

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C  
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
May 29, 2022  
Acts 16:16-34  
Psalm 97  
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21  
John 17:20-26

## One

After forty days of appearances, visits, and interactions with his friends and followers after his resurrection, on the fortieth day, Jesus ascended into heaven while his closest disciples and friends looked on. We call this the Ascension. The church observes it each year on the fortieth day after Easter Sunday. This year that was three days ago on Thursday, May 26.

Luke tells us about the Ascension in both volumes of his two-volume work, the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.

Just before and as he ascends, Jesus gives those he leaves behind one more set of instructions: *Wait in Jerusalem until you are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit after which you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.*

They go from the hillside beyond the village of Bethany where Jesus ascends back into the city of Jerusalem. And they wait. For ten more days. For the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the fiftieth day after the Resurrection, on the day of Pentecost. Next Sunday we will celebrate that.

This Sunday, today, the seventh Sunday after Easter Day and the last Sunday of the season of Eastertide, liturgically speaking, we are in an in-between time, a now and not yet space.

Truth be told, we live much of our lives, one way or another, in an in-between time. We are very often waiting for something, anticipating someone, or transitioning from one thing to another.

But think for a moment about those ten long days between Ascension and Pentecost in the first century, between when Jesus the Christ ascends and the Holy Spirit descends. Imagine how that interval might feel for those beloved and bewildered friends and followers of Jesus at the beginning of the Jesus Movement.

They have already lost him once to death. Their world came crashing down on that terribly bad Friday for them when he died. Beyond their wildest imaginings, he was

raised again, as he said. For forty days it had been like old times only better. Not only was he with them once again, he was also changed in form. Locked doors and walls didn't keep him out and couldn't keep him away from them.

They get the feeling he thinks this ascension thing is not only necessary but also good. They can't imagine how things will be when he departs and stays away. It isn't even that they don't trust him when he says the Holy Spirit will come in power. It's more that it seems so incredible that they can't conceptualize it.

I'm asking you this morning to empathize with those beloved ones who experience the Ascension of their teacher, savior, friend, and beloved as losing him all over again. They have no choice in the matter. He is leaving, and they remain. Surely, they are bewildered and sad and perhaps angry as well as determined to carry on.

Does that sound to you like us right about now? Bewildered and sad and perhaps also angry as well as determined to carry on?

Bewildered and sad and perhaps also angry that we are in some sort of insane in-between time in the life of our nation when people going to church on Sunday or to the grocery store on Saturday or to school on Tuesday can be indiscriminately gunned down. Bewildered and sad and perhaps also angry that there have been 214 mass shootings so far this year and this is only the 149<sup>th</sup> day of the year.

As we wait in this in-between time, suspended between Ascension and Pentecost, today's gospel reading is a portion of what we know as Jesus' high priestly prayer from John's gospel. This is the prayer that Jesus prays on the night before he dies for us. He prays it for his beloveds of the first century as well as for us, his beloveds in the twenty-first century, and for all his beloveds in all the centuries in between and the centuries yet to come.

He prays that all of us and all of them will be one. Not the same. Not all alike. Not always in total agreement. No. He prays that we will be one as he and the Father who sent him are one. One. United, connected, interdependent, inter-related, one.

Sometimes we claim the truth of that oneness. For example, I often pray the collect after the prayers of the people, collect 8 after the prayers, which begins, "Almighty God, by your Holy Spirit you have made us one with your saints in heaven and on earth...."

Sometimes we claim the truth of that oneness. Oftentimes we don't.

Yet it is Jesus' prayer to his Father our Creator for us:

That we may all be one. Unified not uniform. Aligned not all alike. Equally made in God's image and equally valued and equally responsible for revealing God's love to the world. A collective in communion. A collaborative for the common good.

Sometimes we claim the truth of that oneness. We act and live and lead as if it is true. And many times, we offer up excuses for why we can't manifest that oneness, for why we disagree about so many things, for why we have to keep waiting until God the Creator allows Jesus request for our oneness to be fulfilled.

But, seriously, is there any prayer prayed by Jesus the Christ that God the Creator has not answered already? Any request of the Christ that hasn't already been freely granted?

What is there that is in the way of our manifesting the oneness Jesus prayed for and that God has surely already granted?

Consider the case in our first reading from Acts.

Paul our patron and his companion Silas. Thrown in jail in Phillipi after a complaint was made against them.

Throughout their stay in Phillipi, the city of Macedonia where they answered the call to come and help, they regularly went to that place of prayer down by the riverside where they met Lydia, the first Christian pastor in Europe as we heard last Sunday.

And then they kept going to pray there. Repeatedly, a young, enslaved woman with a demon would follow Paul and his companions saying, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." It kinda seems like they might have benefited from the free publicity. But it happened over and over and Paul, Acts says, annoyed, cast the demon out of her so she'd be quiet. And that's when the trouble started.

In healing the young woman, they robbed her masters of a revenue stream that they enjoyed because the demon gave her powers of fortune telling. People would pay the masters for the girl's abilities. No demon; no fortune telling; reduced income; problem; complaint.

So, there they are, after a whole crowd chimed in, and they were beaten with rods, Paul and Silas thrown in the clink in Phillipi, a leading city of the Roman colony of

Macedonia.

Paul and Silas sing hymns and bear witness to the transforming power of God's goodness in their lives from the innermost cell.

The other prisoners are listening to them.

Then there's an earthquake. The doors of the prison are jarred open. Everyone's chains fall off. They could walk right out. They don't.

The jailer assumes the worst, concludes without evidence that they have all made a break for it because, after all, they are literally on the other side from him. Their interests are very directly in opposition to his. He prepares to kill himself because his punishment for allowing them to escape will be his own execution. Might as well take care of it himself on his own terms.

But neither Paul nor Silas nor any of the other prisoners leave. Why don't they?

They seem to have decided that the jailer's life and freedom and wellbeing are as important as their own. Not more important than their own but as important as theirs.

What is the good word from Paul, the lifesaving line that stops the jailer from suicide?

"Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

We got you. We're here. We're with you. We're together. We're on your side. Even you whom we might so easily cast as our enemy, our adversary, we're on the same side.

The reality of the oneness Jesus prayed for and that already exists is disclosed in this word from Paul and these actions, or inactions, by Paul and Silas and the others.

It is possible to live another reality.

"Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." Paul and Silas are living the answer to Jesus' prayer in today's gospel. They are in solidarity with the jailer of all people demonstrating that in Christ there exists not only the possibility but also the reality that we are all one. There is restoration and reconciliation, not just between individuals and God—you and me, Jesus—but also between individuals and one another, and whole communities and the Holy One, and even for the body politic.

In this moment in our nation's history where it seems many people are divided one from another by deep disagreements over hard and fast positions, how could anyone in their right mind imagine that there would ever be oneness, unity, agreement, harmony, concord?

It doesn't come from our mind. It comes from the mind and spirit and will of God. It already exists. We keep disbelieving it. We successfully act as if its opposite is more true or more real. And yet, oneness has been requested from our Creator by our Savior and Redeemer. It is already here.

In our day, in this moment, what do we need to do to get out of our own way and walk in the truth of that oneness?

Repeatedly, if belatedly, across human history people of good will have built consensus and acted collectively for the common good in peacetime and wartime. And surely on this day before tomorrow, Memorial Day, we are reminded that some people have given everything in order to preserve and pass down the freedoms which we enjoy, including the freedom of assembly. Repeatedly, if belatedly, as a species we have acted in history to save lives and literally save the world.

In this moment, if we only tune in to sloganeering, soundbites, and memes from opposite ends of the spectrum, it's easy to miss the fact that already 89% of us are in agreement, alignment—we are one—that serious, deliberate, decisive action must be taken legislatively and immediately to address the public health crisis of gun violence in the United States. 89% of us already agree about that. We are living into oneness. And we must. And yes, there is more to do. So pray on and discern what part of this work is yours to do.

In the ministry of restoration and reconciliation which has been entrusted to us, we are called to live the answer to Jesus' prayer that we be one. We are called to follow the example of Paul and Silas and find common cause with those who appear to be our enemies and adversaries.

This doesn't mean it will all be sweetness and light. It doesn't mean that evil doesn't exist, or that death doesn't hurt.

But it does mean that we who are followers of Jesus the Christ can and do live no longer for ourselves alone but for the One who lived and died and rose for us and prayed that we would be one. What do we need to do to walk in the way of that oneness?

I close with these words from the Irish band U2 and our brother Anglican, the lead singer Bono, also covered by the great Johnny Cash:

One love, one blood  
One life, you've got to do what you  
should  
One life with each other  
[Siblings,] Sisters, brothers  
One life, but we're not the same  
We get to carry each other, carry  
each other  
One