

## FIRST READING – ASCENSION B

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

In the first book, Theophilus,  
I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning  
until the day when he was taken up to heaven,  
after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit  
to the apostles whom he had chosen.

After his suffering he presented himself alive to them  
by many convincing proofs,  
appearing to them during forty days  
and speaking about the kingdom of God.

While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem,  
but to wait there for the promise of the Father.

“This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me;  
for John baptized with water,  
but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit  
not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him,  
“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods  
that the Father has set by his own authority.

But you will receive power  
when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;  
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,  
in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

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.”

Theophilus = thee-AHF-ih-luhs  
(*th as in thin*)

Samaria = suh-MEHR-ih-uh

Pause for **THREE** seconds

then look up at the people

and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## SECOND READING – ASCENSION B

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Brothers and sisters:

I, the prisoner in the Lord,  
beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling  
to which you have been called,  
with all humility and gentleness, with patience,  
bearing with one another in love,  
making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit  
in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit,  
just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,  
one Lord, one faith, one baptism,  
one God and Father of all,  
who is above all and through all and in all.

But each of us was given grace  
according to the measure of Christ's gift.

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles,  
some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,  
to equip the saints for the work of ministry,  
for building up the body of Christ,  
until all of us come to the unity of the faith  
and of the knowledge of the Son of God,  
to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

PAUSE for **THREE** seconds

then look up at the people

and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## GOSPEL READING – ASCENSION B

The Lord be with you.

*And with your spirit.*

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark.

*Glory to you, O Lord.*

Jesus appeared to the eleven and he said to them,  
“Go into all the world  
and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.  
The one who believes and is baptized will be saved;  
but the one who does not believe will be condemned.  
And these signs will accompany those who believe:  
by using my name they will cast out demons;  
they will speak in new tongues;  
they will pick up snakes in their hands,  
and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them;  
they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”  
So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them,  
was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.  
And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere,  
while the Lord worked with them  
and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

*Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*

## SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

First, let us remind ourselves that Ascension Day should not be thought of as a historical commemoration. The New Testament treats the ascension as an integral part of the Easter event.

In fact, the earlier Easter narratives depict the appearances as manifestations of the already risen and ascended One. Hence Paul could include his Damascus experience among the appearances in [1 Cor 15](#).

The later appearance narratives (Luke and John) show a tendency to separate the resurrection and the ascension, but still they are not regarded as two successive events. They are separated in order to contemplate the meaning of two aspects of a single, indivisible event.

When this separation occurs, the ascension seems to be variously located: in [Luke 24](#), on Easter Sunday evening or, at the latest, the next day; in [John 20](#), sometime between the appearance to Mary Magdalene (who is told not to touch the risen One because he has not yet ascended) and the appearance to Thomas (who is invited to touch him); in [Acts 1](#), after the forty days (which, however, are symbolic of the time of revelation; there may be no intention to suggest that the ascension actually “occurred” on the fortieth day).

For several centuries the Church did not, either in its writings or in its liturgy, treat the ascension as though it actually “occurred” on the fortieth day.

With the revised Church calendar, we still keep it on the fortieth day as a matter of convenience (and that this is not an absolute rule is indicated by the rubrical permission to transfer the observance to the following Sunday).

This allows us to isolate for contemplation one aspect of the total Easter event.

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### **Reading I: Acts 1:1-11**

It is curious that in his two-volume work Luke tells the story of the ascension twice (Luke 24; Acts 1). Each narration brings out a different aspect of the truth.

The version in Acts looks forward to the future, to the inauguration of the Church’s mission and the final return of the ascending One. Luke’s perspective on salvation history represents an adjustment. Salvation history, already in the Old Testament, is constantly readjusted in the light of earlier events.

The earliest Church looked for only a brief interval between the ascension and the parousia, an interval that would be marked by the apostles’ mission to Israel and by persecution and martyrdom. Now salvation history is greatly extended. Paul already had modified it to include the mission to the Gentiles.

Now, for Luke, the Church is here to stay, with a mission to the whole civilized world. But the hope of the parousia is still maintained, and the Church’s mission is viewed as a preparation for the end.

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### **Responsorial Psalm: 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9**

This is one of the enthronement psalms, which, according to some scholars, were sung at a (hypothetical) annual feast at which the king was enthroned to symbolize YHWH’s kingship over his people.

As the king took his seat upon his earthly throne, the whole people would have chanted this psalm in celebration of the kingship of YHWH. The Church in its liturgy has associated this psalm with, and transferred it to, the ascension of Christ.

Ascension Day is the feast of Christ's enthronement, Henceforth God exercises his sovereignty over the universe through his exalted Son.

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**Reading II: Ephesians 1:17-23**

Ephesians, whether written by Paul himself or, as now seems more likely, by a close disciple steeped in the thought of his master, begins, like most of Paul's letters, with an opening thanksgiving and prayer. This prayer reproduces the pattern and phraseology of a liturgical hymn.

The first part of our passage prays for the Church's growth in wisdom and knowledge, and looks to the risen and ascended Christ for the power to foster this growth. The hymn then goes on to elaborate on the exaltation and kingship of Christ.

The New Testament views Christ's kingship as exercised in two concentric circles. The inner circle embraces the Church, where his kingship is known and acknowledged: the outer circle embraces the world, where he is de facto king but his kingship is as yet unrecognized (O. Cullmann). The Church's function is to extend that inner circle to cover more and more of the outer one.

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**-OR-**

**Reading II: Ephesians 4:1-13 (long form); 4:1-7, 11-13 (short form)**

We will concentrate here on the second part of the reading, verses 7-13 (verses 7, 11-13 in the short form). First, however, the reader is reminded that 4:1 marks the beginning of the hortatory or parenetic section of the letter, introduced, as in Rom 12:1, with the Greek particle *oun* ("therefore").

The ethical exhortations arise as consequences from the doctrinal exposition. The first part of the reading is an exhortation to maintain the unity of the Church.

Verses 7-13 address the themes of Ascension Day more directly. The maintenance and upbuilding of the unity of the Christian Church depend primarily upon the work of the apostolic ministry, that is, through the proclamation of the word.

The deutero-Pauline author of Ephesians sees the ministry in subapostolic perspective. Whereas Paul saw the charisms of local ministry welling up, as it were, in the congregation from below (though always to be exercised under the ultimate control of the apostles), this author sees them as gifts to be conferred from above by the ascended Christ.

Whether they were conveyed sacramentally through ordination is not made clear, but that is certainly the case by the time of the later deutero-Pauline Pastorals. On the whole subject see Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (1984).

The catchword "gifts" leads to the citation of Ps 68:19, though in a version differing from both the MT (Hebrew) and the LXX (Greek): "gave gifts to" instead of "received gifts from." Actually, however, there is precedent for this change in the Targum, a paraphrasing commentary on the Hebrew text from rabbinic sources, composed in Aramaic.

There the text is modified to apply to Moses' ascending Mount Sinai and receiving the Torah to give

to the people of Israel. Our author Christianizes this Targum (perhaps with polemical intent), making Christ the subject, as he ascends to heaven to receive the ministerial charisms to confer upon his Church below.

Verses 8-10, omitted in the short form of this reading, are a Christological excursus, reflecting on the psalm text and applying it to Christ's ascension (it is odd that the short form omits the verses that deal with the basic theme of the day, but no doubt the argumentation was thought to be too rabbinic).

The fact that Christ has ascended denotes that he had previously descended "to the lower parts of the earth." Commentators are about equally divided as to whether this means his descent at the incarnation (as in the Fourth Gospel) or his descent into Hades at the time of death.

But the message of Ascension Day does not depend on our deciding the question, for the emphasis today is on verse 10. The point the author intends to make is that only one who had previously descended could be said to have ascended again, and therefore the text applies more fittingly to Christ than to Moses.

At his ascension Christ achieved two results: (1) he triumphed over the heavenly universe (the principalities and powers?); and (2) he henceforth rules the universe with his dominion, that is, he is exalted to universal lordship. Ascension Day is his coronation.

Having commented on "ascended" from the psalm quotation, the author then picks up the word "gifts" from the second part of the text and defines these gifts of the ascended Christ as Church offices. In this list it is clear from Eph 2:20 and 3:5 that "apostles and prophets" belong to the foundation period of the Church now past, while evangelists, pastors, and teachers are features of the Church in the author's present.

Evangelists are probably the immediate successors of the apostles, like the writer himself, who exercise authority over more than just local churches, while the pastors and teachers (probably a single office, since the definite article covers both nouns) form the local ministry—the same officers referred to later by the standardized term "presbyters" (elders).

At this early subapostolic period the permanent ministries succeeded the earlier: apostles and prophets in many of the functions, though not in actual office. Whether or not the author thinks of them as having been ordained in an actual rite of prayer and laying on of hands (as in the Pastorals), this passage offers the scriptural warrant for believing that every ordination is the sacramental act of the ascended Christ in his Church.

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### **Gospel: Mark 16:15-20**

It is now universally acknowledged that the earliest texts of Mark end at 16:8 and that verses 9-20 are a later addition. But that is not to say that they are worthless.

In any case, they form a part of the canonical Scriptures as the Church has received them (hence the term "canonical ending"). Also, the ending is a compilation of many traditions, some of them earlier than anything we have elsewhere in the Easter narratives.

The older view that it was an artificial summary of the other Gospel stories is now being increasingly abandoned. For instance, the command to preach the gospel and to baptize is presented in what is assuredly an earlier form than the more developed tradition at the end of Matthew.

At the same time, the second paragraph of our reading is clearly a summary based on the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts (note the separation of the ascension from the resurrection and the location of the appearances between them).

But unlike Luke and Acts, the sitting at the right hand of God is explicitly mentioned.

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