

“In search of faith”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*John 11:17-27, 32-44*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

You’d think that if the Gospel of John was going to tell the story of Jesus’ greatest miracle, it wouldn’t be so... awkward. I mean, not like Noah and his daughters awkward (look it up), but weird.

First, can we talk about Mary and Martha’s message to Jesus: “He whom you love is ill”? Apparently, vaguebooking was a thing even two thousand years ago. For those of you not familiar, vaguebooking is when someone posts on Facebook an intentionally vague and dramatic message, like “How could you!?” I don’t know who or what you’re talking about. In the same way, I’m pretty sure Jesus loves a lot of people; it’s sort of his whole shtick. Maybe try using a name next time.

Then, Jesus, upon hearing that his dear friend is dying, says, *Nah, let’s just hang out here for a few more days. I’m not really in the mood for travel right now.* And when he finally does show up, it’s four days after Lazarus has died. At some point, you know that the savior nominating committee (the SNC) was thinking: wow, we really should have prioritized punctuality more.

Jesus sees all these people crying, and says, *You know what would be helpful right now? Let’s get that dead guy out here.* The best moment, though, is Martha’s response. Martha has just been proclaiming Jesus the Messiah, but even this is too much for her. And the King James Version gets it best. She says, “But Lord, he stinketh.” That’s the actual Bible verse: “But Lord, he stinketh.” (Remember, no embalming. So yeah, Lazarus doesn’t smell good right now.)

Finally, Jesus resurrects Lazarus, who walks out, like a mummy. People are freaking out. But instead of providing comfort, Jesus just says, “Unbind him and let him go.” Let him go? Let him go where? Is he naked at this point? What is happening?

This is the worst funeral ever.

And yet I love this story, because it’s so... real. Jesus shows up late. All the faith in the world doesn’t save Lazarus from dying. Mary and Martha’s grief is full of anger and disappointment. No one knows how to help except be there and cry with them. Even Jesus cries. It’s the shortest verse in all Scripture: “Jesus wept.” I like that this story is messy, because life feels pretty messy. Death is definitely messy. “But Lord, he stinketh!” Faith is messy.

Today is the last of our sermon series of your biggest questions. One of you, a nurse who works with the messiness of living and dying all the time, wrote to me and said, “I sometimes wonder how much of my faith is because I have been so privileged. I think it must be a lot easier to believe that God is good and loves me when I look around and have such a wonderful family,

financial security, and so many other blessings... I encounter many patients at work that have never known an ounce of kindness, brought up in broken homes, witnessing violence on a regular basis. How would someone growing up and living in a situation like that have any faith? What evidence do they have that God is good? Are they destined for hell because they don't know God after living in their own hell on earth?"

The other day, a mother and daughter came into the church. They had recently lost their home. They were looking at the coat tree. And then the mother asked about the personal care pantry; I explained that it's open the last Wednesday of each month. They had just missed it. She looked at me and said, "I didn't know." I gave her a bag of supplies. Why? Because people matter more than policy.

Over and over again, it's what Jesus tried to explain to the Pharisees. Yeah, we're not supposed to work on the Sabbath, but if someone is hurting, heal them anyway, even if it breaks the law. Because people matter more than policy.

Jesus speaks of faith often, and he speaks of it as a condition to salvation. You must believe in order to be saved. We heard it today in John 11: "Did I not tell you that *if* you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Policy. And it's a good one. For faith is a life with God; it is strength in time of trouble; it is righteousness in an evil world; it is mercy in the face of judgment; it is peace when storms thunder. But people matter more than policy.

Today, in the Gospel of John, Jesus meets two of those people: Mary and Martha. They have believed in Jesus, but now their brother Lazarus—whose very name means "the one God helps"—has died. Jesus did not come. Jesus did not save him.

Both confront Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When we needed you most, you were not here.

Martha qualifies her accusation: "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him... Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." And yet, when Jesus tells Martha that her brother will rise again, she misunderstands him, thinking he offers merely a spiritual platitude. And when he proposes opening the grave, she thinks not of resurrection but of the smell of grief and death.

Mary, on the other hand, does not reason with Jesus. She states no faith. She simply cries. She cries for the brother she loved and the God she once knew was there.

Jesus sees her weeping, and sees all the people weeping, and Jesus weeps too, his soul in agony. John uses the same words to describe Jesus here as he will use in the Garden of Gethsemane, and upon the cross, as Jesus faces his own death. Jesus goes to the place where they have buried Lazarus. It looks like what *his* tomb will look like: a cave with a stone lying against it. Here, Jesus speaks of faith, but he does not wait for them to answer, or even believe. He simply cries, "Lazarus, come out." Maybe Martha believed; maybe Mary didn't. Jesus resurrected anyway.

Because people matter more than policy.

Maybe Jesus knew that even *his* faith would come to doubt, when his world fell apart: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Or maybe he simply cared more about Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, simply loved them more, than he cared about their beliefs.

The shepherd seeks the lamb, before the lamb can even cry out. The woman searches for the lost coin, though the coin can do nothing. The father runs to his prodigal son, before the son can say, “I’m sorry.”

Belief matters, but love matters more.

So, to answer your question, I believe, based on the witness of Christ, that if faith is lost in pain, God sees that pain with compassion and answers with life. *That* is the evidence that God is good, not that we believed, but that even when we couldn’t, even when all was bad and lost, God loved us nonetheless.

And you know what really makes me believe? It’s not the privileged who are wandering into our church every day; it’s the lonely, the grieving, the poor, the people who have every reason not to believe. But they come here anyway. That mother and daughter. They see this steeple, and this cross, and they know: here is sanctuary, here is love.

It’s the irony of faith: it grows where you least expect it. It wasn’t to the powerful that the early church appealed; it was to women and the poor, the enslaved and the outcast. Today, faith is growing in the Global South and among some of the world’s poorest countries, whereas it is declining where prosperity is at its peak.

There are no atheists in foxholes, they say. And ours is a faith authored by veterans of foxholes: a suffering people, led by a suffering savior.

To walk through those doors is never made easy by privilege. For privilege, more than suffering, is the enemy of faith; it tells us that we are self-sufficient and do not need God or each other. That’s why Jesus says it’s so hard for the wealthy to believe and enter the kingdom of God. It’s not our successes that bring us closer to God; it’s where we break that the light of God enters.

No one is here because faith is easy; those people have long left the church; you are here because there’s a need inside of you, a hunger.

Your calling is, like Jesus, to show your wounds, weep with the hurting, and reveal a faith that does not run from suffering, but dives into it. Show them a messy faith that “stinketh,” a faith that has been rocked by doubt, wrestled with angels and bears the scars to prove it, borne grief and death, accused God, died and been reborn something new, like Lazarus—a faith that grows, evolves, rises. “Unbind him and let him go.”

You ask what evidence do those who suffer have that God is good? Well, let's start with you. You be the evidence. Sit with them. Listen to them. Touch their wounds. And if they can't believe, don't offer them judgment or lectures. Show them, instead, a love that doesn't quit. Believe for them. Be their sanctuary. Because people matter more than policy. **Amen.**