

“Let Us also Go, That We May Die with Him”

In the name of him who is the Resurrection and the Life, dear friends in Christ: To begin, I want you to put yourself in the sandals of the disciples. Try to get inside their heads and see things from their perspective. So, let’s paint the broad picture first. You’ve been with Jesus about three years now. In that time, you’ve seen and heard some absolutely amazing things. Especially that first, say, year and a half you were with him up in Galilee. Hardly a day went by that Jesus didn’t say or do something that would have blown your socks right off if you’d been wearing any. Those were the days of the swelling crowds that kept getting bigger as the fame of Jesus spread. Thousands were coming from everywhere for healing and to listen to him teach. And boy could he teach. He’d hold people spellbound for hours on end – sublime words that rang so true and warmed the heart. In those days we could see it: The Messianic Age had dawned. The redemption of Israel was at hand. And we were part of it. We were in on the ground floor, partners with Jesus in ushering in the new kingdom. We figured that very shortly Jesus would lead us at the head of a numberless army to Jerusalem where he would be instantly accepted by all and crowned king.

But then things changed. Jesus’ teaching became increasingly dark and hard to understand. He often spoke in riddles. He talked about carrying crosses and judgment and persecution and death. He disgusted people outright by saying they had to eat his flesh and drink his blood. That even creeped us out. He also seemed less willing to perform miracles. The result was that the crowds dwindled and then pretty much disappeared altogether. The faithful few who remained with us were few indeed. There was also mounting opposition. On the right, there were the ultra-conservative Pharisees. They were offended because Jesus criticized their traditions and their rigid interpretation of the Law. He rejected their brand of righteousness and was known instead as the friend of sinners. On the left, there were the priests and other religious authorities. They too were stung by his harsh words, and they saw him as a threat to their power.

The upshot of all this was that by the time we remaining few followers came south with him to Jerusalem a few months back, it wasn’t the grand march on the city that we had envisioned. And there was a lot of tension in the air. The common citizens of the city weren’t sure what to think. On one hand, the stories they heard about Jesus sounded very promising. On the other, there were plenty of negative reviews, especially from the leadership. The ruling council had decreed that Jesus was a menace. If anyone was heard even suggesting that he might be the Messiah, he was to be put out of the synagogue (that would be like being excommunicated). Despite this, Jesus spent most of his time in the city teaching openly on in the temple courts. Naturally, this raised tensions higher still. His teaching was as captivating as ever, which drew a lot of people to him. This, in turn, made it impossible for his enemies to do anything against him. They were afraid of what the crowds might do if they arrested him. So, they were frustrated and growing more angry and jealous of him by the minute.

It came to a head one day while he was teaching at his regular place on Solomon’s Porch. A group of his enemies interrupted and started arguing with him. They called him a demon possessed Samaritan, hoping to start a fight. Jesus didn’t take the bait; but in the course of the ensuing discussion he did call them the children of the

devil and he said that he himself was none other than the same Lord God who had spoken to Abraham and Moses. They went nuts. They tried to stone him for blasphemy right then and there. And of course, we, his disciples, were with him. The situation looked bad for all of us. And we were just as shocked by his brash sounding claim. Sure, we had called him the Son of God; but truth be told, we weren't exactly sure what we meant by it. Certainly, we had never heard him come right out and say that he was God as plainly as that. So here we are, about to be stoned by an angry mob and we're thinking, "Good grief, Jesus, why'd you say that? Are you trying to get us all killed?" Fortunately for us, as he had on several similar occasions, Jesus just walked right through the middle of them and no one stopped him – and you can bet we were close on his heels. After that we left the city. We were relieved to be safely out of harm's way; but look: the whole thing confused us. I mean, if Jesus was who he said he was, why did he back down and walk out like that? Why didn't he just use his divine power to sweep his enemies away? It didn't make sense.

So that's the general situation; now here're the more recent specifics. Since that time, we've pretty much been laying low with Jesus over the winter months in the hill country of southern Galilee. Yes, he still gets around and teaches in some of the synagogues; but it's nothing like it was a couple years ago. His over all approval rating is still in the drain. And us, well, we're disappointed. Our former expectations have been shattered. Of this we are certain: Jerusalem is hostile territory. We can't go back there. But if Jesus is the Messiah, that's where he's supposed to rule from. But nothing Jesus is doing now seems even remotely geared toward raising the kind of forces and support we're going to need to go back there and do the job. So, we're completely confused. And it's caused us to do some rethinking. Maybe Jesus *isn't* who we thought he was. Yes, he's still our teacher and a good and godly man; *but maybe that's all he is.*

Now hopefully you're still with me and can appreciate some of the doubts and the general confusion of the disciples. Now add this to the mix: first comes word from Bethany that Lazarus is sick. It's serious. The sisters Mary and Martha want Jesus there right away. It makes the disciples nervous because it means going back to Jerusalem—the last place they want to be. So, they're relieved to hear Jesus say, "This illness does not lead to death." Whew, that means were staying here where it's safe. So, imagine how it hits them a couple days later when Jesus says, "All right, *now* let's go back to Judea." The disciples try to talk him out of it: "You can't be serious. They tried to kill you down there." And of course, they're thinking there's no reason to go – after all, Lazarus is going to recover, you said so yourself. This is further reinforced when Jesus says, "he's sleeping". Great. It means the fever broke and he's already getting better. No reason to go now. Then Jesus drops the bomb: "He's dead."

They don't hear the part about "And for your sake I'm glad I wasn't there, so that you may believe." What they hear instead is that Jesus was wrong. They think he was wrong about Lazarus getting better – and by the time we get down there it'll be too late for him to do anything about it. And if Jesus was wrong about something as important as this ... well, you can do the math. Their doubts about him go through the roof. They're completely disillusioned. And they're swept by a wave of fatalism. "Well, that's it then. It's over. Jesus isn't who we thought – not the great Messiah we hoped he was. And now he's going to get himself killed." It's more out of the feeling of being lost and devastated that they all share than a sense of loyalty that Thomas says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

“Let us also go, that we may die with him.” The disciples don’t know it yet, but it’s one of those phrases in which someone says exactly the right thing for all the wrong reasons. But we’ll come back to that. First let’s fast forward a few days and see how this plays out – again from the disciples’ perspective.

Martha was furious. They heard the sense of betrayal in her voice when she told Jesus that it was his fault her brother died. “You could have saved him if you’d come.” And the disciples are thinking, “Yeah, that’s right. He could have come but he didn’t.” Mary was more hurt than angry. And it broke their hearts to see her pain. Again, they silently blame Jesus and his lack of action. Then they see him weeping before the tomb. And I’ll tell you what they see: It’s Jesus the failure. Jesus the guy we were wrong to put our trust in. You really messed up this time, didn’t you?

I’ve heard many explanations for why Jesus wept at Lazarus’ tomb; but most of them don’t make much sense. It couldn’t be simply that his friend had died, since he knew he was going to raise him up. No, I think what broke Jesus’ heart was that at that point no one believed in him. After all the time he spent with them, after all they’d seen and heard, they still didn’t trust him. And that’s what breaks his heart still today: that those who claim to be his disciples don’t really believe him. But I’m getting ahead of myself again.

Retuning to the story, you can almost hear the disciples groan inwardly when he orders the stone removed from the tomb. “What’s he up to? Oh, this is going to be a disaster. And in front of all these people. Why in the world didn’t we have the good sense to stay where we were? Now everyone is going to see what a failure he is.”

It’s a good thing for the disciples, both those back then and those of us today, that Jesus knows some lessons can only be learned the hard way. We have to be brought to the point where we’re saying, “It’s too late, it’s impossible, it can’t be done, Jesus was wrong, he messed up, he let me down” before he can answer, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”

Listen: I expect there’s not one person here today who doesn’t believe that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Nor is there anyone here who doesn’t believe that Jesus will raise us all on the last day. Am I right about that? Don’t we all agree that with him there’s no such thing as impossible or too late? That with him there are no mistakes? That he cannot and will not let us down? Does anyone disagree? And yet how often do we find ourselves with the disciples thinking, “Here’s one that Jesus can’t fix. This time he made a mistake”?

What am I talking about? I’m talking about the new life that Jesus promises us in the present. I’m talking about the power of his Holy Spirit to raise us up and make us better people now. It isn’t just in the resurrection on the last day that Jesus has promised to make us anew. Yes, that’s when the job will be done completely; but that work begins now. We don’t have to wait for it. This is what Paul is saying in this morning’s Epistle. “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your *mortal* bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” Please understand what he’s saying. He’s not talking about the resurrection. That’s when Jesus will raise you up in an *immortal* body. But here Paul is talking about a new life for your *mortal* body: the one you have now.

The question is this: what is it in your life that you've determined is impossible for Jesus to deal with? Do you have a temptation that always gets the best of you? One that you've told yourself you'll just have to live with and yes, give in to now and then, because your flesh is just too weak, and the Spirit of Jesus isn't strong enough to help you overcome it? Or how about an ongoing conflict with another member of the body of Christ? A spouse, or a family member, or maybe some other believer whom you just can't get along with? Or who has done something that for you is impossible to forgive – and that you've convinced yourself that even Jesus can't bring reconciliation and peace to the situation? "No, not this time. Not in this case. It's too late. There're too many hard feelings. Too many terrible things have been said and done."

It may be something else, but I hope you see my point. If that's what you're thinking about *anything*, what you're essentially saying is that you don't believe Jesus is who he said he is. You don't believe he has the power to raise you up and give you new life. And let me tell you what that unbelief is: in part, it is a perverse form of pride that imagines you have a problem or a special circumstance so unique that Jesus can't transform you. Likely too it's part fear of what letting Jesus at the problem would actually mean. We tend to guard our pet sins and don't want to live without them. In the case of conflict there are many factors at play, but one of them is the feeling of moral superiority we have over the person we believe has wronged us. Holding a grudge is a way of reminding ourselves that "I'm a better person than the one who offended me." And we dearly hate to let go of that feeling. So, convincing ourselves that Jesus can't fix the problem is a way of making sure we don't have to give it up.

But let's call the unbelief what it really is: it's sin, pure and simple. It's the part of you that's dead. It's the part of you that stinks. It's the part of you that you have sealed up in your darkness of your heart and are trying to keep hidden and out of sight. Jesus says take away the stone you've got covering it up. Let his light in there. Let his word be heard there. "Believe in me and you will see the glory of God."

And this is where Thomas had it exactly right. Jesus went to Jerusalem not only to raise his Lazarus from the dead, but to show all of his disciples that they too were dead in unbelief. They just didn't know it. They had to be shown. They had to be convicted and "killed" as it were before they could be raised up in a new and stronger living faith in Jesus. And the same is true for us. We believe that Jesus died for our sin. And we believe that he will raise us up on the last day. But it's our present unbelief that stands in the way of living as we ought now. Let's call it what it is. Let's put it to death. Let's go also and die with him to our sin and unbelief precisely so that he can raise us up to live as God's faithful children *now* and forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!