

**Luke 24:44-53**                      *The Class of 2020*  
First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, AL  
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44 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46 and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." 50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51 While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52 And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53 and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

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Nobody really remembers the class of 1979. I mean, I kind of do, because I was part of it—the James B. Dudley High School Class of 1979 in Greensboro, NC-- but there wasn't anything particularly remarkable or memorable about us. We did the typical high school stuff, we graduated, and we went off to work or the military or college. Remarkable things happened that year, but I wasn't terribly connected to them. The following fall, on November 3, 1979, was the Greensboro Massacre, in which members of the KKK and the American Nazi Party gunned down five people at a rally for workers' rights. That's a major event that happened in my home town, and I was just an hour down the road in Chapel Hill, but I was oblivious.

A year after *that*, in the fall of 1980, was the first Presidential election in which I was eligible to vote. I'd always been interested in politics. I fully intended to vote by absentee ballot. Except I never followed through on sending off for one—and it turns out they don't magically appear in your mailbox. So I didn't even cast a vote. I was ashamed afterwards, and I did learn something from it. Now, I don't miss a single election, no matter how minor, even if I'm going to be away.

So, yeah—there was nothing especially remarkable about the class of 1979—or, at least, about this member of it.

So now, to you: the Class of 2020. Everyone will remember the Class of 2020. I'm speaking, of course, to those of you who are graduating from high school this year; but in a way, we are all the Class of 2020, because we are all being schooled.

We're learning that there's much we can't control in this world. We're learning that our lives can change in a moment. We're learning what it means to be vulnerable—because we are all vulnerable. And, while I spent my senior year and beyond blithely going about my own business while the events of the world happened, unnoticed—we've all learned that we and the world are one. There is no separation, no disconnect, no special bubble in which we can live. When a routine family gathering can wipe out four family members in a week, as happened to the Fusco family in New Jersey; or when singing a hymn in church can kill off dozens

of beloved members of a congregation—which happened to many churches right here in Alabama; then you know that we are all connected. We are all witnesses to these things.

Our passage from Luke is the very end of Luke’s Gospel, where we hear Jesus’ final words to his disciples before he leaves them to ascend into heaven. These words are his commencement address to them, because while he’s the one leaving, it’s still a graduation of sorts, for them. He’s taught them what they need to know—if they’ll only remember—and now he’s sending them on their way to live by what he’s taught them.

So: the commencement address. First, he “opens their mind to understand scripture”—in other words, they’ve had all these lessons, but now he’s helping them to put it all together, and the gist of it is that the Messiah suffered in order to rise; that they are to proclaim repentance and forgiveness because they are witnesses to these things; and that he will send the Holy Spirit to empower them.

Then, he blesses them and is lifted to heaven while the orchestra plays “Pomp and Circumstance,” and the disciples return to Jerusalem, rejoicing.

So, fast forward a couple of millennia, and what does Jesus’ commencement address say to us?

It tells us that any suffering we have—whether it is the loss of the treasured traditions of senior year, the loss of normalcy, the loss of physical contact with other people, the loss of income, the loss of loved ones from this virus—any suffering we have can be turned to the purpose of rising—of bringing new life to others, so long as it leads to change. That change being repentance and the forgiveness of sins. *Repentance* in the Greek is *metanoia*—“change of mind.”

Out of this particular lesson of pandemic, we’ve had our minds changed about who and what is important in this world—who is *essential*.

We’ve had our eyes opened even wider to the gross inequities in our own society.

We’ve had any notion that politics is something separate from us completely eradicated as we’ve seen, city-by-city, state-by-state, nation-by-nation; that who is in office can literally mean the difference between life and death.

So, “metanoia.” We’ve had our minds changed. But it’s not for the purpose of sitting passively and wringing our hands. It’s for the purpose of the forgiveness of sins. Meaning: not to stay mired in the past, but to have a reboot. A fresh start. A new way of living.

So, as Jesus is lifting off to heaven, he looks at us, reminds us of these things, and declares: “You are witnesses of these things.” That’s our authority. We are

witnesses. And what we've seen, we can't ignore. Because witnessing doesn't must mean seeing something: it also means saying something. Speaking out to let the others know what we've seen.

But how? Where will we get the courage to speak? How can we know it will make a difference? Well, Jesus says, "I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

So, that's the message: stay here in the city (like we've got a choice), until we have been clothed in power from on high. The power he's talking about is the Holy Spirit, and next week is Pentecost, which means we don't have long to wait.

So, for this moment, we can stay where we are, rejoicing—knowing that the losses of this time aren't for nothing. That we, whose eyes have been opened by Jesus and whose minds have been changed by his interpretation of our experience, are now being sent to change the minds and ways of the world.

So, fellow-members of the Class of 2020, fellow-witnesses of all these things: that is our charge—to witness to what we've seen in order to change the minds and ways of the world. It's a lot, but it's also a good reason to throw our caps into the air, because if we ever thought our lives didn't matter, and we didn't have a voice in this world, we've just been taught differently.

We can go forth rejoicing, knowing that we bear the blessing of the Risen Lord; and by the power of the Spirit, we bear fire from heaven—and we will be Christ’s witnesses from Birmingham to Montgomery, to Washington, D.C., and to the ends of the earth. Witnessing for true repentance. Witnessing for transforming forgiveness. Witnessing for new life. Thanks be to God.