2012 Annual Convocation

September 19, 2012, 11:00 A.M.
Metropolitan Baptist Church

By the power vested in me as the 11th President of LeMoyne-Owen College by the Board of Trustees, I now declare the 2012-2013 Academic Year at LeMoyne-Owen College officially open.

LeMoyne-Owen College traces its origin to a school founded by the American Missionary Association in 1862. In 1968, the merger of LeMoyne and Owen colleges was accomplished. Each College brought to the merger a heritage of higher education to African American youth and the strong religious traditions of the United Church of Christ and the Baptist Churches. It is from this background that I developed today’s Convocation Address.

As we observe the 150th year Sesquicentennial Anniversary of LeMoyne-Owen College, the question must be raised, why do some institutions survive while others fail? I submit to you that the answer can be found in the 7th Chapter of Matthew, verse 24:

Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: And the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.

LeMOYNE-OWEN COLLEGE: FOUNDED ON THE ROCK
One of the rocks that I am talking about today is the rock upon which Harvard, Yale, Princeton and LeMoyne-Owen College was founded and that rock was known as Christianity. The other rock on which these institutions, including LeMoyne-Owen, was founded is the basic principles of a liberal arts education. These institutions survived while others failed because each was built on a solid foundation of Christianity and Education. Now that you know the rocks upon which this institution was founded, your goal from this day forward should be to **strive for excellence**.

As we celebrate 150 years of excellence as an institution, my convocation charge to the faculty, staff, students, and even me as your President is to not stop until you have achieved excellence – excellence in academics, leadership, employer-employee relations, community involvement, politics, and whatever career you choose. People who strive for excellence make wise use of their time, are committed to high standards of morality, and have developed a roadmap, I am sorry, a GPS for their lives. Benjamin Mays, President Emeritus of Morehouse College, says that **“the tragedy does not lie in not reaching your goals; the tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn’t a calamity to die with dreams unfilled, but it is certainly a calamity not to dream. It isn’t a disaster to be unable to capture your idea, but it is a disaster to have no idea to capture.”**

Members of the Class of 2016, I especially call your attention to the Biblical reference in Matthew 7 verses 25 and 26 and admonish you not to be like the foolish man who built his house on the sand, and the rain descended, the floods came and the winds blew and the house built on the sands fell. You are not going to fall or fail because you are going to accept the challenge this day to take advantage of the solid rock upon which LeMoyne-Owen College was founded and built. In 2016, I want each of you
to proudly proclaim “LeMoyne-Owen College provided me with a transformative experience and now I am prepared for urban-focused leadership, scholarship, service and professional careers.”

Congratulations to the entire Hollis F. Price Middle College family for receiving the United States News and World Report “Bronze” recognition as one of the BEST high schools in 2012 in the country. I am so pleased that you too are “a part of – not a part from” LeMoyne-Owen College which was founded upon a rock.

I submit the name of Johnnie B. Watson, the 11th President of LeMoyne-Owen College, as a person who was truly transformed by the College. This College prepared me so well that my first professional job application in 1959 was my last. My career was built on the solid rock of information acquired from dedicated professors, from the relationship that I had with LeMoyne-Owen’s first African American President, Dr. Hollis F. Price, and my desire to move from a childhood of poverty to a more affluent lifestyle. Over 50 years later, these opportunities are available to you at my Alma Mater, LeMoyne-Owen College. Build your career on the same solid rocks by taking advantage of learning opportunities with your professors and the current president.

Thomas Jefferson stated that “he who is ignorant of the past is poorly prepared to live in the future.” It disturbs me when I observe efforts to eliminate references to the segregated South, especially slavery. While slavery was a dastardly act, it was a part of America’s history. Not just African Americans, but every American, black, white, Hispanic, young and old will not be truly free until every American takes advantage of all that public or private education has to offer. I charge you to attend all of your
classes with an eagerness to learn. Every American who does not attain the highest degree possible remains enslaved.

They will be like the beautiful majestic eagle who soared through the sky until one day he was captured by an evil man who did not like the freedom the eagle displayed. He captured the eagle and chained him to a tree. For months the eagle walked around the tree day after day, night after night. One day the man released the eagle and the eagle still walked around the tree day after day, night after night. This reminds me of Americans who still do not know the value of an education. What a testimony it would be for the 150th Sesquicentennial Celebration of LeMoyne-Owen College if every student would make the commitment to build the rest of their lives on a solid foundation of excellence through education.

The Transformation Plan of 2008 that now serves as our strategic plan for leadership, opportunity and change was built on the solid foundation known as LeMoyne-Owen College. One of our post-baccalaureate students pursuing certification to teach young children stated “I came to Memphis from New Orleans. It was a traumatic time. LeMoyne-Owen saved my life…I had been a student before, but at LeMoyne-Owen I became a scholar…they took the light that was within me, and helped me manifest it.” All you have to do to make a similar statement is to take advantage of the College’s mission, the reason why the faculty and staff come to work every day. One of the reasons why you chose this historically black college is because LeMoyne-Owen College provides a transformative experience educating students for urban focused leadership, scholarship, service and professional careers.

When you are founded on a rock, the race riots that followed the withdrawal of the Federal troops after the Civil War, a major fire, the yellow
fever epidemic of 1873, two world wars, the great depression, the probationary status of the College in 2006 - all these things could not destroy LeMoyne-Owen College. When you look at our history, all of these events made the College stronger:

✓ A little over 500 students in 2006 and over 1,000 students today.
✓ Ranked number 11 of the 39 UNCF member institutions for fiscal stability.
✓ Accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.
✓ The Teacher Licensure Program is accredited by NCATE
✓ On September 20th, the groundbreaking ceremony will take place for a 300-plus bed residence hall.

As I leave you today and reflect on the solid rock upon which LeMoyne-Owen College was founded and survived for 150 years, I ask you to

✓ build on a foundation of the faith of your choice. Christianity is my choice.
✓ build on a foundation of excellence.
✓ build on a foundation of education.
✓ build on a foundation of love and respect for all mankind.

And the rains will come, the winds will blow, the floods will come, but you, like LeMoyne-Owen College that was founded on the rock, will stand.

Johnnie B. Watson, President, LeMoyne-Owen College, September 19, 2012