

Easter With Faith • John 12:12-19; 18:15; 19:2-27; 20:1-9

There is a story about a Persian general who ordered the execution of a captured spy. Shortly before the execution he gave the condemned man a choice between a firing squad and the big black door. The captured spy thought for a long time and then chose the firing squad. A short time later shots rang out and the spy was dead. The general turned to an aide and said, “They almost always chose the firing squad because people prefer the known to the unknown.” Then the aide asked the inevitable question: “What was behind the big black door?” “Freedom,” the general explained. “But I’ve only known a few men brave enough to take it.”

Facing the choices leading up to the first Easter, many of the eyewitnesses made poor choices. The religious leaders and the Roman politicians chose to arrest and execute Jesus. Judas chose to betray him. Peter chose to deny him. Thomas chose doubt. But John bravely chose faith. Some might consider faith the black door. John saw it as freedom. Of all the characters in the Easter story John is the one I most want to be like.

In the Minneapolis phone book there are 28 pages of Johnsons—those named after the one disciple of Jesus who saw Easter with faith from start to finish. It’s a good thing to be named after John, but it’s even better to be like him.

The week began with Palm Sunday. It was a day of exuberant celebration and John was there. He wrote about it in John 12:12-19 saying:

(That Sunday)
the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. *They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,*

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Blessed is the King of Israel!”

Jesus was on a fast track to the cross and just about everyone was abandoning him at a record pace.

Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written,

“Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt.”

At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!”

It was a great day in Jerusalem and Jesus was the center of attention and celebration. The city was crowded with visitors from all over the world who had gathered for the coming Jewish Passover. It was the goal of non-resident Jews to celebrate in Jerusalem at least once in a lifetime. Even today the Passover celebration ends with the words, “. . . next year in Jerusalem.”

Stories about Jesus were spreading quickly, especially the story that Jesus had raised a dead

man, Lazarus, back to life. Only God could overrule death and Jesus had done exactly that. Excitement was in the air.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem he deliberately chose to ride on a don-

key. That was an ancient symbol of the Messiah. It was an expression of humility, unlike the conqueror riding a warhorse. He was saying that he was the one they had hoped and prayed for over generations.

The crowds paved the road with palm branches. Palm branches were the ancient equiva-

lent of our confetti, streamers and fireworks. They were honoring Jesus with an ancient tickertape parade. They shouted “Hosanna!” which means ‘Save!’ In other cultures and times, like England today, it would be the equivalent of shouting, “God save the king!”

Have you seen on the news the exuberant celebrations in cities like Baghdad and Basra? Or maybe you remember the old newsreels of Allied soldiers entering Paris at the end of World War II and setting the French people free. It was a time of wild celebration. Dancing in the streets. Singing and shouting. That’s exactly what happened on that first Palm Sunday. They were dancing, laughing, shouting and celebrating. It was the day for dreams to come true. It was a day when thousands celebrated Jesus.

For the religious leaders called Pharisees it was an awful day. They were disgusted and frightened by the popularity of Jesus. It was like a standing ovation for the enemy. They were sick inside. It seemed to them that the whole world had gone after him.

John was one of the partiers. He believed in Jesus with all his heart. I can picture him waving his palms, shouting his praises and dancing with enthusiasm. Did he understand exactly what was going on? Not really. By his own admission he really didn’t get it until after Easter, but he enjoyed the Jesus Party anyway. What a way to see Easter! Just celebrate Jesus with all your heart and figure out the details later. It takes faith—and that’s exactly what John had.

But that was Sunday. A lot changed by Thursday night. Jesus wasn’t in a party mood. His talk seemed dark and dangerous. Jesus looked depressed. Then it got dangerous with soldiers coming to arrest him and threats and trials. Jesus was on a fast track to the cross and just about everyone was abandoning him at a record pace.

John didn’t waver when danger peaked. He stuck with Jesus all the way. According to John 18:15, “*Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the priest’s courtyard.*” John wrote these words. He was an eyewitness biographer of all that hap-

pened.

John did a curious thing when he told Jesus’ story. He never actually used his own name. He remained anonymous. In the book we call “The Gospel according to John” he always refers to himself indirectly. Here he calls himself “another disciple”.

John knew the high priest personally. He didn’t even need security clearance to go right into Caiaphas’ home. Of course this put him at the highest level of danger.

In political conflict it is common to not only eliminate the enemy but those aligned with the enemy. Whether Adolph Hitler, Saddam Hussein or a new president in Washington, the common practice is to get rid of all the top deputies as well as the leader himself. Peter denied he knew Jesus in order to save his skin, but that wouldn’t work for John. They all knew him.

John was willing to risk his life for Jesus. His faith was not limited to happy days when the crowd was shouting praises. John believed in Jesus and was faithful even when the crowd was shouting for crucifixion.

There is a lesson here for us all. Some of us love to party with Jesus in the good times but have little faith in the bad times. When life is good we gladly carry the title “Christian” but when life gets dangerous with problems, sickness, financial reverses, lost job and a long list of scary options we’re not so sure about faith in Jesus.

John’s faith was for every season—faith in celebration; faith in danger; faith in duty. John was the only male follower of Jesus who showed up at the crucifixion. The rest were low on faith and hiding out. In John 19:25-27 we read:

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Dear woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

This was a most dramatic moment. Jesus was in excruciating pain. He was dying and he knew

it. Every breath was precious and every word was almost impossible to speak. The whole point of Jesus' death was human salvation. He was dying there in our place. He was taking the eternal consequences of our sin. He was saving our souls from hell and for heaven. Nothing could be bigger and nothing could be more important.

But Jesus had a personal, practical need. He was the eldest son of a widow. He needed someone to take care of his mother after he was gone. His own brothers weren't there. He couldn't count on them to do what needed to be done. So, he asked John.

The ancient historians tell us what happened in the following years as the gospel of Jesus started to spread across the empire and beyond. All the disciples of Jesus left to become missionaries except one. John stayed behind to care for Mary until she died. It was his duty.

Faith in Jesus calls some of us to special assignments. They may not be glamorous and they may not be easy. Jesus may ask us to do what no one else will show up to do. Others may do the spectacular and sensational. Others may have their names in the headlines. Others of us may be assigned to take care of the elderly. Our names may not even be mentioned. We are just "the other disciple" or "the disciple whom Jesus loved". We learn from John that faith calls us to duty and our duty is to do whatever Jesus wants us to do.

I can hardly imagine what it must have been like during those long hours and days after Jesus' death. A dark cloud hung over those followers of Jesus, a cloud that would not go away. Remember those times when you felt totally trapped by hopeless circumstances? Everything went wrong. You felt so lonely. Hopeless. Confused. Frightened. Desperate.

Jesus had told them he would rise from the dead, but they didn't believe it. Frankly, it was just too much to believe. Even those who had seen the once-dead Lazarus come out of his tomb couldn't muster up enough faith to believe that

Jesus would come back to life. All their dreams were shattered.

There is no record that John was different. Maybe the depression of the others dragged him down into the pit of unbelief. But knowing everything else about his life and faith I can't help but wonder if he wasn't different from the rest. It seems to me that if there is anyone who saw Easter coming it must have been John. Here's what he wrote in John 20:1-9:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and he looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

John was that "other disciple". It didn't take much to start him running. Mary Magdalene hadn't reported a resurrection; she had only reported a missing body. John's faith kicked in and he started running. Panting for breath and hoping for life he won the race and arrived at the empty tomb. He looked in, he saw and he believed.

We learn from John that faith calls us to duty and our duty is to do whatever Jesus wants us to do.

Honestly, he didn't see very much. Since Jesus' body was the object of attention—technically John really didn't see anything. But apparently he didn't need to see, hear or touch Jesus. He didn't even need to fully understand what was happening because John was tilted toward faith. He wanted to believe. He was waiting to believe. John was ready to believe.

What did he experience in that moment when he saw and believed? Imagine a prisoner with a life sentence who is suddenly set free. Imagine a patient with a terminal illness who is told there is a cure. Imagine a drowning swimmer who is rescued. Imagine a driver who totals a car and walks away without a scratch. Those are some of the emotions that John must have felt that moment at the tomb.

Jesus was alive! Resurrection worked! It meant that every person destined to die could now come back to life and could live forever.

John was the first to believe. I doubt that he was surprised. He must have thought to himself,

“Of course Jesus rose from the dead!” And then I can picture him throwing back his head in uncontrolled laughter. He was filled with joy. The celebration of Easter beat out the celebration of Palm Sunday ten thousand times.

Your name doesn't need to be Johnson to be counted as a son or a daughter of John. Join in the celebration. Share the laughter. Run to the resurrection. See Easter with eyes of faith. Believe in Jesus, the risen Lord!

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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