

Dear graduates and families, brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace to you and peace from our God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Graduates... congratulations and God's blessings to you on your accomplishments!

What a fun time of the year this is: I like to call it "Graduation Season!" In addition to *this* wonderful celebratory service, there's lots of other graduation ceremonies going on all over these days. There are high school graduations, college graduations and of course, the most adorable graduation ceremony of them all, Kindergarten graduation! In addition to attending these various ceremonies, there are open houses to attend, people to visit with, and lots of delicious meals and desserts to enjoy. But for graduates, particularly the 13 of you here this evening, graduation time also means thinking a lot about the future.

Over the years at First Lutheran, your teachers, principals, and others have equipped you well for your journey into High School and beyond. The instruction you have received here both academically and spiritually has been built upon your identity as a baptized child of God. You've learned to know what it means to be one claimed by God in your baptism. You know you have been forgiven for all your sins, you've received the gift of eternal life with God, and you have His assurance that He is with you always no matter where you go and no matter what you end up doing on your journey through life.

You've gotten off to a great start! You've come a long way, not only being nurtured in your faith but God has also blessed your **intellectual** growth here at First Lutheran School through the work of your teachers, through the work that **you** have put into your studies, and most certainly with work from your parents, too!

So, as we celebrate your accomplishments with you, graduates, you might very well be wondering, "What's next?" "What does God have in store for me as I move forward from First Lutheran School?" It could be that you've been so caught up in getting to this moment, and for the fun and celebrating that lies ahead during the next couple of days, that you haven't given the future very much thought.

But after all the celebrations are over, the decorations are taken down, and the pictures and memorabilia are put away, you **might** find yourself filled with a mix of emotions: Maybe there's the feeling of satisfaction upon the successful completion of your school years here. Maybe you'll be filled with lots of excitement in anticipating going to a new school in the Fall. Maybe, just

maybe, you'll be dealing with sadness at the thought of parting from friends, a familiar routine, and familiar surroundings. Possibly, you've also had some worry about the future.

Satisfaction, excitement, sadness, and worry are feelings with which every one of us can relate, no matter what stage we're at in life. To each of us, God has these comforting words of assurance: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

Still, after the uplifting times of excitement and celebrating are done, there almost always comes that feeling of "Well... now what?" That sense of purpose and joy you had before will become a memory. Then you're going to have to find something else to do, something else that gives you a sense of purpose and joy. That's true of just about everything we do in this world. We all want to have a sense of purpose in our lives. And we all want to have something that brings us joy. School or sports can provide that for some, but only for a little while. Hobbies are good, but the purpose and the joy they bring to us last only a little while, too.

This evening, through God's Word, I would like to show you, especially you who are graduating, where you can find a sense of purpose and joy that will last your whole life long. Yes, it's a joy and a purpose that will **never end**. Let's look to our Gospel lesson from Luke 24.

It was 40 days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead when our Lord Jesus gathers His disciples together because He had a few more things He wanted to say to them before He left them. And as you watch the disciples here, you can see that they're still confused about why Jesus had come. They asked Him if **now** He was going to restore Israel to the glory and greatness it enjoyed in the distant past when King David and King Solomon ruled the land. Jesus told His friends, the disciples, not to think about those kinds of things. What He really wanted them to focus on was their **purpose** in life, now that He was about to leave them.

Over the last 3 years, their purpose as disciples had been to follow Jesus, and to watch Him fulfill every single prophecy about the Messiah that was ever written about Him in the Old Testament. Their purpose was to watch Jesus suffer and die and rise from the dead. Very soon, with the Holy Spirit's help, they would come to understand what all these things meant. For now, they were done; done following, done learning. Now, Jesus is going to give them a new job, a new **purpose** for their lives.

Look at what Jesus tells them in verse 48 in Luke 24: “You are **witnesses** of these things.” The same thing is repeated in Acts 1:8: “You will be my **witnesses** in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” That’s what Jesus wanted those disciples to do – that was their new purpose in life - to be witnesses to other people. They had seen all these things happen. Soon they would understand **why** they happened. Their purpose now was to **witness** the things they had seen and learned, to other people.

As a Christian today, that’s part of **your** purpose too. We just celebrated Easter not too long ago. Through God’s Word, you watched with eyes of faith as Jesus suffered, died, but then rose again. Even though you didn’t see those things with your eyes, you heard about them and believed it with your heart. In tonight’s reading from Ephesians Paul prays that “the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may **know** the hope to which Christ has called you.” By opening the eyes of your heart God, particularly during your years here at FLS, the Holy Spirit has led you to understand why Jesus died, and why He rose from the dead. He was your sacrifice. He is the reason you are forgiven for your sins and have the **sure hope** of eternal life.

8th graders, do you remember when we studied about vocations during Confirmation classes back in March and April? Those are the very important roles that you have in your family, school or work, and in the community. **Now**, in addition to the meaning God gives to your life through your vocations, **part** of your purpose is **also** to be a witness of the things of God to others. That’s why you’re here. That’s why God has put you here on this planet – to be a witness of the facts: That Jesus Christ has come. That He has died on a cross and that has taken away your sins and the sins of all people. Someday He is coming back. That’s amazing stuff that you know. God wants you to be a witness of those things to others. That’s the most important purpose we have to share this Good News of eternal life found only in Jesus.

After talking with the disciples, Jesus performed one more miracle for them. He lifted up His hands to bless them. And then He ascended into the sky, right before their eyes, and eventually, He was hidden by a cloud. As the disciples were staring up at the sky, two angels appeared to them, and told them that someday, Jesus would come back, in the same way that they saw Him go into heaven.

And so, what did the disciples do? We’re told in verse 52 that they worshipped Christ on that mountain. And then they returned to Jerusalem, filled with a sense of great **joy**. They met with each other in the temple courts, praising God for the things they had heard and seen.

Think about that. Before, the disciples would hide in their houses, afraid of the Jewish leaders. Now, we see them out in public boldly worshiping Jesus and filled with joy. Why the big change? They had just seen Jesus triumphantly ascend to His throne in heaven. There was no doubt in their minds anymore that He was the God of the universe, the King of heaven and earth. They had just heard two angels tell them that one day, Jesus would return on the clouds, just as they had seen Him go. That's what filled them with joy. Those angry, menacing Jewish leaders couldn't keep the disciples from displaying their joy in the temple courts.

So, what does this have to do with your life today? What does that have to do with your graduation tonight? If you're looking for a sense of joy in *your* life, a deeper, *longer-lasting* sense of joy, look where the disciples looked. Look to Jesus. Yes, there will be times in your life when you are upset. Without a doubt things will happen that will anger you, sadden you, bring you down. But for a Christian, underneath that anger or sadness, you will find a layer of joy that the world cannot take away. "I know God's not punishing me," a Christian can say. "All my sins have been taken away by Jesus. I know I'm forgiven. I know that God will work this problem out. I know that God will give me the strength I need to endure. After all, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!' (Phil. 4:13) I trust and I know that God will get me through this and best of all there's a better world coming." That's Christian joy. The disciples had it after they saw Jesus ascend. Ten days later on Pentecost their joy was made even more full as they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. In our lives today we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit when we are baptized, when we hear and read the Word of God. Through the forgiveness of sins, and strength for our faith that He gives through these means of grace, *and* in the Lord's Supper, God fills us with joy, the same kind of joy the disciples had after they witnessed the ascension of Jesus.

This evening with the eyes of your heart, *you've* watched Jesus ascend. The Lord has reminded you of your purpose. He has given you a kind of joy that you can't find anywhere else. And He's given you the power to witness that joy to others. One day He will return from heaven in the same way the disciples saw Him go into heaven. On that day, we will be filled with overwhelming and perfect joy as we live with Him and all our loved ones in the faith forever. With Jesus, the best really is yet to come! Amen.
