

Pastor Roy's sermon from June 1, 2014

Today is a Sunday of new beginnings. Our graduates are leaving behind a whole set of experiences, friends, traditions, and comforts for a whole new set of challenges, ideas, friends and traditions. Just when students start feeling comfortable, they are thrown into something new. Learning and growing is not about being comfortable, but about being challenged and moving into a new ways of thinking and doing.

Today we also welcome new members. In joining a community of faith, there is mutual commitment based on mutual faith. Members belong, believe and trust with one another, commit to one another. All within the story of the faithfulness and compassion of God in Christ. Each time a new member joins, there is a new beginning, a new opportunity to work together, pray together, struggle, laugh, and weep together.

Graduating and moving on takes hard work. Real effort. Getting to know new members takes real effort, but like the life beyond graduation, relationships have rich rewards. New friends. New sisters and brothers. The more we invest in each other, the more we receive from each other. The greater the commitment and effort, the greater the joy.

New beginnings. In Acts chapter 1, the disciples are becoming apostles. From learners to those sent. Sent to be and do as companions, teachers, leaders. Here are Jesus and a few messengers inviting the disciples to a new experience.

Every year we have this chance to consider Jesus ascending to the Father after demonstrating that life overcomes death in resurrection, but before the Spirit is poured out at Pentecost. Jesus' ascending is something like a reset button for the resurrection. Ah, it was so good, the disciples seeing Jesus and experiencing resurrection and its hope. What it means that death was not the final word, but that there is hope to experience the life he showed them during his ministry.

But then, as the New Testament narrative goes, he ascends to the Father. He says goodbye one last time. Here is the part of resurrection which is "Goodbye." Eternity is filled with relearning what it means to be alive. What it means to have hope.

Yes, there are goodbyes, but also hellos and welcome backs. Yes, Jesus is gone. They're staring up into the sky, baffled. "Whoa! Hey, come back! We weren't done yet! We had a couple more questions. We wanted to enjoy the comfort of your presence and laughter and tears. We want to just *be* a little longer." But ready or not, like so many things in our lives, he's gone...

Of course, the angel-messengers say, "Don't worry, he'll be back. Go on, continue what he started!" But we don't know exactly when and how he'll be back. The early church was looking for something very concrete and very soon. They weren't expecting things to go on more than 2,000 years without an obvious bodily return.

No, we don't know exactly when or how he will come back. Has he been returning all along? Is his return part of the Spirit moving among us, before us and after us? With new members? New graduations/beginnings? Does he return each morning. . .throughout the day? Does he return in the brightness of the sun? In the stillness of the sunset? In the rain? In a cool breeze? Even in the whirlwind?

The ascension is a new struggle for the disciples. We think of Easter Resurrection as something wonderful and happy and good. It is all these things because it is God visiting us in life with a life that goes on and on. It brings meaning for the struggle of all of our goodbyes. We're not alone, but we have solitude. We don't want to say final goodbyes any more than the disciples, but resurrection doesn't ask our permission to work God's wonders.

We are over and over again graduated into the school of "no longer just learning, but now doing what we have learned." We are no longer in training, we are sent. Sent to practice the compassionate justice which Jesus taught. Sent to love. Sent to act and live even as we say all of our goodbyes. As we hold memories of past experiences and loved ones departed.

We hold the true mystery of all of our Goodbyes gently with hope. They give us quiet strength which produces courage. We have hope because with the Goodbyes always comes new beginnings.

As Jesus ascends, as the memory of his final goodbye to his disciples reminds us of all of our final goodbyes, may we learn the lesson again, goodbyes are not the end but a new beginning.

With them we begin anew, in the solitude of loss and change; the breath of the Spirit moves us out--when we are ready--in service, and mercy, to share peace and hope with all whom we meet.

Let us pray,

Lord, teach us to be those who are sent in new ways with renewed compassion and therefore, with joy. Amen.