

5 Easter May 7, 2023
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A Living Commencement Speech
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Graduation is a wonderful and exciting time in a person's life. It can also be a time of nervous anxiety and fear as the graduate steps out of one world into another. From high school to college, work, or apprenticeship, or from the world of academia to the professional working world where they are expected to apply what they have learned, or from undergraduate to graduate level academia, whatever transition they are making, this is a time where no matter how well a person has done academically, socially, or politically, they now face an unknowable future where anything can and will happen.

This powerful transition is acknowledged during commencement ceremonies through the presence of the commencement speaker. It is the honor and responsibility of the speaker to offer the graduating class some comfort and inspiration to embrace the next phase of their life's journey. Perhaps you can still remember a particularly meaningful speech given at a graduation ceremony you attended.

Many commencement speakers handle this responsibility by sharing lessons they have learned from their lives, or some bit of wisdom that sustained them during difficulties they may have faced. In 2022 entertainer Charlie Berens told University of Wisconsin Madison winter semester graduates how graduating during times of economic uncertainty can be an opportunity to use creativity to make your way in the world. In her 2014 commencement speech to Portsmouth College, Shondra Rhimes encouraged the graduating class to be doers not dreamers, because doers are more likely to accomplish something. Athens native Dr. Atul Gawande told the 2012 graduates of Williams College to learn how to master what he called the rescue: to admit when something goes wrong and do whatever you can to fix or repair it. David Foster Wallace told Kenyan College's 2005 graduating class to learn how to pay attention to what is going on around you, because that is reality. Will Farrell told University of Southern California's graduating class of 2017, "you will never be successful until you learn to give beyond yourself. Enjoy the process of your search without succumbing to the pressure of the result." 2011 graduates from Northwest University heard Stephen Colbert tell them, "Life is an improvisation. You have no idea what is going to happen next, and you are mostly just making it up as you go along." A little closer to home, OU's graduate commencement address on Friday featured the message to consider the power of the stories we each tell, because story has the power to divide and heal.

I could easily go on, but you get the idea; commencement speakers take many different approaches to inspire and encourage the next generation of graduates, and sometimes we can all benefit from their wisdom and message.

Today's Gospel has Jesus giving a speech, and answering questions that address the same feelings associated with a major life change. Even though we are still in the season of Easter, today's Gospel takes place before Jesus' death and resurrection. What we heard today is a portion of John's Gospel that happened the night before Jesus was arrested. Jesus and his disciples were sharing their last meal together. He had finished washing his disciples' feet and was trying to prepare them for the major transition of the end of his earthly ministry. Jesus was going to leave them, he was going to die, be buried, and rise again. This is difficult to understand, and we can recognize in both Thomas and Philip their anxiety and frustration as they struggled to imagine a future and a life without Jesus being physically present with them, directing them, showing them where to go, teaching them. In his speech Jesus was trying to tell his disciples, like in many commencement speeches, all their time together was intended to prepare them for this moment and all that will come after. Of course, there was no way to know exactly what would happen next, there was no book he could give them that would tell them what to do, no GPS that could direct them on where to go, all they had were his example, stories and words, stories.

The words Jesus gave them are immensely comforting: *do not let your heart be troubled*. Jesus knew the news he gave his disciples would cause confusion, fear, anxiety, and sadness. That is normal and natural and should not be ignored. At the same time, Jesus also advised to not let those fears, anxieties, or sadness get in the way of being present with him in those final hours. Anxiety for the future can prohibit being able to learn or receive what wisdom or information is being given in the present moment, which ironically, can be helpful when the future does arrive. That is what pretty much every commencement speaker tries to say.

Last Sunday I announced I have accepted a new call to another parish and will be leaving Church of the Good Shepherd. As I've listened to many of you respond, I have heard happiness for my husband and me, sadness, and some anxiety about what the future will hold for you. All these responses are normal and natural, and I do not want to belittle any of them. They make me grateful because they are evidence of our shared love for one another. At the same time, I believe we can all do well to hear and receive the message Jesus gives in today's Gospel. Perhaps, his words might be especially just for us as we enter our own time of transition: "Do not let your heart be troubled. Believe."

Believe in God. Believe that no matter what happens to either you or me, God has us and God holds us in the palm of God's hand. God isn't going to drop us. God's got us.

Believe in Jesus, who died and was raised to new life, resurrection life. Resurrection life brings healing to what has been broken, it brings renewal to what is tired and worn down or burnt out, it brings hope to the overwhelmed, it restores what has been removed. Resurrection life can help us see the opportunities in challenges and gives us courage to face the unknown.

Believe in the Holy Spirit, who has been with us and will continue to be with us whether I am here as your rector or not. Those of you who were part of the discernment process when I was called to come here as your rector eight years ago remember how strongly we all sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit who called us together because we both were ready for a season of reaching out and being present with our neighbors. The Holy Spirit is still here, despite all the changes and transitions, and will never leave.

The good news is, unlike graduation, we have more than a day or two to make our transition and can spend a few more weeks together. I hope these weeks will be dedicated to expressing our gratitude for each other, remembering all we have been through together, continuing to care for each other, and doing the work necessary to celebrate and grieve together. We have the opportunity to be a living commencement speech to each other, in what we say and what we do. Because all this is holy work, work we do with the Holy Spirit, work that helps us to grow closer to God and to each other, which is the best we can do in any time. Alleluia.