

Going to commencements is what people do at this time of year and all graduations are similar. The graduates wear rented caps and gowns and come down the aisle to Pomp and Circumstance. Speakers for graduations can predictably be heard telling the graduates that the word commencement signifies that that this day is not ending but beginning new stage of life, but with each beginning there is an ending. Weddings are also commencements and for some there is a note of sadness. Parents and children will not live the lives they once lived. When Mary Magdalene saw the resurrected Jesus, she thought that she would resume the life that she and the disciples had with Jesus before his crucifixion. That's not the way it was going to be.

All this brings us to the ascension of Jesus into heaven. He did not really go up into the air like a detached helium balloon. Rather as he was speaking to the disciples, Jesus was lifted up and a cloud signifying the glory of God covered him and an angel said he would come back in the same way. Since then the church has been living in Advent and praying "Come Lord Jesus."

After a graduation or wedding or a funeral, we have good reason to be morose. Life is not going to be the same. The disciples had every reason to be morose, just as they were on the night that he was betrayed when told them he was going away and that they could not go with him. Quite to the contrary after Jesus ascended, the disciples headed back to the temple to glorify God. Strange behavior for a group of men who would not see a man in the same way they had known as a friend. Jesus also promised to be with the disciples until the end of age, but it would not be in those intimate meetings in which as a select group, he taught them about the kingdom of God. That's what the gospel of Mark is all about. Something had happened to the disciples. They were no longer afraid of the Jewish authorities who had crucified Jesus. They were not morose about no longer having Jesus around, but for ten days and they were praising God night and day in the temple. How do you account for the change of behavior? The answer is that for Jesus the ascension was a kind of commencement. It was as much a beginning as it was an ending. Jesus went from an ordinary life to God's right hand where now all things in heaven earth were made be subject to him. He had accomplished all the things God wanted him to do. By the cross he had conquered sin, death and Satan. If the ascension was a commencement for Jesus, a new beginning, it was also a commencement for the disciples. The ascension of Jesus meant that they were going to preach what he had preached. They were going to do what he had prepared them to do.

Here at Zion we get to know seminary students and their agonies. Studies is one of those agonies of the flesh. Come graduation day no student is rushing back into the classroom, but he is setting his vision on his career as a pastor and missionary. Whether it's a child off to the first days of school, a wedding, or even death, commencement does not allow any of us to look back. And the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God. The highlight of this day is, as Mark says, that the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, sat down at the right hand of God. The second highlight is that, like the disciples, now, our seminary graduates are going forth and preaching everywhere, while the Lord works with them.