

Resurrection of the Lord, Easter Day

Isaiah 25:6-9 - The vision of a banquet on Mount Zion, to which all people will be invited and at which death will be swallowed up for ever (vv. 6-9), is framed between a prayer of thanksgiving for God's power over the "cities of ruthless nations" (vv. 1-5), and a prophecy about the fate of one such nation (vv. 10-12). Mount Zion stands at the center, scene of unrestrained rejoicing, symbol of life and salvation, surrounded by silent, dusty ruins where once the proud cities of the nations had stood.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 - Paul wants his readers to be absolutely assured of the Lord Jesus' Resurrection and its profound and eternal consequences for all who believe in him (cf. John 11:25-26). He knew that at Corinth there were doubts about the resurrection. He affirms that the resurrection of Jesus is essential for the gospel message.

The consistent testimony of the church has been – and is – that Jesus died for our sins, rose again, and appeared to numerous witnesses.

John 20:1-18 - This was the first of five appearances of Jesus on resurrection day: to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9-11; John 20:11-18); to the other women (Matt. 28:9-10); to Simon Peter (Luke 24:33-35; 1 Cor. 15:5); to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Mark 16:12-13; Luke 24:13-32); and to the eleven apostles (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-25).

The words "Don't cling to me" (20:17) indicate that Mary needed to realize that Jesus' presence was not permanent. He explained that he had not yet ascended to the Father. That ascent was on the surface a sad departure of Jesus from those who loved him. On a deeper level, Jesus' ascent to the Father opened up the new presence of Jesus and the Father with the believer through the Holy Spirit.

What You See Is What You Get

It's worth noting how many times today's readings reference Christ appearing to His disciples. His resurrection had already taken place. Death had already been defeated. Salvation was already at hand. In other words, the joy and power of Easter was ready and waiting for the followers of Christ. But until He appeared – until He revealed Himself – none knew of it.

Easter is more than a date on the calendar. Easter comes when we see Jesus.

Has grief blinded you? Has life caused you to lose sight of His presence? Look again. Listen as He calls your name. See Jesus. Experience Easter.

Prayer

Almighty God who gives me life through the resurrection of Your Son, Jesus Christ; give me grace to see Him in the minutes and moments of my days; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B*

Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:32-35 - The acts of giving in 4:32–35 were the result of the believers' prayer and the powerful work of the Holy Spirit (4:23–31). The great power of the Spirit led to great acts of grace. There was a spirit of unity among them; a reflection of the Triune God (*cf.* Eph. 4:4-6), and a model of the first commandment in Deut. 6:4-5.

They felt and acted like a family. This was the church's first attempt to finance ministry. It was voluntary and mutual, not mandatory. Love and concern was the motivation, not government or social leveling! The central truth of their message was: Jesus is alive! They felt a responsibility for one another and demonstrated that conviction by love in action.

1 John 1:1-2:2 - To have fellowship with God one must "walk in the light." John sees "light" as utter, absolute truth. To walk in the light is to be honest with God and with our self (vv. 5–7). It is neither true nor honest to claim that we are without sin (v. 8). Instead, we are to confess (acknowledge) our sins—and through confession experience both the forgiving and cleansing power of God (vv. 9–10). As we bring our weaknesses to God He will transform us and enable us to become the obedient, loving, and trusting people the rest of this letter calls us to be.

The individual who excuses their self for their sins is weighed down. One who confesses their sins leaves them behind.

John 20:19-31 - Jesus encountered a group of frightened disciples behind locked doors and gave them what they needed most—Himself. He showed them His hands and His side in order to dispel any doubt that they were seeing anything but their crucified Lord (20:20).

Jesus had decisively given His followers the command to go into all the world and continue His ministry. To enable them to respond to this task, they received a precursor of the full coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost—almost as a deposit for that which was to come fully fifty days later—breathed to them now from the very mouth of Jesus (20:22).

Seeing Is Believing

Do you see a pattern in today's readings? In Acts, the disciples are living out the Gospel in a communal setting. In 1 John, he writes of declaring the Gospel through the senses – what is heard, seen, and touched. And Jesus Himself invites Thomas to touch the nail prints in His hands so that he might believe.

Our faith grows as God reveals Himself to us. The faith of others is nurtured when they experience Jesus through us.

What is it that you can offer to a hurting world? What act of kindness can you give? Simple acts become seeds of faith when they reveal the love of God to those in need. Allow God to use your life to reveal the risen, powerful Christ to those who have not yet experienced Easter.

Prayer

God of grace, help me in word and deed live out the faith I profess in Your risen Son; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B*

Third Sunday of Easter

Acts 3:12-19 - A happy and innocent beginning of a healing understandably attracted a crowd, to whom Peter felt obligated to explain the event. He deliberately turns their attention away from himself, denying any *special power or godliness*. Instead he focuses their attention on the God that they worshipped already, God's approval, and the resurrection of Jesus. Peter reassures them that their rejection of Jesus was due to ignorance, and he calls them to repent and turn to God for the forgiveness of their sins.

1 John 3:1-7 - John emphasizes the importance of right action as a demonstration of Christian commitment. As children of God we have experienced God's love and are to live as members of His family (2:29–3:2). We demonstrate our family membership by righteous living. John reminds us that Christ came to take away our sins (3:5). Jesus died for the purpose of causing us to stop sinning.

Luke 24:36b-48 - Jesus appears suddenly in the midst of his followers. Frightened and confused, Jesus calms their fear and reveals Himself to them.

At his arrest they had forsaken him. He had told them to meet him in Galilee, yet they had remained in Jerusalem. However his first words to them were, 'Peace to you' (v. 36). Jesus loved them dearly, and knew how to comfort them. Jesus proceeds to show them his hands and feet. He was not a 'spirit' or ghost, for he had 'flesh and bones' and, to emphasize this, he asks for food. The disciples must have been awestruck at the sight of their Lord and friend, now risen and eating supper in their midst.

A Vision of Comfort

Like children, we too often try to hide our mistakes. Embarrassed of our failure and afraid of the consequences, we try to banish and bury all that is less than perfect. Today's readings offer reassurance and the courage to clean out our closets!

Peter's words in Acts assure his listeners of God's approval and understanding of the ignorance that caused them to betray Jesus. He reinforces God's forgiveness and extends His invitation to be reconciled. John writes specifically with affirmation of God's great love – a love so great we are now called children of God. And Jesus goes out of His way to show Himself to His disciples, with His first words being "Peace to you."

Easter offers us an invitation to stop hiding in our closets, surrounded by our failures. Jesus is risen! He comes with hands extended, offering love, grace, and forgiveness. Open the door to a new season filled with new life, new hope, and new beginnings.

Prayer

Merciful God, open my eyes to see with faith Your Son redeeming my life and the life of the world; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:5-12 - Jesus had warned his disciples that they would suffer and be brought before councils. He had assured them that the Holy Spirit would teach them what to say. It is with faith rather than fear that Peter now speaks.

He is courteous and clear. He points out that they are on trial for being kind — for healing a person! But, of course, it is because they have healed in the name of Jesus that they are under arrest. Peter tells them that it was at the hands of the Council that Jesus was killed, but God had raised him from death. The healing of the man is proof that they were wrong. They think they have disposed of Jesus — like a rejected building block — but he is the keystone of all life, the creator and Savior of the world.

1 John 3:16-24 - Perfect love is related to the absence of fear. Christ's sacrificial death is a wonderful example of the love for others that should characterize believers. Assurance of salvation comes through loving in deed and truth (3:19–24). Obedience confirms that believers are living in God (3:24). The witness of the Holy Spirit also serves to assure believers that they are God's own (cf. Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13).

John 10:11-18 - Hirelings flee and protect themselves when enemies come; but Christ willingly gives up His life for the sheep. (See Acts 20:29.) As the Good Shepherd, Jesus gives His life on the cross (Ps. 22); as the Great Shepherd, He cares for the sheep (Heb. 13:20 and Ps. 23); and as the Chief Shepherd He will come again in glory for His sheep (Ps. 24 and 1 Peter 5:4).

The “other sheep” are the Gentiles, who were not in the Jewish fold. Jesus must bring them, and He will do it through His voice, His Word. Christ is the Good Shepherd who dies for the sheep. (In the Old Testament the sheep died for the shepherd!) Christ calls through His Word, and those who believe step through the Door, out of their religious fold, into the true flock of Christ, the church.

Here Is Your God

He's coming. What do those words inspire? Hope? Fear? Dread? Anticipation? If Easter has come, then Jesus the Good Shepherd has been seen and those words inspire both relief and joy.

Jesus exchanged places with the sheep. No more will they be slaughtered and sacrificed. Instead, He has given His life in place of theirs. It is a vivid image of the gift He brings to our lives.

Lost and afraid, we wander, searching for safety and a home. *He's coming.* Hungry and thirsty, we desperately try to satiate ourselves with whatever we can find on this earth. *He's coming.* Injured and diseased, we suffer alone in darkness. *He's coming.*

Easter fulfills this hope. *He has come. He has saved.* Easter brings to us the Good Shepherd who protects and provides for us with His own life.

Prayer

Loving God, open my ears to hear the voice of Your Son, my Good Shepherd, and to follow where He leads; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 8:26-40 - Perhaps the most striking element in the story is that God led Philip away from an effective evangelistic campaign that was reaching hundreds to witness to a single individual. Let's never forget that every individual is important to God. Our witnessing to a single person is as important as the mass evangelist's outreach to thousands.

1 John 4:7-21 - The prime directive for believers is to love one another. Love comes from God, is revealed in Christ, and is to be lived by Jesus' people (vv. 7-12). God has given us His Spirit, for we acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God and rely fully on His love (vv. 13-16). God is love, and as we love the experience of being loved and loving drives out our fears of punishment (vv. 17-18). Again John sums up. Anyone who claims to love God and yet fails to love his brother is a liar. Love for God expresses itself in love for others also (vv. 19-21).

John 15:1-8 - The image of the Vine and branches focuses on the experiential aspect of a theological reality. We are united with Jesus (Rom. 6:1-14). To produce spiritual fruit, we must "abide in" the relationship that faith has established.

Jesus is the source of spiritual vitality and fruitfulness. As His disciples we must remain "in" Him, intimately connected by responsive obedience to His commands.

How Does your Garden Grow?

Vintners, like most people, often want what they can't have. They yearn for a particular varietal of grape that is often not compatible with the climate or growing conditions of their vineyard. In order to cultivate the desired vine, they often graft a new varietal to old stock. By attaching it to roots already firmly established and acclimated to the environment, the new grape is able to adapt and flourish in an environment in which it would not otherwise survive.

Jesus' use of gardening metaphors is appropriate. On our own, we do not have the root system to grow and thrive in God's Kingdom. In a very real sense, we are "grafted" into "old stock" – attached to Christ and the very root of faith itself. He has already proven Himself to withstand the storms and the heat of testing and trial. He has shown Himself faithful to produce an eternal harvest. In Him we flourish and thrive, able to firmly take hold in the Kingdom of God with roots that cannot be damaged or killed.

Prayer

Gracious God, cultivate my life to offer nurture and nourishment to those around me; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 10:44-48 - These verses explain the appearance of tongues in this situation. The fact that Gentiles were given this gift, just as the apostles had been on Pentecost (*cf.* Acts 2), was proof of God's acceptance of Gentiles into the church.

1 John 5:1-6 - John stresses the chief confession of faith that should characterize Christians. Christians are those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (v. 1). Those who are genuine believers demonstrate it by their love for God and obedience to His commandments (vv. 2-3). The faith that provides strength for spiritual victory is the faith that Jesus is God's incarnate Son (v. 5).

John's opponents held that Jesus was a mere man to whom the divine Christ spirit came at baptism, and from whom this spirit departed before the crucifixion. However, John makes it clear (v. 6) that Jesus was (and is) the divine Son of God at both baptism and crucifixion, and throughout His entire course of life.

John 15:9-17 - A believer is motivated by the wonder of Jesus' love, which is patterned after the Father's love in its quality and extent. Obedience to the Father's commands is the same for a disciple as it was for the Son (*cf.* 14:15, 21, 23; 1 John 2:3; 3:22, 24; 5:3). Active dependence and loving obedience are the proper paths for all of God's children.

Who's Your Daddy?

Notice the reassurances in today's readings about the expanding nature and culture of God's Kingdom. Gentiles were filled with God's Spirit so that there could be no doubt about their acceptance into the church. John uses the word "everyone" several times, and even makes the point of stressing that if you love a parent, you must also love the child. No doubt, the realities of Christianity's expansion created some growing pains as God's family adopted some children that looked and lived differently from the original disciples.

Thankfully, Scripture goes out of its way to make clear that the Gospel is not just for a select few. Through Christ, God opened wide the doorway to His Kingdom, creating a family out of different people groups and cultures. In God's family, skin tones will vary. So will culture and expressions of worship. Whether we call Him Abba, God, Yahweh, or Elohim, love is the DNA that unites and identifies members of His family.

Prayer

Glorious God, pour into my heart a love for You that overflows to those around me; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Ascension of the Lord

Acts 1:1-11 - Luke has written his first book (What we know as the Gospel of Luke) to Theophilus. He did it so “that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.”

He writes Acts with an aim toward the same thing. Acts is “Book 2”. This book will tell the story of what happens after Jesus has ascended. The story of God’s people learning a new way to live. This life is based on Jesus, the Spirit and the community of God. The new people will live a life empowered by the Spirit of God. The same Spirit that was at work in Jesus.

Yes, he has left them, but he is now somehow still with them by the Spirit. Jesus is a new creation. The disciples are going to learn what it means to live — as they are new creations in Christ themselves.

Ephesians 1:15-23 - If anyone questions whether Paul has a passionate heart for his people, they only need to look as far as this prayer.

Paul asks for people to receive wisdom, revelation and that they may know the hope they have in Christ. He also prays they would know the immeasurable power that is at work within them.

This power, the power to forgive, love, repent and walk in faith, is the same power that was at work when God raised Jesus from the dead. Resurrection Power.

Paul wants his readers to know that they have someone who is cheering for them, pleading on their behalf, for them to know all that is at work as they live their lives for Christ. This message from 2000 years ago is not a bad one for people to hear today. You are not alone; you’re not powerless, you are not forsaken, you are not disconnected.

Luke 24:44-53 - Jesus helps his followers understand not only what is true about him, but what is true about them. Because they are witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, they are now caught up in his purposes. That purpose is to proclaim in their lives repentance and forgiveness in Jesus. They have the power to do that very thing. This power is the Spirit. In the same way, Jesus’ physical presence with them encouraged them; now the Spirit will do the same, and more. Now they will not need Jesus’ physical presence, they have the Spirit, and He will lead them in ways they can never imagine as they begin the work of establishing His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

But Wait, There’s More!

Jesus’ return to heaven might make us feel abandoned.

Thanks for the ride Jesus, that was cool. Now, what do we do?

Jesus answers that question in the Gospels and helps us to understand that without him leaving, we don’t receive the Spirit at Pentecost. Without Pentecost, there is no Church. God is always doing something we can’t quite see. On the surface, it looks like Jesus is taking off when things are getting rough (*Christian persecution in the coming years was no joke*). But God is doing so much more. He is providing for his people and commissioning them in ways that will change the world.

Maybe you can’t see what God is doing. Maybe on the surface, things look pretty rough. There is a bigger picture to see, and if we are patient, we will see it. God isn’t leaving. He is with you and me, and if we can persevere, our world will change and maybe even the world around us.

Prayer – Loving Father, your ascended Son promised the gift of holy power. Send your Spirit of revelation and wisdom, that in the blessed freedom of hope, we may witness to the grace of forgiveness and sing songs of joy with the peoples of earth to the One who makes us one body. Amen.

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Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 - Peter explained that a replacement for Judas was necessary, not because of his death, but because of his defection. Judas had been an active member of the group. He spells out the qualifications: One who had been part of the believers from the beginning, had been witness to the resurrection, and handpicked by the Lord.

The apostles' important task was to tell others of Jesus' resurrection, the central distinguishing mark of Christian faith. In sovereign selection, God chose Matthias to become the twelfth apostle.

1 John 5:9-13 - The Spirit performed miracles through Jesus. The Father confirmed His identity at His baptism. And the Son died an actual death on the cross, witnessed by dozens. When a person believes the external witness to Jesus, God the Father gives us a witness—"in his heart." Faith serves as its own witness. In believing we somehow know the story of Jesus is true, our certainty is confirmed by what God then does in our lives.

John 17:6-19 - Jesus prays that we might experience union with Him, even as He had experienced His own union with God the Father throughout His life on earth. Through faith we are united with Jesus, linked to Him in an unbreakable bond. But we must experience that union by living in responsive obedience, for the One to whom we are united is God.

Part of the 'IN' Crowd

We all long for acceptance; to both know and be fully known. But what does acceptance into "God's crowd" look like?

Peter describes that process. He writes of someone willing to go through good times and bad, describing Matthias as one who had been there from the beginning of Jesus' ministry through his death, resurrection, and ascension. But he describes something more; a willingness to let God's will determine his outcome and fate.

Jesus, in His final words and prayer on this earth, also gives us a picture of His followers. "... the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world." Notice Jesus goes on to specifically say He does not wish His followers to be removed from the world but to be protected, able to withstand and endure suffering.

Acceptance by God does not necessarily mean acceptance from the world. But living our lives in God's favor ensures our lives will be noticed by the world, opening their eyes to the principals of God's Kingdom.

Prayer

Merciful God, give me the grace of Your Spirit to walk in Your ways and speak Your words; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Day of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21 - On the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit falls visibly on the gathered disciples, and they begin to speak in “other tongues” (2:1–4). Stunned crowds gather, each hearing the believers praise God in “his own native tongue” (vv. 5–13). Peter then quiets the crowd. He explains the phenomenon by referring to Joel’s Old Testament prophecy concerning a day when God will “pour out His Spirit” (vv. 14–21).

Romans 8:22-27 - The Spirit’s work within us is present tense salvation: We are being saved from the power of sin and becoming righteous. When Jesus returns we will be saved completely, liberated from the last leftovers of sin, which cling so persistently to us.

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15 - Amid persecution, God will send the Holy Spirit (see 14:16–17), who will help believers bear witness to Christ in spite of the suffering (15:26–27). Jesus warned of persecution so that his disciples would be ready for it (16:1–5).

The Holy Spirit will convict the world in the area of sin that results from disbelief in Jesus (16:9). Second, the Holy Spirit will convict the world in the area of righteousness in light of the life of Jesus (16:10). Third, the Holy Spirit will convict the world in the area of judgment because Jesus defeated the prince of the world who now stands condemned (16:11). Only through the Holy Spirit can an individual be brought to repentance leading to faith. It is not good works that elevate our status before God but the work of Christ. The Holy Spirit enables the follower of Christ to live out the Christ life.

Who Has Seen The Wind?

In her poem, “Who Has Seen the Wind?” author Christina Rossetti asks this age-old question: “Who has seen the wind? Neither you nor I: But when the trees bow down their heads, the wind is passing by.” While Ms. Rossetti might have been writing of events in her backyard, she could well have been writing of the work of the Holy Spirit.

We often want God to appear as a cosmic neon sign with brightly colored words and an arrow pointing a specific direction. But God didn’t promise us a neon sign for guidance. Instead, He promised us the Holy Spirit. Like the wind, we cannot see Him, but we see signs of His guidance as he moves within our lives.

Acts reveals that the work of the Holy Spirit is deeply personal and meaningful. “... each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.” God’s Spirit is a familiar voice clearly heard and understood. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, also emphasizes the intimate nature of the Holy Spirit. He comforts us with reassurance that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding with sighs too deep for words. Finally, Jesus confirms this assurance, introducing His Spirit as our personal advocate and guide to all truth.

Don’t mistake the lack of a neon sign as lack of direction. Are the leaves rustling? Are the branches swaying? God is moving. Like a quick lick of a finger to determine it’s direction, the Holy Spirit will guide your every step, keeping your feet firmly on the path God has for you.

Prayer:

Gracious God, through Your Spirit, teach my heart to love what is good and by Your Spirit give me right judgment to walk in Your ways; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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