

Do You Believe?

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. My name is Keith Knowlton. It's a pleasure to be with you this morning. If we haven't met, I'd love to have the opportunity to do so after the service today.

Well, this morning we are continuing our series in the Gospel of John, looking at the I Am statements of Jesus. Today we're going to be looking specifically in John 11, the first 27 verses. If you have a Bible, you can open there now. The text will also be on the screen behind me. Now, as we approach the Christmas season, there may be some of you, if you're like my family, you enjoy watching Christmas movies.

Of course, most of these movies that we watch really have nothing to do with the Christmas story, but are usually enjoyable to watch. They're warm-hearted with themes of hope and joy and love in a very generic sense, right?

Perhaps you've seen the music, the Polar Express, about the boy who's lost his Christmas spirit. He goes to bed on Christmas Eve, and the train comes out his window and takes him to the North Pole where he sees Santa Claus.

[1 : 05] And he's given the first gift of Christmas, which is this little bell that he thinks is broken at the time because it's not making any noise. And he realizes it's not until he actually has belief, some sort of faith, that this bell actually rings, and from then on, it rings in his ear and those who hear and believe of this Christmas story.

So, in fact, this movie was obviously a book beforehand, if you knew that, and it was a pretty popular soundtrack that went along with it. And I actually looked up some of the lyrics to the song because there was a main song, which I didn't realize until this week that actually won a Grammy for being the song of a soundtrack, whatever category that was.

But there's this line that's repeated in the song that I'll read to you. It says, Believe in what you feel inside, and give your dream the wings to fly. You have everything you need if you just believe.

Now, I hate to rain on anyone's parade if this is a favorite movie of yours, but that's really just a bunch of mushy nonsense, right? I mean, we don't have to pick on this movie.

It's really much of what we see in the Christmas season around us in the secular world, this idea of the sentiment that we have, that we have to have faith, this believing, not anything particular, just kind of this generic, ambiguous feeling that we're encouraged to have.

[2 : 28] Well, in our passage today, we see this call to believe, but it's a very different call to believe. It's not in this generic sense, just so we have some warm, fuzzy Christmas feelings.

It's revealed in this passage, the object of what our belief is, the object of our faith. Jesus asked in this passage, do you believe me? Do you believe I am who I say I am?

And so it's this idea of belief that we're going to be looking at our passage today. So let's look at it together. John 11, starting in verse 1. Now a man named Lazarus was sick.

He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.

So the sister sent word to Jesus, Lord, the one you love is sick. When 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.

[3 : 28] Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. And when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. And then he said to his disciples, let's go back to Judea.

But Rabbi, they said, a short while ago, the Jews were trying to stone you and yet you are going back? Jesus answered, are there not 12 hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daylight will not stumble, for they see this world's light.

It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light. After he had said this, he went on to tell them, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to wake him up. His disciples replied, Lord, if he sleeps, he'll get better. Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. And so then he told them more plainly, Lazarus is dead.

And for your sake, I am glad I was not there so that you may believe. But let us go to him. Then Thomas, also known as Didymus, said to the rest of the disciples, let us also go that we may die with him.

[4 : 32] On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him. But Mary stayed at home. Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.

Jesus said to her, your brother will rise again. Martha answered, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life.

The one who believes in me will live even though they die. And whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this? Yes, Lord, she replied.

I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who has come into the world. This is the word of God. Will you pray with me? Lord, as we now turn to consider your word, we ask that you grant us your wisdom and understanding.

[5 : 39] Lord, please remove our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh. We ask that you awaken our attention to the truth of the gospel. That the truth of your word may go out in power.

That it may refresh us and convict us and encourage us. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, as I mentioned, we're looking at these I am statements of Jesus.

If you've been with us for the last few weeks, we know that we've considered some of these where Jesus says, I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the door. I am the good shepherd. And now in this passage, we see that Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life.

Now, if you remember back further into the autumn, you remember James would have preached on this similar passage, the whole chapter actually, where Jesus actually raises Lazarus from the dead. We're not going to focus so much on the miracle today, so much as these verses from 17 to 23 that focus on Jesus' interaction with Martha.

This conversation that Jesus has with Martha as he approaches Bethany. And so as we consider that, there's really two points I want us to think about today. One is the revelation.

[6 : 46] One is the revelation and two, the response. The revelation and the response. So let's first look at the revelation in this passage. Now, if you're familiar with the life and ministry of Jesus, if you're familiar with the Gospel of John, you might have heard of the name Martha before.

This isn't the first time she comes onto the scene. Back in Luke 10, Luke describes Jesus going to the house of Mary and Martha. And it's Martha who's busy doing all the work and all the hospitality as Mary sits at Jesus' feet.

And Martha comes to Jesus and complains, My sister is not helping me. Will you tell her to come and help me? And Jesus points out to Martha that she's the one that's being anxious, and it's her sister Mary that has chosen the good portion.

And so now we see in John 11, this relationship has obviously blossomed. Jesus is friends with Mary and Martha and with Lazarus. It says that in verse 5 that he'd love them. And so naturally, when Lazarus is sick, it makes sense that Mary and Martha would send word to Jesus, Come, our brother is sick, come so that you may heal him.

They know that he has performed miracles in the past, that he has healed the sick. Certainly, they would want him to come to heal their brother. But we see here that Jesus doesn't comply with their request.

[7 : 59] In fact, he waits a couple days before he goes to Bethany to see them. And so when Jesus arrives, it says in this passage that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days.

And this is significant because the fact that four days indicated that he was really, truly dead. There was an idea at the time that a person's soul would kind of hover above their body for three days before departing.

So the idea that Jesus was coming after four days indicates that Lazarus was truly dead. If you're familiar with the movie Princess Bride, it's that cult classic from the 80s.

The hero of the movie is trying to find his true love to rescue her, and he himself is killed. So his friends take him to this miracle worker, right? And they want him to revive their friends so he can rescue his true love.

The miracle worker says, well, your friend is only mostly dead. And there's a big difference between being mostly dead and all dead. Mostly dead is still slightly alive, right?

[9 : 00] Because he's slightly alive, then the miracle worker is able to bring him back to life. Well, this is not the case here. Lazarus is not only mostly dead. He is completely dead, most certainly all dead.

And of course, this is part of God's plan. Jesus recognized that the bigger the challenge, the bigger the miracle. And so he says in verse 3, in allowing this, he allows this for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.

And so this is the backdrop of the story. As Jesus approaches Bethany, we know that Lazarus has been dead for a number of days, and it's his sister, Martha, who goes out and approaches him. And so we see this very honest and open conversation.

She doesn't waste any time expressing her feelings or her emotions. We see this really delicate balance of faith and disappointment, of belief and grief at the same time.

And so she says to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. And so to her credit, we see that she had faith. She recognized that Jesus was a miracle worker, that he had healed people in the past.

[10 : 07] Why not heal Lazarus? So it's a reasonable question that she would have, a reasonable anticipation that Jesus should come. You've saved all these people in the past that were practically strangers. Why in the world did you not come and save the person that you love?

Well, we see that this faith that she exhibits is actually an imperfect faith of sorts, because we recognize that even though she sees Jesus to be a miracle worker, she believes that his power is brought about by his bodily presence.

And so we don't know whether she had heard of miracles in the past, where Jesus had healed people at a distance when he went and healed the centurion's servant with only a word. How he healed the official's son simply by the power of his word.

And so she follows up with another statement, I know even now God will give you whatever you ask. Again, it's another statement of faith. She's recognizing the relationship that Jesus has with the Father.

But we don't really know what she means by the statement. It's still rather vague. What are her expectations? So we see here this really, her faith is being challenged by her own expectations, right?

[11 : 17] Her brother is sick. She calls to Jesus to help. She expects that Jesus will come to heal her brother, except the fact that he dies. And so now she's conflicted.

Is Jesus really in control? Is Jesus really willing to do what I ask him to do? And so while this isn't the main point of the sermon, I think it's worth pausing here just to think about.

Put ourselves in the situation when things go poorly in our mind, when we experience trouble and strife and hardship, how do we respond? Do we respond with disappointment?

Do we question God's timing or his sovereignty? Are we willing to continue trusting in God's will, even when God's will is different than ours?

Nowhere in the Bible does God promise us health and wealth and safety and comfort, right? In fact, he says when you believe, most likely we'll experience just the opposite. If we go back to verse 5, it says this, Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

[12 : 19] And when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed for two more days. I mean, at first glance, that kind of seems counterintuitive, right? Kind of ironic. I love Lazarus, so I'm going to stay here until he's dead.

Well, it's not counterintuitive when we realize that God's chief concern is not our comfort, but his own glory. We need to remember that the things that happen in our lives, sickness and death and depression, financial hardship, loneliness, whatever it may be, all occur so that Christ may be exalted.

So if we see in this passage that Jesus' goal is his own glory, then that needs to be our goal when we face hardship in our lives. Not seeking our own comfort, but being confident in God's plan, that we see God's glory, and knowing that that will ultimately end in our good.

And so how does Jesus respond to Martha's initial comment? He says very simply, Now, he doesn't directly respond to her comment.

We see at the beginning of the chapter that he explains to his disciples why he's delaying his coming, right? He could have said the same thing to her here. He could have said, Look, I'm concerned with my own glory here.

[13 : 35] I'm going to do a miracle here. He doesn't say that. We see him trying to draw Martha slowly in. He wants her to focus her attention on him, not on her own expectations, but on the reality of who he is.

He really wants her faith to be exercised so that she can see who he is and what he's about to do. And unfortunately, Martha, it seems in this passage, she perceives his comment a little differently, right?

It kind of seems like she receives his comment as if it's just a poor attempt at consoling her. We might have experienced this ourselves. Maybe we've had a family member die, and we've had people come to us, very well-intentioned, they're trying to be loving, but say things that just really aren't helpful to us, right?

They say, well, you know, remember, God's in control. Everything works out for the good. You know, and statements like that, they're not inaccurate. People are trying to be, to say things that will be encouraging to us, but the thing is that truisms do very little to care for our heart.

And so it is in this case, the heart of Martha is hurting. She perceives Jesus' words to just be head knowledge to her, so it doesn't really take root.

[14 : 50] So because of her misinterpretation, she responds with a rather half-hearted response. I know he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day. Seems like kind of a rather disappointed tone.

As if Jesus is telling her something that she already knows, that she doesn't really find pertinent to the situation here. Jesus, I know. I know Jewish tradition. I know Jewish teaching.

We're told that we will rise again on the last day. Well, on the one hand, we can give her credit for having good theology because there were Jews at the time that didn't believe in the resurrection. In fact, the Sadducees taught that, that there was no resurrection at the last day. So the fact that she is professing that is to her credit. She recognized that God's people will rise again.

However, this really isn't the point that Jesus is making here. The point that Jesus makes really escapes her. He's really not testing her theology here. He wants her to focus in, not on the future resurrection, but wants her to focus in on the here and now to understand the true object of her faith.

[15 : 53] And so Jesus responds in a very powerful way with some of the most powerful, clear words in the whole gospel. I am the resurrection and the life. He's telling her to not focus on things that are far off, to recognize the hope that she can have right now in him, that he is the source of life, that he is the one who conquers death.

He is the one who saves. And so the thing about this profession of Christ right here, he is truly saying that he is the incarnate God.

So it's worth just marveling at how bold this statement really is. It's not the language of a teacher or a prophet. This is the language of the Savior.

And so he goes on to say, the one who believes in me will live even though they die. So we see he's speaking directly to Martha's situation here. Even though your brother has died, even though he has been in a tomb for three days, because of his belief, he will be raised by my power.

This is the language of a Savior. This is death. He's announcing death will not be the victor.

[17 : 11] He continues in verse 26, and whoever believes, whoever lives by believing in me will never die. So we see that from the moment of our first belief, we have life eternal.

The death, the sting of death is gone forever. And so what Jesus is emphasizing is the hope that he brings. Don't look to the future. Look to me as the source of your hope and your life.

We recognize that throughout the history of the Bible, they have the history of God's people. They were anticipating a rescuer. From the time of Adam, a rescuer had been promised. The patriarchs were anticipating this.

The prophets spoke of this. The people of Israel were longing for their Savior. And now he had come. John 5, 25, Jesus says this, Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

We see that Martha had great faith in God's future work. But Jesus is making clear that he is the true object of her faith. Not to wait for a future resurrection.

[18:20] He is the resurrection. He is the one that provides life, not in the future but now, more fully than she could ever imagine. And so this is the wonderful revelation that we see in this passage.

This is the truth upon which all eternity hinges. And so then we can turn to the response. Now I'm sure if you've had conversations with people in the past and someone's describing something to you maybe that you're not familiar with, they may describe it kind of in a means of a dichotomy, right?

You either love it or you hate it. You're either for it or against it. This happens a lot in politics, right? People's positions. Maybe you think of Brexit when that was an issue years ago, right?

You're either for it or you're against it. We think about sports teams. Either you love them or you hate them. At least from an American's perspective, it's like the New York Yankees were that team. You either love them or you hate them.

When I arrived in Scotland last year, someone was describing to me what Marmite is. And they said to me, you either love it or you hate it.

[19:27] And I can assure you that I hate it. It doesn't, I don't, how is it a food? I don't know. Why would anyone ever want to put this on toast? It's, it's, I'm in the hate category for that one.

But we see here in this passage, after revealing his identity, that Jesus is taking a similar stance here. He's asking Martha very directly, the central question in this passage, do you believe this? And so Jesus is saying that the reality of his identity, it requires that you take a stance, that you take a position. Do you believe me or do you reject me? There's really no neutral position here.

And so we see Martha's response in verse 27. Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the son of God who has come into the world. Now it's interesting here because Martha doesn't respond in the way that we may think she responds.

She doesn't respond directly to using the same language that Jesus does. She doesn't say, yes, I believe you're the resurrection life. She says, no, I believe you are the Messiah, son of God, who's come into the world. And because of this, there's some varying opinions as to what she was really professing here.

[20:34] Was she just, again, kind of reciting theology that she had been taught in the past? Or was this really personal expression of faith on her behalf?

Was this just kind of a vague response to Jesus' question? Or is she, she looking and focusing in on something a little deeper? Well, obviously we can't know her mind, but I think there's, there's something that we can say for her faith in this passage, even though it's not a perfect faith, even though we see that she was disappointed by Jesus' delay in arriving.

If we go further into down to verse 39, when Jesus is ready to perform this miracle, he asked that the stone be rolled away from the grave. And she objects. She says, Jesus, it's really going to stink. And so we see this faith isn't perfect, but her statement here is truly one of the most complete confessions of Jesus' divinity that we see anywhere else in the gospel of John up to this point.

And so by calling him first Messiah, she's admitting, she's understanding that he is the Christ. He is the one who will save his people. We see this language used when, back in John one, where Jesus is calling his disciples to himself and he calls Andrew.

[21:49] Andrew has this meeting with Jesus and he goes and runs and tells his brother, Peter, he says, we have found the Messiah. She then calls him the son of God.

She's recognizing that, that the son of God is this term that really points to the intimacy and the unity that Jesus had with the father. It's a word also that comes up in John one, when Jesus calls Nathaniel to be his disciple, he tells Nathaniel, he says, I saw you sitting under the fig tree. And how does Nathaniel respond? Rabbi, you are the son of God. Thirdly, Martha calls him. She says that he is the one who has come into the world.

It's this language that's really repeats the theme that we see throughout the gospel of John. In John one, nine, it says, the true light, which gives light to everyone has come into the world. When Jesus feeds the 5,000 in John six, and everyone witnesses the fact that they have been fed by a few loaves and fishes, they proclaim, this is indeed the prophet who has come into the world.

And so we see here that Martha, it seems like she's connecting the dots here. She's linking together these partial professions that have been made in the past, and she's making this into one complete foundational confession.

[23 : 11] Jesus is the Messiah. He is the son of God who has come into the world to save sinners like me and to give life. And so this question that Jesus asks of Martha, it's the same question that he asks every single one of us.

Do you believe? It's the most important question that any of us will ever answer in our lifetimes. And so it's important to understand what is he asking by belief?

What does belief actually mean? There's a few ways to think about belief. You can think about it just as a form of knowledge, right? The possessing knowledge. Yes, I know what the Bible says. I know who Jesus is.

I know what the gospel is. But that's not what Jesus is requesting right now. That's not what he's asking of Martha. He's going further than that.

Even further than intellectual ascent. It's not just, yes, I know and I believe what the Bible says. I believe that Jesus is the son of God. He's going deeper still. This third and really essential element of faith is this personal trust.

[24 : 18] It's this deep affection that we have for Jesus that not only is brought about by our minds, but more importantly, by our hearts.

Some of you know that Rachel and I, my wife, we spent some time in China a number of years ago. And one of the most memorable trips we were able to take when we were there was actually to go to some very remote portions of the Great Wall and hike them.

So usually what you see close to Beijing, at least, is this very restored parts of the wall where you see all the tourists shoulder to shoulder. We didn't want to do that. We hired our own guide, went hours out from the city to these very remote areas where we hiked on the wall for a couple of days. And so we got up and hiked there. And then at night, we went into this little village and caught our fish that we ate for dinner that night, slept in these little villagers' house, and then back up to the wall the next day.

And at the very end of our hike, as we needed to get back to the car to take us back home, there was only two options. We're at the top of this, top of the wall, which we kind of overlooked this ravine into this big gorge and river at the bottom.

[25 : 24] And our guide said, okay, we can do one of two things. We can either take a couple more hours and hike down the gorge and back up the other side to where the car is, or there's this zip line, and we can take the zip line across the gorge. Now, to me, that sounded pretty exciting to be able to take the zip line.

We said, yeah, let's do it. And in my benevolence, I said, Rachel, why don't you go first? And it wasn't because I wanted to see you tested out on her, but I thought, you know, if I go first, she's the one that's a little hesitant to do this.

I may get across the other side, and she gets cold feet, and I'm not going to see her again for a few more hours. So I said, you go first. You make sure you can get across, and I'll follow. And so by agreeing to do this, we had the knowledge that this was a reliable form of transportation.

We'd actually just seen someone go across on it, so we believe that it was able to hold the weight of a human going across the zip line. But it was that level of personal trust that was the hardest part to muster up, because Rachel, when she put on that harness and got linked into that zip line, she was told to step back off the platform.

That was going to take her several hundred feet across this river, several thousand feet to the other side, and she hesitated. Understandably, right? It took some time to coax her and to encourage her before she finally got across to the other side.

[26 : 44] And so when we see her faith, this is the personal trust that Jesus is requesting of Martha here. He's asking for, is this the kind of faith that you have in me?

Personal trust that you have in me. You know, it's important to repeat that this faith, even though it is a level of personal trust, it's not always going to be a perfect faith.

Martha, in this passage, she didn't exhibit perfect faith. She questioned why Jesus didn't come sooner. Rachel, stepping off that platform, didn't have perfect faith that she was, because it took her some time to do it, right?

But the thing is, it wasn't her faith that held her up from falling into the river a hundred feet below. It was the object of her faith. It was the equipment. It was the harness. It was the rope that kept her safe.

And likewise, it is Christ who is the object of our faith. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, this is actually only a sign.

[27 : 48] This points forward, not to the fact that he can raise other people, but that he himself is a resurrection. He is the one who raised himself from the dead. He was crucified on the cross.

He spent three days in the tomb, and he is the one that rose again. 1 Corinthians 15, 21 says this, For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. And so we see that this resurrection is not something that Jesus keeps to himself. Through his death and resurrection, we are offered resurrection life.

And it's important to note what this offer actually is. This is not an offer of healing. Jesus doesn't say, I am the great medicine.

He says, I am the resurrection and the life. Ephesians 2, 4 says, But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions.

[28 : 48] And so it's important to note, without Christ, we are totally dead. Spiritually speaking, we are the same kind of dead as Lazarus was.

There is no way that as a dead man, we can rise from the dead on our own. We require the power of Christ. And so I said earlier, this truth, the reason that Jesus asked this question to Martha, do you believe, is because it demands a response.

So the same for us. It demands a response. This offer of life has been extended to us. Do you believe? Jesus says in John 6, 40, For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day.

And so for those of us who are believers, this is the hope that we have. Not hope in the future. This is the hope that we have now. This is what motivates us in life, to recognize that we have the hope of the resurrection life that is with us now.

May we desire that this affects every aspect of our lives, that others may see the life of Christ in us. But maybe there's some here that are familiar with this passage, or maybe you've been around the church a while, you know a little bit about Jesus, but you're still kind of sitting on the fence.

[30 : 16] Maybe this is all new to you. Maybe you've not heard the gospel message before. Know this, that there is no neutral position.

We either believe that Jesus is the Son of God, believe that he is the one who gives us life, or we face eternal judgment by rejecting him. And so this, though it sounds harsh, this is a reality that can bring us great joy.

Today can be the day of salvation. Place your trust in Christ to recognize that you can be brought from death to the life that we experience through the resurrection of our Lord.

Let's pray. God, we marvel at the fact that you would become incarnate, that you would be crucified, dead, and buried, and raised from the dead.

And so it may be our profession today that you are the resurrection and the life. God, we ask that you grant us genuine faith that we may believe in you.

[31 : 32] May we be willing to die just as you die that we may be raised to new life. And so for those of us that do know you, Lord, may we live in resurrection life more and more every day.

May it rule us. May we walk in its power. May we be strengthened through its influence. Lord, those that don't know you, we ask that you grant them faith, a personal trust that they may recognize that you are the resurrection and the life.

Not a future hope, but hope for us now and forever. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. And now, if you'll stand, we have our last hymn of the morning.

Musicians can come forward, and we'll be singing together, And Can It Be.