

The Grumpy Disciple
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
May 6, 2018 – AM Sermon
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John 11:1-16

Once again we have one of those passages where we would like to have a tape recording of the proceedings. I would like a tape recording of John 11, because I would love to know the tone of voice that Thomas used when he made his pronouncement in verse 16: “Let us go so that we may die with him!” It could have been a triumphant voice. Thomas could have spoken verse 16 in his best Onward Christian Soldiers kind of voice: “Let us go that we may die with him!!” Charge! It could have been, but I doubt it. I think Thomas probably said these words in a tone of resigned obedience. I think that when Thomas spoke these words he sounded less like Winston Churchill and more like Oscar the Grouch. “All right then. Let’s go and die with him.” I imagine his discipleship posture being about the same as a 5 year old sent to clean up his room. I say that partly based on what we know of Thomas’ character – he is a glass half-empty sort of fellow, he is the one who doubts the resurrection in John 20. But I also say this because of the way the disciples are in the rest of this passage. They are not bold; they are really confused.

There are a couple of things that are contributing to the confusion and grumpiness of Thomas and the rest of the disciples. First they are confused by Jesus’ words. The great preaching scholar Tom Long has noticed that in the John’s gospel, when Jesus speaks, he often seems to speak in riddles. Jesus speaks and the people around him are left scratching their head. Our passage is a good example: Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus telling him that his friend, their brother Lazarus is sick. It’s a fairly straightforward message. They want Jesus to come to Bethany. Now, if you were standing near Jesus when he received this message, there’s a kind of an answer you would expect. Something like: “Lazarus is sick, let’s go,” or “Lazarus is sick, we can’t go to Bethany today, but let’s try to leave tomorrow.” Instead Jesus says, “This sickness is not unto death; rather it is for God’s glory that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” You can almost see the 12 scratching their heads. “Did you get that? Do you know what he means? What does he mean? Are we going to Bethany or not?” Then two days later Jesus does decide to go to Judea and the disciples have a very reasonable concern about the trip: “Rabbi, are you sure this is a good idea? Last time we were in Judea the people tried to kill you!” Again there are a range of normal responses you’d expect to that question: Something like, “I know it’s dangerous, but we have to go.” Or maybe, “Yes you’re right, let’s lay low for a while.” But here’s Jesus: *“Are there not 12 hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.”* You can imagine the awkward silence. “Wow Lord, that’s deep. So... are we going or not?” So Thomas and the others are confused by Jesus’ words and that would make their discipleship more hesitant.

Second, they are also confused by Jesus’ strange timing. “Rabbi, why are you going to Judea now? That makes no sense. Lazarus is dead! You said so yourself? If we were going to go, we should have gone two days ago when you heard that he was sick. Then we could have done something. Now that he’s dead, why bother risking it?” “Your timing is strange, Lord. Why did you delay?” It makes no sense to go now. Why would we risk our life? Confusing words. Strange timing. That’s why the disciples are less than enthusiastic. And so Thomas throws up his hands, straps on his sandals, grabs his travelling pack and says, glumly, “Let us also go that we may die with him.” Thomas is the grumpy disciple following with resigned obedience.

Why am I so interested in how Thomas spoke these words? Why do we care about Thomas and his grumpiness? I want you to hear Thomas' tone because it's Thomas' words that led me to preach on this passage in the first place. I was drawn to these words because I see myself in Thomas. On a lot of my days, I am the grumpy disciple, trudging behind Jesus in a posture of resigned obedience. And I know most of you well enough to know that on a lot of days that's you too. And we are grumpy and confused for exactly the same reasons as Thomas!

We sometimes struggle with the Lord's confusing words: This book is the Word of God. It is our only rule for faith and life. It is daily bread. It is God-breathed. God speaks to us from its pages. But is this book sometimes confusing to us disciples? Yes it is. We disciples continue to disagree quite vigorously about what God is saying to us in this book. One person reads this book and sees a call to God and country patriotism, another reads it and hears a call to revolutionary activism. St. Francis of Assisi hears these words as a call to poverty and self-denial; Kenneth Copeland hears it as the secret of wealth creation and personal success. One group of people reads this book as a call to withdraw from the world into a commune; others hear these words as a call to go out to broken places and radically engage. These words are the true and living word of God, but they are not easy. We get confused. We get frustrated by our own inability to understand and we get especially frustrated with the misunderstandings of other Christians. We get grumpy.

Just like the disciples, we sometimes struggle with God's strange timing: A young mother is diagnosed with cancer, and three months later her husband loses his job. The elderly wife is caring for her husband who is in the early stages of dementia and she's just learned to accept her caretaker role. Her prayer has been, 'Lord give me the strength to care for my husband joyfully.' Just a couple of months later she's hit with a degenerative disease and now she can't drive. "Lord this is all out of order. I'm trying to trust here, I'm trying to be faithful, but I'm not seeing the plan." Put these things together and pretty soon we are trudging behind Jesus in a posture of resigned obedience.

About 20 years ago my father was going through a box of old stuff: papers from college and things like that. One of the papers was an essay he had written for the Young People's Society of the Brampton Christian Reformed Church. That's what they did back in the early sixties in young people: none of this games and pizza! No sir. Instead the young people would take turns writing a theological essay and then they would discuss it. My dad read part of his essay to me. To the best of my recollection it went something like this. "We must obey the Lord and we must do his will. Of course that doesn't seem like much fun sometimes and we'd rather be doing something else, and sometimes these rules don't seem to make much sense, but that's just too bad for us. This isn't supposed to be fun. We must keep on serving God whether we like it or not!" Frankly, I'm not sure what my Mother saw in him. Doesn't this sound like Thomas: "Oh well, let's just go so that we can die with him?" And it's not just my Dad of course. Today we installed elders and deacons. I don't want to put these men and women on the spot, but I'm reasonably sure they did not cheer when they received their letter of nomination. It was probably more like: "Oh No! Someone nominated me to be an elder! Someone nominated me to be a deacon! Oh Well... I guess it's my turn... OK... I'll do it." Evening church: "It's 4 o'clock already, Oh well. I guess we should go to church tonight. But Mom! No buts! We're going." Evangelism: "I know, I know! We're all supposed to do evangelism, so I guess we better do it. C'mon everybody, let's grit our teeth and tell everyone about the joy of following Jesus!" It's not always like this of course. But on many of our days we follow our Lord like Thomas: a grouchy disciple trudging behind Jesus with head hanging.

What can we grouchy disciples learn from this passage? I want to say two things. First I want to say that Jesus accepts us. God is able to work with us grumps. Jesus loves curmudgeons

too. Sure the disciples may have followed him in a half-baked sort of way, but the Lord takes this imperfect offering and builds the kingdom with it. Scripture is full of grumpy disciples who were used by God. Think of Moses, sort of the Old Testament version of Thomas. Halfway through the desert on his way to the Promised Land he was so fed up he wanted to quit: *“Lord I’m so sick of these people’s whining! I can’t do this anymore. This burden is too heavy for me.”* Think of Elijah so sick of clashing with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel that he lay down under a broom tree and said *“I’ve had enough Lord. I can’t do this anymore. Take my life, because I’m a failure.”* God came around both these men and lifted them up and continued to use them. Not only can God use grumpy disciples, grumpiness is part of the story; we should probably expect seasons of grumpiness along the path.

The second thing I want to say to you is: while God accepts grumpy disciples, he wants something better for us. He wants our discipleship to be joyful. Why was Thomas so gloomy? He was grumpy because he was sure his journey to Bethany would end in death. Let’s go and die with him. This is going to be miserable, but here we go. Was Thomas right about that? No he was not! He was partly right. There was death on the journey. When they arrive in Bethany, Lazarus will be already in the tomb four days and everyone will be weeping, and the sisters will be angry with Jesus for not coming sooner. But the story does not end in death. This story ends with the grave stone being rolled away. This story ends with Jesus saying in a loud voice, “Lazarus come out! This story ends with Lazarus stumbling out into the light and Jesus saying, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go!” This isn’t a death story; this is a resurrection story! And Thomas should have known it was a resurrection story because Jesus had told him! Jesus had told all the disciples how this story will end: “This sickness will not end in death.” But Thomas couldn’t believe it until he’d seen it with his own eyes.

When my father found that old essay from his Young People’s days, he showed it to me and we both laughed about it. The idea of his 19 year old self being so sober made him giggle. He looked back and thought, “What was the matter with me? Why was I so serious?” He realized that he missed out on something; he could have lived with more joy. I wonder if we will have a similar reaction in the new creation. I wonder if we will look back on all our days of grumpy discipleship, and laugh at ourselves. I don’t think we’ll feel regret – I’d like to think that regret won’t be part of our emotional landscape then – but I do think we will smile and say, “Man why were we so afraid, so down, so anxious, so sober? Jesus was right there with us! And we were part of a resurrection story!!!” I don’t mean to make light of our troubles. Many of you, most of you, are wrestling with obstacles far, far bigger than my father’s teenage seriousness. Most of you are, in your own way, fighting a great battle. And you are tired. And you are scared. But Jesus says to you what he said to Thomas. “Your sickness will not end in death.” Jesus is with you and you are part of a resurrection story! All of us grouchy disciples will have an even better end to our journey than Thomas! There won’t be just one open grave with Lazarus stumbling out of it; there will be 10,000 times 10,000 open graves. Jesus will be there, and so will the faithful departed and there will be shouts and there will be reunions and there will be alleluias. Fears will be gone, tears will be dried and sorrow and sighing will flee away. So take heart all you tired, grouchy people. Lift up your hearts and lift up your heads. You are part of a resurrection story.