Sermon for The Feast of the Ascension

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, May 13, 2018

Text: Acts 1:1-11

Title: To the ends of the earth

For the first few centuries in the life of the Church, the Ascension, which we celebrate today, was a pretty big deal – right up there with Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. But in recent history, this feast has fallen into relative obscurity. There are a lot of reasons why this might be. For starters, it’s not the most obviously celebratory of occasions. At Christmas we celebrate the coming of Jesus; at Easter, his coming back from the dead; and at Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit. But the Ascension is about Jesus’ departure – not his coming but his going. And what Good News is there in that? We celebrate a God who walks beside us: who made us, loves us, and knows us each by name. A God who draws close, not a God who drifts away. As evangelicalism has swayed popular notions of Christianity over the last century in America, a renewed emphasis on the personhood and the presence of Jesus has emerged, with the effect that his absence can seem – even for us Episcopalians – somehow incongruous with the promise of our faith.

But in the wider narrative of Christianity, the Ascension is, unquestionably, Good News. Great News, even. In fact, Pentecost makes little sense without it. The commissioning of the disciples, the mission of the Church, and even our ministry as the Body of Christ in the world today all hinge on it. Jesus – God incarnate – is indeed the one who walks with us, knows us, and loves us. But Jesus also came into the world to accomplish something – something only the word made flesh could accomplish on this earth – and, on Easter Sunday, he did it. He removed the sting of death. He freed us from sin. He opened for us the way to everlasting life, to perfect reunion with God. And now his work here on Earth is finished. He has done what he came to do. If there was more that only he could do – that we needed him to do – we can rest assured he would have done it after the resurrection. He had all the time in the world. He had a new body. But instead he spends just a little time visiting with his friends - teaching, eating, talking about the kingdom of God – before he gathers them together at the edge of the city, and is lifted up in a cloud and taken into heaven.
The mechanics of his exit might remind us post-Enlightenment folks of a middle school play, but the fact of his exit answers the theological question, where is Jesus now? He is not here. He is at the right hand of God. He has, once again, gone before us to that place where all our stories will find their end. Jesus came to do what only God could do, and when all that was done, he left, and in leaving he left the rest to us, with the guidance of the promised Holy Spirit. This is the end of the story of the word incarnate – that is, the earthly life and ministry of one Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary and Joseph, a carpenter, a reformer, a savior. And it is the end of the first half of the Church year, which started all those many months ago with Advent, as we looked forward to his birth. But it is not the end of the story.

Ascension marks that pivotal turning point just about in the middle of the Christian narrative. That one toward which it seems like everything has been building, until you actually get there, and realize what you thought was going to happen didn’t, and that it all meant something slightly different – that the plot is more complex than you realized - and now you are so intrigued how all this is going to unfold that you can’t possibly look away. Which must be something like what the disciples felt, because it’s clear that all the way up to this point, even as they see Jesus slipping up, up and away from them, that they never really understood him. All along, they expected an earthly messiah: the promised heir of David, who would restore the kingdom of Israel in military glory and unite the tribes, ushering in an era of peace and prosperity for all people. And all along, Jesus has been saying, “yes … and.” “Yes, I am the one you have been waiting for, and, no, I’m not about what you think I’m about.” “Yes, I am the promised one of Israel, and, no, I am not only concerned with Israel.” “Yes, I have come to do my part, and I have come that you may do yours.” Throughout the Gospels, the disciples constantly misunderstand their teacher and friend, assuming his vision fits their familiar map, that his dream is already well-known to them, and all the while Jesus is busy doing a new thing in their midst, dreaming a bigger dream than they ever let themselves imagine.

You might think that after the crucifixion and resurrection they would have let go of their obviously inadequate expectations, but old habits die hard. And so even in this very last conversation, their last question for Jesus is, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” In other words, “Lord, we have tried to be good sports, we have hung in with you, and we will do our best to follow, but is it – finally - the time when you are going to do what we have been waiting for you to do all along?” And, true to the pattern of their
longstanding friendship, Jesus answers them without answering them, reminding them that the Holy Spirit is coming, that they are to be his witnesses in the world, and that they have a mission that will start in Jerusalem and spread to the ends of the earth. That is how big, how broad, and how bold Jesus’ dream is for them: the Kingdom of God, not the Kingdom of Israel. Endless, infinite, encompassing all things and all people.

It is not an obviously auspicious beginning to the ministry of the disciples, that rag tag group that constitutes the first Church – a beginning full of misunderstanding, a beginning that highlights not how much they have learned but how much they have not. And yet, Jesus goes: knowing he has done his part, and as alarming as things might look, that his friends – that we - are more than capable of doing the rest. Even if they don’t know it yet. Even if we don’t know it yet. It wasn’t a gamble – some cosmic roll of the dice. It was a well-thought out move on God’s part, the unpromising start notwithstanding, because God always seems to be doing what we least expect in the most surprising ways.

Seven Hills is a neighborhood center in the west end of Cincinnati – a one-stop social services agency established over fifty years ago. Findlay House was one of the first communities of Seven Hills and, today, functions as a community center out of which various programs are offered. Several years ago, Findlay House set up three programs for a group of African American youth who found themselves in some trouble. The first two were fairly straightforward: courses that would allow the youth to complete their GED, and computer skills training. These had measurable outcomes and very competent teachers. The third class was intended to help these young people learn the core skills that underlie healthy relationships. The development and practice of these “soft skills” is, of course, much harder to describe or measure than a degree earned or the acquisition of technical capacities, but they are indispensable for the flourishing of young adults (not to mention adults). The leadership of this program was entrusted to four volunteers: four white, overeducated, well-meaning adults who knew practically nothing about the lives these young people had lived and the neighborhoods from which they had come.

The plan was to meet for two nights a week for eight months. It didn’t take long for the four facilitators to realize their curriculum was getting in the way more than it was helping them connect. So, they decided to throw it out and focus first on trying to understand these kids.

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1 Learn more at [http://7hillsnh.com](http://7hillsnh.com).
Instead of assuming they already knew what the youth needed to know, and that their primary job was to hand that expertise over to them, all tied up in a neat little bow, they started listening. It took time, but slowly the youth opened up, sharing stories about their families, their wounds, their mistakes. It was hard for the adults to hear these things, and to appreciate the cultural and experiential gaps between them, but they stuck with it, realizing that attempts to “help” would be futile unless a foundation of trust was established between them. After several months, one of the participants told the facilitators, “I respect you so much because you may be the only people who really listen.”

Participation in this program, as well as the GED and computer classes, was entirely voluntary. After just a few weeks, the kids simply stopped showing up to the first two classes. But the third program continued to meet well after their eight months were up, and though they threw out their plan early on, the youth developed strong and meaningful relationship with both the facilitators and fellow peers. They even decided to take on making a movie together about the difficult choices facing young urban people, hoping to be a positive force in neighborhoods well beyond their own.

So, what happened? Why did the first two groups fail and the third thrive? In his book, *Community: The Structures of Belonging*, organizational development expert Peter Block argues that the fate of the groups was a matter of leadership. In the first cases, those in charge assumed they knew what the young people needed, that they knew what was best for them, and while getting a GED or learning to use a computer both seem objectively positive, no one asked the kids what they thought they wanted or needed, what would be helpful to them, assessed their motivation, or invested time in getting to know them before the courses began. In the other group, the adults helped the youth learn about relationships by being in relationship with them – both modeling and discovering, together, necessary skills and competencies.

This kind of leadership requires humility, patience, and an openness to being changed. It assumes that even the leaders have a lot to learn, and that we all have things to teach each other. And it seems, from today’s Gospel, like this is how God always intended the Church to be led: not by experts, but by fellow pilgrims: not by people who know it all, but by people with a lot to learn; not as an institution harkening back to when the Sunday School rooms were full and the pews packed – or whatever our inadequate expectations might be - but leaning into an unknown tomorrow, knowing our efforts don’t always measure well, but they do change lives.
Jesus left because he had done what he came to do, and now the hard work of ushering in the Kingdom of God – rooted in peace, justice, and mercy – well, it’s on us, with the help and guidance of the Spirit. It’s a daunting order. Let’s not pretend otherwise. Poverty. Discrimination. Hunger. Inequality. Disease. Exploitation. God is grieved by these things; so grieved that God joined our struggle in Jesus so that we could actually make a difference in this world; actually usher in that illusive kingdom of God. But mending the brokenness of the world is our inheritance as disciples of Jesus. It is our birthright. And it might begin with something as simple, or as hard, as listening to our neighbors. As being present with those we don’t yet know or understand. As showing up with and for the stranger in our midst, or the stranger within ourselves, knowing we are only in the middle of this story, and that we have an important part to play in what is yet to unfold.

After Jesus ascended into heaven, two men appear in white robes near the bewildered disciples and ask, “why are you looking up?” as if to say, “Don’t look up – look around.” After all, we believe in a God who would rather be followed than worshiped. So, why are we looking up, friends? Our end there is already promised. It’s a done deal. Our work now … well, it is right here. Amen.