President Grove-Markwood, Chair Gleason and Trustees, Dean Lewis and Faculty, honored guests: It is an honor to be invited here today. It is good to see old friends and many whom I hope will become new friends. I come as a colleague and a covenanted partner. Bob’s invitation for me to be a part of this special moment in Bangor’s life moved me and I hope you know that I am humbled and sincerely grateful for the invitation.

This is an historic threshold in the life of Bangor Seminary. One hundred ninety eight years ago, when Maine was still a province of Massachusetts, and the boundaries of the state had not even been settled, the founders of this school petitioned and received a charter ‘for the promotion of piety and literature,’ under the name of The Maine Charity School. It was a broad charter; so broad, in fact, that the word ‘theological’ never appears in the original document. The founders could have created a college or any other educational institution, but it was this seminary they designed. Now ten generations later, amid tectonic shifts in the plates that lay beneath theological education, you are re-examining the breadth of that charter and the dreams of your intrepid founders are being probed for new inspiration.

The moment is equally historic in that Robert Grove-Markwood is being installed as President. Bob comes to this position after having ably served as the interim president and, with the trustees and faculty, having courageously guided BTS through what has arguably been the most difficult period of decision-making since its founding. He is a fine choice. You know, Cicero once said that those who are marked by courage are those who are full of faith. And there is no doubt that for Bangor this has been a time of great faith-fullness. [I hope you all know how much the rest of the theological community has watched your courageous decision-making with awe and respect.] Bangor: Great is thy faithfulness: Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, Blessings all yours, with ten thousand beside!

There is no small irony here, of course, as Bob is being installed as the last president of this seminary. We would be disingenuous if we didn’t acknowledge this hard reality. How do you honestly celebrate at the end of something? How do you find hope when it seems in rather short supply?

About 600 years before Christ the thirty year old Ezekiel ben Buzi found himself in the midst of the great Babylonian deportation. Ezekiel came from a good family and he was a preacher’s kid. But not long after he was on the job, he and the people of Judah were invaded, defeated, and taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar. They were forced to make the long and humiliating trek from Jerusalem into Babylonia and while in exile, all Jerusalem and the Temple, the practical
and symbolic center of their faith, the dwelling place of Yahweh, was burned and destroyed. The people of Judah were absolutely devastated, psychically numbed, and without hope.

It was then that God came to Ezekiel’s “satellite” campus under some Babylonian palm tree, and recruited him to speak to those dejected and hopeless Israelites. God said: “I want you to go and talk to these people. Things are bad and if they don’t wake up things are going to get worse. You have to deliver the news for me and it won’t be easy. It’s bad: there’s no getting around it. But it isn’t all bad news: I’ve got a special vision for you share. I want you to tell them that if they will be faithful to me I will lead them back to Judah and build something new for them. I will show you visions and I know they will seem out of this world, and hard to believe, so I’ve asked my cherubim to show you around. They’re my best guides – they each have four heads and four wings! To take this on Ezekiel had to be nuts, but he threw himself into it with all he had.

So there in Babylon, in the desert Jewish ghetto – called Tel Abib – are the exiled people of Judah, 25 years away from their home, their Temple and city destroyed. God dwelt in that Temple and now it is gone. The Exile severed them from the temple and, most dramatically it seemed, severed them from God. The sense of loss was overwhelming; they were depressed and felt utterly abandoned. Then into the middle of their grief and hopelessness, walks our odd poster child Ezekiel and after scaring the daylights out of them, he amazes them when he says: “We are not godforsaken. I have heard God’s promises: If we are faithful we will go home to Judah and Jerusalem and the temple will be restored.” For the people of Israel this message was hard to believe and many were no doubt cynical.

Then, late in the narrative Ezekiel’s four headed heavenly guide who had a linen cord wrapped around him, and carried a 10 foot measuring reed – leads him in a vision back to Jerusalem to tour and measure carefully a restored temple. At the end of the tour the guide shows Ezekiel something unusual: a small trickle of water coming out from under the threshold of the Temple. They follow the water and within 1500 feet that trickle has become much more: it is ankle deep. In another 1500 feet it is knee deep; then hip deep, and eventually it is so deep Ezekiel would have to swim to cross it. Along the way of this growing river, he sees the water giving life to plants and trees. Incredibly, at its mouth it dumps fresh water into one of the most extreme examples of the absence of life: the Dead Sea - the Dead Sea itself is brought back to life!

In the middle of this journey the heavenly guide, stops, points to the water, and says: **Mortal have you seen this?** Do you get what I’m showing you here? Do you recognize God’s power to bring life to things that are destroyed, dead and forgotten? It had to be an astounding message for Ezekiel and the exile community. The promise of restoration after an entire generation in Babylon was beyond imagining. But there was something else going on here - something even bigger.

**Mortal have you seen this?** The trickle of water that became a river carried two messages, not one. Look at the details: the flow of life-giving water – the essential spirit of God – was OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE and it flowed to the lowest and most lifeless place on earth. **Mortal have you seen this?** Ezekiel’s visions showed the exiles that God was not only a God of hope; God was there in Babylon with them! That stream symbolized a radical new perspective on their relationship to God and where their God resided. In essence Ezekiel was saying: folks you used to think that God was locked up back there in that Temple in Jerusalem, but I’m telling you God is here. That temple was destroyed, but not our relationship to God. **Our God is mobile!** God’s goodness flows deeper and wider the more forsaken the setting. God is not confined to Judah and worship of God is not confined to the Jerusalem Temple. In the midst of all his wild imagery
and visions, Ezekiel teleported the people outside the confines of their old definitions and practices, and taught them a radical new lesson; he taught them that no matter how bad things seemed God was with them wherever they were. **Mortal have you seen THIS?!**

This is the same reason Ezekiel told them (in chapter 36) that God sought to give them a new heart. “A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” Don't stop being faithful to me, he said. Your authentic faithfulness is the key to your salvation. “If you are true to me, you shall be my people and I will be your God.” Even to dry bones God says, “I will put my spirit in you and you shall live.”

Here’s the thing: On a regular basis we find ourselves dealing with people who have an exile frame of mind. We have colleagues, bosses, trustees, donors, alums, students, denominations, and entire institutions that are wallowing in just this kind of exile. Yes, it’s true; almost all of the assumptions on which theological education has been based for the last 200 years are in the midst of being swept away. Our frame of reference has been radically disrupted. Our definitions have changed, our dominations have imploded, the place of church in society has been altered, “church” is being done in ways and places we couldn’t have imagined. And the stock market pulled the rug out from under all of us. Bad news everywhere you turn. Other than the Gospel itself nothing is secure. You could make a great case that we are in our own kind of exile.

And in the door walks God and says I’ve got a job for you. Our job is a great deal like Ezekiel’s (hopefully without the funny clothes). In essence God says, yes, this is grim. But if you get lost in it you are making a big mistake. I have not abandoned you. I am with you and if you will be my servant I have incredible visions for you. If you need a guide, I’m happy to send you one: I’ll even send you one with four heads if you like. Just look and listen carefully. Take the time to discern what I am doing and in the process you might just discover something entirely new. And, my beloved, here’s the most important point. I'll be there in the midst of that new thing.

**Mortals have you seen this? Are you getting the point?**

When you step back and look of the long history of the church, there have been many times when it seemed like the bottom was falling out and we wouldn't make it. There were persecutions and schisms. Jesus wrestled with the block-headed disciples “Do you not see; do you not understand?” Paul wrestled with Peter about the mission to the Gentiles. The history of the church is filled with these defining moments when we were called to see ourselves differently. Our sacred narrative celebrates again and again those times when we were able to change our perspective, rise above the moment, and discern the glory and creative power of God’s hand, and then adapted and changed our course to come in line with God’s dream for us, not our dream for God. Our challenge is not so much one a creating a new vision, as it is one of finding a new perspective on the eternal truth in what is happening around us. We need to recognize what’s staring us in the face before it hits us in the face!  

This change of perspective can enable us to recognize that maybe we’re still making horse buggies and when the automobile age has arrived. Some are responding by working even harder at making the best buggy possible and pouring their resources into it. Others are in despair. A few however, step back and recognize that they aren’t in the horse buggy business, but the transportation business. Of course, they’ll miss those beautiful buggies. It is a great legacy, but if they are solely focused on what they have been, they’re going to have trouble focusing on what they might be. And that means they will be prime candidates for irrelevance.
You know we are often critical of religious fundamentalists, but in our ardor to critique them we often fail to recognize our own fundamentalisms. There are other kinds of fundamentalists. There are institutional fundamentalists and methodological fundamentalists and they can be just as narrow and blinded. These other fundamentalists have been as much the cause of the church’s growing irrelevance as bad bible and bad theology. Like the Israelites in exile who were challenged to think differently about their relationship to God, we have to accept the same challenge. Ask yourself: what business are we really in? What fundamentalisms bind us?

To find the right perspective we need to recognize what’s fixed and what isn’t. In order to think outside the box we have to first recognize what box we are in. What have we and those around us assumed? What walls encompass us? What physics, what inertia are we caught up in? What exile mentality has us in its grips? For the people of Judah their faith was defined so narrowly that it confined them into rigid - even empty- patterns of worship and a small vision of who God is, where God is, what God expects, and what God can do. When a tsunami of bad news hit – Nebuchadnezzar, economics, war, and power politics – it swept them out of that box, but they were so paralyzed they were unable to think outside that box. The destruction of the Temple, their frame of reference, rather than freeing them, utterly destroyed them and their vitality. And they would have remained there had not Ezekiel, the wheels within wheels guy, the dry bones, and rivers from under the Temple steps guy, enabled them to finally see it all differently. His wild visions opened their eyes to the fact that God wasn’t confined to the temple but was alive in the verdant waters that flowed from the love of God the temple symbolized. He showed them that God had not abandoned them. And just as God did not abandon Israel, our Sovereign has not abandoned us. God still has a dream for us. God still has a dream for this great community. Mortal have you seen this?

Every day you and I are called upon to recognize how we may be lost in exile. A mountain of bad news can do it to us. We need crazy prophets like Ezekiel. We must feel God’s presence and discern where God at work even in the most challenging of times. For when we renew our faith and reorient our hearts and minds on what God dreams for us, we can tap that wellspring of hope that enables us to do something beautiful for God. Mortal have you seen this?

I think it is wonderful that as Bangor theological Seminary faces its last year it has called for an installation. It reminds me of those profound words of TS Eliot at the end of his Four Quartets:

\[
\text{What we call the beginning is often the end.} \\
\text{And to make an end is to make a beginning.} \\
\text{The end is where we start from.} \\
\text{....} \\
\text{We shall not cease from exploring} \\
\text{And the end of our exploring} \\
\text{Will be to arrive where we started.}
\]

Bangor: from founders to founders! From endings to installations!

So at the end we can do no other that to rise and say with the Psalmist:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the sea; Though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling. There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of god, the holy place of the tabernacle of the most high. [Psalm 46] AMEN.