

From Graduation to Commencement, Part 1: Ascension
Sermon on Luke 1:1-4, 24:44-53 & Acts 1:1-11 (5/16 & 5/17/15)
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I need to begin this message with a bit of a confession. I'm going to make my confession to you...and it's going to sound kind of terrible, but I will explain myself. So please stay with me through the explanation, okay?

Here is my confession: there is somewhere else I'd rather be this weekend. As much as I love you all, as much as I love preaching and leading worship here at McCabe United Methodist Church, I wish I didn't have to on this particular weekend – and it's my own darn fault that I'm not where I'd rather be. Okay. So that is my confession.

Now, please extend me your mercy as I explain myself.

See, I'd rather be in St. Paul, Minnesota, right now because, at 3:00 this afternoon, my sister graduates from Luther Seminary where she has been a student for the last four years. She will receive her Master of Divinity degree from Luther, which is the same degree *I* received from my *own* seminary almost exactly 12 years ago.

I am so incredibly proud of my sister – and I have been present for so many of her big, life moments – but, for various reasons, I just couldn't make it work to be there with her and with my family this weekend. So, while I truly do love being with you all and in worship here at McCabe, my heart is really in St. Paul.

My sister has been gracious about my choice to stay in Bismarck. In fact, she even sort of *discouraged* me from coming, knowing it would require significant planning and shifting of my own calendar in order to be there over a weekend. But, despite her veritable insistence that I *not* come, I still feel *awful* that I'm not going to be out in the gathered congregation as my sister graduates from seminary.

So, like any mature adult does when they feel bad about something they did – or did *not* do – I attempted to make up for things with a gift:

I put together and sent my sister a “graduation care package” of sorts that included items like gift cards, a picture frame, candy, a couple of Archie comic books (because we loved them as kids), and an inflatable stress reliever designed to look like a large hammer.

While the total package cost me a decent chunk of change, the *pièce de résistance* within it was a mix CD that cost me nothing but time and a little thought.

The CD I made I entitled “Commencement” and it contains both pop songs and Christian worship songs. Each song on the CD holds some level of emotional or spiritual meaning – designed to remind my sister how much she is loved, to make her chuckle, and to challenge her to continue to respond to God's call on her life.

(In the immediate future, God's call is taking her to Bozeman, MT, where my brother-in-law will be doing a year-long pastoral internship. So I made sure to include on the mix CD “Cowboy, Take Me Away” by The Dixie Chicks.)

Anyway... 'tis the season for graduations! Not only is my own sister graduating from seminary, but our area high school graduations are coming up soon, college graduations are happening all over the place, and many McCabe folks are traveling throughout this month to watch loved ones traipse across platforms as they receive their diplomas.

In my own life, I've been a graduate at three graduation ceremonies: high school, college, and seminary. And, during each ceremony, it was very clear to me that I was not in any way prepared for what was to come next. Or, at least, that's how I *felt*.

Especially during my own seminary graduation ceremony, I recall feeling sort of suspended in time for several minutes...praying that the ceremony would last forever because I wasn't sure I was ready to *really* be an adult for the first time in my life. I was 24 when I graduated from seminary, so it was high time for me to *be* an adult. But I was pretty terrified about it.

Up to that point, every transition I'd made had shifted me from one educational community to another: high school to college to seminary. And, while educational communities are wonderful and important, I'd never had a *real* job in the field of my chosen vocation – not a full-time job, anyway.

My seminary graduation ceremony created lots of questions in my mind: Can I really do this work well and faithfully? Is God really calling me to this vocation? What if, when I'm actually doing this full-time, I discover I'm terrible at it?

Graduation is exciting, for sure, but it can also be quite terrifying – right?

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Now, though I've been using the term “graduation,” the word most commonly used to describe these ceremonies these days is “commencement.”

To “graduate” from something means you've completed it...that it's done...it's an *ending*. But “to commence” means to *begin* something. While graduation *does* mark a significant *ending*...it really is commencement...it really is a *beginning*.

Your schooling is done, you've earned your degree, but the life you'll live with the knowledge you've gained is just beginning.

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You'll note the title of the sermon series we're starting today is *From Graduation to Commencement*. This is a three-week series we're using to frame three significant holy days in the life of the Church: Ascension, Pentecost, and the celebration of the Holy Trinity.

From Graduation to Commencement. An ending into a beginning. And today our focus is on a most interesting kind of “graduation”...a most interesting kind of ending – for Jesus and his first disciples, for sure...but also for you and for me. The “graduation” in question – the *ending* – being Jesus' ascension into heaven.

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As the Scripture was read a few moments ago, you may have noticed we sort of got the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven *twice*: first, in the reading from Luke chapter 24 and, second, in the reading from Acts chapter 1.

In each of those sections of Scripture, we heard about how Jesus offered final words and instructions to his disciples before he was mysteriously taken up into heaven. Those final instructions included the command that his disciples were being given the task of telling the whole world about him.

Not just telling their closest friends and family: telling *the whole world*. No pressure, right? And they didn't even have mass media at their fingertips to tell the world about Jesus! Not only that, but, very soon, they would no longer have Jesus *himself* as their guide, friend, and teacher.

The day of Jesus' ascension into heaven was, indeed, Graduation Day for his first disciples. And I'm sure they were just as terrified as – if not *more* terrified than – any of us on our own graduation days.

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This may not be news to some of you, but it's pretty widely understood among biblical scholars that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were written by the same author.

In addition to noting that the ascension story was told twice in today's readings – in the section from Luke 24 and in the section from Acts 1 – in addition to that, you may also have noticed that, in both Luke and Acts, there were references to a person named “Theophilus.”

At the very beginning of both books, the writer refers to someone named “Theophilus.”

Again, Luke 1, verses 1-4, reads as follows: “Many people have tried to tell the story of what God has done among us. They wrote what we had been told by the ones who were there in the beginning and saw what happened.

So I made a careful study of everything and then decided to write and tell you exactly what took place. Honorable Theophilus, I have done this to let you know the truth about what you have heard.” That’s the very beginning of the book of Luke.

Then, Acts 1, verse 1, again, goes like this: “Theophilus, I first wrote to you about all that Jesus did and taught from the very first until he was taken up to heaven.”

So, both Luke and Acts are primarily addressed to this Theophilus person...and the beginning of the book of Acts refers to how the writer *first* wrote “about all that Jesus did and taught from the very first until he was taken up to heaven.”

Both Luke and Acts are addressed to the same person...in addition to that fact, the writing in both books is similar in style and theme. (I’ll get back to *that* in a bit.)

For these reasons, it’s safe to assume Luke and Acts were written by the same person and, thus, they are a sort of set: you can’t really understand one without the other. The Gospel of Luke is Part 1 and the book of Acts is Part 2 of the same story.

In the Gospel of Luke, we have stories about Jesus’ birth, his life... stories of how he called and trained his disciples, stories about his teachings and his miracles... plus, of course, the stories of his trial, his crucifixion, his death, his resurrection from the dead, and, today, we’ve now heard the story of his ascension into heaven.

In the book of *Acts*, Jesus’ story continues through his disciples... though, in Acts, his disciples became *apostles*: those who first learned all they could from Jesus and who were then challenged to take all they had learned to all the world.

In Luke, the disciples were the students, but in Acts they became the teachers. And that shift happened on the day of Jesus’ Ascension.

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The day of Jesus’ ascension was, for his disciples, truly a kind of graduation – an *ending* of sorts.

Jesus would no longer be physically present with them on earth. The task of sharing his message was now squarely on their shoulders.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, you could almost picture the disciples in caps and gowns, hands poised to switch their tassel from the right side of their mortar board to the left. It was their Graduation Day. And their commencement. It was an ending that was also a beginning.

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Now, returning to the beginnings of Luke and Acts, think back to that name “Theophilus” – that person to whom both Luke and Acts are addressed.

It’s interesting to note “Theophilus” is a Greek name that literally means “God-lover”: *theo* means “God” and *philus* means “lover.” So, while Luke and Acts may have been written for a specific person whose name happened to be “Theophilus,” it’s also entirely possible – and perhaps even more likely – that both books were being written for *anyone* who loves God.

Isn’t that great? I *love* the idea of both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts being written to the “Theophiluses” of the world – to *all* those who love God. It gives such a timeless quality to Luke and Acts.

It’s as if the writer was letting us know that Luke and Acts weren’t just written for people 2,000 years ago...but that the author had in mind *everyone* who loves God: for all times and in all places.

It’s almost as if the author of Luke and Acts was even writing for *you* and for *me* – the “theophiluses” of McCabe United Methodist Church in Bismarck, North Dakota, in the year 2015. And so, it’s almost as if today is also *our* Graduation Day – almost as if today is *our* day to be reminded of the task Jesus gave his first disciples as he prepared to leave this earth.

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Again, the book of Luke is the story of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection; and the book of Acts is the story of the beginning of the Church following Jesus’ ascension into heaven.

And, as I mentioned a bit ago, there are some clear themes that run throughout both Luke and Acts – ideas about Jesus that come up over and over again.

For example, in Luke, Jesus is both a healer and a teacher par excellence: he restores people’s health and teaches them about God and about faithfulness in powerful ways that touch people’s lives. It makes sense, then, that in the book of Acts, Jesus’ disciples – the apostles – go on to be powerful healers and teachers themselves.

So in the Gospel of Luke, *Jesus* did the teaching and the healing himself, modeling faithfulness for his disciples and followers. Then, after his ascension at the end of Luke, the story continued in Acts as the disciples continued Jesus’ work of teaching and healing.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, it was a graduation experience for the disciples...and that graduation experience was most certainly a *commencement* as well. But as we celebrate Jesus’ ascension in worship this weekend, it’s our own graduation and commencement, too.

And this is something we practice *every time* we worship.

See, at the end of each worship service, after the final song, a benediction and sending forth is offered. We are first offered a blessing – a benediction – assurance of God’s presence and guidance in the midst of all we do in this life. It’s a moment of “graduation.”

Then, after the blessing, we are sent out into the world...not just to go through life in some sort of “normal” way – but to continue Jesus' story in the world. To continue his teachings, to offer healing and love to the world as he did, as his first disciples did. A moment of “commencement.”

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When we are scared about what the future holds – whether it's Graduation Day, whether it's a new diagnosis, whether it's a new adventure about to unfold – when we are scared about what the future holds, it can feel like we're alone in our fear...like we're stepping out into unknown territory with no foothold, no anchor, no hand holding our own hand, no safety net below our tightrope.

Pick your metaphor, but facing a new future can be terrifying. And it can feel like we're facing the fear alone. Jesus' first disciples certainly may have felt that way. After all, Jesus had given them this *huge* task – telling *the whole world* about him – and then he promptly disappeared from planet earth.

But, in addition to the huge task Jesus gave his first disciples, he also promised them something even bigger: that he would send the Holy Spirit to be with them...to guide them, to inspire them, to challenge them, to bless them. To fire them up for the task at hand.

That is the good news of this Ascension Day – that, though Jesus is not physically present with us as we seek to do his work in the world, he *is* present with us through the Holy Spirit. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.