

Commencement

Luke 24:44-53

CWZepp, BWCOB, May 24, 2020

Last week, NBA superstar LeBron James, former President Barak Obama, Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai, and a host of other A-list celebrities headlined a virtual commencement celebration honoring the class of 2020 called “Graduate Together,” streamed live on YouTube just like our own worship services these days. If you haven’t seen it, it’s worth the hour to watch it just to catch the positive vibes and inspiring messages that were delivered to and by members of the class of 2020 from around the country.¹

One of the most disheartening things about the pandemic for me personally has been losing any sense of closure with our seniors, particularly those at Bridgewater College with whom I have spent the last four years sharing life and coming to love, many of whom you saw and heard from earlier in our worship service. One day, everything was normal, and then just like that – they were gone. Their learning continued online through the end of the semester, but all of those things that have come to mark the end of our time together – our BSM Love Feast and End-of-the-Year picnic, Baccalaureate and Commencement, and all the individual goodbyes and hugs and pictures – these things won’t be happening. I know it is a relatively small sacrifice for the greater good of keeping everyone safe and well. And it is certainly a “first world problem.” But it’s still a loss. And it still breaks my heart.

As I was watching “Graduate Together” and thinking about this week’s worship when we would be recognizing our 2020 graduates, it occurred to me how very similar graduation is to the experience that the early followers of Jesus had when Jesus departed from them for the last time. I have to be honest in saying that when I typically think about the Ascension, I get mired in the details and in the questions of believability that this story inevitably raises for us in our modern, scientific world, where we know that beyond the sky is not heaven, but outer space. I have been to the Chapel of the Ascension, where you can see the Ascension Rock which supposedly bears the imprint of Jesus’ right foot, from which he is said to have ascended into heaven. And frankly I just don’t buy that story.

But in truth, such questions and doubts about the historicity and accuracy of the account or the commemoration of the place miss the essence of the story. What is really taking place in the story is a transition – the marking of the end of the disciples’ journey with Jesus on earth, and the beginning of their journey with Jesus in the Spirit. Like a graduation ceremony, it was a moment of both closure and commencement – both the ending of what was and the beginning of what will come to be.

The word commencement comes from its root “commence” – to begin or start. It may seem an odd choice for a label for the ritual ending of a program of study. But we all know that our education is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a time of learning and preparation for the real end – a meaningful and fulfilling life, or as Bridgewater College names in its mission statement, empowering students “to lead principled lives of purpose and consequence.”

¹ Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jrulgmbMHc>

I think this is really what was going on in the story of the Ascension. Regardless of what actually happened, the disciples had come to the end of the end of their time of preparation and learning. Jesus blesses them, takes his leave, and at that moment their real purpose commences. As if to emphasize this fact, the author of the Luke's gospel literally ends the story here and begins another – what we now refer to as the book of Acts.

I can't help but relate these thoughts with our collective reality right now in the midst of our global pandemic. Like our graduating seniors, and like the disciples from whom Jesus took his physical leave in our scripture, we have the sense right now that everything now is going to change. That nothing is certain anymore. That the things we knew and the way we have become used to doing things are going to need to give way to a new reality. That things will never again be the same. It's scary. And nerve-racking. And exciting. And overwhelming. And inspiring. And...the list could go on.

But like those disciples, and like our seniors, the wisdom that is to be shared with us in this moment is – in essence – the same. This is the moment for which we have been preparing. This is the time for us to put into practice all that we have learned. This is the day to take all that has shaped us and nurtured us and formed us and use it to make the world a better place – to shine brightly with the light and love that we have found in Jesus, to shine through the darkness of this time and all the shadows that shall come, to work together to bring God's kingdom of Shalom to earth as in heaven. We don't get to choose the world into which we have been placed. We only get to choose how we live out our faith in it. So may Christ be our light, and shine in this church gathered in heart, mind, and spirit today...