

Third Sunday of Easter

One of the themes running through the lessons for today is that Jesus is **indeed** the promised Messiah, the one foretold from the days of Adam and Eve to be the one that would deliver them from their new **slave master**, sin.

First Lesson: Acts 9: 1-22

Following the **martyrdom** of Stephen and the beginning of the **persecution** of Christians by the Jews, **Saul**, the young man with whom the coats of those stoning Stephen to death were left, enthusiastically becomes involved in the movement to arrest and **imprison** Christians. Today's reading finds Saul preparing to go to Damascus to find, arrest, and bring to Jerusalem for punishment all those who belong to "**the Way**," the name ascribed to those who believed that Jesus was **indeed** the Messiah and now practiced a religion that moved beyond obedience to the Law. Recognize that Saul **thoroughly** believes that he is being strictly **obedient** to the Laws of Moses—wiping out those who turn from following the strict **Jewish** laws.

However, on the way, Saul encounters Jesus in a **miraculous** manner, and Saul immediately recognizes that the person speaking to him is **The Lord**; and the Lord in turn informs Saul that the name of the Lord is **Jesus**. This conversion of Saul is so **complete and real** that, a few days later, Saul is on the streets of Damascus, **proving** to the Jews from Scripture that Jesus is **indeed** the promised Messiah.

So we see St. Paul seeing the Lord as he now begins his magnificent career. And we see cautious Ananias serve the Lord by praying over Saul. Is that all who serve the Lord in this story? We have forgotten someone. Who? It is Judas. Who is Judas? The person at whose house some strangers knocked and asked him to host the Christians' worst enemy. And without hesitation, apparently, they did. And so a man filled with hate is left with a family filled with God's love. What transpired between Saul and that family we are not told. But in the same way, we also can obey God's call in some untold way by serving someone else when God gives us that opportunity.

Epistle Lesson: Revelation 5: 1-7 (8-14)

In order to place ourselves in the right time period for our Epistle Lesson, we have to fast forward to the **last** days of time. St. John is continuing his letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor, and he now pens a **vision** that he sees happening in Heaven. The vision centers around a **scroll** sealed with seven **seals**, and the **question** presented is, who is **entitled** to open the seals of that scroll so that the contents can be read? The answer comes back: the **Lamb** who was slain, the **Messiah**, in order to ransom **all** humanity from its slavery to **sin** in order to make them priests to **God** (recall **1 Peter 2:9**—“**But you are a**

chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”). And indeed, thereafter follows **praises** to God by **every** creature in heaven and earth!

Gospel Lesson: John 21: 1-14 (15-19)

The gospel reading for today is a continuation of the gospel reading from last week, where Jesus had presented himself to the disciples—who were behind **locked** doors—to demonstrate that he had **indeed** risen from the dead. In today’s lesson, Jesus **again** reveals himself to the disciples, but in a different place and in a unique way. Here we find the disciples in **Galilee** to **fish**, but after spending **all night** on the lake, they had come up with **nothing**. Just at dawn, they make out a man on the beach, who asks them whether they had caught any fish. When the response is in the **negative**, the man tells them to throw the nets on the **right** side of the boat. And sure enough, their net is now full of fish. John **immediately** recognizes the man as Jesus, so **Peter** jumps into the water to race to shore, perhaps a strong indication of how **much** Peter loves the Lord (much as a husband and wife **run** to each other after a long absence). This, of course, leaves the remaining disciples to drag in the boat with its net full of fish. Once on shore, they find Jesus with a charcoal **fire** on which is bread and fish, and the disciples are invited to **breakfast**, courtesy of the Lord. Thereafter Jesus and Peter have that famous discussion where Jesus asks Peter whether he **loves** (with **godly** love the first two times, but with **brotherly** love the last time) Him, and then tells Peter to feed his lambs and his sheep.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

As we examine the three lessons for this day, it is apparent that God wants to assure us that Jesus came to redeem **all** mankind, Jews and Greeks (meaning Gentiles), people of **every** nation, tribe, race, and language. In addition, there is **another** theme where, in the first two lessons, we learn that those who follow Jesus can and **will** be persecuted, perhaps even **fiercely**. In our Gospel lesson, however, Jesus assures us that **no one** will be able to tear the believer out of His hand. Why? Recall **James 4:7**—“**Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you,**” as well as **1 John 4:4**—“**Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world,**” plus **Rom. 8:37-39**—No, in all these things we are **more** than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

First Lesson: Acts 20: 17-35

In today’s reading, we find St. Paul on his way to Jerusalem with charitable **donations** from the saints in Asia Minor for the **persecuted** saints in Jerusalem, thus ending his **third** missionary journey. Since he wants to get to Jerusalem in time for **Pentecost**, he decides to avoid spending time **in** Ephesus by calling just the elders to meet with him **outside** of Ephesus. There he reminds them that he preached **repentance** toward God and **faith** in Jesus to **both Jews and Greeks** for 3 years, and warns the elders to be **responsible** for their flocks because trials and tribulations await them, including some of the elders **themselves** splitting off from the church, taking some sheep with them, by inviting but **twisted** doctrines.

Epistle Lesson: Revelation 7: 9-17

In today's reading, St. John has a **vision** of an exceedingly great **crowd** of people from **every** nation, joining the **angels** in praising God and the Lamb who brought salvation to all of these people. One of the elders then identifies who all these humans are: those who suffered **greatly** for their faithfulness to Christ while on earth, and who now are taken care of by God himself, so that all the **misery** to which they were subjected while on earth is no longer a memory, having been **replaced** by God's **grace** and **love** and **provision**.

Gospel Lesson: John 10: 22-30

In today's reading, we find Jesus in the Temple in yet **another** discussion with the Jews, this time addressing the issue (to the Jews) of whether Jesus **is** the Messiah or not. Jesus again confirms that he **indeed** is the promised Messiah, and points out to them that his miracles, healings, casting out of demons, and teaching about the Kingdom of God all testify to the fact that he **is** the **Son of God**, the Messiah. But then he points out that the Jews do **not** accept his testimony because they are **not** of Jesus' flock. Jesus then makes plain that **his** sheep hear his voice and follow him, and that he knows **each** of them. Furthermore, Jesus gives them **eternal** life, and **no** one will snatch them out of **his** hand, nor out of the **Father's** hand, because, Jesus states emphatically, he and the Father are **one**.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

First Lesson: Acts 11: 1-18

The first reading for this day reminds us of the lessons from last week, that Jesus died for **all** mankind, of every nation, tribe, race, and language. But then it goes on to note that this was definitely **not** the understanding common in the early New Testament church. Immediately preceding this text, we find that St. Peter was summoned by a **Roman centurion** in Caesarea, to whom an **angel** had appeared and told him to summon Peter. Peter, along with a contingent of other Jewish Christians, go to his home—but **after** Peter has had this famous experience of seeing a **tablecloth** loaded with unclean animals descend out of heaven and **God** telling him to kill and eat; and when Peter **protests**, God responds with the words, “What I have made **clean**, do not call **unclean**.”

With this in mind, Peter preaches to Cornelius as well as his family and friends. And while he is preaching, the Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius and his household **exactly** as he did on the disciples on the day of **Pentecost**. Peter and the Jewish Christians are **astounded**, but then acknowledge that if **God** has already filled these Gentiles with the **Holy Spirit**, the least they could do is baptize them with **water**, which they do. As you might imagine, this did not go over well with some of the saints in Jerusalem, who call Peter in to **account** for why he preached to the Gentiles. It is then, **after** they hear his account, that they accept that God also wants **Gentiles** to be saved.

Epistle Lesson: Revelation 21: 1-7

Today's reading carries on with the lessons of ***Easter Day***, repeating many of the ***benefits*** that accrue to the believer in Jesus the Messiah, that left Peter—and us!—marveling. Here we find St. John still recording his ***vision*** of events in heaven, noting some of the benefits of being a child of God. These include

- A ***new*** heaven and a new earth.
 - The New Jerusalem, representing ***all believers***, coming to be the bride of Christ.
 - God will ***live*** among his people.

 - There will be ***no*** more tears, death, mourning, crying, or pain.
 - God is making all things ***new***.
 - God provides the ***water of life*** freely to all his children.
 - For those who are ***faithful*** in their belief in Jesus as their savior from sin, God will be ***their*** God and they will be his ***Children***.
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Gospel Lesson: John 16: 12-22

Jesus is in a lengthy teaching session with the disciples, telling them to ask the Father for **anything** in his name; and the Father will grant it so that God may be **glorified**. He continues by telling them that, while the Holy Spirit is **with** them now, later he will be **in** them; and he will **teach** them and **remind** them of all spiritual things. Then he reminds them that he, Jesus, is the **vine** and they are the **branches** that are expected to bear **good fruit**, but only if they **remain** in him.

As today's reading begins, Jesus emphasizes that **when** the Holy Spirit comes, he will **guide** them into **all** spiritual truth, because he will be **reminding** them of Jesus' words, thus **glorifying** Jesus. Then he **startles** the disciples by saying that in a little while they will **no longer** see him, but then **after** a little while they will see him again—preparing them for his **death, burial, and resurrection**. Jesus immediately addresses their wondering what he means by telling them that they will experience great **sorrow**, but just as a woman experiences pain and sorrow in childbirth but which is followed by **joy** with the birth of the **child**, so they will also experience sorrow which will be followed by great joy. (See **Romans 6:3-7** for more details on this process.)

Alternative Gospel Lesson: John 13: 31-35

It is Maundy Thursday evening (as we know it). To Jesus and the disciples, it is their **last** Passover celebration together, because Jesus knows that his suffering begins **that night**. Just prior to our reading, Jesus had announced that one of the apostles was going to **betray** him. Peter prompts John to privately inquire of Jesus who it will be, and Jesus responds by saying that it is the one to whom he will give a **dipped morsel** of bread. As soon as he hands it to **Judas**, Jesus tells Judas to go and **do quickly** what he intends to do, which Judas does. That part of the story ends with the **cryptic** comment that it was **night**. For Judas it was **indeed**.

But as today's reading begins, Jesus announces that now he will be **glorified** by his Father, just as the **Father** is glorified by the work of the Christ soon to be **completed**. Then he reminds them that, what he told the Jews earlier—that they **would** not go where he was going, so also now the disciples **could** not go where he was going—indicating that the **unbelieving Jews** would **not** go to heaven but the **believing** disciples could **not** follow Jesus to heaven **now** as he completes the **ultimate sacrifice** (see **Hebrews 9** for what happened in heaven). But then Jesus gives his disciples an old but **new commandment**: they are to **love** each other with **godly** love, so much so that **all** people would immediately know that they were his disciples by the **obvious** love that they had for one another.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

First Lesson: Acts 16: 9-15

In the verses immediately preceding this reading for today, we find St. Paul and Silas trying to find their way. Paul had just started his **second** missionary journey to the Gentiles, but it seemed as if everywhere they **thought** God wanted them to go, the **Holy Spirit** shut the **door**. But in an overnight **vision**, Paul sees a man from **Macedonia** calling him to help **them**. So Paul and Silas head there and end up in **Philippi**. In the course of their preaching, a woman named **Lydia** believes in the Lord Jesus, and is baptized along with her entire household. In **gratitude**, she invites the homeless Paul and Silas to stay at her home while they are in Philippi. And subsequently, it is in Philippi that a lively Christian church is founded.

Epistle Lesson: Revelation 21: 9-14 and 21-27

Continuing the description of his vision which we read about last week, St. John now expands on the **nature** of the New Jerusalem. In particular, the New Jerusalem is identified as the **Bride**, the wife of the **Lamb**. In other words, **New Jerusalem** is all true **believers**. And continuing with the picture of all true believers being a walled city, we see that it is made up of believers from both the **Old and New** Testament periods, as evidenced by the 12 gates bearing the names of the 12 tribes of **Israel**, and the 12 foundations of the city bearing the names of the 12 **apostles** of Jesus. Then St. John starts to describe the beauty and character of the city, including,

- the 12 **gates** are made of 12 **pearls**,
 - the **streets** of the city are of pure, transparent **gold**,
 - the **temple** of the city is **God himself**,
 - there is no need of a sun or moon because the **glory of God** provides continuous **light**, and there no longer is night, and
 - there is nothing **unclean** there, only those whose names are written in the **Book of Life**.
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Gospel Lesson: John 16: 23-33

Jesus is in the midst of reassuring his disciples that, **after** he leaves them, they will **still** have the Holy Spirit to **teach** them and **remind** them of all things. As our reading starts for today, Jesus encourages his disciples to ask for **anything** in his name that will bring **glory** to the Father. Then he assures them of how **much** both he and the Father **love** those who believe in him. Then Jesus predicts that they will soon all **abandon** him, speaking of the events of Maundy Thursday. But he notes that although in him they will have **peace**, nevertheless in the world, believers will have **tribulation**. However, recalling his words read in the gospel lesson two weeks ago, Jesus states that we should **not** fuss when we face tribulation, because he has **already** overcome the world. In other words, the trials and tribulations of a believer are a consequence of **spiritual** forces aiming at us, which forces Jesus has already **defeated**—and therefore we can too!

Alternate Gospel Lesson: John 5: 1-9

Jesus has begun his ministry, which has been marked so far by his miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding in **Cana**, his cleansing the **temple** of the merchants and money changers, his conversation with **Nicodemus**, a conversation with a **Samaritan woman** at a well, and the **healing** of the son of an official in Capernaum. In today's reading, we discover another example of the **compassion** that Jesus has for those who are suffering. In this case, we find Jesus at the pool of **Bethesda** in Jerusalem. And although there are many invalids congregated around the pool, waiting to be **healed** when the water is stirred by an **angel**, Jesus focuses on one man who is **unable** to help himself. And by obeying Jesus' command in faith, he is healed.

The Ascension of Our Lord (10 days before Pentecost)

First Lesson: Acts 1: 1-11

Dr. Luke had been commissioned by a man named Theophilus to write a **history** of Jesus' walk on earth, which constitutes the **Gospel** of Luke. Now Theophilus would like Dr. Luke to write the history of the **acts** of the early church. St. Luke begins by noting that Jesus spent an additional **40 days** on earth after his resurrection, **appearing** to his apostles and speaking **further** about the Kingdom of Heaven. Then he gave them an interesting **command**. Although they now knew that he had risen from the dead and had a glorified body, and even though Jesus had given them further **insight** as to their mission after three years of **on-the-job training**, Jesus tells them **not** to attempt **any** missionary work, but rather to **stay** in Jerusalem, praying, until after they have been **baptized by the Holy Spirit**, in accordance with Jesus' characterization by John the Baptist (**Luke 3:16**).

And it is with good reason, because once, when they were gathered around Jesus, the disciples wanted to know whether Jesus was going to restore the **Jewish earthly kingdom** now. They **still** hadn't grasped what Jesus was all about! Jesus responded by telling them it was none of their business what God the Father was going to do. But he does tell them that the **Holy Spirit** will fall upon them, by which they will receive **power** to become **effective witnesses** for Jesus. Consequently, they will start going throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria (the **Northern Kingdom**), and then to the **whole world**, bringing the good news of forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation by believing in Jesus' sacrifice. And with that a **cloud** picks Jesus up and carries him into heaven.

And while the disciples are standing there, **gawking** up into the sky, suddenly two men in white robes appear and ask them why they are just standing there looking up. Then they note that, in the **same** way that Jesus ascended into heaven, so he will **descend** to the earth on **Judgment Day**.

Epistle Lesson: Ephesians 1: 15-23

It was at the beginning of St. Paul's **third** missionary journey that he preached Christ to the people of **Ephesus**, a prominent seaport on the west coast of what is now Turkey. In fact, he eventually spent three years there, teaching them the **way of Christ**. But now St. Paul is **in prison** in Rome, and despite his imprisonment he still wants to write a **letter of encouragement** to the Ephesian Christians whom he loves dearly. In today's reading, he **praises** them for their **faith** and for their **love** for all people.

But then he tells them that he never stops **thanking** God for them, and always remembers them in his **prayers**, especially that God would

- give them all a spirit of **wisdom and knowledge** of Christ Jesus,
- enlighten their eyes** to know well their **hope** in God,
the **riches** of their glorious **inheritance in Christ**, and
the immeasurable **greatness** of **God's power** working for believers.

Then St. Paul expands on the greatness of this power; it is the power that

- worked in Jesus to **raise him from the dead**,
- seated Jesus at God's right hand** in the heavenlies, and
- is far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion**, not only in
this age but also in the next.

Finally, St. Paul notes that God the Father has placed **all** things under **his (Jesus') authority**, and made him **head** over **all** things in the church, which is his body.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 24: 44-53

St. Luke records for us the event that took place behind locked doors on the evening of that **first** Easter. We find Jesus suddenly standing in their **midst**, bidding them **peace**, and showing them the marks in His hands and feet in order to convince them that it really **is** He, not a spirit. Then He asks for **food**, and **eats** it in their presence, as additional evidence that He really is the risen Messiah now with a glorified **body**.

Next He gives them a lecture on how He has fulfilled **all** of the prophecies about Him that were recorded in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. He notes in particular that the Messiah would have to **suffer, die, and rise** again on the third day. Under these circumstances, then, He notes that **repentance** and **forgiveness of sins** needs to be proclaimed in His name to **all** nations, beginning in Jerusalem, because they, the disciples, were witnesses of all of this. But then Jesus says something unexpected: **don't** be a witness of these things **yet**. Instead, **wait** until you have been endowed with the **power** of the **Holy Spirit, the promise of the Father** (which occurred for these disciples on the day of Pentecost).

Approximately 40 days later, Jesus leads them out to Bethany, blesses them, and is **carried up into heaven**. The disciples pause to worship the ascended Christ, then return to Jerusalem, and spend time continually in the temple, **blessing** God.