

Who's In Charge?

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on John 11:1-45

Delivered on March 29, 2020

When I was growing up, in my parents' house was a large basement. Now, I don't know the dimensions of the basement, but it probably takes thirty steps to walk from one end to the other, and I would guess it's about ten steps to walk across. It is completely underground with no windows or light to the outside world, so if you turn out the lights in the basement, it is pitch black, even in the middle of the day. Now, there is a door at one end of the basement that leads to the upstairs, and at the other end there is a room that I guess you would call a man cave with a pool table, a dart board and a couch, and lots of cool stuff hanging on the wall. Well, one night when I was about fifteen, I decided to head down to this basement room and throw some darts and shoot some pool while my parents were asleep upstairs. Now, I get really descriptive here, because the sequence of my steps is important. I opened the door at one end of the basement, flipped on the light, closed the door behind me, and walked the thirty or so steps to the entrance of the man cave and turned the basement light off. I stayed down there until I got tired and decided to go up to bed, and when I did that I made sure to turn off the light in that room and close the door behind me, because you know, my parents were always getting on my case about leaving lights on. Well, for some reason, I didn't think it was important that after I turned the light to that room off and closed the door behind me, that I turn the basement light on, I must have thought to myself I'll walk the thirty or so steps to the door on the other side of the basement in the dark, what's the big deal?

Well, let me ask you something. Have you ever, have you ever been in a large room with no light and I mean no light, a room that is pitch black. You see I guess before that I had been in

large rooms that had some dim light, just enough light to make out a few shapes and shadows and get my bearings, and of course I have been in small rooms that were pitch black, like when I was a kid playing hide and go seek, I would hide in a bathroom or a clothes closet with the lights off. But I am unable to describe to you what it is like to be in a large, a very large pitch black room. Well, that night, I quickly found out. I took about five or ten steps, and I suddenly realized that I had no idea where I was. Now, I knew I was in the basement and I knew my head was up and my feet were down, but other than that, I knew nothing. Not only did I not know where I was, I didn't even know what direction I was headed. I didn't know whether I was going backward or forwards or left or right. Now, when you find yourself in this situation for about a minute or two, what you find is your pulse gets faster and you start breathing harder, and you start to panic, and when you panic as you probably guessed, you get even less confident about your surroundings. So at long last, after being lost for what seemed like an hour but was probably no more than about ten minutes, I finally decided I had to do what was the absolute last thing I wanted to do and that was to call out for help. So I yelled help, Help. No answer, Help! Help! And all of the sudden to my great embarrassment and borderline humiliation, I saw the light come on, and there stood father, still half asleep and with a confused look on his face, wondering what on earth his son was doing standing in the middle of the basement yelling for help. And naturally I tried to explain myself, but since he was still half asleep, the explanation didn't really erase that utterly confused look from my father's face. Now, maybe some of you who hear my story are sure this would never happen to you. And if that is you, I don't know how to preach this sermon in such a way that I can convince you that it would. But try it sometime if you're skeptical. Try going into a really large, pitch black room,

even a room you think you're familiar with. Go in there with the lights off, with no windows to the outside world, and then come out and tell me that you weren't utterly confused about your surroundings.

It is called spatial disorientation. And spatial disorientation can not only happen to you in a large, pitch black room, but you may even remember a famous case of spatial disorientation that happened in one of the many tragedies that struck the Kennedy family. It happened in the summer of 1999 when John F. Kennedy Jr, the son of the late President was flying his wife and sister in law in a small private aircraft off the Atlantic coast as the three of them headed to a wedding at the Kennedy compound. You see, Kennedy was flying after sunset, and he was probably not aware that when you are flying after sunset over water, everything around you is pitch black, and the experience is every bit as disorienting as what I experienced that night when I was fifteen. Now, had he been a more experienced pilot Kennedy would have known that when you find yourself in such a disorienting state, you rely on your instruments. You rely on your flight instruments to tell you where your aircraft is in relation to your surroundings. But instead of doing that, Kennedy panicked and not knowing which way was up or down, he plunged his aircraft right into the sea. But you see even experienced pilots can panic when everything around them is black. Even experienced pilots can take themselves right into a watery grave when they are disoriented. And so when they are in flight school, what pilots are taught is when your surroundings are disorienting, don't rely on your senses. Don't rely on what you see or what you don't see. Go with your instruments. Go with your instruments.

I have been standing up behind pulpits like this one and preaching now for more than twenty years. (Joke) And in more than two decades of preaching I have never talked for three

Sundays in a row about the same current event. Even after 9-11 happened, I didn't talk about 9-11 for three Sundays in a row. But these are also the most extraordinary times we have lived in for the past twenty years, and in some ways I think they are even more extraordinary than the days immediately following 9-11. And one thing I think we can probably agree on is that for people of faith this is a time that is disorienting. From one of our churches I have talked to two people in the past week who have said to me "Is God really in control of this pandemic, Pastor?" Now only two people have asked me that so far. But every indication we have is that at least in this country the spread of coronavirus and the spread of suffering and death will get worse before it gets better. And so I imagine that soon more and more people will be asking this question. "Is God really in control? Is God really in control?"

And the answer is it all depends on what you believe. It depends on what you place your trust in. If you place your trust in your senses, then the answer is no. If you trust your senses then clearly what is in control during these days is a microscopic organism. But to call it microscopic is not even to do justice to how small the coronavirus is. A virus is so small it cannot be seen by the kinds of microscopes you used in high school science class when you looked at droplets of pond water and you looked at skin cells and all that stuff. It is so small that it can only be seen with an electron microscope, a microscope that is 5000 times more powerful than what you used in high school. So it isn't just microscopic, it is micro-micro-microscopic. And yes, that is a term recognized by the scientific community, micro-micro-microscopic. And yet if you place your trust in your senses then you believe this micro-micro-microscopic organism must be the most powerful force in the universe. After all, it's the thing that is shutting down our economy, confining us all to our homes, and bringing sickness and

death everywhere, everywhere. But as a person of faith, I find that proposition absurd. I find it absurd that there is nothing in this universe that can be more powerful than this tiny organism that can't even be seen using a regular microscope.

In times like these, as people of faith, we don't rely on our senses, we go with our instruments. And for people of faith, our instruments are what we are promised. So what are we promised? What are we promised? In our gospel lesson today we have the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the tomb when he had been dead for four days. Before Lazarus is raised Jesus has a conversation with his friend and the deceased's sister, Martha, and we hear Martha address Jesus saying I know Lord that if you would have been here my brother would not have died. At the beginning of this story we hear that Jesus had gotten word that Lazarus was sick, but he took a long time to get to where Lazarus was, and so Martha says I know if you would have been here, my brother would not have died. Jesus says your brother will rise again. Well, Martha didn't understand Jesus' words and she says I know that my brother will rise again at the resurrection on the last day. No, Martha, no, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, even though he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? Do you believe this even though your brother lies dead in a tomb and not just dead, but dead for four days? I don't know that we can talk about degrees of death, but if there is such a thing as degrees of death Lazarus was not just dead he was very dead. He was way past resuscitation his body was rotting in the tomb. Martha says yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is to come into the world. Now, the rest of the story of course is that we have this dramatic event where Jesus approaches the tomb and calls to Lazarus to come out, and we have something like a scene from the mummy

where Lazarus steps out of the tomb wrapped in strips of linen from head to toe. But the thing to see is that Martha doesn't have this conversation with Jesus after Lazarus is raised from the dead. She doesn't say yes I believe after Lazarus walks out of the tomb, who can't do that. She says it while he is dead in the tomb. She believes Jesus when his talk about being the resurrection is just that, talk. Nothing but words. Nothing but hot air passing over his vocal chords and making sounds. But those words were her instruments. Those words were her instruments to tell her which way was up and down, which way was left and right when the world was disorienting.

The same holds true of us. When the Lord asks Martha do you believe this, his question leaps out from the words on the page of the bible and addresses us where we are. Do we believe the promise that God is in control? Do we trust the instruments even though the world around us at the moment looks pitch black, and the darkness is so disorienting we don't know which way is up? Do we trust our senses or do we trust the instruments? The promises we have are just words, just like they were just words to Martha. For us they aren't even sounds coming from the mouth of the one who makes the promise. For us they are just a group of lines and squiggles on paper. But this set of lines and squiggles on paper is the only thing that stands between us believing that this tiny organism is in control, and believing that the God of the universe is in control. So what do we believe? In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.