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... and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

Ascension

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• **Lectionary Readings (Year C)**

Revised Common Lectionary

First Reading	Acts 1:1-11
Second Reading	Ephesians 1:15-23
Gospel	Luke 24:44-53
Psalm	47 or 93

Luke 24:(36-43) 44-53

1 *[While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and*
2 *said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and*
3 *thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you*
4 *frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands*
5 *and feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not*
6 *have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said*
7 *this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were*
8 *disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here*
9 *to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in*
10 *their presence.]*

11 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with
12 you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms
13 must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said
14 to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the
15 third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to
16 all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am
17 sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been
18 clothed with power from on high."

19 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.
20 While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And
21 they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually
22 in the temple blessing God.

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

The passage immediately preceding today's text is the story of Jesus' appearance to two followers on the road to Emmaus, which ends by describing how Cleopas and his companion go back to Jerusalem to tell the others what they have experienced:

Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. [Luke 24:31-43]

1. *While they were talking about this. . .*

What is the "this" the group is talking about? Imagine that you are one of the disciples *talking about this*. Close your eyes, and picture the scene. Describe what is happening. Who is there? What are they saying about what Cleopas and his friend have reported? What is the feeling in the room?

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

How do you imagine the response to Jesus' appearance in the midst of the group? What reaction is there to Jesus' saying, "*Peace be with you*"? What about his appearance might leave the disciples *startled and terrified*?

At the Workbench: Ascension

What is a *ghost*? The word that Luke uses here is the Greek *pneuma*, which the New Revised Standard Version translates as “spirit” in every other instance in Luke’s gospel. What difference, if any, does it make to the story to speak of a *ghost* rather than a *spirit*?

What might the writer of this story want us to know by having Jesus say, “*Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.*”?

What in this encounter with Jesus might evoke the disciples’ *joy*?

What might evoke *disbelieving*?

What might evoke *wondering*?

Take a piece of paper and whatever pens or crayons you might have near you and express what is happening in this story, in this mixture of talking, being startled and terrified, fearing, touching, seeing, being joyful, disbelieving, wondering.

What more do you now know about this story?

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

How do you imagine this *opening* of their *minds*? What might it feel like? Look like? Sound like?

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

Luke 24:44-53 • May 16, 2010

What is yet to be done? Why might it be *beginning from Jerusalem*? What is the role of a *witness*?

Imagine yourself as one of those to whom Jesus is speaking. Why might it be important to stay *in the city*? Where else might you want to go? How might you be inclined not to stay, but to go on with other things?

What is being promised? What do you imagine it would be like to be *clothed with power from on high*? As you wait in the city, what are you expecting? Imagining? Hoping for? Fearing?

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

As you are among those standing there, what is the cost of Jesus' withdrawal for you?

What is the promise of that withdrawal for you?

What might be the cost of Jesus' staying with you and not withdrawing? The promise?

2. When—if ever—in your daily life, at your workplace, in the family circle, in the political arena, walking down the street or sitting in a cafe, have you been surprised by unexpected, impossible news, news that left you startled, fearful, joyful, disbelieving, wondering?

How did that mixture of emotions affect you? How did you respond? What did you do?

At the Workbench: Ascension

When have you had an encounter that opened your mind? How did you respond?
What did you do next?

3. What do you know of a time in your life when you received power from on high only after someone or something that had been essential to your life has left or withdrawn from you?

What do you know of this presence and absence, of this appearing and withdrawing?

What do you know of something or someone present right now in your life whose absence might empower you in some important way?

Reading Between the Lines

We know that the gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were originally one book, by the same author. There are two descriptions of Jesus' departure, one in Luke and one in Acts:

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God. [Luke 24:50-53]

When he had said this, 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? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away [Acts 1:9-12].

Compare the two stories. What is similar? What is different? What might be the experience that lies behind them both? What point is the storyteller trying to make? What aspect of the experience is he highlighting or emphasizing?

Think of a time when you have told different people about some experience you have had, or told the same people about it in different settings. How has your telling differed? What changed in your telling because of your audience, your surroundings, your growing understanding of what happened? How does your telling reflect "what really happened"? How is your telling part of "what really happened"?

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Reading Between the Lines

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

For Luke and his readers this is a defining moment on the road to Emmaus. It is the afternoon of the third day following Jesus' crucifixion. Luke describes the meeting of the two traveling to Emmaus with Jesus who tells them what about himself? And what does he tell them about the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms? What does he reveal to them about the scriptures that they may have not known before? How is the definition and purpose of the scriptures changing at this moment? How might these two Jews previously have thought of the scriptures—Moses, the prophets, and the psalms? How would you say this "revelation" has defined the scriptures for the Church ever since? For the meaning and mission of Judaism? For the relationship between Jews and Christians? How much of this new interpretation of the scriptures do you suppose is Luke or Jesus or the emerging church in its conversation with Judaism after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E.?



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Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. (Let's remember that these men may have been grounded in the scriptures since infancy.) What might having their minds opened be like for these people? What in or about the scriptures as they had known them may they need to set aside, discard, contradict, forget? What in the scriptures may they need to know, now, as real events or truths in their own lives? How might it be even harder to take in this new reality of the scriptures than it was to set aside old understandings? Where can we see people in our national life who may need to open their minds to a new reality as they abandon old truisms? What may need to happen for them to truly open their minds?



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Parallel Readings

From *Little Girls in Church*

Ascension

Why do you stand looking up at the sky? - Acts 1:11

It wasn't just wind chasing
thin, gunmetal clouds
across a loud sky;
it wasn't the feeling that one might ascend
on that excited air,
rising like a trumpet note,

and it wasn't just my sister's water breaking,
her crying out,
the downward draw of blood and bone . . .

It was all of that,
mud and new grass
pushing up through melting snow,
the lilac in bud by my front door
bent low
by last week's ice storm.

Now the new mother, that leaky vessel,
begins to nurse her child,
beginning the long good-bye.

Kathleen Norris

From *Eternal Life*

Ask yourself . . . just why it was that though the Christian community attached great weight to the resurrection, no two accounts of it were alike? Indeed, there is hardly a detail in any New Testament narrative of Jesus' resurrection that is not actually contradicted in another narrative. The New Testament writers do not agree that there was a tomb to which the women went at dawn on the first day of the week; they do not agree on who the women were that constituted the group of early morning visitors or on whether these women actually saw the raised Jesus on that occasion; they do not agree on where the disciples were when whatever the experience of Easter was first dawned on them or within them as the case

Kathleen Norris, "Ascension"
from *Little Girls in Church*,
(Pittsburgh: University of
Pittsburgh Press, 1995), p. 42.

John Shelby Spong, *Eternal
Life: A New Vision*, (New
York: HarperCollins, 2009),
pp. 179-80, 183.

At the Workbench: Ascension

Resurrection was an event of inner history at the levels of consciousness where fundamental shifts occur.

might be and they do not agree on who among them was the first of the disciples to “see,” whatever it was that “see” meant, when referring to the Easter moment. They do not even agree as to whether the resurrection was a physical thing! The earliest accounts suggest that event was not physical, but it becomes more and more physical with the passing of time. Was the original account of the resurrection of Jesus a narrative seeking to describe the mystical, but real, experience of Jesus being raised into the eternity of God, or was it a narrative in which he was raised back into the life of this world, from which much later he had to be extricated? Since he could not die again, which is the way that people normally get out of this world, his physically resurrected body had to be miraculously lifted from the life of this world into the life of God, who was conceived of as living above the sky. This is what the ascension accomplishes. It is exactly this attempt to use human language to describe a reality that the early followers of Jesus were not able to doubt or dismiss that makes us suspect that all of the resurrection narratives are in fact late additions to the developing tradition. Why were they late? Because the original Easter moment, wherever it was and to whomever it occurred, was so powerful an experience of a living Jesus that no explanation was necessary. Later generations of Christians would be the ones who needed explanations to make sense out of the way they understood God as something other than what they were, something up there or out there. So given the radically contradictory accounts of this solitary, crucial moment in the Jesus story, our task becomes that of going beneath the explanations to try to define the experience. . . .

God was now experienced “through the filter of Jesus.” Resurrection was an event of inner history at the levels of consciousness where fundamental shifts occur. The disciples, who had localized the God-experience in Jesus, found in his death that this God-experience was no longer localized. The presence of the holy that they had found in Jesus they now discovered in themselves. It was as if they saw that what it was that they had met in Jesus had now taken up residence in their lives and hearts.

John Shelby Spong

From *River Flow**Coleman's Bed*

Make a nesting now, a place to which
the birds can come, think of Kevin's
prayerful palm holding the blackbird's egg
and be the one, looking out from this place
who warms interior forms into light.
Feel the way the cliff at your back
gives shelter to your outward view
and then bring in from those horizons
all discordant elements that seek a home.

Be taught now, among the trees and rocks,
how the discarded is woven into shelter,
learn the way things hidden and unspoken
slowly proclaim their voice in the world.
Find that far inward symmetry
to all outward appearances, apprentice
yourself to yourself, begin to welcome back
all you sent away, be a new annunciation,
make yourself a door through which
to be hospitable, even to the stranger in you.

See with every turning day
how each season makes a child
of you again, wants you to become
a seeker after rainfall and birdsong,
watch now, how it weathers you
to a testing in the tried and true,
admonishes you with each falling leaf,
to be courageous, to be something
that has come through, to be the last thing
you want to see before you leave the world.

Above all, be alone with it all,
a hiving off, a corner of silence
amidst the noise, refuse to talk,
even to yourself, and stay in this place
until the current of the story
is strong enough to float you out.

Ghost then, to where others
in this place have come before,
under the hazel, by the ruined chapel,
below the cave where Coleman slept,
become the source that makes
the river flow, and then the sea
beyond. Live in this place
as you were meant to and then,

David Whyte, "Coleman's
Bed," from *River Flow: New
and Selected Poems 1984-2007*,
(Langley, WA: Many Riv-
ers Press, 2008), p. 288-289.
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surprised by your abilities,
become the ancestor of it all,
the quiet, robust and blessed Saint
that your future happiness
will always remember.

David Whyte

Critical Background

From *The Last Week*

Like Matthew, Luke has two appearance stories, but they are considerably longer. Both are set in Jerusalem (not Galilee), where, according to Luke, the followers remain; they are still there at Pentecost fifty days later, according to Acts.

The first is the Emmaus story. . . .

If we were to use but one story to make the case that Easter stories are parabolic narratives, this is the one. It is difficult to imagine that this story is speaking about events that could have been videotaped. Moreover, the story is marvelously suggestive. . . . Whether the story happened or not, Emmaus always happens. Emmaus happens again and again—this is its truth as parabolic narrative.

Luke's second appearance story (24:36-49) is set on the evening of the same day, so it is still Easter Sunday. Cleopas and his unnamed companion have returned from Emmaus to Jerusalem to tell "the eleven and their companions" about their experience. Then Jesus stands among them and says, "Peace be with you." They are terrified and think they are seeing a ghost. The rest of the story unfolds in three main parts.

The first part, in contrasting juxtaposition to the Emmaus story, emphasizes the "physicality" of the risen Jesus. Jesus invited them to touch him: "Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and blood as you see that I have." He also shows them the wounds in his hands and feet. Then he eats a piece of broiled fish. The point is that this is not just another ghost story. This is more than a ghost story.

The second part is commissioning and promise. Jesus commissions his followers to be his witnesses and to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all nations. He promises them they will be "clothed with power from on high," a promise fulfilled by the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost in the first chapter of Acts.

In the third part, Jesus leads them to Bethany just east of Jerusalem, blesses them, and ascends to heaven. But in the first chapter of Acts, Luke "dates" the ascension of Jesus forty days later (Acts 1:3). Because he has Jesus ascend twice, once on the evening of Easter Sunday (in Luke's gospel) and once forty days later (in Acts), it is clear that the author is not concerned with "calendar time." In any case, in Luke, Easter has been a long and parabolic day.

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, <i>The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem</i> , (New York: Harper-Collins, 2006) pp. 200-202.
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