

A Sermon by the Reverend Mother Crystal J. C. Hardin

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year A)  
“Youth Sunday”

Sunday, May 24, 2020

Acts 1:6-14

Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

I'm guessing that I'm not alone in having spent some time this week and last reflecting on commencement ceremonies. Of course, we are now unable to experience these springtime rituals in the way that we have come to expect. I'm especially mindful of those for whom that is a significant, painful loss: the graduating class of 2020 and all those who have loved them to this point in their lives. The report everywhere is that commencement is cancelled. And yet, that's not really true; like so many things, it will just look different this year.

“Oh The Places You Will Go,” by Dr. Seuss is a beloved text for this graduation season, at the top of all graduation gift lists. “Congratulations!” it reads, “Today is your day. You're off to Great Places! You're off and away!” And yet, it's another Seuss favorite that I have been reminded of more than once in this pandemic season: “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.” You know the story. The Grinch, deeply resentful of the Who people's Christmas fervor commits to stealing Christmas from them altogether. A thief in the night, he takes every single material thing they have that signals Christmas. The story ends, of course, on Christmas Day, with the Grinch waking to the sound of singing, and with the proclamation: “Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small, was singing! Without any presents at all! He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming! It came! Somehow or other, it came just the same!”

I certainly felt that way on Easter morning. It came just the same. And on the occasion of my daughter's birthday, celebrated under quarantine. And upon the death of my good friend's father. And when I consider our graduates. There are some things that just come, ready or not. Some things that just are.

Commencement is often seen as the culmination of a journey, which it certainly is. But, commencement literally means, “begin.” It occupies then that robust middle space. It looks back, honoring an accomplishment, is marked by forward-looking

advice and words of wisdom, but is, really, present tense in its relationship to us. For graduates, it is that moment before they fly, or are pushed, from the nest of what was, before they must take that next step into the unknown of what will be. It is a moment of what is.

Unlike other notable Spring happenings, the Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord can often pass without much notice, since it falls on a Thursday. In fact, it just happened. It is, itself, a commencement.

For forty days after his resurrection, Jesus continued to teach his disciples and carried on his work here on earth. And then, one day, he was done, and he returned to the Father.

Jesus leaves his disciples to continue his work, to embody and proclaim the Gospel without Jesus in the flesh. They have been guided and they have been taught. Now, the disciples are apostles. They must guide. They must teach. *Today is their day, they are off and away.*

But, for a minute, they weren't. They just stood there, looking up into heaven, frozen.

Maybe it's the parent in me that imagines they were gripped by that certain kind of panic that comes with feeling alone and out of your depth. Like when it's time to leave the hospital with your new baby, this precious thing, and you realize that you're on your own now. I remember thinking, "What am I supposed to do with this thing?" But, it doesn't take bringing a child home to know that feeling. I imagine that many people have felt that kind of panic. And have felt utterly alone with it.

One of the rituals that accompanies the commencement ceremony is, of course, the commencement address. They all seem to follow a similar formula, and I've heard many that, while perhaps touching or inspiring in the moment, I can't now recall. These days, the internet is full of articles claiming to have collected "the best graduation speeches of all time." I'll admit to reading more than a few of them.

I guess I wondered what it was that people wanted or needed to hear at that moment in their lives. I expected speeches that extolled the virtues of higher education, that patted graduates on the back for a job well done, that praised their accomplishments and nodded to the privilege of the moment. I expected the ole at'aboy.

That's not what I found. Not in the best of them. Those seemed to grasp that the commencement moment requires speaking the truth – speaking to what is and what will always be. They remind us of who we are and who we can be; what the world can

be with us in it. These, truly, bless us. They don't hesitate to speak of what may befall us. They don't ring of platitudes. They don't promise us fame, or fortune, or other trappings of worldly success. Instead, they gather the human experience into their hands and bestow upon it a blessing.

As Dolly Parton would say, "Find out who you are and do it on purpose!" That's what they seem to suggest that the key to life is: being who we were made to be and applying ourselves to the world.

These are not just words for graduates of course, but for us all. Because, we are always presented with the chance to begin again; to shed our skin, to go a new way, or to re-commit to our present path.

Jesus, in his last act before his ascension and with his last words on the eve of his passion, bestowed a blessing and said a prayer. It was, if you will, the culmination of his commencement speech.

You have everything you need in this moment he seems to say. And what you don't have but will need in the future will be provided. So, keep your eyes open. Keep your heads up. Keep your hearts faithful. And, don't be fooled into thinking you are any less than this: *mine*.

That's the thing to remember isn't it. That's worth a bit of a pause. That's where, as Christians, our own commencement must always begin and end and begin again.

Beloved child of God, this is the only grace I know to be true, a grace that cannot be taken from us: that we, each and every one of us, left alone with ourselves, sit in the very palm of God, born for a time such as this.

We can accomplish much or little by this world's standards. We can graduate or not from reputable institutions. We may be loved or rejected by friends and family. But we are, now and forevermore, God's own.

On this the last Sunday of Easter, the Sunday between the Ascension of our Lord and Pentecost, let us pause, make room for prayer, and take stock of who we are, and whose we are, before we begin again.

Amen.

