

Today we are going to confirm four young people and baptize one of them. How blessed are we? Confirmation is our way of allowing those who were baptized as small children who couldn't speak for themselves to now do so. Some churches delay baptism until children are old enough to speak for themselves, but Presbyterians allow small children to be baptized as a way of affirming that long before we choose God, God has already chosen us. This is what grace means: God names us as beloved even before we express our faith in God. God loves us not because we believe all the right things or behave in a certain way but simply because God is gracious and loving. That's who God is and that's what grace does. Now, our response to that grace is to live a life of gratitude. The entire Christian life of faith is simply saying thank you to God for what God's already done. While God's grace always comes first, our response of gratitude has enormous significance in our lives, which is why confirmation matters. Today, these four young people are responding to God's grace in their own words. And that's an important step in the life of faith, but of course it's just that—a step, not a destination.

I vividly remember my confirmation. I was in eighth grade, and the day before our Confirmation service, our youth group was doing something, somewhere. I don't remember where, but I do remember lifting myself to see what was on the roof of this outdoor shed. It turned out there was a wasp's nest up there, and one stung my lip. So, my confirmation pictures have me with a big swollen lip. That was memorable to say the least, but this week I was thinking of all the things that I was sure were true when I was confirmed. In addition to the four questions I'll ask the Confirmands in a few minutes about who is their Lord and Savior, there was a whole host of other things I was certain about at the time.

Here's a sample: I was certain that God wrote the Bible, which means it was accurate in every claim it made, historic, scientific, or otherwise. I was certain the earth was only 10,000 years old, and that Noah's flood is what killed off the dinosaurs. I was certain that people of other faiths were destined for eternal punishment by the God of love. I could go on, but I'll stop there. And, I'll say what you're probably thinking, "Yikes." Thankfully, I didn't teach any of those things to our Confirmands, did I? I don't share those things with you to make fun of who I was then or of people who believe such things today, because like it or not, lots of people believe exactly as I did when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I share these things with you as an example of what I am calling the sin of certainty, and the antidote to the sin of certainty is the gift of doubt.

Today we remember the story of Thomas the Apostle. What other name have you heard Thomas referred to as? That's right, Doubting Thomas. How many of you have heard the phrase, "Don't be a doubting Thomas!" In fact, we may think that's exactly Jesus' point. When he says to Thomas, "Happy are those who don't see and yet believe," we may think Jesus is shaming Thomas for not believing sooner and praising those who are able to uncritically believe in him. Is Jesus saying that happiness comes through fervent religious faith that is void of critical thinking? I sure hope not. If we make the moral of this story that doubt is a sin, then we are missing the point entirely.

On the evening of Easter Sunday, Jesus appears to the disciples and speaks peace to them, and they are overjoyed. But there's a problem. Thomas wasn't there, and when they tell him what happened, he doesn't believe them. He says: "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe." Can you blame him? Belief isn't something you can simply turn on or off, is it? If I told you that the sun revolves around the earth and that two plus two equals three, you couldn't that if you

wanted to. Why? Because our beliefs are formed by our own experiences and through networks of trust. When we are asked to believe something extraordinary, it's reasonable to require extraordinary evidence. All Thomas asks for is to be given the same experience his friends were, which seems reasonable to me.

You know who else thought it was reasonable? Jesus, because a week later he appears again and gives Thomas exactly what he asked for. Once again, Jesus speaks words of peace, and he invites Thomas to touch his wounds and says to him, "No more disbelief. Believe." It's only after giving Thomas this extraordinary gift that Jesus tells him it's now time to believe, which also seems perfectly reasonable, doesn't it? Had Thomas persisted in his unbelief after seeing the risen Christ, then we might say he was wrong for doubting, but that's not what happens. Upon seeing Jesus with his own eyes, Thomas utters the strongest statement of faith in all four Gospels. He says, "My Lord and my God!" Upon experiencing of the risen Christ, Thomas changes his mind. Christ responds to Thomas' doubt not with condemnation but with grace, and grace is what we all need. Doubt it turns out isn't the opposite of faith. The opposite of faith is certainty.

In Peter Enns' book, *The Sin of Certainty*, he writes, "Doubt is sacred. Doubt is God's instrument, will arrive in God's time, and will come from unexpected places—places out of your control. And when it does, resist the fight-or-flight impulse. Pass through it—patiently, honestly, and courageously for however long it takes. True transformation takes time." I'm so glad that my faith has transformed since my confirmation. So many of the things I was certain of then, I came to doubt, and that doubt was not a stumbling block to my faith but a gift from God. God is always bigger than our thoughts about God, and if there's one thing I'm certain of in my faith now, it's that God is more gracious to us than we've dare to imagine. The God who is takes us as we are, exactly as we are, with all our naivety and our doubts, our certainties and our sins. God comes to us as we are, even to those of us who've abandoned and betrayed, and speaks words of peace and forgiveness. That's a God worth believing in.

As part of our Confirmation program, I asked our Confirmands to write their own statement of faith, knowing that their faith will change over time. I want to read a portion of each one to you. Adrienne Wise writes, "I believe in God. I believe in a God that created all life. A God that created oceans, mountains, stars, my dog, and my best friends. A God who is warm and is open and forgives everyone. A God where every single person is worthy of His love." Kate Dougherty writes, "I believe that God's love is limitless and that we are all God's children. I believe that Jesus Christ is God's son who inhabited the earth and suffered for us. Jesus's suffering was to free us of our sins and to prove God's endless love." Matthew Lederer writes, "The bible says that if you live by God's teaching you may go to heaven and live comfortably in the afterlife, but his teachings aren't just preparing you for an afterlife, they're leading you to a happy fulfilling life on earth also, so for me, regardless of whether I can prove or disprove whether God is real or not, if I choose to live by Gods teachings and devoting myself to live as a Christian I will go through life with joy and hopefully spreading that joy to other people." Ethan Coakley writes, "In the beginning of the class my goal was to not disappoint my peers, but after the class has ended and thinking about it I realized this is something that I want to believe... Everything I want to say can be said in this word 'Yes'. Yes, I want to follow the will of Christ and spread love. Yes, I want to devote myself to the church's teachings. Yes to it all and my Lord and Savior is Jesus Christ."

Pretty amazing young people we have here today, don't we? To those of you who are being confirmed today, may your faith continue to grow and develop. May God grant you the gift of doubt so that you might discover that God is always bigger than your thoughts about God. May you know God's peace and forgiveness, and above all, may you know that no matter what you believe or do, you are chosen and loved by God, both now and forever more. Amen.