

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an open bible and lighted candle at the center of your group. Have group members place near them mementos they carry and treasure from people important in their lives.

LEADER: Jesus, you are the Alpha and Omega

ALL: You are always present with us.

LEADER: Jesus, the First and the Last.

ALL: Bless us who live in the middle of time.

LEADER: Jesus, the Beginning and the End.

ALL: Complete in us all that you promise.

LEADER: Jesus, Morning Star.

ALL: Shine in our lives.

When the trees leaf out in cities, they hide the stars at night. But summer trips often take us beyond the well-lighted streets of cities to lakes and mountains where the stars shine bigger and brighter than we usually see them. We can see ourselves at home in our galaxy, spread across the night. The stars open us to the mystery of space.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

Before we earthlings saw our planet home from space, the heavens belonged unassailably to God. In ancient Mesopotamia people imagined God lived in the heavens, commanding storms and hosts of heavenly beings, a divine army.

One of the names ancient Canaanites called their god was Cloud Rider. In the Old Testament book of Daniel, the prophet sees “one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven” (7.14). Christians draw on this imagery to picture Jesus coming again in glory.

Today humans ride the clouds regularly in planes. The Hubble telescope captures the spidery webs of light from other galaxies. The Church that in the 16th century suppressed Galileo’s proofs that Earth revolved around the sun today welcomes the work of scientists as they expand the edge of mystery in space and in matter.

Recently physicists heard the sound of two black holes colliding more than 1.2 light

years away, a chirp like running one’s finger up the piano to middle C. It proves Einstein’s general theory of relativity is right. Human ears can listen for gravitational waves as well as look for our origins in the stars.

In the cosmology of Jesus’ time, God and the heavens were up and human beings and Earth were below. Our 2,000-year-old gospel tells the story of the risen Jesus’ return to God in the worldview everyone assumed in the first century. To return to God is to go to the heavens.

As the Church celebrates Jesus’ ascension into heaven today, we wonder where he goes, where God’s home is. We hunger for lasting communion with our loved ones.

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

● **How does science affect your faith?**

GOSPEL

Jesus' disciples are his witnesses.



NARRATOR: Jesus spoke to his disciples.

JESUS: Thus it is written that the messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. See, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you, so stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.

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

Luke 24.46-53

Jesus' real absence and real presence begin.

Sunday's gospel passage brings us the last seven verses of Luke's entire gospel. Jesus readies his disciples to take all they have witnessed to the nations. Luke sees Jesus as a prophet whose suffering, death, and resurrection fulfills Israel's scriptures and identifies him as the messiah. From the opening verses of his gospel, Luke aims "to set down an orderly account of the events that have been *fulfilled* among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (1.1-2).

In his inaugural sermon Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah and announces, "Today this scripture *has been fulfilled* in your hearing" (4.21). Luke sees Jesus as the Spirit-filled prophet Isaiah describes, whom God will appoint to bring good news to the poor,

free the oppressed, and proclaim a jubilee year for forgiving debts (4.16-19).

On the road to Emmaus the risen Jesus accompanies two of his disheartened followers. The disciples don't recognize Jesus in the stranger who explains that Israel's scriptures show the messiah has to suffer to enter his glory—not until he breaks bread with them (24.26). In the two verses preceding Sunday's gospel, Jesus opens the minds of his disciples and reminds them "everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms *must be fulfilled*" (24.44).

The simple words that begin Sunday's gospel summarize Luke's theology of fulfillment. "*It is written* that the messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day."

At first Jesus' crucifixion discombobulates his followers. How can the true messiah be so powerless that he suffers death by crucifixion like a criminal? Then Jesus' resurrection puts his death in a whole new light. As Jesus' followers continue to read and pray the scriptures of Israel, they find words and images that anticipate a messiah who suffers. They find scriptures Jesus fulfills.

As a prophet bringing good news to the poor, release to captives, freedom for the oppressed, Jesus runs headlong into conflict with authorities, other Jewish teachers and priests, and ultimately the Roman Empire. Prophets make waves.

● What do you hand on to others about who Jesus is?

In its last seven verses, Luke ties up loose ends of his gospel narrative. Jesus commissions his disciples to preach the good news of his resurrection and repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name. Then he blesses them, withdraws, "and was carried into heaven." However we visualize Jesus' ascension, this moment begins his real absence and continuing real presence with his disciples in the Spirit.

In returning to God, the risen Jesus takes with him the human nature assumed in his incarnation. Jesus is about embodied divinity. Jesus remains God incarnate. One of us humans is with God. Jesus is the first born of a new humanity that shares life



with God. Jesus goes ahead of us, drawing us toward the consummation of all in God.

This is the paschal or Passover mystery—Jesus’ passage from death to life, his coming down from heaven and returning to God’s right hand. The Second Vatican Council restored the paschal mystery to the center of the Church’s life. Before the Council Catholic spirituality tended to invite Jesus’ followers to imitate his suffering. After the Council the Church challenges us to live Easter and transform the world in Christ into a new creation. People sometimes refer to someone dying as *passing*, echoing this mystery. Celebrants wear white for funerals rather than black as they once did.

● **How do you live the Easter dimension of Christian faith?**

● **How do you describe your loved ones’ communion with God after death?**

Why do Jesus’ disciples react with such joy at his withdrawing? From their acts of homage and worship, we infer the disciples’ faith that Jesus is messiah and Lord—God’s Son. In withdrawing from them, he is entering his glory. They bless God for all that has happened. They express their joy and thanksgiving as Jews by praying in the temple.

Jesus’ disciples have a second reason for joy—his message of forgiveness. In Luke’s gospel they now see Jesus’ suffering and death as necessary. He forgives them their blindness. They have passed from confusion to Easter faith.

Thirdly, Jesus’ disciples await what the Father promised—a clothing in power from on high. Luke’s story is only half over. The Acts of the Apostles is the sequel to his gospel. The ascension is the hinge event between Jesus’ resurrection and his sending of the Spirit. Luke

ends his gospel with Jesus’ departure and begins the Acts of the Apostles with the same moment.

In the ascension Jesus passes over into communion with God, bridging the human and divine. He blesses this company of followers about to become a Spirit-filled community.

● **Who do you see among the joyful disciples blessing God in the temple and awaiting the Holy Spirit? Read Acts 1.12-14.**

FIRST READING

Jesus departs; the Church begins.

Luke identifies the Acts of the Apostles as the sequel to his gospel in its opening introductory verse. As in his gospel, Luke again addresses Theophilus in his writing. The name means *friend of God*. He reviews the fact that he has told Jesus’ whole story from the beginning until he was taken up. He makes clear that Jesus instructed specially chosen apostles—the word means *those sent, missionaries*. He sets the scene for Jesus’ departure a second time.

In this scene Jesus’ disciples speak up. They have a persisting expectation that the messiah will restore Israel, then a Roman-occupied province, to a theocratic kingdom again. They want to know if now is the time. Jesus explains this is the Father’s concern.

What the risen Jesus expects in his absence is their witness to the ends of the earth. Their mission is not to establish an earthly kingdom but to live and spread the good news. Jesus promises the power of the Holy Spirit for their work.

Luke's description of Jesus' ascension is the usual way artists visualize this moment. Jesus is lifted up. A cloud takes him from sight. Lifting up expresses the divine worth of all Jesus has done and will continue to do.

Two men appear and chide Jesus' disciples for gawking heavenward. They have work to do. Acts is their story of continuing the mission Jesus began.

Jesus promises the Spirit.

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, 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 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While meeting with them, he enjoined 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."

When they had gathered together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He answered them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout 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 from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there 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."

Acts 1.1-11

- What does ascending, climbing, lifting up mean in your life? In Jesus' life?
- How has the world benefited from the witnesses spreading Jesus' good news?

PRAY

Conclude your reflection together by praying Paul's prayer for the Ephesians, Sunday's second reading.

LEADER: May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give us a Spirit of wisdom and revelation, resulting in knowledge of him.

ALL: May the eyes of our hearts be enlightened.

LEADER: May we know the hope that belongs to our call.

ALL: The riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones.

LEADER: May we know the surpassing greatness of God's power for us who believe that God raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at God's right hand.

ALL: He is head of his body—the Church. Amen.



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DO SOMETHING



- Celebrate Earth by planting a tree. Find out what trees are native to your area and will grow well. Make a commitment to water your tree as it gets started growing. Consider dedicating it to a person or cause you believe in and honor.

Print out the Pentecost sequence to keep with you during this week. Go to goodgroundpress.com.

