

My Brother's Keeper

Name withheld

Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. (John 11:25)

The year I sang the part of Martha in Rob Gardner's *Lamb of God*¹ is also the year my younger brother James came and then nearly left us for good.

James arrived at our home on Christmas Day. He was always one for surprises, so he didn't announce his coming until two days beforehand. He had previously told us he would arrive in October. We prepped his room and waited. And waited.

We didn't know what to expect when James came to live with us. Of my five siblings, he was the one I knew the least. He kept his emotions and whereabouts closely guarded. The family took to calling him the International Man of Mystery. James worked in South America. He traveled all over the world—hiking through Patagonia, running marathons in Argentina, and skiing the Canadian Rockies.

But life had grown increasingly challenging for him. Because of past mental illness and the effects of long COVID, James had to take leave from his high-powered sales job. He needed a place to stay. We had an open bedroom.

¹. *Lamb of God*, Rob Gardner Music, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://robgardnermusic.com/lamb>.

Immediately, James infused our house with energy. We were down to our last kid at home, and our son missed his older siblings. James became like a big brother. He organized a hot wings challenge on New Year's Day. He bought our son an incline bench for lifting and no fewer than seven new basketballs when he made the freshman team.

Every day was like Christmas. A cold plunge pool appeared in our courtyard. New nightlights illuminated the hallways. James bought clip-on reading lamps for every member of the family. Weighted vests. Blue light therapy. Red light therapy. Cases of sparkling water. Forty books on optimizing life. I, a minimalist, feared that our house could not absorb so many *things*.

James was a gatherer. He and our son watched the entire NBA season together; a platter of chips and salsa balanced between them. He invited me to watch masterclasses on writing. The quips he offered from his favorite seat in the dining room became a source of delight. We developed a dozen inside jokes.

The mental illness was also evident, but it hummed quietly in the background. James stayed in bed until the late afternoon. On the days he had energy, he took long walks across town to the grocery store. He bought unusual foods, and too much of it, filling our fridge to bursting.

We had one scare a few months in, when I came out of my room in the morning to find his door flung wide, his bed empty. I called his name. He was nowhere in the house. On a hunch, I pushed open the courtyard door and saw him floating, face-down, in the hot tub. I ran to touch his shoulder, to feel that he was still alive. He popped his head up out of the water.

"Couldn't sleep," was all he said, not realizing that finding him like that had nearly stopped my heart.

James ping-ponged from one therapy to another, trying to unearth a treatment that would heal him. Acupuncture. Massage. He spent hours on forums hunting for long COVID's elusive cure. One of the alternative medicines had dangerous consequences if taken with some of his mood stabilizers. I expressed my concern about him going off his medication, but he assured me it would be okay.

Our family returned from a sun-soaked spring break trip to find a changed James. It was evident during our first conversation. He had deep shadows under his eyes. Alone in our house for a week, he had barely eaten or slept.

James began to pull me aside and whisper his concerns about the government. They were after him, tracking his every move. Something

big was going to happen, and it was all his fault. He became suspicious of our parents. If I tried to reason with him, he became suspicious of me. His eyes would shift, and he would stare at me strangely.

"Is this real?" he would ask, touching his own face. "Am I here? Is this real?"

James had exhibited psychotic episodes before. I realized he was descending into one again. Then, like flipping a switch, he would go back to normal if my husband or son walked into the room.

I encouraged him to go back on his mood stabilizers. He had run out of pills but agreed. We tried to reach his doctors who practiced in another state, but they were slow to respond. I bought James black-out curtains and over-the-counter sleeping pills. Still, the conspiracies became more desperate and nonsensical.

His descent came during an intense time. Our entire family was involved in rehearsals for the annual tri-stake production of Rob Gardner's *Lamb of God*. This year's Easter performance promised to be incredible, with professional singers and full orchestra. We were expected to fill the meetinghouse from the chapel to the back of the cultural hall.

I had been assigned the role of Martha, sister to Lazarus. The beginning of my solo started with the plea of a sibling, "Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick. Master, please, for our Lazarus is dying."

We had long rehearsals every evening of performance week, but James consumed my thoughts. On Thursday morning, I woke at 3 a.m. to the sound of retching.

I sat up in bed. "It's James," I told my husband. "Something is wrong."

He hadn't eaten in two days. I thought this must be his body reacting. I went to his room and put my ear to the door.

"James?" I asked. "James, is everything okay?"

He mumbled a response, zigzagging from one conspiracy to another. Nothing he said made sense. He was in full-blown psychosis. He would not open the door. With my heart racing, I tried to unlock it with a pin. I could feel him gripping the doorknob tightly on the other side.

We called in a crisis team to help coax him out of the room. Nothing worked. James wove in and out of coherency for more than an hour. Then, he mumbled that he had overdosed on sleeping pills to end his life. I sank to my knees and began to hyperventilate. James's life was in jeopardy, and I was stuck on the other side of the door.

We called in the fire department and an ambulance, expecting we might have to break down the door. My husband managed to crawl onto

James's balcony and slip into his room. James still had a death grip on the doorknob. My husband knelt down beside him. I could hear their conversation through the door.

"I'm here to help," my husband said. "Everything is going to be okay."

James became like a little child. He let go of the doorknob and stood. He followed the paramedics to the front porch, where they took his vitals and rushed him to the hospital. I followed close behind.

Sitting in the suicide unit of the hospital was a surreal experience. I felt like throwing James's question at every doctor I encountered. "Is this real? Am I here? Is this real?"

I was flooded with memories of James. This was the brother who, at five years old, spent hours in the bathroom fashioning presents for the entire family out of wet toilet paper. My gift was a telephone no bigger than my thumb.

This was the brother who wrote song parodies and concocted elaborate jokes. His comedic English essays garnered a cult following in high school. On a summer internship in Washington, D.C., he spent weeks tracking down Democratic Senator Harry Reid at church so that he could sit to the left of Reid in Sunday School, lean over and say, "Senator Reid, it's a pleasure to join you on the left."

When he started making real money, he became the uncle who gave all the best presents. Thumbing his nose at my strict parenting ways, he bought my kids an electric guitar and a Wii, thus cementing his favorite uncle status.

But now, this sweet and funny brother was in a hospital bed, hooked up to IVs. In between the parade of doctors and medics, he spoke in rapid-fire sentences about a mysterious white paper and the FBI.

James's lack of appetite had saved his life. He took the sleeping pills on an empty stomach. They had come right back up before they could be absorbed in his bloodstream.

When the doctors determined that James's vitals were stable, they transferred him to the psychiatric ward of the hospital. I had to exit the ER and lock away everything on my person—no cell phone, purse, or even a tube of lip balm—nothing that could be used as a weapon. A security guard ran a metal detector wand over me as I entered the unit.

I thought I'd experienced my fill of hard things that day, but when I saw James again, I had to choke back tears. He was sitting on a plastic mat on the floor of an empty white room. They had dressed him in green scrubs made from paper. It felt cold and terribly cruel.

I slid down the wall and sat beside James. I urged him to sleep, to rest his brain, but he was incapable of settling down. He rambled through his conspiracies, often growing testy and snapping at me. I tried to bring the conversation back to reality, dredging up every childhood and travel memory I could recall.

“Remember New Zealand? Tell me about it. How you swam with the otters below the waterfall?”

Hours passed. Our room had no door, which gave me a clear line of sight into the hallway. The police led in a man in handcuffs. He had on a black-and-red shirt with matching black-and-red shoes. He shouted that they were making a terrible mistake. Didn’t they know that he owned the biggest record label in the country? The guards closed a curtain around him and made him change into the same green-paper scrubs. He sat cross-legged on his plastic mat, muttering. Occasionally, he caught my eye with a look that asked, *How did I get here?*

I watched as several homeless men were wheeled through the hallway, stripped of their drugs, and sent back out to the streets with a yogurt and an applesauce. Down the hall, a woman sang at the top of her lungs. A security guard shouted at another patient to calm down as she slapped at the bare walls. My heart broke and then broke again.

When I stepped out for a minute to get an update from the doctor on duty, she flipped through the papers on her clipboard, cocked her head, and told me, “Yours is really a golden situation.”

I glanced back toward my brother, whose bloodshot eyes stared straight ahead. *A golden situation?*

“Your brother is one of the lucky ones,” she said. “He has a family, a support system.” She gestured down the hallway. “Most of these people have nobody.”

James and I sat alone for hours. No one came to check on us or offer even a cup of water. I asked for food to fill James’s empty stomach. They brought it on a flat cardboard tray with a paper spoon that disintegrated in my brother’s hands. None of the food stayed down long. On my hands and knees, cleaning up the mess, a scriptural phrase ran like ticker tape through my mind. *I am my brother's keeper. I am my brother's keeper.*

As morning turned to afternoon, I remembered the *Lamb of God* rehearsal that evening. It was Thursday, the day before opening night. Someone would have to take my place and sing the part of Martha. I could not do it. The production did not matter as much as what was happening here in the hospital. Not only that, but Martha’s solo, from

beginning to end, is nearly nine minutes long. I didn't have the emotional stamina to stand before an audience of hundreds. I feared that, like the paper spoon, I would disintegrate.

And yet, in that dismal room, with the sounds of despair all around me, I realized that *I was Martha*, a sister begging for Christ to bring her brother back to life. It was as if the song had been written for me, for that very moment on the plastic mat with James beside me. Through a series of miracles, my brother's life had been spared. How could I not stand and sing about that?

After almost eight hours in the psychiatric unit, James was put in a wheelchair and taken by secure transport to an in-patient facility, where he would be monitored for the next several weeks. It was where he needed to go, but saying goodbye was difficult. I didn't want to leave him.

I told the tri-stake music director I wouldn't be at rehearsal that evening, but at the last minute, I decided to go. I was still tentative on some of my entrances and wanted at least one more run-through. Making my way to the front of the chapel, I slumped into my chair as the choir warmed up. My spirit felt as if it had been scrubbed from the inside out with steel wool. The orchestra played their first notes, and the men began to sing.

Thou Hope and Deliverer promised of old,
For whom we have waited e'er long.
O come and redeem us from slavery's yoke,
And deliver thy people home.

I turned back to look at my husband. Hope. Deliverance. Yes. We hadn't just felt it. We had *seen* it, that very day.

Yea, Thou in whose presence our soul takes delight,
On whom in affliction we call.
Our comfort by day and our song in the night,
Our Hope, our Deliv'r'er, our All.

It was my turn to sing. My whole body shook as I made my way to the microphone.

The Lazarus story is about a Savior who arrives too late. He comes after Martha has pled for him to quicken his pace. As Christ's friend and one of his most devoted disciples, Martha has seen his miracles. She knows that Christ can heal her brother. But he doesn't come, and he doesn't come. Lazarus dies. Martha and Mary, brokenhearted, place his body in a sepulchre. When Jesus arrives, Lazarus is *four days* dead.

In her agony, Martha tells the Lord, “If thou hadst been here, my brother then would not have died” (John 11:21).

The Savior comforts her with a reminder that his timing is exact. He asks Martha to believe. She tells him that she does believe—she knows she will see Lazarus in the Resurrection. But the pain of *now* is almost unbearable.

In the oratorio, she pleads in song:

Touch my eyes and bid them see
That my gaze might pierce the veil.

As I stood that night and sang those words, my mind was back outside my brother’s bedroom door—kneeling for hours in the early morning, pleading for James’ life.

Oh touch my heart and bid it know
That ev’ry sorrow here
Is but a moment’s tear,
And Thou wilt make me whole again.

Even as I sang, I felt a change come over me. It was as if Christ’s healing balm was being poured into me, not in measured drops but in a great gush. A few minutes in, the shaking stopped. My mind went quiet. With each stanza, I felt not depleted but stronger. The pain of my brother’s suffering and the anguish of that long day gave way to a clarity that I was only beginning to understand. Christ’s grace had saved my brother—not just now but for eternity. When we sit in a chasm of grief, Jesus weeps with us, as he did with Martha and Mary at the grave of his friend.

As I stood and sang out into the darkness, every evening of that long weekend, I felt a comfort I had never known before. Each night, I arrived at church in a shattered state. The lights dimmed, the orchestra began, and I pled with the Lord that I would have the strength to stand and perform. As we sang to crowds of hundreds about delivery, peril, distress, tribulation, and, most of all, hope, I felt myself getting pieced back together, just as Christ’s miracle brought Lazarus and my brother back to life. I knew that the same Savior who healed *my* soul through song would someday heal the man with the red and black shoes and the woman down the hall who refused to be quiet, and all the broken people I saw at the hospital—all the broken people in the world.

As the weekend rolled into the following months, the miracle of modern medicine did its work to bring James out of his spiral of

conspiracies. I saw my beloved brother emerge from where the psychosis had taken him. His troubled brain began to heal, and the light returned to his eyes.

This was not the first time that James had tried to take his life. I'm not sure it will be the last. Sometimes I am overcome with a fear that I will once again find myself on the other side of a door that cannot be opened. In those moments, I recall the night the Savior met me in my grief and filled my soul through music.

It was then that I realized: Christ can arrive late because he never left in the first place. He is right there with us on the plastic mat in cold and empty rooms. He is continually calling us forth from dark places into his light.

How can I not stand and sing about that?

This essay won first place in the 2025 BYU Studies Personal Essay Contest. The author's name has been withheld at her request, and the brother's name has been changed to protect anonymity.