

GBC Sermon Sunday, June 7, 2020
Go Therefore!

There comes a time in every little bird's life, when they have to leave the nest. The timing may vary depending on the species of bird and careful negotiations between parent and child. Parents often wanting chicks to leave as soon as possible and chicks wanting to stay as long as possible.

Despite these domestic disputes, the nesting environments themselves play a role in the timing of a young bird's departure. For some birds, like towhees and juncos, who build open-cupped nests on or near the ground, the risk of staying in the nest is huge. Predators often find the nests within days, if not hours after baby birds hatch. For others, like chickadees and bluebirds whose nests tend to be more hidden, chicks tend to remain in the nest longer, giving their wings and flying skills more time to develop.

No matter what, those first moments outside of the nest are wrought with fear and trepidation as baby birds summon the courage to step out on their own.

There's a reason this metaphor is used so often in times of major change. Leaving the nest is uncomfortable, it is lonely, and at times it can even be wrought with danger.

There's another side of this equation called "empty nesting". When the kids grow up and no longer need the daily and hourly support they once needed – parents feel like birds no longer responsible for the unending work of going to get the worms to bring back home. There is often *fear* about what one might do with all the free time, and empty square footage.

When young people reach the point of high school graduation and prepare for next steps, parents and graduates alike are ready to clear out the nest. Ready as we think we are, though, stepping out – and sometimes nudging our children out – can be scary ...for everyone involved.

This morning we are engaging in the annual tradition of recognizing our graduates. Young people – many of whom we have watched grow up in our church – are graduating from high school, college, and graduate programs stepping out into a world of uncertainty.

They're leaving the nest... so to speak.

Under normal circumstances, we might guide them toward all the conventional next steps. Complete your education, find a field you really enjoy. Get a good internship and that'll set you up for a life-giving career. After that, all the pieces will fall into place.

But now, those basic next steps seem to fall short. There are no more guarantees. Life outside the nest seems more uncertain than ever before. Add to that, so many of the changes and uncertainties we now face, were unimaginable for just about the whole time you graduates were in school... planning for this moment.

Everything has changed so quickly.

The Scripture reading for today picks up at the very end of Matthew's Gospel. In one short chapter, the two Marys discover the empty tomb, go to tell the other disciples, and then they go to Galilee – just as the resurrected Jesus instructed them to do.

It's "senior year" for the disciples. They'd been following Jesus throughout Galilee for the better part of three years, listening to parables describing the coming Kingdom of God. They had been internalizing Jesus' ethical teachings, as he pushed the boundaries of the social and religious status quo insisting on love and justice over purity and piety.

They processed into Jerusalem with him just a few days prior anticipating a triumphant culmination of all that they had been working for... and then everything changed. Jesus was killed, not crowned and it seemed all was lost, ...nothing would ever be the same again. Nobody could have planned for this.

This is not exactly the "commencement address" the disciples had imagined when they set off to learn the ways of Jesus. The disciples thought that their spiritual education would come to an end in Jerusalem, where the Temple was located, the symbolic center of their faith. Perhaps they imagined coming back to that place – one day in the future – to remember the triumph of Jesus. But it didn't exactly happen the way they'd expected.

Rather than directing them toward Jerusalem, the resurrected Christ sends the disciples away from the holy city, away from the temple and out toward Galilee. Galilee was the location where Jesus' ministry had taken shape before, it was the home of the sermon on the mount, the feeding of the masses, the miracles of healing, and the training ground for the disciples.

I wonder if they thought this was where they would re-group and plan their revised future together? But that isn't what happens either!

The disciples – now 11 in number, having lost Judas to Jerusalem – gather in Galilee anxiously waiting for Jesus to tell them the plan. And then they hear it:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

...and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Like little baby birds with underdeveloped wings, the disciples are pushed out of the nest... forced to fly on their own. "Go!" Jesus says. "But we're not ready!!" they must have been thinking. Our wings are not developed, we haven't been trained for this. It's scary out there. What if I fall? What if I get hurt? What if I mess up?

This year graduates, parents, church-goers, people of faith... all of us totally understand this feeling of being pushed out of the nest. All of our comfortable spaces have now been transformed by COVID 19 and by the outcries issued from people of color challenging us to listen to them, to bring an end to racism, and to create a future where all people are treated equally – just as we are

equal in the eyes of God. No space feels like safe space anymore and we long for the comfort of our nests.

This year, the annual commissioning of graduates feels like more of a commissioning for all of us as we go out into the great unknown. We've said it before during these last few months, but now it rings truer than ever, we cannot go back to the way things were before. Like the disciples standing on the mountain in Galilee, we are hearing the call to "Go" long before we feel ready. Where will we go? What will we do? And what will it matter?

But also like the disciples, when we listen, we might hear the words of Jesus through the Gospel of Matthew reminding us that we know what to do... Make disciples – just as you have been made a disciple... a follower of Jesus... the one who taught you to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and to liberate all who remain captive to systems and sources of oppression. Baptize them – with living water, offering new life that is rooted deep within the heart of Christ. And teach them everything... everything you have learned along the way about love and acceptance, about working for wholeness and always choosing peace in the face of violence. Teach them that bit about welcoming strangers and loving outcasts, listening to the cries of the downtrodden and brokenhearted... for there, on the margins, crying out for justice... that is where you found me ... and that is where you will continue to find me.

So GO, therefore... and do everything I have taught you.

Trouble is, it's never been done this way before. To our young people, graduating from high school and looking ahead to college and careers... we don't know what the next 6 months, 6 weeks, or even 6 days will hold... because we've never been through a time like this before.

But we do know that you're going to be OK. You're actually going to be better than OK... You are going to make a difference in this world – changing it for the better – in ways it is crying out for change. We know this because you have made a difference here, in our little nest, the whole time you've been here. You're going to make it better because you have drawn near to the heart of Christ these last few years. You have learned the language of God's love and you have been awakened to the cries of the unheard. And though many of you will leave the Greystone nest very soon... to live your faith bravely and boldly in our world, we know (and hopefully you know too) that you do not go alone... but you carry us with you every step of the way. And more than that... just as the disciples were commissioned to go out into Galilee, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching others everything they'd learned, you also carry with yourselves ...we all carry within ourselves the promise that Christ is with us always,

Even when we're shoved out of the nest...

Even when everything around us changes...

Every moment, every place, in every time...

Even to the end of the age.

So Go therefore! The whole world is crying out for Good News.