

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. (Matthew 16:13-20 NIV2011)

Confidently on Christ the Church Stands

We’ve always known few things are certain. We know that even our best laid out plans will only happen Lord willing. But especially since March we are even more careful with our plans and our certainty in those plans. You think about all those life occasions we took for granted to be certain that all of sudden no longer were. Marriages, funerals, graduations, sports seasons, school, even church services were put on hold and left us more cautious about getting our hopes up too high. Oh, we’ve always known it. But it seems like we are stepping a little more lightly with how sure we are that things *will* happen. And then you get to Jesus’ words from Matthew 16. He doesn’t add “Lord-willing.” He knows this is God’s will. There’s no addition of, “Hopefully this all works out.” Because he knows it will. “On this rock I will build my church and not even the gates of the dead and hell—Hades—will overcome it.” But will it? Shouldn’t we be a little cautious in how certain we sound? Doesn’t it sound a little foolish, even naïve?

Jesus is entering into his final year of ministry. In a short while Jesus will tell his disciples his plans of going to Jerusalem to suffer, be killed, and on the third day be raised to life (Matthew 16:21). But before all of that happens Jesus has a question: **“Who do people say the Son of Man is? Who do people say I am?”** To which his disciples reply: **“Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”** These were all men sent by God. They were forerunners sent to prepare the people for God’s Chosen One the Messiah. And when the people looked at Jesus and what he was doing that’s who they saw. Up to this point Jesus has already done a number of incredible miracles healing the sick, giving sight to blind, driving out demons, feeding thousands. He’s stood on mountainsides and in boats preaching and teaching so people recognize he speaks with power and authority

(Matthew 7:28). So, who do people think Jesus is? A good speaker, teacher, able to do incredible things. But that's it.

Jesus probably already knows this. And that's not really what he is looking for. Instead, it leads him to his next question, what he really is interested in hearing. **"But what about you?"** Jesus says. **"Who do you say I am?"** The disciples already know too. It maybe came up as they sat around the campfire at night. It maybe was brought up when they would go out fishing. They said it when Jesus had walked on water and pulled Peter out of the water. But now Jesus puts them on the spot—who do you say that I am?

It's one thing to admit when emotions are running high. It's entirely different when things calm down and you have to think about it. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus now asks you. For many of you, you stood in front of this church and already confessed it publicly. And you too have heard how the world answers that question. Some expect Jesus to bring them a better life on this earth while validating their cause as the right one to fight for. Others say Jesus is similar to a Captain America who needs to defend our freedoms of speech and, therefore, religion. Others, Jesus is life-coach and relationship guru; a good teacher and moral leader. Or maybe now they are looking for Dr. Jesus who will rid this world of the virus, racism, and everything else to bring us back to "normal." And still others, Jesus is someone you need to work to impress inviting him into your heart.

But Jesus doesn't ask about the world and their thoughts. He asks you. So, who is Jesus to you, personally? Not what Mom or dad, grandma, grandpa, your friend. But you; who do you say Jesus is? It's very tempting to see Jesus like the world around us. With so much uncertainty, we may be certain that type of Jesus is the one we need. But, that's not who Jesus is. So, who do you say Jesus is?

Peter doesn't seem to miss a beat. **"You are the Christ the Son of the Living God."** And what Peter confesses is what we confess almost every Sunday with the Apostles' and Nicene Creed. Peter is saying that this man, Jesus, born of Mary is the Christ, that is, God's Chosen One. This man Jesus is the one God promises in the Garden of Eden when mankind fell. This man God chooses to save mankind from eternal pain and suffering hell. At the same time Peter knows he is more than a man. Here is God standing in the flesh from eternity; God's Son and true God from the beginning.

But how could he be so sure? How can he be certain? Because Peter didn't come to this knowledge on his own. It wasn't revealed to him by human flesh and blood either, **"But by my Father in heaven,"** Jesus says. It's the same way God reveals this knowledge and truth to you. Oh he uses flesh-and-blood pastors to speak it. He works through moms and dads to bring babies to the baptismal font. He uses teachers so that we learn it. But it's ultimately the Father using flesh-and-blood mouths and hands to reveal this

truth to us. The Father sends the Spirit who works through his Word to call us out of blind, dark unbelief and by the Gospel He sets us apart as people of God. That's what the church is. It's not the brick-and-mortar, stone and wood building where we gather together. It's not the membership list of a physical congregation. The Church Jesus is speaking about here in Matthew 16 is all those who have been called out of sin and darkness and united together in the one true faith. It's all those who believe in their hearts and confess with their lips as Peter did that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. It's all those who know, believe, and trust salvation is found in no one else and by no other name are people saved.

And Jesus promises that on this confession his Church will stand. But will it really where there's so much pushing against it? There's another pandemic that is going on besides COVID. It's the number of people who are leaving the church without even looking back. Fewer babies are being born and baptized. Numbers are down in attendance and membership. Church expenses to educate, operate, to do the work keeps going up while offerings received remain the same or even go down.

The temptation is there to play the comparison game and to see how we don't offer the same programs as the church "over there." We don't seem to be as successful as that other church "down there." The people in this other congregation seem to have more zeal for the Lord; they're real go-getters who get things done. And it can seem like we aren't standing as strong.

Then there's the attacks from society. Increased disregard for the Word in our own little community means a competition for top priority in people's busy lives, work, and school schedules. Don't forget the sins that members continue to struggle against. Then there's the old grudges that should have been forgiven and forgotten long ago along with new grudges that start because of stubborn pride. And if it didn't look like the church was ready to tip and fall, there's the devil pushing against it with all of his lies and empty promises that we need to do something to keep it from falling. He wants you to believe that the stability of the church falls on you; you need to do something to keep it from collapsing. And when you start to think that it's not too long before you fall into despair. It's sadly not too short of trip to thinking that all of our work is meaningless and in vain when the problems and sins are still very present. It's too easy to resent and blame others. It's not hard to get impatient. It's really easy to forget what the purpose of the church is.

And still, Jesus promises, **“On this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”** “On this rock” is not referring to Peter. On more than enough occasions we see how Peter is anything but solid. No, the rock is Peter's confession that he makes. If the church was built on how financially successful we

were, if it was dependent on the number of people in the pews, it was determined by how holy our lives looked, if it was built on any other type of Jesus, it would most certainly have tumbled and fallen long ago. But it's not built on us. It's built on the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. And as the Christ that means Jesus was set apart from eternity and before the creation of the world with the plan to save sinners like you and me. This Son of Man born of the Virgin Mary, begotten of the Father from eternity is your and my Lord. Yes, he is crucified under Pontius Pilate. And, yes, he suffers death and is buried in the tomb. But he redeems you and me lost and condemned creatures. He purchases us with his blood and wins from all sin and death. So he's not going to let you, his church, tumble and fall. He has already stormed the gates of death going to hell and back for you. When he rose from the dead he descends into hell not to suffer more but to proclaim his victory. Satan did not defeat him; he crushed that serpent's head. Sin has no control over him; he was tempted in every way yet is without sin. Death could not keep him. He kicked down those gates and broke free.

As surely as Jesus lives—we have proof in the empty tomb—so we are certain the church will stand. Admittedly the church—that is God's people—do not always look the best on the outside as we continue to struggle against sin in this world. At times it sure seems like we are on the verge of crashing. But our confidence isn't in ourselves. It's based on the rock-solid foundation of Jesus Christ who kicked down the gates of hell to make you his own. He's already shown you how those gates cannot keep you in. You've already died and rose with Jesus in Baptism. Because Jesus lives you too will live. With Jesus in the lead, we the church are called to share the Good News to steal more souls from the death and Hades. In Jesus you have the best weapon to blow up the gates of Hades. Be bold, the church doesn't need you to save it. It already has the perfect Savior in Jesus who is the Lord of the church and controlling all things to guard his chosen ones—you. Speak the Word and leave Jesus to do the rest. Be confident, the church isn't toppling over. We don't want to hide behind these walls; we have the weapon of the Gospel that not even death itself has a defense against. There's no need to circle the wagons to defend ourselves. Go out and share the good news that sins are forgiven in Jesus' name. His warning to his disciples in v.20 to not tell anyone he is the Christ does not apply to us. After he rose and before he ascends Jesus told you and me to go, baptize and teach. Our confidence isn't in ourselves. It's that our foundation is on Christ and on him the Church will stand. Amen.