

Luke 24:36b-48 (CEB) ~ 1 John 3:1-7, 18 (MB)

We are Called

3rd Sunday of Easter ~ Confirmation Sunday/Sacrament of Baptism

April 18, 2021

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Introduction to Scripture:

“It’s really me!” That’s what Jesus said in our first scripture lesson, to the freaked out eleven disciples plus sweaty Cleopas and his companion, who had just jogged seven miles *back* to Jerusalem to tell them about their mystical encounter with the Risen Christ in Emmaus. It was still Easter day, well Easter evening, in the story that Jake and Carlos read.

Our second scripture, is from a letter written about 60 years later, to a church that was struggling with division and conflict. They were forgetting who they were and why they were a church. In the midst of our busy, noisy lives, that’s pretty easy to do. That’s why we have church once a week. We need a reset. We choose to set aside an hour to do some deep listening beneath the noise. Truly, the sheer volume can feel overwhelming. Disorienting.

Sermon:

This has been a year of firsts. Too many firsts we certainly never wanted or asked for, as we have all been navigating through *our* first global pandemic. But *this* morning, we are experiencing a wonderful first. Today is the first time our Confirmation Class of 2021, their mentors and teachers are actually in the same room together! We have been meeting by Zoom since last August. But today, for the first time, we are here together our beloved, holy sanctuary.

Nor is this just any day, it’s Confirmation Sunday. Which is Presbyterian-speak for the day our confirmands will make their own Profession of Faith publicly for the first time. Those who were baptized as infants are confirming the promises made for them on their behalf, and one of our six, we get to baptize today. They will profess their faith by standing and answering the “Four Big Questions” we have been studying all year together. We get to witness with our eyes, these six young people as they commit themselves to Christ and to the church. For the first time in their lives.

You may have heard the recent news about *another* first. According to Gallup, for the first time in Gallup’s history of poll taking, the total number of American’s who belong to a house of worship (church, synagogue, or mosque) fell *below a majority* of our population, down to 47%. Our nation historically has been recognized as the most religious in the world: For six decades, from 1937 - 1999, membership in houses of worship in America remained consistently at about 70% of the population. Since then, since 1999--right around the turn of the century--membership began a steady decline dipping down to 50% in 2018 and now the most recent data from 2020 shows it has declined to 47%.

Shadi Hamid, in his recent Atlantic article, “How Politics Replaced Religion,” argues that many of those who have turned away from organized religion have turned to politics with their religious fervor, finding their *source of identity, community and purpose* beyond themselves in their political affiliation instead'. Perhaps you, or someone you know has made this shift, even without realizing it. We all need these things; the question is where we go to find them. To explore more fully what this means for us as a church and as a nation is another sermon for another day.

My point today is to shine a light on the context in which our six confirmands are professing their faith in Christ and their commitment to the church. This is a counter-cultural move, especially in their generation. The statistical decline in church membership is generational: in each younger generation the percentage drops even further. For millennials the rate of membership is 36%. For our confirmands' generation, which is called “Generation Z” (those born between 1997 – 2015), they are showing a continuation of this downward trend. Yet today, our six will vow to turn from the ways of sin and evil and its power in the world, and instead to turn to Christ as their Lord and Savior. And they will vow to practice and grow their faith by belonging to this FPC church community.

Ekklesia, the Greek word for church literally means “to be called out.” Church is a community where are called out and called together in order to “practice real love” as Eugene Peterson put it in his rendering of 1 John 3:18. “No one who lives deeply in Christ makes a practice of sin.” Yes: we all mess up. We even make the same mistakes over and over. But we learn from sin, we don't make a practice of it. We are called to practice love: which starts with forgiveness, over and over. Anyone who has ever tried to practice real love will tell you: getting that right takes more than one lifetime. That's why Confirmation Sunday is more of an opening day than a closing ceremony. A beginning rather than ending. Even though confirmation is the culmination of your confirmation class, so it may feel like a graduation.

You may have heard the old joke about the best way for a church to get rid of pesky bats in its belfry. If you confirm them, you can be sure you will never see them again. I can tell that joke today, because I know otherwise about these six young people. Not only will we see them again, I believe they will help us to reshape more fully into the FPC community that God is calling us to be. But to really do it--that is up to all of us as a community. We are called to listen to them, now. They have things to say that we need to hear. They have a perspective that we need to see. This is true for all of our confirmed high school and college member.

It is up to us to invite them to serve as elders and deacons, or on Outreach or Green Team or CE. But even that is not enough. Rather than trying to plug them in and expect them to carry on exactly what we are doing, I hear God calling us to open our minds and habits, our traditional ways of being church to let their ideas, perspectives, their energy and vision reform both what we do and how we do it. God knows we need to do better. Perhaps one gift of this pandemic shakeup is the forced it has already started.

Let's begin today by letting their words proclaim God's message in this sermon. All six of them wrote their own, very original Statement of Faith that you have in your hands, printed on your bulletin insert. If you listen closely, you will also see how they have let the Holy Spirit use the challenge of this pandemic year to accelerate their spiritual growth and depth well beyond their years. Listen to what they have to teach us today:

Confirmation is more of a starting point, than anything. Questions about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit will help me forge my beliefs. God is more of a feeling than an actual person, feelings like happiness, joy, and forgiveness. Feelings like these help me to stay connected to God, and that I know God is always looking over me. God believes in and loves me even when I sin. He loves me even though I have imperfections and flaws, even though I let him down. Finding the love of the Lord has helped me through the ups and downs. I believe God will be with me as I walk through life and battle challenges ahead of me.

Jesus is very important in many ways. He loved us so much that he suffered and died on the cross just for our sins. That's why we should try our hardest to grow our relationship with him. Jesus teaches us to be kind and to love our neighbors. As a Christian I believe that I must help others as the Lord as helped me. Joseph and his robe taught me to not be jealous of people who seemed better than me in one aspect or another and to forgive people who I believe have wronged me.

I feel closer to God when I am at church. During the times where the congregation is praying, I feel the spirit of God in our prayers, as we are all thinking of the same thing, for God to help the person in need. It feels like something that is bigger than just myself. It helps me feel like God is really there, and that everything will be alright. The church talks about helping people but at FPC we act and actually do it. I'm joining FPC because of the way they help people in our community. SOS provides food and clothing to people in our area who need it. We help one another with needs and supplies like Jesus did.

I still do not know fully what to believe in. I believe God has the power to grant people mercy and guidance. If he was both willing and able to prevent all of the bad things, I do not think he would let all of these terrible things happen. I believe that people have free will and things happen in life because of the choice we make, not because God causes them to happen.

I believe that God's relationship is loving and caring. It is a very powerful relationship. It can be very hard to understand and learn. As I get still older, I will probably think differently about what I'm learning from the Bible. I'm on a long journey, not at the end of it. There is still much to learn. I believe that God is a spiritual support to guide us though the hard times, teaches us to do the right thing, and provides us with comfort of the knowledge of heaven when our time here on earth is done.

As we heard in 1 John, "Who knows how we'll end up!" We can't know—and we don't need to know. What we do know is that we are children of God. And we are Easter people. This is our identity, our purpose, our grounding. Taking our cue from both of our scripture lessons: our Eastered eyes are opened to Christ within and among us, calling us to act with justice, love tenderly, serve one another, and to walk humbly with God. We do that better, together. We will do that better after today: with these six professing Christians among us. Together we can become deeper and wiser as we go. Bolder and more committed to do the impossible in the

name of Jesus: Like eradicating the sin of systemic poverty and dismantling the sin of systemic racism and white supremacy: sins that intersect and are killing us literally as well as metaphorically. Our Matthew 25 vision needs *their* oars in the troubled waters of our times, powering and guiding our boat we call FPC. Starting today, with these six on board, we will do better, together.

When I was in Middle School, I had a poster on the wall of my bedroom that I loved. Especially when I was struggling. It had a picture of a girl and a butterfly and it read, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." Friends, today, this Confirmation Sunday is the first day of the rest of your life and the life of FPC. Thanks be to the Risen Christ, who is really here. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/america-politics-religion/618072/>