

Our Sunday Readings

With Signs & the Spirit

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 1:1-11
PSALM 47:2-3,6-9
EPHESIANS 1:17-23 or 4:1-13
MARK 16:15-20

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Reading closely

1. Where might the disciples want to go to proclaim the gospel?
2. How do you react to Jesus' warning about disbelief and condemnation (v.16)?
3. How might the disciples feel about the signs Jesus says will accompany believers?
4. What do you imagine the disciples doing after Jesus' ascension?
5. How might people have reacted to these different signs?

Living the word

6. What is the gospel that Jesus wants us to proclaim?
7. What signs accompany believers today?
8. Have you ever seen signs accompany the proclamation of the gospel?

THE GOSPEL READING

Extra ending

Mark ended his Gospel with verse 8. Later editors, perhaps uncomfortable with Mark's abrupt ending, added verses 9-20. Although these verses are very different from Mark's writing style and themes, they've been part of this Gospel since the second century.

Proclaim & baptize

This passage in which Jesus commands his followers to proclaim the gospel and baptize those who believe in him echoes Acts 1:8 and Matthew 28:18-20. Whoever added verses 15-16 to the end of Mark's Gospel probably had these two passages in mind. The Gospel of John also has a story in which the risen Jesus empowers and commissions his disciples (John 20:19-23).

Signs that accompany them

Most of the signs promised here are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament.

- Earlier in Mark's Gospel Jesus sends his disciples to preach, drive out demons, and heal the sick (3:14-15; 6:7-13)
- Speaking in new languages is a sign of the holy Spirit in Acts 2:1-12
- In Luke's Gospel Jesus tells his followers that he has given them the power to tread upon snakes and scorpions (Luke 10:19). Acts 28:3-6 tells how Paul is bitten by a venomous snake but isn't harmed

However, the New Testament contains no mention of Jesus' followers consuming poison.

ACTS 1:1-11

Reading closely

1. How does this prologue (vv.1-5) transition us from Luke’s Gospel to his Acts of the Apostles?
2. Who is present in the story?
3. What are these people expecting?
4. Does the holy Spirit seem significant to Luke?
5. What does Jesus want from and for his followers?
6. What might be running through everyone’s mind as the risen Jesus leaves?
7. How do you imagine the scene?
8. What would you expect to happen next?

Living the word

9. What themes does this passage share with Mark 16:15-20?
10. How is Jesus present to you despite being physically absent?

THE FIRST READING

The prologue

Luke begins his second book according to literary custom. He briefly sums up what happened in his first book (the Gospel). Then he prepares his hearers for what will happen in his second book.

Theological geography

Luke also connects his two works geographically. Jesus goes up to Jerusalem, then up to heaven. The holy Spirit comes down from heaven upon the disciples, who then go from Jerusalem to the rest of the known world. Jesus’ mission ends in Book One. The church’s mission begins in Book Two.

Restoring Israel

When the disciples ask if Jesus is going to *restore Israel* (v.6), they seem to expect a physical change like the end of Roman rule. This isn’t the kingdom that Jesus came to establish, however.

Throughout Acts Luke notes the peace, unity, and joy that prevails in the church as it grows. Exactly how the church spreads and when everyone will become believers isn’t for the disciples to know. They must focus instead on following the Spirit, for the Spirit is bringing about the kingdom they seek.

Ascension

In both Jewish and Gentile writings people who were revered were sometimes portrayed as having been taken up into heaven. Their ascension was a metaphor for divine approval.

Luke draws on this imagery to show not only that God approves of Jesus but also that Jesus shares God’s power.

- In the Book of the Prophet Daniel *one like a Son of Man* comes on the clouds of heaven to exercise judgment (Daniel 7:13-14)
- The prophet Elijah is caught up to heaven in a whirlwind, after which his successor, Elisha, shares his power to speak in God’s name (2 Kings 2:9f). Jesus is like Elijah, and his disciples are like Elisha.

Empowerment

The disciples are witnesses of Jesus’ ascension, just as there were witnesses of his empty tomb. In both cases two men appeared to confirm what happened to Jesus and to redirect his followers.

Once Jesus ascends he is no longer physically constrained, so he can be spiritually and sacramentally present everywhere. He now empowers his disciples to continue his mission. Just as the holy Spirit guided Jesus during his ministry (Luke 4:14), so now the Spirit leads Jesus’ followers in theirs.

PRAYER

adapted from a prayer by St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Lord Jesus Christ,
 to complete your seamless robe,
 and so to complete our faith,
 you ascended through the air into the heavens
 before the very eyes of the apostles.
 In this way you showed that you are the Lord of
 all and the fulfillment of all creation.
 May every human being and every living creature
 bow down at your name.
 Give us the eyes of faith to see that all creation
 proclaims your greatness.
 In your holy name we pray. Amen.