

**If You Believe....**  
**November 2, 2008 - All Saints Sunday**

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Isaiah 25:6-9  
John 11:32-44  
Rev. 21:1-6a

There are probably more than a few persons here this morning who could be described as skeptics. These are people who need proof or evidence, cold hard facts or personal experience. It is difficult for skeptics to take another's word about anything. They want to taste, smell, feel, touch, see, experience, first hand. Many of us are like that occasionally, but some folks are like that a lot.

Some of the ways we express that in our language sounds pretty familiar. We say things like:

*"I'll believe it when I see it myself."*

*"Give me proof, then I'll believe you."*

*"Seeing is believing"*

*"You had to have been there and see for yourself, then you would believe me."*

*"I need to see with my own eyes first, then I'll believe you."*

Skeptics can understand the story about Thomas, that we read about in John 20. After the resurrection, when Jesus appeared to the disciples, Thomas was not with them. When the disciples tried to tell him they had seen the Lord, skeptics can understand Thomas' remark, *"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe."*

When Thomas was able to do that, to have proof, evidence firsthand, that was all he needed. He cried out, **"My Lord and my God!"** Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

When I studied the gospel text for today from John 11, the story about the raising of Lazarus, I was struck by verse 40, where Jesus says to Martha at the tomb of Lazarus, *"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"* Apparently Mary and Martha didn't get the message or understand it, when after Jesus received the news

from them that Lazarus was ill, Jesus stated, *"This illness does not lead to death, rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* But here we find in verse 40 that Martha is telling Jesus that Lazarus has been in the tomb for 4 days and certainly there will be a stench! It appears clear to them that Lazarus is dead. Jesus does not tell Mary and Martha, that he understands that they are all deeply saddened that Lazarus is dead, and so he will raise him from the dead. That way they will see and believe, and know God is being glorified through the work of Jesus. This is not a "seeing is believing" story.(at least not at this point with Martha. in verse 45, we do read that the Jews that had come with Mary, after they had seen what had happened, they believed!) But to Martha, Jesus is saying, "believe and then you will see how God is glorified." Remember I said that his illness will not lead to death.

It must have been difficult for Mary and Martha to believe that anything good was going to come out of this. Why did it take Jesus so long to arrive at their village to minister to their brother and his dear friend?

Now there are many interesting parts of the Lazarus story that we could delve into, like....

-the sense of deep love, friendship, intimacy that is evident among Mary, Martha, Lazarus and Jesus. Mary is the one who anointed Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair...a very beautiful, intimate gesture. And when the sisters sent word to Jesus that we read in the early part of the chapter, that Lazarus is sick, they say, *"Lord, he whom you love is ill."* We see these wonderful expressions that help us understand the relationship among these folks. Mary and Martha are very forthright and direct when they confront Jesus with, *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* They are honest, and even assertive as they let Jesus know how they feel.

-the deep level of feeling and emotion of Jesus that we sense in this text. When Jesus sees Mary weeping and the other Jews with her, we read how he was *"greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved,"* or *"groaned in his spirit"* or *"stirred with indignation"* or *"anger swelled up in him"*. And then we read, "Jesus wept".

So we know that this relationship mattered to Jesus and that he had told

them , Lazarus' illness will not lead to death. Yet here they were..at the tomb after Lazarus was apparently dead for 4 days. And Jesus says to Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

How many times do we doubt and miss the real picture of what is happening?

Can skeptics trust God enough to truly believe that God knows the big picture, and they don't have to?

Martha appeared to be dealing with the reality of what was, at least what she was experiencing...that her dear brother got sick, Jesus didn't get to their village in time to do anything about it, Lazarus was now dead and in the tomb for 4 days. Jesus arrives. Skeptics can understand that Martha was dealing with evidence/proof.....a body in a tomb. How could she understand Jesus' earlier statement, "this illness does not lead to death, rather it is for God's glory."?

How difficult it is to believe and trust that God is in control, not us! That God knows and sees the big picture. We all have resisted and gringed at times when well meaning people have said to a person going through a painful situation, facing a crisis, grieving.....things like, well it must have been God's will, and something good will come out of it. Truth is, we don't have the capacity to know what will come out of it, how God will work in the situation. We don't have the big picture and it isn't for us to know.

What I do believe is that sometimes God is calling us to believe and trust first and foremost. Have faith that God is in control and that God sees the big picture. Too often we want to test God. We say, "well, Lord, if you will heal my son, then maybe I can believe in you, or maybe I can find my way back into the faith community." Or "if you help me find a job, Lord, then I know that you care about me." Or " fill in the blank....

(story of Ella May...ready to die, longing for heaven, praying that God would take her..It wasn't happening....she decided she needed to change her perspective and change her prayer. God apparently had something more for her to do, although she didn't know what. But her prayer became, "God , show me")-

Maybe God is saying....

*"If you believe in me, if you trust me, you will see the Life-giver giving Life."*

*"If you believe in me, if you trust me, I will open your eyes to God's activity on earth."*

*"If you believe in me, I will reveal my divine nature as life giver in ways and places that you can't imagine."*

*"If you believe in me, I will open your eyes to new possibilities. You will notice...you will pay attention....you will see God at work....and the 'glory' of God will be revealed...will be made known."*

*"If you believe in me, I will show you the light, the brightness, the sure sign of God's presence on earth."*

Today we remember and celebrate the people in our lives and congregation who believed, endured and kept the faith in difficult and dark times. We remember and give thanks for those who enjoyed many years of good health, lived a long life, enjoyed a productive career. We remember those who were visionaries and stepped out, taking risks, challenging what was, bringing new life and energy into their families, their work, their faith communities. We remember and celebrate those who worked quietly behind the scenes, those who faced special challenges with health or family relationships. We remember and give thanks for all of those who have gone on before us to their eternal reward. They loved us, taught us, challenged us, cared for us, accepted us, modeled for us, what is important.

The song from Zimbabwe says it well,

*If you believe and I believe and we together pray, the Holy Spirit must come down and set God's people free, and set God's people free."*

**Prayer: We thank thee, O God, for the saints of all ages; for those who in times of darkness kept the lamp of faith burning; for the great souls who saw visions of larger truth and dared to declare it; for the multitude of quiet and gracious souls whose presence has purified and sanctified the world; and for those known and loved by us, who have passed from this earthly fellowship into the fuller light of life with thee. Amen (anonymous)**