

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“Theophilus, God’s Beloved”

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Acts 1:1-11

May 16, 2010

A few of you are graduating this spring and leaving the place in life where you have been, and going to something different. Some of you are leaving town, while some are staying in Waco to go to college from high school, or you may be graduating from your college program, but you are staying here because you love August in central Texas. But even if you aren’t changing life geographically, it is a new place in life, it’s a new time. So this is for you and for all of us who ever came to a point in life that changed everything, and you knew it was one of those moments. You knew it was a moment that changed everything, and you tried to act all important with great wisdom and reflective perspective about the future, and all the things valedictorians talk about in graduation speeches, but in your heart, you had no idea what it meant for your life.

If you read the first chapter of Acts you see that you aren’t the first to feel that way. You aren’t the first to come to a major point when life flips your tassel to the other side of your mortar board, and you go through the ‘Out Door’ into the rest of life while someone cheers you on, “You are ready. Go get ‘em.”

In the first chapter of Acts, the little group of disciples graduates from the school of Jesus. I don’t just mean that as a cheesy metaphor related to our graduations from college and high school. He was their rabbi—their teacher, and they were disciples—learners, followers, really more than students who learned intellectual exercises and passed exams. To follow a rabbi was to have your life absorbed into his, and his life absorbed into yours. They had a saying that was like this, “May you walk in the dust of your rabbi. May you follow so closely to him that you learn not only what he says but what he would say were he here to say it.” And then the day comes when he’s not there and you go forward remembering what you learned in the past.

Jesus said to them, “the Holy Spirit will be with you and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And then He left them. The Bible says, “He ascended. He went up and they watched Him leave.” And, that was that. He’s gone. Everything changes. They have graduated from the school of Jesus. That doesn’t mean of course that they have learned everything there is to learn, or that their graduation means that they’ve got it all down and all right. It means that Jesus has turned over His work to them, and left them to do it. He turned their tassels and said, “Go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.” And two angels standing there with them said, “Well, don’t let the grass grow under your sandals. Get to it.”

It’s more than just a geographic challenge. It’s also a spiritual challenge. If they were reluctant to “get to it,” it’s understandable. Jesus’ last words weren’t exactly good news for these guys. It’s leaving your comfort zone. Jerusalem was where Jesus was arrested and crucified; in Judea they tried to stone him; in Samaria lived the Samaritans, which no one likes. It’s sort of like being told, “You will be witnesses in College Station.” You know deep down God loves those people, but can’t we just leave it at that? And, the ends of the earth

wasn't exactly a luxury vacation. You, who are graduating are either leaving Waco geographically, or at least you are leaving your comfort zone spiritually. Wherever you go, it's different from where you are now.

When you leave here it's possible, if not probable, that you are going to a very different place than Waco. You'll go to a place where, if you have a Bible study in a coffee shop, you'll do it in whispers instead of shouts. You'll go to a place where the clerk at the UPS store will ask you where your package is going, but won't also ask, "Do you know where you are going if you were to die today?" (This happened to me).

But you don't just go. You are sent. We send you. And as we do, we hope there are some things you have learned from your experience and time at DaySpring. Wherever God is taking you, this time here has been preparing you. This is a special place, and each of you have helped make it so. And there are some ways of talking about, and doing church at DaySpring that we hope you take with you as you go. Here are some of them:

We hope you have learned to swim in the deep end of the pool. There are depths to scripture, worship, and Christianity that most of us have only begun to explore. Of the gospel of John, Augustine said, "It is deep enough for an elephant to swim and shallow enough for a child not to drown." This is true of Christianity. It is a simple faith. The humblest believer can understand it and live it. At its core is the untamed assertion that there is a God who knows you and loves you and wants a relationship with you, and is willing to do, and has done, everything possible to clear the path for that relationship to grow. Christianity is about believing in God, repenting of sins, being baptized, and sharing it with others.

But that is not all there is. There are unplumbed depths in the simple clarity of this story. You are not true to the gospel if at the end of studying it and learning it, the gospel does not remain strange, restless, and unfamiliar. As long as we live and as closely as we gaze into the mystery of God, we will always see in a glass dimly, until the day we see face to face. But some see clearer than others.

And that is why we call on the wisdom of those who have gone before us. The Church Fathers, as we call those Christians from the early centuries, who thought and wrote about God --- and what it means that Jesus died on a cross for our salvation; and what prayer is; and how to read scripture; and how to do church; and how to live a contemplative life, and an active life --- a life of prayer and service; and how to overcome temptations, and how to be a Christian without being a "dudus." There's 2000 years of men and women who help us. And the Creeds --- that's why we recite the creeds, because they teach us the faith. There's a deep end of the pool of the faith. And there's a deep end of the pool in your spirit. And we hope you have learned to swim there. The irony is that in water when you dive down deep, you have to hold your breath; in your spirit, when you dive down deep is when you can really breathe, and really live.

Second, we hope you have learned to be confessional and generous. We Christians tend to have a hard time with our beliefs. Sometimes we believe in some core doctrines of Christianity, but then get defensive and belligerent about them like we are always under attack. We have a tendency to insist that our way of seeing and understanding things is the way that everyone must see it to be a Christian. "You're not

really a Christian. No, *you aren't*," is a popular sport. And then to avoid playing that game, we kind of retreat to, "it doesn't matter what you believe --- it's all about the questions." And then we question everything. And that's exhausting.

There are some Christians who find a way to have both. To have their feet planted firmly on solid ground while leaving room for dialogue with people who might see some things different from them. There are some who want to agree on core beliefs, to find themselves shaped by the wisdom of the ages and the guidance of scripture; but who also recognize that there is still quite a bit of room for a variety of understanding the world in the mystery of God. That's probably where we fit.

We hope that at DaySpring you have become the kind of person who can hold on to core doctrines and be generous with others. It's about being united in the main things and generous in everything. That's why we say creeds from time to time to remind ourselves of the ancient core of the Christian faith, and to be reminded of that which is central to us. That's why we have such lively Sunday School classes --- because we find energetic disagreement about other stuff that's not in the creed. At this time, when our culture has become increasingly unable to really dialogue about anything, church **can** be a place where people who are very different from one another can come together and worship shoulder to shoulder and discuss face to face. To be a part of this requires a little bit of courage and a little bit of humility. We hope you are generously orthodox.

We also hope you have learned to be a Baptist and a Christian. For some people being a Baptist means nothing at all. For others it means everything. For DaySpring, it's a little of both. There are some great things about the way Baptists have done church and Christianity. We baptize people under water when they give their lives to Christ. That's a beautiful thing. We think the Bible is central to our faith. We think that all people, you and me, lay people and pastors, are called to be priests to one another, to speak with love and authority about scripture and faith into one another's lives. As a Baptist church, the church is yours: it's responsibilities, it's decisions, it's direction, it's work and worship are yours. The ecclesiology, that's church-speak for the way we do church; puts the church on your shoulders. When you served on the Chart and you mopped a bathroom stall, mowed the grass, served communion to the elderly at Ridgecrest, or prayed during worship, or shared an opinion in a business meeting, you were doing church like a Baptist. I know that might give you shudders, but it's true. This is your church. We hope you've learned to be a Baptist. We also hope you've learned to be a Christian. Baptists are one stream in the river of Christianity that flows in and out of a wider body, and to see that our way of doing Christianity intersects with that of others around us, and before us, is to be open to a wider, deeper river of faith.

We hope you remember fondly your time at DaySpring. We hope that the people, the music and maybe a sermon or two, the service, and your Sunday School class or Life Together Group, the silence, and the peace that rested you in your soul when you came in here on a Sunday morning (and had to sit in the window sill), are experiences you remember and shape you as you leave. We hope they were good experiences that make you hunger for it wherever you go, and that you find a place and people with whom to worship and grow and serve. We hope you have learned and experienced much here that you never forget. But mostly we hope you have learned this: **It's not about DaySpring.**

When you leave here and go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, or the ends of the earth, you may not find a church exactly like this one. Still, you should be on your way to joining a new church within 6 months of getting there. Because it's not about where you came from, it's about where you are going. The disciples weren't given the luxury of being sentimental or nostalgic about what was. What they were told is that God is ahead of you. Now Go. And do God's work.

For a long time people here at DaySpring, (and this is one of the things that allows DaySpring to be so special), have had a saying, "We hold the church lightly." We hold it in our hands, but we don't squeeze it to death. If we here practice this discipline, we ask you who are leaving to do so as well with your memories. "Hold DaySpring lightly." When you came here, DaySpring was probably different from the church you came from, if you came from a church, but you joined in and learned and contributed. The same will be true wherever you go. It will be different from DaySpring, and you'll have to love them for who they are, and love it for what God does in you there.

God has done something in you here. He has opened you up to the depths of your own soul, the depths of scripture, the wisdom of the ages and of the collective congregation. That doesn't change when you leave. You still have much to learn, share, and give to others. It's not about DaySpring. It's about God. It's always about God. We've dreamed about planting other DaySpring-like churches in other cities and maybe you'll be a part of that someday. But mostly, (and you can't plant a DaySpring church unless you get this); it's not about DaySpring, **it's about God.**

The book of Luke and the book of Acts, the first amazing chapter and all that follows about how those first Christians left their comfort zones and saw God at work in and through them, in ways they never imagined—in Jerusalem as the Spirit came on them, and they experienced and practiced deep community; in Judea as they saw miracles at work and were persecuted for their faith; in Samaria and places like it, as they welcomed people very different from themselves into the faith; and to the ends of the earth—Asia, Greece, Rome, and beyond. The whole book of Acts—with its challenge and promise to those who are always in the school of Jesus -- is addressed, in the very first sentence to Theophilus. Maybe Theophilus was a friend of the author. If so, his parents gave him a great name. Theophilus means beloved of God. Scholars debate who this Theophilus was and whether that was his real name or an honorary title given to him. But maybe, just maybe, Theophilus never was just one person; but is everyone who reads this story and then lets it read them. Maybe this is all of us, who are known and loved far beyond what we can earn or deserve, but as this grace poured down on us that changes everything. And that's what we hope most of all that you have learned, and experienced here at DaySpring, whether the church has been mostly for you a place of belonging or healing or rest, or inspiration or community or prayer, that whatever else it has been for you, that it is a place, and a people, among whom you found your true self and your true name. You are Theophilus. You are God's beloved.