



Opening Responses for Eastertide

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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‘Starter for Ten’ Discussion Question

Think of a time when your relationship with somebody else changed forever. What happened, and how did this impact upon you?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Glory to you, O God:
your raised Jesus from the grave,
bringing us victory over death and giving us eternal life.

Glory to you, O Christ:
for us and for our salvation you overcame death,
and opened the gate to everlasting life.

Glory to you, O Holy Spirit:
you lead us into the truth, show us the way,
and breathe new life into us.

**Glory to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
now and forever. Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 93

The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty;
the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength.
He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
**your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting.**
The floods have lifted up, O Lord,
**the floods have lifted up their voice;
the floods lift up their roaring.**
More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,
**more majestic than the waves of the sea,
majestic on high is the Lord!**
Your decrees are very sure;
holiness befits your house, O Lord, for evermore.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead,
opening the way to everlasting life,
both in the here-and-now, and throughout all that is to come.
Let us therefore bring to God those things in need of renewal:
We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
Restore us and heal us.
We bring to you the times we've failed to love one another:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the injustices and oppression in our world:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the failings and disunity of your Church:
Restore us and heal us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of new beginnings,
of love stronger than even death,
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and breathe new life into us. **Amen**

Reading Luke 24:44 – 53

Sermon

One day, I would love to go on pilgrimage to Walsingham in Norfolk, and visit The Anglican Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. Amongst its many eccentricities, one of the quirkier features is the Ascension Chapel, which has Jesus's pierced feet sticking out from the ceiling! It's one of two images that comes to mind for me when I ponder the events described in today's reading from the Book of Acts; the other takes me back to Elvet Methodist Church in Durham City, and sitting in its wooden pews listening to the preacher warn us against making use of what he termed "crude spatial imagery". He used that phrase several times in a very pronounced way (which might be why it stuck in my head) to point to the way in which the author of Luke/Acts saw the world. In this simple cosmology, we inhabit a three-tier universe, with Heaven above, us in the middle, and Hell below. This language appears in the Apostles' Creed, which mentions Jesus' descending

into Hell before ascending into Heaven, and it still has a hold on the popular imagination. We see it comedically in the embrace by some of the Flat Earth Society, and poignantly in the ways that people will sometimes talk of a loved one who has died 'looking down on them'.

However, if we take this view of the Ascension literally, Jesus would now be somewhere on the edges of solar system, flying through the void of the quantum vacuum which is the only thing present in empty space. I imagine him bumping into Superman or Captain Marvel, or some other space-bound superhero from time to time! We've known since the days of the ancient Greeks that the world is actually round, and that the three-tier cosmology just described does not accurately depict reality. So, if feet dangling from the ceiling is a visual example of the kind of 'crude spatial imagery' we need to get away from, how do we make sense of our reading for today? In other words, what is Luke trying to say by telling his community about Jesus's final words to his friends before being carried up to heaven, an event which lays the ground for the coming of the Holy Spirit?

The first factor to note here, as I have already mentioned in passing earlier on, is that the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were both written by the same author. They respectively form Volume One and Volume Two of a combined work, with common threads and several symbolic connections running between the two. The Gospel begins and concludes with worship in the Jerusalem Temple as the primary centre of Israel's spiritual life, in both its account of the birth of John the Baptist as Jesus' forerunner (1:10) and the worship of his friends following the Ascension (24:53). It was from that same city that good news of forgiveness was to be sent out to the nations (24:47) and it was the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit there that would unleash the Kingdom movement (Acts 2). The glimpses we get here of what it means to witness to our faith (24:48 – 49) point towards that same proclamation (Acts 1:4 – 8), and references to the Father's promises being fulfilled and being clothed from on high (24:49) clearly look to

that coming transformation of the ways God works in the world (Acts 3:6, 16:18). It is almost as if Luke is deliberately tying up loose ends, ready for the dramas of Pentecost and what will follow.

Next week, we will celebrate the birth of the Church, and the coming into maturity of those first disciples who went from being too terrified to wander too far from their locked upper room (Acts 1:13) to people unafraid to proclaim the good news of Christ even when disbelieved and ridiculed, accused of being drunk (Acts 2:13), or being martyred for their faith (Acts 7:54 – 8:1). For now, however, we are invited to contemplate the implications of Jesus's leaving the room, as it were, in order that all this would happen. Luke's account of the Ascension is, as I've tried to suggest, more symbolic than literal, less about the 'crude spatial imagery' we need to leave behind and more about the breaking in of the new creation that began with the resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ. However, note that, for all the Walsingham shrine misses the point, there is one detail it does get right – Jesus's crucifixion scars remain even after God raised him to new life on the first Easter day (24:39). This is significant, for at least three reasons:

Firstly, the risen Jesus bearing wounds which are assumed into the life of the eternal God at the Ascension reminds us that, just as Luke weaved common threads within his Gospel and Acts, there are also common threads between the old and new creations – or, to put this another way, there is a degree of continuity between our world as it currently stands, and God's new creation that began breaking in via the resurrection, and is what we point toward when we speak about the Kingdom of God. Thus, what we do in the here-and-now matters and God will not simply 'wipe the slate clean' when this present age reaches its conclusion. This reading reminds us that it isn't for us to second-guess God's timing, and like the early disciples, who had to get used to Samaritans and Gentiles being part of the action as well as Jewish Christians, the Kingdom of God might not fit with our prior expectations (Acts 1:6 – 8). However, what we can know is that our

acts of kindness in the here-and-now are never wasted, because in God they have an everlasting significance, and that we can't simply use and abuse creation on the mistaken assumption that God plans to destroy it anyway.

Secondly, God embracing our wounded humanity at the Ascension, scars and all, reminds us that God-in-Christ knows what suffering's like, and hence we do not worship any distant and disinterested God but one who is deeply committed to everything that same God made and continues to make, through the Holy Spirit. In these days of fear and anxiety, our God is with us. While this does not mean we should expect to enjoy some kind of special protection, or be given an easy ride, it does mean we do not walk through the dark valley alone.

Thirdly, the Ascension reminds us that God's power is made known in weakness and vulnerability, in woundedness and powerlessness. The scars on Jesus's hands, feet and side remind us that 'almighty' isn't a biblical term for God (or at least, not in the wish-fulfilment, all-powerful parent figure way). When non-Christian friends tell me that they reject this kind of God, I tell them that I do, too! There's a sweet cartoon series about a hapless vicar named 'Derek the Cleric'. One of these cartoons shows Derek and another person angrily vying for a parking space. Its caption says, 'Derek hadn't banked on another Christian praying for that same spot!'. If we turn God into some kind of heavenly micromanager with a 'plan' that us mere mortals are not permitted to know, but that dictates who will struggle to survive and who will thrive, who will live and who will die, then as beloved as we might be of such theology, we make God into a monster. Ascension reminds us that God is present in our silence and powerlessness as much as in our rejoicing.

So, as we journey towards the end of this Easter season, and ready ourselves for Pentecost, may we be willing to let go of 'crude spatial imagery' and false pictures of God alike, so that when the Holy Spirit

comes, we may have the courage to proclaim the love that will never walk away, or give up on us, through our words of proclamation, our acts of kindness and our care for everything that our God has made. We ask all this in the name of Jesus Christ, our risen and ascended Lord. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Stephen Cottrell's 2019 book *The Things He Said* explores the post resurrection appearances of Jesus, leading to the Ascension.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Final Prayer – Collect for Ascension Sunday

Almighty God,
grant that as we believe your only-begotten Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ,
to have ascended into the heavens,
so we in heart and mind may also ascend
and with him continually dwell;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen

Blessing

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

May the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

fill us with resurrection hope,
and remain upon us and all whom we love and pray for,
now and throughout eternity. **Amen**