

ASCENSION SUNDAY

People of Jerusalem, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Acts 1:10

I want to tell you about Travis.

As some of you know, two weeks ago I was away at a conference on vocational development called CREDO. I joined a group of 23 other Episcopal Clergy from all over the country – all 55 or older– at a beautiful retreat center outside Richmond, Virginia, for a time of reflection and work together about our lives in the Church, a conference put on by the Church Pension Fund.

We did extensive preparatory work before attending, and the Mayo Clinic, responsible for our health work up, and the CREDO folks, who did the vocational assessment, gave us plenty of feedback.

One of the health advisories we got was that 75 % of us at this conference were overweight. I was pleased to be in the minority, in that instance! And of this heavy group, Travis was the most seriously heavy, probably would qualify as obese. And it seemed in his case that his excess weight was the outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual difficulty.

On the first evening, as we were talking about “housekeeping” issues for the conference, our administrator said that if something went wrong in our rooms – a light bulb went out, or whatever, we should tell a staff member and the problem would be fixed asap.

Travis raised his hand. “But what if my inner light bulb goes out?” he demanded in a rather frantic voice. Who do I talk to then?

Uh oh, I thought, and I know I wasn’t the only one. A friend of mine, formerly from this diocese, said to me, *I don’t think Travis is in a good place*. I’m not the most intuitive person in the world, but this seemed to be stating the obvious.

As the week went on, Travis proved, unsurprisingly, to be somewhat of a loner. You would see him walking around the campus mostly by himself, and at chapel he’d usually sit staring at the floor – and the chapel had glass walls with views of lush rolling hills and verdant trees outside. But still, Travis contemplated the floor.

Thursday night we took our one off-site excursion, to go bowling. You can try to imagine two dozen mostly overweight Episcopal Clergy over 55 bowling, or not! We did, surprisingly to me, have a great deal of fun, and many of us discovered our inner bowlers.

It was Travis's birthday, and we all signed a card for him, and one of the team leaders gave him a long festoon of swirly ribbons. Travis wore these ribbons around his neck for the rest of the week in the manner of a priestly stole.

Toward the end of the week, one of the men in my working group of 4 said, *I'm from L.A, and I have to say I'm surprised there are no gay men here except one of the faculty.*

Excuse me? I said. *What about Travis?*

Both men in the group said, *oh no, he's very conservative, he's Anglo-Catholic.*

Well, I said, *goes with the package.*

The other man in the group, an Anglo Catholic from Alabama said, *Excuse me.*

Well, it's a package, I said, *and I'll bet you \$5.00.*

By the end of the conference they had come to agree with me, though they never paid up.

We all had to produce plans for our future, with three major goals and then an overarching aspiration. We had a couple of days to work on these, and then on the final full day we had a Eucharist for which the homily was the sharing of our plans. 5 hours was allotted for this event on the schedule, and I was extremely anxious, as it turned out most of us were, that we would spend 4 ½ hours "sharing." I mean, two dozen preachers – I ask you!

But all of us, really, were mercifully brief. Most people honored the 2 – 3 minute guideline. But also, the plans overwhelmingly resembled one another: people pledged to take better care of themselves, to take days off, to spend more time with their families, to get more exercise – again I was grateful to feel in a minority of clergy who don't feel constantly overwhelmed, victimized, really, by over work.

Travis was almost the last to speak. In fact, I wasn't sure he would speak at all. But finally he stood up. He stepped out – the chairs in the chapel were set up facing one another in shallow semi-circles – he stepped away from his chair and took a deep breath.

He had a deep and sonorous voice. He said, "I came to CREDO filled with anger at the Church and at God. My plan for the week – I had a plan when I came – my plan was to devise an exit strategy from my parish and from the Church."

"Then," he said, I met with Ted. (Ted was the gay faculty member) "And Ted stripped away the mask that God has always been wearing for me. (We had been talking

some about masks during the week – more about that in another sermon, perhaps) God was naked for me. And I was devastated. Furious. The God I had always known was gone.”

People of Jerusalem, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?

Now, I don’t know what Ted said to him. I’d like to think that he said, *You know what, Travis, God knows you’re gay. And God loves you, not despite your gayness, but because of your gayness.* That’s what I want to imagine went on between them. Whatever it was, Travis said that it had been traumatic and terrifying. He said he had been through hell.

“But now, “ he went on, “I have a new plan.” He took several more steps out into the center of the circle. “My plan is NOTHING LESS,” he said more loudly, and raised his hand in the air, “NOTHING LESS THAN RESURRECTION.”

There was a pause. Then he said, in a softer voice, “and when we meet again, in five years or so, I hope that you will see a lot less of me.” and brushed his hands down over his body as if shedding pounds while he spoke.

He sat down. We all sat in silence. I looked out the window and saw hawks soaring – 8 redtails circling high above us. Then we applauded, long and loud, with relief, and gratitude, and gladness.

Something happened to Travis between that conversation with Ted on Thursday, and that Eucharist on Sunday. Something went on during those three days that seems to me to have been, already, death and resurrection. A death of some kind of pretense and falsehood. And a rebirth of hope and faith.

People of Jerusalem, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?

In a few moments we will baptize Sarah Elizabeth Derby Mahnke into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. She comes from a line of staunch Episcopalians on one side, and will inherit, I am sure, her mother’s faithful curiosity about the Church we’re welcoming Sarah into. I happen to know Sarah’s godmother rather well, and I can’t imagine anyone better equipped to support and uphold her in her life of faith, while encouraging all the healthy skepticism that keeps us sane in this business of Church. And I’m sure, knowing Ben and Elisa, that Sarah’s godfather has been chosen with equal loving care.

And here is my personal prayer for Sarah. That she may never arrive at the place of anger, bitterness, and fear that Travis had arrived at. That she may never feel that

everything she believed in, everything that inspired and consoled her, has been stripped away. That she may never have to devise an exit strategy from the Church, or, far more important, that she may never find herself exiting from a life of faith.

But that if she does, if she does— and nothing we can do can prevent or protect Sarah from some dark night of the soul, sometime – when that dark time occurs, I pray that she may find what Travis found, the gift and blessing of NOTHING LESS.

And I pray that she will not seek for it for a long time looking up, vainly, toward heaven. I pray that she will find, right here on earth, right among her sisters and brothers in Christ, NOTHING LESS THAN RESURRECTION.

Alleluia! Amen