

"Confirmed in Christ"

John 20:19-31

April 27, 2014

2nd Sunday of Easter (Confirmation Day)

Today is the 2nd Sunday of Easter in the Christian Church. It is also Confirmation Sunday in this congregation. These two events share some similarity. We have one confirmand. Our Gospel reading for today mentions one of the first confirmands. The faith journey of confirmands today may parallel the faith journey of Thomas, the confirmand of the Gospel today.

Thomas had been undergoing instruction for the better part of three years. His teacher (or rabbi) was more than just a pastor. He received his instruction from the Son of God, Jesus Christ. We read about this time of instruction in the Gospels and see some remarkable similarities with confirmation instruction today. Jesus taught about the Law – the 10 Commandments. Jesus taught about who He is; who the Father is; and who the Holy Spirit is. Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer in response to His disciples' request to be taught about prayer. Jesus taught His disciples about baptism and the disciples were present when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. Jesus teaches about the Office of the Keys in our text for today. We could say (very anachronistically Thomas got a very thorough confirmation education.

There were pop quizzes ("Who do men say that I am? But who do YOU say that I am?") and a final exam that took the disciples from the upper room to the Garden of Gethsemane, the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest, the hall of Pontius Pilate, and the hill of Golgotha.

Shortly after confirmation was over – after Jesus died on the cross, Thomas dropped out of the group. Why? The Bible never says. Maybe Thomas was afraid of what might happen to him if He continued to believe in Jesus and confess his faith. Maybe Thomas was disappointed and disillusioned. Things hadn't turned out like he thought they should have. There wasn't that "spiritual high" which he had expected after being instructed by Jesus. Or, perhaps, Thomas simply stopped believing what he had been taught.

On the evening of the first Easter, we read about Jesus appearing alive to the gathered group of disciples. This was no ghost. This was no mass hallucination. This was no case of mistaken identity. This was the flesh and blood, alive and breathing, Jesus of Nazareth, son of God and Mary's son who had been crucified three days earlier.

Thomas wasn't with the group that night. He had dropped out, remember? When the other disciples told him what they saw, He refused to believe them. He skeptically demanded proof. If he didn't see the mark of the nails in Jesus' hands and touch them and if he didn't place his hand into Jesus' pierced side, he would not, under any circumstance, believe.

The next week, the disciples were gathered together. Thomas had dropped in to visit his old confirmation class. Jesus appears again. Jesus invites Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Jesus is very blunt to Thomas here. Jesus offers him everything he demanded and then says, "Do not disbelieve." This would better be translated, "Stop disbelieving." Thomas may have had a long time of instruction by the best instructor ever, but he had become an unbeliever in a very short time.

But that soon changes. And it's not because of the miraculous signs Thomas demanded. The text doesn't say that Thomas ever touched Jesus' hands or side. What changed Thomas was the word of Christ and His real presence with him. By the Word of Christ and Christ's presence there, Thomas is able to make one of the strongest and clearest confessions of faith ever: "My Lord and my God!"

There is no record that Thomas ever dropped out of the group – ever quit going to church – again. Although he took no confirmation vows like you, Becca, will, he did fulfill one that you will be asked about continuing steadfast in the faith and suffering all even death, rather than falling away from it. Tradition says that Thomas took the Gospel to India where he was killed for preaching that Gospel by having a spear run through him. Through all of that, Thomas was strengthened and sustained by the Word of the Lord and by the presence of the Lord.

Becca, what does Thomas have to do with you? What does he have to do with all those out there who have taken the same confirmation vows you will take today or those who will take those vows some day in the future?

Becca, you have undergone instruction like Thomas - for two years instead of three. You had a teacher who was slightly less than Thomas' teacher – all right a whole LOT less – me instead of Jesus. You learned the same things as Thomas learned: the 10 Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Office of the Keys and the Lord's Supper.

Shortly after confirmation is over, you will face the temptation that Thomas gave in to and which many new confirmands give in to: to drop out of the group, Church. Some may do it because they are afraid of what it will cost them to faithfully follow Jesus. Some may be disappointed and disillusioned. After two years of instruction and a day of celebration today, it may no longer be all that exciting. Or, some may be like Thomas who go from being a believer to being an unbeliever in just one week.

This is all sin rearing its ugly head for you and all confirmands by tempting you to abandon all that you have learned to confess and all you have learned to do. You or someone else may be like Thomas and demand some miraculous show of God's power or you won't believe, won't confess, or what do what you have learned.

Now it is true that miraculous manifestations of God's power sometimes point people to faith or, like on that first Easter evening, confirm people in their faith. However, God doesn't always work that way. God often works through ordinary means to bring people to faith and to confirm them in their faith. That is what He has done for you, Becca. It is what He has done for every confirmand who has had a confirmation day in this church.

God has made us His children through Holy Baptism. Through ordinary water and the extraordinary power of the Word of God He washed us clean from our sin, gave us the gift of the Holy

Spirit, and created faith in our hearts to receive the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation which Jesus earned for us by dying on the cross and rising from the dead.

God has kept you and me in the faith exactly as He did with Thomas: not by seeing miracles but by hearing the Word of the Lord. Thomas heard it from the lips of Jesus Himself. But we have heard it through the men Jesus has sent and given authority to speak on His behalf. We have read it from eyewitnesses who saw Jesus, heard Him speak, and recorded those words for us 20 centuries later.

Yes, that way is probably more difficult, but it is equally effective. Jesus has a special blessing for you, Becca, and the rest of us here. He said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed!" That's us! They had the Word of the Lord in human form. We have the Word of the Lord in written form. John writes, "These (things) are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Jesus has promised His presence among His people when they gather together. He has said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." (Matthew 18:20) His presence becomes very personal and tangible in us and for us when Jesus' called servant places Jesus' body and Jesus' blood in our mouths for us to eat and drink and receive forgiveness for our sins, strength for our faith, and renewal of our hope in Him.

Becca and all who have been confirmed or will be confirmed, if you do not want to repeat the mistake of Thomas and others who have been confirmed before us, do not drop out of the group – do not stop coming to church. Not only are the gifts of Jesus given and received here, but here is where we can strengthen and support one another in our faith journey together.

Do not stop reading and studying the Word of God simply because you have finished confirmation instruction and think you have "graduated" from that stuff. Continue to hear the voice of Jesus in His Word as you read it, hear it, and study it. Jesus, through His Word, will guide you and

strengthen you on your faith journey which doesn't begin today after graduating from confirmation but which began in your baptism and continues today.

Be in the Lord's presence and receive His presents in Holy Communion where you are united to Him, His forgiveness, and life and where you are united with those who share your faith and your confession. God will strengthen you through this and brothers and sisters in Christ will support you in this.

Today, as you are confirmed, Becca, we celebrate not because you passed the class, not because you have a special ceremony in church or because you have a celebration with gifts in your home. It's even not because you begin a new status as a "real" member of the church. You have been a full and complete member of the Christian Church since you were baptized. Rather, today, you are confirmed in Christ. You acknowledge the faith and gifts given to you in Holy Baptism. We, together with you, celebrate today's important milestone on the journey of faith begun at your baptism. All of us together pray for our continued journey of faith together that we may be faithful in what we believe, faithful in what we confess and faithful in how we live. Amen.