

The Feast of the Ascension: May 8, 2016

The Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin, San Francisco, CA

Text: Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:1-11

Title: The Canvas

This morning we observe the Feast of the Ascension, a somewhat bittersweet moment, I imagine, for the disciples. Remember that they have only just gotten Jesus back. It wasn't but a few weeks ago that they were hiding in an upper room, locked away and afraid, certain that their friend and teacher was dead and buried, and that the authorities who had killed him were on their way. But Jesus returned, triumphant over the grave, and remained with them, teaching, enjoying their company, and, again, preparing them for what was to come.

Ascension marks a loss as Jesus returns to the Father from whom he came. It's an ending - but it is also a beginning. To better appreciate this, it helps to have a sense of where we are in the Church year. Our liturgical calendar starts with Advent, when we prepare to welcome the infant Christ into our hearts and our world. He comes at Christmas, and we then follow the early life of Jesus throughout Epiphany. All too quickly he is pushed out into the desert at Lent, and his earthly life is cut short. Easter comes with awe and wonder, an unexpected and undeserved breath of hope. We are still in the season of Easter now, and Sunday after Sunday we hear of the miraculous moments he shared with his friends on this side of resurrection. Next Sunday we will celebrate Pentecost, as the gift of the Holy Spirit descends on the early community of Jesus' friends and followers. And then from Pentecost on - from next week until November 27th (I looked it up) the focus of our annual cycle shifts from the life of Jesus to the life of the Church, the mystical body of Christ. Something critically important begins to shift with Jesus' Ascension. He departs so that something new can come to life.

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there was a young artist, full of promise. Her parents recognized her gifts and arranged for her to apprentice with the local master. It was a difficult and rigorous undertaking. She struggled to learn new techniques, new theory, new language, all while continuing to cultivate the joyful creativity that inspired her work. After years grinding pigments, preparing canvases, cleaning, and crafting, she learned to embrace every task set before her, and patiently practice her art. It was the master's custom to have his students work on one final project. For months she labored on the painting before finally bringing it before her teacher, who agreed that it was, indeed, ready to be shared with the community. The next morning she took the painting to the center of town and set it on an easel with a note, "I offer this for your enjoyment. If anyone should find any errors, please circle them," and attached a yellow pencil. Throughout the day she heard many compliments of her work, but she did not return to the canvas until the following morning, and when she did she was crestfallen to see the canvas covered with circles, large and small.

Embarrassed and confused, she carried the canvas back to her teacher. He asked her what had happened, and she explained the note. He nodded thoughtfully, inspected the canvas and handed it back. "Do it again," he said, "exactly as before." So she set to work, creating a replica of her first painting. It was several more months before she came to the master again, who agreed it was ready. Together, they walked to the center of town, and set the canvas where it had stood before. Only this time he suggested a different note, which read, "I offer this for your enjoyment.

If anyone should find any errors, please correct them.” Instead of affixing a pencil, the young artist left her entire paint set at the foot of the canvas. When they returned the next day, the piece was untouched.

One of the countless joys of being married to someone from a different cultural heritage is learning the folktales that shaped their imagination in childhood. The tale I just told is one my husband grew up hearing over and over again in Pakistan. Standing alone, it can sound like a critique of the critics – a subtle but searing calling out of the tendency in us all to notice fault without suggestion solution; to tear down rather than to build up. And that is, certainly, part of how I believe it is meant to be heard. This is a destructive tendency in any community, but seems to be especially widespread in our society today. We learn the art of critique from a young age in formal settings, like school, and informal settings, like familial conversation: how to tear apart an argument, dissect a thesis, and present our criticism as unique and novel, and ourselves as smarter than the original author or artist to boot. This particular approach to problems and ideas sticks with us, and is easy to discern today in our political process, celebrity culture, social media interactions, and even, tragically, our own intimate communities. It has its place.

What is often much harder to teach, learn, and practice is constructive and collaborative creativity. On a deeper level, this is what the folktale speaks to. In it, the artist does not say her work is “finished.” She is ready to share it with her community when she has done all she can. Perhaps it could have been made more beautiful with the contributions of others. Perhaps that was the final lesson her teacher offered. Perhaps she left it out a few more days and that’s exactly what happened. This points to a fundamental shift in the way we approach a situation, a day, a lifetime: are our places of work, our relationships, our society, our communities – including this one – places where we encounter structures or patterns set in stone, with which we can only find fault, or are they places where we have the opportunity – even the invitation – to collaborate? Places where we can co-create, celebrate, even play, as we take part in shaping what is yet to be?

Jesus was not born to found the institutional Church. He did not leave his disciples a building or a strategic plan. Instead, he showed them how to live, how to love, and how to serve one another. And then he returned home, in a posture of eternal blessing, and sent the Holy Spirit to guide us, and to remind us how to live and love when we forget. Everything else we’ve been figuring out over the last 2,000 years.

Jesus ascended to make room for us to take up his ministry, to be his hands and his heart in the world. Perhaps some spheres in which you operate really don’t make space for your voice, your vision. But the Church – to be truly the Church – absolutely must. As the body of Christ – cosmic and global, yet manifest right here in this parish of St. Mary – each member is integral to the whole. Each of our voices, and, importantly, our decision NOT to speak at times, contributes to the quality of our shared communion. We **are**, in a totally practical and deeply mystical sense, co-creators of this community, this reality, even if our canvas today seems as ordinary as shaping a child’s imagination, feeding one hungry mouth, or mindfully entering a conversation with kindness as our guide.

The masterpiece before you may seem devastating empty or too perfect to touch. Either way, the brushes are at your feet, and the paint is still wet ...

Amen.