

Dear graduates and families, brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace to you and peace from our God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

What a fun time of the year this is: Graduation Season! Ceremonies to attend, open houses to visit, lots of delicious foods to sample and enjoy, and it also means lots of thinking about the future.

Yes, graduation is a wonderful time to celebrate the great accomplishments that these students have achieved. It's a time to be thankful for the professional educators and the families who helped these young people to meet their goals. It's also a time to thank God who has carefully watched over and blessed these graduates and brought them to their goal.

But, after all the celebrations are over, the confetti is swept up, the decorations are taken down, and the pictures and memorabilia are put away, you may very well be filled with a mix of emotions: Maybe it's satisfaction at the successful completion of a program. Maybe it's excitement in anticipating what comes next in life. Maybe it's sadness at the thought of parting from friends and a familiar routine. Maybe it's feelings of worry about the future.

Satisfaction, excitement, sadness, and worry are feelings to which every one of us can relate, no matter what stage we are at in life. To each of us, God has these comforting words of assurance: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

In other words, God is in control. Rely on Him to guide you. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." (Proverbs 3:5-6)

Still, after the uplifting times of excitement and celebrating are done, there almost always comes that feeling of "Well... now what?" That sense of purpose and joy you had before – it's gone. Now you're going to have to find something else to do, something else that gives you a sense of purpose and joy.

That's true of just about everything we do in this world. We all want to have a sense of purpose in our lives. And we all want to have something that brings us joy. School or sports can provide that for some, but only for a little while. Some people like to dive into home improvement projects, and that works too, but only for short time. Hobbies are good, but the purpose and the joy they bring to us lasts only a little while, as well.

Today, through God's Word, though, I would like to show you where you can find a sense of purpose and joy for your life that will last your whole life

long. Yes, it's a joy and a purpose that will never ever **end**. Let's take a look at our Gospel, Luke 24.

It was 40 days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead and our Lord gathers His followers together on the Mount of Olives. This was in the same general area where He had been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. In fact, it wasn't too far away from the hill where He was crucified. On this day, the risen Lord Jesus gathers His disciples together because He had a few more things He wanted to say to them before He left them.

And as you watch the disciples here, you can see that they're still confused about why Jesus had come. They asked Him if He was now going to restore Israel to the glory and grandeur it had once enjoyed in the past when King David and King Solomon ruled the land. Jesus told His disciples, His friends not to think about those kinds of things. What He really wanted them to think about was their **purpose** in life, now that He was about to leave them.

Over the last 3 years, their purpose as disciples had been to follow Him, and to watch Him fulfill every single prophecy about the Messiah that was ever written about Him in the Old Testament. Their purpose was to watch Jesus suffer and die and rise from the dead. Very soon, with the Holy Spirit's help, they would come to understand what all these things meant. For now, they were done, done following, done learning. Now, Jesus was going to give them a new job, a new **purpose** for their lives.

Look at what Jesus tells them in verse 48 in Luke: "You are **witnesses** of these things." The same thing is repeated in Acts 1:8: "You will be my **witnesses** in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." That's what Jesus wanted those disciples to do – that was their new purpose in life - to be witnesses to other people. They had seen all these things happen. Soon they would understand **why** they happened. Their purpose now, was to **witness** the things they have seen and learned to other people.

As a Christian today, that's part of **your** purpose too. We just celebrated Easter not too long ago. Through God's Word, you watched with eyes of faith as Jesus suffered, died, but then rose again. Even though you didn't see those things with your eyes, you heard about it and believed it with your heart. In today's reading from Ephesians Paul prays that "the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may **know** the hope to which Christ has called you." By opening the eyes of your heart God the Holy Spirit has led you to understand why Jesus died, and why He rose from the dead. He was your sacrifice. He is the reason you are forgiven of your sins and have the **sure hope** of eternal life. Today, in addition to the meaning God gives to your life

through your vocations, or callings, those very important roles you have in your family, work and community, **part** of your purpose is **also** to be a witness of the things of God to others. That's why you're here. That's why God has put you here on this planet – to be a witness of the facts: That Jesus Christ has come. That He has died on a cross and that has taken away your sins and the sins of all people. Someday He is coming back. That's amazing stuff that you know. God wants you to be a witness of those things to others. That's the most important purpose we have- to share this Good News of eternal life found only in Jesus.

After talking with the disciples, Jesus performed one more miracle for them. He lifted up His hands to bless them. And then He ascended into the sky, right before their eyes, and eventually, He was hidden by a cloud. As the disciples were staring up at the sky, two angels appeared to them, and told them that someday, Jesus would come back, in the same way that they saw Him go into heaven.

And so what did the disciples do? We're told in verse 52 that they worshipped Christ on that mountain. And then they returned to Jerusalem, filled with a sense of great **joy**. They met with each other in the temple courts, praising God for the things they had heard and seen. Think about that. Before, the disciples would hide in their houses, afraid of the Jewish leaders. Now, we see them out in public boldly worshiping Jesus and filled with joy. Why the big change? They had just seen Jesus triumphantly ascend to His throne in heaven. There was no doubt in their minds anymore that He was the God of the universe, the King of heaven and earth. They had just heard two angels tell them that someday, Jesus would return on the clouds, just as they had seen Him go. That's what filled them with joy. Those angry, menacing Jewish leaders couldn't keep those disciples from publicly displaying their joy in the temple courts.

So what does this have to do with your life today? If you're looking for a sense of joy in **your** life, a deeper, **longer-lasting** sense of joy, look where the disciples looked. Look to Jesus. Yes, there will be times in your life when you are upset. Without a doubt things will happen that will anger you, sadden you, bring you down. But for a Christian, underneath that anger or sadness, you will find a layer of joy that the world cannot take away. "I know God's not punishing me," a Christian can say. "All my sins have been taken away by Jesus. I know I'm forgiven. I know that God will work this problem out. I know that God will give me the strength I need to endure After all, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!' (Philippians 4:13) I trust and I know that

God will get me through this and best of all there's a better world coming." That's Christian joy. The disciples had it after they saw Jesus ascend. Ten days later on Pentecost their joy was made even more full as they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. In our lives today we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit when we are baptized, when we hear and read the Word of God. Through the forgiveness of sins, and strength for our faith that He gives through these means of grace, **and** in the Lord's Supper, God fills us with joy, the same kind of joy the disciples had after they witnessed the ascension of Jesus.

Today with the eyes of your heart, **you** have watched Jesus ascend. The Lord has reminded you of your purpose. He has given you a kind of joy that you can't find anywhere else. And He's given you the power to witness that joy to others. One day He will return from heaven in the same way the disciples saw Him go into heaven. And on that day we will be filled with overwhelming and perfect joy as we live with Him and all our loved ones in the faith forever. With Jesus, the best really is yet to come! Amen.