

## “By-Level Believing”

John 11:1-45, the Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Faithful friends, I have great joy in announcing that God gave me a clear sign this past Thursday as to what message I am supposed to present to you all today. Here's how it happened ...

I was traveling out to Lebanon, PA to attend my monthly training day with Oasis ministries (this is the two-year spiritual direction program I am enrolled in.) Knowing I was going to be stopping for breakfast sometime during that early morning two-hour trek, I also brought with me a folder full of study notes and commentary on this morning's Bible passage. I figured I'd get a little more sermon prep in before the other, intensive studies of the day.

The commentary I was most intrigued by was written by a preacher I hold in very high regard, Rev. Fred Craddock, and it was called “A Twofold Death and Resurrection.” It intrigued and inspired me to interpret this morning's familiar Bible story in a way I hadn't thought of before. But I couldn't spend much time on it. I was on a very tight schedule, and so I had to move on from it fairly quickly.

After scribbling some notes to myself, I finished my coffee and breakfast sandwich, packed up my folder, switched my brain to the study on “centering prayer” that was to come, and hit the road. Then, somewhere around the eightieth mile of my Route 78 West trek, the sign appeared. I regarded it as a sign from God, but otherwise, it was just a sign ... that is, a billboard! Given the article on “two-fold death and resurrection” I'd just read, what made this billboard seem divinely placed was that it was advertising a local attraction featuring flights in a historic bi-plane! Two levels of a flying machine, two levels of death and resurrection ... for me, this all quickly added up to the flight of faith we call “belief.” Thus was born today's sermon, “Bi-Level Believing.”

Well, that's enough of a glimpse into part of my sometimes crazy sermon writing process! Now onto what I'm calling “bi-level believing” is all about. The cover to your bulletin is just a little visual to hopefully hammer it all home!

I have to begin by saying that I love and trust Jesus for many reasons. But first and foremost among these reasons is that Jesus was a *believer*. A mentor of mine has pointed out that when we consider the Old English root of the word, to “believe” means

to become what we long for. Jesus became what he longed for on two levels. He is the perfect example of a bi-level believer.

On one level, Jesus believed in full self-expression. By all accounts, he did not bottle and box up his feelings. He was openly passionate. Many of us who profess to be spiritually mentored by Him, though, bottle and box up our feelings. There is something in the air of American society that seems to choke us from allowing ourselves to get choked up. Letting our feelings out, especially for men, is considered a sign of weakness, of not having a thick enough skin to tough life out or at least put on an air of toughing it out.

I learned this in an acute way back in the fall of 1997. I was a full-time student intern at a nearly two-thousand member church in Wilmington, DE. I'd been through the full wringer of Princeton seminary, having graduated that spring. I'd felt sufficiently prepared and polished for ministry, save for the fact that I had kept on being a folksy sort of fellow in my personality. Now when it came time for mingling during weekly coffee hours, friendliness is welcome. But complete honesty when asked, "So, how's it going, Rich?" on any given Sunday when I was feeling stressed, oppressed or flat out sad ... well, that was not so welcome. I was, in many ways, told that I was supposed to only exhibit strength of conviction and overall character. Just being a fellow, folksy Christian having a tough day didn't cut it. Granted, I was still a professional in training. And, professionally speaking, I knew I was expected to pay attention to the leadership role I was in. Yet in my mind, my role was first and foremost that of being an ambassador for Jesus, and Jesus himself had no trouble letting people know how he was feeling. Why did I have to hold myself in check?

Of course, the more experience I gained, the more I learned a comfortable balance. Still, that experience reinforced a life-long social kibosh on expressing my feelings in more spontaneous, uncontrolled ways.

Let's compare this to what we learn about Jesus in this morning's lesson from the Gospel of John. Did he hold back his feelings for the sake of making a more polished, professional presentation of himself? Was that the message he wanted to communicate about the living God?

Like so many other times in his life and ministry, Jesus didn't hesitate to reveal his belief in full self-expression. Especially since the situation he found himself in was profoundly personal, while at the same time also a professional moment in ministry.

Lazarus, brother to Mary and Martha, all very close friends of Jesus, had fallen gravely ill. A messenger had brought Jesus the news, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” I’m sure on one level, the level of believing in full self-expression, Jesus wanted to cry out, “Oh, no!” the same way any of us might react to similar news about a loved one. But for reasons of bi-level belief that I’ll say more about in a minute, he seems to have held back and kept a reasonably unfettered demeanor. Dramatically, this also meant not rushing to save his friend’s life. Even still, though he waited two days to be with them, we are reminded again how much he loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

After a few rather important conversations, Jesus finally meets up with them. But by this time Lazarus had died. Jesus was able to hold himself together until he saw Mary and various other mourners weeping. We are told that’s when he showed signs of being in distress, of being “deeply moved in his spirit.” While holding fast to one level of belief, Jesus then lets loose his other level of belief, the one about full self-expression. And so, in the shortest verse in all of Scripture, we read in John 11:35 that “Jesus wept.” Those who witnessed this remarked at how very obvious and deep his love was.

Why, then, didn’t Jesus, who had all sorts of compassion and radical healing power, run right away to save the life of Lazarus? To understand, we have to pay attention to the other level of belief Jesus clearly exhibited. He not only believed in full self-expression, he even more so believed in trusting in the truth of God the Father. This truth had everything to do with God’s power to absolutely overcome the power of death. And as we know from Lent and Easter seasons gone by, it was a truth inextricably woven into the very fabric of Jesus’ passionate being.

So with intimate, holy authority, Jesus revealed this level of belief by making bold proclamations like “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (Jn. 11:4) and “Your brother will rise again ... I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though they die, shall live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” (Jn 11:25).

Jesus was the perfect bi-level believer. He became what he longed for – a person exhibiting full self-expression while also exhibiting full trust in the will and the way of God the Father. He became his own full self-expression of God’s passionate, victorious love.

None of us can be a perfect bi-level believer the like of Jesus. Not do we need to be. We need only follow, to the best of our ability by grace and through faith, His holy example. Like those bi-planes of old, we cannot soar in our faith without having two-

levels of belief guiding our spiritual engines. We need to be fully present and self-expressive to the life we live here – with all of its joyful highs and painfully deep, weeping sorrows. We need also be fully trusting that our God is more powerful than the grave, and through Jesus Christ has fully proved it once and for all.

This was a heavy-duty week for me. Not just because of my one-day journey to Lebanon, PA and then back home; not just because of the fact that both my daughters had the virus that's been hitting every home I know of; but more because it's been a week of being physically and prayerfully present to two congregation members enduring very serious health crises. It's been a week where I have no choice but to take what I'm preaching about bi-level believing and put it directly into practice. I've been fully self-expressing myself to God and to close family and friends, fully feeling my worry and sorrow and hope concerning unexpected "bad news." Yet it's also been a week of fully placing all my feelings and the care of others into the hands of God whose will and way and life-sustaining power I trust explicitly. I've had to fly by faith and become what I constantly yearn to be.

What situations in your life are you living through right now that call on you to be a bi-level believer? How is the ever-living example of Jesus guiding and inspiring and empowering you? What signs have greeted you on your journeys to remind you not only to express yourself, but also to express your loving trust in God? Amen.