

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
June 1, 2025 – The Sunday after Ascension Day
John 17:20-26; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21
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Thursday was Ascension Day, forty days after Jesus' resurrection and ten days before Pentecost. Because Ascension Day is a Thursday and we don't have weekday services here except in Holy Week, we tend to pass over the event without much thought. We move from Easter season straight to Pentecost, which we celebrate next Sunday. But in the creeds of the church and in the prayers of the Holy Eucharist we always recall the crucifixion, the resurrection and the ascension. 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, in fact, an important event, a turning point in his relationship with humanity.

As you know, after the resurrection Jesus appeared to his followers on many occasions. Each year during Easter season we read accounts of some of those appearances. We hear about Jesus coming among the apostles who were locked in a room for fear on the night of the resurrection and again a week later when Jesus showed his wounds to Thomas. We hear about Jesus offering breakfast to Peter and the other disciples who had been fishing in the Sea of Galilee. After the resurrection Jesus let the women and men who loved him know that he was alive. He gave them final instructions and words of consolation as well as the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In Luke's Gospel the ascension is described in these words (24:50-51): "Then Jesus led [the disciples] out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." 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, we know that Jesus knew pain himself, most especially on the cross. If we are afraid to die and ask Jesus for help, we know that Jesus experienced the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane. If we are weary and need solitude for prayer, we know that Jesus had felt this way also. If we are grieving for someone we love, we know that Jesus wept when his friend Lazarus died. Jesus' personal experience of human life and his experiences with other people – including the people who came to him for healing – are eternally present with God, not a chapter in the past. Jesus the Christ isn't "back then." He is now and will be forever.

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.’”

This morning’s reading from the last chapter of the Book of Revelation begins with Jesus’ promise to come again. “See, I am coming soon.” Jesus identifies himself as “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” The beginning and the end and everything between. Jesus also speaks of himself in terms that are traditional Jewish messianic titles – “the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” Jesus invites the thirsty to “take the water of life as a gift.” The Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, ends with Jesus saying, “Surely I am coming soon,” and with the response of the followers of Jesus, “Come, Lord Jesus!” In Aramaic this is “maranatha,” “Come quickly, Lord!”

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. In our lesson from the Gospel of John we heard Jesus’ prayer to the Father just before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion: “Father, I desire that those ... whom you have given me may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” 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, BCP, 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’s Holy Spirit fill our hearts with faith and with hope and with God’s peace, and may the Holy Spirit guide us and strengthen us to love and follow Christ as we wait for his coming. In Jesus’ name. Amen.