Jesus Christ: Life's Commencement Address

This is the time of the year when students graduating from pre-K, elementary school, high school, and colleges celebrate with their families and loved ones the time-honored ceremony called Commencement. In addition to the conferring of diplomas, there is a tradition that a famous individual should offer words of congratulation, confer sage advice, provide inspirational stories, and describe the qualities that the graduates possess that have made them successful. My favorite line that is repeated time and time again is "commencement is not an end but a beginning" which has been spoken so often it is impossible to cite its origin. With as much preparation as these speakers endure to deliver that one wonderful speech, many of us who have attended these events over the years can barely remember what was said, let alone who said it. I am sure that the words of wisdom that I offered to our graduates at CBU's Commencement this year are long forgotten.

As I reflected on this commencement season, I began to think about the 40 days Jesus Christ spent on earth after his resurrection. The analogy that comes to mind would be the pressure he must have felt to have to give that final "commencement speech" to his graduates, the apostles. In the case of Jesus Christ, this was a speech that could not be forgotten as it not only needed to be etched into the minds and hearts of the apostles, but must be in a form that could be passed on through eternity by humans......not a simple task!! He also knew that after his Ascension into heaven, he would not be on earth in the form of a human to reaffirm those words as is the case with the traditional commencement speaker.

So how did Jesus approach that last commencement address? In his divine wisdom, Jesus divided his commencement address into manageable segments with appropriate signs that would be easily remembered and would allow the apostles to pass the message to subsequent generations. In the story of the road to Emmaus, he first engaged the apostles in a lively dialogue as they did not recognize him, but then through the breaking of the bread, they knew that Jesus had risen from the dead. He followed up this appearance with a visit to the apostles showing them his hands and feet, using the words "peace be with you" and instituting the sacrament of Penance. Then, there was the story of Jesus on the shore telling Peter and a few apostles to cast their nets having caught nothing previously. After they listened to him, they caught an overflow of fish and recognized him. Subsequently, after asking Peter if he loved Jesus, he told him to "feed my lambs and sheep" and follow him.

My favorite and maybe most powerful "commencement speech" was that related to doubting Thomas, someone to whom all of us can relate.

Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:24-29)
Do not let these final words of Jesus go the way of so many of the commencement addresses. We will be hearing this spring....."His life on earth was not an end but a beginning" for all humanity!