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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Easter 6, Series A
Saturday, May 20th, 2017
Sunday, May 21st, 2017 (Confirmation Sunday)

Sermon: Unapologetic Hope
Text: 1 Peter 3:13-22

Focus: We stand on Jesus' love.

Function: That they would always be ready to say why they believe what they believe.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: "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" (SC, 3rd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. In our epistle lesson today, the apostle Peter, on whose confession our Church is built (Matt. 16:18), writes: "But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame" (1 Pet. 3:15-16, ESV).¹

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

It is probably no surprise to you that if you were to ask 100 Christians *what* they believe and *why* they believe it, very few of them would be able to give you a cogent answer. Statistics and research by the Barna Group and others consistently show that many Christians are confused about even basic teachings of the Christian faith. If asked why they are Christians, some would probably say, “Because my parents are Christians.” Others would answer, “Because that’s what the Church teaches.” A few might even trot out the rather unconvincing tautology, “I believe it because it’s true, and it’s true because I believe it.” A great deal would probably honestly admit, “I don’t know.” What about *you*? What would *you* say? Why are you a Christian? Why do you believe what you believe?

Ever since the earliest days of Christianity, Jesus’ followers have been asked to give a reason for the hope that is in them. The Greek noun translated as “defense” in our ESV Bible, or “answer” in the KJV and NIV, is the word *apologia*. An *apologia* is a well-reasoned argument for why you believe what you believe. Unfortunately, *apologia* is also where we get the English word, “apology,” although the etymology is

misleading, because in New Testament Greek an *apologia* is anything but an apology. Christians are never, ever supposed to say, “I’m sorry” for what they believe. Like Luther—and millions of believers before him—we confidently take our stand on God’s Word. And yet, as Peter points out in our epistle, that will open you to suffering and persecution for the name of Jesus.

When I was a child in Sunday school, we used to sing a song called “The B-I-B-L-E.” It went like this:

The B-I-B-L-E!
Yes, that’s the book for me!
I stand alone on the Word of God.
The B-I-B-L-E!

As a child, I never quite understood why I stood alone when so many others were singing the song with me. Reflecting on the simple lyrics years later, of course, I recognize that standing alone on the Word of God means that you stand on the Bible as the most important teacher and only way to live. And yet, in our increasingly hostile culture that hates Christianity and rejects religious truth claims, you may just find someday that if you stand on the Word of God, you *do*, in fact, stand

alone. As men's hearts grow cold and the younger generation falls away from faith in the Lord Jesus, there will be fewer and fewer believers standing with you. There may be times when, like the prophet Elijah, you complain to God, "I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away" (1 Kings 19:10).

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the start of the Lutheran Reformation, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg castle church. And while in Lutheran iconography, this is one of our most storied moments in Luther's life, perhaps an even more important scene took place three years later at the Diet of Worms. For there in 1521 the representatives of Pope Leo X pressed Luther to recant, or deny, his writings and give up the Gospel. Here is what Luther said:

"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures and by clear reason (for I do not trust in the pope or councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me. Amen."

“Here I stand!” Wow! What an amazing answer! When Luther was called upon to give an answer for the reason for the hope that is in him, he did not back down. He stood on his faith in God and the truth of God’s Word. He stood up for Jesus in the face of the emperor and the papacy. And that is what we are called to do in our world today.

This weekend at our 11 o’clock worship service, our confirmands will stand up before the congregation and answer these two questions: “Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death?” and “Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?”² In response, they will say, “I do, by the grace of God.” And whether you realize it or not, what these 10 young people will promise is that they would rather *die* than to stop believing the Christian faith. They would rather *die* than renounce Christ! They would rather *die* than deny the teachings of Scripture! They would rather *die* than stop being a

² The LC-MS Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 273.

Christian or going to church. And in the history of Christianity, many martyrs have paid the price for that costly confession with their blood. In the near future, even here in America, you may be called upon to go to jail, lose your job, lose your friends, or even lose your life because of your Christian faith. Talk about a “Here I Stand” moment! Talk about being ready to give a reason (*apology*) for the hope that is in you! I hope that is something not only our confirmands, but we also, would be willing to do for the sake of the name of Jesus. When that day comes, where will *you* stand?

It’s relatively easy to stand here and make public confession of your faith before the Church—in front of your pastor, parents, and fellow believers. Oh, to be sure, you may have a bit of shyness and embarrassment having to stand up in front of a crowd. But, as wonderful as it is, to say that you believe the Bible in front of the congregation is, as they say, preaching to the choir. Your true examination will come when you face your friends and family back home, at school, in the marketplace, and in the public square. Where will you stand and what will you say when someone tempts you to sin

against your conscience, when your teacher or professor ridicules your beliefs, or when your friends reject you because you love Jesus more than them?

The apostles had to defend their faith before governors and kings—just as Jesus said they would (Matt. 10:17-18). They testified in the Temple, in courtrooms, in jail cells, and just before their own executions as martyrs for the Christian faith.

Always be ready to give an answer for the reason for the hope that is in you (1 Pet. 3:15). Are you ready? Do you know what to say? After two years of confirmation classes and a lifetime of Sunday school and personal devotions, I hope that you are prepared. Yet your reason, your defense—your *apologia*—may not always come in the words of the Catechism or well-formed apologetic arguments, or even a Bible verse. Sometimes it may come in the words of a hymn: “I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind, but now I see!” or “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Sometimes it may come in the form of a feeling or conviction. After all, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Faith cannot be

proven on paper like a geometry theorem. Faith must be lived and breathed and tested. Sometimes you don't know where you stand until you fall.

And you will fall. You will have doubts in droves and fears by the fistful. They will come at the most inconvenient times: when a lover breaks your heart, when your parents die, when somebody at church offends you deeply. Such hurts cannot be avoided. Perhaps you will even go through what Kirkegaard, that most existential of theologians, called "the dark night of the soul." But do not confuse doubt for unbelief. You can have doubt and still believe. You can have doubt and still follow Jesus. In fact, the Bible says, "Have mercy on those who doubt" (Jude 22). So-called "Doubting Thomas" was corrected for unbelief, not doubt (John 20:27). Very often faith and doubt go together hand in hand, such as when the mute boy's father cried out, "Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

God hears—and answers—an honest prayer like that. I can attest to that because I also have doubts. But the Lord always answers. The answer may not come until the eleventh hour. And very often, as

Frederick Buechner writes, “God himself does not give answers,” at least not as we expect. Instead “He gives himself” (*Telling the Truth*). He give us Jesus. The Bible will not satisfy your every curiosity about faith, religion, the world, or even God himself. But the Bible *will* point you to Jesus, “the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb. 12:2, KJV). Ultimately, Jesus is our answer. Jesus is the reason for the hope in you. His death and resurrection are your life. His forgiveness frees you to be the person he created and calls you to be. Your new life began in Baptism, which saves you (1 Pet. 3:21). But Jesus is not *done* saving you. There is still more to do. You are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works (Eph. 2:10). So you are a work in progress. “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

Confirmation is not graduation. It is another beginning—not an end. It’s a jumping off point for the next adventure. In confirmation classes, you’ve learned a lot about the Bible and theology. But you don’t know everything, and you certainly don’t know everything you need to know for the rest of your life. In truth, knowing is never as

important as believing and loving Jesus. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1). Confirmation is part of your building up and growing up. We still have much growing up to do. You still need to read your Bible. It’s how God speaks to you. You still need to pray. It’s how you move and breathe. You still need to go to public worship with other believers. We need you, and you need us. And you still need Jesus. You will never not need Jesus. Never stop learning and growing. Never stop loving Jesus. And never stop believing that you are loved *by him*.

Christ’s love is the reason for the hope that is in you. He will *never* leave you or forsake you. And even if you wander far from home—and far from church—the Lord will always take you in. He will never stop pursuing you with his “Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love.”³ No matter what comes your way in life, Jesus will remain. That is why St. Peter urges, “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled” (1 Pet. 3:14). Jesus is your Rock, your

³ Sally Lloyd-Evans, *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 340.

“hope and stay,” “[your] one defense, [your] righteousness.” **He** is

where you stand. Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!*

Alleluia! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy

Spirit. Amen.