

Resurrection of the Lord, Easter Day

Acts 10:34-43 - Peter's words were revolutionary. They swept away the prejudice and indoctrination of generations of Judaism. The word "Messiah" means "Anointed One." So, when Peter said, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth, he was saying: God declares Jesus to be the Messiah (cf. Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:16-21; Acts 4:27) As a first-hand witness, Peter confirms the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus: God's "Anointed One."

Colossians 3:1-4 - As followers of Christ, we are to live our lives controlled by the pattern of heaven. Our hearts are to be focused upon "things above," not dominated by the things of this earth. The word "set" means "to seek or strive for earnestly." The only way we can do this is to focus our attention upon the ascended Christ (Ephesians 4:10), who is seated at the right hand of God (Ps. 110:1; Lk. 22:69; Rom. 8:34).

John 20:1-18 - It is reassuring to observe that Jesus, when he rose from the dead, showed himself. In this passage, he is seen first by Mary Magdalene, then Peter and John... individuals who loved him. Jesus sought the fellowship of his own as they desperately needed to be certain that he lived.

For these witnesses – and us – Jesus freely reveals himself. Like Mary, we too fail to recognize him immediately. Yet, Jesus speaks our name, and suddenly our eyes are open.

An Empty Grave

Like Mary, many of us know what it feels like to watch hope die before our very eyes. And like Mary, we return again and again to the place of wounding and death. But if we focus only on grief and the grave, there can be no Easter. Sorrow consumes us and we are incapable of seeing Life standing before us.

The miracle of Easter is not only the resurrection – but also the fact that the risen Lord shows Himself to us. He appears where hope has died. Often, we don't recognize Him, but He's waiting there nonetheless; offering us the joy and miracle of new life.

Look beyond the grave and see Jesus, the One who is risen from the grave!

Prayer – *Eternal God, who has overcome death through Jesus Christ, help me to truly celebrate the joy of your resurrection and the miracle of new and unending life; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

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

Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:14a, 22-32 - “We killed him, but God raised him.” Peter speaks to the crowd about Christ’s death and resurrection. Though Christ had been morally blameless and performed many signs showing his deity, the Jews crucified him (2:22–23). God knew, however, that this would happen, as seen in the prophecies it fulfilled (2:25–28; see Ps. 16:8–11), and in the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead—to which all the apostles could bear witness (2:24, 32).

1 Peter 1:3-9 - Because of Christ’s resurrection, Christians have a hope of eternal salvation that is a certainty, for it is “beyond the reach of change and decay.” It is guaranteed and protected by God himself (see John 10:22–30).

Followers of Christ can rejoice in the assurance of their salvation, even in the midst of earthly trials. Our goal is to demonstrate the kind of faith that will “bring [us] much praise and glory and honor” at Christ’s return (1:7).

John 20:19-31 - In his resurrection appearance to his disciples, Jesus reconfirmed his words of comfort, his promise of the Holy Spirit (20:19–20), and his commission to them (20:21–23).

Thomas’ doubt is short-lived. Once he saw the wounds of Jesus, he confesses that Jesus is indeed Lord, the Son of God. It was the perfect expression of faith and worship by a disciple (follower) of Jesus. Additionally, Jesus clarifies the relation between faith and sight. While sight may help us believe, faith is not predicated upon sight.

It’s Not the Questions That Kill You

In the Acts reading, Saint Peter points out the absolute certainties that resulted in Christ’s crucifixion and death. The Jewish leaders were so confident in the “rightness” of their actions, that not even the Son of God could not sway them. Their convictions killed Jesus.

Contrast their resoluteness with the Gospel reading describing Thomas’ doubt. Thomas had too many questions – too many disappointments. That pain permeates his words as we hear him protecting his heart from further grief... “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands... I will not believe.”

It’s comforting to realize it’s not the questions that kill us. God is not limited by our doubts and disappointments. When we’re questioning – when we need the touch of a nail-scarred hand – we’re in good company. Jesus is ready for the opportunity to make Himself seen in our lives.

Prayer – Merciful God, give me grace to live out the profession of my faith, reflecting the life of Your Son; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Third Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 - After Peter convincingly establishes that Jesus is God's Son, the Messiah, roughly three thousand people repented of their sins and were baptized. This incredible response was a result of the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit.

To be a follower of Christ requires turning from our sins and turning to God. Baptism identifies us with Christ, a visible act that indicates we have died with Christ, and are raised with Him.

1 Peter 1:17-23 - Peter indicates that a proper reverence for God and an appreciation of the high cost of redemption demands holy living. His audience would understand redemption as the freeing of a slave by paying a price. The payment that released Christians from an "empty way of life" was the "blood of Christ." Peter noted that God had determined the performance of this work of Christ before the beginning of time. He had only recently made His plan evident in the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of Jesus.

Luke 24:13-35 - The experience of the Emmaus disciples pictures the reversal the resurrection brought to the disciples' despair. These two disciples mourned the departure of the Prophet of Israel who might have redeemed the nation. But instruction in Scripture and the revelation of Jesus Himself shows that God had a plan, which included Jesus' death. God has indeed raised Jesus, vindicating both Jesus and the plan.

Understanding the nature of God's plan and seeing Jesus' role in it, turns despair to joy! Events that on the surface appeared devastating to Jesus' claims, in fact, were foundational to what God was doing. Jesus' death should not cause despair because it allowed heaven to open its gates to humankind.

Follow the Sign

We all know the feeling of uncertainty of being on a dark highway, not sure where we're heading. We wonder if we took the right turn. We look for geographic landmarks to tell us if we're still on course. Then we see a sign – feel the relief of visible confirmation that we haven't lost our way.

Today's readings offer us these same signs, referencing sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, which have defined the Christian church and faith. Traditionally, the sacraments are understood as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In Acts, we read of roughly 3,000 people being baptized as followers of Christ. And in the Gospel, we read that Jesus broke bread with two of his disciples. When he gave them bread, "their eyes were opened and they recognized Him."

The sacraments do the same for us today. We are baptized into new life. We receive His Body and our eyes are opened – we see Him. These signs let us know we're still on course; we haven't lost our way.

Prayer - *Gracious God, open the eyes of my faith, that I may see You in all Your redeeming work; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

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Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:42-47 - This passage demonstrates a remarkable unity – shared in community – in the early Jerusalem church. The values and commonalities shared were: **1) Teaching.** They paid attention to the apostles' instructions. **2) Fellowship.** They regularly met together. **3) Breaking bread.** They shared the table, in common meals as well as the Eucharistic fellowship. **4) Prayer.** They prayed together. **5) Possessions.** They shared everything in common, giving freely to those in need. **6) Worship.** They met regularly in household fellowships – as well as continuing their worship and witness in the Jewish temple.

Their witness was a remarkable sign to their communities. The power of the Spirit was evident, and God blessed their faithfulness. As a result, the church grew steadily in numbers, day by day.

1 Peter 2:19-25 - Jesus is our example in the way He responded to suffering. In spite of the fact that He was sinless in both word and deed, He suffered at the hands of the authorities. This connects, of course, to Peter's words in 1 Peter 2:19–20. We wonder how he would have responded in the same circumstances! The fact that Peter used his sword in the Garden suggests that he might have fought rather than submitted to the will of God.

Jesus proved that a person could be in the will of God, be greatly loved by God, and still suffer unjustly. There is a shallow brand of popular theology today that claims that Christians will not suffer if they are in the will of God. Those who promote such ideas have not meditated much on the Cross of our Savior.

John 10:1-10 - To the Jewish mind, a “shepherd” was any kind of leader, spiritual or political. People looked on the king and prophets as shepherds. Israel was privileged to be “the flock of the Lord” (Ps. 100:3).

The sheepfold was usually an enclosure made of rocks, with an opening for the door. The shepherd (or a porter) would guard the flock, or flocks, at night by lying across the opening. It was not unusual for several flocks to be sheltered together in the same fold. In the morning, the shepherds would come, call their sheep, and assemble their own flocks. Each sheep recognized his own master's voice.

The true shepherd comes in through the door, and the porter recognizes him. The thieves and robbers could never enter through the door, so they have to climb over the wall and enter the fold through deception. But even if they did get in, they would never get the sheep to follow them, for the sheep follow only the voice of their own shepherd. The false shepherds can never *lead* the sheep, so they must *steal* them away.

What Do They See?

Bernie Madoff. Enron. Wall Street. Say the words and people see visions of greed and corruption. The same was true of the people described in Acts. Then as now, people long to see the unity and community described in today's reading. As in the days of the early Church, today's society yearns to break bread with those who invest into their lives spiritually and physically.

When they look at us – when they look at God's Church – what do they see? With God's grace, our actions can point others to their hearts' most earnest desire.

Prayer – *Almighty God, give me ears to hear Your voice and courage to follow You, shining Your light and love into the world; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

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Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 7:55-60 - You wonder what kind of a world we live in when religious bigots can murder good and godly men like Stephen! But we have similar problems in our “enlightened” age today: taking hostages, bombings that kill or maim innocent people, assassinations – all in the name of politics or religion. The heart of man has not changed, nor can it be changed apart from the grace of God.

What were the results of Stephen’s death? For Stephen, death meant *coronation* (Rev. 2:10). He saw the glory of God and the Son of God standing to receive him to heaven (see Luke 22:69). Our Lord sat down when He ascended to heaven (Ps. 110:1; Mark 16:19), but He stood up to welcome to glory the first Christian martyr (Luke 12:8). This is the last time the title “Son of man” is used in the Bible. It is definitely a messianic title (Dan. 7:13–14), and Stephen’s use of it was one more witness that Jesus is indeed Israel’s Messiah.

1 Peter 2:2-10 - Peter gave a full description of Jesus Christ, the stone. He is a *living* stone because He was raised from the dead in victory. He is the *chosen* stone of the Father, and He is *precious*. Peter quoted Isaiah 28:16 and Psalm 118:22 in his description and pointed out that Jesus Christ, though chosen by God, was rejected by men. He was not the kind of Messiah they were expecting, so they stumbled over Him. Jesus referred to this same Scripture when He debated with the Jewish leaders (Matt. 21:42ff; see Ps. 118:22). Though rejected by men... Jesus Christ was exalted by God!

John 14:1-14 - Jesus responded that a life given in belief and faith in Him would pave the way to eternal fellowship with Him (14:6). Jesus’ claim to be the way, the truth, and the life is of great importance. Jesus is not one among many ways to God, but the only way to God. The early church was even called “The Way” because of its insistence upon this point (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23).

That Jesus embodies and proclaims the truth is a theme throughout the Gospel of John. Jesus also offers life itself, life through God the Father, the Creator and Giver of all life.

What Does God Look Like?

There’s a song that was made popular by Joan Osbourne in the early 90s that asks some probing questions, “What if God was one of us, just a slob like one of us, just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home?” If we’re honest, we have a vision of what God looks like. If we’re really honest, we’re sure he doesn’t look like the guy riding mass transit!

But Saint Peter essentially posed the same thoughts in today’s reading. Jesus didn’t look like a Messiah. He didn’t come from the “who’s who” of society or the right side of the tracks. The Jews hadn’t heard Ms. Osbourne’s song and didn’t know to ask the same questions. As a result, they missed the God right under their noses.

We do the same. God comes to us in the people we least expect. In everyday moments and inconsequential happenings, God is waiting to be seen – longing to be experienced. But too often we stumble right over him, in too much of a hurry to get to work – or to church.

Allow yourself to see through eyes of faith life’s moments, the mundane and the mysterious. See God – even if it’s in the face of a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home.

Prayer – Holy God, open my eyes to perfectly know and see Your Son, Jesus Christ, walking in His footsteps toward eternal life; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 17:22-31 - Paul's address was before Athens' "Council of Ares," the government of this Greek city-state. His strategy was: (1) seek a point of contact, which here was an altar dedicated to an "unknown god," vv. 22-23; (2) discuss the nature of God and His relationship to the creation, showing that even Greek poets and philosophers have glimpsed the truths Paul now presents, vv. 24-28; and (3) affirm that God, who calls on all to reject idolatry and repent, has not only appointed a day of judgment but has proven His intervention in human affairs by the resurrection of Jesus, vv. 29-31.

While the form of Paul's sermon is philosophical and ideally suited for its context, the content remains totally biblical. We can change approach to suit an audience. We can never change the message itself.

1 Peter 3:13-22 - As Christians, we are faced with crises, and we are tempted to give in to our fears and make the wrong decisions. But if we "sanctify Christ as Lord" in our hearts, we need never fear men or circumstances. Our enemies might *hurt* us, but they cannot *harm* us. Only we can harm ourselves if we fail to trust God. Generally speaking, people do not oppose us if we do good; but even if they do, it is better to suffer for righteousness' sake than to compromise our testimony.

John 14:15-21 - Jesus had a great deal to say about the Holy Spirit in His Upper Room message, for apart from the help of the Spirit of God, we cannot live the Christian life as God would have us live it. We must know who the Holy Spirit is, what He does, and how He does it.

The Holy Spirit is given two special names by our Lord: "another Comforter" and "the Spirit of truth." The Greek word translated "Comforter" is *parakletos*. It means "called alongside to assist." The Holy Spirit does not work instead of us, or in spite of us, but in us and through us.

A Pursuing Love

Today's readings give us a glimpse of God's pursuing love and the creative lengths He goes to in order to express that love to us. In Acts, we hear Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, reaching out to the uninformed. Although the Athenians did not know God, they longed to. Far from despising their ignorance, God found a way to connect with their hearts, revealing Himself to them.

Peter's words reveal a God who is willing to pursue us to hell and back. He makes a brief statement about Christ making a proclamation to the spirits in prison before He was raised from the grave. It is knowledge of this love – a love greater than death – which strengthens us to "sanctify Christ as Lord" in our hearts.

The Gospel reading shows us the tender, protective love of the Father who will not abandon or orphan us. In His love, He gives us His Spirit. This abiding presence is a comfort to us in every situation. His Spirit is also an advocate for us, helping us in every decision and circumstance.

What comfort in today's readings! When we are without answers, God is waiting to make Himself known. When we feel lifeless, Jesus is waiting to speak life to our spirits. And when we feel abandoned, God's comforting Spirit advocates for us!

Prayer – *Loving God, pour into my heart a greater love for you that overflows into the lives of others; 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 1:6-14 - Acts 1:8 is a key verse. To begin with, it explains that the power of the church comes from the Holy Spirit and not from man (see Zech. 4:6). God's people experienced repeated fillings of the Spirit as they faced new opportunities and obstacles (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9). Ordinary people were able to do extraordinary things because the Spirit of God was at work in their lives. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is not a luxury; it is an absolute necessity.

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11 - Persecution is not something that is alien to the Christian life. We should not be surprised when we encounter challenging times. Peter reminds us that it is an honor and privilege to suffer *with* Christ and be treated by the world the way it treated Him. "The fellowship of His sufferings" is a gift from God (Phil. 1:29; 3:10).

Not every believer grows to the point where God can trust him with this kind of experience, so we ought to rejoice when the privilege comes to us.

John 17:1-11 - Here we have the beginning of the longest recorded prayer of Jesus (17:1-26). Many interpreters have called it Jesus' "high-priestly" prayer. In the first section of the prayer, Jesus noted that the cross would bring glory to himself, for it was the will of God and the means of salvation for all who would believe.

Most of this portion of Jesus' prayer is devoted to the welfare of the disciples. Jesus prayed specifically for their protection in the area of unity (17:11), emphasizing again the importance of the unity of the body of Christ, the church. This is not organizational unity but interpersonal, relational unity.

Why So Surprised?

If only our response to life could be as steadfast as today's readings, we'd be fine. Instead, life's circumstances – and our emotional response to them – often resemble a roller coaster. We're up one minute, then free falling the next, all the while trying to hang on for dear life! Yet notice the response to the unexpected in today's readings.

Notice what is happening in the Acts passage of scripture. Jesus is standing with his disciples having a Q&A session. All of a sudden, his disciples watch as he is lifted up into heaven, disappearing from their sight. The angelic response to this rather miraculous moment is somewhat anticlimactic. "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" the angels ask. They might as well have said, "Nothing to see here, go on about your business."

Peter echoes this same tone when he says not to be surprised by the "fiery ordeal" taking place. He gives this admonition to people who were facing ridicule, retribution, torture, and even death for their belief in Jesus. And yet Peter says not to be surprised.

The quiet confidence heard in the words of the angels and Peter comes from the assurance they had in the words of Jesus, spoken in today's gospel reading. They knew Jesus had been glorified, knew those given to Him now rest safely in the Father's protection. In life and in death, those who are in Christ are firmly held in the Father's hands.

Prayer – Almighty God, strengthen me with Your Holy Spirit, bringing me safely to the place where my Savior has gone before; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21 - The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost furnished the power for the Christian mission. That is the significance of the “roll call of nations” in verses 9–11. Already at the very beginning the worldwide mission was symbolized in the witness in all these languages, representing all the areas of the civilized world.

Another significance of Pentecost was the *universal* outpouring of the Spirit. In the Old Testament, God’s Spirit resided only with selected individuals like the prophets. Here in the church, the new people of God, the Spirit rested on everyone, young and old, male and female alike. As Joel had prophesied long before, this was a sign of the final times. Peter made Joel’s prophecy the starting point for his sermon.

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 - No one speaking by the Spirit’s power will use derogatory words about Jesus. The confession “Jesus is Lord” is the touchstone of the Spirit’s genuine work in the community.

Paul named nine gifts of the Spirit. Their use is compared to the functioning of the various parts of the human body for the good of the whole. All believers have been “baptized by one Spirit into one body.” The same Spirit brings refreshment and unity to the whole body.

Matthew 27:11-54 - 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).

As with the “Great Commission” recorded in Matthew 28, Jesus decisively gave 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).

Begin Again

For those of us who follow the seasons of the Church, Pentecost is a kind of exclamation point that follows the seasons of Advent, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. It feels like the culmination, the place at which we’re tempted to say, “the end.” But it’s important to note that Pentecost falls in the middle of the Church year. There is more to come.

Pentecost is immediately followed by a long season called “Ordinary Time.” The reason is clear. The gift of the Holy Spirit is not a “ta-da!” moment but rather a beginning point when the real work begins. Now comes the season of living out our faith – day after day, moment by moment. In the mundane, everyday moments, we are given the opportunity to see faith grow. This cannot happen without the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is that moment when we realize the real work is just beginning. It will take God’s Spirit working within us to produce wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, divinely inspired words, and interpretation. In other words, it will take God’s Spirit to outwardly reveal the faith growing within us. Only when our faith becomes visible, impacting the world around us, can the power of the Gospel be fully realized.

Prayer:

Everliving God, pour into my heart the gift of Your Holy Spirit, empowering me to make Your Word known in the world; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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