

Part 1: The Poorly Timed Entrance

Tyler Velin | John 11:1-44

March 28, 2021

Welcome everyone to the start of Holy Week. Today we gather on what is traditionally called Palm Sunday, the day when Jesus entered into Jerusalem a few days before his crucifixion. This Friday we will gather together for Good Friday, a day where we stand in the somber reality of Jesus' death in our place. And next Sunday we gather together in light of the day death died, Resurrection Sunday.

In light of this we are going to hit the pause button for a couple of weeks on our series through the book of Proverbs.

Instead we are going to be in the book of John and look at some of the off-Broadway pieces of the Easter story. In other words we aren't going to camp out on the Easter texts. Instead we are going to focus on some of the surrounding events which help us understand the significance of the Easter story more clearly.

That's because the book of John is a book written so that you might be one who believes in and abides enduringly in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

There's a division in the book of John and that is that in the first ten chapters we read largely about Jesus' public ministry and his interaction with the crowds and the Pharisees. What's unique about this is that we see people believing in Jesus left and right and yet as the narrative of John goes on, these people become discontent as the Jesus they believed in looked more and more like the biblical messiah and less and less like the Jesus they wanted him to be.

There's a really interesting scene in John 8 where Jesus is speaking to Jews who believe in him but then he goes on to say something really winsome and seemingly optimistic, but also challenging. Look at **John 8:31-32**.

In speaking to the Jews who believed in him he begins to shape what their life will be like if they truly believe in him. But within the span of a few short paragraphs these very same Jews who believe in him pick up stones to kill him!

In these first ten chapters we see a lot of this belief and then falling away. But beginning in chapter 11 the scenery begins to change and instead of focusing on Jesus and the crowds, John begins to focus on Jesus and his closest followers. And what's interesting is that these individuals also believed amidst their own doubts and concerns, and yet by the end these were those who endured. Instead of wanting to kill Jesus, many of these people would go on to give their lives for Jesus.

So what changed?

Many of us have thoughts on Jesus but are these thoughts Jesus shaped thoughts on Jesus. How might Jesus want you to understand him, how might he want you to believe in him, and how might that belief shape your life so that you can abide forever in him?

Over the next few weeks we are going to let God's words show us what we are to believe about Jesus, what we are to believe about following Jesus, and what we are to believe about living our lives for Jesus.

This process starts today not with the story of the Triumphal Entrance, but with the story which proceeds the events of Palm Sunday. The story which I'm going to call the Poorly Timed Entrance. It's the day when Jesus seemingly showed up late and everything fell apart.

You may have heard it called the story of Lazarus, but as we will see today it might better be called the story of Thomas, or the story of Martha, or the story of Mary, or more correctly the story of who Jesus is and how he loves his friends.

We are going to read one story about Jesus' friend Lazarus dying and ultimately being brought back to life, but along the way we are going to look at three key interactions Jesus had with three of his followers. Each of which understands some truth about Jesus, but each of which also wrestles with a bit of doubt about who Jesus is and what he is capable of.

What we are going to see today are three scenes of partial belief: **A Jesus who is fully true but limited in control, A Jesus who is fully Lord but limited in power, and lastly A Jesus who is fully our friend but limited in love.** Yet despite these incomplete pictures, by the end we will have a more complete picture of who Jesus is and how he loves us.

So we are going to read the opening context of our passage today and encounter our first point in **John 11:1-16.**

So here the table is set, the one whom Jesus loves is sick and ultimately dies, and Jesus is going to return to Jerusalem area in order to "awaken" him.

Now you would think that this would be a cause for much celebration and anticipation if you were a disciple would you not? Yet that is not what we see in this passage. We see much trepidation from the disciples. This is where we see our first scene of partial belief: **A Jesus who is fully true but limited in control.**

What has happened up to this point in John is that Jesus would be in the area of Judea, which is where Jerusalem and most of the Jews were. And he would hang out there until things got a little dicey with the Jews and then he would remove himself from the area till they cooled down. At the very end of chapter 10 Jesus fled Jerusalem across the Jordan River because the Jews were actively trying to kill and arrest (in no particular order) Jesus.

But now only a short while later Jesus says to his disciples, let's go back to Judea. Why? Because Lazarus had died and Jesus wants to help.

Here we see the privilege of being a friend of Jesus. Here is Jesus, separated from Lazarus and his two sisters, but because of his friendship and compassion for them he is willing to pass through dangerous lands at risk of his own life if only to be with them.

On the one hand we should not be surprised at this, when the eternal son of God was born in the flesh as Jesus he showed his willingness to enter into dangerous and broken places for the sake of his friends.

Jesus lives to lay down his life for his friends. If you've wondered how much Jesus loves those who he will save, here we see a glimpse of that.

But the disciples are shocked at what Jesus is proposing, this is quite certainly a suicide mission. They protest saying: "Jesus they are seeking to kill you and you want to go back?"

And Jesus answers in a way where we almost laugh, only because we weren't there with them. Jesus' first response is almost a riddle which basically sounds like: "Don't worry guys, we will go in broad day light."

And then he actually says, "Lazarus is only sleeping and I'm going to wake him up."

So not only is Jesus going to walk down the highway in broad day light, but he's risking all of this for the sake of a guy who is going to wake up on his own?

But look at how this passage concludes: **John 11:12-16**.

Jesus clarifies that the reason he is going down is because Lazarus really is dead, and this will work out for the very good of the disciples. In fact Jesus is glad for the disciples.

And then Thomas speaks. I love Thomas. This is the same Thomas we see doubting Jesus' resurrection later in the book as well. And Thomas is always a mixture of strong belief, but also present doubt and here we see that in its fullest.

He says, "Well, I guess we will go and die too."

Here's the tension in Thomas' profession. He says on one hand, "I believe you are who you said you are, I believe all the things that have made these people want to kill you, I believe so much so that you are the truth that even in the face of death I'll march with you but I don't believe you have any way to save us from the mess that will follow."

Remember, Jesus had just told his disciples that Lazarus' illness will not lead to death but now Jesus tells them that Lazarus has died? Does this Jesus actually have the ability to control anything?

How easy it is to live like Thomas in the face of hard circumstances. We become holy stoics and Christian fatalists who say: "I guess I believe in Jesus, he's better than the alternatives, but I expect this to be the most difficult and painful road I could travel."

It is a duty completely devoid of delight.

But look at the two truths Jesus proclaims. First his enigmatic answer in **John 11:9-10**.

What is Jesus saying here? He's not talking about the road to Judea at all. He's talking about walking in the light of God's providence. Jesus knows why he was sent by the Father. He knows and has mentioned multiple times in the book of John that his time had not yet come. Jesus knows that in going to Lazarus God's plan for him will not be frustrated or foiled by evil men.

Jesus knows the safest place for him is walking openly in God's plan. Nothing can happen to him outside of the Father's will.

So too for us as followers of Jesus we must trust that the safest place we can be is under the sovereign control of our gracious Father. We've been looking at the book of Proverbs and while it seems the first principle of the book is wisdom, wisdom is secondary. God's sovereignty is primary. The only way we can believe that we can safely live as a meek and righteous person in a violent and wicked world is if we believe God is big enough to care for us exactly as he sees fit. Wisdom works because God works.

And more than that we see the second truth in **John 11:14**. That even when things do seemingly go awry, like in the death of Lazarus. Jesus is glad for us because he is working for our own belief.

One winter my car spun out in the middle of Reserve Street. I remember it happened so fast and yet it seemingly took forever. I had enough time to talk to myself and say, "You're probably going to hit something, it's ok, just brace for impact." So I did. But God's grace I actually didn't.

But I wonder how many of us spend our Christian lives bracing for impact instead of trusting in the God who controls our every step. A God who even if he does bring impact does so out of his own gladness?

Now admittedly seeing God's gladness for us in times of fear and pain is often not as warming as we would like. In fact we might even be frustrated towards God at this idea. But this is why we must understand the privilege of walking in the sovereign light of the God who controls all things. If God really does guide and guard the details of our lives then his gladness actually accomplishes something in our lives.

We will see this in the story today, but we see this most clearly in the cross where it seems God had lost all control and his smile had faded entirely. Yet behind the darkness of Good Friday stood the smiling providence of God as he vindicated his own righteousness, established his Son as the glorious high priest and made redemption possible for his people.

There will be no joy or peace in life for those who believe in Jesus but refuse to trust in Jesus.

What we will see as the story goes on is that neither Thomas nor any of the disciples will die on this journey. But by the time their journey with Jesus is done they will say not with dread and duty, but with sovereign delight: "To live is Christ and to die is gain."

Now we transition into the second scene of partial belief. This where Martha shows us **A Jesus who is fully Lord but limited in power**.

Read with me: **John 11:17-27**.

Here we have Jesus' interaction with the first of Lazarus' two sisters. We encounter Mary and Martha in Luke's gospel and there we see Martha busying herself in service of Jesus and Mary sitting in the presence of Jesus. We see the consistency of their character strengths and faults even here in the gospel of John.

Martha, always the busy one, the analytical and anxious one runs to Jesus with a three part theological confession. She calls Jesus, "Lord," admitting that if Jesus were there her brother wouldn't have died.

Though Jesus never made this promise to anyone, she assumes perhaps in good faith, perhaps in presumptive, what is true: that if Jesus were there he had power to keep Lazarus from dying.

She also affirms a unique nearness of Jesus with God. Jesus can ask anything from God and he will give it to him.

And when Jesus says, "Your brother will rise again." Martha affirms her previously existing sound theology. Jews always believed in the resurrection from the dead. But that resurrection was an exclusively future and one-time event when the Messiah would set up his kingdom. Here she says, "I know Jesus," but there's almost this feeling that even this theological conviction brings her little hope in the midst of her pain.

For millennia the Jews have been hoping in this future hope but nothing has changed that would give any sort of confidence it was a fast approaching hope. In this sense it was a hope deferred that made a heart sick.

But Jesus intervenes in Martha's theological musing to alert her to what is standing right in front of her. Here is the Lord. Martha was right that Jesus could ask anything from God, but at this point it hasn't yet clicked in Martha's mind that this Jesus was God!

Jesus will go on to say something completely blasphemous if it weren't true in **John 14:13-14**. Jesus is teaching his disciples that they can pray in his name and it is equivalent to praying in the name of the Father. Jesus is the second person of the Trinity in the flesh.

And this is the wonderful reality of all theology is that it finds its fullness and its application in the person and work of Jesus Christ. I love theology. I love musing about the analytical aspects of what we believe in terms of how we are saved and what God might do as we move towards the New Heavens and the New Earth.

But our theology, which is simply the study of God, ought not to blind us to the one who is God!

This is how Jesus takes good theology and presses it into deep abiding hope: **John 11:25-27**.

Jesus literally told Martha, "Your brother will rise." And she said, "Yes, I believe that." But in all reality she didn't believe it enough. For Jesus was about to do just that.

So Jesus interjects and it's almost as if he pulls the veil of anxious thought off of her eyes so that she can see the reality of him who stoops to console her: "I am the resurrection and the life. If anyone believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. Do you believe in me?"

Good theology and close proximity is of no hope to any of us if we do not actually believe what Jesus Christ says about himself. He is the one who alone will bear the burden of our sin and its chain of death in our place so that we might have life and life abundantly.

It's easy to punt our idea of life in Christ only to the future hope of heaven but the raising of Lazarus will go to show that the physical life he gives to Lazarus is also a glimpse into the spiritual life he gives all who come to him. For the believer, Jesus has come to help you now, in the present.

Jesus is exactly what you have been waiting for in your life. Would you believe in him? If not, what is holding you back?

Because what we see in our final point today is how loving and caring it is to believe in a savior like Jesus.

This is our third scene of partial belief today: **A Jesus who is fully our friend but limited in love.**

Read with me: **John 11:28-37.**

So here finally Mary comes. I love this. Both Mary and Martha are brothers of the same Lazarus, lovers of the same Jesus and yet one comes first when she is ready, and another later when she is ready. Neither were right nor wrong in their coming. Why? Because they both came.

That's the beauty of the gospel. You're not graded on when you came and how much sin or doubt you did or didn't have prior to it, you're only celebrated when the friendship of Jesus ultimately calls for you to come.

Here's what I love about Mary. She is absolutely grief stricken. Where Martha was the analytical one, Mary was the feeler. There's room for both in the grace of Jesus.

Mary greets Jesus with the same lament: "Lord if you were here my brother would not have died." And this, this is what I love.

Mary doesn't offer a theological concession. She doesn't ask for anything. She falls to the ground in brokenness before Jesus and offers nothing more.

How many of us have encountered real pain in this world? How many of us have cried out to God a similar cry, "Lord if you were here!"

What I love about Mary is that she has all of that emotion, all of that frustration and confusion and yet she knows enough about Jesus, enough about her friend, that she can come and leave it at his feet without further comment. She knew she was burdened, but she also knew it was safe to go to Jesus with the sum of her experience.

Where do you go with your pain and confusion in life? Do you run to Jesus with it? There is this wonderful model with Mary to go, to go to the one who loves you and to pour out your heart in submission at his feet.

Yet we know something more of Jesus' love than Mary even did. Mary went to Jesus because he was her friend but it does not appear that Mary had any hope that Jesus' friendship could be of any help besides a sweet comfort.

But here Jesus begins to act. At each stop Jesus has been hinting that he was going to do something, and here he moves towards action by asking to see the tomb and then he begins to weep. Now we aren't quite sure why Jesus weeps, but the principle we see here is that there is no action of Jesus for his brothers and sisters which is not deeply rooted in his heart.

Yet at these tears, those around Mary begin to talk. Look at what they say: **John 11:35-37**.

Here, even though Mary and others see Jesus' friendship and love, they deny that Jesus is anything but a shoulder to cry on.

Some even err on the side of frustration and begin to say: "If Jesus really loved them, why would he let Lazarus die!" Don't we often here this cry in our world today: "How can a loving God allow such evil to happen!?" "If God loves me why would he make me feel like this?"

This is the stunning nature of Jesus' love. Look back at **John 11:5-6**.

What love is this? When Jesus found out Lazarus was dying, he waited. Here he wept.

Why? Because he loved his friends. But this love is not powerless. This love is not tragic. This love is divine love, divine love which often allows what is hard and difficult in order to produce what is miraculous and deeply comforting.

Look at the miracle which follows: **John 11:38-44**.

Here we see the raising of Lazarus, what an astounding power. Jesus raised a man who was dead four days to life. He enlivened his dead heart and unstinkified his rotten corpse.

And in this moment all the threads of belief and unbelief begin to give way.

Here in the moment of Lazarus' resurrection Mary saw that Jesus' love is never late. That the reason we can run to Jesus our friend is because Jesus' love for us is constant reminder of all his love is able to do. It has broken the curse of sin, it is stripped away the sting of death, it has won you back to God in full acceptance through faith. His love is unlimited in what it is capable of.

In Lazarus' resurrection Martha was convinced that everything she hoped for in the God of scripture, the redemption of his people, the hope for life after death, the help for the hurting was here in the person of Jesus Christ. Here was life. Life not in a theological principle but life in a divine person who had entered powerfully into her own need.

And Thomas and the disciples saw the gladness of Jesus in that they now saw that if Jesus has authority over death itself how much more does he have authority over the events of our own life and that he is worthy of our trust.

Yet all of these things were only signs. As astounding as the resurrection of Lazarus was, it didn't answer all the questions of doubt. It didn't fix all their incomplete views on Jesus. But there would be a death and resurrection that would, and it would happen in a handful of days.

That's the day when Jesus would lay down his own life and be raised from the dead not as a sign of new life, but as the source of it.

