

(light organ music)

- Good morning, welcome to Duke Chapel this sixth Sunday of Easter and commencement Sunday. When you hear the bells begin to toll, that is the sign that the class of 1996 has officially graduated. I'd also like to extend a special word of welcome to all the mothers and grandmothers present with us today. You are bearers of life, co-creators with God, and that is a very special gift. We hope that this will be a day which is a joyous day of celebration for you and your families. Our preacher is the Reverend Nancy Ferree Clark, pastor to the congregation at Duke Chapel. It is our pleasure to welcome her to our pulpit once again. Now, let us continue our worship with the call to worship, please stand. You are no longer children of the world, put away your childish gods. God desires that we search and find our maker. Glory to God, whose face is not hidden behind the clouds. Other peoples may worship unknown gods, but as for this house, we will worship the Lord. (organ music) Let us pray. Loving God, in whom we live and move and have our being, dwell with us here, transforming the landscape of our souls, and granting the nourishment we need. We are hungry for your truth, and thirsty for real peace. Hear our prayer and praise, turn us away from evil, and prepare us for life abundant, amen. You may be seated.

- Let us pray the prayer for illumination. O living God, bring us forth from death to life so that, as the scriptures are read, and your word is proclaimed, we may be brought to a sure and living faith in your lordship, amen. First lesson is from 1 Peter 3:13-22. "Now who will harm you "if you are eager to do what is good? "But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, "you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, "but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone "who demands from you an accounting "for the hope that is in you, "yet do it with gentleness and reverence. "Keep your conscience clear, so that when you are maligned, "those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ "may be put to shame. "For it is better to suffer for doing good, "if suffering should be God's will, "than to suffer for doing evil. "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, "the righteous for the unrighteous, "in order to bring you to God. "He was put to death in the flesh, "but made alive in the spirit, "in which also he went and made a proclamation "to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, "when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, "during the building of the ark, in which a few, "that is, eight persons, were saved through water. "And baptism, which this prefigured, "now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body, "but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, "who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, "with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him." This is the word of the Lord.

- The appointed Psalm for the day is Psalm 66:8-20, found on pages 790 and 91 in your hymn book. Please stand as we read responsively. "Bless our God, O peoples, "let the sound of God's praise be heard, "who has kept us among the living, "and has not let our feet slip."

Audience: "For you, O God, have tested us, "you have tried us as silver is tried."

- "You brought us into the net, "you laid affliction on our loins."

Audience: "You let people ride over our heads, "we went through fire and through water, "yet you have brought us out to a spacious place."

- "I will come into your house with burnt offerings, "I will pay you my vows, "that which my lips uttered "and my mouth promised when I was in trouble."

Audience: "I will offer to you burnt offerings "of fatlings, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams, "I will make an offering of bulls and goats."

- "Come and hear, all you who worship God, "and I will tell what God has done for me."

Audience: "I cried aloud to Him, "and he was extolled with my tongue."

- "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, "the Lord would not have listened."

Audience: "But truly God has listened, "He has given heed to the words of my prayer. "Blessed be God, "because He has not rejected my prayer "or removed His steadfast love from me." (organ music)

- You may be seated.

- The gospel lesson is from John 14:15-21. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. "And I will ask the Father, "and He will give you another advocate "to be with you forever. "This is the spirit of truth, "whom the whole world cannot receive, "because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. "You know Him because He abides with you, "and He will be in you. "I will not leave you orphaned, "I am coming to you. "In a little while, the world will no longer see me, "but you will see me, because I live. "You also will live. "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, "and you in me, and I in you. "They who have my commandments and keep them "are those who love me, "and those who love me will be loved by my Father, "and I will love them and reveal myself to them." This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

- A reading from the Acts of the apostles. "Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus "and said Athenians, "I see how extremely religious you are in every way. "For as I went through the city and looked carefully "at the objects of your worship, "I found among them an altar with the inscription, "to an unknown god. "What therefore you worship as unknown, "this I proclaim to you. "The God who made the world and everything in it, "He who is Lord of heaven and earth, "does not live in shrines made by human hands, "as though he needed anything, "since He Himself gives to all mortals "life and breath and all things. "From one ancestor He made all nations "to inhabit the whole earth, "and He allotted the times of their existence "and the boundaries of the places where they would live, "so that they would search for God "and perhaps grope for Him and find Him, "though indeed He is not far from each one of us. "For in Him we live and move and have our being, "as even some of your own poets have said "for we too are His offspring. "Since we are God's

offspring, "we ought not to think that the deity "is like gold, or silver, or stone, "an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, "now He commands all people everywhere to repent, "because He has fixed a day on which "He will have the world judged in righteousness "by a man whom he has appointed, "and of this He has given assurance "to all by raising him from the dead." This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. It seems appropriate that in today's lectionary reading from Acts, on this graduation Sunday, as the bells remind us so gloriously, that we would overhear Saint Paul preaching in Athens, a university town, for such a setting shares many characteristics with ministry to a college campus. As a marketplace of ideas, Athens was a place of cultural and intellectual sophistication, the kind of place where curiosity flourishes, where new ideas come and go, where there's always an interesting conversation going on, likewise within a university. When James B. Duke first envisioned the Duke campus, over 60 years ago, he believed that within the mix of diverse ideas presented here, he wanted religion to be at the very center of that conversation, and that campus. Thus, he instructed his builders to erect a greater towering church at the heart of west campus, a building which would provide the literal connection between the living and learning portions of the university in hopes that it might influence the spiritual lives of all those who study and work here. For all of his wonderful vision, I wonder if Mr. Duke could really ever have imagined just what ministry in this place, in the late 20th century, would be like. Could he have envisioned how diverse the mix of beliefs represented here would become? How vital worship in this place would be to hundreds of people each week, and yet, how marginal, or even irrelevant, or offensive it would seem to others? After 11 years of ministry here, I feel confident in saying that a college campus is one of the most stimulating, yet challenging environments that I can imagine for witnessing to the gospel. Unlike the rural community where I grew up, where church, alongside school, and maybe 4H clubs, were the only games in town, a university provides a thousand different choices, it seems, ranging from what to read to who or what to worship. We are fortunate in these days of diminished Christian presence on many campuses to be blessed with a multitude of faithful worshipers and dedicated servants of the Lord here at Duke Chapel. Yet, Paul's address to the Areopagus continues to be relevant today. We need instruction about the ways in which Christianity is distinctive from the surrounding culture. How are we called to be set apart from those who would worship others gods? And where do we find common ground? How do we witness to the reality of Christ resurrection even as we struggle with our own temptations to pay allegiance to false gods? Interestingly, Athens was not a part of Paul's original itinerary for his missionary travels. He went there only after encountering some stiff opposition in Thessaloniki and Beroia, angry crowds accused him of turning the world upside down with the message that he was preaching. It seemed expedient for him to get out of town ahead of these mobs who were so hot on his trail, and so Paul's supporters sent him ahead as far as Athens, while Silas and Timothy remained behind. What could they have been thinking as they sent Paul on his way? That a bustling city might be a little safer place where he wouldn't stand out so much in the crowd? That he might actually have a chance for some R and R before creating another controversy? Not a chance, Paul was not one to take a holiday from preaching the gospel, though he did take the opportunity while waiting for his friends to join him to explore the city, and what a city it was. Native city of Socrates and Plato, and the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno, it represented the highest level of culture attained in classical antiquity, it was a place of unchallenged prestige, but there was just one problem with Athens, and for Paul it was a big one, it was a city overrun with idols. For what we might view today as masterpieces of architecture and sculpture were to the Athenians in those days temples and images of pagan deities. Paul was deeply distressed to see them, and he was

compelled to speak out. He argued in the synagogue, he debated the stoic and Epicurean philosophers, he addressed anyone in the marketplace who would listen to him. Paul actually became known as a babler to some of the Athenians, a word used by the Greeks to refer to a worthless loafer. Others called him a proclaimer of foreign divinities based on their lack of familiarity with Jesus, and the misunderstanding by some of the word resurrection, which could've been interpreted to mean the name of another goddess. In other words, Paul caused quite a stir, enough that he was taken to the Areopagus where the chief court in Athens could inquire further about just exactly what he was teaching. The occasion was a great opportunity for Paul to proclaim the good news. He begins by establishing common ground with his listeners. Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way, for as I was going around looking at your objects of worship, I noticed an altar bearing the inscription to an unknown god. Brilliant orator that he was, Paul knew how to connect with his audience. There was rampant superstitious idolatry all over Athens, but there was also enlightened philosophy. Paul needed to use terms familiar to the Greeks in order to get the gospel message across. His point might well have been relevant to the interest of the Epicureans, for instance, who attacked irrational belief in the gods as expressed in idolatry, though their chief concern was pursuing pleasure and tranquility in life. Or to the stoics, who stressed the importance of reason, obedience to the dictates of duty, and a pantheistic conception of God. What Paul appeared to be doing was to side with the philosophers, if only for a moment, but then to demonstrate that they did not go far enough. He goes on as if to say having seen how scrupulous you really are in matters of religion, now I'm going to teach you about the living God for whom you have been searching all along. In order to find a basis for discussion which these gentiles could understand, Paul appeals not to scripture, but to their knowledge of the natural world. He stresses that this God is, first of all, the creator of the cosmos, the world, and everything in it. How could a temple made by human hands ever encompass this creator? Solomon himself recognized that when he dedicated the temple by asking will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built. Even though we like to think we can claim just a small bit of power over God with our magnificent edifices, Paul reminds us that God is always in charge. Second, God is so great as to have no need whatsoever for anything humanity could supply. As God once asked Job in a memorable discussion, where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? What could the creator of the universe possibly need from us? On the contrary, it is God who is the source of all life, sending the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. Such a generous God is good and trustworthy in all things. Third, this deity is the Lord of all life, not only as creator, but as the shaper and sustainer of human existence. From our common ancestors, Adam and Eve, God fashioned the human race, allotting, according to our text, the times of our existence, and the boundaries of the places where we would live. When will we be born? When will we die? When will the seasons come and go? Where will the rivers flow and the sea separate itself from the dry land? Wisdom teaches us these matters are beyond the powers of any idol, meant to rest only in God's hands. Fourth, this human dependence on God has resulted in a desire to be in relationship with our maker. It is compelling that we search for God, or as the text reads, grope for God, even though God is always very near to us. As Saint Augustan put it, our hearts are restless til they rest in thee. Paul seems to be suggesting that even the pagans unwittingly are engaging in such a search. Likewise, we know many in our own culture who resort to a variety of means, ranging from transcendental meditation to astrology in an effort to reach a higher spiritual plain. It is as if we are aware our souls are thirsty, yet we hardly know where to turn for water that truly satisfies. This relationship with God, which we need so desperately, is a very profound one, akin to that between parent and child. As Paul proclaims by

drawing again from the language of the Greeks themselves, he writes for in Him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, for we too are His offspring. How timely it is that our lectionary text today should provide this feminine image of God on the day when we pay tribute to our earthly mothers. According to Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, to live and move and exist within God refers to God's womb, for at no other time in human experience do we exist within another person than during the time spent in our mother's womb. Such an interpretation may strike some of you as radical, but if that is the case, then so was the book of Job. We find in chapter 38 of Job images which depict the sea as leaping tumultuous from the womb, and God's giving birth to the ice from the womb. And in Deuteronomy 32, we read, "You were unmindful of the rock that bore you, "you forgot the God who gave you birth." Even more relevant to this divine womb in whom we live and move and have our being is the fact that the Hebrew word for compassion is closely related to the word for womb. As Old Testament scholar Phyllis Trible has suggested, Hebrew references to God's compassion could be translated as God's womb love. Thus, to exist within God's womb could be interpreted as dwelling within God's love, an obvious connection for any mother who has ever carried a child within her womb. How is it possible for a woman to carry a child inside herself and not love that child from the very depths of her being? Isaiah further develops the image of God as nurturer and caretaker in asking the question does a woman forget her baby or the child within her womb? Yet, even if these forget, I will never forget you. God's love surrounds us more completely and is even more constant than the most intense forms of human love we can ever experience. Such love, plainly, cannot be represented by a piece of gold or silver, nor stone, it is not possible for us to create this life-giving God, or to manufacture a home for this God, nor is it needed. For the relationship God seeks to establish with us was fully, definitively revealed through Jesus Christ, we don't need to go on groping in the dark, expounding on the various gods we may choose to worship. God came to dwell among us in human flesh, was crucified on the cross, and on the third day, was resurrected from the dead that this relationship might be sealed forever. Whereas there may have been a time when God turned a blind eye to the ignorance of humankind, since the resurrection of Jesus, that time is no more. The coming of Christ represents a fresh start. There are no longer any excuses for rejecting God after the perfect revelation of God occurred through Christ. Paul proclaims to his listeners that God has fixed a day on which the world will be judged in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed, and God has provided assurance this will happen by raising this man from the dead. Therefore, Paul issues a call for repentance, asking for a dramatic turnaround by the Athenians. Who would forgo their pagan idols and believe this holy one of Israel, who not only creates and sustains, but who also resurrects the dead? I realize that for many of us, Paul's concerns about polytheism and the need for repentance seem far removed from our experience. Most of us have never seen an idol, much less bowed down and worshiped one. Yet, we have erected our own altars to unknown gods when we have mindlessly and even recklessly given over everything we have and are to forces that seem far removed from the living God. We joke about paying homage to the gods of basketball and the temple known as Cameron indoor stadium, but we also know that we have sacrificed mightily for the gods of tenure, promotion, class rank, homes in the most desirable neighborhoods, membership in the most prestigious social groups, jobs in the most impressive law firm or medical group or big steeple church, and these sacrifices can come at a very high price. None of these things in and of themselves are antithetical to God, but when they consume such a magnitude of our time and energy and devotion that there is nothing left for God, we begin to look like modern day polytheists. We say we believe in God, but the question becomes where do we devote our time and our resources? What, in fact, do we worship? Paul concludes his

sermon and encounters the results of his message. Having invoked the scandalous language of faith, he had moved beyond the common ground of reason and powers of observation into areas of significant theological differences. The Greeks did believe in the immortality of the soul, but not in bodily resurrection. And so even at the mention of it, resurrection, that is, some of Paul's listeners scoffed and mocked him. Others said we will hear you again about this, as if it were an issue that could be put on hold for a while. But some of them did believe, including Dionysius, who tradition says may have become the first bishop of Athens, a woman name Damaris, and others with them. Such is the life of one who seeks to spread the gospel in new places. Some of you may have seen the article in yesterday's News and Observer about religion on college campuses. According to this article, bacalaureate services at UNC and NC State are being held this weekend on campus for the first time in several years. The reason is that after a number of years when state universities sought to erect strict walls between church and state, more students are asking to be able to practice their religion openly. What does that mean for a campus which enrolls students from a variety of religious perspectives, and where sensitivity to diversity is a primary concern? The campus minister who planned the UNC service was quoted as saying, "Students were encouraged to name "the particulars of their faith "rather than saying all religions are the same, "we want an authentic expression of gratitude," he said. "For Christians, that means naming Jesus Christ, "for Muslims it may mean invoking Mohammed." Another student said, "You learn more this way "about your own religion." Instead of sweeping religion and religious differences under the rug, these campuses, like Duke and many others, are encouraging the issues to be discussed openly. And what would Saint Paul say about all this, do you think? As one never to shrink from controversy, he would be pleased, I think, pleased that at least the conversation about faith is being resumed. After all, of all the discussions ever held on a college campus, what could possibly be more important than this one? It appears that Mr. Duke built his chapel in exactly the right place. (organ music)

- You may be seated. The Lord be with you. Let us pray. O God, by whose word the universe was created, by whose spirit humankind was enlivened, and by whose grace all persons are called and recalled into communion with you, we give thanks for your great and wondrous love. As you have loved us and called us your children, you have also called us to love one another, and to be worthy of our inheritance. We are grateful for those in our lives who have shown us what it means to love and be loved, for mothers who teach us the meaning of love that never ends, and for families who show us how to love for better or worse, we give you thanks. Strengthen our families, that they may be places of renewal which empower us to bear fruit in the world. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. There are so many people in our world who are in need of signs of love, not the least of which are some of our friends. Help us be the kind of people who reveal ourselves to each other in friendship and love. Show us concrete ways that we might respond to our brothers and sisters, teach us to be better friends. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. You have taught us, Lord to ask for whatever we need, and when our words are inadequate to express our deepest yearnings, you have promised that your spirit would pray for us. Therefore with confidence, we lift our prayers to you. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. You also taught us to pray for one another, therefore let us pray for the church and the world. We pray for the church throughout the world that we may be faithful disciples who witness to your love. Bridge the walls between us and overcome strife with peace, that we may be united in the one body of Christ, brothers and sisters in faith. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We pray that you would guide the people of this land and all the nations in the ways of justice and peace, free us from the

bonds of violence that are destroying our youth and imprisoning women and the elderly and children with fear in their own homes. Make our streets, our shopping centers, our businesses, and our homes safe for inhabitation. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Be especially with those who face war, or the ever-present threat of violence. Bring sanity to the insanity of war and mindless killing. Show us how to respond with compassion, and teach us new ways to resolve conflict. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We pray for all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit. Give them courage and hope in all their troubles, and help us reach out to them with love so that they will not suffer alone. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Be with all the graduates from Duke and other universities, that these youth might take the strengths and skills that you have given them and use them to bear fruit in your kingdom. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We pray all these things in those prayers that you know but which remain unspoken, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, amen. All good things we possess, and all the time we enjoy on this earth are gifts from God. We are invited to a generous offering of thanksgiving as instruments of God's grace in the world. (organ music) Generous God, we dedicate these gifts and ourselves to you, for we want to accomplish the greater works to which Christ calls us. Increase our generosity that we may learn to give in proportion to the mercy we have received. Ready us for the sacrifices that may be required of all who seek to live in faithful response to the way, the truth, and the life. May our lives in the ministry supported by our offerings be a witness to your grace. In the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be 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. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen. (organ music) And now go forth in peace, and may the blessing of the God of Abraham and Sarah, the blessing of Jesus Christ, born of Mary, the blessing of the Holy Spirit who broods over us like a mother over her children, be with you and remain with you always, amen. (organ music)