

Christ Church, Georgetown
Easter 7, The Sunday after Ascension Day, May 28, 2017
Acts 1:6-14, John 17: 1-11
The Rev. Timothy A. R. Cole

Many years ago, as a young boy in my father's church in Edinburgh, I remember the then Bishop of Edinburgh came to visit. He was a very forward-looking, liberal Bishop and very much in favor of the introduction of the Peace which was coming into use at that time: Coming in some churches but certainly not in my father's Church at that point! Even so, the Bishop announced to the congregation "Even though you don't normally do this at St Cuthbert's, since I am here, and it is a special occasion, we will exchange the Peace." He then announced it and launched himself toward the front pew where, unfortunately for him, there was a very lovely but formidable lady with a fur hat on. As he approached, she said to him quite distinctly, "Go Away!"

I have never seen a bishop's sails collapse quite so quickly and completely!

Well, I hope like me you have come to love and appreciate the Peace as an expression of our common life as Christ's body in this place. We are all friends in the faith here. We are connected to each other in the love of Christ and as members of his family here at Christ Church.

It is a good thing, even if, as Kristen and Elizabeth make a very gracious show of being glad to do, I have to say, it does mean that they end up having to kiss me three times before noon every Sunday, which is almost certainly twice more than any of us have kissed our own family that day!

Peace or no peace: Connection or isolation: Ironically, we are told that we live in the most connected generation in history and yet one that suffers from the greatest sense of isolation ever. It almost seems that the more connected we become, in information terms, the lonelier we get.

Speaking as someone who has spent probably eight years out of the last 22 deployed away from my family on operations or exercises or various types of training in the British Army, Lorraine and I have had to find ways to build a connection that survives these long separations. When there is no physical connection or presence there has to be another kind for relationships to survive.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.

And though it in the center sit,

Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

The 16th Century divine, John Donne, in this still popular poem, “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” describes two lovers and how their physical separation is set against an indissoluble spiritual one.

That amazing image of the twin compasses, such as we may remember from our school days, joined at the hinge with the spike firmly centered on the piece of paper or chart. With that fixed, the other leg can be turned and moved in a perfect circle because the distance between it and the other is fixed at the joint above.

It is a surprisingly moving image despite its mathematical nature, isn't it? The idea that their love guides and holds him absolutely no matter how far he wanders or the miles and oceans that separate him from his love.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th'other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

If there can be, and I know there can, such a connection, however sad and difficult and costly it may be at times, then a connection that is made with God and God's kingdom can also be possible.

How many of us have not looked up at the night sky, or stood on the sea shore looking out across the ocean, or stood on top of a mountain and looked at the hills stretching out into the distance before us and not been aware of something beyond what we can see; been aware of a presence reaching back towards us; some otherness that lies behind the great stretches of what we can see; a vastness behind the vastness; a presence that is not just emptiness or space, but an otherness that is pregnant with knowing, being, and life?

Today is the Sunday after Ascension Day, the day we celebrated Jesus ascending into heaven. It is, on the face of it, a ridiculous idea, is it not? It is beautifully portrayed in our magnificent window at the back of the Church there, given as we heard last Sunday in memory of one of our founders, Thomas Corcoran and his wife, Hannah Corcoran. But it is still a real stretch to imagine, isn't it? The disciples try to describe it, but the description comes out like Jesus going up like a rocket into the sky.

There is an Ascension Chapel in a shrine of pilgrimage in Norfolk, England, called Walsingham. In it, above the altar, there is a cloud suspended from the ceiling. It has two small feet sticking out from it. It is hard to see and not to laugh!

And yet anyone who has tried to put into words their own experiences of God's presence in their lives knows that words fail and break down in meaning. We are reduced to saying things that sound equally bizarre. “It is like...” we say. “It is like the light in the room has become brighter

and more real; like the sky becomes full of something you can't see; like the mountains have become the foothills of a much vaster mountain range that is invisible to the eye. "It is like..." But it really isn't at all like any of these things, is it? It is just that we have no words to say what it is really like because we are trying to describe God's greater world in the language of our own much smaller one.

Jesus does not go up into the sky like a rocket, his feet dangling for a moment out of the bottom of a cloud. Where would he go next? Into orbit, to the moon, Saturn, wherever? Of course not. What the disciples are seeing is Jesus passing: Crossing the boundary of this fragile reality into the greater reality of what lies beyond it.

This week we celebrate that Jesus has ascended to the throne of heaven. He, who walked with us and took our frail human nature upon him, is now the ruler of the universe.

But what about us? Are we, like the disciples, left staring up into heaven? Has he gone and left us? Well, the first disciples clearly did not feel abandoned. Saint Luke says they returned to Jerusalem immediately after this experience filled "with great joy."

Saint Augustine points out in a sermon on the Ascension that Saint Paul's image of the Church as the body, with Christ as the head, is the key to understanding the Ascension.

"Out of compassion for us he descended from heaven, and although he re-ascended alone, we also ascend . . . not because there is no distinction between the head and the body but because the body as a unity cannot be separated from the head."

In other words, the Church is like a body in a pool of water as the swimmer breaks the surface to take in a great breath of air. The body remains submerged in the dark water but the head is in the world of light and air again. The body, even though it is submerged, because it is connected to the head, lives and breaths that self same life giving air. Christ, Augustine is saying, breaths the air of heaven and, because he does, we who are connected to him do also.

Like the twin compasses of the lovers we are joined forever to him as long as we keep that bond intact: As long as we love him and strive to remain in his peace, which is to keep trying to do his will. If we don't, however, the circle of our lives and the life of the world breaks down. Without the join at the hinge of the compasses the circle wobbles and disintegrates. Our lives and the life of the world can quickly become a macabre and horrific nightmare. As we have seen this last few days with 22 innocent people, many of them children, torn to pieces by the bomb in Manchester, Great Britain, and the 53 poor Coptic Christians on the bus in central Egypt gunned down by the same broken, malevolent religious ideology. The triumph of Christ we celebrate today has to be lived and become part of human lives. Just as the Cross and the Resurrection become part of our lives in the little deaths and the small new beginnings we experience, so we have to find the Ascension in us also: The connection with the head that breaths the air of God's kingdom so that we, who still remain beneath the surface in the sometimes very dark waters of this world, can still breath in the light and hope and life of God.