

“Aha! You would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!” (Mark 15:29-30). The words of those who passed by cut deeper every time. Crowds had once hung on his every word, but these onlookers had turned on him in the most vicious way. The chief priests and scribes pointed out the utter folly of this “Son of God”: “He saved others; he cannot save himself! Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe!” (Mark 15:31-32). Here Jesus hung, suspended between heaven and earth, utterly alone. His followers had fled into the darkness the night before, and except for his mother, the two Marys, and John, all his people seemed to have turned against him. He turned his eyes where he was certain to find some respite. He looked into the heavens, searching for a sign of deliverance from his God. But even the midday sky closed itself to him. The clouds were thick and the sun was nowhere to be found—all he saw was black nothingness. Jesus gazed into the abyss and cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). His cry echoed into the darkness—unreturned. How could his Father God leave him like this?

On January 12, 2010, Odinel, a mother of six, was preparing rice and beans for her family’s dinner. One of her children was playing outside while the rest were inside their ground floor apartment doing homework and playing. One moment, it was a day like every other day—the next moment, the world itself shook with great convulsions, bringing the six-story building crashing down upon them in a few moments of chaos. Stunned and confused, Odinel was able to compose herself and dig herself free, but she feared the fate of her five children who had been inside with her: “I was screaming out for the children as I threw pieces of concrete off me but heard nothing. I could see layers of concrete lying on the spot where [they] had been doing homework. I was sure they were dead.” The silence Odinel faced was deafening. She could never move that kind of concrete rubble by herself, and with everyone else scrambling for their own survival, this mother faced the harsh reality that her children were dead or very soon to be. In a matter of moments, five of her precious children were violently snatched from her motherly embrace.

The 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck 16 miles west of Haiti’s capital city and killed an estimated 230,000 people left our world staring into the abyss. The reality is that this world is a dark, dark place. When we aren’t entertaining and distracting ourselves, we are pressed by the brutality of this world on so many different sides.

From everyday struggles and frustrations to wars to terrorist attacks to natural disasters to broken families to lost jobs to tragic car accidents to long battles against disease. In these moments we come face to face with our utter helplessness. We cry out for help—to anyone!—looking for answers. And we especially pray to God, time after time. But what do our cries get? Often the same thing that Jesus got—silence. How many Christians have prayed to be delivered from the clutches of cancer or another terrible illness to no avail? Sure, one or two make it against the odds, but what about the rest? We struggle with questions, like: did he ignore the cries of the 230,000 people who were killed in Haiti's earthquake?

As the dark clouds swirled over the head of Jesus, he faced his greatest trial—everything he stood for hung in the balance. In a matter of hours he would be dead, and already he had been shamed, humiliated, and discredited. Everyone around Jesus had reason to abandon faith because the pressure to despair was immense. What good was it for him to patiently wait any longer? What could he possibly be waiting for as death reached out to embrace him? How could this be the arrival of God's kingdom that he had so forcefully preached? How could he be the Messiah and long-awaited King of Israel? Had he been mistaken? Now was the time to own up to that! Now was the time to give up! No one could fault him for it! But stubbornly, defiantly, Jesus pressed onward. He did the unthinkable—he resolved himself to patiently wait on his Father in heaven. He refused to give up his hope that God's kingdom was at hand. He did not fight to bring himself down from that cross. He did not call on an army of angels to intervene. He did not curse God. Following the way of love, he persisted till the end. And the end did come.

Under six stories of broken building, seven-year-old Kiki and his ten-year-old sister Sabrina were buried alive. Tucked away in a small pocket in the concrete rubble with the bodies of their other siblings, they had amazingly been spared from a crushing death. But now they were trapped—alone, hungry, thirsty, and weak. The days passed and there was no sign that rescue would come—they heard no one calling out for them or digging to set them free. Kiki and Sabrina clung to each other and waited. Though it would have been easy to simply surrender in despair, slipping into death like their brothers and sisters, they continued to hope beyond all hope that they would be rescued. They found their solace in one another, strengthened by the fact that they were not alone.

In this world death also stands on your doorstep—diseases, disasters of every sort, wars, and violence rage all around threatening to tear your life apart. Will you continue to look to God in hope or will you walk away in despair? Alone, you will eventually fall into despair, but with others there is a chance for hope. Like Kiki

and Sabrina, it is important that you and I face the harshness of reality in the company of one another. If you and I try to go it alone, then we will not make it—we are simply not strong enough. God has given us a community of brothers and sisters that we might build each other up and strengthen ourselves in the face of the world's darkness. Peter's first letter was written to Christians facing persecution, people tempted to give up on God. 1 Peter 1:6-9 says, "Now for a little time you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine." He wrote these words to Christian communities, not to individuals. He wrote about facing despair as part of a community in Christ. Without community gathered around the cross, the task ahead of us would be too much. When you and I stare death and despair in the face, refusing to buckle, we need each other. The hymn writer put it this way. "When all things seem against us, to drive us to despair, we know one gate is open, one ear will hear our prayer" (LSB 915, v. 4).

On Friday they laid Jesus' body in the tomb. He had stared into the abyss and it swallowed him up. It looked like the kingdom he preached never came and now he was just another dead Messiah—a failure. Scoffers said his trust in a god who would let him face rejection, suffering, and crucifixion was a joke. How, they ridiculed, could he have thought that such a god was real? His god had been too late—his trust had been in vain. In a world where the strong conquer, he had been weak. In a world where wisdom ruled, he had been a fool. In a world where death had the final say, he was dead. This dark and unforgiving world once again asserted its strength. But as it pressed down relentlessly on this weak and seemingly foolish Jesus, its iron grip began to slip. On Sunday morning, the way of the world was shown to be a fraud. The world that everyone thought they knew was completely turned on its head. Jesus, this crucified failure, was bodily raised to life! His foolishness was proven to be true wisdom—his weakness, true strength! Everything the world thought it had figured out began to crumble in a pile of rubble.

A week after the disaster, Kiki and Sabrina's aunt, Devinal, returned to the family's apartment to look for some belongings. As she looked through the rubble she heard what she thought were muffled cries. Immediately she started to dig with a crowbar. Amazingly, a team of 20 American rescue workers from New York and Virginia stumbled onto the scene and moved in to help. They began to dig. After four hours of digging and cutting through five layers of crushed concrete they came upon Kiki. Huddled next to the corpse of one of his siblings they were able to pull him free. Then they released Sabrina who was trapped behind a metal chair.

After eight grueling days without food or water the two children were reunited with their mother amidst tears and laughter. Their foolish hope was answered, and a small window into another world was revealed.

In the story of Kiki and Sabrina, and in countless others throughout the world, we are given small reminders that our natural understanding of what is good or evil, right or wrong, wise or foolish, strong or weak, has been turned upside down in Jesus Christ, the crucified. The insignificant and humble ways of faith, hope, and love are shown in him to be God's way. The dark world around us continues to mock their foolish hope but our assurance is that the outcome of faith in Jesus' God is nothing short of true rescue on the other side of death. As Peter wrote: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Peter 1:8). Though you do not see God, you know you will be saved from the evil clutches of a world of disease, disaster, war, and broken relationships. Cling to God in all things and you will be raised from the dead, just like Jesus! As you lie on your deathbed—and even in the days between now and then—you can be certain that your God, the God of Jesus, acts on the other side of death, on the other side of the abyss. The eyes of faith, given by the Spirit of Jesus, reveal to us that the true God of this world is found in the midst of the fearful abyss—our God resides in the crucified Jesus. If it is foolish to believe in a God like that—a God you cannot see, a God on the other side of death—then let us be fools, because the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom.