

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
The Sunday after Ascension Day – May 21, 2023
Acts 1:6-14, John 17:1-11
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

“The only constant is change.” We’ve all heard that expression. Life is full of change, isn’t it? Good, wonderful change and sad, unwelcome change. Especially when we are in the midst of the changes in our own lives, we would agree – “the only constant is change.”

Jesus was fully human, and his life was full of change, just as ours are. He experienced all the developmental change that we have experienced, from his conception to his birth and as a child. We know very little from the Gospels about Jesus’ childhood. There is almost no record of his life from his birth until his public ministry began when he was about 30 years old. This long time is sometimes referred to as Jesus’ “hidden life.” Luke records that Jesus “increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52). These few words summarize a great deal of change, change that lies behind Jesus’ public ministry and the man we know from the Gospels.

In the weeks following Easter we focus on a monumental – and for us, mysterious – change in Jesus’ life, his resurrection from the dead. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to many of the disciples to assure them of his ongoing life and love. He was certainly recognizable and also certainly changed.

The risen Lord’s presence was very temporary. This past Thursday was Ascension Day, forty days after Easter. Our first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, describes Jesus’ ascension to heaven, his final leave-taking before he comes again to establish God’s kingdom forever. On the day of his ascension the disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” His reply is something to keep in mind if anyone tries to pull us into a discussion of the “end times”: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” Jesus redirected the disciples to what was their legitimate concern and their work: once they had received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, to witness to Jesus throughout the world.

Jesus then ascended into heaven. He had come from God, and he returned to God. The long history of the church was about to begin. As followers of Jesus, we are part of that ongoing history, a story full of change.

Because Ascension Day is forty days after Jesus’ resurrection it always falls on a Thursday and not a Sunday. So, we tend to pass over the event without much thought and miss its importance. Remember that Luke’s Gospel ends with the ascension and part two of Luke’s writing – the Acts of the Apostles – begins with the ascension. Christ’s ascension is a turning point in his relationship with humanity.

Theologically, the ascension marks Christ’s humanity being taken into heaven, when he returned to the Father from whom he came. This is important. Jesus’ life on earth ended, even his post-resurrection meetings with the disciples ended, but his human experience was not left behind when he left the earth. What does this mean for us? We may have confidence when we pray that God forever understands, from the inside, the burdens of human life. If we are in pain and pray to Jesus, Jesus isn’t saying to himself, “Let me see, I think I still remember the pain of

the cross, but it was a long time ago.” If we are afraid to die and ask Jesus for help, Jesus isn’t saying, “Oh yes, the Garden of Gethsemane, but that was just a few bad hours I’d nearly forgotten.” If we are grieving for someone we love, Jesus doesn’t say to himself, “Oh right, I remember when my friend Lazarus died. I was quite upset back then.” Jesus’ personal experience of human life and his experiences with other people are eternally present with God, not a chapter in the past. Jesus isn’t only “back then.” He is now and will be forever.

“The only constant is change.” That does seem to be true. But there is a greater truth. God does not change. God’s love does not change. The essential nature of our response to God does not change: love for love. The essential nature of our witness to Jesus Christ in the world does not change: love of our neighbor. These are the constants that ground us through all the changes of life, through all the changes in the world and in the church. “The only constant is God.” Let that be our assurance through all the changes we face. Let that be our hope, as we look forward to the changes our loving God will bring about.

All of us experience life in time and space. As Christians, we locate ourselves in “the between time,” between Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension and his coming again in glory. Luke’s description of the ascension recorded in Acts ends this way (1:10-11): “While [Jesus] was going and [the disciples] were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’”

We who are in “the between time” can look back and learn about Jesus from the record of Holy Scripture. We learn there not only who he was and what he did back then, but who he is and what he does now and forever, because Christ’s humanity was taken into heaven at the ascension. By the power of Christ’s Holy Spirit, we experience Jesus now when we pray, when we receive the Eucharist, in many ways. Jesus is here with us as he promised to be when he said, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20).

In company with Christians who have died and Christians who are alive now, we also look forward in hope. We look forward in hope, trusting that Jesus has indeed gone before us “to prepare a place for us; that where he is, there we might also be” (Proper Preface for the Ascension, the Book of Common Prayer, page 379). Lovers of Christ, this promise is no small part of the peace which Christ offers us, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:8).

The risen Christ has ascended to heaven, not to leave humanity behind but to take humanity to God. The risen Christ has promised to come again, to take us where he has gone so that we might be with him forever. May Christ fill our hearts with faith and with hope and with God’s peace, and may Christ’s Holy Spirit comfort us with his love as we wait for his coming. In Jesus’ name. Amen.