

# A Sermon for DaySpring

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**“Into Death”**

**John 11: 1-16**

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The season of Lent is supposed to be for the Church, an attempt to follow Christ into Jerusalem and what awaits Him there. He was so intentional about it... this journey to the cross. The gospels are clear about that.

He takes a deliberate path to death.

He isn't swept towards it by the currents of popular opinion or mass mania. He tends to shy away from all that, especially as he nears Jerusalem.

His enemies aren't calling the shots. John's gospel spells that out. **“I'm laying my life down,”** says Jesus, **“No one is taking it from me.”**

His followers aren't in charge. They're often pushing him to step up to the plate and hit it out of the park and he keeps saying, **“It's not my hour, the time hasn't come.”**

It's as if Jesus has an eternal watch he keeps looking at...

or a Day Timer no one else can see...

an agenda that is just between himself and God.

He's going to Jerusalem and he's going there to die. That's the agenda, what Paul called Kenosis... an emptying of himself and a humbling of himself... **“even unto death, even death on a cross.”** He's not going there to lobby congress. He's not going to start a movement. He's going there to die.

In the Gospel of John, we see Jesus making that journey towards Jerusalem and towards the cross event and it culminates in chapter eleven, which we read earlier. To appreciate that moment, we need a quick review.

Here's the way John paints it.

In Chapter Two, John has Jesus cleansing the temple. The other gospels put this event last... John has it first which is his way of saying, **“This system is coming down.”**

In Chapter Three he tries unsuccessfully to communicate to the ultimate insider, Nicodemus, and Jesus says, **“You're a teacher for Israel and you don't get this?”** The insider is the outsider.

In Chapter Four the first real revival breaks out in Samaria of all places. They're the ones who first believe... so the outsiders are the insiders.

In Chapter Five Jesus heals a crippled man and tells him to get up and carry his mat... trouble was... it was the Sabbath and both of those things (healing and carrying your mat) were illegal on the Sabbath.

Then Jesus begins saying some odd and seemingly heretical things like:

**“If you believed Moses,**

**you'd believe me because Moses was writing about me.”**

**“I am the bread of life..."**

**eat this bread and you'll live forever.”**

**“My teaching comes from God himself.”**

You can imagine the disciples... just wincing over and over... every time Jesus opened his mouth they'd hold their breath because they figured Jesus was going to come out with something that would get him into trouble again.

**“Sabbath??? Well, my Father is at his work and so I'm working too.” “And, by the way, you don't know me or my Father.”**

If that's not bad enough... He goes and takes the name of God. Over and over he used it... **“I am,”** Yahweh. “Ego eimi,” in the Greek. I am.

**“I am the way.**

**I am the Good Shepherd**

**Before Abraham was born... I am.”**

Some of the folks are thinking this is *deja vu* in the desert but some of them are thinking, **“You don’t talk that way in our house.”** And you didn’t, say those kinds of thing and live very long and John keeps telling us aside.

**“They were plotting to kill him...  
they tried to arrest him...  
they tried to seize him.”**

In chapter nine he heals a blind man... on the Sabbath, wouldn’t you know it. In chapter ten they **“pick up rocks to stone him”** but he escapes and heads for the hills across the Jordan where John was first Baptizing.

And that’s where he is when word comes to him that his friend Lazarus is in critical condition. He doesn’t go then. He’s still watching his own clock, keeping a different time. He waits two more days and then he says, **“Now let’s go back to Judea.”**

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived in Bethany, which was a suburb of Jerusalem. So, going back to Judea meant going back where everyone is polishing up their best stoning rocks just waiting for Jesus to show his face again... and the disciples reminded him of that. **“Have you forgotten you’re a wanted man back there?”**

Jesus tries to explain why that doesn’t matter and you can tell they don’t really get it and that’s when they heard the words from Thomas that I want us to hear this morning.

**“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”**

Now for sure, Thomas is saying what it obvious given the predicament they’re all in. Thomas, who is known for his honesty, is just going to say it. **“Jesus is going back there and he’s going to be killed and we belong to him so let’s suck it up and go stand at his side no matter what the cost.”**

That’s what Thomas is saying but John, who tells us the story, is saying something more. There’s never one level to interpreting the scripture... not if you’re taking it seriously. Thomas’ line isn’t just a line about the political reality those disciples would face back across the Jordan, it’s a line for you and me and the spiritual reality we face.

Lent is a time to follow Jesus intentionally and Jesus is going intentionally into death. This isn’t just an unfortunate event, which happens because the world was too close-minded. It’s not,

**“Jesus was just too radical  
and this what happens when you’re too honest  
or too loving.”**

No doubt all that was a part of the story but there’s a larger story and deeper purpose being worked out.

I love to read the theology of the early church and especially as they wrote about the cross... the things I read are so poetic and large. I find myself saying “Amen” someplace in my heart and in my head thinking, **“now, this is getting closer to expressing what is true about why Jesus is on that cross.”**

We just whittled it down through the centuries  
so it would fit in a tract  
or on a bumper sticker.

I grew up reading a theology of the cross that could fit in a gospel track. I grew up, like most of you, singing hymns that shrunk this Paschal Mystery down to a few words, most of which rhymed with “blud.” And some of which sounded more like a hoe-down than a something from a Holy Week.

The early church saw something essential and cosmic taking place. **“O divine crucifixion,”** wrote one pastor around 200 AD **“O divine crucifixion, whose reach extends everywhere and to all things. O most singular of all things singular, thou art truly become all in all... so that everything might be saved.”** (*Hippoclytus*) Put that on a bumper sticker.

The early church saw, in the death of God, a loving and compassionate heart that assumed all the suffering of humanity and redeemed it all. They saw the God-man who willingly entered into death... in order to destroy death.

As Gregory wrote in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, ***“Humanity had to be brought to life by the humanity of God.”*** Christ is united with us in being and in love and in suffering. He willingly assumes it, even our sin, in order that the world might be renewed. It is the way of transformation of all things... including you and me.

In the death of Jesus,  
     the early church saw a pattern...  
         an essential, sacred pattern.

They saw that the cross and resurrection were more than events to change things, they were events that revealed something...

They reveal that in God’s kingdom  
     and in God’s world,  
         death always leads to life.

And it was a life they were invited into and a way they were invited to walk... a willingness to walk into death. So... Baptism was an entering into that death that leads to life. What was lethal became life-giving. (Clement)

Gregory, in a sermon on Easter centuries ago, wrote...

*Yesterday I was crucified with Christ;  
     today I am glorified with him.  
 Yesterday I was dead with him;  
     today I am sharing in his resurrection.  
 Yesterday I was buried with him;  
     today I am waking with him from the sleep of death.*  
 (Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p51)

Thomas spoke up that day across Jordan, and he said more than he could imagine he was saying, **“Let us go with him so that we may die also.”**

This is the way of Christ...  
     It is the way to newness.  
         It is the way to life. And there is no other.  
 To cling to life is to lose it...  
     cling to self and you lose that...  
         cling to the past and you’ll lose the future...  
     cling to a moment and you’ll lose the next one.

As someone has said, **“Every present moment must become a baptismal.”** There is no living without a dying.

Well, this is all very mystical sounding isn’t it?

What we need is a parable. Ever heard the Parable of the Acorn? (Needleman, Lost Christianity) Here’s a version of it a friend of mine put in her book recently published.

*Once upon a time, in a not-so-faraway land, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernized acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy; and since they were midlife, baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses.*

*There were seminars called, “Getting All You Can out of Your Shell.” There were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original “fall” from the tree. There were*

*spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various aconopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.*

*One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped “out of the blue” by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And crouched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. Pointing upward at the tree, he said, “We... are... that!”*

*Delusional thinking, obviously, he other acorns concluded, but one of them continued to engage him in conversation: “So tell us, how would we become that tree?” “Well,” said he, pointing downward, “it has something to do with going into the ground ... and cracking open the shell,” “Insane,” they responded. “Totally morbid! Why, then we wouldn’t be acorns anymore.”*

I wonder, how much of our lives are driven by that notion. Clinging to what we are... thinking it is a nutty notion to be something other than we are... dying all the time... but not in any way that brings redemption.

Jesus was asked once for a sign. **“Give us a sign so we can know.” “The only sign I’m going to give you is the sign of Jonah. I’m going down... descending.”** Jonah goes down... down to Joppa... down into the ship... down into the sea... down into the belly.

Jesus is going down... first. Into the belly of the whale... into darkness. Salvation is first a downward movement. Falling into what is transforming. Like a acorn giving up the protective shell.

That’s where Jesus is headed, when he tells his disciples it’s time to head back over the Jordan. To redemptive suffering. Suffering born... willingly.

It is what Christian theology has called, “The Happy Fault”... where there must be first a good Friday in order for there to be an Easter Sunday.

Thomas says to all of us... **“Let’s go die with him.”** Life’s going to take you there... you may as well say yes to it... “die before you die” Intentionally let go... and allow it to be redemptive.

This is what the saints do. They do it in deeply dark and challenging times... during dark nights of the soul... And they do it in very ordinary times.

Most of it’s small, it’s ordinary, and it’s everyday.

It’s putting someone else’s needs above your own.

It’s thinking about how you might help a neighbor, and doing it.

It’s worrying about another’s reputation,  
rather than your own.

It’s loving and being an example of love without expecting one thing in return or one bit of recognition. Being kind when someone didn’t deserve it. Accepting someone who is only irritating.

Going out of your way... again... and again without having a commentator in your head saying, **“Well, how about that, Bob, he’s one really special person... I’ll bet everyone will think really highly of him now.”**

This is really hard work... dying to self. But this is what the saints do. They let go. They take out the garbage with a glad spirit... The saints in this world sit and hold hands with sufferers and they don’t worry about having nothing to say that can make any difference. And they write notes and emails of encouragement because they can’t get the other off their mind.

They get up in the middle of the night and change diapers so their spouse can sleep. They run errands for teenagers who are still learning how to be grateful and don’t often show it. They write checks to feed the hungry, even when their portfolio can’t handle it.

Every moment becomes a baptismal one... where a dying to self leads to a life that couldn’t be known otherwise. And every major sacred tradition has come to this bottom line and communicated it. It is the essential pattern and it is made known in Jesus.

There must be a dying. There must be a letting go of the self. And little by little, those who let go, the saints, are the ones who are transformed in the process.

So, what do you say? **“Let’s also go, that we may die with him.”**

Amen?