



*Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015
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Disciple-making 101: A 90 Day Challenge
Confusing Things
John 10-16

The other day I was driving home, and the most extraordinary thing happened. A Bald Eagle dropped down from the sky and leveled off right in front of my car, about 20 feet above the road. He cruised along in front of me below the tree line. As the road turned, so did he. When I got to my driveway, I just sat in the road and watched. He continued down the road to Wollochet, and then gracefully banked around the corner and out of sight. It was spectacular and a little confusing! I had to look twice to make sure I saw what I thought I saw. But it was awesome following an eagle as he led me home!

We have one week left in our 90 Day Challenge to read one gospel chapter a day. How many of you have participated at some time in the 90 Day Challenge? How many of you read last week's seven chapters in the last gospel, John? In ancient times each of the gospels was represented by an image: Matthew was the lion, Mark was a man, and Luke was the ox. Guess what John's image was? The eagle. Why? Because the eagle is said to be the only creature that can look directly at the sun and not be blinded. And when we read John's gospel, we have the most brilliant glimpse of Jesus as the divine Son of God than we have in any other gospel. So today—and for one more week—we are going to follow the eagle as he leads us to our spiritual home.

But sometimes our spiritual journey can be confusing. How many of you have experienced something in your life that made no sense! The boyfriend you had prayed for and just knew was the one... dumped you. The job you moved for got eliminated. The baby you prayed for didn't come. The child that was raised in the church turned her back on the Lord. These are confusing times, aren't they? You pray and pray, but you just can't make sense of it. God seems asleep at the switch.

There were some confusing moments in last week's gospel readings. In John 13 Jesus gathers his disciples for a meal and then strips off his robe, wraps himself in a towel and begins washing the disciples' feet. Remember how confused they were? This scummy job was reserved for the lowest slave in the household. But Jesus—the divine Son of God—humbles himself and washes manure from the feet of his followers. Confusing!

Or later when Jesus tells them he is going to leave them. "You know the place where I am going, right?" Jesus asks. Do you remember Thomas' answer? "Lord, we don't have a clue where you are going. How can we know the way?" Confusing!

Or in 16 when Jesus makes this remarkable statement, "I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away." In other words, "You'll be better off without me." How could they possibly be better off without Jesus than with him? Confusing, right?

But the most confusing moment from our readings comes in chapter 11 when Jesus receives word that his good friend, Lazarus, was deathly ill. I want to tell you that story.

¹Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. ³So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." ⁴When he heard this, 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." ⁵Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁷Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." ⁶Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. ⁷Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." ⁸"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

...he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." ¹²His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. ¹⁴So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Then Thomas said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

²⁸And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." ²⁹When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

³²When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴"Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵Jesus wept. ³⁶Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹"Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." ⁴⁰Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

⁴¹So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

That story was from John's gospel, chapter 11. Open it up as we dig in a little deeper. The first gospel, Mark, was written around 60 A.D., only thirty years after Jesus' returned to heaven. Then came Matthew and Luke. But John wrote his gospel when he was in his nineties, 60 years after Jesus left earth. Why did John need to add one more gospel to the list? Like I said, he wanted to make it clear that Jesus was the Holy One sent to earth by the Father on a rescue mission. Like the eagle looking into the sun un-blinded, when we read John, we gaze into the face of the radiant Son of God.

But I also think he wanted to tell some stories the other guys left out... the changing of water into wine; the Samaritan woman at the well; the healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda. When John read the other gospels he must have slapped his head and said, "I can't believe you guys left this stuff out!" And there was no more head-slapping moment than the story of Lazarus. Only John tells this story... the most powerful miracle Jesus ever performed.

But it is also confusing. Why? Because, when Jesus—who was up north in Galilee, 90 miles from Bethany—heard that his friend Lazarus was ill, what did he do? He tarried! He stayed in Galilee for two extra days. How many of you ever got bad news while you were out of town? One of our elders, Bart Brynestad, was in Hawaii last week when he heard his mom had had a stroke. Shortly after that, his dad was also admitted into the hospital with chest pains. When I talked to Bart, guess what he was trying to do? Get an earlier flight out of Hawaii so he could get back home. Why? Because he loves his mom and dad and he wanted to be with them.

Which makes this passage even more confusing... “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.” Wait a second! That doesn’t make sense! Don’t you expect to hear, “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, so as soon as he heard that Lazarus was sick, he set out immediately for Bethany.” Yet he dawdled... on purpose. Confusing!! His disciples were certainly confused. Jesus said he was going to wake Lazarus up. His disciples said, “If he’s sick, he needs his sleep; that’s how he will get better.” Once again, Jesus had to get very clear with them. “Lazarus is dead!”

Can you hear the wheels turning in their heads? “Lazarus is dead? Then why did we wait so long, Jesus? He’s your friend. You stay in their house every time you visit Jerusalem. Wouldn’t you want to be there for your dying friend... to heal him as you have so many others? Or to raise him from the dead like you did Jairus’s daughter or the widow’s son? Why would you dawdle, Jesus? He was your friend. We are confused!”

Did you see his answer? “...for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.” There; that’s a lot clearer, isn’t it? No, not at all! How does Jesus’ being absent from a place of great need help them believe? And if Lazarus is already dead, it really doesn’t make sense to return since the Jews were trying to kill him. Oh well, he’s the boss. As Thomas says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

By the time they completed the long journey back, Lazarus had been dead and in the tomb four days. This is significant. The Jews believed that the spirit of a person hung around the body for three days after his death. Only then was it taken up to heaven. Can you see the significance of Jesus’ delay? By waiting until Lazarus had been dead four days, it meant that his spirit was truly, truly gone! In fact, by now, the body was beginning to decompose. When Jesus tells them to remove the stone, Martha protests that there will be a bad odor. I like the King James Version best. “Lord, he stinketh!”

Jesus responds the same way: “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” He prayed and then, in the most spectacular moment of his ministry, he shouted toward the now-open tomb, “Lazarus, come out!” And out he

came. This four-days-dead-man—whose spirit was long gone and whose body had begun to rot—heard the voice of his Master and rose to life. Did you notice that Jesus called Lazarus by name? Ever wondered why? Because there were other bodies in that tomb! If Jesus had just shouted an indiscriminate, “Come forth!”... every body in the place would have risen up and walked out in obedience to the voice of their Creator! Jesus had to be specific about which one he was ordering back to life!

What a story... but pretty confusing! The disciples couldn't understand why Jesus dawdled, and then they couldn't understand why he would walk into a death trap. The sisters couldn't understand why Jesus abandoned his dear friend. Even the visiting Jews were confused why this miracle-worker didn't come through for his friend. Confusing!

One of the great confusions of life—the issue that trips up more people spiritually than any other—is the issue of pain and suffering. Why does God allow it? Our basic answer is simply this: we live in a sinful, broken world and one of the consequences of sin is disease and death. Someday, all sin will be destroyed; all things will be made right, but not yet. And in these “not yet” times, the Bible teaches us two things.

First, God enters right into the midst of our suffering. God does not choose to stay aloof and unmoved by the pain of His broken world. He sent his Son right into that pain. You will never find a clearer statement of this than John 11:35, the shortest verse in the Bible. “Jesus wept.” Did he weep with frustration? Did he weep because he felt powerless in the face of death? No, he knew exactly what he was about to do. But in that moment as he saw those whom he loved suffering, he wept with them. The first thing to remember is that in our confusing, painful times, God enters into our pain with us.

But God does one thing more in these “not yet” times. We see it twice in our story. What did Jesus want from his disciples and the sisters? What did he hope for by delaying his miracle? Belief! He told the disciples he was glad he had delayed for their sake, because it would help them believe. Likewise, he chided Martha. “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see God's glory?” He wanted their trust! Even in painful, confusing times—especially in confusing times—Jesus wanted them to trust him.

He still does. We may wish that God didn't allow confusing things, but Jesus uses confusing things to make disciples. How? Because, if life was never confusing—if we had everything figured out all the time—why would we need God? We could depend upon ourselves. We could, as the proverb says, “Lean on our own understanding.” But when confusion clouds our lives, that is the time we choose either to believe that Jesus is capable of ruling our lives or not! If Jesus is only God when things are good and clear and delightful, what kind of Lord is he?

The best answer when we are faced with inexplicable confusion is the same one Jesus offered his friends: "Believe! Believe in me! Do you believe in me or not? Do you believe I am Lord or not? Do you believe I am God or not? Do you believe I have control of everything that feels uncontrollable to you or not? It may look dire. It may feel like four days have come and gone, the spirit has abandoned, the situation stinks, and it is hopeless, hopeless, hopeless! Perfect! Hopeless, confusing times are my specialty. You may not see it now, but someday, it will be made clear to you. But for now—for now, for now—just believe in me!"

This morning we celebrated Pastor Megan and Larry's good news. We are thrilled for them, aren't we? We remember her sermon when she shared of her infertility. We remember that paper prayer chain that represented, not just their seven years of confusing, unanswered prayer but hundreds of others in this church who face their own times of confusion... where God seems to be dawdling and tarrying and asleep at the switch.

Well, he is not. He's got it covered. He's got you covered, whether you believe it or not. If you choose not to believe, the confusion will only be more painful. But if you can bring yourself to believe—to really trust Jesus when all looks bleak—well, someday, you will hear his loud voice calling your name and ordering you to be set free. However confusing your life might be right now, believe and watch for God's glory!