

Always Claim Hope (Pentecost's Commencement Advice). 19 May 2024.
Pastor Fritz Wiese. COS

Well, it's graduation season around the world. And today, we're delighted that we can take some moments in today's service to honor our own COS grads. It's always fun to see who will offer the graduation addresses—the valedictorians but also guest speakers like Jerry Seinfeld last week at Duke.

As a complement to those inspiring speeches, I wonder if God's Word this morning offers a few nuggets of wisdom that will offer blessing as you commence this new chapter of your lives.

The first Word of Wisdom comes from our first lesson today: “**Always claim hope.**” Can you repeat that with me? Always claim hope. The prophet Ezekiel recounts a spiritual experience, when he was taken by the Spirit into the driest of deserts. In a scene rivaling any IMAX movie, Ezekiel is surrounded by skeletons. Nothing but death. No hope at all.

But then God's Spirit commands him to craziness: start talking to the bones. Tell them, Ezekiel, in the name of the Lord, to rise up. Proclaim, “Bones, hear the word of the Lord!” Which gives us the song some of you've heard and I invite you to sing it with me: “Bones, them bones, them dry bones. Bones, them bones, them dry bones. Bones, them bones, them dry bones. Now hear the word of the Lord.”

Somehow those bones DO hear. And with God's Spirit and breath—reminding us of how God's breath brought Adam to life in Eden—those bones come together, renew their flesh, and start to live again.

Having witnessed this resurrection, the prophet Ezekiel is instructed to take the message back to his hurting people. In sum: Always claim hope, for the God of Life is on your side.

Class of 2024, we celebrate that you are riding high these days. Graduation, summer break, a chance to begin new adventures. We love it. But in that love, we speak a word of Bon Voyage that's also honest about the trip ahead. Both my kids had good runs in college. But every day was not a bed of roses. Part of their education in college was confirmation of what they learned in high school already—and probably you too—life can be mysterious, cruel, difficult, befuddling, isolating and whatever other challenging word you'd like to use.

You watch media full of global conflicts and societal leaders not offering the best examples. On top of that, you must navigate the new world of social media, where the craftiness of consumerism and critique of culture is a 24/7 challenge to our healthy self-identities. Stress, self-criticism is tough. Right?

Amid your inevitable ongoing accomplishments, we want you to remember that you are not alone when sometimes you might feel you're out there with Ezekiel. A "desert of death" might be overstating it. But you're not alone when you struggle in life, when you feel disconnected from others and even yourself, when it seems like everyone else has their act together, but you're the only one who doesn't. All of us struggle at times, but all of us can claim God's hope.

While we do our best to let our lights shine, but we also feel the darkness—as we all do—we can reach out for support. We're all in this together with our Lord. This Tuesday night, we've got some experts coming to COS to address those times when we get depressed and negative thinking is consuming too much bandwidth. All are invited. For God invites the Class of 2024 and all classes, "always claim hope." Because our God is a God of resurrection, new beginnings, and positive change.

How many of you here today ever have a dog. Me too. So how about this story? Fido is in the dirt gnawing on a bone. It is dry, brittle, depleted of marrow and moisture. You approach Fido with your hands behind your back. He wags his tail with his doggy smile, but keeps his paws firmly planted on the bone.

You slowly bring a hand out from behind your back revealing a half pound of USDA prime cut choice ground sirloin beef. This catches Fido's attention. He smiles and smacks his lips. You extend your hand closer with the meat clearly offering it to Fido. Now Fido gets on his feet but still keeps the bone in his mouth.

This is the Fido who sleeps in your bed at night, who licks your face in the morning, and licks the chicken grease off your fingers. This is Fido who drinks from the toilet. So, you expect Fido to accept your offer. But he hesitates and begins to back off as if he feels cornered or unworthy. You don't understand Fido's reaction. You have only good intentions toward Fido. That is why you are offering the meat. (So, what if there is doggy

medicine mixed in with the meat?) This is all for his good. Fido ought to know that.

But Fido is still not sure, backing up with that nasty bone still in his mouth. You want to tell Fido, "Just drop the bone! This meat is my gift for you. I love you, so drop the bone. Take the better offer."

Take the sure thing or trust the promise of what might be? That is Fido's dilemma! And it might be ours too.

Friends, sometimes I wonder if we're like Fido. God offers us the richness and hope of a new opportunity. But we're so scared or stubborn, that we want to cling to the old lifeless, dry bones of our lives because we're creatures of habit. But friends, always claim hope!

I wonder if another key commencement injunction is to ask, "**What does this mean?**" It's the Day of Pentecost, recognized as the birth of the Christian church. The disciples spent those first days after the resurrection in fear and confusion, hiding behind locked doors. But Jesus appeared to them. And now they are together in Jerusalem, obeying Jesus' instruction to wait for the next phase of the plan. And then it comes. Wind blows. Lights glow. And a phenomenon unfolds more spectacular than northern lights, eclipses, and cicadas—the power of the Holy Spirit allows the good news to transcend any barrier between people—language, nationality, or class. In a key "with Jesus, all means all" moment, we're told people from all sorts of nations hear the gospel, are baptized, and the birth of a global movement of hope begins.

(Hey, as little aside, I thought it was really cool to discover the timeliness of this aurora borealis event right before Pentecost. We've heard that this beautiful phenomenon is caused by violent solar storms or "solar wind." The aurora, named by Galileo in 1619 was named after the Roman goddess of dawn's light, Aurora and the Greek god of the north wind, Boreas. The aurora borealis, a magnetic movement, is indeed truly made of light and wind—just like Pentecost! So cool.

Back to the sermon--In the midst of this Pentecost Pulse, a group of people start to ask, "**What does this mean?**" Would you repeat that with me? What does this mean? And because they asked, Peter stands up and gives them Christianity's very first sermon, sharing the gospel—that Jesus died and rose for everyone's release from the bondage of sin, fear and death.

Many of you graduates know, “what does this mean?” was the question around which Martin Luther wrote the small catechism. As we’re taught Jesus’ parables, the creed, the 10 Commandments, we’re continually to ask, “what does this mean for my life? My attitude? My professional and vocational decisions?”

Class for 2024 and beyond, never stop asking the question lodged at the very heart of Pentecost: What does it mean the world is hurting? What does it mean that I say with Paul, “I do the very things I don’t want to do?” What does it mean that I feel more alive when I’m connected to people or God’s creation? What does it mean, that like the first disciples, God comes to me in love and has given me abilities to make a difference?

Finally, friends, perhaps a third key quote from Scripture that will shine light on your future pathways. The request from Jesus in the gospel: “**Testify on my behalf.**” Would you repeat that with me? Testify on my behalf.

These days and just about all days, there are high profile court cases in the news. And the scuttlebutt always includes who might be called to testify for or against the defendants. Jesus knows that in every age, every culture, and for every person, HE is on trial in a sense. And everything he represents—the way of forgiveness, charity, generosity, love for your God and fellow human. A verdict is in the balance. So, his list of witnesses is very clear. You and I are on the witness list. He is asking us to testify.

And we’ve agreed. As graduates of our confirmation classes, we’ve agreed to testify—in our words and deeds—for Jesus, his message and methodology. In Acts chapter 1, right before his ascension and the Pentecost, he tells his followers, please be my WITNESSES here in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

So, to help us celebrate how the Spirit is stirring us in the witness game, we’ve got a little display at the end of the hall on the sanctuary window. We’d like you to visit it (on your way into the sanctuary to share scripture and prayer on the floor with markers). We celebrate how COS folks are testifying for Jesus with a Pentecost Pulse, locally, regionally, or globally. For instance, do you coach a team or help at a school? Do you volunteer at a pantry or help pack lunches? Do you show love to an elderly neighbor somehow or financially support a positive cause in addition to the church?

Think about how you are testifying for Jesus' love and agenda and then take a red, flame shaped sticky note, write your example and name down, and stick it up on the wall. We want to celebrate all the ways God empowers us. And we'd also like to catalogue your sharing. If you are in an Alzheimer's support group or book club or ELCA disaster relief team or Squarefoot Ministry initiative—you get the idea—write it down with your name so Barbara Anderson, our Director of Connecting Ministries can keep it in our files and help connect visitors and new members with you, as she and we learn of their interests.

We could go on and on. But let me end with this. For my calendar, I'm sort of old school. I've used this little red book for ELCA pastors for decades. But last week, I lost mine. And apparently when it wasn't in my possession, for whatever reason, somebody ripped out all the pages of this month, May. And I gotta tell you, I was totally DIS-MAYED. (You get it? 😊)

Our esteemed COS graduates, and all of us who continue our education with Jesus, we never have to be dis-mayed, right? For with our God we always claim hope, we keep learning by consistently asking "what does this mean?", and we enjoy the satisfaction when the Spirit blows God's breath and shines an equipping fire in our hearts, helping us to testify to what Jesus has done for us and can do for the whole world. Let it be so. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Gospel. John 15.

[Jesus said to his disciples,] ²⁶"When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. ²⁷You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.