

# Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections  
based on this week's lectionary readings

May 16, 2021

Seventh Sunday of Easter/Ascension, Year B

The readings this week:

- Acts 16:16-34 ◦ Psalm 97
- Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21 ◦ John 17:20-26



[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

## Looking Up

What if you had just become accustomed to seeing the resurrected Jesus among your friends? And now, the Cloud has taken him, suddenly. And there you are, alone, looking up into the sky.

The church observes a time of waiting, an unknowing, a desolate expectation of "I-know-not-what" (John of the Cross). Like its analogue, the dark night of the soul, Ascensiontide unfolds as a paradoxical state of perceived abandonment and unitive fulfillment. And like the dark night of the soul, Ascension yields the most profound fruitfulness of the interior life. Indeed these ten days offer a true 'dazzling darkness' of numinous Presence in absence.

In this liminal time between Jesus entering the Cloud, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the church contemplates the High Priestly Prayer (John, chapter 17). The lectionary divides the prayer in three parts for years A,B, and C.

Jesus prays for himself, for the disciples, and for the church to come in future generations. He prays for the unity of the disciples; "Keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one" (vs.11). He prays for union amongst future followers; "I do not pray for these (the disciples) only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, I and I in thee." (vs.20-21a). He prays for humanity's overall union in love with God through him; "I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them" (vs.26). Bruno Barnhart calls the High Priestly Prayer, "The Prayer of Consecration of the New Temple." (The Good Wine: Reading John from the Center)

Word Made Flesh becomes Flesh Made Word. Christ ascends not far away beyond clouds, but into the heart of hearts to manifest within every heart. The enthronement of Jesus takes place in deep union within us.

But the soul cannot perceive this at first. The mystics of the church testify to a stunning paradox. The abandonment IS the union. It is in the Dark Night of the Soul that Lover

meets Beloved and transforming union takes place. A hidden union so intimate, perception fails for a time. But like the seasons of the soul that precede this one, a slow appropriation takes place. The inner eye adjusts to the light blazing behind the darkness. The light comes from within.

The with church we sing, "Come, mine elect one: and I will set my throne within you.\*"

May we all be one within this glorious and hidden union.

~ Suzanne Guthrie, [At the Edge of Enclosure](#)

*But now...he is right in our midst, right here where we are, and not beside us, not merely next to us. "Behold, I am with you all days!" ~ Karl Rahner*

In a way, Jesus' abandonment of the disciples upon the Mount of Olives is more profound than their abandonment on Calvary. As grievous as it was, the crucifixion was no surprise. The disciples themselves predicted he would die. "Let us go and die with him" says a resigned Thomas when Jesus chooses to risk going to Judea to console his friends in Bethany. But no one foresaw the Resurrection and the extraordinary forty days during which Jesus dwelled again with his friends. Imagine their despair when Jesus entered the Cloud. "If I do not go, the Comforter will not come." Again, imagination fails. The loss incomprehensible. (The disciples do not yet know what Jesus means by "the Comforter" "the Spirit of Truth" "the Holy Spirit.")

The Church blessedly gives us ten days to practice dwelling in the ambiguous time of the Resurrected Christ vanished, and the Holy Spirit not yet come. In the mystical life, Ascensiontide is the Dark Night of the Soul, the anguished sense of abandonment after a period of union. The soul can not cling even to this union. The last threads of attachment must be broken in the darkness of unknowing before the completion of the Christian transformation – being "sent" into the world as bearers of Love.

But the mystics testify to a stunning paradox. The abandonment IS the union. It is in the Dark Night of the Soul that Lover meets Beloved and transforming union takes place.

Have a most blessed, intimate Ascensiontide!

# Reflecting on the Word



## \_\_\_ 1st Reading: [Acts 16:16-34](#)

What does the response of Paul and Silas mean in verse show about them? How must the jailer and others in prison must have experienced them? What do you learn here? What do you think caused the jailer to want to be saved? In what ways does the jailer express his new faith in Jesus? What does this story say to you about dealing with hard times? How did the Lord open your heart to respond to the Gospel? Who did he use as a part of the process? Where do you have “open doors” for ministry now? How might God be using you as a vessel of His Grace? If he asked “What must you do to be saved?” how would you answer? [Union Church](#)

## \_\_\_ Psalm Reading: [Psalm 97](#)

What does it mean for a king to reign? How can Paul say that men who are in rebellion are without excuse before God? How do the heavens declare the righteousness of God? What is the response of God’s people when they view His judgments? Why do they respond in this way? Provide several examples from history where the nations experienced the temporal (earthly) judgment of God. What are the things that bring the greatest joy to our lives? In what situations might we contemplate the holiness of God and find great joy? How do we react when we happen to observe that which is evil? [Generations](#)



### Praying Toward Sunday

Grant, we pray, Almighty God, that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into heaven, so we may also in heart and mind there ascend, and with him continually dwell; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen

~ A collect for Ascension Day

Today our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven; let our hearts ascend with him. Listen to the words of the Apostle: “If you have risen with Christ, set your hearts on the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God; seek the things that are above, not the things that are on earth.” For just as he remained with us even after his ascension, so we too are already in heaven with him, even though what is promised us has not yet been fulfilled in our bodies.

...We cannot be in heaven, as he is on earth, by divinity, but in him, we can be there by love.

~ Augustine, Sermon for the Lord's Ascension via Suzanne Guthrie, [At the Edge of Enclosure](#)

## \_\_\_ 3rd Reading: [Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21](#)

If you were to find out, with certainty, that Jesus is going to return sometime next week, what changes would you make? How would you live differently? Who are “those who wash their robes” and what have they gained? Who can come, and what is the price of the Water of Life? Why is it significant that no restrictions are placed on these invitations? Three times in this passage Jesus tells John that he is “coming soon.” Why was this message important to those first readers? What difference would this knowledge make to them? How differently might they view their struggles if they believed that Jesus might return in their lifetimes? This was written around 2000 years ago, and yet Jesus has still not returned. Why is this challenging news for us today? If Jesus were to come back today, would you say you were “ready” in the sense we’ve described above? If not, what can you do differently to be ready? [Faith Element](#)

## \_\_\_ 4th Reading: [John 17:20-26](#)

Obviously, unity is a prominent theme in this portion of Christ’s prayer. Make a quick list of the ways in which verses 21-23 speak of the unity of the church and Jesus’ unity with the Father? What effect does Christian unity have on the watching world? Have you experienced or witnessed the kind of transformed community that testifies to the world about the validity of Jesus’ work and claims? If so, what were some of the features of such a community? If not, what might you imagine such community to look like? What obstacles inhibit this kind of unity? In what ways is our church community living up to this high calling for life together? In what ways are we not? Can you think of ways that you could personally contribute to greater unity in our church life? [A Blueprint for Revival](#)