

By Therese Sherlock, CSJ

Open a bible, and light a candle beside it at center of your group. Join hands in a prayer circle and express any intentions you hold in your heart.

LEADER: Loving God, we open our lives before you, waiting for your Spirit to touch our spirits and inspire us to act in justice and love each day.

ALL: Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

I often stumble over the words in the middle of the Apostles' Creed, but I always get the ending right. "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy, catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting."

In my small town we lived a block from church and two blocks from the cemetery. We went to Catholic school and daily Mass. Everlasting life with God was not something I doubted.

In a lecture at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, put everlasting life in the context of creation. She pointed out that in the beginning of the Creed we say, "I believe in God, creator of heaven and earth." At

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the end we say, "I believe in the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting." At the beginning and the end we talk about life.

Sister Elizabeth went on to say that the more we know about creation, the more we know about the creator. The more we learn about the complex interrelationships of molecules and atoms and biochemicals that make up the stars and the wheat and our own bodies, the more we see creation as lavish and ourselves as part of creation.

When we learn that the iron that was the rust on the crust of this earth in its evolving state is what makes our hemoglobin red and that the matter of

exploding stars is part of our cellular makeup, we stand in awe. We see ourselves as part of something endlessly expanding and changing, new life always emerging.

In creation death is always hand in hand with life. When we admire a flower, it is already well on its way to seed, which will cycle back again as flower. Creation is complex and expanding. Why shouldn't our lives be that way, too? When the flower petals of our life on earth blow off into the wind, why shouldn't we believe there is more life after that?

● What do you believe about life everlasting? What gives you that hope?



GOSPEL

Believers will do the works Jesus does.

NARRATOR: Jesus spoke to his disciples.

JESUS: Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, and believe in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places. If this were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you with me, so that where I am, you also may be. You know where I am going and you know the way.

THOMAS: Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?

JESUS: I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. You do know the Father; you have seen him.

PHILIP: Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.

JESUS: All this time I have been with you, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever sees me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father?" Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

The words I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me does these works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Or, believe me because of the works I do.

Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works I do and works far greater because I go to the Father.

John 14.1-12



Jesus speaks to all disciples.

Sunday's gospel is close to my heart. I was in New York studying for my masters in library science when I got word my brother David had been killed in Vietnam. The time between that phone call and his funeral is a blur to me. I didn't help plan the funeral. The old priest who had been at our parish for many years chose Sunday's gospel for its connection to my brother's life. In his homily he

said, "David spent many hours in his Father's house here—attending Mass, serving, making quick visits. I am sure that today he has quite a mansion in heaven." This was very comforting to us. We asked for this gospel for my mom and dad's funerals, too.

This passage begins Jesus' long farewell discourse in John's gospel that takes up four chapters, 14-17. The setting is the last supper after Jesus

washes his friends' feet and shares a meal and before he and the guests go to the Garden of Gethsemane. In these chapters Jesus both anticipates his death and looks beyond his resurrection to the mission his friends will continue. He fills his leave taking with advice and the promise of abiding with them.

The community that gives us John's gospel lived Jesus' teachings for more than two generations before the gospel took written form late in the first century. They experienced Jesus' absence after the ascension and his presence in the Holy Spirit and in their Eucharistic gatherings. So, they had a sense of both Jesus' absence and his presence.

Over the decades John's community experiences other losses. Until the Romans destroyed the temple in A.D. 70, Jews who followed Jesus and Jews who followed other rabbis could worship together. Afterwards, they no longer had a place that brought them together. As synagogues became the only home of Jewish religion, tensions with Christian Jews arose in some places. Israel's ancient religion divided into Judaism and Christianity.

To add to feelings of loss and displacement, Jesus' second coming didn't happen as many early Christians hoped. They begin to question what happens when Christians die. For all these reasons, John's community

needs to know there is a home for them with Jesus.

The noun in Greek that we translate *dwelling places*, or mansions in the older translations, comes from the verb *mévw*, which means to *abide, remain, stay, last*. This verb has dynamic theological meaning. John is telling us that to be in Jesus is also to be in relationship to the Father, to abide in God, to dwell in God.

● **What difference does it make to think of heaven as a relationship, as abiding in God?**

In John's gospel those who have conversations with Jesus often learn through misunderstanding. In this way the gospel writer helps us readers learn from the questions and misunderstandings of Jesus' friends. Their feelings and fears mirror our own. We might have asked their questions if we were talking to Jesus face to face rather than gathered around his teachings in written form.

We benefit from the skeptical Thomas, who insists that Jesus' friends neither know where Jesus is going nor the way to follow. In response, Jesus explains that he is the way. He embodies and reveals who God is. His friends have seen God in seeing Jesus.

Philip doesn't get it. He seems unable to fathom what Jesus says to Thomas. Seeing Jesus struggle to explain the very point he has just made ought to comfort teachers when this happens with students as it frequently does.

For Philip, Jesus repeats, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." Jesus seems a bit exasperated with Philip when he adds, "How can you say, 'Show us the Father?'"

The "Amen, amen" near the end of the gospel announces Jesus' concluding charge and promise. Those who believe in Jesus can do the works he does because he is with God empowering them.

In his life Jesus reveals love, healing, and forgiveness as God's way, truth, and life. To believe in Jesus is to let his words and promises take up residence in us. In faith we do Jesus' works and embrace the people of our globe with his compassion. Countless people embody God's way, demonstrate the truth

of Jesus' teaching, and live lives that reveal his Spirit dwelling in and among us.

● **From whom have you learned Jesus' way, truth, and life?**

● **What roadblocks do you experience as you follow Jesus' way?**

● **What discomfort does the Spirit of truth stir in you?**

This "many mansions" gospel still comforts me, but I'm glad to have expanded my understanding of it. Abiding in God. Dwelling with God. Those words describe Jesus, God incarnate, Word become flesh to dwell among us.

Jesus tells us these words describe us, too. We are dwellers not just in God's house, but in God's love. We are in relationship with God as Jesus is. The befriending Spirit is our advocate. That's the post-resurrection state of things.

We aren't yet what we will be, those of us living or those who have gone before us. But we are all in God. My brother Dave doesn't have a two-story house or his own special cloud, but he does have his essence—his love and laughter and his good heart. Someday we will meet again because all of that is safe and will never perish.

● **Which, if any, of Jesus' farewell words affirm or anchor your faith in him?**

● **Who do you look forward to being with in life everlasting?**



The Church expands its ministry.

The first reading puts before us a rare instance of conflict and disharmony in the Acts of the Apostles. Out of conflict between the Greek-speaking Christians of Jerusalem and those who speak Hebrew, a new ministry emerges. In these early days of the Christian community, as is true today, many of the poorest are widows. This is a community that takes responsibility for its poor.

Widows need help.

In those days as the number of disciples grew, those who spoke Greek complained against those who spoke Hebrew that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The twelve summoned the whole community and said, "It is not right that we neglect the word of God in order to serve the tables. Look among you, friends, for seven men whom you know to be wise and full of the Spirit, and we will appoint them to this task. For our part, we devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word."

This proposal pleased the community. They choose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus of Antioch, who had been a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed over them and laid their hands on them.

The word of God continued to spread. The number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly. A great many priests embraced the faith.

Acts 6.1-7

The ministry of spreading the good news takes precedence for the twelve disciples of Jesus, whom Luke also calls apostles or missionaries. The community accepts their suggestion of appointing seven to serve the needs of the poor among them. The apostles pray over and lay their hands on those the community chooses for this ministry. We recognize in their service the inauguration of the ministry of deacons.

Stephen's role expands to preaching in the next chapter; by its end he has been stoned to death for his words. Then Saul begins persecuting Christians, and the deacon Philip flees to Samaria where he begins preaching.

The ministries of deacons have proved fluid over the centuries, including serving the poor, preaching, teaching, administering dioceses. The Church continues to require new ministries to respond to new needs, new language groups, new cultures.

The Church restored the permanent diaconate to men at Vatican II. These deacons preach, teach, baptize, and witness marriages. Recently, Pope Francis appointed a committee to study whether women can serve as deacons today.

● How do men deacons serve your community?

● How might women deacons serve?

PRAY

Join hands and take turns asking the Spirit to help you live and embody Jesus' way in your own way.

LEADER: Gracious God, our souls wait for you.

ALL: You are our help and our shield.

LEADER: Our hearts are glad in you, because we trust your holy name.

ALL: Let your steadfast love be upon us, O Holy One, even as we hope in you. Amen.



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- Visit catholicwomendeacons.org to hear stories of women who experience calls to this ministry today.
- To learn about the diverse ministries of men and women deacons over the centuries, listen to "Deacons, Women, and the Calls to Serve," a video of a panel at the Fordham Center on Religion and American Media with James Martin, SJ, as moderator.

Visit GoodGroundPress.com

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