Good morning, Colonial! I am so excited to have the opportunity to bring the message on this Student Sunday. My name is Julia Edmondson. I just graduated from Heritage Christian Academy, and I’ll be headed to Wichita State University in a few weeks. My family has been at Colonial for four years, and I have been so blessed by all the experiences I have been given for growth and leadership. Just to tell you a little bit about myself- I love music and sports, but I really do not like running. So I’m going to start my time today with a little story.

A few years ago, I decided to run a 5K that my school was hosting as a fundraiser. I put my mind to it, trained, and was excited to run the course. Now, as I said before, I do not enjoy running. Not one bit. Although I play sports, I am not interested in running around for the fun of it. I’m only interested if there is some type of ball and goal. But nevertheless, I thought running a 5K would be good for me, and although I started off having a good time, the feeling of happiness quickly disappeared. I made it nearly two and a half miles and saw that I was approaching a massive hill. That was it. I was about to stop and start walking for a bit, but then I saw a figure running toward me over the hill. It was my brother, who is actually good at running. He had finished the race and come back immediately to finish with me. As soon as I saw him, I knew I could do it. He ran with me to the end, and that made all the difference.

**Read Scripture- Hebrews 12:1-2**

“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 endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder 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.”

**Intro**
This morning, my message is entitled “Running the Race.” In the past several months, the question that keeps coming to mind for me is, “How do I live my life in the midst of all of these unknowns?” The COVID-19 outbreak has radically changed so many aspects of life for most of us, and I know that, at least in my case, I have been left feeling weary and unsure. I have also found that my need to place full trust in the Lord has risen dramatically. So what does it mean to run the race that God has set before us, in the depths of job uncertainty, economic turmoil, canceled plans, social and political unrest, sickness, and even death? How do we run the race? In reflecting upon Hebrews 12:1-2, I noticed 5 key elements from the passage that exhibit how to run this race. We run by faith, laying aside every weight, with endurance, looking to Jesus, for the joy. We will spend some time focusing on each one of these elements as we dive deeper into this Scripture.

By Faith

The first key point, by faith, comes largely from the preceding chapter, Hebrews 11, also known as the Hall of Faith or the Faith Hall of Fame. This purposeful collection of stories demonstrates examples of Biblical heroes and the blessings God gifted them through their faith. Now, I’m not the Geek with the Greek, but I do love studying the English language. And since Hebrews 12 begins with the word “therefore,” we must go back to see what the author is referring to. Chapter 11 ends with verses 39 and 40, which refer to the heroes of the faith, stating, “And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” So the contextual events leading to today’s passage are stories of faith, followed by the promise of future gifts, leading to the “therefore.” “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 endurance the race that is set before us.” Now I want to focus on the phrase “cloud of witnesses.” There has been speculation regarding the meaning of the word “witnesses” in this verse. On one hand, it could mean spectators watching us run the race, while on the other, it could also convey the telling of beliefs and experiences. John Piper says, “I think it is the act of telling. The verb form of this word “witness” (martureo) is used five times in Hebrews 11 (in verses 2, 4 [twice], 5, 39) and always refers to the giving of a (confirming) testimony rather than the mere watching of an event. So I take the witnesses of Hebrews 12:1 to be the saints who have run the race before us, and have gathered, as it were, along the marathon route to say, through the testimony of their lives, “By faith I finished, you can too!” And so, I want to read Hebrews 11:32-38. And as I do, take some time to reflect, be encouraged, and think about how you have seen faith at work in your life and in the lives of those around you.

“And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”
Then we come to verses 39 and 40 and the beginning of chapter 12.

“And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. 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 endurance the race that is set before us.”

So how do we run the race? By faith. But then the question remains- if this faith is what we are attempting to embody in our race, what is faith? To find out, we need only look at the beginning of chapter 11. Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It is a firmly established confidence in the God we serve, in the work of Christ, and in the promises of future joy. This faith allows us to step out on the race course and begin our journey. And as we do, I ask you to consider, how can I express confidence in the Lord today as I run the race?

**Laying Aside Every Weight**

This brings me to my second point. When we step onto the course, the next key element becomes the process of laying aside every weight. “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 endurance the race that is set before us.” As the New International Version states, we must throw off everything that hinders. Without discarding these hindrances, we are prevented from running our best race. Sometimes we are seemingly prevented from running the race at all. This removal is a continual action that needs to be regularly completed. However, it is not a practice that can be done on our own. We try lots of methods of getting rid of our weights- avoiding
them, dismissing them, succumbing to them- but the only way we can truly lay aside every weight is to bring them before the Lord. We have to recognize what these weights are- not dwelling on them- but acknowledging them- and give them up to the finished work of Jesus. The process of seeing our weights is not an easy one. It took me what seemed like forever to recognize that some of my greatest weights were guilt and shame, associated with my tendency to seek perfection. What I didn’t know was that my unidentified hindrances were keeping me from running my best race, as I tried to address them on my own. I felt that I couldn’t come before Him until I was perfectly fixed, but all He wanted was for me to let Him take my burdens away. So I ask you to think now, What are your weights? Think about what it would look like to throw those off, placing them before Jesus. The Lord has been faithfully teaching me that, in order to run the race He has for me, I have to throw off everything that hinders. Hebrews 12 also instructs us to lay aside sin which clings so closely. Unfortunately, the natural tendency of sin is to cling. It doesn’t just pass through on occasion. It sticks around until it is thrown off. Another important aspect of sin is that it doesn’t just cling to unbelievers. A misconception that I have dealt with is the feeling of failure that, as a believer, I continue to stray from the will of God, over and over. But God still offers His promises to us. We again need to identify our sins and ask the Lord to help us remove them from our lives.

With Endurance

Once we begin with faith and lay aside every weight and sin, we are ready to run with endurance, the third key element in running the race that is set before us. Understanding that the race is set before us is important to establishing our place within it. God has laid out the course. He is familiar with every roadblock, every turn, and every hill. He has given us everything we need so
we can run with endurance. For some in this season of COVID, it can be hard to feel like we’re running at all. I know I have felt stuck in the same place, surrounded by similar experiences.

Running into something new and exciting sounds wonderful. But the problem with this outlook is that I am looking only to the immediate future, to the part of the race course that is just around the corner. When my level of endurance is dependent upon the course itself, it is easy to lose motivation. Instead, we focus on the end goal, the promises of future joy that God has given us. With those promises in mind, nothing can stop us or make us slow down. This is endurance— a patient trek that does not allow circumstances to get in the way of the journey. And so, we run by faith, laying aside every weight, with endurance, looking to Jesus.

**Looking to Jesus**

“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 endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder 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.”

At this point we recognize that we are to run by faith, laying aside every weight, with endurance, but these things can only be accomplished by keeping our eyes on Jesus. Charles Spurgeon said, “The Greek word for ‘looking’ is a much fuller word than we can find in the English language. It has a preposition in it which turns the look away from everything else. You are to look from all beside to Jesus. Fix not thy gaze upon the cloud of witnesses; they will hinder thee if they take away thine eye from Jesus. Look not on the weights and the besetting sin—these thou hast laid aside; look away from them. Do not even look upon the race-course, or the competitors, but look to Jesus and so start in the race.” And so, this looking becomes even more powerful as we choose
not to look at other things. The passage describes Jesus as the founder and perfecter of our faith. This faith, the thing that initiates our race, was created and completed by Jesus. And if He is this founder and perfecter, this author and finisher, this creator and completer, we can trust that He will be with us in the race. In the beginning and the end, and in the middle. Philippians 1:6 tells us, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” How comforting is this, that Jesus does not just shoot off the starting gun and wait around until we cross the finish line. He is with us through it all, actively bringing our race to completion. Looking to Jesus also provides us the most perfect example of one who has run the race. When studying Hebrews 12, I was struck with the similarities in word choice between ourselves and Jesus. We are told to run with endurance, in the same way that Jesus endured the cross. Additionally, as we run the race that is set before us, Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him. So we look to Jesus, not only as our help through the race, but also as one who came and ran before us.

**For the Joy**

We run by faith, laying aside every weight, with endurance, looking to Jesus, for the joy. “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 endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder 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.” As these verses state, Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him. What joy was this? Jesus was seeking life with His Father in Heaven and a repaired relationship with us humans. We mean that much to Him. We are that important to him, that He endured the cross for
His joy, which was opening a way for us to come to God. So Jesus was able to endure the most difficult hardship because of the joy ahead. Now we have the same future, so we also should endure with joy. We not only run the race for the joy, but we also run the race with joy. Joy is the goal, and joy is the process. 2 Corinthians 4:17 says “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” A weight of glory beyond all comparison. Enduring with joy doesn’t mean dismissing our struggles. It is acknowledging and clinging to the truth that we are made for more. Then we can run with our faith, the laying aside of every weight and sin, our endurance, looking to Jesus, for and with joy. We can run the race. And we are not alone in this race. We have Jesus as our guide, and just like the story with my brother, it makes all the difference when we trust Him to bring us to completion. So let us run, by faith, laying aside every weight, with endurance, looking to Jesus, for the joy.

Pray

Lord, we come before you this morning, thankful for your example and presence with us in the race that we are running. We thank you for the promises you give to us. We ask that you would bless and multiply our faith. Help us to express confidence in you today. God, we also want to lay aside our weights and sins, giving them to you. Help us to identify these hindrances and leave them at the foot of the cross. Give us strength and endurance in the challenges of life. And help us always look to you, seeking and living with joy. We love you Lord. Amen