

Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

John the Gospel writer tells us that Jesus loved this family – Mary, Martha and Lazarus. His love for them is one of the ways that we know that Jesus was truly human. The Jesus we encounter in John’s gospel can seem other-worldly at times, so it’s important to remember that he loved these folks, he took them as they were, warts and all.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” In other words, “Where are you, God?”

Isn’t this the question that we all have asked at some point. If God is so good, where is God when tragedy strikes? Sickness, accident, suicide. Cancer, Alzheimers, drug addiction. Where were you, God, when the tornado struck, when the planes hit the twin towers, when a drunk driver kills a family? Where are you, Lord, in the poverty and violence, the despair and loneliness, hunger and hopelessness that seem to be part and parcel of so many people’s lives.

John the gospel writer never uses the word “miracle.” John calls the astonishing deeds that Jesus performs, “signs.” There are seven signs in John’s gospel, beginning with changing water into wine at the Cana wedding and building in scope and drama until this final sign at Bethany, raising Lazarus from death. Once again in today’s Gospel, as we have seen in the past few weeks, Jesus uses a sign, this miraculous sign, to bring people to believing. He even says it: “I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.”

What is the nature of this believing? And notice that I am intentionally using the word believing, not belief. In John’s gospel, believe is always a verb, never a noun. Always in John, believing is tied to seeing, hearing and touching – to experiencing Jesus with the

senses. Always in John, believing is tied to making a commitment. Believing is an active verb. Believing in Jesus is an experience, not a state of mind.

In John's gospel, those who come to understand that Jesus is the Word made flesh speak the words, "I believe." We heard these words last week in the story of the man who was born blind. We are told that Jesus disciples *believed* after they saw him change water into wine at Cana. We are told that the official who came to ask Jesus to cure his sick son *believed* the word that Jesus spoke to him, then went home and found that his child was alive. We are told how after her conversation with Jesus at the well, the Samaritan woman's testimony brought many to *believe*.

Throughout the gospel there is a recurring theme – a recurring question: Will people believe in the miracle or will they believe in the man? John contrasts the fickleness of the crowds and the stubbornness of the Jewish leaders with genuine believing that comes to those who can see Jesus for who he really is. Believing is an action verb, an active, living trust.

In today's story the stakes are as high as they get. Lazarus is ill and not expected to live. Mary and Martha send for Jesus, knowing that he has healed others. Once again the disciples misunderstand what Jesus tells them. Even though he knows that Lazarus has already died, he tells them that his friend has fallen asleep. And the disciples take Jesus literally, thinking that if Lazarus is merely asleep, he will wake up on his own. But once again, Jesus operates according to his relationship with God, not according to human expectations.

But when Martha comes to meet him, she has no miracle. Her brother is dead and the one person who could have stopped it arrived too late. So when Jesus asks her whether

she *believes* in him, whether she believes in the life he brings in the face of death, she has a moment of choice, a moment that hangs in the balance. And as she answers him, “Yes, Lord, I believe,” she lets go, she lets herself fall into faith. She speaks the same words that Peter speaks in the other three gospels: “You are the Messiah, the Son of God.” She gives up her need for answers and guarantees and steps forward into the unknown. She allows herself to be swept onto the path of Jesus Christ and her life will never be the same.

Believing is an action verb. So it’s worth taking a few minutes to think about what is it that we are saying when we say the words “I believe...”

When we say that we believe in God the Father, we are saying that God created a physical world of light and dark, cold and hot, animal, vegetable and mineral, earth, air, fire and water. That even though we humans have abused and tried to destroy this fragile planet of ours, God continues to declare all of creation good, worth redeeming.

When we say we believe in God the Son, we say that God loved this world so much that God entered human history as a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. That this Jesus was truly human and truly divine. That he ate bread and drank wine and felt pain when he banged his finger with a hammer. That he laughed and cried and hugged his friends and told parables and performed signs and miracles to show how God works. That he was put to death on a cross for being who he was – Immanuel, God-with-us. That the bonds of death could not hold him, and that he rose from the dead so that we, too, will have life for eternity.

When we say that we believe in God the Holy Spirit, we say that God’s holy breath gives life wherever it blows. The holy breath that blew into that valley in Ezekiel’s vision, bringing life back to a valley full of dead bones, is also the holy breath that Jesus calls to

bring Lazarus back to life. The holy breath that raised Jesus from death on the cross is also the holy breath that touches us in our baptism, that brings us into new life when all the odds are against it. God's holy presence is no further away than the breath in your lungs.

When we say that we believe, we are saying that we are ready for action. God gives us the ability and the words to speak. God gives us a mind to think and hands to serve. God gives us feet to walk in God's own path. God gives each one of us gifts that we never thought we had. When we say that we believe, we are saying that we are ready to be swept onto the path of Jesus Christ himself.

When we say that we believe, we make a commitment. Back in January, this congregation adopted a new purpose statement: "God's purpose for Immanuel Lutheran Church is to *welcome* and *embrace* one another in God's love and to *serve* and *seek justice* for those in need." Over these past four Sundays we have looked more closely at those action verbs: welcome, embrace, serve and seek justice. The sheets of paper that we filled up are taped to the wall of the fellowship hall downstairs. Go and look at them. They are no mere exercise. Everything that we do as a congregation will be our commitment to those verbs. What do we mean when we claim those actions, individually and collectively? What do you do to live out your believing?

The Long family is about to join this congregation by affirming their baptismal promises: to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth? Jay, Kresi and their children are going to make a commitment to this believing community. A commitment to live, hear, share, proclaim, serve and strive. Action verbs.

We are deep in Lent, and we are tired. We are tired of the Lenten disciplines we set for ourselves. We are tired of being beaten down by the news of the day – conflict that never seems to end. Politicians who refuse to work together for the common good. Economic troubles. Killing and violence. Fear, anger and mistrust. We long for Easter, for the chance to sing songs of new life, resurrected life. To feast rather than to fast.

But we do not get to Easter without a death on Good Friday. Believing in Jesus Christ means dying to the old and being raised to the new. Believing in Jesus Christ means facing suffering and death and grief with him, knowing that he shares the most painful and difficult moments of our lives. Believing means seeing Jesus for who he really is, being swept onto his path, being ready for action.

When Jesus says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life,” he speaks God’s very name. “I AM” – it’s a verb in the present tense, the active voice. Resurrection life is a gift that is not just for us at the end of time, but right here and now. We, too, come face to face with Jesus, the one who offers God’s own life, right here and right now. Here in our singing together. Here in our praying together. Here in our sharing of God’s peace with each other. Here at the table, here in the bread and wine, here where Jesus own body is given for you; Jesus’ blood is shed for you. Action verbs. And in our believing, our commitments and our actions, we join Martha and Mary and Lazarus and everyone who has ever been swept onto Jesus’ path. We too, can confess “You are the Messiah, the Son of God.”