Hearing is Believing
John 4:43-54

On June 30, 1859, a crowd of some 25,000 people gathered on the American and Canadian sides of Niagara Falls to behold a spectacle. The French acrobat Jean François Gravelet, better known as Monsieur Charles Blondin, was going to walk across Niagara Falls on a tightrope, 1300 feet long, and not even an inch wide, that had been tied around a tree on one side, and a rock on the other.

“There were hundreds of people examining the rope,” reported one witness, “and, with scarcely an exception, they all declared the inability of Monsieur Blondin to perform the feat, the incapacity of the rope to sustain him, and that he deserved to be dashed to atoms for his desperate fool-hardiness.”

No one believed Blondin could do it. But then he stepped out onto the rope and walked across, the crowds clamoring – and some fainting – on either side. He crossed back with a large camera strapped to his back, pausing to snap a picture of the American crowd. The crowd was astonished. Some condemned him for such recklessness. Some applauded his daring. Some refused to believe it had actually happened.

But Blondin came back to the falls a week later, and this time he walked to the Canadian side without his balancing pole. On the journey back he walked across blindfolded.

He returned again on July 15 – as did the crowds – who watched as Blondin walked to Canada backward and then made the return trip while pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with 350 pounds of cement.

When he and his wheelbarrow touched American soil, he asked the cheering crowd, “Do you think I can push a man across in this wheelbarrow?” The people applauded exhuberantly. Having seen his other feats, they had no doubt about this one.

Blondin then approached one man who was clapping and whistling and asked him, “Sir, do you think I could safely carry *you* across in this wheelbarrow?”

“Yes, of course,” replied the man enthusiastically.

“Then get in!” said Blondin.

The man did not get in. No one got in Blondin’s wheelbarrow.

You can say that you believe in someone, or something, but when the rubber hits the road…it’s actions that prove the extent of your faith. In this case, even though this man had seen Blondin perform extraordinary feats, seeing didn’t lead to a believing that was deep enough to prompt action.

The question of belief is at the heart of our passage today, specifically the relationship between belief and action, and what it is that we believe *in.*

Like the first miracle we looked at, this one takes place in Cana. But Jesus hasn’t stayed in Cana since the wedding. So what’s happened in the meantime?

Well, as we said last week, after the wedding in Cana, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Passover. Here he clears the temple courts and performs a number of miracles that are witnessed by the crowds who are also gathered for the festival. John tells us that upon seeing these

signs, the people believed in Jesus. Also in Jerusalem, he has a conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus in which he tells Nicodemus that in order to see the kingdom of God, he must accept the testimony of Jesus, the words Jesus says, and so be born again.

After this Jesus and his disciples go out into the Judean countryside where John the Baptist testifies about who Jesus is, using very similar words to those Jesus used with Nicodemus. “The one who comes from heaven,” says John, “is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.”

Notice how in both John’s testimony and Jesus’ words to Nicodemus the emphasis is on the words of Jesus. There’s nothing in here about seeing Jesus’ miraculous deeds and so believing – what is required is that the people hear Jesus, listen to Jesus, and believe in Jesus – believe in “The Word” made flesh.

Well, the Pharisees don’t believe in Jesus, and they’re hearing is that he’s gaining quite a following, which troubles the Pharisees. So Jesus and his disciples return to Galilee, passing through Samaria on their way. Samaritans were a group closely related to the Jews, but who had split off centuries prior over some theological disagreements. Jesus stops at a well and has his famous conversation with a Samaritan woman, telling her that he is the living water and that he is the Messiah. The woman believes him, and gathers a crowd who convince Jesus to stay with them for two days. John writes, “Because of his words many more became believers.” Again – note the emphasis on *words.*

After these two days in Samaria Jesus arrives back in Galilee, and he returns to Cana. This is where our story picks up.

There's a royal official whose son is sick. We don't know much about this royal official. It's likely that the royal he serves is King Herod. Luke and Matthew tell a similar story in which the official is a centurion, which would make him a Roman, but there's nothing to suggest in John's gospel that he isn't a Jew. Whatever the case, he is, first and foremost, a father, and his son is deathly ill. So when he hears that Jesus, this miracle worker, has arrived in Cana, he makes the forty kilometer journey to see if the rumors about this Jesus fellow are true.

When he finds Jesus, there's just one thing he asks. "Please, sir, come and heal my son, who is close to death."

I imagine that on the nine-hour journey from Capernaum to Cana the official ran over this scene over and over, imagining how it might play out. Best case scenario, Jesus says, "Of course. Lead me to him." Worst case scenario, Jesus says, "I'm sorry, I can't help you."

I don't think he expected the response he actually got.

"Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe."

Wh…what?

This response feels strikingly similar to the reaction Mary got when she told Jesus the wine had run out at the wedding. And it's a bit more abrupt and a bit more rude than we'd expect. So…what's going on here?

Well, as we've seen, a key theme for John is the idea of belief in Jesus on the basis of his word. This is actually the only time in John's gospel

that the word “wonders” is used to describe some miraculous event. And he uses it unfavorably, because, says theologian Raymond Brown, wonders – miraculous, spectacular events – can blind the eye to the miracle’s ability to reveal who Jesus is. Unless people also *hear* Jesus – unless they pay attention to his testimony, the miracle remains just a really cool event, but doesn’t lead people into further relationship, into a deeper belief in Jesus as the Son of God.

The official here represents the Galileans. John has already told us that the Galileans had welcomed Jesus because they had seen everything he had done in Jerusalem during Passover. Now we know that that’s not a positive thing. John is starkly contrasting the Galileans with the Samaritans, who believed in Jesus because they heard his words. And John – and Jesus – are unapologetic in stating that the Samaritans get it, in a way the Galileans do not.

No matter that the official has been rebuffed by Jesus – he persists. His son is sick and he’ll put his pride to the side. He continues to beg Jesus – “come down to Capernaum before my child dies.”

Jesus still doesn’t give the man what he wants. He doesn’t say, “Okay, lead the way.” He doesn’t go with the official. He simply says, “Go, your son will live.”

And I think the next line is the crux of this passage. “The man took Jesus at his word and departed.” This is an incredible act of faith. The man simply trusted that Jesus’ words were true and set off again on the nine-hour trek back home. He didn’t insist that Jesus come with him so he could personally witness Jesus healing his son – he believed that Jesus’ word was enough.

Well he's not yet back yet when some of his servants meet him on the road, gasping out the news that his son is alive and well. The official asks what time this change took place, and he realizes it was at exactly the time when Jesus told him his son would live, at one in the afternoon, which, incidentally, with the Jewish clock starting at 6am, was the seventh hour. At the seventh hour – seven being a number that marks completion and wholeness - the boy lived. So this official, and his whole household, believed.

Notice that we never actually see a reunion between father and son. John doesn't tell us that the official waited to confirm things until he'd seen them with his own eyes. He believed the word of Jesus and now the testimony of his servants and that's enough for him. He moved on faith – faith that Jesus' words were true, faith that Jesus had the power to heal his son, faith that by speaking, Jesus had acted, faith that by speaking a word, Jesus had made life happen.

"Now faith," says the writer of Hebrews, "is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

How often are we called to move in faith? To move forward without any real certainty, without a visible sign that everything's going to turn out okay, without seeing or knowing how God is going to move in our midst, but trusting that he is, trusting that his words are true, trusting that he hears and answers our prayers…even if we have a journey to walk before we discover how?

A few months ago, Pastor Tom preached about liminal space – that time in between leaving one place and reaching another, no longer able to remain in one place, but unsure about what lies ahead. For the official, that nine-hour walk was a liminal space. It must have been

excruciating…just plodding forward through all the questions and uncertainties and hopes and fears, needing to move forward, but not knowing what would await him when he got there.

But that in-between time can be much longer than nine hours. It can be months, even years, between us asking God for something, and then seeing how he answers those prayers, how he brings that particular journey to a close.

Which is why our faith can't rely on sight alone. We can't just wait to see Jesus, to see something miraculous, to see the end result. We have to listen to what Jesus has said. We have to hear his promises, here everything he's told us about who he is and what he's about. It is those promises that keep us going, that keep us steady, that keep us putting one foot in front of the other, when what we see seems dark or hopeless.

Jesus could have gone to Capernaum and healed the official's son. But then the official would have believed only in the wonder. Jesus wants the man to stake his faith on Jesus himself. Because faith in Jesus leads to something more than what the man thought he wanted – it leads to salvation, to the one who brings life now, and forevermore.

You know, no one ever got in Blondin's wheelbarrow. But later that summer, a perhaps even more astonishing feat took place. Blondin crossed Niagara Falls again, this time with his manager, Harry Colcord, on his back.

As they set out on that tightrope, Blondin said to his manager, who was staring down at the abyss, "Look up, Harry…you are no longer Colcord, you are Blondin. Until I clear this place be a part of me, mind, body, and

soul. If I sway, sway with me. Do not attempt to do any balancing yourself. If you do, we will both go to our death."

Be a part of me…and trust me. Trust me to hold us both.

That is the invitation Jesus extends to us. Come find relationship with me, trust in *me*…and I will hold you fast. I will carry you along this journey, over the abyss that seems so frightening. Hold fast to me, look straight ahead, and listen to my voice. Take me at my word. It's enough.

Would you pray with me?