

John 14:15-27**Sixth Sunday Morning of Easter, May 16, 2004****High School Graduate Recognition Day**

Can you imagine that Place to which we are going? We can only imagine, as The Youth Ensemble has just reminded us in this powerful song, what it will be like in the very Presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. Imagine: to literally be in His Presence one day. It will be here before we know it. Imagine all those places you and I will go as we make our journey from this life to Life Everlasting in the Presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are reminded in this text from John 14 that Christ is with us. He is not here literally as you and I understand human presence. Yet, He is here literally because He is present in your lives and in mine. On that Thursday evening before Good Friday, Jesus wanted to comfort His disciples and encourage them by reminding them that regardless all the places that they would go He would be with them through the One His Father was sending. That One, the Holy Spirit, would strengthen and encourage them. He would be their Friend. He would create truth within their lives. They would have an Advocate through the Power and the Presence of the Holy Spirit.

Can you image the Power that is available to each of us as a result of the faith that we have in Jesus Christ? That power makes our journey to the next life even more exciting. It makes our journey to Heaven one that is adventurous and great. That power creates an unspeakable joy and an unbelievable peace that brings comfort through the very peace of Jesus Himself. He said, ***“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid”*** (v. 27). None of us has to live with a troubled heart anymore.

These young men and women who are graduating from high school this week have, at various times in their lives, experienced difficulty and trouble just as the rest of us have. The reality is that they will experience difficulty and trouble in days and decades to come. In the midst of it all, however, there is a Presence that is abiding and a Presence that will sustain them whenever their hearts might become troubled. That Presence will enable them to take seriously what Jesus said at the very beginning of John 14 when he said, ***“Do not let your hearts be troubled”*** (v. 1) and at the end in verse 27, ***“Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”***

Now I must confess to you that my heart is somewhat troubled. I do attempt to take seriously all graduating classes. I honestly try not to play favorites. This year that is hard to do. I am very emotional about this class and I can't image what it will be like next year when my daughter, Emily, graduates. This class is special for several reasons. They were freshman when I became their pastor. So I have had the great joy of watching them during the entirety of their high school years grow in Jesus. And believe me: they have grown. Those I know intimately have grown deeply in Christ Jesus. I am grateful for that.

I look forward to reading and hearing about their journeys in the future. I look forward to learning about the difference they will make in the world and how each will impact the world with the Gospel of Christ as they live out the command to love just as Jesus loved. Where will they go? Some will go to various and sundry places here in Carrollton – believe it or not, you can go to various and sundry places in Carrollton! Some will go to places in Georgia. Others will go to places across the nation. Perhaps some will go to places internationally where they will make a difference. Who knows? Some may become missionaries in some of the remotest places on the Third Rock from the Sun. Oh the places these young believers will go!

If they will keep their hearts close to Christ and if they will allow the Spirit of God to comfort them and be their Advocate and speak truth to them, they will be able to make a grand and glorious difference wherever they go and I have every confidence they are going somewhere. Oh, the wonderful places that they have been. Oh, the wonderful place they are right now. Oh, the wonderful places to which they will go all their precious lives. Graduates, you need to be assured of something. John 14 is the basis of this assurance. You are not alone, even when you are alone, as you go into the future.

That Presence, which is unimaginable, is right here and always will be. That Presence, that we say we can only imagine, is really not our imagination. That Presence is real and inspires and encourages us. And wherever you go, the Presence of God in Christ goes with you. So you do not have to live with troubled hearts. You don't have to be afraid no matter the places you will go. You will never be alone even when you are.

Now there are lots of places you will go, aren't there? In Lewis Carroll's classic tale, Alice in Wonderland, Alice was having a conversation with the Cheshire Cat. She said to him, "Please sir, could you tell me the way I should go?" The cat responded, "That depends a great deal upon where you want to be." Alice said, "I'm not too much concerned about where." The Cat cleverly replied, "Then it doesn't make too much difference which way you go."

The truth is it does not make any difference where you go as long as you go with the reality of God's love deep in your hearts. As long as you go with the reality that this day is not about you, even though it is; that this day is not about Tabernacle Baptist Church, even though it is; and that this day is not about all the accomplishments you have made, all the honors that you have received, even though it is. This day is about the Lord Jesus Christ who has brought salvation into each of your lives and done so as a result of His grace and your response to His grace, which is called faith. If you will covenant to keep that reality ever before you, then you can go wherever in this world and be whatever as a result of the abiding Presence of Jesus of Nazareth.

Charles Dickens made an astute observation. It is somewhat discouraging and depressing. Dickens said, "It is a disquieting thought to do anything for the last time." Indeed it is whatever it may be. Whether it is some activity in band, sports, cheerleading, speech, debate, drama, going to history class, or walking down the hall for the last time as a student. The church plays into this too. Whether it is singing in the student choir or the Youth Ensemble or going on a student mission trip or retreat for the last time. These kinds of things really are disquieting. They do bring uneasiness to the soul. But there can also be something good discovered in doing something for the last time. As one season of life closes, another opens. New opportunities avail themselves. I don't know what those opportunities may be for you, but I have a hunch they will be wonderful because of the places you will go.

I graduated from high school on Thursday, May 29, 1975 – 29 years ago. I had no idea at that time that I would be privileged, blessed, and honored by God to stand before you this day and this family of faith to preach and speak. I had no idea then that I would be blessed and privileged to pastor such a wonderful congregation like Tabernacle Baptist Church. Who knows where God may take you. He will guide you and as you go in His guidance, always remember that He goes with you.

As I said just a few moments ago, there will be those times when you are alone, when you feel alone. Even though you are alone, rest assured you're really not. There is a Power and a Presence that is far greater than you can possibly ever imagine that will sustain you and encourage you and grant you peace so your hearts will not be troubled and your fears may be overcome.

Some of you were here two weeks ago today when my "mentor at a distance" and my favorite preacher, Frank Pollard, was here to preach. Frank has always been an inspiration to me. He did something in his sermon that inspired me to do something this morning. So I have been hustling, trying to pull this together. I don't know if I can pull it off or not, but I'm going to make an attempt.

There is a wonderful new book that has just been published entitled, The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss.¹ I'm going to purchase it this week. James Kemp, the author, points out the "gospel truths" that are found in many of Theodor Geisel's (alias Dr. Seuss) writings. I began to realize several years ago that Dr. Seuss is an excellent theologian. He has some very profound things to say and especially so on a day when we affirm our high school graduates as we think about all those places they will go. Some years ago, he wrote a wonderful book called Oh, The Places You'll Go!² I do believe that Dr. Seuss said it so well in that book when he said,

Congratulations! Today is your day.
 You're off to great places. You're off and away.
 You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes.
 You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
 You're on your own, and you know what you know,
 and you're the one who'll decide where to go.

You'll look up and down streets, look them over with care.
 About some, you may say, "I don't choose to go there."
 With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet,
 you're too smart to go down any not-so-smart street.

You may not find any you'll want to go down.
 In that case, of course, you'll head straight out of town.
 It's opener there in the wide, open air.
 Out there, things can happen and frequently do
 to people as brainy and footsy as you.
 And when things start to happen, don't worry, don't stew.
 Just go right along – you'll start happening, too.

Oh, the places you'll go!
 You'll be on your way up. You'll be seeing great sites.
 You'll join the high flyers who soar to high heights.
 You won't lag behind because you'll have the speed.
 You'll pass the whole gang and you'll soon take the lead.
 Wherever you fly, you'll be best of the best.
 Wherever you go, you'll top all the rest.
 Except when you don't because sometimes you won't.

I'm sorry to say so, but sadly, it's true
 that bang-ups and hang-ups can happen to you.
 You can get all hung-up in a prickly perch.
 Your gang will fly on. You'll be left in a lurch.
 You'll come down from the lurch with an unpleasant bump,
 and then chances are you'll be in a slump.

Now when you're in a slump, you're not in for much fun.
 Unslumping yourself is not easily done.
 You'll come to a place where the streets are not marked,
 some windows are lighted, but mostly they're dark.
 To a place you could sprain both your elbow and chin.
 Do you dare stay out? Do you dare go in?
 How much can you lose? How much can you win?

And if you go in, do you turn left or right? Or
 right and three-quarters? Or maybe not quite?
 Or go around back and slip in from behind?
 Simple, it's not I'm afraid you'll find
 for a mind-maker-upper to make up his or her mind.

You can get so confused that you'll start into race
 Down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace
 and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space,
 headed I fear for a most useless place –
 The Waiting Place – Where everyone's just waiting:

Waiting for a train to go or a bus to come
 or a plane to go or the mail to come
 or the rain to go or the phone to ring or a snow to snow
 or waiting around for a "yes" or a "no" or waiting for their hair to grow.

Everyone's just waiting – waiting for the fish to bite
 or waiting for wind to fly a kite
 or waiting around for Friday night
 or waiting perhaps for their Uncle Jake or a pot to boil
 or a better break or a string of pearls or a pair of pants
 or a wig with curls or another chance. Everyone's just waiting.

No, that's not for you.
 Somehow, you'll escape all that waiting and staying.
 You'll find the bright place where boom-bands are playing
 with banners flip-flopping.
 What's more, you'll fly high, ready for anything under the sky –
 ready, because you're that kind of gal or guy.

Oh, the places you'll go.
 There's fun to be done.
 There are points to be scored.
 There are games to be won.
 And the magical things you can do with that ball,
 will make you the winningest winner of all. Fame.
 You'll be famous as famous can be,
 with the whole, wide world watching you on TV.

Except when they don't because sometimes they won't.
 I'm afraid that sometimes you'll play lonely games, too –
 games you can't win 'cause you'll play against you.
 All alone, whether you like it or not,
 alone is what you'll be quite a lot.

And when you're alone, there's a very good chance
 you'll meet things that'll scare you right out of your pants.
 There are some down the road between hither and yon
 that will scare you so much you won't want to go on.
 But on you will go though the weather be foul.
 On you will go through your enemies' prowl.
 On you will go through the hack and crack's howl.

Onward, up many a frightening creek,
 though your arms may get sore and your sneakers may leak.
 On and on, you will hike, and I know you'll hike far
 and face up to your problems, whatever they are.

You'll get mixed up, of course, as you already know.
 You'll get mixed up with many strange birds as you go.
 So be sure, when you step, step with care and great tact,
 and remember that life's a great balancing act.
 Just never forget to be dexterous and deft
 and never mix up your right foot with your left.

And will you succeed?
 Yes, you will indeed –
 ninety-eight and three-quarters percent guaranteed.
 Kid you'll move mountains.
 So be your name Buxbaum, Bixby, or Bray or Mordecai, Ali, VanAllen, O'Shay.

Or if by chance your name be
 Campbell, Pitts, Wood, or Warren,
 Carter, Lyle, Scott, Sherseth, or Loren.
 Mercier, Morgan, Standifer, Wilkins, or Dilnore,
 Green, Head, Hollingsworth, Gilmore,
 Kimbrell, Stone, or Kilgore.

You really are off to great places. Today is your day.
 Your mountain is waiting, so get on your way.

And as you get on your way, don't ever forget, that Christ is with you. He "*will not leave you as orphans*" (v. 18a). Don't ever forget that Tabernacle Baptist Church loves you very much. And don't ever forget, that the Pastor of your high school years loved you very much, too, and he always will. Praise God for all the places you will go! And praise God you're never alone as you go to all those places you will go!

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor
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All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from Today's New International Version, 2001.

¹James W. Kemp, The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2004.

²Dr. Seuss, Oh, The Places You'll Go! New York: Random House, Inc., 1990.