

"I Believe... I Think"

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

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First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa

[texts: Exe. 37:12-14/Rom. 8:6-11/Jn. 11:1-45]

What does it mean to believe?

Is it like the story of the boy who went to the riverside revival meeting, "got religion," and decided to get baptized? The preacher led the boy into the water and cried out, "Do you believe?" while plunging the boy under the water. He came up spluttering to hear the preacher ask again, "Do you believe?" and found himself under water for the second time. Again he came up gasping for breath as "Do you believe?" rang out and he went down for the third down. This time he came up for breath and responded, "Oh yes, I believe you're trying to drown me!"

Is it some 'Peter Pan' quality within us that allows us to believe in fairies and thus put a 'kinder, gentler' edge on life?

Is it something we hold on to, simply because we want to hedge our bets for the future? Sort of 'fire insurance' for the afterlife -- if there is one?

Or is it one more way to get a handle on the uncertainties of life; a means by which we reduce the variables of life and death to rote, 'pat' answers; a catechism approach to life with an answer for every question?

The latter approach certainly seems to be the one Martha took at the death of Lazarus her brother. When she went out to greet Jesus, she did so with something of a reprimand: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." She could say that in confidence -- she'd seen Jesus heal the sick, she knew what he could do. Her hope was that something more could be done -- "even now," she says, "I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Given that conventional Jewish wisdom of the time held that the soul hovered near the body for three days hoping for reunion, but the first sign of decay -- thought to occur on the fourth day -- caused the soul to finally depart; this being the fourth day, she had high hopes.

One would think Jesus' response to this reprimand, "Your brother will rise again," might have lifted her spirits. Instead Martha comes back with an almost 'catechism,' rote-memory response: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." What she heard Jesus say touched her in the same way that statement would touch one of us, were we in mourning. She was a pious Pharisee (a believer in the resurrection -- can always separate the Pharisees from the Sadducees that way. The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrections so they were "sad-you-see"). Belief in the

final resurrection was so much a part of her culture that scholars tell us the Palestinian word for "consolation" had acquired the meaning "resurrection." She heard what she *thought* was a pious platitude -- so she responded in kind. One pious platitude deserves another, as it were. Her response was, "I believe. . . I think."

The difference was that Jesus was not speaking in platitudes, but certitudes. His declaration: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die," takes the catechism answer and turns it on its head. At the moment of Jesus' declaration Martha -- and all the world for all time -- are in the presence of life itself. When Our Lord uses this "I am" form, as it is placed throughout John's gospel, he identifies himself with his Father, the Creator. Moses encountered the One who said his name was "I am" in the burning bush and was transformed into a savior of his people. Martha encounters the savior and is transformed into a child of God. In that moment and in the action that follows, Jesus changes what it means to believe. It is not an exercise in platitudes or even in formulating statements of faith, rather it is in a restored relationship with the Author of Life itself. Believing becomes an experience of transforming reality.

Those who see in this story only a foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection on the third day or yet another miracle story pointing to eternal life as an infinite prolongation of human existence as we know it, miss the point. The resurrection is not "pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by-when-you-die." It is a here-and-now reality involving the presence of the Living God in the life of the believer. The experience of resurrection, as Paul notes in the Letter to the Romans, begins in our mortal bodies reanimated by "the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead." It is more a question of the quality of life rather than just its quantity. As one commentator has written, "Rather, [John] conceives it qualitatively, as life no longer held hostage by the fears, anxieties, and desperate ambitions that so often control and, finally, dehumanize us. For this evangelist, eternal life comes in one's 'hearing' Jesus' word and 'believing' the one who sent him (5:24)."¹

Thus, Ezekiel's prophecy of "dry bones" living again, of a people's graves opened and their rising comes to fulfillment in the declaration of Jesus. Those who believe rise from graves of cynicism, rise from being entombed in the hardness of heart, rise from the lack of sensitivity and live. Jesus comes to put flesh on the tattered skeleton of humanity -- stripped clean by selfishness, stripped clean by self-centeredness. Our 'dry bones' live and are made whole through Jesus' example of unselfish love and self giving. The foretaste of the resurrection is the restoration of our

¹Victor Paul Furnish Proclamation 3 'Lent' (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 62-3.

true humanity in Christ. Resurrection begins now -- when we believe. Paul writes, "...if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you." We begin to move away from life as it was to life as it was meant to be -- and can be.

Thus, the belief in the resurrection is not just about what happens to us when life, as we know it, is over. Rather, it is an experience of healing and a recovery of our true selfhood and identity. Augustine saw this aspect very clearly when he preached to his people on this passage from John's gospel back in 416. He declared:

"Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall raise again." This was ambiguous. For he said not, Even now I will raise thy brother; but, "Thy brother shall rise again. Martha saith unto Him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection, at the last day." Of that resurrection I am sure, but uncertain about this. "Jesus saith unto her, "I am the resurrection." Thou sayest, My brother shall rise again at the last day: true; but by Him though whom he shall rise then, can he rise even now, for "I," He says, "am the resurrection and the life." Give ear, brethren, give ear to what He says. Certainly the universal expectation of the bystanders was that Lazarus, one who had been dead four days, would live again; let us hear and rise again. How many are there in this audience who are crushed down under the weighty mass of some sinful habit! Perhaps some are hearing me to whom it may be said, "Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess;" and they say, We cannot. Some others, it may be, are hearing me, who are unclean, and stained with lusts and crimes, and to whom it is said, Refrain from such conduct, that ye perish not; and they reply, We cannot give up our habits. O Lord, raise them again. "I am," He says, "the resurrection and the life." The resurrection *because* the life.²

Take away the quaintness of language and you have a powerful message to what one news journal has called a "culture of victims." Our society seems to be loaded with people who see themselves as violated by their situation. Victims of their upbringing or social status they are no longer responsible for their actions. Such an attitude is a downward spiral, a slippery slope which reduces people to a less than human state. The 'culture of victimage' is a whining, mewling existence, perpetually caught in the 'Family Circus' cartoon where children confronted with "Who broke this?" produce three little "ghosts" named 'I don't know,' 'Nobody,' and 'Not me.' Belief that is real allows us to take responsibility. Through the resurrection we don't have to be victims -- of our self-destructive attitudes or those of others. We can become truly ourselves.

²Augustine Homiles on the Gospel of John trans. John Gibbs and James Innes, vol. VII Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Philip Schaff, ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995). p. 375.

It begins with our response to Jesus' question: "Do you believe this?" The rote answer just doesn't suffice. Believing is more than our mere intellectual assent to a body of theological concepts or formulations. Believing is entering into relationship with the living God and then living it out in the midst of his people; which is how the Puritan divines -- theologians -- explained the covenant each believer "owns" when joining the Church. We are healed and, in turn, expected to be healers by the manner in which we deal with one another.

It would be ludicrous to deny that doubts and questions will arise. It is part of what it means to believe -- more importantly, it is part of what it means to *live*. Yet, the experience of the living God, found through the Spirit and in the living body of believers, will sharpen and refine our response to the doubts and questions we have. Through our doubts, through our questions we will come to believe. Almost like the experience of John Wesley who had come to America to convert the Indians, but wondered who would convert him? Filled with self-doubt, he encountered a Moravian pastor who advised him, "Preach faith until you have it and because you have it you will preach faith." Believe, then, through the doubt and you will have faith. If, like Martha, we come expecting something from Jesus -- we won't be disappointed. Our profession of faith is, then, not something which can be consigned to words alone. It is our living that makes the believing real. It is not the response: "I believe. . . I think," but "I believe . . . I live." "Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world."

So be it. Amen.