

“Did Jesus Wear Ruby Slippers?” – ASCENSION SUNDAY 2015

My thanks to those who have participated in our service this morning – especially to members of Diverse Harmony for sharing your amazing voices and talent, and to Brayton for gifting us with your direction of the combined choirs. Thank you. This is the third year you’ve visited us and the third year I’ve had the responsibility and delight to offer a reflection in your presence. I always seem to have my work cut out for me when you visit. The first year it was Pentecost – the strange story of people from different places who were all able to understand voices in their own languages; the second year we tackled a passage difficult for those of us committed to diversity, pluralism, and interfaith action – the story where Jesus says: “I am *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life and the *only* way to God is through me.” This year is no exception, with this Sci-Fi imagery of Jesus ascending to heaven. These passages challenge me because I work them out for you – for all of you; they are also challenging because they force me to work them out for myself. I have to be comfortable with them before I can stand before you with any confidence. (I gladly leave Easter to Tim.)

I confess to you, my friends, these opening paragraphs have undergone a dozen revisions. Of course I wanted to begin with something funny so I could win you over with my clever wit... but after singing this beautiful song of reflection, I realized I wanted to begin with this: the story from Luke this morning is nothing more than a homecoming story. Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “My Abba God’s home has many rooms, if that weren’t so, would I have told you that I go there to prepare a place for you?” Yet, the idea of *homecoming* in the guise and language of ascension is elusive. We’re left scratching our heads.

Making sense of Jesus' dramatic disappearance from his disciples is difficult to wrap our minds around, unless we imagine that – like Dorothy (and Patrick) – Jesus wore ruby slippers. Imagine *that*!

And yet it makes sense that a homecoming story is difficult to grasp when the experience of *home* of true *belonging* is also elusive for so many of us. I think the idea and experience of home is elusive for at least two reasons... For some the idea of home is difficult because they literally don't have a home, or because home has become unsafe, dangerous – a place where belonging and beloved ones are replaced by disconnection and disapproval.

For others, home is elusive because we've become so obsessed with being somewhere we're not – of being *someone* we're not.

We live in a society consumed by a *somewhere else mentality* – we are a people rarely if ever satisfied. “The grass is always greener over the *next* hill,” we say. As a result, I fear, even those of us privileged enough to have a *house* experience a sense of belonging that's so off-kilter, we seldom pause to appreciate it – pause to just *be*.

I imagine, that for some of us, our experience of home is elusive because we live our lives in between places, always wanting more, always asking, “What's next? Where are we going now?” Instead of sitting back to watch the sun set in the evening, we chase the sun, trying to catch it, to outrun it, which inevitably leaves us exhausted and unsatisfied.

When I was in elementary school my parents and I lived in Philadelphia. When summer came, we drove north to Old Orchard Beach, Maine, where my Nana lived. The beach stretches seven beautiful miles along the coast. During the summer it's occupied by

sunbathers, and sand castle builders, and children in those funny little puffed arm-floaty things.

It's also a great place to surf.

One summer, when I was in third or fourth grade, I became obsessed with surfing. I sat in the sand watching the surfers zig-zag over the waves. I wanted to be out there. I wanted to paddle a board out into the frothy blue water. It looked magical *out there*.

I started dropping hints to my parents – and by “hints” I mean something akin to Ralphy in a Christmas Story: “Mom, Dad, wouldn't it be fun to try *surfing*.”

About a week into the summer I was the proud owner of a Styrofoam boogie board – not a surfboard, I know, but heck, any real surfer has to start somewhere. When we arrived at the beach, I ran down to the water with the board and gazed out at the surf. Small to medium waves that day – perfect for a beginner.

I had to ditch my parents.

I just had to get *out there*.

I waded out waist-deep, flopped onto the board and began to paddle away from shore.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been paddling, or how far out I was, so I glanced back over my shoulder and realized my mom was a tiny stick figure on a massive dune of sand.

Maybe this is far enough, I thought, sitting up. I turned the board around to face shore and realized that she continued to get smaller even though I was no longer paddling away.

Later, I would learn that I paddled into an undertow, which was pulling me out into the open ocean. What I knew at that moment, as my heart began to pound, was that the blue water was no longer inviting – it was dark and foreboding; its depths held unknown creatures. There was only one place I wanted to be: back on the beach with my parents – *back there*.

I paddled furiously – frenetically, but still my mom got smaller. I sat up and started screaming at the top of my lungs: “HELP! HEEEEELP!” What I wouldn’t have done for a pair of ruby slippers – even ruby flippers at that moment.

My dad, who had just undergone foot surgery hobbled to the waterline, but it was clear he couldn’t make his way out to me. Just then a man came bounding down the beach and into the water. He dove in and with massive strokes swam toward the little kid drifting out to sea. When he reached me, he grabbed the Styrofoam and said something goofy, like, “All aboard! Get it? Board? Surf board?”

I hardly cracked a smile. I just whispered, “Can you please take me back to the beach, Mr?”

“No problem, kid. Just hang on.” And with that, he pulled me back to shore.

As soon as the water was shallow enough, I hopped down and practically crawled to the beach. I was never so happy to see my parents.

The next morning, when we arrived back at the beach, I sat in the sand looking out at the water. The only place I wanted to be was out there with the surfers... *out there*.

This is how life unfolds, with that aching desire to be somewhere we’re not.

Soon after singing, Somewhere over the Rainbow, with that longing in her voice, Dorothy runs away from home. A short time later she finds herself *somewhere* over the

rainbow in a merry little place called Oz. Almost immediately after arriving, where does she want to go? ***Back home.***

If our own sense of belonging, or lack of it, leaves us dissatisfied; if our experience of home is that it's a dangerous place – if we long to belong, then how and where do we find the security to be authentically who we are.

Throughout his ministry – long before the Gospel writer we know as Luke penned the scripture Tim read for us this morning, it seems that Jesus was adamant heaven wasn't *somewhere* else. Jesus said, "They will not say, look here it is, or look, there it is. For behold, the kingdom of heaven is in your midst." Some translations even read, "The kingdom of God is *within you.*"

What does Glinda say to Dorothy at the end of the Wizard of Oz, when the wizard's hot air balloon lifts off without her? Dorothy is distraught and asks, "Oh, will you help me? Can you help me?" Glinda responds, "You don't need to be helped any longer. You've always had the power to go back..."

The power was always in your grasp.

About four years ago I had the great honor of preaching for Homecoming Sunday – a sermon titled, "Locked Out." Some of you may remember I reflected on an experience I had one morning when I was late for work. I ran out of the apartment and down to my car only to realize I didn't have my keys. I ran back up to the apartment and tried the door and realized with a sinking feeling that I was *locked out.*

From the front porch I noticed that the kitchen window was unlocked, so I slid it open. The only way to get in the window was face-first over the sink, so I started to shimmy in. At one point I placed my hand back against the wall and pushed, accidentally

flipping the switch for the garbage disposal, which roared to life just inches below my face. Startled I back out and decided to try something else.

From the same porch I leaned out over the railing and tried my bedroom window, which was also ajar. With some awkward finesse, I slid this window open. Two stories above the parking lot, I had to climb from the railing to the windowsill. Again, the only easy way was face first. As I managed to get my head and chest through the window, I lost my balance and fell into the room – but not all the way because my belt buckle caught the windowsill.

At that moment I'm not sure what startled me more: dangling upside-down from the windowsill with my face just inches from the carpet, or the sound of my keys falling out of my pocket and onto the floor.

There I was, almost literally turned inside out by my efforts, holding the keys to the door all along.

Sometimes, it just happens by accident – moments of serendipity that open us up by us being open to them.

But I think more often than not, finding the key to our own experience of belonging – to our own experience of self – happens through the relationships we have with others.

The Scarecrow, Lion, and Tin Man realized they had what they wanted all along. These discoveries came not from within, but instead by banding together in order to help a friend. Their bravery, love, and knowledge were always parts of them, but they weren't made manifest until they joined *together* to help their friend Dorothy.

At it's best, this is how life works. Perhaps it's also how ascension works – those moments when we transcend ourselves and experience belonging in a whole new way, because we find our truest most authentic selves reflected back in the people we love. Sometimes we find it in family, sometimes in friends, and sometimes – oddly enough – in a room of strangers.

Richard Blanco, who offered the poem at President Obama's inauguration in 2013, will be coming to join us during an extended homecoming week in September. He wrote a book on the experience of offering the inaugural poem, which includes these words:

From the CNN studios we rush off to the Human Rights Campaign ball. The organizers had told everyone I wasn't going to attend; they had wanted my appearance to be a surprise, and it is, for me as well: I walk onstage to say a few words, but I'm silenced by three minutes of whistles, applause, and hollers. Though I have lived an openly gay life for decades, I came of age in a generation fraught with homophobia. As such, there was still some small part of me that hadn't fully accepted myself as a gay man until that very moment when I am overcome by the crowd's response, the palpable love from *my* LGBT community. Not a town or a city, but a home nevertheless, where I belong...

Recognizing home, recognizing belonging in the people who surround you requires us to step away – however briefly – not from them, but from that *somewhere else mentality*. Sometimes it's as simple as being present to a moment. Sometimes it takes great leaps, or the tremendous effort of paddling back toward shore even as the massive current pulls you out into the ever-deeper abyss of the open ocean.

Looking back on it, during my days leading up to sobriety, I drank to get away. Some people drink to numb pain, others drink to fit in, others drink because without a home – without a sense of belonging – a false sense of comfort comes from the effects of intoxication. I drank for all of these reasons and no reason at all.

One of the things I came to realize, was that along with risking absolutely everything I had, I was preventing myself from appreciating *everything I had*. I didn't belong because I wouldn't allow myself to belong – worse than that, I didn't belong because I didn't believe I was worthy of belonging.

In a reflection about the song we'll sing in a few minutes, Rod Romney writes, "I believe that the highest will of God is for all people to come *home* to the truth of their own being where they can love and accept each other fully."

I wonder if that is the truest form of Ascension.

One day at a time isn't just about making it through the day without some substance; instead we learn to take life in small chunks – one day at a time – in order to appreciate the life we have, the people we love (who also love us), and the places where we experience belonging. We learn to click our heels together each of these days, and then open our eyes, and realize we haven't gone anywhere because we're exactly where we wanted to be all along. For some of us, it's the opportunity to curl up with a beloved one, for others it's a shared brunch on Saturday morning, and for you, members of Diverse Harmony, perhaps it's gathering in the choir room on Tuesday nights.

For others, it is this coming together on Sunday morning.

[Leave pulpit]

There's no place like home (x3).

You see, I wouldn't have it any other way. I hope and pray all of us find a place to belong, where we are nothing more than who we are – where we belong and where we are beloved.

May that continue to be so.