

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an open bible at the center of your group. Have a votive light for each group member and one larger lighted candle.

LEADER: Each of us received a candle at baptism to symbolize our faith in Jesus Christ. I invite each of us to light a vigil light to symbolize our faith. Place it near the bible, and make a simple statement of your faith, such as, “Jesus promises us life with God.”

Allow time for each person to participate in this ritual.

LEADER: May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ give us a spirit of wisdom.

ALL: May God enlighten the eyes of our hearts.

LEADER: May we know the hope to which Jesus calls us and the inheritance of the saints.

ALL: May we know the immeasurable power of faith in the God who raised Jesus to new life.

Theologically Sunday’s feast celebrates the risen Jesus’ return to God—the culmination of the paschal mystery and promise of our own life with God. In Sunday’s first reading Jesus says farewell to his disciples, is lifted up, and a cloud takes him from sight. In the gospel Jesus is taken up and

May 16, 2021, Ascension, Vol. 30, No. 33

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

sits down at the right hand of God.

Up is where God is in the ancient world. Up still represents the highest position, the top rung, the penthouse suite, the upper echelon, the seat of power. We lobby for public policies that lift people out of poverty. Upward mobility expresses power and achievement. The ladder of success goes up.

The view of Earth from space, however, has pushed us to revise our images of the heavens above as God’s home and throne. As astronauts have circled Earth, they see the thin blue line of atmosphere that shelters us from the limitless space. The cosmos appears a vast, dark unknown rather than God’s paradise in the clouds as it does from Earth.

Indeed rocket liftoffs are not the only way we free ourselves of gravity and all that weighs us down. Lifting up can also express movement into solidarity with others. We lift up people and their needs in prayer. We

identify with their needs.

Singing is an intimate act of sharing emotion and meaning. We each give our voices to a single melody or a great chord.

Singing a song such as “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” the black national anthem, expresses the shared commitment and unity its words describe.

*Lift ev’ry voice and sing,
till earth and heaven ring,
ring with the harmonies of liberty;
let our rejoicing rise
high as the listening skies,
let it resound
loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith
that the dark past has taught us,
sing a song full of the hope
that the present has bought us;
facing the rising sun
of our new day begun,
let us march on till victory is won.*

—James Weldon Johnson

● What is an experience that has lifted you up?



GOSPEL

Preach the gospel to all creation.



NARRATOR: Jesus spoke to the eleven.

JESUS 1: Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. Those who believe and are baptized will be saved; but those who do not believe will be condemned.

JESUS 2: These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them;

they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.

NARRATOR: Then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. They went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it.

Mark 16.15-20

Blow out the single candle after reading the gospel. The lights representing our own faith remain.

ending calls us to evangelize. The good news is ours to tell and live.

About AD 70 Mark collected and wrote down the oral traditions about Jesus. By this time eyewitnesses like Peter and James had suffered martyrdom, silencing their preaching. Other disciples who knew Jesus face to face had grown old. As a written document, the gospel could permanently proclaim to new generations the good news to which Jesus first followers could no longer testify in person.

Perhaps the women's unexpected silence at the original ending worked more effectively in oral telling. Early on Christians added alternatives, such as "The Longer Ending," which is the Sunday's gospel. It borrows and shortens accounts of Jesus' Easter appearances from Luke's gospel.

In this ending the risen Jesus appears to the eleven men disciples and commissions them to evangelize the world. Then, Jesus ascends into heaven as he does at the ending of Luke's gospel and the beginning of its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles.

The original ending of Mark calls readers beyond fear and awe to faith in Jesus risen. The longer ending in Sunday's gospel calls us to continue Jesus' mission in his absence.

● How do you respond to the original ending of Mark?

Jesus commissions his disciples.

Sunday's gospel comes from one of three alternative endings to Mark's gospel. Its tone is very different from the rest of the first gospel to be written. In the best and earliest manuscripts Mark's gospel ends at 16.8 with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome coming out of the empty tomb in awe, trembling, and ecstasy.

Inside a young man in a white robe has announced to them the core of our Christian faith. "Do not be amazed," he says. "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. Go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him as he told you" (16.6-7).

As readers and hearers of the narrative, we stand with the women at the empty tomb, at the threshold between life and death, between the apparent failure of Jesus' death and the promise of his resurrection. At this point the narrative deliberately suspends the women in awe and ecstasy. They don't carry out the young man's commission to announce this good news to Jesus' other disciples. "They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid" (16.8).

This abrupt ending makes us, the hearers and readers of the gospel, the only ones who can tell what the women have just heard: Jesus is risen and goes ahead of us. The surprise



REUTERS/Stefano Rellandini

Pope Francis greets crowds in Medellín, Colombia, September 9, 2017.

holds his humanity and divinity together. Jesus remains God incarnate. One of us humans is with God. Jesus is the first born of a new humanity that shares transforming life with God. The promise of Christian faith is the communion with God to which Jesus returns.

● **How do you imagine communion with God?**

● **What would you add as an ending to inspire people today to spread Jesus' good news?**

Sunday's gospel identifies healing the sick and casting out demons as signs that will accompany believers as they spread Jesus' good news. Both of these signs continue Jesus' own actions.

Speaking in new tongues is a sign of the Spirit's presence that begins on Pentecost when Jesus sends the Spirit upon his waiting disciples. It occurs among those who hear the good news Jesus' disciples preach in the Acts of the Apostles.

Indeed the Church today speaks in hundreds of tongues. People throughout the world and throughout the centuries have heard the good news of Jesus, believed, received baptism, and lived the gospel. In their living the gospel, they have enculturated its message.

Hispanic Christians reenact the story of Jesus'

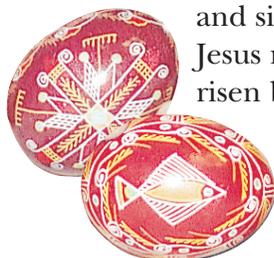
death and resurrection in public fiestas. Ukrainians paint symbols of Jesus' triumph over death on eggs, symbols in themselves of new life. In Boston Catholics put palm on the graves of loved ones on Palm Sunday and flowers on Easter, including them in their celebration of Holy Week and in their faith in the promise of Jesus' new life.

Picking up deadly snakes and drinking poisons without harm are not actions Jesus did in his life. These signs exaggerate in a concrete way our faith that nothing can ultimately harm believers. Jesus promises life with God.

● **What do you consider signs that authenticate Jesus' message?**

In the final verses of the alternative ending of Mark, Jesus is taken into heaven and sits at God's right hand. Jesus returns to heaven in his risen body. The incarnate Son returns to God.

The risen Jesus does not come apart at some seam that



Jesus promises the Spirit.

At the site of Jesus' ascension just outside Jerusalem, guides point out a rock with two side-by-side, indented swirls that one can imagine look like footprints. When I saw the rock, I remembered I had read about it as a child and accepted as real that Jesus would leave his footprints in a rock when he returned to God.

As an adult, I realize feet can't leave an imprint in rock. Did I think Jesus blasted off with foot rockets to leave such molten footprints? Until the early teen years, all of us have only concrete brain operations. We can only take stories literally. We wonder, for example, what kind of car God used to drive Adam and Eve out of paradise.

To express who the risen Jesus is, Luke draws on how people saw the world in his time. In ancient Mesopotamia people imagined God lived in the heavens, commanding storms

and hosts of heavenly beings, a divine army. God reigned in a heavenly court. The Canaanites described their god, Baal, as Cloud Rider, who brought rain and fertility.

At the making of the covenant in the book of Exodus, the people experience God's presence in storms and lighting that cover Mt. Sinai. God leads the people through the desert in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

When Elijah returns to this holy mountain five centuries later, he no longer finds God in the wind, storm, and lightning but in the still silence after the storm. He moves from an external, physical image of God to a sense of an invisible, spiritual voice that speaks in silence. Our own faith develops in a similar way from literal to spiritual understandings.

The ascension is the hinge event between Jesus' resurrection and his sending of the Spirit. Luke's gospel ends with Jesus' ascension and the Acts of the Apostles begins with the same scene. Luke draws on the familiar imagery of God's heavenly court to picture Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, returning to reign with God, to take his place at God's right hand. As God's

incarnate Son, human and divine, Jesus is the firstborn of a new creation—the promise of who we are to become.

Luke addresses the Acts of the Apostles as he did his gospel to Theophilus. The name means *friend of God*. In other words Luke addresses all of us in his parallel accounts of Jesus and the birth of the church.

You will receive power.

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. To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during 40 days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

When they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or season which the Father has fixed by his own authority.

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While they were gazing into heaven as he went, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "People of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Acts 1.1-11

● What are you looking to heaven for that you should be doing on Earth?

PRAY

LEADER: Every Christian is a living gospel.

ALL: We live in the Spirit of Jesus.

LEADER: Let us each hold the vigil light we lit and say a way in which we let the light of our Easter faith shine.

Each person makes a faith statement.

LEADER: May our faith lead others to faith.

ALL: May our love give others life. Amen.



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, the editor of *SUNDAY BY SUNDAY*, holds a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Search an online version of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" and sing along with this uplifting anthem.
- Lift someone's spirit today with a compliment, a thank you, a little special time, a gift.