

# HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

In Scripture and Prayer and The Great Cloud of Witnesses

Week of April 14, 2024

*Collect for the Third Sunday of Easter*

**O** God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.** BCP 224

## **Acts 3:12-19** NRSVue, 2021

*Peter has just healed a crippled man, and in this passage he proclaims the fundamentals of the gospel to those who come running to hear him. From the beginning the new faith showed its power through such healings, and these occasions were used for preaching the good news. Many of these speeches are presented as summaries of basic themes. The role of the apostles as witnesses to Jesus' resurrection is stressed, as is the theme of scriptural fulfillment.*

[For context: [Acts 3:1-11](#)]

- 12 When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, “Fellow Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?
- 13 The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of our ancestors, has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him.
- 14 But you rejected the holy and righteous one and asked to have a murderer given to you,
- 15 and you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.
- 16 And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.
- 17 “And now, brothers and sisters, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.
- 18 In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer.
- 19 Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.

### **Exploring Acts 3:12-19**

**Acts.** This book is the sequel to the gospel according to Luke. Beginning with Jesus' ascension, Luke tells the story of the beginnings of the church. By no means a comprehensive history, it does however describe the spread of the church from Jerusalem to all of Palestine, and as far as Greece. The episodes he reports show how Christianity arose out of Judaism. He shows us something of the struggles the church underwent in accepting Gentiles as members. The Holy Spirit guides and strengthens the church as it spreads through much of the Roman Empire.

In her book *The Temple Bombing*, Melissa Fay Greene describes the events surrounding the 1958 hate-crime dynamiting of the Temple, the oldest synagogue in Atlanta. The next Friday evening, at the first Sabbath service after the bombing, the Temple, its windows still shattered and boarded up and its doors hanging off their hinges, was filled to overflowing, almost as if it were the high holy days. The rabbi, a powerful preacher and civic leader named Jacob Rothschild, stood up to speak. He looked out at the full congregation, and after standing silently for a moment surveying the crowd with a penetrating gaze, he quipped, “So, *this* is what it takes to get you to temple!”

A somewhat similar scene is enacted in this passage from Acts. In this case, the “explosion,” the event that attracts the attention and draws the big crowd to the temple, is not a tragic crime, but a piece of shocking news nonetheless: the crippled beggar who was a constant presence at the temple’s Beautiful Gate had been dramatically and unexpectedly healed in the name of Jesus ([3:1–11](#)). In response, an astonished and puzzled throng packs into the area of the temple known as Solomon’s Portico, pressing around Peter and John, the men who seemed to be the source of the miracle.

We know that after momentous events, both good and bad, people are drawn to sacred places and to people who seem to have divine power. At the end of World War II, when humans first walked on the moon, when the soaking rains fell at last to end the great drought of the 1930s, when President Kennedy was assassinated, when rumors spread that the Virgin Mary had appeared in a small Southern town, and after the tragic events of 9/11—these and other similar events over the years have sent people crowding into places of worship out of wonder, fear, curiosity, and amazement. Just so, when news of the healing at the Beautiful Gate spread, a throng gathered around Peter and John. What were they looking for? Spiritual power? Healing for themselves? More miracles? An explanation of the one they had already seen? Who knows? Perhaps they did not even know themselves. All they knew was that something startling and unexpected disrupted their normal world, and they gathered at the holy place. “So, *this* is what it takes to get you to temple!”

Whatever drew the crowd to Solomon’s Portico and to Peter and John that day, the chances are good what they received when they got there was not at all what they expected. They came to Solomon’s Porch wide eyed and astonished, lured by the mystery of healing, and what they got in return was ... a sermon. They came drawn like moths to the ultraviolet glow of miracle, and what they got was the clear, steady light of a homily. In fact, the way the story is told, the author of Acts makes it clear that the main event here is not the healing, but the *preaching*.

Why? Amazing as it was, the healing by itself was mute, ambiguous, and finally misleading. It took the proclaimed word to tell the whole truth. The healing was powerful, but its true meaning was hidden until the sermon was preached. Notice what went wrong in the people’s minds and hearts, which is what went wrong pastorally, before the sermon gave full meaning to the event. *First, they misunderstood the source of the healing* and assumed that it came from Peter and John. We have a relentless human hunger to believe that there

are people who have tapped into the healing powers of the universe and who can make these powers available for us, whether they are the faith healers of the backwoods revival tent or the slick self-help counselors on television talk shows. We want to believe that these people have the right touch, can say the right prayer formula, have the right technique, have discovered the right wisdom to bring wholeness to our lives. We order the CDs, go to the rallies, watch the programs, read the books, touch the hems of the garments, seeking for ourselves some of their power, knowledge, and success. “You’ve got it wrong,” Peter declares in the sermon. “Do you really think that it was *our* power, *our* spirituality, *our* piety, *our* clever wisdom that healed this man? This is not about us. This is about God. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the one true healer.”

Second, *they misunderstood the nature of life with God, thinking that brokenness is the rule and healing is the astounding exception.* In our time there is a kind of functional atheism that prevails for many. Life is perceived to be barren of God, and if God ever should speak or act, it would be an incredible exception to the norm. Indeed, the crowd in this passage rushed to Peter and John because their ministry of healing seemed to be an astonishing interruption in the dreary business of life as usual. “Why do you wonder at this?” Peter asks the crowd, in his sermon, which speaks of another world, an Easter world, where the healing and forgiving power of God is as pervasive and present as sunshine and rain.

Third, *they thought that the healing called only for astonishment; but it calls for more, it calls for repentance.* Whenever we see signs of God at work in our world—someone is healed of cancer, a broken relationship is restored, a hungry child is fed, nations put down weapons and work toward peace, despair yields to hope—people of goodwill are full of wonder and joy. But Peter’s sermon lets us know that such events call for an ever-deeper response of self-reflection. God’s healing and restoring work discloses another world, another reality, another sovereignty shimmering amid the wreckage of a decaying culture. In the face of God’s deeds of mercy all around us, we are summoned not merely to say, “How wonderful!” but to turn around, to repent, to change our citizenship, and to become a faithful part of God’s work in the world.

## Psalm 4 NRSVue, 2021

*The prayer of one falsely accused, and an expression of confidence in God, who instills confidence and peace in all circumstances.*

- 1 Answer me when I call, O God of my right!  
You gave me room when I was in distress.  
Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.
- 2 How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?  
How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? *Selah*
- 3 But know that the LORD has set apart the faithful for himself;  
the LORD hears when I call to him.
- 4 When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent. *Selah*
- 5 Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD.

## 4

6 There are many who say, “O that we might see some good!  
Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!”

7 You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound.

8 I will both lie down and sleep in peace,  
for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.

### Exploring Psalm 4

**Psalms** is a collection of collections. The psalms were written over many centuries, stretching from the days of Solomon's temple (about 950 BC) to after the Exile (about 350 BC.) Psalms are of five types: hymns of praise, laments, thanksgiving psalms, royal psalms, and wisdom psalms. Within the book, there are five "books"; there is a doxology ("Blessed be ... Amen and Amen") at the end of each book.

**SELAH** (סֶלָה, selah). Likely a musical or liturgical term. The term may refer to silence, pause, or an interlude. However, the exact meaning of the Hebrew term is unknown. *Lexham Bible Dictionary*

### **Pastoral Perspective**

*By Gary V. Simpson*

Not all the sacred songs and prayers are for the worshiping community gathered together. There are times when the individual believer needs to cultivate some intentional time in practicing the presence of God. This psalm gives us permission to spend private time alone with God at the end of each day.

What keeps you up at night? We are a culture of insomniacs engaged in endless and unfruitful activity. We all do it. We lie awake at night replaying the video of the day's events in our minds. The regrets of yesterday and today, intermingled with the uncertainties of tomorrow, haunt our twilight hours, our dark nights, and our solitude. Our night becomes the season for second guessing, piling worry upon worry; a time to be troubled about lack of support and the presence of opposition on the journey. When we present ourselves to God for worship, we cannot be fully present for God because of a lifestyle characterized by endless and unfruitful activity—exhausting tossing, turnings, toiling, and mindless channel surfing. We so desperately seek for peace and tranquility as the darkness nestles us in a blanket of stillness. Too often we are under siege by restless spirits and minds that will not slow down. This is precisely the place for prayer.

The psalms show us that there are indeed many types of and times for prayers—invocation, confession, intercession, and thanksgiving. For some reason, however, as children we are taught that the nighttime is the optimal time for prayer. Who has not heard the bedside prayer in verse?

Now I lay me down to sleep; / I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake, / I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Perhaps the power of nighttime is in its stillness ([Ps. 46:10](#)) or the “luminous darkness,” so often spoken of by mystics from [Gregory of Nyssa](#) to [Howard Thurman](#). Our orientation obligates us to see life in a day-night cycle. Consequently, we pray at night as a conclusion to the day's affairs. Prayers at night are not merely the result of reflective gratitude for what has already transpired, but a reverent plea to be kept by God in the midst of the uncertainties yet to come. The Hebraic idea of time places nighttime prayer at the beginning of the day, “and there was evening and there was morning, the first day” (Gen. 1:5).

Whether in the brightness of daytime or the gloom of night, there are times when the believer is caught somewhere between the mercy of God and merciless humans, somewhere between the God of love and the vile hatred of humanity, somewhere between the tranquility of trusting God and the trappings of human treachery. With a thorough reading of the Psalms from beginning to end, one could easily come to the conclusion that life is full of enemies, tribulations, and hardships. In fact, one could readily conclude that enemies, tribulations, sickness, and hardship go hand in hand with living. This seems to be one of the core truths the psalmists talk about. While these painful realities may not define all of human experience, they certainly seem to be at the heart of all human existence.

Far too often we mistakenly understand what should lead us to praise and what should lead us to feel blessed in terms of the absence of hardship and adversaries. Blessing, as this psalmist will conclude, is about having the full confidence in God in the midst of the inevitable realities of hardship and enemies. To nurture a faith or practice a spirituality that does not recognize or acknowledge adversity and adversaries is to live in a different world from the world of the psalmists. It is to live in a world removed from reality. The psalmists lived in the real world, and they called out to the God they found in the midst of the real world. The New Testament echoes this sentiment also when the apostle Paul asks a question in Romans 8:35: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” [The writer follows](#) with a list of circumstances so determined, intentional, and pervasive that each one appears to take on personality.

Perhaps it is because of the complexity of human relationships that we are driven to seek God’s answer to our prayers. According to [verse 2](#), honor suffers shame, and mortals love vain words and seek after lies. We pray to God because there is no false communication with God (at least on God’s behalf). With God, we have authentic communion and sincere communication.

Psalm 4 confirms some of the things we assert about God.

God answers prayer.

God gives (breathing) room in human suffering.

God is gracious.

God is the source of our safety.

As God’s rest on the Sabbath was an act of love—an example for us who are made in the divine image and likeness to emulate—human rest is an act of divine trust. The psalmist declares that “you have put gladness in my heart”—gladness beyond trouble, beyond the darkness of night, beyond the pain of broken relationships. Jesus said to his disciples, “Do not worry about your life” (Matt. 6:25). Certainly Jesus says this, not because there is nothing to be anxious about, but rather, because the one who depends on God and calls on God will lie down in safety.

## 6

That soul that on Jesus doth lean for repose  
I will not, I will not desert to its foes.  
That soul, though all hell shall endeavor to shake,  
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.<sup>[1]</sup>

Good night, God, and thank You!

[1] "How Firm a Foundation," 1787, writer uncertain.

## 1 John 3:1-7 NRSVue, 2021

*In this lesson we learn that through the Father's love, disciples are now children of God, and they no longer live in sin. Their destiny is to be like Christ. Those who live without God do not understand what it means to be a child of God any more than they recognized Jesus. But Christians know that a dramatic change has taken place in their lives, and that the mystery of what they are fully to become still awaits them.*

- 1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.
- 2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.
- 3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.
- 4 Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.
- 5 You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.
- 6 No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.
- 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

### Exploring 1 John 3:1-7

**1 John.** This epistle was addressed to a general audience, unlike those written by Paul. It shares a style, phrases and expressions with the Gospel according to John, so it is very likely that both were written by the same person. It appears to have been circulated to various churches. The author seeks to combat heresy, specifically that the spirit is entirely good but matter is entirely evil. John tells his readers that morality and ethical behaviour are important for Christians.

## God-as-parent is a radical metaphor

*By Debie Thomas*

*It's not possible to parent without experiencing risk, weakness, pain, and transformation.*

My youngest child turns 20 this month, which feels like a milestone. No more teenagers in the house! Everyone's an adult (sort of)! We've officially launched our kids!

Those exclamation points are in earnest; I have much to celebrate, and much to be grateful for. At the same time, I'm feeling tender and pensive. Like Mary in Luke 2, I'm pondering many things in my heart. What have the last two decades meant? Who was I when I became a mother, who have I become since, and who will I become now? Most of all, I'm pondering the bewildering business of letting go. My children are out in the world now. How will I bear the uncertainties of that?

Spiritually, this tender time has led me to contemplate one of the Bible's central metaphors for God: God as parent, as father and mother. This is a metaphor I've always taken for granted, but now I'm freshly curious, hungry to know more about the paternal and maternal faces of God.

Thankfully, the Bible gives me plenty to work with. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1). “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (Isaiah 49:15). “Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him” (Deuteronomy 32:11). “How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (Luke 13:34). “I will bellow like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant” (Isaiah 42:14). “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you” (John 14:2).

This small sampling reveals so much. The God these passages describe loves his children wildly and without restraint. She has a long memory; she holds the stories of her babies. He resists complacency and insists on courage, growth, and risk-taking. She does so with wisdom; she hovers, launches, supports, and guides. He longs to give and receive affection and aches when his children refuse his embrace. She groans in labor, giving herself over to shattering pain to bring new life into the world. He keeps house, honoring the diversity of his children by preparing not one room but many rooms for his children to return to and call home.

What strikes me most about these images of God-as-parent is God’s vulnerability. In a beautiful reflection on Isaiah 42:14, [Lauren Winner describes it this way](#): “The point is not just that God is vulnerable, although that itself is startling. The point is that in the struggles of labor, we can learn what strength is. If our picture of strength is a laboring woman, then strength is not about refusing to cry or denying pain. Strength is not about being in charge, or being independent, or being dignified. If our picture of strength is a laboring woman, then strength entails enduring, receiving help and support, being open to pain and risk.”

I remember giving birth as one of the most empowering and vulnerable-making experiences of my life. I was stunned by what my body could do, as well as by my need for the love and knowledge of those who accompanied me. During those grueling hours in the delivery room, I was simultaneously powerful and powerless. Alone and surrounded. Fierce and fragile. I can’t think of a better, more radical metaphor for God’s paradoxical strength.

Looking back now over my years of parenting, I can see that vulnerability has been the name of the game all along. My cocky sense of certainty ended seconds after my daughter was born. I couldn’t get her to breastfeed. Or sleep through the night. I didn’t know what to do when she cried. As she got older, she asked questions I couldn’t answer. She had opinions I found bewildering. She faced challenges I couldn’t fix. Every moment of pain, fear, loneliness, or defeat she and her little brother experienced resounded inside of me, a deafening gong. To give myself over to mothering was to know powerlessness like I’d never known it before. Yes, I had authority and strength. But my strength never canceled out my vulnerability.

Is God’s experience similar? I was taught that God is unchanging, transcendent, all-knowing, all-powerful. But the truth is, it’s not possible to parent without experiencing risk, weakness, pain, and transformation. It is not possible to offer up your own body as

## 8

nourishment, or to nudge your frightened child out of the nest, or to carry your reckless young on your outstretched wings, or to watch your children refuse your protection, or to offer first-rate hospitality in the full knowledge that it might be rejected—and not embrace vulnerability as a way of life. If God is indeed our parent, then God daily puts God’s heart at risk for the sake of love.

In this tender season of my life, I’m grateful to be in good company as a mother. Whatever else God might be, God is a parent who knows what it costs to hold and what it costs to let go. I’m grateful for a vulnerable God who births, nurses, loves, guides, and launches us, her heart on the line until we learn to fly, choose our course, and make our way home.

["Faith Matters"](#) post on [The Christian Century](#) website, May 4, 2022. Accessed April 8, 2024

## Luke 24:36b-48 NRSVue, 2021

*In our gospel the risen Jesus shows himself again to his disciples, and he interprets to them the scriptures which reveal that his death and resurrection were part of God’s plan. This Jesus is no ghost or phantom (as some later interpretations of the resurrection might have suggested). His appearance is real; his friends touch him and he eats with them. Now they are to be his witnesses and to carry the message of repentance and forgiveness to all peoples.*

- 36 [For context: [While they were talking about this](#)], Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”
- 37 They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost.
- 38 He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?
- 39 Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”
- 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.
- 41 Yet for all their joy they were still disbelieving and wondering, and he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?”
- 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish,
- 43 and he took it and ate in their presence.
- 44 Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”
- 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,
- 46 and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day
- 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.
- 48 You are witnesses of these things.



## Exploring Luke 24:36b-48

**Luke.** Three gospels in the New Testament offer similar portraits of the life of Jesus; Luke is the third of them. Its author, traditionally Luke the physician who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys, draws on three sources: Mark (via Matthew), a collection of sayings (known as Q for Quelle, German for source) and his own source. It is a gospel that emphasizes God's love for the poor, the disadvantaged, minorities, outcasts, sinners and lepers. Women play a more prominent part than in the other gospels. Luke never uses Semitic words; this is one argument for thinking that he wrote primarily for Gentiles.

### **Pastoral Perspective**

*by Nancey R. Blakeley (excerpted)*

The disciples huddle together behind locked doors, afraid that the authorities will come after them. They struggle to take in these strange reports of “Jesus sightings” and wonder what it all means. Then suddenly, Jesus is there in their midst, “opening their minds,” and, in so doing, sets them free from their fears. Today we need such transformation.

Note the threefold progression of emotions. Those gathered in the room are already on edge. When Jesus appears in their midst, they are “startled and terrified.” They think they are “seeing a ghost” (v. 37). Earlier the women have talked about the empty tomb, relaying the news that Jesus has arisen, and the two from Emmaus have told of Jesus being revealed to them as they broke bread. Still, the followers are not prepared when Jesus suddenly materializes.

Fear is the natural human response. It would be our response. Jesus responds to their fear in two ways. His first words are, “Peace be with you” (v. 36). Jesus both understands and challenges their fears. “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” (v. 38) Jesus meets the disciples where they are. Then by inviting the disciples to touch and see, and by eating some fish, he encourages them to move beyond where they are. For in Jesus, death is transcended.

Fear turns to joy, but they are still disbelieving and still wondering. Again, we can relate. Our hearts would thrill to see Jesus alive, but it is too much for our feeble minds to reason through to a logical conclusion. Yes, we are glad, but how can this be so? Jesus moves them to the next level. He uses familiar words of Scripture to remind them of the prophecy. Jesus opens their minds to begin to see that death is not the final word. Set free from those bonds, they are commissioned to become witnesses. The seeds are planted that will come to fruition on Pentecost.

Today, this text addresses our pastoral issues. We cannot escape our fears. The preacher may ask behind what locked doors each one of us is hiding. Our fear may be very personal, such as the fear of hearing that dreaded word “cancer.” Other fears are unemployment, loneliness, and loss. Often those fears get played out on a national level. We fear terrorist attacks. Underlying our fears is the one that we cannot seem to talk about easily—the fear of death, our own or that of someone we love. Our fears hold us captive. It becomes difficult to give witness to the great joy that is ours—that the bonds of death could not hold Jesus. Jesus is alive.

The power of the resurrection is the power to plant the seeds of transformation. The hope of the resurrection is grounded in the experience of those first followers. Closed minds can be opened. The potential is for a release in a prophetic way. The word of God calls us to peace rather than security.

## Bibliographical and Contributor Information

Unless otherwise noted, the Introductions to the readings come from *Introducing the Lessons of the Church Year, Third Edition* by Frederick Borsch, and George Woodward. (New York; Harrisburg, PA; Denver: Morehouse Publishing, 2009).

Bible verses are from: *New Revised Standard Version: Updated Edition*. Friendship Press, 2021, unless otherwise noted.

[Book Outlines](#) are from [Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary](#) website maintained by the Anglican Diocese of Montreal.

Unless otherwise noted, the commentaries are excerpted from: David L. Bartlett, and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B. Vol. 2*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

### Contributors

**Nancy R. Blakely**, Chaplain, Hospice of the Upstate, Pelzer, South Carolina

**Michael Lodahl**, Professor of Theology and World Religions, Point Loma Nazarene University, San Diego, California

**Thomas G. Long**, Bandy Professor of Preaching, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

**Gary V. Simpson**, Senior Pastor, The Concord Baptist Church of Christ, Brooklyn, New York

**Debie Thomas** is minister of lifelong formation at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, California, and author of *Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories*.

### Odds & Ends

#### Psalm 4 "Theological Perspective"

*by Michael Lodahl*

It is one of the great surprises in human history that countless thousands of Gentiles—at one time “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” ([Eph. 2:12](#))—have turned in faith and obedience to the God of Israel. This great turning has occurred, of course, largely through the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and his dramatically drafted apostle Paul, who never failed to understand himself as eschatological prophet and priest to the Gentile world (e.g., [Rom. 15:7–19](#)). Through this amazing turn of events in the wake of Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection, we in the church have found ourselves drawn into with the rich history and heritage of the people Israel.

It should never be forgotten, nor taken for granted, that to read the Psalms in the church is to read from the songbook of the Jewish people, our all-too-often estranged siblings, God’s people of the synagogue. We shall, of necessity, read those incredibly moving songs differently. We read them because of Jesus—and thus we read them through Jesus. Or to employ an image of which the late Episcopal theologian [Paul van Buren](#) was fond, we Christians read Israel’s Scriptures over Jesus’ shoulder. He, after all, did himself read and sing these wonderful poems as a faithful, if radical, first-century Jew of Galilee.

In this Easter season, we who call upon the God of Abraham and Sarah in the name of Jesus are, in turn, called upon to rejoice in the glorious, if mysterious, reality of Christ’s resurrection. We read over the shoulder of the living Christ, faithfully anticipating that this Living One will

once more open the Scriptures—including the Psalms—to us, perhaps even setting our hearts afire within us ([Luke 24:32](#)).

What would it mean to read Psalm 4 over Jesus’ shoulder? It would mean first that we remember that it was undoubtedly a prayer on Jesus’ lips from time to time. Thus, we can read this prayer first as Jesus’ own prayer before it is ours. “Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer” (v. 1). Our minds readily shift to Jesus in Gethsemane, confessing his deep distress to his inner circle of followers, seeking their prayerful support and crying out to the one he called Father—crying out for “room,” for another way than the way of the cross, if possible.

Similarly, just as Psalm 4:3 testifies confidently that “the LORD hears when I call to him,” so also we recall the intriguing words of the letter to the Hebrews that “Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission” ([5:7](#)). Robert Jewett comments, “Not only does [Jesus’] sharing of the human plight serve to dispel the sense of abandonment and gloom of those who suffer under it, but also he provides a powerful dialogical example. In the midst of impending doom, he cried out for help and was heard.”<sup>11</sup> We too now may testify confidently with the psalmist that “the LORD hears when I call to him”—but we do so in, through, and because of Jesus, who at Gethsemane and Golgotha has cried out to God and been heard.

The psalmist’s adversaries, who are addressed in verses 4–6, are cautioned not to sin when they are disturbed or angry (v. 4). This counsel is cited in [Ephesians 4:26](#)—once again, precisely because Jesus “came and proclaimed peace to you [Gentiles] who were far off and peace to those who were near [i.e., his fellow Jews]” ([Eph. 2:17](#)). That is to say, the psalmist’s counsel becomes, through the coming of Jesus, a word spoken anew to Christian believers, fellow participants in the eschatological community. It is because in Christ “we are members of one another” that this implication immediately follows: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” ([Eph. 4:25–26](#)).

Indeed, Jesus taught his disciples that only in so living with one another could we “offer right sacrifices” (Ps. 4:5). In one of the more striking passages in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, in addressing the issue of anger or insults toward a fellow disciple, makes a remarkable demand: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” ([Matt. 5:23](#)). Surely these are sobering and striking words for us contemporary disciples, for they make it plain that the “sacrifices” that we would offer to God in our worship will be “right” only if we have actively pursued reconciliation with those believers from whom we have become estranged. It is worth noting that Jesus instructs us to be sensitive not simply to whether we have something against another, but in fact whether someone has something against us. This demand upon his disciples makes it clear that the kind of worship God desires—the kind of sacrifice we are called upon to offer to God in Jesus’ name—is radically conditioned by our efforts to seek peace with one another. Only then shall “the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!” (Ps. 4:6); only then may we “lie down and sleep in peace” (v. 8).

[1] Robert Jewett, *Letter to Pilgrims: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), 88.

## 12

### Who wrote the Gospel according to Mark?

*The last time we met we wondered who wrote the Gospel according to Mark. This response is from the Introductory notes to Mark in the NABRE.*

Although the book is anonymous, apart from the ancient heading “According to Mark” in manuscripts, it has traditionally been assigned to John Mark, in whose mother’s house (at Jerusalem) Christians assembled ([Acts 12:12](#)). This Mark was a cousin of Barnabas ([Col 4:10](#)) and accompanied Barnabas and Paul on a missionary journey ([Acts 12:25; 13:3; 15:36–39](#)). He appears in Pauline letters ([2 Tm 4:11; Phlm 24](#)) and with Peter ([1 Pt 5:13](#)). [Papias](#) (ca. A.D. 135) described Mark as Peter’s “interpreter,” a view found in other patristic writers. Petrine influence should not, however, be exaggerated. The evangelist has put together various oral and possibly written sources—miracle stories, parables, sayings, stories of controversies, and the passion—so as to speak of the crucified Messiah for Mark’s own day.

Traditionally, the gospel is said to have been written shortly before A.D. 70 in Rome, at a time of impending persecution and when destruction loomed over Jerusalem. Its audience seems to have been Gentile, unfamiliar with Jewish customs (hence [Mk 7:3–4, 11](#)). The book aimed to equip such Christians to stand faithful in the face of persecution ([Mk 13:9–13](#)), while going on with the proclamation of the gospel begun in Galilee ([Mk 13:10; 14:9](#)). Modern research often proposes as the author an unknown Hellenistic Jewish Christian, possibly in Syria, and perhaps shortly after the year 70.

*New American Bible, Revised Edition* (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mk

### What is an ossuary?

*A question posed on March 27*



**ossuaries** (from Lat. *os* or *ossum*, “bone”), small chests used for gathering human bones after the corpse had decomposed. Ossuaries were usually made from limestone with average dimensions of 20–30 inches by 12–20 inches by 10–16 inches. They became popular among Jews especially in Judea in the first century BCE, but fell out of use after the second century CE. Their use during that period may be associated with the burgeoning craft of stone masonry under Herod the Great’s temple construction. After death, a corpse was placed in a wall niche of a burial cave and, about a year later, after the corpse had disintegrated, the bones were gathered into an ossuary, which was placed either in a smaller niche or on the floor. Typically, the bones of several individuals, probably family members, were placed inside a single ossuary.

Many ossuaries have been excavated in the tombs of Jerusalem and Jericho; they were sometimes decorated with engravings and identified with the names of the deceased. Although most burials around Jerusalem during the Second Temple period used ossuaries, graves have also been found in which the deceased were simply placed in the ground or interred in shaft tombs without secondary burial. At one point, theories were advanced to suggest that the diversity in burial practices might reflect different conceptions of the afterlife, but most scholars now attribute the variance to practical questions of space and socioeconomic factors (i.e., the very poor could not afford ossuaries).

Anthony J. Saldarini, “Ossuaries,” in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (Revised and Updated), ed. Mark Allan Powell (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 728–729

\*\*Click the image to view The Metropolitan Museum of Art information about this ossuary.