

John 11:1-16  
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*Following Courageously*

Have you ever felt like God was taking you somewhere that you just weren't quite ready to go?  
I remember my first time abseiling.  
I was standing on the top of the cliff.  
Harnesses were all attached.  
But for some reason,  
I didn't feel quite ready to take the plunge.  
I just wasn't feeling like it was exactly the right time to step off the edge of the cliff.  
I wasn't scared you understand.  
If I'd had five minutes, I would have been perfectly composed.  
The thing was there was a queue of my classmates in line.  
They were all very keen for a turn.  
At least that was the impression they were trying to convey.  
Three seconds felt like forever.  
And my fear of my classmates' derision overcame my fear of the cliff.  
And I stepped out ready or not.

Sometimes going where God wants you to go can be a bit like that.  
You don't always feel ready for what God has in store.  
But the thing is,  
God chooses the timing based on what brings him glory  
not based on what we feel ready for.  
I don't imagine Abraham felt ready to be asked to sacrifice his son.  
I know Moses didn't feel ready to lead God's people -  
because he complained about the job God gave him to do.  
I'm pretty sure Jeremiah wasn't ready to be put down a well.  
In the garden of Gethsemane,  
Jesus himself didn't feel ready for the cross.  
But God has his plans for us.  
Sometimes it's better if we are not ready.  
Then we are more ready to rely on God's strength rather than our own.

In John chapter 11,  
Jesus' disciples are feeling a little unsettled.  
That's not unsurprising.  
In John chapter 10,  
Jesus had been down in Jerusalem,  
at the Festival of Dedication.  
The Jewish leaders had been asking him straight out,  
"Are you the Messiah?"  
And Jesus' response had not been to pour oil on troubled waters.  
In Jn 10:30, He said,  
"I and the Father are one."  
To the Jewish leaders that sounded like blasphemy.  
He was claiming to be equal with God the Father.  
And unless it were true,  
then it would have been blasphemy.  
So given that they didn't understand that Jesus was God the Son,  
instead they decided that he was a blasphemer who ought to die.  
They picked up stones to put him to death.  
But it wasn't God's timing for Jesus to die.  
So he just walked clear of them.  
But you can understand that his disciples were feeling unsettled.  
It's not exactly reassuring to hitch your wagon to someone,  
only to have that person stir up the authorities to the extent  
that they want to kill him.

Well the disciples blood pressure would have dropped a little.  
Jesus took them back to Galilee,  
away from the Jewish leaders,  
away from danger.  
But then there's a message.  
Jesus is very good friends with two sisters and a brother,  
their names are Mary, Martha and Lazarus.  
Jesus has stayed with them in the past.  
And the sisters send him a message.  
"Lord, the one you love is sick."

Now if you are one of the disciples listening to this message,  
you are kind of torn.  
No doubt you have a high regard for Lazarus.  
Jesus loves Lazarus.  
You are one of Jesus' disciples.  
You want Lazarus to be healed.  
But on the other hand,  
Lazarus lives in Bethany.  
Bethany is about 3 of Steve Smith's on drives from Jerusalem.  
If we go back there,  
we are walking straight into the hands of people who want to kill us.  
No, Jesus.  
Let's hang about here in Galilee for a while.

And initially, it sounded reassuring.  
Jesus said,  
"This sickness will not end in death.  
No it is for God's glory.  
So that God's Son may be glorified through it."  
Well that sounds kind of hopeful, doesn't it?  
The sickness isn't going to end in death.  
That means we don't have to go back to Jerusalem, right?  
And then Jesus doesn't hurry back,  
he hangs around for a couple more days.  
Phew, you are breathing easily again.  
And then the bombshell in verse 7.  
"Jesus said to his disciples,  
"Let us go back to Judea."  
Just when you thought that everything was safe,  
the rug got pulled out from under your feet.  
Jesus' disciples answered him.  
But, but, but,  
"But Rabbi, a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you,  
and yet you are going back?"  
Are you in fact crazy?

But no.

Sometimes God takes his people  
into places they aren't quite ready to go.

Well Jesus provides his disciples with an answer.  
It's an answer that helps us to understand  
how we should think about it,  
when God sends us to a place we're not quite ready to go.  
The only problem with Jesus' answer  
is that it's difficult to understand.  
And when we're reading this story,  
we're in a hurry to get to the resurrection of Lazarus.  
So the disciples discomfort at heading back to Jerusalem  
is easy to skip over.

Jesus answered,  
"Are there not twelve hours of daylight?  
Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble,  
for they walk by this world's light.  
It is when a person walks at night that they stumble,  
for they have no light."  
At a surface level it's easy to understand.  
Do your walking in the daytime,  
that way you won't trip over.  
Makes sense to me.  
Even in the days of having a torch in my phone,  
I can see the sense in doing my walking in the daytime.  
The hard thing is to understand  
what relevance that has  
to the disciples' fears about going back to Jerusalem.

The key is to understand what the light refers to.  
When we do our physical walking around,  
we need physical light.  
In our spiritual lives, we need spiritual light.  
And so there is an application to Jesus' ministry.

First of all for Jesus.

For Jesus, there is a period of spiritual light,  
and a period of spiritual darkness.

While he is doing his public ministry,  
he is doing exactly what the Father wants him to do.

And nothing is going to go wrong.

You remember that in the last chapter,  
the Jews wanted to stone Jesus,  
but they were unable.

Why not?

Because the Father's light was shining on Jesus,  
and nothing was going to go wrong.

So what is Jesus saying to his disciples?

There are 12 hours of sunlight in the day.

And there is a certain period of time  
when the Father's light is shining on my ministry.

During that time,  
nothing will go wrong.

So you have nothing to fear.

Come with me to Jerusalem.

Everything will be OK.

However there is also another time when the light is taken away.

At that point in time,  
it doesn't matter whether you are in Jerusalem or in Galilee,  
the Father's will will be done,

I am going to the cross.

I think there's an application of this to us in our lives too.

We need to be courageous in following Jesus.

The Father's light is shining on us,  
so we have nothing to fear.

Not that no bad stuff will happen.

But stuff will happen.

But when it does,

we have a loving heavenly Father who promises us,

"All things work together for good for those who love me."  
We walk in the light of the resurrection.  
For us there really is no night.  
So we need have no fear.  
The disciples feared going back to Jerusalem.  
I'm not sure what you fear.  
But you can probably work it out.  
What wakes you up at night?  
What situations give you that churning in your tummy?  
What gives you a headache just to think about it?  
Whatever it is, Jesus says,  
"Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble."  
You walk in the daytime of the resurrection.  
So let's make a New Year's Resolution.  
This year I resolve to fear nothing and no one.  
I resolve to walk in God's light,  
and claim his promise that I will not stumble.  
When bad things happen,  
I trust him to sort them out.  
Even if I have to wait till judgement day,  
I will still trust him to sort them out.

You've probably heard the apostle Thomas  
referred to as doubting Thomas.  
That's because after Jesus rose from the dead,  
Thomas said,  
"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands  
and put my finger where the nails were,  
and put my hand into his side,  
I will not believe."  
That wasn't Thomas' finest moment.  
But here in chapter 11 he has a better moment.  
You could call him persevering Thomas.  
He is prepared to keep on going  
and see things through.  
"Thomas said to the rest of the disciples,

"Let us also go that we may die with him.""

Now if you were rating Thomas on a scale  
where pessimist is on this side,  
and optimist is on that side,

Thomas is right down the pessimist end.

"We'll all be rooned" said Hanrahan.

And sometimes we think that if you are a pessimist,  
that stops you from being a faithful believer.

Shouldn't a faithful believer trust God's promises  
and be an optimist?

Well Thomas is showing us how to be a faithful pessimist.

"Let us also go that we may die with him."

In the end, your faith isn't measured by how bubbly you feel inside.  
It's measured by whether you get off your bottom and follow Jesus.  
Pessimism is only a problem if it leads you to paralysis and inaction.

Now don't get me wrong,  
pessimism can be a problem.

It can cause you to give up  
because you don't think anything is going to work.

That's a problem.

But pessimism like Thomas' pessimism,  
that's ok.

Because at the end of the day,

Thomas was still encouraging the other disciples to follow Jesus.

"Let us also go that we may die with him."

Does it matter that he thought that they would probably die?

Not really.

In the end,

we are told to trust in God's promises.

But God has never promised us that we won't die following him.

In fact there are significant passages in the Bible praising the martyrs.

In Revelation 6, the angel opens the fifth seal.

This is what it says,

"When he opened the fifth seal,

I saw under the altar,

the souls of those who had been slain  
because of the word of God  
and the testimony they had maintained.  
(That is to say,  
John saw the souls of the martyrs.)  
They called out in a loud voice,  
"How long, Sovereign Lord,  
holy and true,  
until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"  
And they were given a white robe to wear,  
and told to wait a little longer.  
Why should they wait?  
Why doesn't God avenge them straight away?  
Because there are still more martyrs to join them.  
Their number is not yet complete.

When you read passages like that,  
you realise that Thomas is not so far from the truth.  
"Let us also go that we may die with him."  
Christian tradition tell us,  
that after the resurrection,  
Thomas himself took the gospel to India.  
He was the first person to bring Christianity to that great nation  
where today one billion people live.  
And he was martyred for doing it.  
Now that's not in the Bible.  
It doesn't tell us anything of what Thomas did after the Resurrection.  
But the tradition dates from the early centuries of the church.  
If you go to India today,  
you can see a plaque in the spot  
where Thomas' boat is said to have landed in 52AD.  
And some time later he is said to have been martyred.

What's the point.  
The point is that being a faithful Christian  
is about whether you follow Jesus wherever he takes you.

It's not about trying to convince yourself  
that everyone is going to say "hooray for you" when you do that.  
Chances are that Thomas is not so far from the mark.  
But like Thomas, we need to follow Jesus anyway.

I wonder where you need to be more courageous in following Jesus?  
You know friends,  
we don't live in a courageous generation.  
We live surrounded by microwave ovens and remote controls.  
I read a joke on Christmas Day,  
the jokes in the bonbons were so bad  
I felt the need for something different.  
Man in 1857  
"Darling, I killed a buffalo."  
Man in 1957  
"Darling, I fixed the roof."  
Man in 2017  
"Darling I shaved my legs."  
Sort of speaks to the lack of courage of our generation.  
And if there wasn't a grain of truth in it,  
you wouldn't have laughed.  
So where do you need to be more courageous in following Jesus?

Betty Dalton made the mistake  
of wandering past my front gate this week.  
That's a dangerous thing to do unless you have courage.  
I can see you out the window of my study.  
So I came rushing out the front door, down the garden path.  
She was a sitting duck, she can't run as fast as I can.  
"Betty, what are you doing on Friday at 10am?  
I need someone to bear witness to Jesus  
by doing a eulogy at Jean Hart's funeral."  
And Betty doesn't come from the generation  
where men shave their legs,  
so she wasn't fazed.  
She took courage and bore witness to Jesus.

Well

I wonder where you need to be more courageous in following Jesus?

The era of courage for Christians is upon us.

In case you hadn't noticed,

we aren't exactly flavour of the month out there.

Remember, Jesus is the light of the world.

If you walk in his light, you will not stumble.

We don't want to have false optimism.

Let's learn from Thomas.

Bad things may happen.

But God will work them together for good.

Those of you who are listening carefully  
may have a question at this point.

Where's Lazarus?

You've spent your time in Jesus and his disciples,  
and left out Lazarus.

Have no fear!

Lazarus will be here next week.

But now let's pray for courage.