***I BELIEVE…***

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Texts: John 11:17-27 and Hebrews 11:1

“*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?*” That was the question Jesus posed to Martha when she met him along the road following her brother Lazarus’ death. Were that question posed to you, how would you respond? Would you answer as Martha did: *“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”*? Or would you respond with something else? Do you believe? And if so, ***what*** do you believe?

Martha’s bold affirmation expressed faith in who Jesus was – not just a teacher, healer, and prophet – but the Son of God, the long-promised Messiah. Did Martha fully grasp what that meant – for Jesus to be the Son of God and Messiah? We don’t really know, though it is doubtful, but we do know that she trusted Jesus and did not hesitate to express her belief in him in those words pregnant with theological meaning: *Christ, Son of God, Lord*. Across the centuries Christians have followed Martha’s example in articulating their faith in their own words in a variety of ways. In the early church, the fundamental affirmation of faith was simply: *Jesus is Lord*. That may not sound like much, and it would certainly shorten our worship services if we were to make that statement our weekly affirmation of faith after the sermon: *Jesus is Lord! Amen.* But those three words were a bold declaration of faith in a time when Caesar claimed to be Lord alone. To say “Jesus is Lord” was to reject the lordship of Caesar and to embrace Jesus as the promised Messiah sent by the Lord God Almighty.

Subsequent generations expanded their affirmations to reflect broader understandings of faith in light of the challenges and questions they faced in the times in which they lived. Our Presbyterian tradition is a confessional tradition that embraces the essential tenets of those expressions of faith across the years while being open to new expressions of faith that reflect new understandings or priorities in an ever-changing world. In so doing we gain new insights into our faith and new perspectives on God and God’s purpose for our lives. No one affirmation of faith is wholly adequate, for we can never fully articulate what we believe. But we can try to express our faith and to learn from the expressions of faith of generations who precede us. Each week we do just that in response to the Word proclaimed by together affirming our faith in the words of confessions that have been written by our ancestors in faith in other times – The Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Brief Statement of Faith, the Confession of 1967, or today, The Heidelberg Catechism. The words we repeat are chosen from the twelve confessions of faith that are part of our Presbyterian constitution – The Book of Confessions.

This summer, Rachel and I hope to explore those confessions in a sermon series entitled: I BELIEVE. The purpose is in part to provide some context for you for those affirmations of faith that are part of our weekly worship. More importantly, we hope to provoke some reflection on your part about what **you** believe, what doubts and questions you have, and what is important to you about the faith you hold. There will be no test at the end of the summer to assess what you have learned or to identify which confessions you like best or least. There is, however, an invitation to you to do what our confirmands do and what our elders do as part of their elder training – to write out or write down or mull over how you might answer that question posed by Jesus: Do you believe? And if so, **what** do you believe and how might you express that belief?

Stanley Hauerwas tells of a team of evangelical Christians who once invaded Shipshewana, IN to bring the lost souls of Shipshewana to Christ. In front of Yoder’s dry goods store one of these earnest young men confronted a Mennonite farmer with the challenge, “Brother, are you saved?” The farmer was taken aback by the question. All his years of attending the Peach Bloom Mennonite congregation had not prepared him for such a profound question. After a long pause in which the farmer carefully considered his answer, he asked his questioner for a pencil and paper and proceeded to list the names of ten people he believed knew him well. Most, he explained, were his friends, but some were less than that and some might even be considered enemies. “Ask these folks on the list if they think I am saved,” said the farmer, “for I would not presume to answer that question on my own behalf.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Were we to ask ten of your friends and acquaintances about your beliefs - whether you were a Christian and if so, what you believed – what might they say? Would anyone know? Do your life and day-to-day living reflect the beliefs you claim to hold, or are they at odds with them? Is your faith foundational for the choices you make and the priorities you set, or do you segregate your beliefs from the rest of your life and reserve them just for this hour each week? Would anyone know what you believe from the way you live and talk and treat others?

As many of you have heard me say before, faith is not believing that someone could push a wheelbarrow across a tightrope stretched across the Grand Canyon. Faith is getting in the wheelbarrow! It is not just believing with your mind, but trusting with your heart. It is acting on your beliefs; it is trusting as true what you say you believe and ordering your life accordingly. Faith is not something static; it is something that grows and morphs over time as we confront new challenges, glean new insights, wrestle with persistent doubts, and make decisions about how we will live and what we will do day to day.

In his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg offers insight as to how the meaning of faith grew for him. He writes:

*For those of us who grew up in the church, believing in Jesus was important. For me, what that phrase used to mean, in my childhood and into my early adulthood, was “believing things* ***about*** *Jesus.” To believe in Jesus meant to believe what the gospels and the church said about Jesus. That was easy when I was a child, and became more and more difficult as I grew older.*

*But now I see that believing in Jesus can (and does) mean something very different from that. The change is pointed to by the root meaning of the word* ***believe****. Believe did not originally mean believing a set of doctrines or teachings; in both Greek and Latin its roots mean “to give one’s heart to.” The “heart” is the self at its deepest level. Believing, therefore, does not consist of giving one’s mental assent to something, but involves a much deeper level of one’s self. Believing in Jesus does not mean believing doctrines about him. Rather, it means to give one’s heart, one’s self at its deepest level, to the post-Easter Jesus who is the living Lord, the side of God turned toward us, the face of God, the Lord who is also the Spirit.*”*[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Which brings us back to that question posed by Jesus: Do you believe? Do you really believe, not just with your head but with your heart, with your life?

Martha was willing to boldly say what others had been hesitant to say to and about Jesus: “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” Is that what you believe? If so, what difference does it make in your life? If not, is it because you believe something else or because you simply have not considered what that might mean for your life and your living? To put it in terms of the question posed to that Mennonite farmer in Shipshewana, IN: Do you believe you are saved, and if so, what difference does that make for you and your living among all your neighbors day to day?

We are people of faith who profess belief in Jesus as Lord as did those first Christians. We are heirs to a tradition that declares Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God who came into the world, as Martha did. We are disciples who profess to trust and follow the risen Christ by loving God with all that we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves as he commanded. Our challenge, our task, our opportunity is to translate our trust in that truth into our living so that friends and neighbors and total strangers will know what we believe, not because we tell them, but because we show them in our lives day after day after day. In the words of that familiar song, “They will know we are Christians by our love.” And that, my friends, may be the greatest profession of faith we can offer! Amen

1. Stanley Hauerwas in *How My Mind Has Changed*, ed. By James M. Wall & David Heim, Eerdmans, 1991 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p.137 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)