

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
May 17, 2026 – 7 Easter  
The Sunday after Ascension Day  
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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.

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 and for forgiveness – 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.

Every Sunday in the lessons from the Bible appointed for the day there is enough material for several sermons. You probably know that my focus in preaching is nearly always on the Gospel passage for the day. In the biblical books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John we have our clearest record of what kind of a human life Jesus led, what he said and what he felt, as well as many accounts of his interactions with people of all sorts and in many different circumstances. In my understanding it is vital to know the Gospel "stories." To know them so that they are in our minds and in our hearts when we need them.

Jesus' religious tradition was Judaism. His teaching followed the teaching of the great prophets we read in the Hebrew Bible. In the book of the prophet Jeremiah, written over 600 years before the life of Jesus, we read these words of God about his covenant with the Hebrew people: "But such is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel... declares the Lord: I will put My Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No longer will they need to teach one another and say to one another, 'Heed the Lord,' for all of them, from the least of them to the greatest, shall heed Me – declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 31:33-34, Tanakh translation). That is the "goal" of our spiritual growth, to have the teaching of God so much a part of us that we will live as God would have human beings live. To have the teaching of God so much a part of us that, in a sense, we have no choice but to live as God would have us live. To belong to God.

St. Paul urges the followers of Jesus to “put on the mind of Christ.” That means taking the record of Jesus’ life into our minds and into our hearts, deeply, so that the words of the Gospels are within us. The words of Jesus and the words spoken by others to Jesus. Words to guide us, comfort us, reassure and encourage and strengthen us.

Think of these words of Jesus: “Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7); “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16); “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God” (Luke 18:27); “Neither do I condemn you” (John 8:11); “Do not let your hearts be troubled” (John 14:1); “Peace be with you” (John 20:21); “Lazarus, come out!” (John 11:43); and in the garden on the first Easter morning – “Mary!” (John 20:16).

It is good to know what people said to Jesus during his earthly ministry. Think of these words: “Lord I believe, help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24); “Lord, save us!” (Matthew 8:25); “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28); “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” (Luke 17:13); “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see: (John 9:25); and “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you” (John 21:17). When you know the words of the Gospels well, when they are in your heart, the words will come to you as you need them. And they will be there if you pray for God to “give you a word.”

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. 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. We believe that we participate in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection when we are baptized, as Jessie will be in a few minutes. 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 the Gospel of John we read 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.