

(choir singing)

- [Reverend Willimon] Welcome to this service of worship on the third Sunday of Easter. We have been led in worship by Mister Richard Cox and the university choral of the university of North Carolina, Greensboro. One of the great musical groups in our state. You may recall that last year when the university choral visited us we were without electricity on west campus. They did so well we've invited them back with lighting this time and they do well in the light or in the dark and we're glad that they're with us. Leading our service today is the Reverend David O. Jenkins who is the United Methodist campus minister and also Joseph Hester Presbyterian campus minister intern. They represent two of our active campus ministry groups here on the Duke campus and the Reverend Jenkins led a group of 25 students from Duke on a work team to Jamaica over spring break, which was funded in great part through the contributions of worshipers here in Duke Chapel and we're glad to have them leading us today. There's an error in the bulletin. Next week's service will be as usual at 11am, and not at 11:45. Let us stand and sing the hymn as we continue our worship. (organ music) (congregation singing)

- [Reverend Jenkins] Let us pray. We have come to this place, oh Lord because you have adopted us and as your daughters and sons we have come to love you to need you and to praise you. Gathered together, what we do here our singing, our preaching, our praying our listening, our waiting collected into worship as you transform us into a worshipping community in your name and by your grace we come before you. Amen.

Joseph Hester: Let us pray. Open our hearts and minds, oh God by the power of your holy spirit so that as the word is read and proclaimed we might hear with joy what you say to us this day. Amen. The first lesson is taken from the Book of Acts. Peter, standing with the eleven addressed the Judeans. "Let all the house of Israel therefore know "assuredly that God has made this Jesus "whom you crucify both Lord and Christ." Now when the Judeans heard this they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles "Brothers and sisters, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them "Repent and be baptized, every one of you "in the name of Jesus Christ "for the forgiveness of your sins "and you shall receive the gift of the holy spirit "for the promise is to you and to your children "and to all that are far off. "Everyone whom this Lord, our God calls." And Peter testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." So those who received Peter's word were baptized and there were added that day about 3000 souls. This ends the reading of the first lesson.

- Let us stand and read responsibly Psalm number 116 beginning at verse 12. What shall I return to the Lord for all my benefits? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call in the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. Precious is the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones. Oh Lord, I am your servant. I am your servant, the child of your handmaid. You have loosed my bonds. I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people in the courts of the house of the Lord in your midst of Jerusalem. Praise the

Lord. (organ music) (choir singing)

- The second lesson is taken from the Book of First Peter. And if you invoke as father the God who judges each one impartially according to their deeds conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile. You know that you were ransom from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors. Not with perishable things such as silver and gold but with the precious blood of Christ like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. Christ was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of times for your sake. You have confidence in God through Christ whom God raised from the dead and glorified so that your faith and hope are in God. Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for sincere love of each other love one another earnestly from the heart. You have been born anew. Not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and abiding word of God. This ends the reading of the second lesson. (organ music) (choir singing)

- We're in Easter. That time when we went out to the cemetery to look for Jesus crucified and dead only to discover that he was loose pursuing us already back to Jerusalem with that in-breaking of God's kingdom and so appropriately our gospel is a parable about the kingdom. Jesus said, for the kingdom of Heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day he sent them into his vineyard, and going out at about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them, he said "You go to the vineyard, too "and whatever is right I will give you." And they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour, he went out and found others standing and he said to them, "Why do you stand here "idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You go to the vineyard, too." And when evening came the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, "Call the laborers "and pay them their wages beginning with the last "up to the first." And when those hired about the eleventh hour came each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came they thought they would receive more. But, each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder saying, "These last worked only one hour "and you've made them equal to us "who have borne the burden of the day "in the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them "Friend, I'm doing you no wrong. "Did you not agree with me for a denarius? "Take what belongs to you and go. "I choose to give to this last as I give to you. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose "with what belongs to me? "Or do you begrudge my generosity?" So, the last should be first and the first shall be last. Jesus said that God's kingdom is like the owner of a vineyard who has some grapes to be harvested. And so he goes out into the marketplace early in the day and he hires some workers agreeing to pay them one denarius a day. And they go to work. But at mid morning, he looks over his vineyard and he sees that he is going to need more workers to get the job done. And so he goes back to the marketplace where he encounters some people standing around and he hires them. Even though a third of the day is already over he hires them, telling them that he'll pay them what's right. At noon he goes back downtown and he sees some people hanging out on the street corner and he invites them to come to work in his vineyard telling them that he'll pay them what's right. At three, well he's back downtown where he encounters a couple of young men with nothing to do, idle on the street corner and even though the sun is beginning to move toward the west, well what the heck? He hires them, agreeing to pay them what's right. Finally, at 5pm, one hour before quitting time he's back downtown and now there's almost no one left loitering on the street corner by this late hour of the

day. But there are a couple of slackers leaning over against the wall of the unemployment office sharing a bottle of Ripple. And even though it's only one hour before quitting time he hires them as well. Now if you're keeping score, by the end of the day we have different groups of workers in the vineyard who have been hired for twelve hours, for nine hours for six, for three, and for only one hour. Now they will be paid. Now if you will recall, a wage was agreed upon only for those workers who got there first and the wage was a denarius. But this parapatretic padrone pays those who got there last first. To everybody's amazement, he pays those who have worked for only one hour a denarius. And so everybody does some quick figuring and I suppose that means that those who've been there twelve hours are going to get twelve denari, right? Wrong. No, they get what they agreed to work for. A denarius. So there are murmurings of injustice. "What kind of way is this to run a vineyard?" They ask. "No," they are told, "the injustice is only apparent." They agreed to work for a denarius. They got a denarius. Now, Matthew in his editorial postlude to this parable suggests that this parable has something to do with the last shall be first and the first shall be last. And what does that mean? "Oh," said the disciples. "Oh, we get your point, Jesus! "Those Pharisees who have criticized you for "going out and eating and drinking "with sinners, those self righteous Pharisees "that think they know so much "and that they're so religious "they're going to end up on the outside "and those of us that those Pharisees "consider to be such outsiders "are going to end up on the inside, right Jesus? "The first shall be last, the last shall be first." "Oh," said the early church. "Ah, we get your point, Jesus. "Those Jews, those Jews who are supposed to be "God's chosen people. "They've rejected you, "and so now we gentiles, "those of us who were supposed to be last "those of us who had absolutely no claim "whatsoever on the promises of God "we get to be first "and those who have rejected you will be last." Well, we can certainly understand the murmurings of injustice of those Pharisees or those Jews who grumbled over God's generosity in Jesus coming to us and so late in the day, too. After they had believed and suffered because of their belief down through ages of misunderstanding and persecution and exile but that's tough. Even though we are last, we gentiles we get the same generous grace that God offered to them so long ago. The first shall be last, and the last first. God's grace is the same. The wages are the same for those who get there last as to those who get there first. But such an interpretation, I fear does not do justice to the scandal of this little story. The bite of this parable. On the first day of the class first day of the semester the professor says, "Now students, I have this difficult "very complicated math problem "the solution to which shall constitute "your entire grade for the whole semester. "Now, I'm going to go ahead and give you this problem "right now on the first day of the semester "because I want everybody in the class "to make an A. "The goal of this class is for everybody "to make an A "and I urge you to go ahead and begin work "on this problem right away "because it'll be your whole grade." Well you want to do well you don't want to have happen to what happened to you last semester and so you go right out of the class you get over to the library you check out books that will help you solve this problem and you go to work immediately. You begin calculation. And to your surprise you note that during mid February in casual inquiries to other members of the class that the rest of the class, it turns out hasn't even begun to work on the problem. They're gonna be sorry come spring. But of course that's tough that's their business. You've been at work on the problem since the second week of January. The week before the semester ends you are proudly putting the finishing touches on your solution to the problem and you run into Joe Jones in the cafeteria and Joe casually mentions to you that if he works very hard over the next couple of days, staying up for 48 hours straight he just might get the thing finished. And he tells you that there are others who haven't even begun. But of course, there's no hope for them no matter what, but that's their problem. Then comes the last day of

the semester. You proudly hand in your work to the professor. And to your shock, everyone else has their work as well. How did they do it? You're about to find out. Amanda Smith says, "Professor Jones, I want to thank you "for helping me figure this thing out last week. "I tell you, why, without your help "I don't know that I would've ever gotten it finished." "Well here it is Professor," says Jane Robinson. "All done, but of course thanks to your kind assistance "yesterday in the library." "Hey," says Joe. "Thanks for coming by the dorm last night." (laughter) "I'm sorry what my roommate said "of course the last person he expected to see "in a dorm was a math professor "but I really appreciate you coming by." You're aghast, they have all finished their work. While you were hard at work finishing this thing out on your own this professor has been all over campus visiting the dorms, he's in the library he's been everywhere helping everybody everybody but you, that is and so you tell him what you think of it. And the professor responds "Wait a minute. "I'm a math professor. "I want people to learn math. "Now why do you begrudge my generosity? "Didn't I make it clear at the beginning of this class "that the goal of the class was for everybody "to get an A? "You were able to finish it on your own, and that's fine. "The others needed a little special attention. "You get an A, and they get an A. "What's wrong with that, am I not doing you right?" Well somehow, it just doesn't feel right. You look at your A. It was what you wanted out of the class but now that everybody's got an A what with the professor's midnight forays into the dorms and everything well it just doesn't feel like an A. Isn't it odd how the professor's graciousness just doesn't feel like graciousness? You see, I don't think we'll get to the scandal of this little story by focusing upon Matthew's probably later editorial comment that the first should be last and the last should be first because that acts as if the scandal of the laborers in the vineyard isn't everybody despite when each arrived got a denarius or if the scandal of the story of the professor is that everybody got an A. But that's not really what gets us about this little story because after all, if you look at the bottom of your RSV Bible in the footnote a denarius a day is not all that great a wage to begin with. While nobody knows the precise value of a denarius we do know that it seems to have taken about a denarius a day to support a laborer and his family just at the level of bare subsistence. A denarius a day is not that generous. I mean, it's not as if this importer is throwing around money or something. In fact, the story says very little about wages. The main action of the story the plot is in these constant comings and goings of the owner of the vineyard. He goes out very early and he hires workers for the day and that's supposed to be it. But to our surprise, barely three hours later he's back downtown hiring more workers. And then again, and then again, and then again and we wonder why this owner of the vineyard was so bound bent and determined to have everybody off the streets that he could lay his hands on. Were his grapes already overripe? Did he know it was going to rain and the harvest might be ruined? Did he have a soft spot in his heart for the unemployed? We don't know. The story doesn't say. What the story does say and with great detail is that this particular master expended a great deal of gasoline going back and forth back and forth from his vineyard to town picking up anybody off the street who would go and agree to work in his vineyard for what's right. And it's enough to make you ask what is right? What's right? What's justice? I think for us, justice is a matter of giving people what they are worth. Let's see, let's see, you work longer so obviously you should get more. Let's see, you stayed in school, didn't you all the way through your BA, your MA, and your PhD? Oh, well you should get more. You have a higher IQ, then certainly you should get more. That's justice for us. But the funny thing is in the story justice, what's right is determined not by what's right. I mean, after all, he agreed to pay a certain wage, he just ended up paying it to everybody. What's right is determined by the owner's desire for laborers. It isn't that a denarius is so generous the scandal of the story is in this owner's repeated forays in and out in and out to town. It's in the invitation the generosity is in the

invitation. He just wouldn't stop going back and forth back and forth, he wouldn't stop calling he wouldn't stop inviting and hiring and seeking and offering. Here it seems is a kingdom which is not structured on justice. What we deserve or what's fair or what's earned. Here is a kingdom structured on something other. Now we may structure our kingdoms on justice or at least we attempt to do so but let's remember that that's our way of doing business. The way God does business, it would seem is quite another matter. When we put a statue of justice over the door to our courthouse, you note what it is? It's a woman who is blindfolded. That's our idea of justice dispassionate, cool, distance, objectivity. That's what we call right. Balanced, blind, objectivity. But God's right may not be our right. Persistent, intrusive invitation not dispassionate, blind justice is the way God's kingdom is structured. We like to think that we get what we have based on our efforts our attempts to be good and our attempts to do good. But the story suggests that we'll get what we'll get based on the invitation, the invitation. The grace in the story, the grace is in the owner's persistent forays into town. The owner won't be happy until everybody is at work in the vineyard. The owner is the professor who won't sleep well at night until everybody in the class gets an A. It's the giver of a banquet that just won't be happy until everybody's inside moving to the music. If all we want is justice from God that's probably all we'll get. Here, take your denarius and go, big deal. But through the master's intrusive, never-ceasing mercy you and I may hope for a little more than justice. More than just what's right. We may get the master persistent, intrusively, relentlessly pursuing us until the midnight hour unhappy until everybody's there. And so I say to you, this is an Evangelical this is an Easter parable. That's why we're telling it to you today. Because it's a story, and I bet you can think of others of a God who refused to leave us alone who just wouldn't let us be with what's right. A God who came out and he sought us out and he found us. Sometimes early and sometimes late. He pursued us into our warped humanity and even when we rejected him and we crucified him and we came out to the cemetery saying "Well, it's all over." As it turned out, it was just beginning. And he pursued us. He pursued us in life, he pursued us in death he pursued us all the way to Hell. He pursued us. You're here this morning not because you've been given what you deserve, I mean who would want that from God? But because you've been invited. Some of you came early and some of you got here late. That's okay. It's the way God does things, relentlessly. And even if you're not here this morning the parable suggest there's still time. Even if you're not really here that's okay, because the good news is he's out looking for you. Eleventh hour workers are as sought by him as those who have been here all day. And maybe if we've been here all day since early morning the funny thing is that the bad news is and the good news is that here's a master who invites, welcomes, pursues everybody even though those that we have spent much of our lives despising and thinking that we deserve more than they. Do you remember a celebration in church on the Sunday you got the news that convicted Watergate crook Charles Colson had been born again? I don't think we had a celebration here. How did you feel when you got the news that convicted cocaine dealer John DeLorean had found the Lord? I don't remember a celebration even though Jesus says Heaven goes wild over just one of these. And last week, reading through the news magazine I said, "Well, it's at last good to see "that Pete Rose finally gets what he deserves." And my wife informed me, "You know, I hear Pete is being born again." I said, "There has got to be a limit to this sort of thing!" (laughter) Murmurings of injustice. Let us get it through our heads that our worth in this vineyard is determined not by what's right, justice but by the invitation, who's called. Our shepherd says he's got other sheep yet to be found into this fold. And the hope, the Easter Evangelical resurrection hope is that the God who has pursued us so in life and I bet some of you could tell a story about that shall pursue us even in death so that in life or in death come early, come late, we're invited. He's out looking for you. The invitation

is based not on how hard we've worked or long we've been here but on the mercy the pursuing, never-ending mercy. Amen. (organ music) (congregation singing)

- The Lord be with you.

Congregants: And also with you.

- Let us pray. Oh Lord we are here because you have invited us and we give you thanks for such a great mercy-filled invitation. We come before you as a people you have forgiven yet even as forgiven people we still choose to sin and live as if you have not invited us live as if you do not exist. In this silent time of confession teach us how to pray. Teach us how to confess and in that confession, forgive and welcome your forgiveness which heals and sanctifies us. In silence, we pray to you, oh Lord. Forgive us Lord for only wanting the world's justice for being afraid of your grace and mercy forgive us for the violence which is in our lives the violence which is untouched by the prince of peace forgive us for leading false lives for our facades and deceit untouched by your truth about us forgive us for wanting to be anonymous even here in this place with friends even before you. Enable us to trust you and one another as we are fully known by you. Forgive us for all our broken relationships which we nurture, untouched by Christ who has reconciled us with our God. Forgive us for continuing to hate our enemies. We come before you with thanksgiving for this chapel we give you thanks for all the times you have waited for us here for all the times you went into town and brought us here for all the marriages and baptisms and funerals and feasts which are celebrated in this place and make it holy For all the students who sit alone in prayer here for the guests who come to worship for the musicians who fill this place with praise for Will and Nancy who preach good news for those who sweep and repair and tune and type for those who laid stone upon stone and fashioned windows of your stories. Oh Lord, we give you thanks. During this week of exams we pray for all the students here that they would seek wisdom that they would be honest that their security and hope and self image would rest in you. We pray for all teachers that they would seek wisdom that they would know your justice that they would lead such lives of goodness and faith they would be mentors in their relationships with students saints for us here. We pray for those today who are dying friends and strangers to us that they would die faithfully and the church would be faithful to them in their dying. For those who suffer we pray you would enable them to suffer faithfully and that all our pain and struggle might draw us deeper into intimacy with our Christ of the Cross. In this season of Easter enable us to be witnesses to the world of this resurrection, always pointing to the true hope and joy and peace and justice of our God. Oh Lord, God, lamb of God hear our prayers. In the name of the blessed trinity we pray amen. (choir singing) (organ music) (congregation singing)

- Oh God of the universe for everything good that we have and everything good that we are we give you thanks. Let praise and thanksgiving be ever on our lips as you transform us into thankful people. Let Jesus be our example even as we pray his prayer. Our Father which art in Heaven hallowed by thy name thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom the power and the glory forever. Amen. Go now in peace to love and serve the Lord who has invited you into this vineyard into his kingdom. In the name of the blessed trinity, amen. (organ

music) (congregation singing)

- [Reverend Willimon] Let us go forth in the name of Christ.

- Praise be to God. (organ music)