

“May God be gracious to us and bless us,  
and make God’s face shine upon us.” AMEN!

As we near the time of the season of green,  
it is wise for us to take notice of  
the last couple Sundays we have left  
in the season of white: Easter.

White is the symbol of light and a  
metaphor for cleanliness, but the white of Easter  
is really a bit messy.

A bit like raising the white flag is a sign of surrender.

Surrendering is messy because  
there’s a laying down of weapons and  
a trust that the opponent will not  
simply shoot you, anyway.

That happens a lot.

If by some chance of grace that’s not  
the result there’s still a messiness in the  
peace negotiations.

That’s the way Easter is.

It’s a peace negotiation.

We've been given certain promises from God  
about resurrection and redemption.

We've been taught to see the importance of  
surrendering to God's will and  
there's opportunity to bask in God's mercy,  
but then what?

I've got all this stuff in my heart and  
it wants to flow through my hands, feet,  
heart, and attitude and that's  
when it gets messy. (Pause)

This time of year is meaningful in other ways, too.

Graduation is in the air!

Yards have signs congratulating  
their children on their achievements and  
surpassing an important rite of passage.

At the ceremony we went to on Tuesday  
at the Civic center  
it was beautiful to see so many families  
and friends cheer and celebrate  
their graduates.

Even quiet Colleen and introvert Pastor Tom  
yelled and rang cowbells when Jonas'  
name was called. :-)

And as I sat there amidst the thousand of others,  
the question came to me.

Why do we have things like  
convocations and graduations.

Why do we hold theses ceremonies  
that make people, often times, cry.

I watched students hug their  
teachers and say their good-byes;

watched as friends and family embraced.

We heard speeches from administrators,  
the salutatorian and valedictorian.

Why do we have these events that are  
so full of good-byes? (Pause)

Our lessons from the Bible might help us  
answer some of these questions.

For in the gospel, we hear part of the speech  
Jesus gave to his disciples when he began  
the process of saying good-bye to them.

In essence, what he was saying was  
that it's okay to be happy and sad,  
at the same time.

It's why he repeats in verse 28 these words:

You have heard me say to you,

"I am going away, and I am coming to you."

It's okay to be happy and sad at the same time.

We are sad when those we love graduate and  
leave because it signifies an ending,  
yet we are happy too, right?

One reason, yes, is achievement but  
even more powerful than achievement,  
we are filled with joy because there's  
something new happening.

And that can be scary, intimidating, and even messy.  
(Pause)

Jesus was helping the disciples see that  
they'll be sad when he must leave, but  
they'll also rejoice for another is coming.

"My peace I leave with you."

It is that promise of the presence of God's Spirit  
that will accompany us, remind us of  
Jesus' promises and mission, and  
always ensure us to know that God's  
love remains near and with  
human beings.

Joy and grief; happy and sad. (Pause)

We need these events in our lives because  
they mark for us an end to something,  
but something new is beginning. (Pause)

We recognize the messiness of it all.

The section from the book of Acts read  
today reflects what I am saying.

Paul received a vision and was  
convinced God called him, and others with him,  
to go to Macedonia to proclaim  
the gospel there.

What we didn't read was that, before the vision,  
they'd traveled through a handful of cities and  
met one dead end after another,  
but they kept being available and open  
to where the Spirit called them.

They kept showing up, and then,  
Paul received the vision.

This fall St. Stephen will begin  
prayerful process of renewal around this  
very text in Acts.

I don't need to tell most of you  
that our society has been dramatically changing

over the past few decades.

We used to be able to count on Lutherans coming to the church and that's just not the case anymore.

This is not only affecting our denomination.

Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Catholics, Baptists and even non-denomination Christian bodies are finding this new reality.

People are not, by and large, joining the church like they used to.

Sometimes there are good reasons to leave (or not come back) to church but the truth is that society has changed and membership is not as important as it used to be.

The move in our culture today is toward authenticity.

Which, in the end, is a good thing, something to be happy about, but it's going to get a little messy.

We'll need to encounter change and say "good-bye" to things, even people, that we assumed would be with us forever, as unrealistic as that belief is.

But in the change and messiness,

we'll encounter the Lydias around us.

We'll meet the strangers who already believe in God  
and we'll be our authentic selves knowing  
we are gifted and privileged with much  
to offer and share.

We carry a knowledge of God's love and  
can extend a welcome to the outsider  
to share a place at the table.

And when one must say good-bye,  
we'll fight back the tears and give thanks  
for the time we shared space and  
walked alongside one another,  
but we'll know something...

We will know that  
there's is something greater coming and  
that we are all changing. (Pause)

When I was young I wondered what heaven would be like.

I'd come up with some wild imaginations,  
but when I read this section of Acts  
(and the section of Revelation)

I think that it may be like prayer on the  
outside of the city and it's like a  
city descending to earth.

A city with refreshing streams and  
healing leaves for all the nations.

A place to go to and a place that's already here.

Like when we gather at the end of something and  
realize that this end  
begins something new.

AMEN!