

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

LECTONARY #58

READING I Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

In the first book, Theophilus,

I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught

until the day he was taken up,

after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit

to the apostles whom he had chosen.

He presented himself alive to them

by many proofs after he had suffered,

appearing to them during forty days

and speaking about the kingdom of God.

While meeting with them,

he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem,

but to wait for "the promise of the Father

about which you have heard me speak;

for John baptized with water,

but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

When they had gathered together they asked him,

"Lord, are you at this time going to restore

the kingdom to Israel?" >>

Theophilus = the-AWF-uh-luhs =

Lover of God

"I" refers to Luke.

Decide where you are going to take a breath

or pause in these long verses. Mark your

workbook as you practice.

Increase your volume slightly to make

it clear that Jesus is being quoted.

The disciples still think Jesus is going to

restore an earthly kingdom. Use an upward

inflection for their inquiry. Jesus, forever

the teacher, again explains himself. Use

a patient tone.

There are options for today's readings. Contact your parish staff to learn which readings will be used.

READING I

As the Easter season winds down, the Gospel tradition faces a logistics problem: how to move from the appearances of the resurrected Lord to a Spirit-charged community engaged in mission. In order for a transformation to take place, two events must first occur: Jesus' appearances must cease, and the community must be animated by the Spirit.

The four Gospels deal with these two events in different ways. Regarding Jesus' departure, there are striking variations. In Matthew, Jesus commissions his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, and promises to stay with them (Matthew 28:16-20). Mark's original Gospel text has no account, although Jesus' ascension is found in Mark's "Longer Ending" (Mark 16:1-20). John's Gospel records a final encounter in Galilee, but it refers to Jesus' return, not his departure (John 21:1-25). Finally, Luke concludes his Gospel (Luke 24:50-53) and begins the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:6-12) with two slightly different descriptions of Jesus' ascension from the outskirts of Jerusalem. Regarding the Spirit, Jesus imparts the Spirit at the Last Supper in John; Matthew and Mark imply that Jesus' "Spirit" remains active among the eleven; and Luke provides the dramatic Pentecost descent of the Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles. It is the first event, Jesus' definitive departure and its consequences, that we celebrate today. Our first reading includes Luke's second account (Acts of the Apostles) of Jesus' ascension. The ascension account forms the last part of the book's formal introduction.

He answered them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons

that the Father has established by his own authority.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes

upon you,

and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,

throughout Judea and Samaria,

and to the ends of the earth."

When he had said this, as they were looking on,

he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.

While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going,

suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood

beside them.

They said, "Men of Galilee,

why are you standing there looking at the sky?

This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven

will return in the same way as you have seen him going

into heaven."

The baton for being a witness to Christ is passed to us. The Holy Spirit supports our efforts to proclaim God's Word. This is amazing. Proclaim it with wonder.

Consider what type of tone you want to give the angels' question as they call the stunned apostles back to the present.

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9 (6)
R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.
or
R. Alleluia.

All you peoples, clap your hands,
shout to God with cries of gladness.
For the Lord, the Most High, the awesome,
is the great king over all the earth.
God mounts his throne amid shouts of joy;
the Lord, amid trumpet blasts.
Sing praise to God, sing praise;
sing praise to our king, sing praise.
For king of all the earth is God;
sing hymns of praise.
God reigns over the nations,
God sits upon his holy throne.

tion known as the prologue. When we consider the prologue, as found in today's first reading, we find that Luke summarizes his Gospel with amazing brevity, referring to Jesus' teaching, ministerial activity, election of his apostles, suffering, resurrection appearances, eating with the disciples (proof that he is alive), and his instruction that they remain in Jerusalem to await baptism with the Holy Spirit.
Following that whirlwind summary, the narrative slows as a process of transformation and empowerment unfolds. Responding to their question about the res-

tation of the "kingdom to Israel," Jesus gradually moves them from knowledge to mission. Knowledge, we read, is not given to them, and belongs only to the Father. Instead, they will be empowered by the Spirit to give witness to Jesus in Jerusalem and beyond, "to the ends of the earth."
Jesus' response to their question, and the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, leads to a second question. As Jesus departs from the disciples' sight, two men in white appear. This recalls for us other appearances of heavenly beings, at the empty tomb (Luke 24:4-9) and at the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36). These men now question the disciples: "Why are you standing there looking at the sky?" Here, we can draw parallels between Jesus' ascension and his transfiguration. The two men in white at the transfiguration were Moses and Elijah, who, according to tradition, were taken up into heaven to make way for their successors (Joshua and Elisha, respectively). Similarly, now that Jesus has ascended, his successors (the disciples) can be empowered though the Spirit for their mission to go out into the world to be Jesus' witnesses.

READING II Ephesians 1:17-23

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians

Brothers and sisters:

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,

give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation

resulting in knowledge of him.

May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened,

that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call,

what are the riches of glory

in his inheritance among the holy ones,

and what is the surpassing greatness of his power

for us who believe,

in accord with the exercise of his great might,

which he worked in Christ,

raising him from the dead

and seating him at his right hand in the heavens,

far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion,

and every name that is named

not only in this age but also in the one to come.

And he put all things beneath his feet

and gave him as head over all things to the church,

which is his body,

the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

Or:

insights as a new generation of Christians is emerging. Following the Greco-Roman pattern of Pauline letters, this reading comprises all but the first two verses of the thanksgiving section of Paul's letter. The section begins, naturally, with Paul giving thanks (1:15-16—not in the lectionary reading), and quickly moves to its next task (as found in our reading for today): developing the theme of the universal church, with an exalted Christ as its head. In contrast to the distrust of visionary experiences in some churches (for example, Colossians 2:8-23), Ephesians shows great interest in visionary wisdom and revelation, and Paul prays that "the eyes of your hearts be enlightened." Paul defines the believer as one filled with knowledge of the triune God and as having enlightenment regarding the hope and inheritance that belong to the holy ones. It is through Christ's exaltation that the final triumph of believers is made possible. The description of Christ seated at God's right hand in heaven and prevailing over other powers is similar to apocalyptic writings (for example, Daniel 7), where Ephesians presents Paul's

The Letter to Ephesians 1. The Letter to the Ephesians is often identified as one of Paul's prison letters, although some scholars place the letter after Paul's death. All agree that Ephesians is a letter influenced by liturgical forms such as hymns and poems. Addressed to a predominantly Gentile-Christian community (or communities) that was (were) convinced that the world was dominated by the forces of evil, Ephesians proposes that protection is found in strengthening one's identity in Christ who is the head of the universal church. Ephesians presents Paul's

READING II

Emphasize "above" and it will be applied to each of the following realms of power: Nothing is beyond Christ's rule. The metaphor of the body is used. Christ is the head of the Church.

Ephesians = ee-FEE-zhuhn-z through our baptism. connected with Christ's paschal mystery have already happened. We are intimately understand better the mysteries that Paul's prayer for his readers is that they

Ephesians = ee-FEE-zhuhn-z

READING II Ephesians 4:1-13

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians

[Brothers and sisters,
I, a prisoner for the Lord,

urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you
have received,

with all **humility** and **gentleness**, with **patience**,
bearing with one another through **love**,

striving to preserve the **unity of the spirit**
through the bond of **peace**:

one body and **one Spirit**,

as you were also called to the **one hope** of your call,
one Lord, **one faith**, **one baptism**;

one God and **Father of all**,

who is **over all** and **through all** and **in all**.
But **grace** was given to **each** of us

according to the measure of **Christ's gift**.]
Therefore, it says:

He ascended on high and took prisoners captive;
he gave gifts to men.

What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended
into the lower regions of the earth?

The one who descended is also the one who ascended
far above all the heavens,

that he might fill all things.
[And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets,

others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers,
to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry,

for building up the body of Christ,
until we all attain to the unity of faith
and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood,

to the extent of the full stature of Christ.]
[Shorter: Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13 (see brackets)]

Ephesians = ee-FEE-zhuhn

The overarching theme of the reading is unity.

Diversity is a blessing; it need not threaten

our unity. Unity is more easily achieved
when we practice these virtues.

Emphasize "he gave." Our vocations are not

of our own volition, but are given to us as
gifts from God. Read the listing slowly and
with equal emphasis on each item so the
assembly can consider the calling in their
own lives. One vocation is not better than
another if it is given to us by God.

heavenly exaltation celebrates a triumph
over historical authorities and powers.
Because the Ephesians are convinced that
the "ruler of the power of the air" (Ephesians
2:2) dominates the present age, the letter's
potent counterimage is their God, who
seats Christ in heaven as head of the
Church and who "put all things beneath his
feet." The reading concludes by declaring
that Christ was given as head over the
Church, thus tying the Ephesians' under-
standing of the Church to their understand-
ing of the exalted Christ. This image of
Christ's heavenly role enriches our reflection

of his ascension and the work he continues
to do after he ascended to the Father.
Ephesians 4. An essential part of any
Pauline letter is its ethical exhortation, also
known as a paraenesis. Often, after an initial
exhortation, Paul followed with the develop-
ment of a major theme. In this reading, after
exhorting the believers to "live in a manner
worthy of the call you have received," Paul
turns to a his major theme: unity.
Beginning with a poetically worded
confessional statement, Paul uses the
word "one" to demonstrate the communi-
ty's oneness of body, Spirit, hope, Lord,
and then his descent to deliver it to the
ascension of Mount Sinai to retrieve the law
interpreted by rabbis as referring to Moses'
Paul quotes from Ps 68:19, a text often
in two ways, again to emphasize unity. First,
the measure of Christ's gift," is developed
according to grace, given "according to
grace, given to each in a certain measure.
the observation that it results in the gift of
poetic description of baptismal unity with
source of their unity. Paul concludes the
oneness illustrates its role as a liturgical
inclusion of baptism in this description of
faith, baptism, and God and Father. His

GOSPEL Mark 16:15-20

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Go into the whole world

and proclaim the gospel to every creature.

Whoever believes and is **baptized will be saved,**

whoever does **not believe will be condemned.**

These **signs will accompany** those who believe:

in my name **they will drive out demons,**

they will **speak new languages.**

They will **pick up serpents with their hands,**

and if they drink any **deadly thing, it will not harm them.**

They will lay hands on the **sick, and they will recover."**

So then the Lord Jesus, after he **spoke to them,**

was **taken up into heaven**

and took his seat at the right hand of **God.**

But they went forth and **preached everywhere,**

while the Lord **worked with them**

and **confirmed the word through accompanying signs.**

Jesus is giving a commission. Convey

confidence in your tone.

Emphasize "whole." God's message is not

exclusive.

Emphasize "they will" in this first instance.

Let each new sign be the item that is heard

in the following lines.

Jesus was raised by another power.

Emphasize "taken."

people. However, Paul alters the text slightly and uses it to refer to Christ the giver of the gift, that is, grace. In his ascending and descending, Christ is more powerful than any other force (he "took prisoners captive"). Thus, there is but one giver of the gift—Christ. Second, Paul identifies the large number of ministries in the Church that have but one purpose: "building up the body of Christ." Once again, as in the first reading, Christ's exaltation in his ascension emphasizes a Church on mission, united in Christ.

GOSPEL

Mark's original Gospel text presents a conundrum in that there is no resurrection appearance. It appears that the Gospel originally ended with an empty tomb and a message directed to his disciples to meet him in Galilee (Mark 16:1-8). In the second century, this troubling ending was supplemented with several possible endings. Today's Gospel is taken from the second half of one possible ending (the "Longer Ending") and is part of a collection of appearance accounts drawn from other Gospels. In it, there are two distinct parts presented. The first is the commission of Christ's mission, which he left us to take up after his ascension. S.L.