The Very Rev. Ian S. Markham  
Welcome Sermon for the Class of 2011  
August 11, 2008


“Arise my love my fair one, and come away.” (Song of Solomon)

My text today is that delicious phrase from the Song of Solomon, “Arise my love, my fair one, and come away.” It is one of those fortuitous moments where both of the lectionary readings work perfectly together for a special occasion such as this. Because what you get in both passages is a sense of transition, of movement, of relocation to a different place. In the love song of the Song of Solomon, we hear the call of love inviting us to a different place; and here in the Gospel, we find Jesus exhorting his disciples to move beyond fear, beyond possessions and things, and to ‘be dressed for action’. So here you all are, responding to the call of love and dressed for action.

For many of you this is a major transition. For those on the MDiv, you have been in discernment, the countless committees and individuals – probing, asking, exploring with you – to discern the authenticity of your call. For those on the MTS, you have perhaps traveled afar (never entirely sure when that visa would come) or you are more local and seeking to realize your lay vocation within the Church. Some of you are here for a year, some for two, and others for three. And you’ve all made the transition, you have all paid a significant price, and you are all are seeking to serve.

This Seminary has a job to do in the time that you are with us. Our goal is discipleship. Here in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus exhorts us to become disciples and to put away fear – (how dare we fear – we are invited to keep the company of the Creator of the Universe) and instead learn how to trust.
There are two instructions for discipleship embedded in this Gospel. The first is that rather shocking suggestion that we “sell our possessions.” Now this sounds crazy. And of course one must exegete this carefully – most of us – even at Seminary – still have some possessions. So what does it mean? This is the first insight into discipleship: Possession/Stuff can get in the way of trusting. You might have found already how stuff can be a hurdle to trusting – how can I afford to study, when I need to earn a salary to pay the mortgage on my house? You might have also found that stuff ends up with us focused on the wrong things. When we have lots of stuff – a house, a car, significant investments in the stock market, an antique collection – then we have lots of worry. We can find our preoccupied with that stuff; we can end up so preoccupied by the potential recession that we stop enjoying this moment. The quest for the next gadget (to pick my particular temptation weakness) can so absorb us that we forget to enjoy a moment of laughter with a friend or a child. The point is simple: the precious gift of each moment of being that God has given us can be destroyed by our worry about all our stuff. In fact, we can end up preoccupied less with the moment we are called to live in and more with the things we have. And we start imagining that these things are more important than the call and those around us. So Jesus invites us not to let our attitude to ‘stuff’ get in the way. Trust instead. Put God and those we love first – and things will work out.

Then we have the second insight into discipleship – be dressed for action. We have work to do. We need to be alert, attentive, and ready to serve; we need to learn the necessary skills for faithful discipleship; and we need to make spending time with God the absolute priority. We need to allow God to structure our priorities and enable us to live as God has called us to be. We need to seize every opportunity to be transformed by God’s grace.

And why? Because the God of love has called; and we have responded. “Arise my love my fair one and come away.”

Amen