Today’s Happiness and Tomorrow’s Hope
Baccalaureate Address
May 11, 2014
Luke 10:38–42

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Good morning. It is good to be together this morning to celebrate, give thanks, and receive blessing. And especially to the mothers in attendance, please accept our best wishes for a happy Mother’s Day.

The baccalaureate message traditionally provides an opportunity to reflect on some aspect of our students’ experience as part of the Emory community; to explore its coherence (or dissonance) with some of the ancient truths of faith; and in so doing perhaps to try to make that lesson more meaningful and enduring. But before drawing directly from the truths in this year’s scripture passage as read by Dean Nair, consider first an observation by the Albert Einstein, who, in the context of the first half of the 20th century said, “Any man who can drive safely while kissing a pretty girl is simply not giving the kiss the attention it deserves.”

Ok, so it’s not exactly scripture, and it could be updated to better suit current societal norms. Still, what he seems to be saying is that we can become so preoccupied with where we are going and with our hopes for the future and for getting there successfully, that we lose the opportunity for the fullest measure of happiness available right now. We may neglect to give the kiss—the happiness of present—the attention it deserves.

Our preoccupation with the future as a principal source of happiness might be a cultural thing. That same Albert Einstein, who encouraged us to pay attention to the kiss in the moment, also said, “The American lives even more for his goals, for the future, than the European. Life for him is always becoming, never being.”

He seems to be right. Think about it. What is among the most common questions that you have been asked recently? Is it not, “What’s next? What are you going to do after you graduate?” Surely you have heard that question a lot these days. But it has not been a question of just these days.
The “What’s next?” question is not a new one for you. We have been asking you that question for much of your lives.

As a child you heard, What you want to be when you grow up?
As a freshman in high school you heard, Don’t you want to get good grades? They count now. They will be important for your future.
Where do you want to go to college?
What do you want to major in?
What’s next after graduation?
Do plan to get married? And if you do, almost as soon as you return from your honeymoon we will ask you, “When are you going to have kids?”

It’s always about the next thing, it seems. We have helped you to learn from the past in order to hone your skills of prediction of the future with hopeful anticipation, while skipping right past the present. It is a practice that counts on the fact that we can be happy in anticipation of future happiness.
In some cases this practice of ignoring the present is done intentionally and even understood as a virtue. In his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck even recommended the practice of what he called “delayed gratification.” Put immediate opportunities for happiness aside for now, he urged.

In addition to cultural pressures to focus on the future, we also seem to be biologically predisposed to seek happiness based on our hopes for the “not yet.” Our own Professor Greg Berns, who studies brain and behaviors, tells us that in the early 1990s, Swiss neuroscientist Wolfram Schultz observed anticipatory happiness in animals. He monitored the happiness chemical dopamine in the brains of monkeys that were conditioned to strike a lever to release a food pellet whenever a light flashed in their cage. Sensors recorded a burst of dopamine during this very happy sequence of events. What was especially interesting, though, is that once the animals were conditioned to press the lever when they saw the light flash, simply seeing the light became sufficient to cause a release of dopamine. In other words, merely anticipating that there might be food in their near future was a source of happiness. For these animals, and likely for us, hope in a bright future or at least a rewarding event is a source of genuine happiness.

But I want to suggest that a lifetime of cultural conditioning built upon a biological predisposition to seek happiness in the future, while a good thing, is at most half of the recipe for happiness, if it diverts us from enjoying the opportunities for happiness in the present. A preoccupation with the future can rob us of the opportunity to reap joy in the present, every bit as much as having an unhealthy preoccupation with regrets of the past. The fuller recipe is one that I hope you were able to follow in our Emory community, but one that you may have to pursue with greater intent and discipline once you burst free of the Emory bubble.

That is in fact, at least in part, the point of the story in the Scripture passage
about those two sisters, Martha and Mary. In the tiny village of Bethany just outside Jerusalem in Israel, Jesus was visiting in the home of Martha, whose sister Mary was there as well. As the story goes, unassisted in her preparations, Martha becomes rather miffed at Mary, who has spent her time conversing with their very special guest instead of helping out. When Martha can’t take it anymore she asks Jesus to insist that Mary leave his side and get busy assisting with the tasks at hand. But Jesus declines to do so, noting that “Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

This passage is often used as an illustration of how we often give our commitments to the busy-ness of our days priority over things that are holy. But I wonder if the message isn’t a bit more subtle. I wonder if Martha isn’t anticipating the greater enjoyment of the presence of Jesus when all will dine together at a well-prepared meal—soon, not right now, but soon. Thus, Martha has chosen to draw her present happiness from her anticipation of a greater happiness in the future while begrudging Mary her happiness in the moment. Mary is giving the kiss the attention it deserved.

The moral of that biblical story echoed in an experience of my own. In the late summer of 2008, during one of those hot August Saturdays when we welcome freshmen and their families to Emory, I had the opportunity for an extended visit with the father of an entering freshman. He was clearly distraught. To comfort him I told him not to worry about his daughter. She would make friends, do well, and be supported here at Emory. He looked at me with watery eyes and said, “I am not worried about her. I’m worried about me.” It turned out that he had spent the years of his daughter’s childhood working (as Martha might have) to provide all the best for his family’s future. It was a noble thing to do for all of those years. But in the process of committing so much of his attention to ensure the best possible future for his family, he had failed to spend much time in the present being a father. Eighteen years had passed, as had the opportunity to take fuller advantage of the happiness that comes from being the father of a daughter while the two lived together under the same roof. He simply had not given the present the attention it deserved.

What a shame it would be if, while working for all the right things for our futures, we failed to enjoy what already is right and good and fully worthy of enjoyment and happiness now.

Enjoying life in the moment takes concentration. It takes time away from our efforts at ensuring a better tomorrow. We fear the risk of compromising our productivity, which has become the American virtue of the 21st century. But that guru of positive psychology, Shawn Achor, challenges the notion that attention to the present compromises our productivity and the possibilities for future happiness. He claims that the data show that genuinely happy people are more productive than those who merely expect someday to be happy. In other words, it is possible to enjoy the happiness of
the present while compromising neither our productivity nor our prospects for the future. We can enjoy both kinds happiness—a full measure of happiness today and happiness in hope.

So what do we do? How should we resist the temptation to settle for only half of life’s happiness by focusing exclusively on the future? The pressures to draw our happiness only from anticipation seem almost overwhelming. The most common approach seems to be to pretend that neglecting the present is right and wholesome and even noble. I’m thinking of that recent commercial for the Cadillac ELR model electric car. For the better part of 60 seconds we listen to an actor portraying a man as he moves from poolside through his elegant home and into his fabulous car, all the while explaining that forgoing vacation, family, and personal time is only natural for “crazy, driven, hard-working believers [who] create [their] own luck and . . . gotta believe that anything is possible.” He closes by telling us how very proud he is of his accumulated possessions. “As for all this stuff,” he says, “that’s the upside of only taking two weeks off in August.”

In contrast, I hope most of you have experienced another way while you have been here at Emory. The evidence is objectively clear that you have spent these years of your life living and studying shoulder to shoulder with some of the world’s most intellectually able people and in the classrooms of some of the world’s best and most accomplished scholars. You have been successful. And so you have all of the essential ingredients to become one of Cadillac’s “crazy driven hard-working believers.” And yet, most (and I wish all) of you can think of moments when you were not doing homework, not studying for an examination, not working in the lab or library—time when you were just with your colleagues and friends, and you remember being really happy. It is in the simple fact that you can recall those times that there is incontrovertible evidence that happiness can be had in the present, not just in the prospects for the great potential that each of you have for the future.

These moments may not seem remarkable to you. But they are. In fact they are so remarkable and so important that I urge you to consider intentional practices that will guarantee that these opportunities are never entirely crowded out by a conviction that all happiness is in the future and over the rainbow. I can’t tell you what practices might work best for you. Perhaps you should talk to your family/your parents. How do they, when they are awakened at 3 o’clock in the morning, celebrate the quiet restfulness of the moment rather than start that whirring buzz saw of an engine in their brain that is thinking already about tomorrow and the many tomorrows thereafter and in the process stealing the opportunity for happiness in the moment. Ask them what they do. Maybe it is in a discipline of regular conversations with friends over a cup of coffee in the morning, or exercises in gratitude. Maybe it is in yoga or meditation, or maybe an abiding faith in belonging to that which is holy and to which the future belongs.
Think about that, if you will. Consider it your final homework assignment from Emory University, the first laboratory practice of which will come on commencement day, tomorrow. May it be a day of happiness, a time of celebration. As soon-to-be graduates of Emory University, you have every right to be happy. The celebrations of the last few days have been attended to with great mirth because of what they stand for right now, not because of what they mean for your future.

Like Mary, may you resist the temptation to be always preparing for what is next, missing the happiness and blessing of the present. My prayer for you is that even as you prepare for your respective futures (as you must), you might make room every day to grow in faith and confidence concerning tomorrow, that divine grace and the gift of your abilities and preparation will be more than sufficient for what comes down the road, and in doing so that you will feel empowered to give the kiss of the moment the attention that it deserves. May God bless you in this moment and in all of your future moments.

Amen.