

Sermon – John 14:23-29
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
6 Easter – Year C – Confirmation
1 May 2016

“That You May Believe”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

1. The confirmands were nervous. It was the day before Confirmation Sunday and, in a time-honored tradition inspiring fear among the young and the faithful, they were to be hauled into the pastor’s office, one by one, for their examination. Jenny stood in the hallway, palms sweaty and stomach churning. What would she need to remember? The details of the Athanasian Creed? The particulars of the doctrine of the hypostatic union? All fourteen verses, in German, of Luther’s Christmas hymn, “Vom Himmel Hoch?” Jenny saw Peter emerge from the office, pale as a ghost; he mumbled his best wishes and Jenny heard the pastor call her name. With trepidation, she entered the inner sanctum. The pastor, barely looking up, simply said, “Tell me the Ten Commandments in any order.” Jenny breathed a sigh of relief. She had this one. She looked up and, with surprising confidence, said: “The seventh, the fourth, the ninth, the second, the eighth, the first, the tenth, the sixth, the third, and the fifth.”
2. Well, our confirmands are no longer examined in such fashion, but they were nervous nonetheless. It was Friday evening, and we gathered in the church library in anticipation of the Witness Service. Each of them had spent weeks preparing their witness statement and, yes, they were nervous. When the time came, each young woman and man stepped to the pulpit or the lectern. And they preached. These eighteen young Christians gave wonderful witnesses – sermons, really – about the life of faith, the power of God in the midst of fear and doubt, the desire for peace in our broken world, and the

grace and love that flow from our crucified and risen Savior, Jesus. It was a wonder to behold! The first to speak was Ellie, who concluded her witness about faith in the midst of doubt by saying, "Jesus died to give us strength and to save us. That's God's gift to us and in exchange God wants us to take a leap of faith. We won't always understand everything; we will always have questions. That is why our religion is based on faith, not facts. So is doubt a bad thing? No, because through prayer God will erase our doubt."

3. Ellie's witness had the story of Jesus healing a boy possessed by a demon and the boy's doubting, faithful father as its jumping off point, but she – and many of the other students – could have had today's gospel reading as her theme. The scene is the night before Jesus' death. The meal has been served; the feet have been washed; the betrayer has gone out to do what he must. And Jesus' disciples – his students and friends – are gathered around him, their hearts troubled, their minds filled with fear. They have spent three years in Jesus' confirmation class, learning and preparing, but now the time has come. Have they learned what they need to know? Will they be faithful in their witness? Or will they fall apart as Jesus leaves them, first for the cross and then to his Father in heaven? Everything is about to change in their lives. How will they face the uncertain future that will surely come?
4. Clinging to faith as life changes around us is difficult, and it requires trust. As Sadie says, "The difficulty of putting your trust in God is why we call it a faith journey and not a faith vacation." To help us in our faith, Jesus finally does not give an examination so much as he gives us a proclamation, a promise: "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." In his going away, Jesus declares that things have not come to an end, but are only now just beginning. In his dying, rising, and ascending, Jesus has done all that is needful for us – for all people in all times and places. In baptism, we have

received the full inheritance of God's promise of grace. In confirmation, we are reminded of Jesus' promise of the Spirit's presence, granting wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord, and joy in God's presence. In confirmation, we don't promise that we have it all figured out; no, today these students hear again – we hear again – that Jesus is present in their lives through the Holy Spirit, guiding and guarding them and us with these most-needed gifts. Or, as Natalie says, "Whatever the future brings, I hope not only to be a strong Christian role model to my sisters, but also to the other people around me. No matter where I am or what I am doing, the strengthening of my faith will never stop. My faith will keep growing, and I will keep sharing it with others. I will follow and seek God all of my days." Whatever the future brings, may we do the same!

5. Jesus knows that the road will not always be easy. So it is that the Spirit is sent to call us again and again to the gifts of Word and water, bread and wine, in which Jesus is truly present for us, granting a peace that the world cannot give. Such peace will be needed, and such peace does come to us all through Christ. Ella writes, God is "watching over me and giving me strength and courage for what I thought was impossible." Olivia writes, "The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have made a difference in my life. Knowing that my sins of selfishness, greed, and envy will be forgiven as a child of God – I lift up my eyes to God and know he will not let my foot slip." It is this sort of peace in the midst of sin and uncertainty that sustains not only our confirmands but all of us; this peace enables us to leave our fears and our troubled hearts at the foot of the cross and step with confidence into God's future – not because we have all the answers, but because Christ is alive and the Spirit is at work in us, every day of our lives.
6. Not long after the death and resurrection of Jesus, his students were ready and the Spirit fell upon them. They were sent forth not to live lives that were easy, but lives that were faithful. So it is for our eighteen confirmands, and so

it is for each one of us gathered here today. Yes, there will be challenges. Dr. Seuss, in his inimitable *Oh, the Places You'll Go*, reminds us that "on you will go though the weather be foul. On you will go though your enemies prow. On you will go though the Hakken-Kraks howl. Onward up many a frightening creek, though your arms may get sore and your sneakers may leak. On and on you will hike, and I know you'll hike far and face up to your problems whatever they are." Yes, indeed. For you will not hike alone. The risen Christ walks by your side; the Spirit of God dwells in your heart. [So, my eighteen dear friends, remember this: Jesus loves you, and so do we. You cannot go so far in life as to leave Jesus behind, and the love of Grace Lutheran is always here for you.]

7. In Christ, we have all that we need. Our sins our forgiven. Our life is assured. Our family is here, gathered once more around the waters of the font and the feast of the Lord's Supper. You know, I wish that I had time to quote all of our confirmands' witnesses, and I certainly don't have time to mention how many of them are surprisingly excited to not have to get up at the crack of 8:00 a.m. to make it to confirmation class on time, so I encourage you to pick up a copy of their statements and read them all; they are all worth your time. But for now, I'll leave you with Madeleine's words: "God and Jesus will be with you forever and always. Not just anywhere, but through everything. No matter what happens, no matter how lonely or scared you might be. I don't know what the future will bring, but I know that the love of God will be with me through all of it." Indeed, Madeleine, and amen. Welcome to life in the Spirit! May the peace of Christ sustain our confirmands, uphold them by the presence of the Holy Spirit, and lead them as they lead us forward, together in Christ at Grace Lutheran and to the ends of the earth. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!