

# HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

In Scripture and Prayer and The Great Cloud of Witnesses

Week of May 12, 2024

*Collect for the Seventh Sunday of Easter*

**O** God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. **Amen.** BCP 226

## **Acts 1:15-17, 21-26** NRSVue, 2021

*In this lesson we hear of the selection of Matthias to take Judas's place as one of the twelve apostles. Peter perceives that it is prophesied that another should replace Judas, and lots are cast to select between two men who had been among the larger band of Jesus' followers. Matthias is chosen as one of the companions of Jesus who is able to witness to the resurrection.*

*Context: [Acts 1:1-14](#) After the Ascension and before Pentecost in Jerusalem.*

- 15 In those days Peter stood up among the brothers and sisters (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said,
- 16 “Brothers and sisters, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus,
- 17 for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”
- 21 “So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,
- 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.”
- 23 So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.
- 24 Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen
- 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”
- 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was added to the eleven apostles.

### **Exploring Acts 1:15-17, 21-26**

**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.

### **Homiletical Perspective**

*By Barbara K. Lundblad*

To some people, tossing the dice will surely seem an arbitrary way to choose a disciple.

## 2

Who would call a minister by throwing darts while blindfolded? Would you choose a bishop by casting lots? Even if you are in a hurry, as the disciples seemed to be in replacing Judas, there would seem to be better methods for choosing an important leader. On closer look, we see that both candidates for this position had very specific and similar qualifications. Both had been with Jesus from the day of his baptism until he was taken up into heaven. That itself is remarkable, because Luke did not say anything about the disciples being present at Jesus' baptism! How that happened is not explained, but the narrator makes it clear that both of these men were qualified to be witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Matthias becomes part of the inner circle; the other loses the toss of the dice. Even his name seems to be in question: Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus. The truth is that we know very little about either one of these men.

Their lack of renown is a wondrous reality. In the next chapter Peter stands with the eleven to preach his Pentecost sermon. That would mean that Matthias must have been there even though he is not named. Where was Justus? Perhaps he was there too, for the narrator tells us that all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. Some will argue that "all" means only the Twelve, now including Matthias. But Justus must have been with them when they cast lots. He must have been in the house, along with some women including Jesus' mother Mary. After Matthias was chosen, the text does not say the rest of them left Jerusalem. When the day of Pentecost came, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages" ([Acts 2:4](#)).

Rather than being disappointed by having so little information, we can be grateful for the witness of those who are so little known. The sermon can be a time to acknowledge and celebrate the ordinary people who have carried the extraordinary gospel from one generation to the next. Who is Justus in your faith journey? In a small congregation the preacher could ask people to share names aloud or perhaps remember names later in the prayers. There is the Sunday school teacher who taught for over forty years, never eligible for a church board because women were not even allowed to vote. There is a man whose name you cannot remember who told you that Jesus held him through the weeks and months after his wife died. There is the pastor who always served small congregations and never went back to seminary reunions because he felt as if he did not have much to talk about. And there is every person sitting in the sanctuary. Some are natural leaders, well known to almost everybody. Others do not think of themselves as leaders at all, and others may not see them that way either.

One of the most poignant portraits of ordinary believers unfolds in Richard Lischer's book *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey through a Country Church*. The book opens with his initial disdain for the little rural congregation in New Cana, Illinois, where he had been assigned by church authorities. After all, he had a PhD in theology and surely knew more than these farmers. "Of course I knew that Christendom needed unstrategic little churches like this one," he said, "but I bitterly resented the bureaucrats who had misfiled my gifts, misjudged my obvious promise, and were about to place me in rural confinement." [1] In his first sermon he quoted James Joyce, Heidegger, Camus, and Walker Percy. He spoke about the problem of meaninglessness. "It didn't occur to me ... that Marx's critique of religion

rarely came up for discussion at the post office.”[2] Looking back on that sermon, Reverend Lischer knew he had failed to honor the ordinary people of faith sitting in those pews:

Why couldn't I see the revelation of God in our little Church? In our community everyone pitched in and learned how to “pattern” a little girl with cerebral palsy. We helped one another put up hay before the rains came. We grieved when a neighbor lost his farm, and we refused to buy his tools at the auction. As a people, we walked into the fields every April and blessed the seeds before planting them. Weren't these all signs of “church” that were worthy of mention in the Sunday homily? Whatever lay closest to the soul of the congregation I unfailingly omitted from my sermons. I didn't despise these practices. I simply didn't see them. [3]

Amazingly, Lischer wrote this book more than twenty-five years after he had left that little church in New Cana. In his years there, he met Justus many times over—ordinary men and women who taught him the meaning of the communion of saints. On his last Sunday he looked out at the faces of the congregation and saw Jesus there: “The only thing that made us different from any other kinship group or society was the mysterious presence of Jesus in the community. We were his body, which is not a metaphor. The ordinary world really is capable of hosting the infinite Being. As I searched the face of my congregation on my last Sunday, I felt the theological point was proved.”[4]

Justus lost the toss of the dice, but there is no indication that he lost his faith in Jesus. As the book of Acts unfolds, there are hundreds of unnamed people who pass on the story of Jesus. Most of them are even less well known than Justus. Without these ordinary folks, Peter and Paul would have remained quite lonely and ineffective in bearing witness “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” ([Acts 1:8](#)). The people listening to today's sermon are there because ordinary people told somebody about Jesus. Thanks be to God!

[1] Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey through a Country Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 11.

[2] *Ibid.*, 73.

[3] *Ibid.*, 75.

[4] *Ibid.*, 232.

## Psalm 1 NRSVue, 2021

*The Lord makes fruitful those who choose the way of righteousness.*

- 1 Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked  
or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers,
- 2 but their delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law they meditate day and night.
- 3 They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season,  
and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.
- 4 The wicked are not so but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

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5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous,  
6 for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.

### Exploring Psalm 1

**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.

#### **Theological Perspective**

*By Ismael García*

This brief but theologically rich psalm proclaims the beatitude: blessed or happy are those who find delight in meditating day and night on the law of the Lord (v. 2) This blessing unveils the two purposes of the psalm. First, it instructs us that all the Psalms are to be read as Torah. [Torah](#) entails much more than studying and abiding by laws and regulations (a sure recipe for self-righteousness and legalistic attitudes). Rather, through poems, songs, prayers, stories, and, yes, laws the Psalter instructs us about God's nature and purpose, the way God relates to us, and the way we ought to relate to God. From the Torah Psalms we gain theological insights and instruction about sin, forgiveness, vengeance, justice, compassion, and key theological concerns that inform the whole of the Old Testament.

Secondly, Psalm 1 presents its own instruction. It proceeds by establishing a radical contrast between the righteous and the wicked. The contrast is predominantly not moral but theological. The issue is not whether one obeys or disobeys moral laws, but whether or not one makes God and God's reign the center of one's life.

The righteous are those open to, dependent on, and trusting of the presence of God and the realization of God's reign. The wicked follow a different way. They are a law to themselves, living by their own wit, cunning, and self-determination. Being their own master, they are free to seek and secure their self-interest. Being their own judge, they find themselves to be justified in doing whatever they do. In affirming their autonomy they cannot but deny the sovereignty of God. This psalm confronts us with an existential and absolute decision: do we trust and live by God's Torah, or do we place our faith in our own self-given Torah? Do we live out the freedom that comes from obedience or the false freedom that springs from our own illusory autonomy?

The option has consequences. The psalm claims that the righteous are happy and that they will bear fruit and prosper (v. 3) and that the wicked will perish (v. 6). The happiness of the righteous does not consist in the immediate gratification of their needs and/or desires. They are not even spared being subject to and even victimized by the temptations, humiliations, and abuses of the wicked, the sinners, the scoffers, and all those who deny or question the ways and purpose of the Lord (v. 1). It is also evident that the wicked many times fare better than the righteous.

The happiness and delight of the righteous consists in that personal and communal identity they gain by allowing themselves to be instructed by God's Torah. Torah gifts

them with a firm foundation. Having shaped their life by the source of all life, they become individuals and communities of character and conviction. They know to whom they belong and see themselves as being part of a story that is larger than themselves and that bears fruits (v. 3). They are made free to commit themselves, in the company of others (v. 5), to goals and projects beyond their narrow self-interests. They live in the assurance and the trust that in spite of their shortcomings the Lord watches over them (v. 6). They delight in the Torah that allows them to live with integrity committed to the justice and care of God's reign in a world that is conflict ridden and hostile to God's ways. In a world that is confused, cynical, and driven to despair they live in the hope that even in the worst of circumstances God is present and can create a way out of no way. They delight and are happy because they know that the only enduring purposes belong to God. By God's instruction and transforming power they are able to embody the theological virtues of love, faith, and hope, and this is the source of their happiness. As such, they can resist all the vicissitudes of life and the wickedness thrown at them. They delight in being sure that the ways of God will be vindicated, and so will the fruits of their labors—despite their shortcomings and the stubborn opposition of the wicked. The righteous are well rooted and their leaves will not wither (v. 3). They not only endure; they flourish.

The way and fruits of the wicked, insofar as they disregard or deny God's Torah, are not fitting for God's providential purpose and thus will not endure (v. 4). They will not be remembered and will not be part of God's redeeming purpose (v. 5). The self-centeredness of the wicked becomes an obstacle to recognizing that the only true way is the one initiated by God. Further, there is no way of overcoming our sin by ourselves, because left to our own devices, we cannot recognize our self-centeredness as a sin. In addition, what is more significant is that we do not want to overcome it.

The Torah, thus, initiates us in a journey toward the authentic life. It instructs us that a full and happy life consists in our being open and attentive to God's way. The reward of the Torah, our delight in meditating on it, is our being formed by it. It reveals that wholeness and fulfillment are found in trusting our life to our Creator and Redeemer. This psalm affirms the Christian conviction that in Christ, our Torah, we learn the blessedness that comes from trying to be faithful as Christ was faithful. In this sense the Torah is a means of grace. It is God's effort to overcome our sin, God's instruction as to how to turn away from ourselves and center our lives in the giver, sustainer, and redeemer of life.

## 1 John 5:9-13 NRSVue, 2021

*In this lection disciples are bid to believe in the testimony that God has borne to Jesus, the Son of God. They are to have confidence that their prayers are heard and that in the Son they have eternal life. Elsewhere in this letter it is indicated that God's witness to Jesus is especially made known through the experience of love, a love made manifest in Jesus. Those who trust in Jesus as the Son of God realize this testimony within their own hearts. Refusal to accept this witness means to lose the possibility of true life.*

9 If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son.



- 6**
- 10 Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son.
- 11 And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.
- 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.
- 13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

### Exploring 1 John 5:9-13

**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.

#### **Pastoral perspective**

*By Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore*

In the first three verses of this passage, the word “testimony” appears six times. “Human testimony” is compared to God’s testimony (v. 9). If we believe the former, whether or not it is only gossip, why would we deny God’s greater Word? In this passage, the writer of 1 John is picking up the Gospel of John’s opening declaration, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The truth of God’s testimony receives succinct definition in our passage: God gives us eternal life through God’s Son (v. 11). We can believe this or deny it. When we do the latter, we make God a “liar” (v. 11). There is no equivocation here.

This passage is not, of course, the first time truth and bearing witness have come up. This letter reaches its conclusion by turning back to the Johannine tradition to which the author himself testifies. The term “truth” appears more frequently in the Gospel of John than in all three [Synoptic Gospels](#) combined. Shortly after Jesus says he is the “light of the world” and is accused by the religious community of bearing untrue witness to himself, he proclaims to those who believe, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” ([8:12, 32](#)). Several chapters later, he says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” ([14:6](#)). All this reaches a climax in Jesus’ arrest and trial, with his last words to Pilate, “For this I was born ... to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” ([18:37](#)). We cannot help but hear Pilate’s haunting retort, “What is truth?” ([18:38](#)). Although the truth of God’s love is no easier to describe and verify today than centuries ago, 1 John offers an answer to Pilate.

There is an assurance in this passage that is both enviable and unsettling. This assurance has its dangers, especially when it tempts us to sort and judge. There are places earlier in this treatise where the author waxes doctrinaire and even a bit rigid, painting life in broad brush strokes. In [chapter 3](#) he says, “Everyone who does what is right is righteous.... Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil” ([vv. 7–8](#)). In [chapter 5](#), the author intones, “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” ([v. 12](#)). Too bad he did not add one more line here appropriate to the Johannine tradition, about

not casting stones unless we are “without sin” ([John 8:7](#)). Luke and Matthew say it even more clearly: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged” ([Luke 6:37](#); see also [Matt. 7:1–5](#)).

Our country has learned the hard way the danger of simplistic black-white portraits of the world as divided along an axis of good and evil or between those “with us” and those “against us.” Labeling others evil and ourselves as good distorts the complex reality of human nature and God’s unpredictable grace abounding anywhere and everywhere in God’s created, groaning world. When we listen to the words of this author, we must be careful not to presume too much about our own righteousness as God’s chosen.

In the months following 9/11, staunch patriotism forbade humble national self-examination of the log in our own eye, the places where our nation has abused power around the globe and contributed to injustice, killing, violence, and destruction, rather than life and grace. So it is no wonder some of us approach witnessing with caution or envy in relation to those with greater confidence in the truth(s) they possess. After visiting a church with more orthodox beliefs, a youth in my own congregation observed, “They didn’t just say, ‘We believe.’ They said, ‘We know!’” Other youths felt uncomfortable with the certainty of those in a more evangelical and proselytizing tradition than their own.

Traditions vary greatly over the degree to which testimony plays a role in Christian life. Many congregations do not practice testimony, at least not self-consciously, in part for fear of inappropriately imposing beliefs on others. Other communities keep it at the heart of their practice. The Church of Latter-day Saints teaches children to witness almost as soon as they can stand and talk, first to those in their own age group and then as part of their initiation into the wider community. In many African American congregations, testimony occupies a major place in worship. Preachers and laity tell others how God has changed their lives. Testimony, observes Thomas Hoyt, a bishop in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, is based in part on the location and experience of marginality. It has functioned as a means of catharsis and healing. Burdens are shared. Assurance of God’s word is received. In testimony, “people speak truthfully about what they have experienced and seen, offering it to the community for the edification of all.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Lest we immediately assume that testimony involves the community only in Spirit-filled truth telling through word and song, some testimony moves beyond words and appears in concrete acts of compassion. Today I received a letter from a good friend and active member of the United Church of Christ who is involved in Communities without Borders. She appealed to me for a contribution but she also testified: “I reached a point where I just couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t stand what was happening to so many children, women, and men ... in large part because they were unlucky to be born poor.” She is working to build a health clinic in a poverty-stricken town. This also testifies to faith in the promise of life—life given eternally through God in Christ’s love alive in the world.

[1] Thomas Hoyt Jr., “Testimony,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 92. See also <https://practicingourfaith.org/practices/testimony/> and Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

## John 17:6-19 NRSVue, 2021

*In our gospel Jesus prays for his disciples shortly before his death, asking for their unity and sanctification in truth. He prays that they may be protected in the Father's name, that is, by God's true character as it has been made known by Jesus. Because of Jesus' revelation to them, the disciples are set apart from unbelieving worldly society. Yet, in another important sense, they remain a part of this world and are consecrated to witness to the truth in it.*

- 6 [Jesus continued], "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.
- 7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you,
- 8 for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me.
- 9 I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.
- 10 All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I have been glorified in them.
- 11 And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.
- 12 While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.
- 13 But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.
- 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.
- 15 I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.
- 16 They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.
- 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.
- 18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.
- 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

### Exploring John 17:6-19

**John** is the fourth gospel. Its author makes no attempt to give a chronological account of the life of Jesus (which the other gospels do, to a degree), but rather "...these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." John includes what he calls signs, stories of miracles, to help in this process.

### Homiletical Perspective

*by Thomas Troeger*

There is something very tempting about escaping from the world. Travel agents, the tourist industry, and the real estate business know this. They spend millions to lure us to take luxury cruises where our every whim is met, to enjoy fractional ownership in condos at the shore, to buy a second home in the mountains, to live in a gated community where we



can leave our workaday pressures behind. Although the images used to sell these retreats reflect our glitzy media world, the human desire for respite from the world and its incessant pressures is as ancient as the Bible.

Religious faith may intensify the desire for escape from the world. Having glimpsed a vision of what is holy and good, the human spirit may hunger not for the promised splendor of luxury resorts, but for a community and a way of being that avoid the clamor and conflict of the world. The history of Christianity is filled with stories of such human arrangements: monasteries, convents, reform movements, communal living, utopias, retreat centers, small groups centered on prayer and piety, attempts to reclaim the practices of primitive Christianity as interpreted by charismatic leaders. While each of these developed its peculiar shape and ethos, all of them have been efforts to create a space, unencumbered by the world, that would allow for a fuller realization of a faithful, holy life.

It appears that the desire to live apart from the world arose in the community of John. By the end of the first century [CE](#), as conflict with the authorities increased, the members of John's community were understandably attracted to a life of faith that would disengage them from the powers that were opposed to the gospel. How good it would feel to retreat into their own group, to recall the stories of Jesus, to sense his presence in their meals of bread and wine, to enjoy each other's supportive fellowship, and no longer to have to defend their beliefs and practices in a hostile world.

The lection for this Sunday can be read as a sermon addressed to this desire for a more ingrown, parochial life of faith. The wisdom of John's sermon, delivered as the instruction of Christ, is this: it provides an alternative to retreat from world without giving into the pressures of the world. Again and again we read that Jesus and his disciples "do not belong to the world," that is to say, the world's claims do not shape their essential identity, faith, and values. But at the same time Christ is crystal clear that there is no escape from the reality of the world. He says, "I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves" (v. 13). Christ speaks to them in the same world where they live and where they will find joy "in themselves" or, to provide another equally valid translation, "among themselves." Yes, they can be a community, and yes, they can find joy in that community, but no, the community is not to abandon the world.

As if fearing that the congregation will not get the message straight, John portrays Christ as reiterating the point over and over: "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world" (vv. 15–16). Instead of retreat from the world, Christ offers an alternative model that can empower the community to live in the world without succumbing to its values and pressures. They are to stay in the world under the protective care of God. They are to live amidst all of the knotted complexities of the world without themselves getting entangled.

The holiness that they might have hoped to achieve by escape from the world is to be found not through disengagement but through the action of God and immersion in God's word: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (v. 17). Christ recognizes their desire to be holy but reorients the direction of their yearnings, turning them to the truth of God's word that is revealed in the here and now of the world.

This plea to remain in the world rises to a crescendo as Christ prays, “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (v. 18). The strong phrase “sent into the world” is the exact opposite of getting out of the world. In one clean, clear verse Christ reminds the church that the pattern of his own life was not escape from the world but engagement with the world, with all of its distorted powers and pressures.

John’s sermon is a polemic for remaining in the world, addressed to a community that for good reason is exhausted by the world and ready to be done with it. Imagine a sermon that connects to our contemporary exhaustion with the world’s ceaseless violence and corruption, and the frequent feelings of despair over the inability to make a difference.

Think of a colleague who returned from a vacation to one of the escapes named earlier: cruises, retreats, second homes. She looked well rested, restored to her usual energy. She said wistfully to me, “If only I could keep this all year.” We are glad she had such a splendid vacation. She deserved it, but a sermon on this passage could present for all of us something more enduring than a good vacation: a sense of Christ’s presence that will allow us to live vitally and faithfully in the world, not owned by it, but fully engaged with its needs and wounds and energized by the truth of God’s word, by the truth who was sent into the world that we all might have a more abundant life here and now.

## 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.

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## Odds & Ends

### Ascension of Christ, The, or Ascension Day

The occasion on which the risen Christ is taken into heaven after appearing to his followers for forty days ([Acts 1:1-11](#), [Mk 16:19](#)). The Ascension marks the conclusion of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. It is the final elevation of his human nature to divine glory and the near presence of God. The Ascension is affirmed by the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds. The Ascension is celebrated on Ascension Day, the Thursday that is the fortieth day of the Easter season. It is a principal feast of the church year in the Episcopal Church. "[Ascension](#)" in [An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church](#)

### The Feast of the Ascension

*by Michael K. Marsh*

Today, forty days after Easter, is the Feast of the Ascension.

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?" ([Acts 1:9-11](#)).

On April 12, 1961 the Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, was the first man to enter outer space and orbit the earth. Western sources claimed that during this space flight Gagarin commented, "I don't see any God up here." Later sources denied Gagarin made that statement and attributed the following to Nikita Khrushchev, "Gagarin flew into space, but didn't see any God there".

Regardless, the statement points to some assumptions, even misunderstandings, about God and God's relationship to the world. Too often we believe, speak, and even live as if God is "up there" and not down here, somewhere "out there" and not within. We are left with a gap between God and humanity, spirit and matter, heaven and earth. So if Gagarin had only flown higher would he have seen God?

A literal reading of the ascension story might leave us looking up toward heaven in an attempt to get one last glimpse of Jesus. The difficulty is that we sometimes think of heaven as another place, as there are places in the world. The logic that follows this way of thinking is that if Jesus ascends to heaven, then he must go to another place.

But the ascension is about presence not absence. Jesus has not left us. Rather Christ has filled us. Former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple said, "The ascension of Christ is his liberation from all restrictions of time and space. It does not represent his removal from earth, but his constant presence everywhere on earth." Christ now fills and sanctifies all time and space. The grace of the ascension is that "Christ is all in all!" ([Col. 3:11](#)). The unity of humanity and divinity revealed in the incarnation is brought to fullness in the ascension.

Jesus disappears in his ascension beyond the clouds, not into some geographical location, but into the heart of all creation where he dwells in his glorified humanity. The ascension reveals that in Christ's humanity, all humanity has been enthroned next to God. It is our "eternalization," and from that moment on our homeland is in heaven. Through the ascension Christ is still present but in a different way—an interiorized way. He is no longer physically in front of his disciples but rather within them.

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