Opening Remarks
Before we join in the Prayer for Illumination,
    let me take just moment to say thank you
for the wonderful welcome you all have given to me and my family.
Fourth Presbyterian Church has lived up to and surpassed
    all expectations of Southern hospitality -
you really know how to welcome a minister
    and a minister’s family!
Beginning with that fine weekend we enjoyed with you a few weeks ago
    first, at Derrick & Lisa Quattlebaum’s with the PNC
    and then the lunch with the staff on the Gwinn’s back porch,
    and that picture perfect evening with the officers out on the lawn at the Mitchell’s,
    enjoying the amazing spread provided by Tony Pepper, and Howard,
    it was a delightful weekend!

I also want to say a big thanks to Buz and those youth
    who took Langley and James out on the town
    and followed up with them as the weekend went on -
    that made quite a big difference in their outlook
    and has given them a sense of excitement
    to go along with their nervousness about moving to a new place.

And while the list of people to thank could go on quite a bit longer
    I would be remiss not to mention my adopted family here in Greenville,
    Craig and Betsy Marchant -
    who have shown amazing grace and generosity
    first hosting all four of us Hoyts on our earlier visit,
    and now hosting me in fine fashion
    during my bachelor period this first month.
You are all wonderful people
    and truly have extended the warmest and kindest welcome
    one could imagine.

Transitions are never easy,
    but you have made this one downright pleasant,
    and the Hoyt family cannot thank you enough.
Crossing the Ascension Bridge
Ephesians 1:15-23; Acts 1:1-11

Seeing Jesus ascend and disappear into a cloud,
I think the disciples would agree
“Transitions are never easy.”

I was delighted a few months ago to find that my first Sunday here at Fourth would be Ascension Sunday.
I cannot think of a better story
to mark such a significant day in the life of a congregation
than this transition of all transitions
experienced by the first disciples!

Saying goodbye to a long-time beloved pastor like Allen McSween cannot have been easy for you.
And while some of Allen’s biggest fans may have wondered
if he might just float up and disappear into a cloud on his last Sunday,
even they would have to admit it hasn’t been quite as hard for you
as for those first disciples when they said farewell to Jesus
and found themselves standing on their own two feet, so to speak,
and called to be the church
in a challenging and often hostile context.

As for surviving transitions,
all indications are that you, the disciples of Fourth Presbyterian,
have risen to the occasion, not only surviving the interim,
but growing stronger and deeper in your faith and your mission
during this in-between time.

That is a sign of a strong and healthy church!

Before I came down for my first on-site interview with the PNC,
I had read an article about a walking bridge in downtown Greenville
that you had constructed around some previously under-appreciated falls,
that now provide a beautiful, natural centerpiece for the city.
During my visit,
Derrick Quattlebaum took me on a walking tour of downtown
on a remarkably gorgeous day in January!
I was, of course, very interested to see the bridge. So as Derrick and I were walking down Main Street going South, we crossed the *Main Street bridge* over the river, and I looked down to the right and saw that little man-made spillway with the little green footbridge just behind it. And you know what I was thinking, so trying to cover my disappointment, I said “Oh, that’s really neat.”

Derrick realized my mistake, that I thought those were the falls and that was the bridge, but - being a good Quattlebaum, he kept a straight face and didn’t say anything. Needless to say, when we approached the real falls with the white water breaking over the rocks, and that grand circular footbridge, I was duly impressed and quickly fell in love with the sight, and the genius of making this downtown treasure available to be enjoyed in such an charming way.

Living in a city of bridges for the past 11 years, I have come to appreciate the beauty and grace of these arched monuments across the rivers. Being located at the convergence of three rivers, Pittsburgh prides itself as rivaling even Venice in the number of its bridges. So I have been delighted to see the river and bridges of Greenville, and new bridges being constructed here and there along the Swamp Rabbit Trail.

Moving from one city of bridges to another, I am aware of what a fitting symbol a bridge is for our calling in Christ.

Well, what has any of this to do with the Ascension? The *Ascension* story in Acts is itself a *narrative bridge*.

Not only is the Ascension story important for what it says, but for what it *does* in the narrative unity of Luke-Acts.

As you probably know, the gospel writer Luke also wrote the Book of Acts as a second volume of his gospel account. These first eleven verses of Acts are significant in that they provide the *transition* - the *narrative bridge* -
from the story of Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection, to the story of the church’s life and ministry, and the church's dying and rising with Christ.

On the day of Ascension, Jesus calls his first disciples to cross a bridge into an unknown future to undergo a challenging transition, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from one way of living with Jesus and following him - in the body - to a new way experiencing Jesus - through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Crossing the Ascension Bridge, letting go of Jesus physical presence and living into a new reality, was no easy task, but it was the only way for the gospel story to continue.

As you well know from your experience of the last two years, crossing bridges is an act of trust. Making a transition from a familiar and beloved pastor into an interim period and into the beginning of a new pastorate calls for a great deal of trust.

Like us, the disciples have questions for Jesus as they cross the Ascension bridge:
Is this the time, Lord?
Is this the way you will fulfill our dreams?
When, Lord? When our dreams finally come true?

And Jesus only answer is a call to trust:
It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority...
...but you will receive power...and you will be my witnesses.

Not all of our questions can be answered in such a time; not everything about the path is perfectly clear; the supports under the bridge may be strong, but we won’t really know until we cross the bridge, and cross the bridge we must for Jesus has called us and given us a mission on the other side.
If crossing the Ascension bridge is a transition that calls for trust, it also calls for something else: **Jesus calls us to transcend our differences.**

He sends his disciples out to be witnesses to the good news, but not just to familiar others who look like them, talk like them, and dress like them. He lets them start with the familiar, but he moves them out of their comfortable, familiar surroundings into the unfamiliar -

> you will be my witnesses in [holy] Jerusalem 
> in all [familiar] Judea 
> [but also in despised] Samaria, and [even] to the ends of the earth.

Jesus’s gospel is universal -

> good for Jews, good for Samaritans, good for Gentiles, good for people so different that the disciples wouldn’t even begin to know how to categorize them.

And if we are to be Jesus’ disciples, we’d best get used to approaching, talking and listening to, and loving people who are very different from us.

One of the things that first drew me to Fourth Pres. is the way you say this very thing in your values statement which is posted to the website -

> do you remember how this reads?

You say,

> “We build bridges to those different from us, racially, economically, theologically, and spiritually, and welcome discussion of issues, questions, and ideas, including controversial ones;”

That is a great statement!

> And it is bound to lead to some discomfort! But such discomfort is well worth it if it means we are doing the reconciling work of Jesus Christ.

One thing I like about Fourth is that you are known for, and consistently described as, being a moderating voice in Foothills Presbytery and the Presbyterian Church.

By your witness, you provide a sturdy bridge upon which people on opposite banks can meet in the middle and feel safe in meeting.
You don’t do this by avoiding difficult issues
but by practicing the art of holy listening,
listening respectfully to one another and honoring the faith of those
who may not express their faith in exactly the way you would express it,
but who are nonetheless standing on the bridge with you -
and the bridge on which all stand, dear friends,
has already been built,
built for us by the master builder of bridges
the Creator of all things - and the bridge is Christ!

One of the candidates for moderator in the PC(USA) this year
spoke to Pittsburgh Presbytery
and used the image of a bridge to describe her leadership.
She described herself as being one of the main supports
on one side of a church debate;
this is because she is known for advocating on “one side of the bridge.”
She felt that it was only by being on one side or the other
that we could truly be grounded,
but that to stand in the middle of the bridge is to somehow be unrooted.

I asked her after her presentation
if she might not be misperceiving the bridge on which we all stand.
It is Christ who is fully present and fully grounded
on both sides of the river, both sides of the chasm,
and to walk across that bridge, and meet someone in the middle,
or to go with them all the way to the other side,
is to trust in and stand firmly upon
the One who alone can reconcile our differences.

Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr calls us into this sort of non-dual spirituality,
“The lowest level of consciousness” he says
“is entirely dualistic
win/lose...me versus the world...basic survival.
“Many,” Rohr fears, “never move beyond this.
The higher levels of consciousness [however]
are more and more able
to deal with contradictions, paradoxes, and all Mystery.
This is spiritual maturity.

At the higher levels,
we can teach things like compassion, mercy, forgiveness,
selflessness, even love of enemies.
Any good [spiritual] practice
quickly greases the wheels of the mind
toward non-dual consciousness.
This is exactly why saints can overlook offenses [in others]
and love [even their] enemies!"¹

If Fourth Presbyterian Church can be that sort of place,
and all indications are that you already are very much that sort of place,
we will be poised to served our Lord faithfully
in the midst of these troubled times.

I look forward to crossing the Ascension bridge with you in the years ahead,
and to experiencing the transformation that comes
from trusting the One who transcends all our differences
and from discovering that Christ is present “there” as well as “here”
and from standing firmly upon
the One who is our only true support and grounding
in this journey of life.

Together, let us be joyous witnesses of this good news!