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Because memories are not enough

Easter carries the hope of life

At Easter time, I remember. Our Lord's death, of course. But now, other deaths in our family, too. And I realize that if the resurrection of Jesus means anything, it means something about our grief at the separation that is death.

This is the time of year that my only brother, then barely past his 50th birthday, died. I am no longer flooded by the grief that overwhelmed me in the first years after his death. But as spring comes each year, I still feel a deep sense of loss. He should be here to see the cherries bloom again. He died too soon, it seems.

The first Easter Sunday after his death, I visited the church where his ashes had

been interred. I arrived early so I could stand beside the memorial garden, a small square of damp hyacinth-and crocus-filled earth, my brother's grave unmarked except by upthrusting spring flowers. There seemed so little to mark his having been, the spring garden so sadly empty of his presence.

I wept silently, my tears welling up out of the deep and seemingly inexhaustible place of sadness so few seemed to understand. "Were you close?" people would ask me, and I wouldn't know how to answer. He was my "big brother," four years my senior. We, with our other two sisters, had shared a childhood, the every-morning breakfast table where oatmeal porridge and a chapter of Proverbs were served to fortify us for the day.

I had tagged along with

him when his hobby was chasing butterflies in the fields beside our home on the edge the city, netting them and naming them from the small blue butterfly book he had let me come with him to the bookstore to buy.

And later, I tagged along when his hobby was trying out the tone of pipe organs anywhere in the city he could find an open church. My job was to kneel piously in a back pew and signal to him if anyone official-looking came in. And when, against much pressure to train for pastoral service, he went on to university, he blazed a trail for me to follow.

Had we been close? "Not in our adult years," I would have to explain. But we had been brother and sister, and he was gone.

That Easter Sunday morning as I stood and wept, the minister paused to speak

with me. "Is someone you love buried here?" she said gently.

I nodded. "My brother," I said.

She touched my elbow. "Remember," she said, "he will always be with you. He will live on in your many memories..." I was unable to respond and her words trailed off as she left, hurrying to a side door to prepare for the service.

I welcomed the kindness of her words and the humanity of her touch, honoured her for taking time on her busy Easter Sunday morning to speak to me, but her words were no comfort for my grief. I knew then, as I know now, that memories are not enough.

To have been comforted, I

needed to know far more.

I needed to know my brother lived. That his death had opened out into life in which he continued to be,

however transformed, the unique, identifiable, unrepeatable person who I had lost. That because of the Great Sacrifice we remember



at Easter, I could dare to hope to see my brother again, to know him, maybe once more to tag along with him while he expounded or explained. After all, he's getting a head start on heaven.

What might that kindly, well-meaning minister have said that would have helped me wipe away my tears, that would have expressed the

essence of the Christian's hope? How should we comfort one another in our losses?

She could have said to me what Jesus said to Martha, the weeping bereaved sister of John's gospel—"Jesus said, 'He who believes in me will live, even though he dies'" (John 11: 23, 25). Or the apostle Paul's words to the Corinthians: "[To be] away from the body [is to be] at home with the Lord" . . . (2 Cor. 5:8). Or even, quite simply, she might have recounted the earliest of creeds, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures . . . He was buried . . . He was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15: 3).

The Christian hope—the reason for the Easter celebration—is not that people merely live on in our memories. It is that life empties into Life, through the narrow passage that is death. Not just memories, but hope.

It was not merely memories of Jesus' life that lifted his disciples from cringing, fearful disillusionment to the confident public proclamation of a preposterous message—"God raised him

from the dead" (Acts 2: 23-24). The message that Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem was that Jesus himself, the same Jesus they had walked, talked and fished with, argued, trekked and healed with, run from and denied—this same Jesus was alive again.

The world has always had various forms of consolation in the face of mortality. But the Christian hope is not just that our loved ones will live on in our memories, or that we will live on in our

children, or that our decomposing bodies will nurture other life forms—however true these lesser, naturalistic consolations may be.

The Christian hope is that one day we will see the loved ones who have, in and because of Christ, crossed over from life to Life, and that in that seeing and meeting, at last we will truly know each other, and finally be fully known.

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