

Maybe we're all agnostics. A little unsure of our faith, unsteady on our feet. We want to believe, but our faith is laced with doubt. We are the poor sap to whom Jesus asked, Do you believe?

The man answered, I believe, Lord, help thou my unbelief.

Even Ezekiel seems to have waffled. There he was, looking over the valley of brittle bones, bleached white from the sun, when God asked him this simple question: Can these bones live?

Now most of us would have answered, Of course not. They are dead. Ezekiel didn't say, No. But he didn't say Yes, either. Like I said, he waffled, Only you know, O Lord.

I believe, Lord, help thou my unbelief.

Martha, too – her exchange with Jesus belies agnostic doubt.

Her brother Lazarus died and Jesus took way too long to help. Still, now that he's here, Martha rushes out to meet him. She is edgy from grief, her eyes still red from crying.

She knows that Jesus could have healed her brother – she saw him heal blind men and turn water into wine. She knows Jesus could have saved Lazarus. If you had been here, my brother would not have died – she says politely, but firmly.

Jesus acted like he didn't hear Martha, saying only, Your brother will live again.

To which Martha responds – now pay attention – what she says is for them politically correct – it sounds good, but it is full of doubt: Yes, I know he will: on the last day.

This answer is full of doubt because it is a standard, cookie-cutter, religious answer. Everyone in those days thought the dead would rise at the end of it all –

Jesus wasn't looking for an off-the-shelf religious response, he wanted honesty from Martha.

Had Martha been honest, she would have thrown dishes, kicked at things. Her brother died, and Jesus, the healer, did nothing about it.

It would have been far more honest for her to beat Jesus' chest than to recite elements of the faith that meant nothing to her.

Faking faith is far different from expressing doubt. Faking faith is dishonest. Expressing doubt is honest.

But, I'm pretty sure everyone in this room – myself included – has faked faith, once or twice. I believe in God the Father Almighty, when I'm just not so sure.

There is a renaissance painting of the nativity, Rembrandt, if I'm not mistaken, that depicts a manger scene with a burst of sun coming through the window. Painted into the sunburst is a cross - the Good Friday cross – and perhaps the meaning is obvious to you –

Jesus' death was always in the picture, from the day he was born, his destiny was death.

Now think about this: If Jesus was born to die, what about us?

What do you suppose scares Martha more? Lazarus' death, or the prospect of her own? The truth of the painting and maybe of this story is not just that Jesus was born to die, it is that we were all born to die. Lazarus, Martha, you and me.

Our mortality, which is why the priest intones harsh words on Ash Wednesday as he etches ritual into your forehead: You are dust, and to dust you shall return.

We obfuscate, hide the stark reality behind euphemisms: John passed away, last night, or Jane now rests in Christ, or more humorously, six feet under, and pushing up daisies.

It's not just the euphemisms. We fight death inch by bloody inch. Life-support machines keep people alive long beyond that which is reasonable.

Also, we hide from death, we soften its impending threat with cosmetic surgery, omega-3 fish oil, and the antioxidants of red wine.

I'm reading the novel, *Freedom*, by Jonathan Franzen. Not the most enjoyable read: the characters are multi-dysfunctional, but one of them, the mom, makes a poignant comment.

One of the other characters tells her how good she looks these days, to which she responds:

“Well, and that's what really counts, isn't it? I've become one of those women who put a ton of work into looking OK. If I can just go on and make a beautiful corpse, I'll have the whole problem pretty well licked.”

There is nothing morally wrong about looking good. But looking good won't stay the inevitable: None of us is getting out of here alive.

Maybe Martha wasn't afraid of her own death. Maybe I'm reading too much into the story. But she did shroud her doubt using rote religious words, Yes, he will rise again at the last day.

And Jesus did look at Martha like she was the one who needed to be raised, and not Lazarus: but Jesus raised both, Martha and Lazarus.

To paraphrase Rainer Maria Rilke, writing about Lazarus' return to life: Jesus lifted his hand ponderously, more slowly than any other hand ever has been lifted. Then he clinched his hand like the claw of a hawk, so intense and passionate that one might suspect all the dead to emerge from Lazarus' tomb.

Jesus beckoned Lazarus, and Martha emerged. Martha came alive!

You know, our mortality needn't bother us. We do have the Easter promise of resurrection life. Rather, what should bother us is our relevance. What meaning do you find, what purpose do you have?

But Jesus still looks Martha and you and me in the eye and promises relevance, in him:

I am the Resurrection and the Life.

You can find your meaning in me.

Jesus – he's not just about the future – the by-and-by. He is about the here and now. Sinew and flesh added to dry brittle bones. Oxygen breathed into oxygen-starved lungs.

Yes, we might be a little agnostic. We might teeter sometimes at the edge of the faith we espouse. But we don't have to stay there.

Therefore my invitation to you is simple: Let yourself rediscover your teetering faith, this Holy Season, with renewed vitality –

Walk with Jesus from death to life.

Become Martha; rediscover meaning, rediscover life, rediscover Jesus.