

St. Andrew's, Sedona  
Sunday after Ascension Day  
May 8, 2016  
The Rev. Grayce O'Neill Rowe

I have to tell you that I almost made a terrible mistake today. Several years ago I traveled to Jordan for a friend's wedding. It was an amazingly wonderful adventure. After the wedding I spent a few days sight-seeing in Jordan. I went to the beautiful, ancient city of Petra; I went to the Dead Sea; I went to Mt. Nebo, where Moses saw the Promised Land; and I went to Bethany, the site that many scholars now believe is the site where Jesus was baptized. I found it deeply moving to be able to walk on land where Jesus walked. Although the spot where Jesus was baptized is now a dry riverbed, it was truly amazing to stand where he might have stood, to stand where John the Baptist might have stood. I was so deeply moved by this that every time since that I have read that Jesus went to Bethany I thought of this baptism site. Jesus went to Bethany to Mary and Martha's home, he went to their home and raised his friend, Lazarus, from the dead. He went to Bethany a few days before he made his triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, his Palm Sunday procession on the back of a donkey. And then, today, in Luke's Gospel we just heard, "Then he led them out as far as Bethany and he ascended up to heaven."

Now, I started to get pretty excited about this, maybe it's a priest thing, but it was exciting to make all sorts of connections between baptism and the resurrection of Lazarus, between baptism and Palm Sunday, between baptism and the Ascension. I was even more excited when I remembered that the site of Jesus' baptism is also believed to be the site where Elijah ascended. I was working myself up into a pretty fantastic sermon about all of these geographical connections.

And then, just in the nic of time, I remembered, and my sermon was ruined, but I remembered that the site where Jesus was baptized is not called Bethany; no, it is called Bethany Beyond the Jordan and I started to think about the fact that Bethany Beyond the Jordan is not in Israel; it is, in fact, on the east side of the Jordan River in Jordan. Jerusalem is on the west side of the Jordan River in Israel. Something didn't seem right so I looked at a map of New Testament times and there it was, right before my eyes, the huge mistake that I had made and on which I had almost built my sermon.

There were two Bethany's – one in Israel just a very short distance from Jerusalem, on the west side of the Jordan River, and one in the present day country Jordan, on the east side of the Jordan River.

The site of Jesus' baptism, the site of Elijah's ascension is not where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and it is not where he went before his triumphant Palm Sunday march and it is not from where he ascended.

My sermon was ruined by geography.

And then, I realized, that geography is precisely what the Ascension is all about. Well, not actually geography, rather the absence of geography.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, his presence was geographically determined, you might say that his presence was geographically limited. He was either in Jerusalem or Galilee or Nazareth or Bethany Beyond the Jordan – but if he was in one place, he was not at the same time, in another. His presence was limited by geography.

Because of the Ascension, because Jesus ascended to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit to be with his people – everywhere, no matter where they were; because he ascended into heaven he was no longer limited by geography and instead can be with you and you and me and people who are in Jerusalem or in Bethany beyond the Jordan or in California or France or Belgium or Syria or Iraq – Jesus is no longer geographically limited.

And that is truly incredible news. That means, as one scholar said, “the great irony of the Ascension is that in leaving the world, Jesus became more present to it.”

It was only by leaving the world that Jesus was able to be with each and every one of us in a very personal, and you might say, in a very geographical way.

And consider one more thing. The position that Jesus was in as he left the world. Luke tells us that he lifted up his hands and he blessed them, he blessed the disciples. While he was blessing them he withdrew from them and was carried up. Not after he finished blessing them, but while he was blessing them.

No wonder the disciples were filled with joy. Jesus left, yes, but he started blessing and he continued blessing and he blesses still.

The good news of the Ascension is that Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, is present and is blessing each and every one of us wherever we might happen to be. Believing that, of course, is a matter of faith.

And, so, on this Sunday after Ascension Day, my prayer for each of us is that we will have the faith to see the ascended, ever-present, no longer geographically limited, and ever-blessing Lord and Savior Jesus Christ - that we will have the faith to see Jesus every minute of every day of our lives no matter where we are, geographically, emotionally, or spiritually.

If we do have that kind of faith, our lives will be incredibly enriched wherever it is that we find ourselves. Amen.