

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Links to Christ and Grace

*****Worship service and sermon posted each Saturday evening**

YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgveCGQgn0okeiNXLcmZI_w?view_as=subscriber

Website: <https://www.christandgrace.org/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ChristandGracePetersburg/>

OFFERINGS: We are thankful for you!

Your faithfulness in sending your contributions to the church is something for which we are most grateful. Your gifts allow us to continue the ministries of Christ and Grace even when we cannot be physically present to one another. We can support our church and the wider community with our prayers, our acts of service, our participation through online worship and study, our reading of mailed news and sermons, and our financial gifts.

For those who are able, please know that you can make a contribution electronically by going to "Give" at www.christandgrace.org. Offerings can be set up for a one time or recurring gift. The church is charged a fee for this service. If you are able to include the fee with your offering, the total amount is tax deductible. Or you can set up a regular payment through your bank's bill pay, or mail checks to Christ and Grace 1545 S. Sycamore Street, Petersburg, VA 23805.

PRAYER LIST: We beg you to feed the hungry, protect the refugee, embrace the distressed, house the homeless, nurse the sick, and comfort the dying. Especially we pray for Tyrone Allen, Robyn Arrington, Brian Hettinger, Horace Higgins, Mark Jones, Josh Lumley, Mike McKibbin, Lilly Rudd, Mark Sheffield, Ted Simpson, Wendy Taft, Larry Tucker, and Paige Whitley.

WEDNESDAY SERVING OPPORTUNITY:

Did you know that you can serve others while you shop for your groceries?

Each Wednesday we are collecting food for the Hope Center Food Pantry. You may bring food and leave it in the plastic bin at the back door. If you would like to send a monetary contribution to the Hope Center they would be most appreciative. Send to The Hope Center at 827 Commerce Street, Petersburg, VA 23803. You can also donate via their website at dcuhopecenter.org.

New items needed are grape jelly, crackers, canned meat (tuna, chicken, spam, stew), along with canned fruits and vegetables.

GENTLE REMINDER

The church building is closed for our safety. We are not sanitizing the building at this time so every person who comes in is not only putting themselves at risk but also is exponentially increasing the risk of infection for others. If you need something from the building please email or call and arrange with us to pick up things on Wednesdays when we can bring it out to your car. We appreciate your understanding and care for one another.

MESSAGE FROM BISHOP SUSAN HAYNES

The Advisory Panel that is assisting Bishop Haynes to develop some guidelines for re-gathering the church continues its work in earnest. We are aware that many are eager to return to church buildings but want to do so as safely as is possible. We assure you that the guidelines will be issued soon. In the meantime, church leaders and Vestries might begin thinking of the following matters which the panel most certainly will recommend:

- The appointment of health and safety officer in each parish who can oversee the compliance with health and safety guidelines. This does not necessarily have to be a medical person (such as a doctor or nurse), but someone who is familiar with the guidelines and can oversee their implementation parish-wide.
- The ordering and securing of health, cleaning and sanitizing supplies such as hand sanitizer, sanitizing wipes, and face masks. The development of protocols for cleaning and sanitizing the building after each use.
- The removal of prayer books and hymnals from the pews unless a protocol is developed to sanitize them in between services.
- The measuring of seating space and marking of seats so that 36 square feet is afforded each unit that is seated in the pews (noting that family units may be counted as one unit). It is worth considering that the usual worship space in the building may not be the best room in which social distancing is the most easily accomplished. Consider your parish halls or other large rooms as temporary worship spaces for the sake of social distancing.
- Paying attention to how traffic flows through the space so that people enter by one way and exit by another.
- Consideration by church musicians of other forms of music besides choral and congregational singing (at least in the initial re-entry phases).
- Continued use of online worship for those vulnerable members who should not return to the building initially.

These are just a few suggestions of what churches can be doing now to get ready. God is empowering us to be the Church during this pandemic. We are called to respond.

MESSAGE FROM ROBIN+

As this final Sunday of Easter approaches, we hear from John's Gospel of the disciples' anxiety as Jesus prepares them for his departure. He knows their hearts – their yearnings and longings, their disappointments and their sadness. He knows they will be grieving the loss of their life with him; grieving all the ways they had been, the things they had done. He knows life is about to change and so he models for them what will help them in the days to come. Jesus prays for them. Jesus prays, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." What Jesus prays is important to note when we recall that those disciples did not live in peace and comfort all their days, did not avoid suffering and death, and did not return to life as it had been before the resurrection. So, what was Jesus praying? What did he mean by protect them...so that they may be one?

Jesus knew that to get through all that would lie ahead would mean that they be a strong community that cared deeply for one another. It meant that the needs of each member would be of concern to the whole community. If one was in need, then the community would respond. It meant they would have to be vulnerable with one another.

We have been exploring five specific things we can focus on in this holy gift of space and time as we have worshiped from home since the third Sunday in Lent. The first is to surrender, where we lean into the disorientation brought about by this pandemic and trust the leading of the Holy Spirit. The second is innovation, where we have explored new ways to worship, study, communicate and do ministry together that are reaching beyond our doors.

The third area of focus is that of meaning making, as we have considered our values and how they have guided us through our history as a parish. This is not simply returning to the old ways that made us feel good, but an exploration of why those ways made us feel good and then some thinking about how we might do new things that will create those feelings of joy and wholeness we all long for right now. The fourth area of focus is that of defining one good next step. This is where we consider what gives our community meaning and purpose and then apply our gifts and passions to begin creating new ministries and ways of worship and study and fellowship together.

For this week, our final area of focus is to attend to the yearning in our hearts. Yes, we are rational people and we live our lives making rational decisions, but when we are in a place of deep disorientation as we are now, rational decisions are not always possible. What is it we really need? What is it that God wants for us? Being vulnerable enough to share our yearnings with one another creates a strong community and will guide us to the other side of chaos. Letting go of what once was, we let ourselves be led by God, who is even now drawing us forward and into our future.

Jesus' prayer for his disciples is his prayer for us. Imagine Jesus praying for Christ and Grace a prayer for protections so that we might be one, moving ahead into the future together! What is Jesus praying for us and how will we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and open to hearing and responding to that prayer?

In closing I would like to share one of my favorite post communion prayers, even as we patiently wait to be together again for Eucharist and entering a new future.

Lord Jesus Christ, you have put your life into our hands; now we put our lives into yours.
Take us, renew us and remake us.
What we have been is past; what we shall be, through you, still awaits us.
Lead us on. Take us with you. Amen.

For insights shared I am indebted to Susan Beaumont - Finding Our New Normal, April 20, 2020
<https://www.congregationalconsulting.org/finding-our-new-normal/>

Sermon for the 6th Sunday of Easter, May 24, 2020

When the apostles had come together, they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they 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."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. Acts 1:6-14

Have you ever thought about how often we place everything we do on a vertical plane or axis, that is, up or down. We prefer our grades to go up, we are worried about our investments going down. We take medication to lower our bad cholesterol and keep our blood pressure from getting too high. In the church, success is sometimes determined by an increase of people in pews, only, right now our attendance is lower than ever. But hey, our Facebook likes are going up!

We inherited this way of directional thinking from earlier civilizations. Their understanding of a three-tiered universe is evident throughout the scriptures and in other writings from the ancient world. Earth, the middle tier, was flat. God lived in heaven above on the top floor, and hell was in the basement. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus looked up to heaven, and in our first lesson from Acts, Jesus was lifted up into heaven. In the late second century, Christians confessed the Ascension in the Apostles' Creed: "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." And in our Eucharistic Prayer the priest calls "lift up your hearts" and the people respond, "we lift them to the Lord." It will be a glorious day when we can again gather around the communion table and lift up our hearts!

In our creeds and confessions, art and architecture — from ancient manuscripts to icons, to fine art through the ages, Christians have professed their belief in the Ascension. Jesus went up — because up was where God was believed to be. That's why we still use the flat-earth language of God up top sending Jesus down to earth to be born in a manger, then taking him up in order that the Spirit might come down in order that believers might be able to go up. Are you experiencing vertigo yet? A dear priest friend of mine always referred to this season in the Church as "elevator season"! How do we make sense of it in light of our 21st century scientific knowledge?

In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning the apostles are talking with Jesus - the resurrected but not yet ascended Jesus. He has been appearing and disappearing all over the place for forty days since his resurrection at Easter. His followers seem to have almost gotten used to Jesus in this new "now you see me now you don't" form of being, and are again becoming comfortable, and thinking just maybe this is going to work after all. They ask him, "Lord is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Perhaps we can imagine Jesus rolling his eyes at this question because they are still not understanding the bigger picture, they are still focusing on their own personal desires, still hoping things will return to the way they had been before Jesus was crucified.

They are weary, they are anxious and they want life to be good again, they are tired of waiting in uncertainty. So they ask Jesus the question, no more hemming and hawing. "Is this the time Lord? Are you going to restore the kingdom to us *now* Lord? Or not?" And I'm guessing that the answer Jesus gave them was not exactly what they wanted to hear, and mostly because they could not envision how it would play out. "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

And the next thing they knew, Jesus was disappearing again, only this time they knew it was different, that he was truly leaving them to return to his Father. They had to trust that Jesus would send the Holy Spirit. As if to confirm that, two men in white robes suddenly stood by them, and seeing their incomprehension of all that they had just seen and heard the men in white 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.”

Haven't we all found ourselves in such an incomprehensible place? Life gets crazy, chaotic, and unmanageable. Whether it's a personal crisis, the loss of a loved one, or a pandemic, we find ourselves looking up to heaven wondering what on earth we are supposed to do next, wondering how we will even take the next step when it seems so daunting, so uncertain. Yes, I think we do know something of what those first followers of Jesus were feeling that day. Right now, we may be wondering when we will finally be able to regather in this worship space, and we might not hear exactly what we want to hear. Some of us are eager to return and some of us don't feel safe returning yet. We might not be able to envision how it's all going to play out.

The apostles were expressing the most inexpressible mystery of the presence of God in the only language they knew – a pre-scientific language. We have the advantage of knowing that the world is *not* flat and that the universe is not constructed in three vertical tiers. We have the benefit of science, but even then things aren't always easy to explain. Perhaps that's the point. Perhaps we are trying too hard to explain things; to find answers to questions such as “how” and “when.”

Jesus has gone before us into the future... ahead of each one of us to a future we cannot yet see or comprehend. And yet, Jesus is still with us in the presence of the Holy Spirit to help us discern, over time, all of our “hows” and “whens.”

Jesus is, even now, sending the Advocate to a group of people in our diocese to help us discern when it will be safe to return to our worship space and how it will look when we do. A group of parishioners, doctors, nurses, musicians, educators, and clergy are busy working on all the details, and there are many, so that when we return we will be able to provide worship that is safe for those who can return, even as we continue to care for those who are most vulnerable among us. It is ongoing work for which we will not have all the answers, but we are listening for the Spirit of truth and always holding foremost Jesus' command for us to love one another. What we do know is that as we follow Jesus, who goes before us into the future, things will be different.

The apostles had their lives turned upside down yet again, but even in their uncertainty, Jesus redirects their focus, expanding their expectations and their horizons. Might Jesus be redirecting our focus here at Christ and Grace? And in the Church in the world? It's not enough to think only in terms of our own personal interests and hopes. Jesus sends us out in the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the ends of the earth! We are not called to stand in the same place where we last saw Jesus. We are called to look around for where Jesus is going next. We can stand around looking up and get a crick in our neck, or we can follow Jesus. Amen.