospel doesn’t take away that bad things happen, but it does take away the sting of the bad things that happen. We can say “well it doesn’t change the fact that Jan died.” But if it’s true that she’s actually and truly still alive right now, that’s she’s in a far better place and will see her again, then that would that mean that Jesus has changed things pretty significantly for her, wouldn’t you say? And it changes things pretty significantly for us too if we really believe it.

Jesus wept because these people who said they believed in eternal life really didn’t. They thought Lazarus was dead and gone. They talked about the resurrection, but they didn’t really believe it. They were people who talked about hope, but really didn’t believe it. This is what made Jesus cry and this is the very reason God came down from heaven in the form of Jesus, died and rose again. He wanted us to live this life with hope; with knowing the death is not the end; that our time on earth is brief and precious; that we should spend life loving each other and when we lose loved ones we can know they are not really gone. That’s what God came to fix, to take away our hopelessness and to heal our grief.
Of all the things Christianity teaches and offers—how to live, how to love and care for each other—they are all based on the single and most important truth of our faith—that God has conquered death and opened the gates of heaven to all believers. God cares about our sadness and grief—enough to cry about it and enough to die about it. So God did do something about it. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Because of God’s gift Jesus Christ, you are guaranteed to survive your own death. Because of God’s gift of Jesus Christ, Jan is not dead but alive. She is with her sister and all the saints who have gone before us. I know this is true and I can’t wait until we all get there so I can say, “I told you so?”

God help us in our grief. It is so very hard to lose our loved ones, especially when they leave us so young and when their death could have been avoided. We don’t understand all the things that happen in this life and there are so many things we don’t like. This is one of them. And so in the midst of things we don’t understand and don’t like, help us to trust in you and your promises. Give us comfort that while we are sad, we can also hold joy in our hearts because Jan is with you. She is alive, she is well, and we shall see her one day. For the gift of this great promise we give you thanks and praise. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen