

5th Sunday in Lent – Year A – April 10, 2011 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
based on John 11 – written by Pastor Paul Horn

Do you believe this? Jesus is both Death and Life.

Have you ever heard some say, “Do you believe this?” It is a simple enough question isn’t it? “Do you believe this?” But sometimes it is not used as a question but it is more of a statement to express anger, disappointment or bewilderment. Can you believe this? The NFL may not have a season next year. Can you believe this? The federal government almost shut down on Friday. Can you believe this? A boy in Maine, born without hands has earned a spot in a national penmanship content. Can you believe this? Libya, Egypt, the Ivory Coast, Yemen, where next? Can you believe this has really happened?

I think that kind of statement might have gone through the mind of a woman from the village of Bethany, which is about 2 miles from Jerusalem. Her name was Martha. Martha and her sister Mary sent word to Jesus that Lazarus, who was their brother, was very sick. **“Lord, the one you love is ill.”**

Now Mary and Martha knew Jesus very well. Whenever he visited Jerusalem he would stay at their house. They literally sat at Jesus’ feet and heard his teachings. Mary was one of the women who poured perfume on his feet and wiped them with her hair. When this illness hit their brother Lazarus, it was natural for them to send a message to Jesus for help.

Jesus was on the other side of Jordan River. It was the place where John the Baptist once preached. Now Jesus was here preaching to the crowds who came out to see him. But Jesus did not leave right away. He stayed for two more days before leaving.

Now back at Bethany, the two sisters and Lazarus waited for Jesus to come to their rescue. Waiting is never easy. I am sure that this wait was especially difficult. Put yourself in Martha and Mary’s sandals. Your loved one is lying ill. Death is hovering over him and may take him any moment. There is a hope for a cure. You’ve seen it before. You had seen Jesus perform hundreds if not thousands of miraculous cures. Jesus will come in time.

We are told that before Jesus arrived, Lazarus died. Many of us, if not most, have felt the pain of the death of a close family member or friend. Death rips at every fiber of our hearts and pumps sorrow throughout us. Now add to this feeling, the pain of knowing that it could have been very different. Where was Jesus? What was taking him? What could have been more important?

I am sure that those very human thoughts were racing through Martha’s mind because she possessed something that you and I have as well: a sinful nature. I can see Martha’s sinful nature behaving like mine: looking for any opportunity to cast me into doubt and despair. I am not alone. Take a look at yourself. How often have you said a prayer but it was not answered the way you asked and so you think God didn’t hear? May you have said “Do you believe this? Where is God when I need him?” How often are we tempted to think God doesn’t know or care what is happening in our lives, especially when you look at what is happening in your life right now; your marriage is in shambles, you have some issues in your family that stress you out, even at your work or at school there are some problems; a loved one is deployed, a loved one has died, you are ill; you’ve tried to share the good news of Christ with someone who is really hurting but they don’t want to hear it, it’s just one thing right after the other, and so the devil is right there moving your sinful nature to blame God. If we are truthful to ourselves, don’t we have to say that there have been times that we sin and doubt God’s goodness and mercy and so we say in disgust, “Do you believe this!”

Now as Martha faced those same temptations, news arrives that Jesus has come. Martha doesn't get Mary, who is at home, but goes out directly to meet Jesus. Nothing was going to get in her way. But what would Martha say to Jesus? Would she be up in his face and say, "I cannot believe that you are four days late for this funeral! Don't you care?" No, she looked to Jesus with a heart that still has hope and faith. **"Lord,"** she says, **"if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."** Even in the face of death, Martha looks to Jesus for help.

What is Jesus' response? He says, **"Your brother will rise again."** Martha knows that on the Last Day all the dead will rise. She heard Jesus teach this truth. It gave her comfort so she says, **"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."**

Now the Apostle John throughout his inspired Gospel records many great 'I am' statements. **"I am the Bread of Life." "I am the Light" "I am the Good Shepherd."** Now here is recorded one of the greatest "I am" statements. He turns to Martha and says, **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."** Then he asks the question to Martha, **"Do you believe this?"**

Some of the Soldiers I serve informed that some of the memos that come down to them from command contain the letters BLUF, which stands for "Bottom Line Up Front." Jesus went right to the bottom line and asked, "Do you believe this? Do you believe that I am both Lord over life and death?" The world then as today would laugh at such a statement. Death – to the world – is always the final victor and there is nothing that anyone can do about it. Is that what Martha believed as well?

Martha shows very clearly that her hope and faith is not in the world but in Jesus. She says, **"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."** What a bold confession of faith! Even in the face of death, her faith does not waver. When the world would say that evidence to the contrary lies in a grave, she trusts Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God.

Look at those two titles that she uses. Christ means *the Anointed One*. Martha confesses that she believes that Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit to live the perfect life God demands of all people – to live without doubt, without anger or fear. Jesus did just that, always putting his trust in his Father. The second term she used was *the Son of God*. Jesus is both true Man and true God. As true man he could die. As true God his death was enough to pay for the sins of all people. Jesus is both Death and Life. He came to die so that we might live in him. Jesus turned to Martha and asked, "Do you believe this?" And she said, "Yes! Lord, I believe!"

The word of Jesus was enough for Martha, but Jesus uses the situation to demonstrate to all that he is indeed the Christ, the Son of God. What he is about to do is not for his benefit. As in all his miracles, he does it to strengthen the faith of the believers and to point them to his Father in heaven. He orders the stone rolled away from Lazarus tomb. Now once a body was placed in the family tomb, it was not opened until there was another funeral. Martha, knowing this and that her brother's body had been decomposing for four days, tries to dissuade Jesus. While Martha believed Jesus to be the Christ, she could not comprehend all that that meant. So Jesus patiently instructs her. **"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"** In other words he is asking Martha again, "Do you believe this?"

They roll the stone away. Jesus calls out in a loud voice: **"Lazarus, come out!"** Do you believe this? Lazarus comes out! With the power of his voice Jesus demonstrates that he is the Christ, the Son of God, in whom there is life.

My friends, do you believe this? This is the question that Jesus asked Martha. It is the question that he asks each one of you today and every day. When you face ridicule for your faith, Jesus asks you, "Do you believe this?" When you face the hardships and sorrows in your life, Jesus comes to you and asks, "Do you believe this?" When your sinful nature, Satan and the sinful society in which you find yourself tempts you with doubt, fear, and anger toward God, Jesus comes and asks you, "Do you believe this? Do you believe that I am the Resurrection and the Life? Do you believe that I am still Lord of Life and Death, in spite of the contrary evidence in your life?"

Thankfully, God has worked into your faith, the same faith he worked in Martha and you can say, **"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."** I believe that you have power over death. I believe that you have power over my life, and I know that you will do what is best for me.

And praise God! He has given you the ability to see in Jesus both Death and Life. Praise God that you see his death as your death to sin. Praise God that through faith Jesus' life is your life to the resurrection of the dead.

Do you believe this? It's what I thought as I read an e-mail I received this week asking me to sign a petition to cancel the showing of a movie in the United States, and if I didn't pass the e-mail on to 10 of my friends I would be called least in the kingdom of heaven. The petition was against a movie entitled *Corpus Christi*, about a gay Jesus and his gay disciples. My first thought was, "Can you believe this?" So I looked it up. Not true. I did, however, find a documentary by the same name, *Corpus Christi*, recently released, that has nothing to do with Jesus' sexual orientation. And I did find a play, written by Terrance McNally, which has been running since 1998 that depicts a gay Jesus. In fact, it showed in a performing arts center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin last month.

Do you believe this? Sure I do. There will always be sinful people who are trying to distort the truth about Christ. What does it cause us to do? The same thing news about war, and death and hardships and sufferings cause us to do. They will send us back to the Word of God, where we will see Jesus for who he really is, both Death and Life, my death to sin, and my life to eternity in heaven.

My friends, next Sunday you will walk through gates of Jerusalem with Jesus. Next Thursday you will recline with him in the Upper Room. You will watch and pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. You will make that awful climb up Mount Calvary. You will run with Peter and John to the empty tomb. And all the while Jesus will be asking you, "Do you believe this?" In faith, with hearts filled with hope and joy, we will say, "Yes Lord, I believe this! Amen!"