

A Resurrection of Belief, part 1

(John 11:1-16)

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Introduction

Our time at seminary in California was a chance for us to see sights and sounds that we had never seen before..

One of the first things we checked out was the Hollywood sign.

We actually went to a place called the Griffith Observatory which offered a fantastic view of the sign..

The hill that the observatory sat on also offered an incredible and overwhelming view of the entire city of Los Angeles.

It was really impressive.

We also were able to go downtown to to see the LAColosseum where the 1984 Olympics were held.

It was really an impressive site..

Yet, not all of Southern California was really that impressive.

The first thing that was really disappointing was Hollywood Boulevard.

Instead of bright lights and movie stars, it was dirty sidewalks and an instructing assortment of all types of people.

We strolled along the Hollywood walk of Fame looking at all the stars of famous actors but we quickly strolled back to our car after that.

But probably the most disappointing aspect of Southern California were the beaches.

Coming from South Carolina beaches, we expected a major upgrade in Southern California, but we found a major disappointment.

Now to be fair, we didn't see every beach, but I can assure that the beach around the famous Santa Monica pier isn't what I had in mind at all..

White sand? Not quite.

Clean and tidy? Not quite?

Warm water? Not a chance.

Needless to say, I was really underwhelmed with the beaches of Southern California.

I am sure there are good beaches there, but the ones we went to at Santa Monica and Venture Beach made me miss the Carolina Coast for sure..

Yet, this is often the case in life.

Things that sound look good in our mind's eye often let us down when we put our real eyes on them..

The same can be said of true belief in Christ.

And what I mean by that is this.

We often picture salvation and belief and trust in Christ in bright glowing terms..

WE picture the young couple with 2 kids and Bibles in all their hands in front of the church on Easter morning.

We often have this picture of faith as an idealistic portrait.

Everyone is happy.

Everyone is healthy.

Everyone is holy.

Yet, true Christianity is often far from that.

It is difficult and disappointing and dreary at times.

Salvation is not always a bed of roses.

And belief is often tried and tested and tempted..

Now remember, John's gospel is the 'gospel of belief.'

In fact, John's purpose in writing this gospel is spelled out in John 20:31..

31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is [h]the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

And to make sure the reader understands that purpose, John uses the word believe over 90 times in 21 chapters..

Now the word believe is a word that we become all too familiar with in the church, yet it is so crucial to understand what it means to believe in Christ..

And so John has helped us understand what it means to believe...

We have seen the disciples believe in Christ.

We have seen some people in Israel believe.

We have see a Samaritan woman believe..

WE have seen a Gentile saved after his son was healed..

We have seen a crippled man and a blind man be healed and believe.

And all of those miracles and salvations are fantastic and wonderful and thrill our hearts.

Yet belief is not always that beautiful picture of happy days and sunny skies..

And that brings us to John 11..

Incredible miracle here.

Jesus raises a man to life who has been dead for 4 days.

It is a glorious story meant to highlight the deity and power of Christ.

It is meant to serve as a sign that Jesus is the Messiah.

It is meant to draw people to belief in Him, and it will and we will see that..

And this will be an incredible picture of Christ in all his glory...

But right alongside all those beautiful pictures of belief will be the difficulties of belief as well..

And I think this is important for us all to consider..

The gospel is not easy to believe.

It is hard to believe.

But even when you do truly believe, it is also hard to live out that belief every day..

We all need to be reminded of that..

We all to be encouraged in our belief..

But we also need to be honest with ourselves and others that while being a follower of Christ is the best of life, it doesn't always deliver us from the difficulties of life..

With that said, let's begin to look at John 11, and we won't get through all of it today.

It will take at least 3 weeks, but it will be a great encouragement to all of our hearts...

This morning, we will simply set the stage for what is coming, but we will also learn a little about true belief...

So, let's get into this chapter by simply reading verses
1-3 of John 11...

We will call this..

I. Belief Seeks Christ (1-3)

Verse 1..

1 Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. 3 So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick."

Now as we get into this miraculous event in the life of Christ, we are first introduced to the main characters.

Clearly, the central figure is Christ.

Jesus always is the focus of the miracle, but John also gives us some background on the other people involved.

The first being a man named Lazarus that we know very little about.

There is a Lazarus in the book of Luke who is one of two central people in a story that Jesus tells the disciples..

In that event, Lazarus dies and goes to heaven while a rich man dies and goes to hell..

And Jesus uses that event in Luke to teach the disciples about the power of the word of God.

Well, the Lazarus in John 11 is a different Lazarus, and this would be normal since Lazarus was a common name in Israel..

Now we also meet the sisters of Lazarus here in verse 1 as well..

Mary and Martha were his sisters, and John makes sure to let us know which Mary this was, since Mary was also a very common name in Israel..

And we also need to take note of where they lived.

A tiny village known as Bethany.

Now to add to your confusion, there are also two Bethanys in the NT.

There is a Bethany beyond the Jordan, which is actually the area that Jesus is in when he gets the news of verse 3..

And there is a Bethany right outside Jerusalem...

And this is the village where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived..

Here is a reminder of what Jerusalem looked like in Jesus' day.

Behind the Temple Complex is the eastern wall..

And beyond that wall is a steep drop into a little creek often called the Brook Kidron.

And as you climb up out of that valley, you are on the Mount of Olives and after you pass over the Mount of Olives, you spot a little town known as Bethany about 2 miles east of Jerusalem..

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus called that little town home, but Lazarus had gotten sick.

So sick that his sisters sent word to Jesus that he was sick.

Now, when we left off last week in John 10, Jesus had left Jerusalem and headed east to an area beyond the Jordan..

We don't if Jesus was in that Bethany east of the Jordan, but he was at least a day's journey away from Bethany near Jerusalem..

But the messengers found Him and gave him a simple message from Mary and Martha..

“Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.”

Now there are 3 Greek words for love...

Eros expresses a romantic love.

Agape expresses an all encompassing love like God has for His people.

And then there is phileo, which a brotherly love..

And that is the word that Martha and Martha chose here.

Jesus, your dear friend that you love like a brother is sick.

And look, let's state the obvious.

True belief first looks to Christ for help.

Now to be fair, there is no medical community or hospital for Lazarus..

So it isn't like these sisters have options for their brother's health..

But the reality is that Jesus first comes to mind for those who truly believe in Him..

These sisters have a sick brother, so they seek out Jesus.

May we all do the same in our times of need.

A second truth about true belief is found in verses 4 to 6..

II. Belief Lacks Understanding (4-6)

Lazarus is sick.

Jesus is a day away.

The next verse should read this..

Jesus dropped all he was doing and headed to see Lazarus..

But that is not what the next 3 verses say..

Verse 4..

4 But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was.

You ever pray to the Lord and expect him to show up in the next 5 minutes only to see nothing happen?

Well, Mary and Martha had the same thing happen to them..

Jesus hears their message, but does nothing right away...

I mean this really throws a wrench into the plans of those TV preachers telling their followers to name it and claim it...

In their minds, you speak a word to God and he is forced to act because of your faith in Him..

In their twisted theology, God is at your beckon call..

Name your need and God is ready to act...

Yet, John 11 reminds us that God is at no one's beckon call...

God is not confined to your schedule and your timetable.

God is free to do as He pleases according to His will in the world..

You don't name your healing and expect the Lord to comply...

You don't name how much money you need and expect God to open his wallet..

This is false teaching.

The pot doesn't tell the potter what to do, and we need to be careful with our expectations of God..

Now, I don't know if Mary and Martha expected Jesus to come right away, but I do know that many of us often have that expectation of Christ..

But we shouldn't.

Ultimately, no one knows what the Lord is doing while we wait for Him.

In this case, Jesus was waiting so that everybody could very sure that Lazarus was dead.

Now that may sound awful, but it is the gospel truth..

You see, skeptics will always doubt Christ, but it is not because Jesus didn't do all he could to remove their doubt..

So even though the sister called, Jesus waited until just the right time to go...

And I want you to note something here that is very encouraging..

Look at verse 5...

In the middle of 2 verses about Jesus waiting to go, John simply writes that Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus..

You see, the enemy and even our own flesh will tempt to doubt the love of Christ when our prayers go unanswered.

Unbelievers will even mock our God when He doesn't respond immediately to our prayers...

But the Bible is clear here...

God's delay does not mean He doesn't love His people..

In fact, his love for us causes him to delay in answering our prayers.

Because that delay often grows our faith and trust in Him.

It will in this case.

Jesus' delay causes everyone to think it is too late for Lazarus, yet that unbelief will turn to belief when Jesus raises him from the dead after 4 days in the tomb...

Bottom line, you don't know what God is doing while you wait.

You aren't God.

You are simply human.

Belief doesn't let us see all that God is doing.

Belief simply calls us to trust that God knows what He is doing.

IF you are saved in here today and waiting on God to act, trust that his delay is for your good.

A third truth about belief is found in verses 7 and 8...

III. Belief Falters Frequently (7-8)

In verse 7, we meet an additional set of characters in this scene, and these characters are none other than Christ's disciples..

Let's read verse 7..

7 Then after this He *said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8 The disciples *said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?"

When the message reaches Jesus, he is out in the wilderness near the Jordan River.

He is there because tensions are high in Jerusalem..

The last time he was there, he was almost stoned to death twice by the Jewish leaders..

They have had enough of his teaching.

They have had enough of his claims to be God.

They have had enough of Jesus ruining their nice false religious system that was lining their pockets with money..

And since the religious leaders wanted Jesus dead, his disciples defiantly weren't high on the Jews list either..

So, when Jesus finally decides it is time to head to Lazarus, he meets some opposition in his own disciples..

And look, I don't want to beat up on these men too much, but this is a great reminder that even the best of men are men at best.

Even men of faith find that their faith falters at times.

It is not that these men stop believing, they simply let their belief in Christ be overshadowed by their fear of man...

Sadly, we are all like the disciples at times.

WE know the truth.

WE know Christ and his power and authority, yet the task looks too hard or too dangerous..

The threat seems too real..

And I can tell you that this culture is going to make it harder and harder to follow Christ..

Some in my generation will lose jobs because of their belief in Christ and His Word..

But many in my children's generation will feel the threat of man if they believe certain truths in the Bible..

The enemy doesn't carry stones these days but he does threaten your bank account and relationships..

And the reality is that our fear of man is quite real at times.

And the fear of man leads to a faltering faith..

Look, true belief is hard at times.

It is challenged at times..

But in the end, true belief sticks with Christ.

These disciples may doubt in verses 7 and 8, but they will go with Jesus in verse 15 and 16..

I will just say this.

Stay with Christ, but stay humble.

Our faltering faith just of our incredible weakness.

We all want to think that we would go anywhere and do anything for Jesus, but he who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall..

Belief in Christ is wonderful, but let's make sure we are always aware of our weaknesses...

A 4th truth about belief is seen in verse 9-15..

IV. Belief Needs Assurance (9-15)

As these trusty disciples look anything but trustworthy, Jesus seeks to reassure them..

Verse 9...

9 Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” 11 This He said, and after that He *said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep.” 12 The disciples then said to Him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will [a]recover.” 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of [b]literal sleep. 14 So Jesus then said to them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, 15 and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him.”

Verses 9 and 10 are simple reminders to the disciples that Jesus is only here for a short time.

Night is coming he departs but while the Light is in the world, it is time to be doing the Father’s work.

And this is also a reminder that just as the day and night are set, so is the Father’s plan for Jesus’ life.

Jesus isn't going to die one second before it is time.

Therefore, Jesus has no fear of what may happen to Him if he heads back to the area around Jerusalem..

The same is true for your life and my life.

Our days are set by the Lord, so we can be courageous in our work for Christ.

Again, this isn't a promise of rescue despite recklessness..

This is simply a reminder that God is fully in control and ordains the days of our lives..

Jesus is going to Judea to do bring Lazarus back to life..

So he reassures them of his trust in the Father, but also note that He is going back to Judea to help the disciples faith as well..

Look again at verse 14..

14 So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, 15 and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him."

That is a stunning statement by Jesus.

In other words, Jesus is glad that he wasn't there when Lazarus died so that the impact of the miracle would be greater..

And it wasn't that Jesus was wanting to do a most impossible miracle just to wow the crowds..

Now clearly, He is going to be glorified in this resurrection of Lazarus..

But it also clear here that the miracle would boost the disciples faith as well..

And look, it is easy to forget that believers need their faith in Christ to be boosted and encouraged at times...

We saw that in our relocation to California for seminary..

Tonya and I had been believers for 14 years, yet those 3 years in Los Angeles grew our faith tremendously...

The same is true in your life..

We try avoid to trials and trouble but those events are blessings to grow and enlarge our trust in the Lord.

These disciples had already displayed great faith and trust in Christ, but the miracle of raising Lazarus is going to increase their belief in Jesus.

And that is always a good thing..

Don't avoid the area around Jerusalem because you want to stay safe.

Go to that area because you will leave with a greater level of trust in the Lord.

I remind you this morning that comfortable Christianity is rarely a growing Christianity..

Only when we leave our comforts will we find a great trust in Christ..

Sometimes an uncertain future provides us with a more certain faith..

If you need your faith lifted, lift yourself off the couch and do something for Christ.

A final truth about faith is found in the final verse of this opening section..

We will call this...

V. Belief Follows Christ (16)

Verse 16..

16 Therefore Thomas, who is called [c]Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, so that we may die with Him.”

Unfortunately, Thomas the disciple gets a bad rap from a just a couple verses in the Bible..

The other verse is when he refuses to believe that Christ has been raised from the dead unless he sees and touches Him..

That verse along with this verses lead people to use the phrase “doubting Thomas.”

And in a sense, I understand that..

But let me give you another way to think about this verse..

Yes, there is doubt here that Jesus and the disciples will make it out of the area around Jerusalem alive...

There is sarcasm here that speaks of Thomas’ lack of trust..

But there is something else here as well..

There is also obedience..

“Let us also go.”

In life, belief in Christ may falter and fail and lack understanding...

But in the end, belief in Christ simply leads us to follow and obey Him..

Thomas may be a smart aleck of sorts, but he is also a smart man...

If he is going to die, it is better to die with Jesus in Judea that without him near the Jordan..

Ultimately, belief understand this...

I may not know what is happening around me..

I may not know what is going to happen to me..

But in the end, I know that whatever happens, it is better to be with Christ than without Him..

Thomas' faith may doubt and complain, but it doesn't depart and quit...

Conclusion

Let's end with a couple quick thoughts for your heart this morning...

#1 - True belief is not always truly pretty.

As you have seen this morning, true believers get sick.

True believers have siblings that get sick.

True believers have to wait on the the Lord.

True believers are filled with doubt..

And sometimes true believers simply can't believe what they know to be true..

The Christian life is not always a church, a covered dish supper, and a group of happy people.

Sometimes, the Christian life is filled with sick people, unanswered prayers, and what seems to be overwhelming doubt..

It is in those times that we have to remember this second truth of today...

#2 - *True belief is never far from Christ.*

I love how the passage begins and ends..

Two believing sisters wanting to Jesus to come.

And one believing disciple not ready to leave Jesus..

Though belief is difficult at times, our hope and comfort is found in Christ.

Let me remind you...

When you have a need, call on Christ..

When your prayers aren't trust, trust in Christ's purpose.

When your fear of man is great, let your belief in Christ be greater..

And finally when your faith is faltering, make sure your obedience to Christ isn't.

Let us pray.