

IT ALL STARTS HERE

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John 20:1-18

Today, in a few moments, we will observe the rite of Confirmation. Since September, Michael has been guiding three of our young people on a journey towards full membership in the church. Along the way, they have explored the questions of what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be a member of the church, and how they might live lives of discipleship.

You may ask why the youth need to go through Confirmation. After all, aren't these youth baptized and members of the church? Yes, they are. However, as Presbyterians, we typically allow for the baptism of infants. Many of us, myself included, were baptized when we were just three or four or five months old. We had no idea what was being done to us.

We baptize infants on the faith of their family. At baptism, the child is clueless as to why this scary person in the black robe is rudely pouring water on their head. But the church considers the faith of the home and recognizes that the child is being raised in the faith and therefore is suitable for baptism.

So, we come today and offer these young people the ability to accept (or Confirm) their baptism, to claim it as their own. It is their opportunity to state publicly that while they did not understand what was happening in at their baptism, they do now, and they want to claim it. They will confirm their baptism.

Invariably, when you have a group of youth going through the Confirmation process, there will be one or two who, for whatever reason, were not baptized as infants. That is okay. We simply baptize them on the day of Confirmation making that day a joyful opportunity not only to Confirm but to celebrate the Holy Sacrament of Baptism, as we shall do today.

And there's no better occasion for baptism or confirmation than Easter Sunday. Historically, in the early church, it was on Easter that adult converts were baptized into the faith. In the earliest days of the church, baptisms took place spontaneously. In the book of Acts, we find several stories of people giving themselves to Christ and being baptized there on the spot. For example, there is the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. We read: *As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the [man] said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"* And so Philip baptized the man.

By about 150 AD, Christians generally agreed that becoming a Christian was a three-part process: 1. accepting Christ, 2. living the faith, and 3. being baptized. Baptism normally took place on Easter after a period of fasting and prayer.

By the third century, this protocol had developed into a full three years of training. The church called the converts catechumens and the time of preparation was catechetical training. Part of their training was to memorize catechisms. However, even before they were tasked with learning the doctrine of the church, the initiates were first taught how to live in the faith; they were taught prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The commitment required to become a Christian was enormous.

In time, the three years of catechetical training was condensed to fit within the 40 days of Lent. During this time, the candidates were publicly examined, their family, friends, and neighbors were asked to testify to the person's character. There was also in-depth Bible training. The final week—Holy Week—was devoted to prayer, fasting, and reading the scriptures. On the night before Easter, the candidates observed the Easter vigil. At dawn, they went to the church for their baptism.

Through the centuries, understandably, there were fewer adult baptisms and more infants being baptized. Lent lost its significance as a time of training and instead became a time for all in the church to prepare for Easter. The connection between baptism and resurrection—between baptism and new life—was difficult to envision. When I stand before the congregation holding an infant, I'm not thinking of death and rebirth, just birth. But both baptism and Easter call us into new life that we profess in Jesus Christ. In the ancient church, as a sign of this new life, the catechumens removed their clothes and went naked into the waters of baptism. They were casting off their old, sinful selves. And then, they put on new robes living the words that Paul wrote to the Galatians, *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ* (Gal. 3:27).¹

Our scripture reading from the gospel of John tells about how on the third day following the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed. She got there and sees that the large stone sealing the tomb had been pushed aside. Without looking, she runs back to tell Peter that Jesus' body had been taken. Peter and another disciple race back to the tomb and see that indeed, the body is gone. Since there was nothing they could do, they leave.

A bit later, Mary returns to the tomb. Not knowing what else to do, she just stand there weeping. She looks into the tomb and sees two angels who ask why she is crying. She tells them that she doesn't know where the body had been taken.

Mary then turns around to see Jesus standing there behind her, but she doesn't recognize him. She assumes that he is the groundskeeper and asks if he knows where the body might be. Jesus calls her name, and she realizes who he is.

¹ <https://pres-outlook.org/2016/03/putting-easter-baptism/>
<https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-1987/easter-baptism-ancient-tradition>

When Mary and Peter and the other disciples go to the tomb, they do so with certain expectations. They expect to find a corpse. Jesus is dead and his body had been placed in the tomb. Our expectations from our experience are that dead things stay dead. And then, when they find the tomb empty, they assume that the body had been absconded with. That was their expectation. If a body is missing then someone has certainly taken it. What they didn't expect was the miracle of resurrection. Mary had gone to the tomb before sunrise to prepare the body for its proper burial. This was the end. Jesus had lived; Jesus had died. It was over. They would now just go back to their old lives.

But that morning, at the tomb, he was not there. Far from it. The empty tomb marked the beginning of something which continues today. The resurrection is the fulfillment of God's promise of new life, of salvation. The resurrection is evidence that nothing, not even death itself, is an obstacle to God's work. God does not leave us or abandon us. We are never so broken that we cannot be mended by God's love.

To conclude, on this day of Easter, the question I put before you is this: As the youth confirm their baptisms, do you confirm the resurrection? Do you accept what God did at a time when you did not understand it?

The youth have spent the last seven months preparing for this day. I say to them that this is not the end of their journey. You can't join the church and then disappear. This is only the beginning. Their lives as Christians start here. This is a standing-at-the-tomb moment. We may expect it to be the end, but in fact, it all starts here, now. For those of you who were long-ago baptized, I ask that you listen to these baptismal vows. On this Easter Sunday, recommit yourselves to living lives in Christ as these young people commit their lives today.