

**7th Sunday of Easter/Sunday after the Ascension – John 17:1-11
St Andrew’s Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ**

Rising to the Occasion of Being One

*“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me,
so that they may be one, as we are one.”*

A few weeks ago, I attended the Festival of Homiletics in San Antonio, Texas. Various workshops, presentations, and worship services were held in three downtown venues. Each venue reflected different aspects of the city’s history and culture, yet each provided the space for us to share God’s love and to rejoice in Jesus, our Risen and Ascended Savior. Each venue also provided the setting for us to experience the Ascension in a new light – to not only be witnesses to Jesus’ Ascension, but to be the Body of Christ rising to the occasion and responding to unexpected situations with creativity and grace.

One of the venues was Travis Park United Methodist Church. The congregational seating area reminded me of a theatre that faced a huge stage and had a balcony that wrapped around three sides of the sanctuary. On one side of the stage there was a nearly full-length stained glass window depicting Jesus as the Good Shepherd. On the opposite side, a large painting hung above an exit door. The image caught my attention because I had been reflecting on the Ascension, and this painting depicted a barefoot Jesus ascending to heaven. He was wearing a flowing white garment as he floated in the sky. A crowd of people stood on the ground pointing in awe and wonder -

and probably with a bit of trepidation - at the sight of their Lord and Savior leaving them. The scene on the ground looked somewhat chaotic. There was movement and energy not only focused upward toward Jesus, but also among the people who had come to see him – perhaps to be healed by his words and touch. One man was sitting in the foreground on a stretcher. A woman was carrying a child; another a jug of water. Other people were reaching out to Jesus as he ascended to his Father in heaven. There appeared to be a sense of anxiety among the crowd. And why shouldn't these people be worried? Their Lord and Savior, their healer and spiritual leader had appeared and disappeared several times since he suffered death on the cross. Jesus' seekers and followers had seen or heard about his post-resurrection appearances. But this time, he really was going away. Now what were they supposed to do?

In the painting, there were several men who appear to be trying to reassure the crowd that Jesus was not leaving for good. He promised to return to them in new ways, especially through the gift of the Holy Spirit. He promised to be with them forever; to be one with them as He is with God. Perhaps we can see ourselves in this painting – as the man who desires God's physical healing; as the woman who wants Jesus' spiritual healing; as many of the others who seek to have their difficult lives transformed by Divine grace. Perhaps we see ourselves as one of the disciples who is guiding people to live into Jesus' promise of new life now and in the age to come. Perhaps we are

reassuring people that Jesus will keep his promise to always be with us - even in unexpected ways. In this painting, Jesus is ascending to the Father after completing the work he was given to do; leaving the disciples to rise to the occasion as they take on their new leadership roles in carrying on God's work and spreading the Good News. In Spirit and in Truth, God is calling all of God's beloved community to rise to the occasion and create heaven on earth by living into the life that God intends for all - the heavenly life that we glimpse now in this world, and the eternal life that the Risen Christ promises; the heavenly life in which the diversity of all people and all creation is honored and celebrated; the heavenly life in which all are once again made one with God regardless of the color of their skin, or their socioeconomic status, or their country of origin, or their sexual orientation, or their physical or mental abilities. In the heavenly realm, the arms of our Risen Christ are open wide to all who believe and seek to do the will of God. The heavenly realm, the arms of the Risen Christ arms are wide open because God is gracious and merciful, and transforms us by the loving embrace of forgiveness and reconciliation. Not just up in the sky with the birds and the planes and the space shuttles and satellites. But God is right here with us now on land and sea because we are the hands and feet and voices of the living Body of Christ. We are the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the world responding with creativity and grace to

those awkward moments when things don't go exactly as we planned or as we had hoped.

That brings me back to the Festival of Homiletics and to share about the second venue where we gathered to be witnesses to our Risen and Ascended Christ. The location was the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center, and the featured speaker was Rob Bell. Rob is a fairly young and energetic speaker and a former pastor. He has a great sense of humor and is quite entertaining. Like many motivational speakers, Rob presents his material without notes. But on this occasion, he wanted to reflect on some photos that he took of quirky situations that inspired him to see the Risen and Ascended Christ amidst the beautiful diversity of God's beloved community. The main point of Rob's talk was to encourage us to notice God's activity in everything and everywhere as we prepare our weekly sermons – out into the wonders of our galaxy, and back into our remarkable neighborhoods, and even down into the messiness of our daily lives. Rob wanted to offer vivid images of God showing up in the predictability of unpredictable moments. Surprisingly one of those unpredictable moments happened just as Rob was about to click through his PowerPoint slides. As any of you know who have worked with technology - sound systems, and projectors, and computers don't always cooperate with their operators. Rob's first slide showed up for about two seconds and then vanished as quickly as one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. The same

thing happened for the next 30 minutes. But Jesus showed up again - in the gracious patience of about a thousand audience members. Jesus showed up in helping hands that were familiar with the idiosyncrasies of computers and projectors.

Jesus showed up in the calm, and seemingly non-anxious presence of the presenter – through his witty humor, his relaxed professionalism, and his ability to improvise in the heat of the moment. Jesus showed up in the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center through the merciful goodness of the living Body and Blood of Christ. Through the loving kindness and compassion of each person, the collective assembly rose to the occasion to be the Beloved Community that God calls us to be. By the grace of God, the audio-visual team got Rob’s presentation up and running. And sure enough, every one of his photos celebrated the creative diversity of God’s people and inspired us as preachers to be more alert to the presence of God, especially in all of life’s messy and unexpected moments.

Speaking of messy, that brings me to the third venue in which the Festival of Homiletics gathered its flock of preachers and proclaimers of the Good News. The third venue was the Scottish Rite Auditorium – an early 20th century building that is a fine example of the craftsmanship and grandeur of the Freemasons. But since it was built several decades prior to the Americans with Disabilities Act, there we many slippery marble stairways to ascend and

descend. Of course, many of us who were fairly able-bodied reached out to assist those who were less mobile. But the stairways were just one of the challenges of gathering a large conference in a 93-year old building. The plumbing system failed to keep up with all of our needs, and at one point the water had to be turned off, and we had to rely on the hospitality of a neighboring hotel and church when we need to use the facilities – that is until the City of San Antonio delivered a truckload of port-a-potties! Talk about rising to the occasion and being creative and gracious examples of the Body of Christ!

But you know as well as I, that the Body of Christ doesn't just rise to the occasion in San Antonio. The Body of Christ rises to the occasion in every city and town, in every neighborhood and community, in every household and every homeless shelter; in every encounter and every conversation. For we are the hands and hearts and voices of the Body of Christ in the world. We are the Body and Blood of Christ rising to the occasion – whether it is by reconciling with an estranged family member, comforting a friend who is wrestling with a serious medical condition, listening to a neighbor who is grieving the loss of a spouse, or serving a hot meal to a community member down on their luck – it is each and every one of us who God calls to rise to the occasion, and be one with each other, and one with God as together we manifest heaven on earth with creativity and grace.

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