

Confidence in Christ

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Dear friends in Christ: I'd like to begin this morning with a little survey. A few moments ago we confessed together the fundamentals of the Christian faith as expressed in the words of the Athanasian Creed. How many of you believe that everything you said in the course of that confession is true? Let's have a show of hands. (... Maybe I should ask how many completely understood everything we said.) Okay, sure: just as I expected, we all believe what we said. We're all Christians and this is one of the three ecumenical creeds that we hold in common with all the Christian Church on earth.

All right, now let me ask this (and I won't ask for a show of hands, but I want you to think about your answer): how many of you believe everything you said when you confessed the Creed with *one hundred percent absolute certainty and without even the slightest bit of doubt about anything?* Again, I won't ask for a show of hands because I'm afraid that someone might actually indicate yes, and then I'd have to call you a liar because essentially what you'd be saying is that you don't have a sinful nature anymore. I'm pretty sure that no one here has achieved Christian perfection just yet, and the sinful nature in you is always first and foremost a doubter. That is, if you are sinner (and you are) then there is a part of you that doubts the teachings of the Christian faith and the words and promises of God.

And let's face it: there has never been a time in history when the truth claims of our faith have not been under attack. Each and every article of what we believe about God: that he created all things by his powerful Word, that he still upholds all things by that same Word, that he's one God in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; that he sent his Son into our human flesh to be our Savior, that Jesus died for our sin and rose from the dead on the third day – even the truth that *there is* a God – all of these truths are constantly being challenged. And small wonder: Satan knows his business. It's to undermine the Lord's truth. He is a deceiver. And we are all susceptible to his attacks. And perhaps the most insidious deception he's foisted on us in this post-modern era is the notion that we really can't be sure about anything because absolute truth does not exist. We hear this all the time: "There is no such thing as absolute truth." People spout this off thinking themselves to be enlightened, critical thinkers without ever realizing that it's a self-contradictory statement. I mean, they say there's no absolute truth *as if it's an absolute truth*. Duh! You can't have it both ways. If it's absolutely true that there is no absolute truth, then even that statement must be false; which means that there is truth. And given that truth exists, the question is: how can we know the truth – and know for certain that it is truth – when we find it? That's what I'd like to explore with you today.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus coming to his remaining 11 disciples on a mountain in Galilee. He's told them to meet him here. And we need to understand that this is after his resurrection from the dead. He's already appeared to his disciples several times in Jerusalem. He's also appeared to them at least once here in Galilee. At that time, they had a miraculous catch of fish and they had breakfast with Jesus on the beach. Now Jesus appears to them yet again on this mountain. And when he does, they see him, they recognize him, and they fall down in worship before him. And then we read these startling words: "but some doubted". And it's an unfortunate translation because the word "some" is not in the Greek text. What it actually says is that they worshiped Jesus and they doubted.

Isn't that amazing? Here are the men Jesus hand-picked to be his closest disciples. They spent three long years with him in constant, personal, face to face contact. They were with him throughout his teaching ministry. They heard pretty much all he had to say. They saw him perform all of his spectacular miracles. They confessed him to be the promised Savior, God's only-begotten Son in human flesh. They saw him die as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. True, they didn't understand that when it happened; but they do now. And since his resurrection they have seen him, heard him, spoken to him, physically touched him, and even eaten several meals with him. They know he's alive. And yet after all this, now, even while kneeling before him in an attitude of adoration, *they are still harboring doubts*.

And you know, sometimes the text of Scripture can be frustratingly brief. We're told that they were doubting; but wouldn't you like to know what it was specifically that they had doubts about? Was it doubt that this was really Jesus they were seeing, the same Jesus whom they followed for three years? Could it have been doubt that anyone was there at all, like maybe they having some kind of group hallucination? I suppose it could have been something like that; but I don't think so. The very fact that they followed his instructions to meet him here on this mountain suggests that they expected to see him: the real, bona fide, in-the-flesh Jesus.

Well, what did they doubt then? Was it that it seemed somehow wrong to worship him? Were they grappling with the whole question of how this very human person, Jesus, who sweated and ate and drank and slept could also be the one true eternal God? That's a pretty hard concept to wrap your mind around. Was that it? Or was it a question about the nature of God and the Holy Trinity (a term that hadn't been coined yet)? Think about it: could they be wondering how this Jesus could be God and yet also pray to his Father who is God and promise to send the Holy Spirit who is God – and yet there's only one God. That's enough to melt your brain if you think about it too hard. And they didn't have the benefit of having a bunch of really smart theologians like the guys who wrote the Athanasian Creed work it all out for them very carefully and in accord with the Scriptures like we do. Surely the whole mystery of the Trinity could stir up a few doubts. Or perhaps their doubts were about the future: "Where do we go from here? Nothing has worked out with Jesus like we thought it would. We thought he would be setting an earthly kingdom and reigning over it from the city of Jerusalem. We never guessed that he'd die and rise from the dead. And now he's talking about going away again. What's next? What does it mean for us? And are we going to be all right?"

You see, there's an awful lot they could have had doubts about. And maybe that's why we're not told what these doubts were. Maybe their doubts were about all these things I've mentioned and more. In other words, maybe the disciples were a lot like you and me: believing in Jesus and worshipping him and still doubting at the very same time.

But let me ask, what are *your* doubts concerning Jesus and the teachings of Christian faith? I'm not talking about those strange passing thoughts that bother us all now and then and which are instantly suppressed. I'm talking about the ones that nag out you, that keep recurring with some frequency and that unsettle your peace of mind. In other words, about which truths is Satan driving the wedge of doubt between you and Jesus your Savior?

This morning we heard the Bible's Creation account, a story ridiculed by modern science and dismissed as a pious myth for the ignorant by many even within the Christian Church. Is there something about that account that bothers you – that you're not so sure of? You say you believe in the forgiveness of sins; but is there some dark secret in your past or burden of guilt on your soul that you fear will rise up to expose you in the Day of Judgment? When I stand up front here and declare to you Christ's forgiveness, do you really believe that's what God is

saying to you? Or how about when you kneel here for Holy Communion, do you really believe that in that little bit of bread and wine Jesus is giving himself to you, his body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins? Aren't there times when you think it's really rather silly to think such a thing could be possible? How about the future? Do you have doubts that the Lord will continue to care for you and keep you from falling? Do you wonder sometimes, say when we're doing a funeral, if this whole thing about life after death and living together forever in glory with all those who are in Christ—if the whole thing isn't just a story we made up to comfort ourselves? A pleasant delusion to make us feel better in times of loss? What *do* you have doubts about? And wouldn't you like to have them put to rest? Wouldn't you like to know for certain – with complete confidence – that what the Church confesses about all these things is absolutely true? Or, understanding that because of your sinful nature 100% assurance is not possible in this life, wouldn't you like to be a whole lot more confident in Christ than you are now?

If so, I'd like you to consider the Apostle Peter in today's reading from Acts; how he speaks with a bold confidence that belies any doubts he may have had in the past. Indeed, all the disciples are enjoying this same high level of assurance. Whereas before they were timid and doubting, now they are standing firm and they're on fire with faith. And when Peter speaks, not only is he confident in what he believes, he says, "Let all the house of Israel therefore *know for certain* that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified!" That is to say, not only is he sure about the truths of God that he speaks; he's speaking precisely so that his hearers – and that includes us – will share his certainty.

So let's ask, what's different? How did Peter go from a rather hesitant and lukewarm faith in Jesus that was infested with nagging doubts to the confidence he displays today? The answer, in a word, is Pentecost: the outpouring and indwelling of the Holy Spirit that he and the other disciples received from Jesus. Jesus, having cleansed his own by his passion and death, having risen for their justification, and having ascended to glory to receive from his Father authority over all things now sends the transforming power of the Spirit to enable his disciples to do what they could not do before; namely, to believe confidently in him like they could not before. This is what the Holy Spirit does. He works faith and trust in Christ in the hearts of God's people. It's precisely as we confess in the Catechism's explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed when we say, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified, and kept me in the one true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

Do you sometimes struggle with doubts about your Christian faith? If you're breathing, the chances are extremely high that the answer is yes. They come from the devil, the world, and your own sinful nature. Would you like to get them under control? Would you like to be more confident? The solution to your weak faith is the Holy Spirit. Last week we heard about the person and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives using Jesus' metaphor that relates the Holy Spirit to water that our bodies need to live. And in that context, I spoke about how we tend to keep ourselves in a state of spiritual dehydration. Our faith in Christ and consequently our walk of faith in Christ suffer because we don't get enough of the Spirit.

So, knowing that we need more of the Spirit, the question is: where do we get him? The answer is from Jesus. He's the one who sends the Holy Spirit into the world. And he's the one who invites us to come to him and drink deeply of the Living Water that is the Spirit.

All right; then the question becomes: where do we find Jesus? That's what Jesus is telling us in today's Gospel reading. He says this: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and disciple people from every race ..." And then he tells us *how* to disciple them: "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to keep all the words I've commanded you to say. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Got that? Disciple people. How? Baptize and teach. And what's the result of baptizing and teaching? Jesus is with you.

So, where does Jesus tell you he will be? In Baptism. He is the Word of God united with the water. And through Baptism he unites you to himself in his passion, death, and resurrection. And since Jesus is in Baptism, we know that he also must be in the words of absolution that are the renewal of Baptism in the life of the believer. And Jesus is in his teaching. He must be for he is the Word of God that's being taught. And where Jesus is, there he grants the Holy Spirit; and with the Spirit the gift of faith: the gift of faith that supernaturally instills confidence, makes certain, and drives out doubt. And though not explicitly mentioned by Jesus in this passage – though it is implied because it falls under the teaching of Jesus – another place we can reliably find Jesus is in his Holy Supper. He means it when he says "This is my body" and "This is my blood." And some people think, "Gosh, I don't know. I have doubts about that; maybe I shouldn't partake of the Supper because my faith is weak." No! It's precisely to strengthen faith by the power of his Holy Spirit that Jesus gave us his Supper. I mean, if you're sick, you take the medicine that will make you better.

Now, someone may protest, "What you're saying here sounds a lot like brainwashing. 'You build up faith by hearing more solid Christian teaching and partaking of the Sacraments.' You're just trying to control people and make them think like you." This is not true. Brainwashing, as it's been practiced, is a method whereby people are forced against their will through sleep deprivation, low level torture, and a harsh system of rewards and punishments to change their thoughts and their thought processes. There's no such compulsion among us.

But for the Christian who wants to grow in faith and gain confidence in Christ – to be more certain of the salvation we have in Jesus and to be empowered to live the Christian life – there is a positive sort of brain washing that takes place in a supernatural sense as we are exposed to Christ's teaching and his Sacraments. It's the washing away of sin and sinful doubt, which is done by the Holy Spirit as he works the gift of faith in the heart and mind of those who seeks to know Jesus who is the truth. You see, confidence in Christ is gained not simply in hearing about Jesus; it's by spending time with Jesus who comes to you in his Word and Sacraments.

We are to be his disciples. And a disciple is by definition someone who is learning, who is growing, and who is always gaining confidence. And the Lord wants us to have confidence. After all, "These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name." Therefore let this be our prayer: "Lord I believe; help my unbelief. And by the power of your Holy Spirit, make me confident in Christ. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!