Blessed are Those who have not Seen and Yet have Believed
Hebrews 11:1-16
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 11, 2013
Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

There were these people living under the Roman Empire. They got themselves together in small
groups in every city in the empire. They tried to get together on Sundays, but they got together on other
days as well. They sang praises to this guy named Jesus. They ate His body and drank His blood. They
listened to readings from documents that they believed were the words of Jesus and the message of Jesus.

They did these things every Sunday in spite of the fact that it was illegal to do so. They did these
things in spite of the fact that if the Roman authority caught them doing it, the authority would drag
them to the arena and throw them to the lions or have them put to death by crucifixion or beheading or
have them imprisoned until they died of starvation or leprosy.

Why would these people risk all of that in order to keep on eating the body and drinking the
blood of the Lord? Why would these people risk their lives in order to keep listening to the message of
Jesus? Why would these people risk depriving their families of themselves, husbands risking depriving
their wife of a spouse, parents risking depriving their children of care and livelihood, why would they do
that in order to sing the praises of Jesus?

They did that because they actually believed in Jesus.
They considered that Jesus was faithful. They considered that when Jesus made a promise it was
reliable. They had faith. They had faith in Jesus. They knew that they had an eternal city whose craftsman
and builder was God.

If they had not believed these things they would not have suffered so. They would not have
given their lives. But they did give their lives. They had faith in Jesus. They gave their lives by faith.

There were these people who discovered the Bible. The Bible had been lost for many years. It was
left untranslated into the language of the people. Because of this lack of translation even when the Bible
was read no one could understand it. People did not have the education to learn to understand it. They
did not have the education to translate it into something that they could understand. Almost none of
them had any desire to do so. They had other things on their minds like raising a family and keeping
them warm and fed.

In the midst of this there were a few people who discovered the Bible. They read it in its original
language. They realized what it said. They realized that what it said disagreed with what religious
leaders were saying at the time. They realized that if anyone was going to hear the truth about Jesus it
was going to be them that would have to tell them.

They began to tell a few people at first, but then more and more people found out about it. More
and more people found about what the Bible said. More and more people found out what the Bible
actually had to say about Jesus. They found out about His grace and His mercy. They found out about
His atonement. They found out that Jesus forgives you freely for the sake of His death and resurrection.
They found out that Jesus promised eternal life because of His death and resurrection. Jesus did this
without demanding that you do anything for Him first. They found out that this was called grace.

The religious leaders at the time were opposed to this idea. They taught that you had to work
your way into heaven. They taught that you had to be good in order to inherit eternal life. They taught
that you had to give to the poor and live in self denial and watch over orphans and widows in their
tribulation. They taught that you had to fast and to give to the Church in order to motivate Jesus to give you eternal life.

They used these doctrines in order to enslave people. They used this idea that you have to work your way into heaven in order to tell people to do things that they wanted them to do, but to tell them they were doing it to earn eternal life from Jesus. Nations were manipulated in this way. The people who taught these things obtained all kinds of power and then by telling people that they could simply pay money in place of good works, they obtained all kinds of wealth as well.

These new people who had discovered what the Bible said were a threat to them. If these people who had discovered the Bible and what it said about the grace of Jesus began telling people that Jesus had already given them eternal life and that they did not need to do anything in order to earn it, then these religious people would lose their hold on the people. They would lose their wealth and their power. They needed to bring these people who had discovered the grace of God in the Bible to a stop.

The people who discovered the grace of God in the Bible soon found that the people in charge of things opposed them. The people who had discovered the grace of Jesus in His death and resurrection soon found their writings being burned and their lives threatened.

The pope excommunicated Luther which was his public declaration that Luther was going to hell. The emperor put Luther under the ban which meant that any authority that knew of Luther’s whereabouts was to hand Luther over to the emperor so that Luther could be put to death. They never got Luther, but a number of his friends died. They died because they believed in the grace that Jesus delivered. They believed that the death and resurrection of Jesus forgave them of their sins and gave them everlasting life. Knowing that they had His grace and everlasting life, they knew that death was nothing. It would be overcome by Jesus.

And by so risking their lives, they condemned the unbelieving world.

There were these people once who believed that they were eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus in the Sacrament of the Altar. Even though these people could not produce any physical evidence that they were eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus, they continued to believe it. Even though they themselves could not see that they were eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus they continued to believe it. They believed it because Jesus said it was His body and it was His blood. They believed in Jesus.

The country that these people lived in did not believe this. In fact the government opposed this idea. The government believed that the Sacrament of the Altar was nothing more than a symbolic meal with bread and wine and nothing else.

You would have thought that the government would not have cared whether or not a bunch of people in its country believed in the body and blood of Jesus in the Sacrament of the Altar, but they did. They could not stand these people who lived in their country and continued to believe that they were eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus.

As a result of this suspicion the government began to spy on them. In response to such spying the people who believed that they were drinking the body and blood of Jesus began to hold secret meetings. That way they would not face governmental interference for their beliefs. The government became even more suspicious of these secret meetings. The government arrested the people who believed that they were drinking the body and the blood of Jesus in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Eventually these people decided to leave their country. They left their homeland. They left those portions of their families who chose to remain behind. They got on boats and set sail for another country where they could eat the body of the Lord and drink the blood of the Lord without facing governmental
interference. On the way to this new country one of their boats sank and all on board died. When they got to the new country they faced ridicule from other groups who did not share their beliefs, but at least they did not face suspicions and arrests from the government.

These people continue to stubbornly cling to the belief that they are eating the body and drinking the blood of the Lord. They also continue to stubbornly believe that God made the world out of nothing so that the things that are seen did not come from anything that is invisible. After all faith is the conviction of things not seen. The creation was not seen. The body and blood of Jesus are not seen. Faith is the substance of things that are not seen.

These people continue to resist a culture around it that either wants them to return to paganism or change their form of Christianity into something that is more works and performance oriented rather than focused on Jesus Christ. They face a world that continues to tempt them away from Jesus with subtle and cunning guile. They face a world that offers them a form of Christianity that has little to do with Jesus and hardly ever mentions Jesus leaving people with nothing other than their own good deeds to comfort them in the face of their sins. And yet that form of Christianity is much better than the alternative that the rampant paganism offers.

If the founders of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod had not resisted to the point of risking arrest and some of them died and going to a new land to live a new life and more of them died that first winter in the United States then the words of Jesus would not have been preserved for us in the way that they were.

And why risk so much? Why leave a homeland and make a new life somewhere else? Because they knew that their homeland was a heavenly one and that no homeland on this earth could replace it. They knew that everything that is of the earth is transitory and that only what Jesus promises is permanent.

None of these people received the promise in full. They only saw it from afar.

The early Christians did not receive their promised eternal life when they gave their lives in martyrdom. They saw it from afar trusting in the one who had promised it.

The Reformers did not receive their promised renewed Church in glory. The Church continues to struggle against false teachers who seek to drag people away from the Word of God. In fact the false preachers far outnumber the true ones. But nevertheless they looked forward to the day when the Church would rise from the dead and see her Lord and all controversy would be brought to an end.

The founders of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod did not receive their promise either. And even over 150 years later our church body has not received what her Lord has promised it. We view our heavenly homeland from afar knowing that when it comes our faith in Jesus and in His sacraments will be vindicated.

And these groups find themselves in good company with Abel, Noah, Enoch, Abraham and Sarah.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.