

- The third reading is from the Gospel according to St. Matthew, the 16th Chapter. Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the son of man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, "but other Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah "or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, "the son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you Simon, "son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed "this to you, but my father in heaven and I tell you, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church "and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven "and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven "and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered his disciples not to let anyone know that he was the Messiah. This was the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

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- It was exam time and Jesus gave a one question examination of his disciples. Who do you say that I am? And only one of his disciples got it, Peter. You are the Messiah, the son of the living God. One of the things you learn to love about students is when they are giving the exam, when they are questioning you because sometimes students don't know any better than to ask such basic, fundamental questions. The younger the student, the better. And sometimes they are these basic questions that maybe we thought we answered a long time ago and have settled down with some comfortable answer, or maybe it's a question that we stopped asking a long time ago because we were afraid there wasn't really an answer. And sometimes students don't know any better than just to ask. A student asked me to explain to her the difference between Christianity and Judaism. She's in love with a law student who's Jewish and they're thinking about marriage, and how will they deal with the difficult differences? I assured her that I had known people who marry lawyers and they go on to have happy marriages. (congregation laughing) Just kidding. (congregation laughing) The differences that trouble her are the differences between two disparate faiths. Well, we discussed rituals, of festivals, beliefs, and then she asked a fundamental question. "When it comes down to it," she said, "What is the one thing that makes Christians Christian?" The answer is not potluck dinners or WWJD bracelets or pushy preachers. The thing that makes us Christian is Jesus. Jesus Christ is Christianity. Other faiths have love, other faiths have beliefs about the good and the true, but Christianity has Jesus. If God had kept aloof from us, if God had only given us the book, we would have the bible, but we wouldn't be Christian, we would be another noble philosophy of life or a system of ethical virtue, but what God did, we believe, is to come among us in the flesh as a Jew from Nazareth named Jesus or more Hebraically, Joshua, a name which means God saves. We believe that the peculiar way God saves is Jesus. It's our astounding claim that when we look at this Jewish carpenter's son from Nazareth, we see as much of the almighty God as we ever hope to see, this one who was born strangely and lived briefly and died violently and rose quite unexpectedly. This one is the great revelation of God, is God. Now we can sympathize with those folk who look at Jesus and see only a noble teacher or a great, moral example or a wild-eyed proto-Marxist revolutionary. After all, from the very beginning, from the very beginning as today's gospel reminds us who

Jesus was and what Jesus was about was not self-evident. There were people who stood face-to-face with Jesus and said this is God incarnate, but there were many more, many more who said this man is nuts. So from the very first, from the first that God came to us as Jesus, it meant that lots of people just didn't get it. Jesus frustrated people's expectations for how a messiah was supposed to be and supposed to act. Jesus had a way of not directly saying who he was and today's scripture, after Peter gets to the point, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God," Jesus tells him, "Well, don't tell anybody about it." You wonder why. Scholars say well, maybe Jesus wanted more time to keep laying out his program and how different he was from conventional Messianic expectation, maybe. Jesus didn't walk around with a sign on him saying son of God. Messiahs were supposed to have power. They were supposed to take charge and they were supposed to set things right, fix all of our problems, but Jesus refused to stiff arm anybody into following him. He refused to dominate, he refused to take up arms or seize political power. No wonder that looking at Jesus' life, many people would say that Jesus is one of history's most noble failures. Sometimes when alumni ask how many students do you get out on Duke Chapel on a Sunday morning? I say, "Probably a good deal more than Jesus "got for his sermons." It wasn't just that God came to us, it was that God came to us as Jesus. He just didn't look like we thought God was going to look. He didn't act like we thought God ought to be God. Eventually, Jesus was executed for doing the things he did and saying the things he said. He wasn't killed for walking around saying, oh, by the way, I am God. No, Jesus was killed for being Jesus. He was killed for saying things like, "This is God's way, "the poor are precious and the rich are in big trouble." That's why we asked the counter tenor today to sing the anthem in Latin, thinking that if we sung it in Latin, then maybe you wouldn't get it. Those are nasty things to say to a bunch of people like us. He's filled the hungry with good things and rich people, he has sent empty, away. Jesus said things like that all the time. He said, "Caesar isn't God, despite the claims "of his spin doctors." Not everybody who cries Lord, Lord is gonna get into the kingdom. In fact, speaking of the kingdom, whores and tax collectors are gonna get in there before you do. You just don't say things like that to people and get tenure. (congregation laughing) And Christianity, being a Christian is about following Jesus and doing the same things he did and saying the same things that he said. Certainly, we don't all succeed. You can read today's Gospel as a astounding success that like, Peter got the point or you can read today's Gospel as well gee, 11 other disciples didn't get the point. It isn't easy following Jesus because he's Jesus. He warned us upfront that his way was narrow. "A lot of people who put their hand "to the plow look back," he said. Time and again, Jesus said things we wish he had not said. I don't know what he was getting at when he said, "Hate your mother, hate your mother-in-law." I don't know what he meant when he said, "You want to follow me? "Great, go sell everything you have "and give it to the poor and follow me." Well, to be honest, I know what he meant, but I don't like it. For most of us, it isn't that we've listened to Jesus and found him incomprehensible, it's that we've listened to Jesus and we found him darn difficult. So somebody came out of the chapel one Sunday morning after the service and said, "I know that you would never "want to hurt anyone with something you said "from the pulpit, but I was really hurt and offended "by what was said today." For just a moment, I stepped back and I said to myself, "I wonder where you would have gotten the notion "we don't want to hurt you." (congregation laughing) Lady, this thing is about Jesus. It's gonna get bumpy along the way, okay? Being Christian is about that challenging lifelong struggle to be friends with Jesus and it isn't easy. That's why we began this service with a confession of sin. We don't always get it. We can't always follow him closely. It's about that journey, it's about the struggle to be friends with Jesus and maybe more difficult, to risk letting him be a friend to us. It's about a relationship. I think it was Richard Niebuhr who said that conversion into

this faith occurs when the God whom you thought was your enemy, an enemy to be feared, is really found out to be the friend to be loved. We love God because we believe that God first loved us in Jesus, so Christianity is not first an adherence to a set of great ideals, of ethics. It's not the ability to comprehend a system of great ideas, philosophy, it's a way of life, it's a way of walking behind Jesus, trying to keep up with him, being in relationship because we really believe not only that God came to us and that God spoke to us and Jesus, we believe God is with us, with us. If Easter hadn't happened, who would still think about Jesus? Much of his teaching was unoriginal, his inheritance from the faith of Israel. He wasn't particularly effective in getting his program across to his followers, but when he came back to us, oh, even from the dead, we then say that Jesus, who he was, and he taught, and what he did had been vindicated by God. That's what those early Christians meant when they exploded into the world shouting, "Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!" Easter was like God reaching in and saying to us, in case you've ever wondered whether or not Jesus was truly, truthfully revealing my will for the world with all of his talk about forgiving enemies and loving the unlovable and reaching out to the lost, well, be assured this is exactly the way I see it. When Jesus speaks, I'm speaking. When you look at Jesus, you're looking at me. When you pray to Jesus, you're praying to me. The one who hung the sun and flung the planets in their courses, this one has come among us in Jesus. Now I know this seems an astounding assertion to those who have not experienced it, but Christians really believe that Jesus is present with us, walks with us, is closer to us even than we are to ourselves. This summer, I've been rereading Augustine's Confessions. Someone wrote a book recently entitled Augustine and the Invention of the Modern Self. "Augustine with his searching, relentless gazing upon his soul invented the modern sense of the self," the scholar says. Augustine wanted to find out about the world. How did he found out about the world? By rummaging around in himself. We modern people are accustomed to that. We say look in yourself for the answers. We got sophomores who wander around saying I'm trying to find myself, I'm trying to discover myself. And we owe this, says this scholar, to old Augustine, who in the 4th century picked through his own soul for a couple of hundred pages, but if you read the Confessions, you find out that's not quite right. Augustine begins by saying, "I'm going to tell you "the story of my life," but after a few pages, you realize this is just a sly way of saying I'm gonna tell you the story of God's life. You become aware that Augustine is saying less of I and me, and my, and much more of you, thou, God. Augustine says during his youthful indiscretions, during his climb up to the top of the academic ladder, he said, "I thought I was, I was desiring, "and I was looking, and I was searching," but when he was converted, he realized surprise, it was God that was looking and searching for him. He says, "I was searching everywhere for you oh God, "only to find that you had been searching "everywhere for me." That's a presence I'm talking about the Christians learn to name as risen Christ. So we say a prayer, we break open a loaf of bread, we have a sip of wine at the Lord's table and we really believe Jesus is with us. In fact, Jesus said if just two or three of you will show up on a Sunday, I'm there. And there are many more than that here. So what makes Christians Christians? It's Jesus. We're here not because like the rest of the country, we're searching for more meaning in our lives and we discovered Jesus. Rather, most of us were minding our own business and from out of nowhere, he found us, or we were just biding our time, we were trying to make it through the Sunday service without dozing off and he grabbed us, or we stood and we just were gonna sing a hymn and only to sit down after the last note saying I believe. You really are Messiah, son of the living God. It's all about Jesus.