

Missing the Point

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From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

February 22, 2026

John 11:1-16

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve 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." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the

Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

The true story is told of a young pastor celebrating the Lord's Supper for the first time at a new church. The pastor was an earnest young man intent on starting well. He arrived early on Sunday to prepare the elements. The bread was located easily enough, but the grape juice was nowhere in sight. Finally, he came upon a box of purple powder. "This must be the way they do it here," he thought to himself as he mixed the powder with water, placing the liquid in the little cups. He set the trays in the refrigerator and went back to the sanctuary to practice his sermon.

Ninety minutes later, when the deacons arrived to set the table, the young pastor trailed them into the kitchen, chatting, getting acquainted, making friends. And so it was that he was standing right there when the trays were pulled out of the fridge—glistening and jiggling in the kitchen light—full of grape Jell-O. (Childers, Jana, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 4/5/10, p. 31)

Sometimes we all fail to grasp the larger picture. It isn't a risk only for a newbie—or for that matter, an interim--pastor, as it can happen to all of us in various settings. Such was the case for the first disciples over the course of a Biblical scene we have just read together. I personally believe they didn't have everything pieced together by the end of that conversation with Jesus either, but they offer us a model for faithfulness even so, in those times we miss the point.

During this season of Lent, we are moving slowly through the 11th chapter of the Book of John. Those 57 verses serve as a kind of narrative hinge in the fourth gospel, transitioning between the events prior to that offer signs of Jesus' authority—turning water into wine, driving out the moneychangers from the Temple, healing and feeding the multitudes--to the events of Holy Week that will reveal Jesus' glory. That latter storyline begins with the twelfth chapter and thus the section that is our extended focus in Lent offers the final and greatest sign of Jesus' power.

Our first reading introduced us to the day long ago when Jesus received word that his friend Lazarus was very sick. Lazarus lived in Bethany with his sisters, Mary and Martha. The message was clear: “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” Upon hearing that news, Jesus announced that those events would not lead to death, but to God’s glory. “Accordingly,” John says, “though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”

Our second reading picks up the narrative when those two days have passed, as Jesus says to the Twelve, “Let us go to Judea again.” The group objects, recalling events in Jerusalem that are detailed in the previous chapter, where Jewish leaders became so incensed with Jesus’ words and actions that they took up stones, ready to kill him. They had sought to arrest him on the spot, but somehow he escaped and left the city, crossing the Jordan River before stopping in a safe place. Now, he tells his disciples that it’s time to head back, and they understandably are fearful. “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?”

In reply, Jesus offers what is likely a Jewish idiom of the day meant to reassure them that in daylight, they will be fine. He then says, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to awaken him.” One of his followers responds, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be alright.” In other words, “There’s no point in us risking our lives for someone who is merely resting.” John, in a pattern seen elsewhere in his gospel, explains to the reader that Jesus was trying to be gentle about Lazarus’ condition, much as persons today will talk of someone who has died as having “passed away” or “gone away.” Given their confusion, though, Jesus then speaks plainly. “Lazarus is dead. For your sake, I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” It is then that Thomas says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Over the course of those 16 verses, there are multiple times the disciples miss the point. Jesus talks about Lazarus having breathed his last, but the group thinks the friend is only asleep. When he clarifies that the man is dead and that the events to come will be an opportunity for them to believe in him, instead of asking how he knows Lazarus' condition or how the events to come will produce deeper faith, Thomas goes back to the original theme of danger. To my ears, it sounds like a Biblical version of the old Abbott and Costello comedy routine of "Who's on First?" as Jesus speaks of one thing, the disciples hear something else, he seeks to clarify, and they miss the point again. In other words, it's a nice summation of our own faith journey.

For no matter how long we have been followers of Christ, no matter how many times we have gathered in worship, no matter how many different moments we have engaged in Bible study or turned to God in prayer, we all have times when we still miss the point; when we focus on the wrong thing or an erroneous conclusion. To be sure, there are moments we get it right, when lives are turned around, and suffering eased, when incredible generosity occurs, and a grace that can only be called divine is offered. The first disciples had moments like that, too, yet in this brief conversation, they demonstrate those other occasions when our humanity interferes. Times when we see things first from our own perspective and bias. Times when we offer our response before the other person is through speaking. Times when we just start talking and hope that somehow it will make sense. All kinds of things can cause us to miss the point.

A woman in the Trinity Presbyterian Church of El Paso, Texas, was confused. In the worship bulletin that morning, there was a typographical error which read: "Couples Group will meet at Trinity to view a video on Noah's Ark. Please join us and bring a snake to share." The pastor thought everyone would surely realize that it was supposed to read "a snack to share," but when the cares and concerns time occurred during the service, the member raised her hand and asked, "Is there any particular kind of

snake you want at this Noah's Ark thing?" (Carpenter, Marj, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, citation lost)

Every congregation I have served, including this one, has been blessed by members like that, people who are ready to respond with whatever the church asks of them, even without fully understanding why. That was true of the twelve disciples, too, as it took them a few moments to understand that Jesus was telling them Lazarus had already died. They clearly understood that it was dangerous for Jesus to head out for Bethany, given how the religious leadership had made it clear their teacher was a marked man. Yet in the face of such knowledge, Thomas spoke.

“Let us also go,” he said, “that we may die with him.” Thomas is recorded as speaking only in John’s gospel, and this is the first of three times. The next occasion will be on a troubling night ahead in Jerusalem when Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life... You know the way to the place where I am going.” Speaking for the group, Thomas says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Yet the moment for which Thomas is certainly best known comes in his last recorded occasion of speaking. He is absent as the risen Christ appears for the first time and when ten of his colleagues tells him about it later, he references Jesus’ wounds from the crucifixion and declares “Unless, I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

That response is why he will forever be known as “Doubting Thomas,” an unfair moniker in many ways, especially given his words here. For even though he doesn’t understand all that is ahead on the day recalled by our text, when Jesus announces they will go to see Lazarus, Thomas clearly understands the danger in heading back toward Jerusalem, but still says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” There is no further conversation recorded, and instead, when John resumes the narrative in the next verse, the group has arrived in Bethany.

Like the others, Thomas did not understand much of what Jesus was talking about, yet he was willing to continue the journey even so. He didn't fully understand what was ahead either, but he was committed to following his Lord no matter what. Such is our calling, too.

Years ago, I shared with my staff a devotional called "Sorry, Millennials." It was not a diatribe against the generation of that name, but rather the honest assessment from a pastor in Chicago of things it took him more than four decades to learn about God. Here's what Matt Fitzgerald had to say: "I am 45," he writes. "Speaking optimistically, I'm halfway through my life. This is good because you have to grow old to know that God is faithful. You can experience God's faithfulness in youth, but only as an abstract claim or a future guarantee. As you age," Fitzgerald says, "God's promise is fulfilled. It is the long haul that reveals the joy of fidelity. Young relationships can be thrilling, but long relationships become beautiful.

"The shape of God's love changes over time, or at least I've experienced it differently. As a child, God was the creator of awe; the expanse of the sky and the height of a climbing tree. In middle school, my father died. God became Christ crucified, abandoned with me in my abandonment. In high school, God was the law, corrective and protective in ways I wouldn't let my mother be. In the confusion of my twenties, God was the Spirit, mysterious and sustaining. When I met my wife, God was the empty tomb, a bright promise, and new life. When our infant son had open-heart surgery, God was the Church, carrying us. All the while, my faith waxed and waned, went from robust to life support and back again. I assume such oscillation will continue. But looking back, I see that while my experience of God has varied...God has always been there.

"At 45, I'm finally able to trust God, because the years have revealed God's faithfulness to me. I will *never* be abandoned. What was once a

promise is now a *relationship*. It was one-sided for years, but the relationship I have with Jesus is the longest one I've ever been in. He knit me together. He's been with me every second since. All those days, all that solidity, reliability, empathy, presence, and mercy. *God is faithful*. What was once an abstract claim has become my personal history. It is yours as well," Fitzgerald concludes, "Or it will be. Sorry, Millennials, but you have to wait. The good news is you have a wonderful gift waiting for you on the other side of forty." (Fitzgerald, Matt. "Sorry, Millennials," dailydevotional@ucc.org, 11/7/16).

That pastor isn't suggesting we arrive at the place where we are fully aware of God's will and intention. Such a destination is not reached in this lifetime. Yet I do hear him proclaiming that in our lives we, like those first disciples, can continue to move ahead even when we don't fully understand. As it is, the certainty of God's faithfulness to which we can cling, too, especially in those times when we otherwise completely miss the point.