

(baby crying)

(classical music)

- Grace and peace to you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We welcome you to this service of worship at Duke University Chapel on this 13th Sunday after Pentecost. We realize that many of you are visiting with us from around the country, and we welcome you warmly to our campus. We hope you will have an occasion to be with us soon. Our preacher for today is the Reverend miss Helen Ninest, Director of the Campus Ministry Section, Division of Higher Education at the Board of Higher Education and Ministry for the United Methodist Church. That's quite a title. (laughing) Those of us who have had the opportunity to work with Miss Ninest are impressed by her vision for campus ministry and what the church's presence should be on college campuses, and also by her creativity. We feel especially privileged to have her with us as our preacher today. You are reminded that the sacrament of holy communion will be celebrated immediately after the service in the Memorial Chapel. Please note the other announcements as they are printed in your bulletins. And now, hear these words of scripture. "This is the day that the Lord has made. "Rejoice and be glad in it." (organ music) (choir singing in unison with organ)

- When we gather to praise God, we remember that we are a people who have preferred our will to the Lord's. Accepting God's power to become new persons in Christ, let us confess our sins before God and one another that we may be at one with our maker. Almighty God, you have called us into your church to be your servants at the service of others. Forgive us for falling short of your calling. We have loved our buildings more than our brothers and sisters. We have been more concerned with budgets than with justice and peace. We have been more ready to think about Christ than to live in Christ's image. Cut through our evasions, increase our courage, renew our vision, make us and the whole church more nearly what you would have us be. Through Jesus Christ, whose body we are, amen. Hear the good news, Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. That is God's own proof of His love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

- In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

- Let us pray. Open our hearts and minds, oh God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, so that has the word is read and proclaimed, we might hear with joy what you say to us this day, amen. Our first lesson this morning is from the book of Jeremiah 20:7-13. "Oh Lord, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived; "thou art stronger than I, and thou hast prevailed. "I have become a laughingstock all the day; "every one mocks me. "For whenever I speak, I cry out, "I shout, 'Violence and destruction!' "For the word of the Lord has become for me "a reproach and derision all day long. "If I say, 'I will not mention him, "or speak any more in his name,' "there is in my heart as it were a burning fire "shut up in my bones, and I am weary "with holding it in, and I cannot. "For I hear many whispering. "Terror is on every side. "'Denounce him, let us denounce him!' "say all my familiar friends, watching for my fall. "Perhaps he will be deceived, then we can overcome

him, "and take our revenge on him." "But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior; "therefore my persecutors will stumble, "they will not overcome me. "They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. "Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. "O Lord of hosts, who triest the righteous, "who seest the heart and the mind, "let me see thy vengeance upon them, "for to thee have I committed my cause. "Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord! "For he has delivered the life of the needy "from the hand of evildoers." This ends the reading of the first lesson.

- Arise, oh Lord, oh God, lift up thy hand. Forget not the afflicted.

- Why does the wicked man revile God? Why does he say to himself, "He won't call me to account"?

- Thou dost see; yea, thou dost note trouble and vexation, that thou mayst take it into thy hands.

- Break thou the arm of the wicked and evildoer; seek out his wickedness till thou find none.

- The Lord is king for ever and ever; the nations shall perish from his land.

- O Lord, thou wilt hear the desire of the meek; thou wilt strengthen their heart, thou wilt incline thy ear

- to do justice to the fatherless, the motherless, and the oppressed, so that one who is of the earth may strike terror no more. (organ music) (choir singing in unison with organ)

- Our reading from the gospel is from St. Luke 12:49-56. "I came to cast fire upon the earth; "and would that it were already kindled! "I have a baptism to be baptized with; "and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? "No, I tell you, but rather division; "for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, "three against two and two against three; "they will be divided, father against son "and son against father, mother against daughter "and daughter against her mother, "mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law "and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." He also said to the multitudes, "When you see a cloud rising "in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming', and so it happens. "And when you see the south wind blowing, "you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. "You hypocrites! "You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; "but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" Here ends the reading of the gospel. (orchestral music)

- Our epistle lesson this morning is from the letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 12:1,2, and 12-17. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great "a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, "and sin which clings so closely, and let us run "with perseverance the race that is set before us, "looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, "despising the shame, and is seated "at the right hand of the throne of God. "Therefore lift your drooping hands "and strengthen your weak knees, "and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame "may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. "Strive for peace with all people, and for the holiness "without which no one will see the Lord. "See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; "that no "root of bitterness" spring up and cause trouble, "and by it the many become defiled; "that no one be immoral or irreligious like

Esau, "who sold his birthright for a single meal. "For you know that afterward, when he desired "to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found "no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears." This ends the reading of the epistle lesson.

- Nancy commented on the length of my title, but what she didn't tell you is that in the bureaucracy of the United Methodist Church, the longer one's title is, the further down the ladder of the totem pole one really is. So, I would ask you not to be too impressed by the length of the title. Any preacher who is honest with you will share, will reveal both herself and her sources and her sermon, and I want to do that as I begin. I'm indebted to Robert Raines for both the title and the kernel of the message this morning, and to the author of the letter to the Hebrews. In addition, Heather Marie Elkins, who is a preacher friend of mine from West Virginia, shared with me the story of an experience in her first parish that left me forever changed. And finally, what I want to say this morning reflects some of the heart of my own faith struggle in the last eight or nine months of my life. Given that, will you bow with me for a word of Prayer? In Christ's name, amen. As the late E.B. White watched his wife Katharine planning the planting of bulbs in her garden, during what was the last autumn of her life, he wrote these words, "There was something comical, "yet touching, in her bedraggled appearance. "The small hunched over figure, her studied absorption "in the implausible notion that there "would yet be another spring. "Oblivious to the ending of her own days, "which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, "sitting there with her detailed chart "under those dark skies in a dying October, "calmly plotting the resurrection." Katherine White was a member of the Resurrection Company, the great host of those who plant seeds of hope under threatening skies of grief or oppression, going about their living and dying until one day, no one knows how or where, or when, the tender Easter shoots appear and a part of creation is healed. Katherine White was a member of the cloud of witnesses of which Hebrews speaks. Katherine knew the strength promised in the epistle this morning. Katherine was a plotter of the Resurrection. We are surrounded by a great company of plotters by a great cloud of witnesses. Emily Dickinson was one. She wrote, "Hope is the thing with feathers "that perches in the soul and sings the song "without the words and never stops at all." Dickinson knew that a great sorrow might snatch away the words of grace, but she could still hum it's melody. Dickinson, in her own way, was a plotter of the Resurrection. She knew something of the strength promised in the epistle lesson. Or Oscar Romero, celebrating mass in San Salvador, "If they kill me, I will rise again "in the hearts of my people," and they killed him. And today, his picture hangs and countless homes and churches across Latin America. He knew the strength promised in the epistle, and his spirit continues to plot the resurrection. Or my preacher friend Heather, and the stories she tells about her first appointment in the hills of West by-god Virginia. It was not what you would call a great appointment. A bypassed village, a dying factory mill railroad town. No chance of being mistaken for a successful here. But, they did well by holding their own. As a matter of fact, one very hot August day, they were doing just that, holding their own, race. Never mind that they were wildly overshadowed by the international Elby's race that was being held in Wheeling, Virginia, where people came from all over the world to compete. That didn't matter. They were holding their own. And, never mind that they didn't have the TV cameras or the famous runners, they were holding their own. In memory of a young high school student, a Catholic, who had died suddenly. And so, all the entry money went to a scholarship to help some other young person get a head start out of town. And, there were a lot of entries, all ages, all kinds. They were the golden boys without jobs, but still helpful. There was the 83 year-old optometrist who ran to prove he was still alive. There were wonderful women in different stages and ages of life, all gathered

for a 3-mile run around the center of town, not big. You had to do that twice to make three miles. And Aaron was there. Aaron was the youngest of the runners. Aaron was seven, and he lived four doors down the street. Aaron's father had died before Aaron was born, and his mother tried hard to let Aaron walk as big and proud as he could. So, there was Aaron in the hot August sun. His armband so big it kept slipping down around his wrist. And, the mayor lifted the gun, and off it went, and off they took. The townspeople stood around and shuffle their feet and talked and waited. I don't think they really cared who was going to win. They were more interested in who was going to be able to finish. They didn't have to wait long. The first of the runners came around the far corner towards them. They came around what my friend Heather calls the only Christian institution in town, which was the volunteer fire department. As they aimed towards the first lap, the townspeople counted them as they went by. Most there, though some had dropped out. They watched closely as Aaron finally rounded the corner. A little shaky and beet red, his armband missing by now, but he smiled fiercely at his mother as he ran past. And then they waited again, and time got long, and they waited some more. The first of The golden boys was properly cheered, and then the townspeople waited again. Who would finish? One by one by one they came in, counting noses, counting numbers. It seemed to be the last, and no one had seen Aaron. His grandmother's house was along the marked path, and the townspeople thought he probably stopped about there. Just as the crowd was beginning to move, he came around the corner, all alone, and they waited and they cleared a way for him, and he came on and he got about 20 feet away, and he fell and he lay. Heather was across the street from where his mother stood, and she watched her for a moment. His mother waited about two heartbeats to see if he would get up by himself, and while he was trying to struggle up, she ran up to him and pushed away the others who were there and lifted him up. And, there was a moment when they just watched each other, looked at each other in that hot August street. Everyone thought she was going to take him over to the shaded table where the water was, but what she did was to shift him higher and turn, and she began to run. And, holding him high against her heart, she carried them both over the finish line. In the heat of that street, in the middle of nowhere else, the townspeople trembled. They knew what they had seen. The way the journey ends. And, I had seen it too through Heather's eyes, the way the journey ends. For when we lay our life on the line, when we out race our hearts, when we give all that we have to give, and the end is not yet, when everything in us gives way and we go down, as we will go down, then the Risen One comes and lift us up and carries us over. First to last, the good news, in life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us, we are not alone, thanks be to God. Aaron and his mother, you see, are plotters of the Resurrection. They each knew something of the strength promised in the epistle to the Hebrews. They are members of that great cloud of witnesses. In so many ways, we do the plotting, and it is God who brings the resurrection. Our offices, our church, our homes, our city, our university, our nation, and even the world needs poets like Dickinson, and prophets like Romero, and runners like Aaron. We need those who will plot the resurrection. We need the great cloud of witnesses, both living and dead. We need those whose lives witness to the strength, promised in the epistle to the Hebrews. Sisters and brothers, lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely. Run with perseverance the race which is set before you. May you hear the call to be a plotter of the Resurrection, and may you find the strength that comes from knowing God has raised us all from death to life. Amen, so be it, amen. (organ music) (choir singing in unison with organ music)

- The Lord be with you.

- And, also with you.

- Let us pray. Oh, eternal God, who art the hope of the ends of the earth, we turn our hearts unto thee. In the spirit of thanksgiving, we offer these prayers for others, trusting in thy eternal goodness, seeking to give thanks in all things. Let us pray for peace in our world. Oh, eternal God, in whose perfect Kingdom knows strength is known, but the strength of love, so mightily spread abroad your spirit, that all people's may be gathered under the banner of the Prince of Peace as children of one creator. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Let us pray for social justice. Grant, oh God, that thy life giving spirit may so move every human heart, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatred cease, and they all divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Let us pray for those who suffer. Oh, ever living God, look with pity on those who live with violence, oppression, disease and death as their constant companions. Have mercy upon us. Strengthen those who spend their lives seeking to heal or to comfort others. Help us to see the day when everyone may enjoy a just portion of the riches of this land. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Let us pray for creative human endeavors. Oh, creator of the universe, we pray for all hopeful and constructive movements now afoot in our midst. We pray thee for all scientists seeking new discoveries, for all teachers who instill a thirst for knowledge, for all students who desire to know the truth, for all those who love beauty and seek to create it, and for all servants of the common good who seek to make a better world. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Our kind and gracious God, so draw our hearts unto thee, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills that we may be holy thine, utterly dedicated unto thee, and then use us we pray, to thy glory and the welfare of thy people. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ we pray, amen. And now, in the spirit of thanksgiving for the mighty acts of God, let us offer our gifts and ourselves unto God. (classical music)