What could be better than an angel? And why bother about this now? Because our babies do not become angels when they die, and that is great news.

It is so comforting to hear about your child as an angel. Smiling down on you. Helping you along your way. We imagine the baby-faced little cherubims on the edge of paintings smiling at the scenes unfolding around them, in complete peace. We see figurines of little ones with wings and a halo and imagine them singing in an angelic children's choir.

But… that's not what angels are like. They're actually pretty terrifying creatures. Think of all the times in Scriptures that the first words out of their mouths are "Do not be afraid." Why would that be their first utterance – every time? What must it feel like to be with them? What must they look like?

That's a good question. However they may appear to people in those stories, and even when sometimes they appear disguised like a man, one thing is for sure: those are just representations. Because "angels have no bodies…the angels are pure spirits" (Summa Theologiae I.I Q 51, A1). St. Thomas adds in that same section that even "their intellectual operations of understanding and willing depend in no way at all upon material substance." So they're different in how they think and will things – they do it outside of time and material. No changing their minds, no thought process, no sight or touch, no development. Distinctly not-human in operation. They magnify the glory of God and act as messengers doing His will, and their presence is so powerful it overwhelms grown adults and makes them fall to the ground.

That's…not how I want to think of my little one. I'm glad that our children are not angels. But, if they aren't angels, what are they?

Short answer: still human. And that's a good thing.
Because of Jesus, the saints (humans in heaven) become higher than the angels. After all, Scripture asks us, "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" (1 Cor 6:3).
It wasn't always so. Man was created to be lower than the angels, though unique in being designed in His image. "For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor"

(Psalm 8:4-5). But then, that happy fault, that sin of Adam, cried out for a savior and in His great justice and mercy God sent His Son into the world.

See, when Jesus came and took on our humanity and died and rose again, breaking the chains of death forever, and went up to heaven in the Ascension, he raised the dignity of all humanity with Him. "The blessed apostles together with all the others had been intimidated by the catastrophe of the cross, and their faith in the resurrection had been uncertain; but now they were so strengthened by the evident truth that when their Lord ascended into heaven, far from feeling any sadness, they were filled with great joy. Indeed that blessed company had a great and inexpressible cause for joy when it saw man's nature rising above the dignity of the whole heavenly creation, above the ranks of angels, above the exalted status of archangels. Nor would there be any limit to its upward course until humanity was admitted to a seat at the right hand of the eternal Father, to be enthroned at last in the glory of him to whose nature it was wedded in the person of the Son" [Excerpt from a sermon by Pope Saint Leo the Great (Sermo 1 de Ascensione, 2-4: PL 54, 305-396)].

This speaks to the deepest parts of us because we were made for relationship with God forever, and because we are rightfully scandalized (awed) by how much He loves us and elevates us for that relationship.

Remember, we – not the angels – we're made with a body, an intellect, and a will meant for relationship and love. We were specifically meant to echo with other humans the relationship and love God Himself shares in the persons of the Trinity.

That's part of the tragedy of losing any loved one, especially our littlest ones: the loss of that relationship. Even though we know our loved one continues to exist as a human being, we lose him or her here and now in the type of relationship we have had. This is a hard change.

We know intuitively that our child is different now, and our relationship has changed in a most awful and usually unexpected way. We know it is a tragedy and we don't need to ask why.

But humor me.

Why does it hurt so much when we know that the little one continues to exist as a human? Why can't we be like the apostles when Jesus ascended, full of joy?

Because the overarching tragedy of human death is the separation of body and soul. It's what defines death, theologically, and it is tragic because we are made to have both body and soul forever. Death was not part of the original plan. But as Christians we believe (as all Christians have since the early Church) in the resurrection of the body, a result of the conquering of sin and death by Jesus Christ. Our bodies will rise again, and for all eternity the saints (humans in heaven) will together worship God in reunited and glorified soul and body. We can only conjecture what these glorified bodies may look like from what we know about Christ's glorified body (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 997). But this oh-so-human unity with God is what we were made for, and we hope to praise Him with this glorified body and soul in heaven.

So here's the takeaway.

Fr. Michael Gaitley, MIC, always says: God's Plan B is better than His Plan A. Death wasn't part of Plan A, but in some way we are grateful to Adam and Eve because God's Plan B was Jesus coming into the world. Because of Him, our humanity is elevated above the angels, we receive glorified bodies for eternity, and we strive to spend that eternity with God in heaven. Our little ones will also receive glorified bodies and we are so, so glad that they remain human like us in death.