

# A LONGER LOOK AT THE LESSONS

## Study Guide and Leader Guide

for Pericopes as Listed in *Lutheran Service Book*

Series B

Lent 1–Easter 7

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# Lesson 7

## The Resurrection of Our Lord

### The Holy Gospel: Mark 16:1–8

Mark's account has been the Church's Easter Gospel from its early centuries. It is concise, but provides all the basic facts. Mark identified three women—the same ones he mentioned earlier as having served Jesus in Galilee, having watched at the cross, and having witnessed His entombment. Matthew named only two; Luke added Joanna and referred to “the others with them.” They had purchased *arōmata*, liquid spices, the night before, and had risen before sunup to go and complete the burial. There was still some element of urgency in their minds, for they needed to complete the task before the onset of decomposition would make it impossible. They were so preoccupied with their preparations that they didn't think of the heavy stone that blocked the entrance to the tomb until they were approaching the garden. The disciples and the women evidently knew nothing at this time about the request of the chief priests for a guard and a seal, which had been approved.

The stone—*lithos*, not *petros*—was a hewn, flat, circular slab, which stood upright in a groove outside the tomb. It could be rolled away up a slight grade and held in place with a block to allow entry and, unblocked, easily rolled down again to the low spot in the groove, where it prevented entry. Matthew says an angel came and removed the stone and sat on it. Evidently it lay flat on the ground near the entry.

The women were confronted by an angel messenger. The NIV and the ESV say they were “alarmed”; the King James Version (KJV), “frightened”; the Revised Standard Version (RSV), “amazed”; the NEB, “dumbfounded.” The Greek verb allows all of these, but the last probably describes their state of mind best.

107. Identify five elements that make up the angel's Easter message to these dumbfounded women. What does each of these elements say to us for our own Christian faith?

108. Only Mark has “tell His disciples *and Peter*.” Why would it be Mark who would include that specification of Peter? What is the significance of the angel's mentioning Peter specifically?

Before His suffering, Jesus had told His disciples, “After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” (Mark 14:28). Now they were reminded of this. Later, in Galilee, Jesus appeared to, and interacted with, all of His faithful followers.

109. How many saw Him at the same time on that occasion? (See 1 Corinthians 15:6.) Why was it important that the risen Jesus was seen by all the faithful as they were gathered together?

The women were seized with “trembling and astonishment” as they left the tomb. *Ekstasis* refers to a state of mind beyond self-control. They were still dumbfounded because of the awesome experience and its importance. At first they said nothing, probably because the disciples were not all in one place. Later, when they were all together, the women reported what they had seen and heard, as they had been commanded to do.

## **The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 25:6–9**

Isaiah 24 ends with the promise that “the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings on the earth, on the earth. . . for the LORD of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem” (vv. 21, 23). These surely were reassuring words. Assyria had conquered the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and had deported major elements of the population for settlement elsewhere. Her armies then pressed southward into Judah, overwhelming its northern villages. Jerusalem itself was threatened. Isaiah steadfastly prophesied that Jerusalem would be saved, and encouraged its people and their leaders to trust in the Lord instead of political alliances.

In chapter 25, the prophet praises the Lord for this assured deliverance. Its first verses use terminology that called to mind the Lord’s strength in fighting for Israel in the destruction of Jericho and the conquest of Canaan, and His mercy toward Israel in settling them in the Promised Land. Verses 6–9, the heart of the chapter, gives the praise an eschatological, universal thrust.

110. Which mountain was Isaiah referring to with “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine”?

111. What is the “covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations”? What is especially striking about the fact that Isaiah says that on this mountain, the Lord of hosts “will swallow up death forever”?

112. For whom will the sovereign Lord wipe away the tears from their faces and take away their reproach? (See Revelation 21:1–4.)

113. What impact is added by the prophet’s ending with “for the LORD has spoken”?

114. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The lesson ends with a short song of praise that displays the attitude of all who have been tested and have learned that the Lord's promises are sure and certain. Read the words aloud together: "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, that He might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for Him; let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation!"

## The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 15:1–11

1 Corinthians 15 is the Bible's great "resurrection chapter." It gives us detailed instruction about the event that is the keystone in the arch of our Christian faith and the foundation of our own living hope.

The world to which Paul was commissioned to bring the Gospel of Jesus was shaped by Greek culture and philosophy. The traditional world view of Greek thought was one of dualism, which saw the realm of spirit as essential reality and the material world as no more than its temporary, imperfect, even evil, reflection—a dimension in which the spirit operated, or was "imprisoned," for a time. To the Greek mind, the concept of the immortality of the soul or spirit made sense, but the idea of a resurrection of a material body not only did *not* make sense, but was seen as undesirable. As the verse that follows this pericope indicates, some of the Corinthian Christians were denying the possibility of a resurrection of the dead.

This dualistic worldview is not peculiar to the ancient Greek world. The Eastern religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, also see spirit as the ultimate reality, and speak of earthly incarnations and reincarnations as the means by which individuals move upward toward absorption into the universal spirit. The New Age movement in our own society also focuses on the spirit and incorporates ideas of reincarnation into its philosophy.

The Christian faith is decidedly not dualistic. Christian teaching reflects the Genesis account as it sees God's creation of the material world, and also our human physicality, as good—but corrupted by sin. God's action in Christ was not just to rescue *souls* from a material world, but to rescue *people*, body and soul, from their bondage to sin and death. The creeds reflect this with "I believe in the resurrection of the body." The Christian hope in Christ is for continued personal identity as human beings, not just immortality as spirits. The Bible speaks of our being given new bodies like that of the risen Jesus, which will be just right for life in the new heaven and new earth in which righteousness will dwell (see 1 Corinthians 15:51–57; Philippians 3:20–21).

Since the Christian hope is based directly on the saving work of the Son of God, Paul began his instruction about the resurrection of the dead with a review of some of the evidence to support the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. He reminded his readers that they had received, and had taken their stand on, the Good News of Jesus, which he had preached to them. But he wanted them to know that it is not enough to *have* received and to *have* believed. The faith must be continued and applied to all aspects of life.

115. What happens if we do not "hold fast to the Word"? How may we get a firmer grip on the Word and its saving message to us?

116. Why did Paul recount for his readers the appearances of the risen Jesus to various individuals and groups? Why did Paul include the fact that once Jesus appeared to more than 500 of His disciples at one time? Why did Paul end, for emphasis, with his own personal experience with the risen Jesus?

117. What point did Paul make about life with God and service to God by using himself, his calling and service as an apostle, as an example? Why is it often true in the life of the Church that the great champions for Christ are those who come to faith and life in Him only through a great personal struggle? How may we grow in our awareness of the presence of our living Lord in our daily lives?

# Lesson 8

## Second Sunday of Easter

### The Holy Gospel: John 20:19–31

The Jews did not name the days of the week, but identified them in their relation to the Sabbath Day. The Greek text here has “the first day with reference to the Sabbath,” which designated it as the first day after the Sabbath. Our English translation, “the first day of the week,” is appropriate—it was the evening of Easter Sunday when the events recorded here took place.

It is not hard to understand that the disciples would have the doors locked for fear of the Jews. If the authorities had been bold enough to see to the death of Jesus, it surely could have been that they, Jesus’ disciples, were in danger too. The sudden appearance of Jesus among them without knocking and entering through the door surely got their attention.

118. Jesus’ “Peace be with you” was the common Jewish greeting, *Shalom*. How did its use by the risen Jesus on this occasion add new meaning to it? Why did Jesus repeat this greeting as He spoke of their commissioning as His representatives?

119. How is Jesus’ commissioning of those who represent Him related to His having been sent by the Father?

120. What was the point of Jesus’ breathing on them as He gave them the Holy Spirit? In what sense was this gift of the Spirit preliminary to the later outpouring of the Spirit on them on the Day of Pentecost?

The authority to forgive sins or not forgive sins, which was given by Jesus to the apostles and then to the Church, is not to be used in an arbitrary manner, but only as a pointed, personal application of the Law-Gospel message we are commissioned to proclaim.

121. What do we call the authority Jesus gives to those who represent Him? How do we experience the use of this authority in our life as a congregation?

The Greek is more expressive than our “forgive” and “not forgive.” The Greek *aphete* means that sins are “sent away” from a person; the Greek *kratete* speaks of sins being “held fast” to a person (see Psalm 103:11–12).

122. What is the purpose of the Church’s pointedly telling those who persist in willful sin and refuse to repent that their sins are not forgiven?

Thomas was unwilling to base his faith on the experience of others, and Jesus accommodated His questioning disciple. But when His enemies had demanded a convincing miraculous sign, He had refused to comply with their demand.

123. Why was Jesus willing to go an additional step to give Thomas a firsthand Easter experience? Why must we, as modern Christians, be happy to hear that Thomas’s initial skepticism gave way to full conviction? Will Jesus always accommodate questioning and skepticism on the part of His followers?

124. What do you sense as you read the last verses of John 20? What was John’s purpose in writing his Gospel? In what way was the account of Jesus’ interaction with Thomas a good way to bring the purpose of his Gospel to a climax?

## **The First Lesson: Acts 4:32–35**

The Sundays of Easter use selections from the Book of Acts as First Lessons. This is fitting. The celebration of Jesus’ victorious completion of His saving work spotlights what it meant for the apostles, and what it means for us, that Jesus is alive, and that He is continuing to carry out His saving ministry through those whom He commissions to represent Him—the apostles in their day, and the Church in every time and place.

Acts 2 tells us that the first Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (v. 42). That continued to be the hallmark of the Church as its numbers grew to 5,000 and beyond. Here Luke focused on their solution to the problem of the needy among them. Their selling possessions and bringing the money to the apostles for distribution was a spontaneous display of love.

125. What was the fountain from which their spontaneous acts of Christian love flowed? What continually refreshed their desire to serve Christ and His people in this way?

Later, this practice became the setting in which God showed the Church the importance of honesty and sincerity in the display of such love, and that He sees and judges motives as well as deeds, as when He exposed and severely judged the hypocrisy of two members who wanted to impress the congregation but lied to the Holy Spirit in the process.

126. How does this First Lesson tie in with the Holy Gospel for the day?

## The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 1:1–2:2

Though John the apostle did not identify himself as the writer of the Letter, the Early Church was unanimous in naming him as the author. This “Epistle of Love” evidently was intended to be a circular letter sent by John from Ephesus to be read in the Churches of the province of Asia. It was written toward the end of the first century to underscore John’s eyewitness testimony to the *incarnation* of Christ, the Son of God as Jesus our Savior—and thus to counteract the beginnings of Gnosticism in the Church, which questioned His truly becoming the God-man. It will instruct us as the Epistle for the Day on all of the Sundays of Easter.

The first paragraph of John’s First Letter reminds the reader of the prologue of his Gospel, which in turn played on the first statements of Genesis 1. John wrote about the Logos, the “Word of life.”

127. What was John insisting on with “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands”? (See Colossians 2:9–10.)

John wrote of fellowship between Christians being based on fellowship with God through the Word made flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ. *Koinōnia*, “fellowship,” means “a sharing or participating in” or “the enjoyment of intimate personal intercourse.” John was hoping that his testimony would lead to a return to true Christian fellowship on the part of those who had separated themselves from the Christian body because of what they claimed as “higher knowledge” direct from the Spirit.

128. On what basis was this fellowship to be regained? (See John 14:6–7.)

129. What quality in God is emphasized by “God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all”? What did John point to as the first indicator that a Christian is “[walking] in the light”? (See Colossians 3:15–17.) What benefit is ours as we walk in the light?

130. On the other hand, what is meant by walking in the darkness? What results from this? What is the one thing God’s love cannot deal with? (See Luke 18:9–14.) What did all of this say to those who were being led astray by incipient Gnosticism?

John made Jesus’ saving work as God’s atoning sacrifice for our sins very clear. *Hilasmus*, “propitiation,” was used in the Septuagint, the Old Testament in Greek, for the covering of the ark of the covenant between the cherubim, where the presence of God was thought to be most intensely located.



This was called God's "mercy seat." The blood of the sacrificial animal was sprinkled on this mercy seat on the annual Day of Atonement. John's words assure us that Jesus' blood shed on the cross became a once-for-all *hilasmos*, God's mercy seat, His atoning sacrifice (See Hebrews 9:11–14).

131. How does the assurance of God's forgiving love encourage us to not sin in our daily life? How can we live with the fact that none of us succeeds in "not sinning"? (See Hebrews 9:11–14.) How did John assure us of our Savior's ongoing concern and action for us?

132. Why is it vitally important to us that Jesus' atoning sacrifice was for "the sins of the whole world"? (See Romans 3:21–26.)

# Lesson 9

## Third Sunday of Easter

### The Holy Gospel: Luke 24:36–49

The events described in this Holy Gospel took place in the evening on Easter Sunday. The disciples of Jesus had gathered in the Upper Room to talk over the amazing experiences of the day. The risen Jesus had appeared to the women and to Simon Peter. Then the two who had left to return to Emmaus came rushing in to tell them that Jesus had been with them. They were talking about all of this when Jesus stood there in the room with them.

133. Jesus greeted them in the traditional Jewish manner with His *Shalom*—“Peace to you!” How did the circumstances in which Jesus said this add a new depth of meaning to His greeting?

134. What does Jesus’ sudden appearance among them say about His resurrected body? What does His invitation to examine His hands and His feet say about His body? Why did Jesus eat in their presence?

135. Jesus again became their teacher to help them understand and appreciate the significance of all that had transpired. What is the significance of the phrase “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms”?

136. How does Jesus still open our minds to understand the Scriptures? (See John 14:15–17, 25–26; 15:26; 16:13–15.)

137. How did Jesus describe the work He was commissioning them to do? How is it significant that their work was to begin at Jerusalem? What were they to wait for in Jerusalem? What were to be the basic elements of the message about Jesus and His saving work?

138. What double dynamic is at work in the proclamation of the message of Jesus Christ? (See Romans 1:16–17; 10:14–17.)

### **The First Lesson: Acts 3:11–21**

Peter and John went together to the temple to worship and to witness about Jesus to the other worshipers as the Spirit gave them opportunity. They responded to the appeal of a lame beggar by healing him in Jesus' name (Acts 3:1–10). The miracle caused considerable stir. People gathered around to learn what had happened. Peter used the opportunity to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to them.

139. Peter addressed them formally as “Men of Israel.” As he began his explanation, why did Peter call God “the God of Abraham, . . . Isaac, and . . . Jacob” and “the God of our fathers”? What was he saying about Jesus by calling Him God’s “servant”? What claim was he making about Jesus by calling Him “the Holy and Righteous One” and “the Author of life”?

140. What was the key thrust of the apostolic witness regarding Jesus?

The Greek word for “repent” calls for a complete change of heart and mind, a turnaround to a life directed to God and His will.

141. What is the difference between sinning out of ignorance and sinning willfully, with full knowledge and understanding? (See Numbers 15:27–31; Hebrews 10:26–31.) Can deliberate sin be forgiven?

142. What blessings did Peter promise would be theirs as a result of repenting and turning to the Lord? What is the ultimate blessing to which their repenting and turning to the Lord would contribute?

143. Peter used phrases from the Old Testament Scriptures many times during the course of his preaching. Why was that so important in this setting in which he was proclaiming the Gospel? Why do we today expect our preachers to base their messages on texts of the Bible?

144. How does this First Lesson tie in with the emphasis of today's Holy Gospel?

### **The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 3:1–7**

A major thrust of present-day psychology is the basic human need of personal self-esteem. In a world challenged by economic and political pressures, it is understandable that individuals might feel lost and powerless and insignificant. The Christians to whom John wrote his First Letter also needed personal encouragement. They were being put down by the “super-spiritual” who claimed to have special “knowledge” direct from the Spirit. They were suggesting to ordinary Christians that something was lacking in them and in their faith. Today some Christians give that same impression—and end up causing doubt in other Christians instead of strengthening them in their faith. To the Christians of his day, John brought striking assurance of their value in God's sight and in God's will and purpose for them. His words speak also to us and our needs. They offer the ultimate source of proper Christian self-esteem.

The opening statement of this pericope is an exclamation about the kind of love the Father has given us in Christ, which may be seen in the fact that we are called \_\_\_\_\_. John was writing to Christians, most of whom had no status in the eyes of the world. The majority of those who became Christians in the first-century Greek world were slaves. They could be treated badly or disposed of at the will or whim of their masters. The Gospel of God's love in Christ had brought them a wonderful sense of personal worth. God's Son had been made sin for them so they could be made the righteousness of God in Him! But they were feeling pressure. In the Church, they were being put down by the “super-spiritual.” In the world, they were beginning to feel official persecution for confessing “Jesus is Lord!” and, as a result, rejecting the requirement to worship the emperor as a personification of the divine spirit of Rome.

145. In what ways is it still true today that the world, which does not know God, does not know the disciples of Jesus as children of God?

146. In what ways may the feeling of being put down or one-upped even by other Christians still be a problem in the life of the Church?

The Bible doesn't give us a lot of details about the eternal life that God promises. Here John wrote, “What we will be \_\_\_\_\_.” His words encourage us to recognize that for now, it is sufficient to know that “we are \_\_\_\_\_.”

147. What assurance is added by John's “when He appears we shall be like Him”?

John then returned to an emphasis of the importance of living out who we are in Christ. We are to purify ourselves just as He is pure.

148. What does John point to as motivating factors in our purifying ourselves to become more like Jesus in our daily living?

John went so far as to make the Christian life a *necessary* validation of our Christian faith. He wrote: “No one who \_\_\_ in Him \_\_\_; no one who \_\_\_ has either \_\_\_ Him or \_\_\_ Him.” This section ends with a positive statement of Christian living: “Whoever practices \_\_\_ is \_\_\_, as He is \_\_\_.” It is helpful to see that verse 8 continues the either/or contrast: “Whoever makes a practice of \_\_\_ is of the \_\_\_.”

149. What kind of sinning is John concerned about in writing these words?

On the Fifth Sunday in Lent, as we looked at a Second Lesson from Hebrews, we noted that the New Testament uses both “obey the Gospel” and “believe the Gospel.” *Obey* stresses the commitment involved in believing, which really always results in obeying.

150. Does this section of John’s First Letter encourage our “believing” or our “obeying”? Is it possible to separate the two in our relationship with Christ?

151. It’s clear that our “believing” motivates our “obeying.” Does our “obeying” have a strengthening effect on our “believing”?

# Lesson 10

## Fourth Sunday of Easter

### The Holy Gospel: John 10:11–18

The Holy Gospels from John 10 that are assigned to this Fourth Sunday of Easter make it Good Shepherd Sunday every year. In the course of the three years of the lectionary, we are given a complete look at this metaphor. Jesus' picture of His person and work was based on something familiar to all His hearers, both from their awareness of what was involved in shepherding and from their familiarity with the Shepherd Psalm, Psalm 23.

The Greek has Jesus say "*Egō eimi*," "I, I only, am. . . ." This is another forceful I AM by which Jesus pointed to Himself as the Lord God in action, for the name *Yahweh*, by which the Lord God revealed Himself to Moses at Sinai, means "I AM."

152. What did Jesus point to as the first evidence of His being *the* Good Shepherd?

The Greek *huper tōn probatōn*, "for the sheep," means more than just dying to defend the sheep. *Huper* conveys the sense of "on behalf of" or "in the place of." The earthly metaphor falls short, for this Good Shepherd dies as a substitute for the sheep. The Bible's teaching of vicarious atonement finds its expression also in this unique use of the metaphor (see 2 Corinthians 5:21).

153. What does Jesus' "No one takes [My life] from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord" in verse 18 add to this consideration?

The Father commissioned the Son to lay down His life for the sheep, and He loved Him because He willingly accepted the commission and was faithfully carrying it out.

154. What is the difference in this metaphor between a shepherd and a hired hand? What assurance is there for us in Jesus' being the Good Shepherd and not just a hired hand? What does this metaphor say to those who are to serve as the Lord's under-shepherds? (See Jeremiah 23:1–4.)

155. What did Jesus point to as the second evidence of His being *the* Good Shepherd? How intimate and complete is Jesus' knowledge of His sheep? (See John 10:30.)

156. How does it make you feel to know that Jesus knows you that intimately?

Jesus spoke of “other sheep that are not of this fold.” Again, the little Greek word *dei* is used in the text, denoting a necessity, an urgency.

157. Who are these “other sheep,” and why is it urgent that Jesus bring them too? What do Jesus’ words about “one flock, one shepherd” say about the Church? What is the distinction between the “one holy Christian and apostolic Church” and “the Churches” that we can see in the world?

### **The First Lesson: Acts 4:1–12**

This pericope is a high point in the drama of the growing boldness of Peter as a result of the Pentecost outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Remember, this is the same Peter who followed Jesus to the courtyard of the high priest—and there shamefully denied his master. But in the power of the Holy Spirit, this was now a new Peter. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter had preached to the crowd, spearheading the proclamation of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. He had seen the Spirit-powered response of 3,000 people. Soon after, as he and John were going to the temple to pray, Peter boldly applied the power of Jesus’ name to heal a lame beggar, and then openly explained to the onlookers that it had been the name of Jesus and faith in His name that were behind the miracle. Peter and John were taken into custody, kept in jail overnight, and the next morning, were brought before the Sanhedrin, the same body that had condemned Jesus to death. Earlier, Peter had fearfully denied Jesus under the questioning of slaves and servant girls in the courtyard of the high priest, and now he was being interrogated by this powerful man himself in the presence of the Sanhedrin, the Jews’ supreme court. Peter did not waver. He boldly and pointedly confessed the name of Jesus.

158. What were the two elements of Peter’s testimony about Jesus in his response to the high priest’s questioning?

159. Why was Peter led by the Spirit to quote the Scripture from Psalm 118 as part of his testimony?

In conclusion, Peter boldly declared: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” The little word *dei*, “must” or “it is necessary,” points to the exclusiveness of Jesus’ saving name. This became the clear testimony of the inspired, apostolic Word (see John 3:16–21; 1 John 2:22–23; 1 Timothy 2:5–6).

160. Why is Jesus the one and only Savior?

161. What impact had Peter's bold action and words had on the beggar who had been healed by him? (See Acts 3:8.) on the crowd at the temple? (See 3:10; 4:4.) on Peter himself? (See 4:8.) What impact did it have on the Jewish authorities? (See 4:13–22.)

162. How is it that the same message enabled by the same Spirit opens the minds and hearts of some but not the minds and hearts of others?

163. How does this First Lesson tie in with the emphasis of today's Holy Gospel?

### **The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 3:16–24**

This Epistle for the Day stresses the *doing* of love that is the expected fruit of faith in God's display of love in Jesus Christ. Christ acted in laying down His life for us. Our response to learning from Him what love requires is manifested in practical displays of active love. As active Christian love *does* something to help others, it *says* something to them, but John indicates that it also *speaks to us* to strengthen our faith and life as we practice it.

164. What does it say to the person who is being helped in Christian love? What does it evidence to the one who is acting in love? How does being active in love help us to “reassure our [hearts] before [God]”?

We always need to remember that the love John is describing is agape, the determined, purposeful love of the regenerate will, that *consciously* offers a responsive love to God by *actively* seeking the welfare of the neighbor in Jesus' name.

165. How can we silence our hearts when they condemn us because we do not live up to the ideal of consistent, active agape love in our daily lives? What does it do for us to have consciences that are clear because we know we are doing our best to obey God's commands and do what pleases Him?

166. What are the two basic commands God gives to those who are His? How do these relate to each other?



167. How may we be sure that we have the Spirit that Jesus gives to those who are His? (See 1 Corinthians 12:3–7; Titus 3:4–7; 1 John 4:13–21.)

168. How are God's nature and work as three divine persons manifested in this pericope?

# Lesson 11

## Fifth Sunday of Easter

### The Holy Gospel: John 15:1–8

This passage contains another of Jesus' great I AM statements. He used imagery completely familiar to His disciples: a grapevine and the care that goes into encouraging its full production of grapes. In His metaphor, He said, "I am the true Vine," the One who supplies real life power—not to grow grapes, but to grow disciples. His heavenly Father is the gardener, the viticulturist. Disciples of Jesus, then and now, are the branches that grow on the Vine to produce the desired fruit. It is the \_\_\_ that is the focal point of Jesus' emphasis in His picture.

169. Why did He call Himself the *true* Vine?

170. What is the aim of all the pruning done by the Father?

171. What is the fruit that branches attached to the Vine are to produce? (See Philippians 1:9–11 and Galatians 5:22–23.) What is the end result when disciples of Jesus display their attachment to the Vine by their fruit-bearing? (See Matthew 5:16.)

172. Why are branches that bear no fruit finally cut off? Why are those that bear fruit "pruned"?

173. What does Jesus point to as essential for us as His branches if we are to bear fruit?

174. How can we continue and even improve this necessary close relationship with Jesus throughout life? How can we increase our production of fruit that will glorify the Father?

175. What promise is given to those who remain firmly attached to Jesus in faith and life?

### **The First Lesson: Acts 8:26–40**

This incident in Acts describes an act of loving obedience that produced God’s desired fruit—a new Christian. This Philip was one of the seven men appointed as deacons in the Jerusalem Church (see Acts 6:1–6). Like Stephen, Philip had gone beyond “waiting on tables” to become an effective preacher of the Word. When persecution arose, Philip was among those who fled to Samaria, where he carried on a Gospel ministry that was being blessed with good response. Then Philip was told by the Spirit to interrupt his work in Samaria and travel south some 50 miles to have contact with one person. That’s the value of one individual in God’s gracious outlook!

The man to be contacted was an Ethiopian official, probably from the region of the upper Nile where a matriarchal kingdom had gained some kind of political acceptance by Rome. He had a position of influence as “secretary of the treasury” for Candace, the queen mother. The Ethiopian official had evidently been attracted to Judaism and had become a “God fearer,” a proselyte of the gate. He was a eunuch, probably castrated originally so he could serve in the royal harem, but had advanced to a position of high responsibility.

176. How is it that the Ethiopian official was able to read a scroll of the prophecy of Isaiah, and that he and Philip were able to converse?

Note the focus on the Word. It is through the Word that the Spirit of Jesus touches hearts. In God’s will for this man, he was reading from “the evangelist of the Old Testament,” a section that provided Philip an easy transition from prophecy about the Suffering Servant to its fulfillment in Jesus. They were traveling through hot, dry desert, but the same Lord who arranged their meeting evidently arranged for some water to be in one of the wadis they passed.

177. How did the Ethiopian show his eagerness to receive Jesus and His blessing?

The NIV text doesn’t show the weight of his concern. The Greek text says, “Is there anything that prevents me from being baptized?” This question came out of his position in Judaism. As a eunuch, he could never be received fully into Judaism, nor enter the inner temple courts—even if he wanted to accept circumcision and become a proselyte of the altar (see Deuteronomy 23:1). With his question, he was concerned about his eligibility for life in Christ.

178. What does it say about the Good News of Jesus that Philip was immediately ready to baptize him?

With God’s purpose in Philip’s traveling to the Negev to meet this one man fulfilled, Philip was taken away, and the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing.

179. How could this “infant” Christian be allowed to return to his homeland without receiving more complete instruction in the Christian faith?

Tradition says the Ethiopian was not only valued by God, but was valuable in God’s plan. He evangelized his people and even baptized Candace. The Coptic Church of that region traces its history to early Christian times.

180. How does this First Lesson tie in with the emphasis of today’s Holy Gospel?

### **The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 4:1–21**

John’s main concern in writing his Letter was the incursion of Gnostic thought into the Church—thought that combined Greek philosophy with Christian doctrine. In its emphasis on the spirit being the only essential reality, Gnosticism stumbled at the Good News that the eternal Word actually took on our human flesh and lived among us and died for us as Jesus Christ to be the Savior, and so it disregarded the teaching of “redemption through the blood of Christ.”

181. John warned against such teachers who rejected apostolic teaching and claimed to be enlightened directly by the Spirit. What test was the Church to apply to teachers and their teaching to determine their validity? How did John reassure his readers that they would overcome the false teachers and their misleading teaching?

The “apostle of love” then continued to teach about God’s love and our responsive love. *Agape* is the Greek word for conscious, purposeful love that seeks the other’s true welfare. It appears 28 times in various forms in chapter 4, providing us a look at the spiritual base of that love.

182. Why is it that you cannot know God until you are willing to imitate Him in determined love for your neighbor? How does the love of God for us open up the possibility of our imitating Him in this way?

183. Why is it vital that we understand fully that the source of love is not “that we have loved God” but “that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins”?

184. How, according to John, may we know that we live in God and God lives in us? What does the Spirit lead us to do that in itself evidences His indwelling in us? (See 1 Corinthians 12:3.) How does our knowing and confessing that Jesus is the Son of God enable us to know and rely on the love God has for us?

185. What was John saying in writing “God *is* love”? May this be turned around so that it says “Love is God?”

John said, “[His] love is perfected in us.” The Greek word *telos* in all its forms refers to “reaching the goal,” “achieving the purpose.”

186. What is the goal or purpose in God’s love, which makes us “as He is” even though still in this world, and which will give us “confidence for the day of judgment”?

187. What is the “perfect love” that casts out fear? What can the Christian who “has not been perfected in love,” who is still fearful of the Day of Judgment, do to gain the perfect love that drives out fear?

John said, “We love [are able to practice agape as God does, and are motivated to practice agape as God does] because He first loved us.”

188. Why is love for the neighbor really the only practical way for us to show love for God?

# Lesson 12

## Sixth Sunday of Easter

### **The Holy Gospel: John 15:9–17**

This Holy Gospel expands on the emphasis of last Sunday's "Vine and branches" picture. Jesus goes more fully into what it means to be firmly attached to Him and thus to bring forth fruit to the glory of the Father. He talks about His Father's love for Him and about His obeying His Father's commands and remaining in His love. This is an evident reference to His life and mission as the Christ, which is always the basis of His encouraging those who follow Him to abide in His love.

189. What does "abide in My love" mean for our daily lives?

190. How can we grow in our appreciation of Jesus' saving love for us? Why is obedience to His commands an integral part of abiding in His love? What is His basic command to those who abide in His love?

191. Why must our love for Jesus be expressed in love for those around us? (See 1 John 3:16–18; 4:19–21.)

192. What, according to Jesus, is the highest expression of love?

193. How does our abiding in Jesus' love and obeying His commands become the source of a joy that is full?

194. What is the difference between our being Jesus' friends and our being His "slaves," as the Greek has it? What is it that Jesus learned from His Father and has made known to us, His friends?

195. Why did Jesus make the point that it was He who had chosen His disciples, and not they who had chosen Him? What did this later mean for the Church?

196. Does His choosing of those who are His own apply also to us? (See Ephesians 1:3–8.) What is Jesus' intention for you as a result of His choosing you to be His disciple?

197. How is our bearing fruit by abiding in His love and obeying His commands related to the Father's giving us what we ask for in Jesus' name?

### **The First Lesson: Acts 10:34–48**

Peter was in Joppa. Messengers arrived, sent to bring him to Caesarea, to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who was a respected "God fearer" in the synagogue there. Peter went, obedient to the Spirit. In Cornelius' home, Peter reminded Cornelius and his family and friends about what they had already heard about Jesus—and then boldly proclaimed the Good News of Jesus to them.

198. What was at the center of Peter's witness to this gathering? How did his preaching become a pointed invitation to them to believe in the Lord Jesus and be saved?

While Peter was speaking, the Pentecost event was repeated in Caesarea. The Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his relatives and friends. They began to speak in tongues and were praising God.

199. Why were the Jewish Christians from Joppa who came to Caesarea with Peter astonished at this outpouring of the Holy Spirit? What had happened in Joppa that brought Peter to Caesarea and into Cornelius's home and prepared him to understand and accept what God was doing? (See Acts 10:9–23.)

200. Why did Peter so pointedly ask his companions, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” What was the point of Peter’s wanting to follow God’s evidence of their having been accepted by God by baptizing them with water?

201. What is significant about these new Christians asking Peter to stay with them for a few days?

202. How does this First Lesson tie in with the emphasis of today’s Holy Gospel?

### **The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 5:1–8**

In today’s Epistle, John continues his emphasis that God is love, and that Jesus Christ is God’s Son in human flesh.

203. What is the essential characteristic of one who is born (again) of God? How does this rebirth evidence itself in a person’s life?

The Greek text uses two words in connection with “his commands”: *poiōmen*, “do” or “obey”; and *terōmen*, “keep” or “guard.” Rebirth and love for God are shown by guarding and cherishing the commands by which He shows His will for our lives, and by carrying them out in specific instances in our daily lives.

204. The Greek word for “burdensome” indicates a fiercely heavy weight. How is it that God’s commands, even though well beyond our ability to carry them out fully, are never crushingly burdensome? (See Galatians 3:13.)

205. In what sense does one born of God “overcome the world”? Why is our faith the indispensable instrument in gaining this victory?

206. Why did John emphasize Jesus’ coming by water *and blood*? Whose testimony regarding Jesus is then added by John?



John's emphasis is that there are *three* testimonies to the truth that Jesus is the Son of God: the Spirit, the water, and the blood. This is in accord with God's requirement in Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15, which require that the testimony of two or three, not only one, be required to convict individuals of serious crimes—a principle that is continued in our law courts today.

In the KJV and some other versions, an additional phrase crept into the text, which said that there are three who testify in heaven—the Father, the Word and the Spirit—to give added weight to the testimony. As true as it may be, it is not to be considered part of the text of First John.

207. What was John insisting has to remain at the center of the Christian faith?

# Lesson 13

## Ascension of Our Lord

### The Holy Gospel: Luke 24:44–53

In the Upper Room, on that Easter Sunday evening, there stood Jesus in the midst of His disciples. They were startled and frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus went out of His way to let His followers know that it truly was He—the same Jesus they had known before His death. He called attention to His hands and feet, where the wounds caused by the nails were visible. He invited them to touch Him and see for themselves that He had truly risen from the dead. He ate a piece of broiled fish in their presence.

Luke's Greek text uses the word *sarka*, translated "flesh"—a word that pointedly pertained to the physical body. Paul made our salvation dependent on the truth of Jesus' resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:12–19).

There in the Upper Room, Jesus reassured His disciples that His suffering and death were all part of the saving plan. He reminded them that He had told them beforehand that everything written about Him in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. This text has Jesus saying, "The Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead." The Greek text uses the little word *dei*, meaning "it is necessary." His suffering, dying, and resurrection *had* to happen! God's saving will *had* to be done! Luke said that Jesus had "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures," especially His suffering and dying and resurrection as the climax of God's saving plan.

202. According to Jesus' words to the disciples in the Upper Room, what is the key to understanding the Bible?

203. Jesus commissioned His followers to proclaim "repentance and forgiveness of sins" in His name to all nations. Why did He tell His disciples first to stay in the city instead of telling them to get right to work with their mission? What does this say to us about our own mission of representing Jesus in our world? How may we be clothed with power from on high for our mission?

204. The reaction of those who witnessed Jesus' ascension was to return to Jerusalem with great joy and to continually bless God in the temple. Why is Jesus' ascension, His return to heaven, a source of joy and a reason for praising God also for us?

## The First Lesson: Acts 1:1–11

Luke wrote his Gospel to instruct Theophilus regarding the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *Theophilus* means “friend of God.” Most scholars see him as an individual, probably of some position and prominence, for in his Gospel, Luke addressed him as “most excellent Theophilus.” Some, because of the name’s meaning, think Luke used it to address anyone who wants to be a friend of God. Acts is a sequel to Luke’s Gospel. It focuses on Jesus’ continuing presence and power and direction in the apostles through the Holy Spirit. Acts is sometimes called “The Gospel of the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus “ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father.” The apostles had been commissioned by Jesus and blessed with the Holy Spirit already in the Upper Room on Easter Sunday. In this lesson, Luke tells of Jesus giving them instructions through the Holy Spirit during the weeks that followed the resurrection.

205. Why didn’t Jesus just tell them, “You have your assignment; get to work!”

The apostles still didn’t understand the nature of the Kingdom Jesus was establishing. They asked, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

206. How are we too at times tempted to force our agenda on the Lord’s kingdom?

207. What did Jesus say His gift of the Holy Spirit would do for the apostles?

Jesus outlined the mission they would carry out for Him. Paraphrase Jesus’ words to fit our own location. As we hear Him describe its outreach, we can use adjectives to say that the mission is to be \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_.

Jesus’ ascension came to a climax when “a cloud took Him out of their sight.” Clouds were frequently the setting for theophanies in Scripture. Witnessing this event assured the apostles again that Jesus is \_\_\_\_.

208. What assurance did the angels bring the wondering apostles?

Luke listed the eleven apostles and the group who waited with them, which included Jesus’ mother, Mary, and His brothers, and tells us they “joined together constantly in prayer”—no doubt praising their living Lord and asking that His promise of power in the Holy Spirit be fulfilled (see 1:12–14). In our worship life, we, too, are “waiting” for Pentecost. We still exult in Easter praise, but we recognize also our need of power in the Holy Spirit to be faithful disciples as we carry out our commission to represent Jesus in our world.

209. How does this First Lesson tie in with the emphasis of today’s Holy Gospel?

## The Epistle for the Day: Ephesians 1:15–23

Paul told the Ephesian Christians that they had gained a reputation for \_\_\_ in the Lord Jesus and \_\_\_ toward all the saints.

210. Does our congregation enjoy a reputation like that of the Ephesian Christians?

211. What spiritual blessing did Paul keep asking God to give them?

212. If we know we have been saved by grace through Jesus, and we even believe that in His grace God chose us in Christ before He created the world, why should we, like Paul, keep on praying for “a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him”? How may we work at gaining that spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him that God wants to give us?

Paul tells us that it is when the eyes of our hearts are enlightened that we will be able to know the \_\_\_ to which He has called us, “the \_\_\_ of His \_\_\_ in the saints,” and “the \_\_\_ toward us who believe.”

213. What amazing thing did Paul say about the Christ—now exalted to God’s right hand, under whose feet God has placed all things—in His relationship to the Church?

214. What equally amazing thing does he say about the Church in its relationship with its Lord Jesus as the Head of everything as it carries out the mission He has assigned to us?

# Leader Guide

## How to Use the Leader Guide

Put in time and effort to make these thoughts your own. Notes on your Study Guide will help you remember them in class. If you think a point is stated particularly well in the Leader Guide, you may want to quote it—but do not use the Leader Guide continually as “the last word.” Your group’s ideas about themes and emphases and applications may differ from those in the Leader Guide. That’s okay; explore their insights. Since each study is a unit in itself, you may easily use substitute leaders. Provide them with a Study Guide and Leader Guide, with instructions for their use, well in advance.

Each lesson in the Leader Guide begins with the collect assigned for the day. You may use this prayer, or another prayer suitable for your needs, to begin your study. Suggested also are the hymns and songs, listed topically in the index of *Lutheran Service Book*, appropriate for the season or day. The index begins on page 993.

# Lesson 7

## The Resurrection of Our Lord

*Almighty God the Father, through Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, You have overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us. Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of our Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by Your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

OR

*O God, for our redemption You gave Your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross and by His glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of the enemy. Grant that all our sin may be drowned through daily repentance and that day by day we may arise to live before You in righteousness and purity forever; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

### The Holy Gospel: Mark 16:1–8

The first three paragraphs provide information about Jesus' burial and the vital importance to our faith of His resurrection. John tells us that Joseph and Nicodemus wrapped Jesus' body in linen with myrrh and aloes. These were probably in powdered form so they could be quickly sprinkled into the cloth as it was wrapped around the body. The women bought aromatic liquid spices with which to cleanse and anoint His body. Regarding the stone, a *lithos* is a prepared stone; a *petros* is a boulder.

107. The five elements of the angel's message and their significance to us: "*Do not be alarmed*"—the message of Easter eases our alarm, and while we continue to be amazed at the death and resurrection of the Son of God, we are not dumbfounded, but rejoice to praise Him today (see Romans 5:9–11). "*You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified*"—The One about whom we hear the Good News of His resurrection is none other than God's Man who gave Himself into death as God's atoning sacrifice for our sins (see Romans 4:25). "*He has risen*"—The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that He is indeed the Son of God and that our salvation has been accomplished (see Romans 1:1–5). "*He is not here. See the place where they laid Him*"—John tells us the grave cloths were lying on the burial ledge. The suggestion is that they were in the position where they had been placed, but now flat, no longer containing the body

(see John 20:1–9). “Go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you to Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you”—This Easter “Great Commission” still involves us in going and telling and assures us that Jesus will be with us in our mission for Him (see Acts 1:3–8).

108. Mark’s Gospel is generally thought to be Peter’s eyewitness account. Peter wanted this word of assurance to him recorded. Peter was mentioned specifically by the angel because he had denied the Lord and needed assurance of Jesus’ continued love.

109. Paul says 500 believers saw the risen Jesus at one time. To get a feel for this, compare that to the number of people your church will seat. It was important that the first Christians be able to reassure each other through this common experience. It was not just a small, select group who saw Jesus risen from the dead.

### **The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 25:6–9**

110. “On this mountain” refers back to the concluding verses of chapter 24, where the Lord is described as reigning on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem. In eschatological terms, we see this as a reference to the new Jerusalem, the eternal kingdom of our Lord. It is especially striking, and emphasizes the eschatological thrust of this pericope, that the feast of rich food will be prepared *for all peoples*. The prophecy of hope is not just for the people of Judah, but will find its ultimate fulfillment when the Good News of salvation in Jesus is proclaimed to all nations.

111. The covering cast over all peoples and the veil that is spread over all nations are illustrative of death. None can escape its reach. In ancient times, death was sometimes called “the great swallower.” Here, the Lord is described as the one who will swallow up death forever, and He will do it “on this mountain.” This refers ultimately to eternal life in the new Jerusalem (see 1 Corinthians 15:54–57). But it is striking that it was also geographically true that the One who won the victory gave up His life and rose again “on this mountain”—just outside the gates of Jerusalem. The great swallower was itself swallowed up by our Savior.

112. The promise that tears and reproaches—death and sorrow, disgrace and disadvantage—will be overcome and removed once for all belongs to all who will find eternal life through faith in Jesus, the promised Messiah. John repeated Isaiah’s picture as he was given a view of its fulfillment in his vision in Revelation.

113. “For the LORD has spoken” is like a great “Amen” at the end of the statement. When we say “Amen,” we are saying, “Yes, that certainly is true!” As the prophet brought this great eschatological assurance, his “Amen” was “The LORD [not Isaiah] has spoken.” Preachers need to be able to say “The Lord has spoken” when they have finished a sermon because they know they have proclaimed His Word.

114. The obvious tie to today’s Holy Gospel is its description of the removal of the shroud and the swallowing up of death. That was accomplished once for all by the risen Jesus—to which we say, “Amen! The Lord has spoken!”

### **The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 15:1–11**

The Study Guide describes the situation Paul confronted, a situation that is still current today. Help your group see the difference between the ideas and goals of dualism and the teachings and goals of the Christian faith. The Bible does not disparage physicality. It does not condemn our physical desires and appetites—only their sinful abuse. It assures us that the present creation itself, corrupted and suffering because of human sin, has been redeemed and will be renewed along with us when we receive our “adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (see Romans 8:18–25).

115. Receiving the message when it is heard is one thing; continuing in what the message means to us by having it apply to all of life needs to follow. If we do not hold fast to the Word, Paul says we may

end up having believed in vain. What is called for is more than an intellectual agreement with teachings, but a life lived in relation to the living Lord (see Matthew 13:3–9, 18–23). We may get a firmer grip on the Word and its influence in our lives by faithfully hearing it and studying it, always inviting the Holy Spirit to be our teacher and enabler (see Luke 11:27–28; John 14:26). Ignore the Word in daily life and you may be jeopardizing your relationship with Christ, for the dynamic that produces faith is in the hearing of the Word (see Romans 10:14–17).

116. The New Testament is nothing more or less than the inspired testimony of eyewitnesses that Jesus is God's Son, our risen Savior and Lord, which the Holy Spirit enables us to "see" and believe. The Christian faith is not just a transmission of ideas and teachings. It is historical, built upon events that happened according to God's saving will at the appropriate time and place. It involves a relationship with the historic figure who was at the center of those events.

That more than 500 saw the risen Jesus at one time effectively removes it from being just "the story of a few enthusiasts." It happened! All of them saw Jesus alive and they testified to each other of its truth! And, Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians, many of them were still alive when he was writing, still giving their testimony. Paul ended with his own experience of Jesus' resurrection and its power to change lives because he was the one who had transmitted the Gospel to the Corinthians.

Paul's experience with Jesus on the Damascus road was dramatic. The average Christian's experience and testimony are not that dramatic, but they can be equally personal. Parents, pastors, teachers, Christian friends, all may be the Holy Spirit's instruments as they bring their testimonies to those around them that Jesus is alive and is their Lord and Savior, and as they back up their testimonies with the examples of their Christian lives. We now are to find our own places in the long chain of "witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

117. By pointing to his calling and service as an apostle, Paul underscored the fact that God acts in pure grace as He carries out His saving will in drawing people to Jesus for eternal life. Paul had conscientiously rejected Jesus as the Christ and was actively opposing the Christian way. If he could be transformed by meeting the risen Jesus for himself into the apostle who "worked harder than any of them," then the grace of God in Christ can also transform us into believers and servants who have "seen" Jesus through the eyes of faith. As we, in the power of the Spirit, set ourselves to be disciples and not just believers, we, too, will be able to say, "By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain." It is true that many down through the centuries who have become champions for Christ have done so only after long, personal, spiritual struggles. Something that is hard won is always valued more. Martin Luther was one of these champions. Ask your group to name others. Conversely, we who grow up knowing Jesus all our lives may tend to take it all for granted and not display the great dedication of champions. But the Lord leads even "average Christians" through times of trial and testing, and they come away stronger in faith and more dedicated to their discipleship, and become conduits for His Spirit power to those around them (see 1 Peter 1:3–7).



# Lesson 8

## Second Sunday of Easter

*Almighty God, grant that we who have celebrated the Lord's resurrection may by Your grace confess in our life and conversation that Jesus is Lord and God; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

### The Holy Gospel: John 20:19–31

118. The peace the risen Jesus gives is not just an absence of turmoil in life. Through the assurance of the complete success of His saving work, He provides a positive peace with God that is ours at all times, also in times of turmoil. The peace Christ gives is intimately related to the mission that Jesus' followers have. But when we actively represent Jesus and proclaim God's truth, the world does not always accept it peacefully. We need strong inner peace to endure the world's sometimes rejection and ridicule and threats, and to persist in our calling.

119. Our proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus is part of the implementation of God's saving will for our world, just as Jesus' being sent to carry out the saving work in His life, death, and resurrection implemented God's saving will once for all and provided the basis for the Church's proclamation to the world of every age and place.

120. By means of His breath and Word, Jesus imparted the Holy Spirit to the apostles. In both Hebrew and Greek, the same word is used for "wind" and "spirit" and "breath"—*ruach* in Hebrew; *pneuma* in Greek. The gift of the Spirit on Easter Sunday enabled the disciples to believe in Jesus' resurrection and opened their understanding of their mission; the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost filled them with power for their work.

121. We call this authority the Office (or power) of the Keys. It is obviously to be asserted and applied only within the life of the Church. The key of the Gospel applied to repentant sinners opens heaven to them; the key of the Law applied to unrepentant sinners closes heaven to them. The Church happily announces forgiveness to the repentant in a formal way as part of our worship services.

122. Formally pronouncing the sins of those who are unrepentant of obvious, persistent, willful sins of commission or omission to be *not* forgiven is an attempt to help them be honest about their refusal to repent and see it as *de facto* rejection of Christ. It calls them to turn to Christ again. The spiritual health of a congregation and of its individual members requires that both keys be used conscientiously and pointedly.

123. Jesus dealt gently and patiently with Thomas because his reaction was still part of the first exposure of the disciples to the reality of His resurrection. Thomas had followed Jesus as His disciple—and he was to be one of His convinced, apostolic eyewitnesses, so Jesus gave him that experience very personally. We who live in the age of science, in which we look for scientific evidence to verify things, may be happy that this first-century questioner was given sufficient empirical evidence by Jesus to lead him to confess "My Lord and my God!" and to dedicate his life to the Gospel mission. Tradition says

Thomas was martyred in India. The Mar Thoma Church in today's India attributes its beginnings to the work of Thomas. There is a difference between honest questioning, which God honors as a search for truth, and skeptical unbelief (see Matthew 12:38–39). No Christian should use Thomas's experience as an excuse to adopt a skeptical, demanding approach regarding the Scripture and its witness to Jesus Christ.

124. John's purpose in writing his Gospel was to show Jesus to be the very Son of God and Savior of all. Thomas's coming to full conviction about this central truth of the Gospel after his initial reluctance and skepticism wrapped up John's emphasis nicely.

### **The First Lesson: Acts 4:32–35**

125. The Christians willingly shared everything they had because all the believers "were of one heart and soul." The apostles' continuing testimony to the resurrection of Jesus provided continuing Spirit power and grace to all of them. Our hearing the Gospel read in our services offers us the same.

126. This lesson's "with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" relates to the testimony of the apostles to Thomas—and the greater testimony supplied by Jesus Himself.

### **The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 1:1–2:2**

127. John was insisting that Jesus Christ is none other than the eternal Word of God in human flesh, who saved sinners through His life, death, and resurrection. He emphasized this to combat the teachings of Cerinthus, who was troubling and misleading many of the Christians of Asia with his mixing Greek philosophical thought into his teaching about Jesus. Cerinthus asserted that Jesus was a natural man who was filled with and used by the Logos to be the revealer of God, but from whom the Logos departed before He suffered and died. This incipient form of the Gnostic heresy rejected Jesus' death as atonement for sin because they considered what the physical body of Jesus did to be inconsequential. Cerinthus and his followers also practiced and encouraged a libertine lifestyle as an expression of their Christian freedom, consistent with their philosophical view of the Christian faith and life. They held that what you did physically did not matter as long as you had the spiritual *gnōsis*, "knowledge," that came from the Spirit.

128. Cerinthus and his followers had withdrawn from fellowship with those who still held to an inferior "blood theology." John wanted them back—but only on the basis of their acknowledging Jesus to be the Word of God made flesh to atone for human sin. At the Council of Nicaea, 325 AD, the Church formally rejected Gnosticism and its offshoot, Arianism. On the basis of apostolic testimony like that of John, the Church strongly formulated apostolic doctrine in the Nicene Creed: Jesus Christ is "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made. . . . For us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate." Today's interest in *The Da Vinci Code* has grown out of a renewal of Gnostic, "New Age" philosophy.

129. "God is light" speaks of God's holiness and righteousness; He is without flaw and always does what is right. God's light exposes our sins and forces us to confess them—but it also lets us see God's setting things right with us through Christ. The first indicator is living in the fellowship of Christ's body, the Church. The benefits of living in Christ's light are that we have fellowship in His name with other Christians, and that we live in daily awareness that His blood cleanses us from sin as we "agree with God" about our sins, confess our sin and need, and look to Christ for forgiveness.

130. Walking in darkness means rejecting God's light in Christ. Essentially, it is repeating the original sin by rejecting the One who is God's Son and our Savior from sin (see John 3:16–21). This results in self-deception in which people imagine they need no forgiveness. Super-religious Pharisees and

secular New Age humanists of every era are prime examples. The one thing God cannot deal with is when “we say we have no sin.” Then we will not be looking to His Son for God’s solution to our sin—forgiveness and new life. All of this said to the superior *gnōsis* people that they were missing the mark in not recognizing Jesus Christ as true God in human flesh, who came to offer Himself in atoning sacrifice as God’s own light and life giver. When they diminished Christ’s person, they were robbing themselves of the assurance of His saving work. When they persisted in walking in fleshly darkness, they were fooling themselves about it not affecting their relationship with the Light Giver.

131. God’s forgiving love encourages us to not sin as it encourages us to keep Jesus always at the center of life. The Greek word for sin used here denotes “missing the mark.” God’s forgiving love encourages us to live in active love toward Him and toward one another—and thus God’s intentions for us are approached more nearly. Later, John said it clearly: “We love because He first loved us” (4:19). We live with our failures by living always under God’s grace in Christ. The solution is not to be found in our own self-styled wisdom or in imperfect works of penance to make up for our failures. It is to be found only in our living under God’s grace in Christ, always accepting and building our lives on His saving gifts of forgiveness and righteousness. John pointed to Jesus as our *Parakletos*, our advocate. This was a legal term. It pictured Jesus coming to “stand beside us” to plead our case before His heavenly Father on the firm basis of our redemption through His atoning sacrifice.

132. That Jesus atoned for the sins of the whole world assures us that we are included—and encourages us to bring the Gospel to others.

# Lesson 9

## Third Sunday of Easter

*O God, through the humiliation of Your Son You raised up the fallen world. Grant to Your faithful people, rescued from the peril of everlasting death, perpetual gladness and eternal joys; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

### The Holy Gospel: Luke 24:36–49

133. Jesus is alive, and His work as Savior is completed and completely successful. These are the sources of true peace for those who believe in Him. As the Risen One, He truly is the Prince of Peace. At first His disciples were overwhelmed with amazement and joy, but the peace of God that surpasses understanding was coming to their lives.

134. Jesus' appearance without coming in through the door indicates that His glorified body is not limited by time and space. Jesus' invitation to touch Him and to examine His hands and feet gave them empirical evidence of His bodily resurrection. Luke, a physician, aware that Greek thought denied the possibility of resurrection of a dead body, would surely have been interested in an accurate description of what Jesus' rising from the dead entailed. His Greek quoted Jesus as saying that He had *sarka*, "flesh," and *ostea*, "bones," both of which emphasize the physicality of His resurrected body. Some still stumble at the bodily resurrection of Jesus and speak only of His spirit surviving, but this scientist testified that Jesus had returned to life in His humanity, body and spirit. Jesus' hands and feet and side bore the wounds made by the nails and the spear, so there was no mistaking that He was indeed the one they had seen crucified. Jesus ate in their presence to demonstrate that He was alive in His human body, though now it was a glorified body. All of this underscores the fact that when He said "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20), He meant it. He is with us always, everywhere, as our Savior and *Brother*.

Just as He had for the two going to Emmaus, Jesus now led the assembled disciples into understanding of Old Testament prophecies about the Christ.

135. "The Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" was the Jewish way of referring to all of the Scriptures by naming the three sections of we call the Old Testament.

136. Jesus still refers us to the sacred Scriptures and opens our minds to the truth through the Spirit of truth.

137. The apostles of Jesus were to proclaim "repentance and forgiveness of sins," the Good News of Jesus to be proclaimed in His name to all nations. That they were to begin their mission in Jerusalem is most natural. The Jews were the people of the covenant promise of grace and blessing given to their father Abraham. Jerusalem was the center of their hopes. It is there and to them that the Good News was to be proclaimed first. They were to wait in Jerusalem for "the promise of [Jesus'] Father," the Holy Spirit. Then they would be "clothed with power from on high." The basic elements of the message about

Jesus then and now are these: Jesus is the Son of God, who was given into death for our sins and was raised for our justification.

138. The double dynamic is this: The Word of Jesus is the power of God that leads to repentance and to receiving forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus. Both are essential. Repentance without forgiveness leads to despair; forgiveness without repentance is a “cheap grace” that is not life renewing.

## **The First Lesson: Acts 3:11–21**

139. Peter used the favorite Jewish ways of speaking about the covenant Lord. He is the one who established His covenant with their ancestors, and the phrase “God of our fathers” brought the historic faith into their own time frame and identified Peter and John with their hearers. They were Jews talking to Jews about the Jew who is the fulfillment of the covenant. “His servant Jesus” tied Jesus in the minds of his hearers to Isaiah’s prophecies about the Servant of the Lord. “The Holy and Righteous One” and “the Author of life” both boldly proclaimed the deity of Jesus Christ as God’s promised servant.

140. The key thrust of apostolic preaching was always that Jesus, the crucified Messiah, arose from the dead and continues to offer new life to all who believe in Him. The apostles told of Jesus’ life and death, but they saw themselves mainly as “witnesses of His resurrection.”

The essence of sin is a break in the relationship with God—someone turned away from God and turned in on himself or herself in self-will and self-love. The essence of repentance, then, is more than just “being sorry.” It includes turning to God to enjoy renewed relationship with Him through His gracious, forgiving love in Christ.

141. A Christian’s sinning out of ignorance or human frailty does not break the faith relationship with Jesus, but willful sinning with knowledge and understanding repeats the original sin and says no to Jesus (see Hebrews 10:26–31). Also, deliberate sin is forgiven in God’s grace when the sinner is led to sincere, deliberate repentance. We need always to remember, however, that deliberate sin is spiritually deadening. When persisted in, it eliminates the very desire for a real relationship with God and makes real repentance less likely.

142. Peter promised these blessings: repenting and turning to the Lord removes the negative as sins are blotted out, and brings the positive of times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. Peter added the interesting thought that their repentance and turning to the Lord—and each person’s repentance and turning to the Lord since then—brings Christ’s return in glory to establish His eternal kingdom one step closer, as it accomplishes that individual part of God’s will and purpose for the salvation of all.

143. Peter quoted Scripture to show that he was not proclaiming something strange and new, but the fulfillment of what the sacred Scriptures of the Jews had promised for centuries. We want preachers to be able to say to us, “Thus says the Lord!” and not to give just their own opinions about spiritual matters.

144. The First Lesson shows Peter carrying out, in a life situation, his commission to be an apostle of Jesus.

## **The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 3:1–7**

**Fill-in answer:** The kind of love the Father has given us in Christ may be seen in the fact that we are called children of God.

145. Christians may be recognized by the world in general because of humanitarian service—as the late Mother Theresa of Calcutta is honored by Christian and non-Christian alike. They may also be honored for their secular achievements in politics or business or science or the arts. But for Christians to be honored because we are born again as children of God through faith in Jesus is out of the question. The gift of rebirth in the power of the Holy Spirit is meaningless to those who have not themselves received the gift and its assurances. The world looks at outward actions; it doesn’t give credence to the inner

beliefs of Christians as the basis of their actions. Witness the interview of a Christian athlete or other celebrity who credits the blessing of the Lord Jesus for his or her achievements. The interviewer usually doesn't know how to handle this, and the network is eager to get on to something else. The world sees the Christian faith as just one of many ways by which people aim at becoming "good people." It stumbles over testimony about being reborn to be "a new person" through faith in the one Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

146. Some Christians put down those who do not possess certain spiritual gifts or qualities. Individuals in a congregation may feel they are out on the fringe of congregational life because the regulars and leaders constitute a clique concerned largely with itself. A congregation led by an influential pastor may one-up other congregations that are not growing as rapidly or don't have as varied a program of activities or services. Think of other possibilities.

**Fill-in answers:** John wrote, "What we will be has not yet appeared." His words suggest it is sufficient to know that "we are God's children now."

147. We shall be like Jesus—with glorified bodies like His (Philippians 3:20–21); in full awareness of God's presence with us (Revelation 21:1–4); in our "reigning" in glory with Him (2 Timothy 2:11–13); and in having God at the center of every aspect of our lives (Revelation 7:13–17).

148. The hope of eternal life we have in Christ encourages us to begin living an other-worldly life, different from the general society around us. (In Bible terms, *holy* and *pure* mean "different from," "separated from.") Verse 5 adds the motivational factor of always remembering that Jesus came to take away our sins. We love because He loved first.

**Fill-in answers:** John wrote: "No one who abides in Him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen Him or known Him." This section ends with a positive statement of Christian living: "Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as He is righteous." It is helpful to see that verse 8 continues the either/or contrast: "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil."

149. John was not suggesting that Christians can become holy and pure—except through faith in Jesus. He was concerned about willful sinning that in effect says no to Jesus and damages or breaks the faith relationship with Him.

150. Both believing and obeying are encouraged. What greater encouragement to believe can we receive than to be reminded about God's love in Christ that declares us to be God's children? What greater encouragement to obey can we enjoy than to be reminded that no one who lives in Him keeps on sinning, and that the one who *practices* righteousness is righteous and does what is right—because Jesus is righteous and did what is right? The two are inseparable in God's will and purpose for us. He has saved us in Christ for new life in Him. It is helpful, however, to distinguish between *believing* and *obeying* in terms of justification and sanctification. We are *justified* by faith alone, trusting Jesus and what He accomplished for us, not by our obedient Christian life, which is always flawed by our falling and failing. But a justification devoid of sanctification is no justification. "Faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26).

151. Clearly, only Christ's Gospel in Word and Sacraments strengthens our faith, not our good works. But our "obeying," that is, our faith-enabled, active obedience to God's will for our lives, does give our "believing" a chance to work and to grow.

# Lesson 10

## Fourth Sunday of Easter

*Almighty God, merciful Father, since You have wakened from death the Shepherd of Your sheep, grant us Your Holy Spirit that when we hear the voice of our Shepherd we may know Him who calls us each by name and follow where He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

### The Holy Gospel: John 10:11–18

In playing on the Scripture's metaphor "The Lord [Yahweh] is my shepherd," Jesus surely was identifying Himself as that Lord, the Promised One of the covenant. Compare John 8:48–59 and you see that the Jewish leaders, who opposed Jesus, clearly recognized His claims when He said "I AM" in such forceful ways.

152. The first evidence of Jesus' being *the* Good Shepherd is that He lays down His life for the sheep. Jesus stated this twice for emphasis.

153. No one could possibly take Jesus' life from Him against His will (see John 18:1–11, 36). That He laid down His life of His own accord emphasizes His full, willing participation with His Father in the plan of salvation (see Philippians 2:5–8). His death was no accident, nor was it just another human tragedy. It was the purposeful act of Jesus' will as the Savior of the world (see John 12:23–33).

154. In that culture, a shepherd owned the sheep. He cared for his family's flock and was born to the task. He focused on the welfare of the sheep and was ready to face hardship and danger for their benefit. A hired man would think largely of the pay he would receive for "doing a job." He would not be ready to risk himself for sheep that belonged to someone else. Jesus' metaphor says He was not just "doing a job" in which He had no real personal interest. As the eternal Word, He participated in the divine determination to save lost mankind. As we see Him loving us even to the point of laying down His life for us, we are assured that He will never leave us nor forsake us in our daily needs. Under-shepherds of the Good Shepherd must remember that they themselves and the flock they care for belong to the Good Shepherd. They are not to concern themselves with what *they* get out of their work—possessions, popularity, power (see Matthew 4:1–11). Instead, they must learn to imitate the Good Shepherd and lay down their lives in service to the flock He entrusts to them.

155. The second evidence of Jesus' being *the* Good Shepherd is His knowing His sheep. Jesus knows His sheep as intimately as He knows His heavenly Father—with whom He is one.

156. That Jesus knows us that intimately may be disconcerting at times, for He searches the thoughts and intents of our hearts. But in this picture, Jesus intends to give us comfort and assurance. Though He knows the sins and failures that are part of our lives, they do not separate us from Him who laid down His

life for us as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. He forgives us daily, and in His perfect knowledge of our needs, He is at work in all things for our good.

157. Some think of the “other sheep” as “good people” who follow other religions, as if in the end it won’t matter whether you know and believe Jesus, *the* Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep. For the people to whom Jesus was talking, the “other sheep” were the Gentiles, formerly outsiders, but now to be included by the Good Shepherd. We who stem from Gentile stock are these other sheep, now part of the Shepherd’s flock. It is urgent that He gather people from all the nations and make us all one flock; He’s the only one who can. Jesus’ words remind us that the Church is one in Christ (see Ephesians 4:1–6; Galatians 3:26–29). In our denominationally divided Church world, Jesus’ emphasis might be seen as encouragement to look out and recognize other kinds of Christians as part of the flock. When we confess “one holy Christian and apostolic Church,” we acknowledge that all who believe and follow the Lord Jesus Christ are members of His Church, the Church that only God sees, the one Church that finally counts. We see “the Churches” made up of people who publicly say they are believers and disciples, but Jesus said there may be weeds among the wheat. Our view of “the Churches” makes us recognize that there are differences in teaching and practice and tradition, which are not unimportant—and when they impinge on the Gospel, we remember that Jesus said that not everyone who says “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who are part of the Holy Christian Church will, of course, be part of and make their public confession in one of “the Churches.”

### **The First Lesson: Acts 4:1–12**

158. The two elements of Peter’s testimony were Law and Gospel, embodied in his words: “Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.”

159. Peter’s quoting Scripture is especially significant in view of the setting. He was “instructing” the Jews’ top theologians to convince them that the Scriptures supported his testimony that Jesus is indeed the promised Christ.

160. Jesus is not just *a* savior but *the* Savior because He is the only-begotten Son of God, the eternal Word, the Creator of all that is made, who became flesh to redeem and rescue sinful humanity. Unless He is God, and unless He accomplished fully what He came to do, we have no real basis for certainty. But He is, and He did, and we do! (See Colossians 2:9–15; Romans 5:6–11.) And since He is the one and only Son of God, any suggestion that there are other ways to eternal life with God is out of the question (see John 14:6–11).

161. The beggar walked and jumped and praised God. The crowd was filled with wonder and amazement, and many believed. Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and gave bold testimony. The religious authorities were impressed, but hardened their resolve to put a stop to the Christ movement.

162. God always gives people freedom to say no to Him and the Gospel—and many refuse and reject the efforts of the Spirit of Jesus to open their minds and hearts to the Good News. He wants a *willing* yes, which means it has to be possible for us to say no to Him. When we are led to say yes to Jesus, it is not because we are better people. We do not boast about receiving Jesus as our Savior. We gratefully praise God for His *grace* to us (see Ephesians 2:8–10).

163. Peter’s words in this First Lesson are an example of “preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins” that pointed to the One who laid down His life for us as the Good Shepherd, as it was begun in Jerusalem by the Spirit-powered apostles.

### **The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 3:16–24**

164. Active Christian love says to the recipient of a Christian’s loving action that the Lord is indeed at work in our world through people He has touched—and it may encourage his response to the Lord’s



love too. Active Christian love, practiced in Jesus' name, reminds the Christians who are giving the active love that "we are of the truth." Being active in love "[reassures] our [hearts] before Him" because we see that we are walking with Him in the way, "[keeping] His commandments and [doing] what pleases Him." We always walk in His grace and enjoy His continuing forgiveness and know we are walking with Him, even with all our stumbling and failing.

165. We silence accusing and condemning hearts by remembering that "God is greater than our [hearts]." He knows everything, also our falling short of the love we should be practicing, and He loves us still because He looks at us through Jesus. He did not come to condemn, but to save. Living under the grace of God and enjoying clear consciences because we know we are not willfully involved in persistent, deliberate sin and are doing our best to please Him, we "have confidence before God" and continually communicate with Him as our loving Father (see 2 Corinthians 5:7-10). In its Greek root, *parresia* "confidence" means "openness" or "frankness." Confidence before God means that nothing is hindering our prayers (see 1 Peter 3:7). It is the general experience that when Christians get involved in situations of persistent, willful sin they stop worshiping with their congregation and even stop talking meaningfully with God in prayer. Those who live under grace and obey God's commands "receive from Him everything we ask."

166. God's two basic commands are "Believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as He has commanded us." Believing God's love in Jesus, which is always the result of the Spirit's work in us through the Gospel, opens a relationship with God in which we want to please Him through active love for one another. We might think our love is our gift to God, but also our active Christian love is a result of the work of the Spirit of Jesus in us. What God commands He enables! And we give Him glory and thanks and praise!

167. Knowing we have the Spirit living in us is not a matter of our "*feeling* the Spirit." We may indeed feel that exhilaration at times, but there are also times when the feeling is absent, so it is not a dependable basis for assurance. Our confessing "Jesus is Lord!" in faith, our having been baptized in His name, and our commitment to loving one another as He loved us are assurance to us that the Spirit has worked in us, is working in us, and will continue to work in us, even when we don't *feel* His presence. Then we quiet our consciences and seek to obey Him on the basis of His good Word to us, and our assurance is based on His objective truth, not on our subjective experience.

168. We have confidence before God (the Father) through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit lives in us, leading us to obey His commands and live in Him.

# Lesson 11

## Fifth Sunday of Easter

*O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

### The Holy Gospel: John 15:1–8

**Fill-in answer:** It is the fruit that is the focal point in Jesus' picture. He does not make us His own just to take us to heaven someday, but to make us His kingdom, so we live under His gracious rule in love and service here and now.

169. In Old Testament Scripture, Israel was pictured as the Lord's vine or vineyard (see Isaiah 5:1–7). Attachment to Judaism and the expression of faith through its religious systems was intended to promote spiritual vitality, but it had degenerated into legalism, and, as is always true of legalistic religion, it did not produce spiritual vitality broadly among the people. Jesus, the true Israel, pointed to Himself as the true Vine because attachment to Him does produce God's desired result: new people who live in a new faith/love relationship with Him.

170. Pruning is intended to prompt Christians to live up to their full potential in faith and life.

171. The fruit is not just "believing in Jesus." That is pictured already in the fact that the branches are on the Vine. The fruit the Father looks for is the expression of that faith in a Christian confession of Christ as Savior and Lord, and in Christian love and service. When we are fruit-bearing Christians, others may see that the Lord is at work in us (see John 13:34–35). The end result is that they are led to glorify the Father (see Matthew 5:14–16).

172. Branches that bear no fruit—those who do not want to mature as disciples into active expressions of Christian virtue and love—are cut off because the life force has not produced its desired result. Being cut off and burned points finally to Judgment Day, but the dying takes place in this life. This is a stern warning against those who are neither serious about being disciples nor want to catch and display the spirit of their Master. To the Church's life, it says that inactive, nominal members should be brought to an either/or, both for the sake of their being honest with themselves and the Lord, and for the sake of the health of the Church. The whole process of loving discipline outlined in Matthew 18:15–18 is involved. Disciples who are bearing fruit are pruned to push them toward full production.

173. The essential requirement for branches if they are to bear fruit is that they remain firmly attached to the vine. Apart from Christ, our Vine, we can do nothing; attached to Him through faith, He can do all that He desires through us

174. The close relationship with Christ is continued through Word and Sacrament. We become more firmly attached, growing in grace and the knowledge of Jesus, as we are led by the Spirit into deeper appreciation of the mysteries of the Gospel. We can increase our love by consciously exercising it in Jesus' name, finding a need and filling it. Remember, this is not *erōs* or *philia*, loves that are prompted by the object of the love. This is agape, love that is given out of a determined will.

175. Jesus promises those so attached to Him, "Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." This is fully appreciated when our prayers reflect what He desires in us, and we are led to pray, "Your will be done in us and through us."

## **The First Lesson: Acts 8:26–40**

176. The Ethiopian official was reading from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Greek had become the international commercial language, and it allowed people from different nationalities and languages to converse with each other. This is why also the New Testament was written in Greek by the apostles and evangelists.

177. As he told the Good News of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, Philip surely also spoke of the coming of the Holy Spirit and of being baptized in Jesus' name for life in the kingdom of God. The Ethiopian official was eager to receive this blessing, the fulfillment of all he had hoped for when he first pursued his interest in the Lord's covenant. He wanted to be baptized then and there.

178. The New Testament says clearly that Jesus has removed all former distinctions between people (see Galatians 3:28). There is no "chosen people" anymore—except as people are chosen by God's grace in Christ. Any sinner qualifies for that blessing!

179. Instances such as this and Paul's leaving some new converts virtually on their own as he planted churches on his mission journeys show the confidence the Early Church had in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus had opened the apostles' understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures' teaching about Him, they expected the Spirit of Jesus to do the same for new Christians as they studied the Scriptures.

180. The First Lesson shows that the faithful attachment and loving obedience to Jesus of those who are His will produce the fruit of new Christians—even from among Gentiles and from those formerly disqualified.

## **The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 4:1–21**

181. In that setting, with a concern about Gnostic infiltration, the test of teachings was "Does it teach that Jesus the Christ has come in the flesh?" The incarnation of the eternal Word to be Representative Man, the Second Adam, is at the core of the Good News of salvation. John reassured his readers that the One who was in them is greater than the one who was in the Gnostic teachers. They were from the world and spoke about receiving spiritual knowledge, *gnōsis*, in worldly philosophical terms. But the apostles spoke the "foolish" truth of God as the Holy Spirit enabled and guided them—the mysterious, surprising truth of God's Son, Jesus Christ, coming in the flesh and providing for sinful humans redemption in the blood of Christ.

182. God's purpose for us as disciples of Jesus is that we learn to express agape love in interaction with each other and our world. Unless that is taking place in us, we have not fully appreciated the quality of His love for us, and His purposes are being frustrated. As believers in Jesus Christ, we "know" God intimately when His love is active in and through us as disciples of Jesus. The love of God is unexpected and undeserved. Receiving God's love in faith and applying it to life, we become a new creation. God's undeserved love prompts us, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to give the same love in Jesus' name to others who are also undeserving.

183. If we don't recognize, believe, and apply the truth that agape love begins with God, and that our learning to show agape love is a blessing that He works in us through the Holy Spirit, we begin to think that it is our good deeds that win us God's favor. To the extent that we credit ourselves in this process of salvation, we are not crediting Jesus, believing and trusting Him for salvation, and glorifying Him in everything. Then, in doubt, we ask, "Am I doing enough, and doing it well enough?" And we all know the answer to that question.

184. We know we abide in God and He in us "because He has given us of His Spirit." The Spirit leads us to "testify that the Father has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world" and to "[confess] that Jesus is the Son of God." Knowing that God lives in us, and we in Him, enables us to keep on knowing and believing the love God has for us. Every preacher knows that his own faith is strongest when it is his aim to convict and enlighten others through Law and Gospel.

185. God's person and character and His greatest glory are most clearly seen in His agape, in which He reaches out to rescue sinners. You may not turn it around because "Love is God" would put an abstract, impersonal quality into the place of the highest Person. Our world does this, unfortunately. But any suggestion of this is a denial of God as the one who acted personally and willingly and deliberately in love to save us.

186. The goal of God's love is people who learn to love in response to His love. As the presence of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in our lives is evidenced in our learning to love others, we appreciate His love for us all the more. The way we learn to love in Jesus' name is to consciously practice agape love that seeks the welfare of those around us.

187. The perfect love that drives out fear is the perfect love Jesus displayed as He brought God's saving will and purpose to completion. Drawn to a new relationship with God through faith in Jesus, we gain a confidence that dispels fear as we look to the return of our Lord and Savior (see 2 Timothy 1:12). Any Christian who is not perfected in love and is still fearful of the Day of Judgment can begin by confessing this openly to God, asking the Spirit to guide into the full assurances of the Gospel, then consciously carry out the exercises of discipleship: hearing the Word, receiving the Sacrament, confessing the faith, worshiping the Lord, supporting the Gospel ministry, and seeking opportunities for service in home and family, in the Church family, in the community and in the world.

188. Genuine love demonstrates itself. Real love of God is demonstrated in love of neighbor.

# Lesson 12

## Sixth Sunday of Easter

*O God, the giver of all that is good, by Your holy inspiration grant that we may think those things that are right and by Your merciful guiding accomplish them; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

### The Holy Gospel: John 15:9–17

189. “Abide in My love” means living under the Good News of forgiveness and eternal life, continually appreciating and enjoying the mercies of God that are new to us daily.

190. We grow in appreciation of Jesus’ love for us as we deepen our understanding of the Holy Scriptures that convey His Good News to us, and as we experience the truth of it in lives as His disciples (see John 7:16–17; 2 Peter 3:14–18). You cannot live in the love of Jesus and at the same time willfully refuse to obey His commands to love and serve those around you. Jesus’ basic command is “Love one another as I have loved you.”

191. Love for God is not sitting around and telling Him how much we love Him; it is actively loving, in practical ways, those around us, whom God loves just as He loves us. When this is missing, one’s love for God is questionable.

192. The highest expression of love is laying down one’s life for others, as Jesus did. The most difficult part of this is not the occasional dramatic display of spontaneous love that leads people to risk their lives to be of help; it is the everyday determined agape love in Jesus’ name that consistently puts interests and welfare of others ahead of our own.

193. We fool ourselves if we think our joy in Jesus will be full while giving Him only half-hearted devotion and occasional obedience. True joy comes in resting in Jesus’ love and in allowing Him to love others through us.

194. Slaves are expected to obey orders without question; friends are given understanding of the will and purpose behind the orders. In His humanity, Jesus “learned” from His Father the secret of a love so amazing that it was ready to offer the supreme sacrifice to save sinners and renew relationship with them. As Jesus’ friends, we know that it is God’s purpose that we, too, learn this secret, and learn to express it as we interact with those around us. Jesus called it denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Him, but here He says that doing that results in full joy.

195. In Jesus’ day, men were encouraged to choose a teacher and to attach themselves to him as his disciples, to learn from him and to catch his spirit. But Jesus told His disciples that with Him, it is different. *He* chooses and reaches out and calls and enables. They were His handpicked men, chosen by grace, on whom He was counting. Later, when the Church was determining the canon, the “boundaries,” of the New Testament, a primary question was “Is the writing apostolic—from an apostle or someone

closely associated with an apostle?" The Church did not want second- or third-hand authority, but the authority of the Spirit-filled men who had been chosen by Jesus to be His apostles. Thus, it is appropriate to say that the Church "received" the Scriptures. The Lutheran Confessions call the prophetic and apostolic Word the only source and norm of Christian doctrine.

196. God's gracious choosing surely does apply also to us, out of the mystery of His eternal predestining in grace. Why us and not others? That's a mystery we have to leave in God's gracious will and providence, and respond in faith and thankfulness. God's intention for all of us is that we faithfully believe and proclaim the Gospel to our dying world. What our own particular assignment may be as part of God's intention for us is a question that each of us must determine with God's help. Abilities and opportunities differ; the goal of glorifying our Lord is the same.

197. When we remain firm in faith and are actively serving in love, we enjoy clear channels of communication with our Father, and we learn to shape our prayers so they are in accord with His will for us.

### **The First Lesson: Acts 10:34–48**

198. At the center of Peter's witness was "They put Him to death by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him on the third day and made Him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead." The apostles consistently referred to themselves as "witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus." Peter's preaching included both Law and Gospel: "He is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead" and "Everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name." His hearers had to reckon with God's judgment of sin, but they also heard the Good News of forgiveness through faith in Jesus.

199. The Old Testament's assurance that they were God's "chosen people" and its requirement that God's people remain separate from "the nations" easily had become for them a source of a sense of superiority that looked down on other peoples as unworthy. And here these "unworthies"—even hated Romans—were being blessed by God, just as the apostles and others were on the Day of Pentecost. It was hard to understand. In Joppa, Peter had received God's instruction through the vision of the sheet filled with animals, clean and unclean, and had been told by God, "What God has made clean, do not call common" (Acts 10:15). He saw the fulfillment of that statement in the home of Cornelius.

200. The Jewish Christians who had accompanied him had witnessed God's outpouring of the Spirit and the gift of tongues on Gentiles, and Peter wanted their full agreement about the Romans' eligibility for Baptism in the name of the Lord, which would place God's name on them, bless them with the indwelling Holy Spirit, and formally acknowledge them as believers and members of the Church. Perhaps Peter was anticipating a reaction in Jerusalem to acceptance of Gentiles into the Church and was solidifying their eyewitness testimony for that occasion. Baptism with water in the name of Jesus—and later using the whole formula of Baptism that is part of the Great Commission—confirmed the Spirit's having led people to confess Jesus as their Lord and Savior. It blessed them with being "born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5), which Jesus said was essentially necessary for entrance into the kingdom of God.

201. Their desire for more instruction in the Word was the Spirit-guided response to their conversion experience and Baptism. They were reacting just as the 3,000 who repented, believed, and were baptized acted on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:42). Instruction in the Word is still part of the ministry of the Church to baptized Christians.

202. The experience in Caesarea was teaching them what the Father had taught Jesus: that salvation is for all.

## The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 5:1–8

203. Essentially, the one born of God believes that Jesus is the Christ. The evidence of rebirth to faith in Jesus is love for our heavenly Father, prompting love for others who are children in God's family through faith in Him.

204. God's commands are not crushingly burdensome because Christ has redeemed us from the crushing weight of the Law's judgment of our failures, and because when He commands us to love and serve, His Holy Spirit is right there to enable us.

205. Obedience to God's will is *willingly* given to the One who loved us first. As we learn to obey in the specifics of daily living, we learn that God's commands are not given to spoil our fun but to protect us from life's negatives and to bless us with life's positives. "The world" tempts us to make the temporary central; the Spirit leads the born again to recognize and pursue eternal values in relationship with the Lord Jesus. Our faith brings the continuing influence of the Holy Spirit into our lives, implementing eternal values and providing Spirit power for our victory (see Romans 13:11–14). The victory of faith is never just theoretical; it is always life related.

206. John's Gospel and First Letter were written to counter the beginnings of the Gnostic heresy. *Gnōsis* means "knowledge." Some were combining Greek thought with Christian teachings to suggest that real inner knowledge of God comes directly from the Spirit instead of through the Gospel of Jesus. They saw Jesus as a man to whom this Spirit came at His Baptism, enabling Him to be the revealer of the Father, but taught that the Spirit left Jesus before His suffering and death. John was insisting here that "the blood," Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice, is as necessary for salvation as "the water," Jesus' Baptism, at which the Spirit filled Him for His work as Teacher and Savior. John added, "And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth."

207. John was insisting that the cross and the empty tomb, not just Jesus' Baptism and His being blessed with the Holy Spirit, are at the center of the New Testament proclamation.

# Lesson 13

## Ascension of Our Lord

*Almighty God, as Your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, ascended into the heavens, so may we also ascend in heart and mind and continually dwell there with Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

### The Holy Gospel: Luke 24:44–53

In writing to the Corinthian Christians, who had trouble with the concept of a bodily resurrection because of the pervasive influence of the philosophy of dualism in Greek culture, St. Paul made an issue of Jesus' resurrection as the proof of our salvation. Dualism saw spirit as good and matter as less than good, even evil. Dualists had difficulty accepting the idea that God, whom they saw as the Ultimate Spirit, would send His Son really to come into the flesh and really to be one of us as a human being. This outlook carried over into doubting the bodily resurrection of Jesus and disbelief in the resurrection of Christians to eternal life. But Paul made our salvation dependent on the truth of Jesus' resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:12–19).

202. The key to proper understanding of the Bible is recognizing the surprising Good News that God's Son truly became a man to redeem lost humanity. All other teachings have to be understood in ways that will serve that central truth (see 1 John 4:1–3). This is the only key that opens all of Scripture to our faith and understanding.

203. The apostles were not to get right to work but were to wait for "the promise of My Father upon you." The work they were to do would not be accomplished by purely human means. It would require the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit. Still today, we are dependent on the gracious, life-giving power of the Holy Spirit to convert people and lead them to faith in Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 12:3). This says two things to us about our own mission: first, we fool ourselves if we think we can accomplish this through our own logical argument or our own forceful presentation; it is the Word of Christ that touches hearts. Second, we may take heart in seeing that we are not expected to accomplish what is impossible for us. We are to be faithful in proclaiming Christ as clearly and as winsomely as we can, but the Spirit is the only one who can touch hearts and make our witness effective. The heavenly Father will give us the Holy Spirit when we ask Him in the name of Jesus to send Him to us with power for our ministry (see Luke 11:9–13). The power of the Spirit is available to us for our own faith and life and for our proclamation also when we are focused on the Word of God, the Gospel of Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 2:1–5, 14–16).

204. Jesus' ascension has been called "the coronation of the God-man." He ascended bodily, still our brother in the flesh, though now with a glorified body. It is none other than our Savior, our brother Jesus, who now wears the crown of glory in heaven and rules all things for the benefit of His people on earth (see Ephesians 1:16–23). That has to be the most uplifting source of joy, the most solid basis for our confidence in proclaiming Him Savior and Lord, and the greatest reason for praising God in our words and in our service.



## The First Lesson: Acts 1:1–11

205. In the Upper Room, Jesus had blessed His disciples with the Holy Spirit, who caused them to believe in Him as the crucified and risen Redeemer, and during His appearances He had instructed them through the same Spirit. But now they were moving toward being given “fire-power” for their work! They could not yet “get to work” because their mission would depend on the power and blessing of the Holy Spirit. It would not succeed just through their own wisdom and skills. Only the Holy Spirit can touch hearts and tie people in faith and life to Jesus Christ.

206. The apostles still labored under the lifelong influence of Jewish anticipation of an earthly Messiah-King in an earthly kingdom of Israel. We too can impose our agenda on the Kingdom: judging the Church by outward qualities such as number of members, buildings, financial resources, or impressive programs.

207. The gift of the Spirit would give the apostles power for their mission and would enable their Gospel proclamation so it would lead people to life in Christ.

**Fill-in Answers:** In paraphrasing to your location, consider city, county/state/country, an ethnic group in your community, and the world. Using adjectives, we could say that the mission is to be local, national, ethnic, and international.

The ascension of Jesus assured the apostles and assures us that Jesus is God. His ascension exalted Him also according to His human nature to glory as the Father’s “right-hand man.” The final part is still to come when He returns in glory.

208. The angels assured the apostles that the same Jesus (the God-Man, our Savior and Brother) would return in glory. At that time, Paul said, everyone will acknowledge that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

209. The ascension of Jesus was an essential aspect of the glory for which He prayed in His High Priestly Prayer in the Holy Gospel.

## The Epistle for the Day: Ephesians 1:15–23

**Fill-in Answers:** Paul told the Ephesian Christians that they had gained a reputation for faith in the Lord Jesus and love toward all the saints.

210. Let your group analyze your congregation’s reputation in the Church at large and in the community.

211. Paul asked God to give them a Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. The “knowledge” of God and Jesus means more than just knowing facts about Him; in Hebrew and also Greek tradition the “knowledge” implied intimate relationship. It was used, for example, of the man-wife relationship.

212. There is no standing pat in Christian discipleship. We either grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus or we diminish. Apathy and false security are deadly (see 1 Corinthians 10:12). God blesses with this knowledge of Jesus as His disciples when we do what we are doing in this study—inviting Him to give us wisdom and revelation through His Word. That knowledge becomes practical, everyday knowledge of Jesus as it is put into practice daily.

**Fill-in Answers:** Paul tells us that it is when the eyes of our hearts are enlightened that we will be able to know the hope to which He has called us, “the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints,” and “the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe.”

213. Paul said that the exalted Christ has been appointed head over everything *for the Church*. He rules all things for our benefit as we trust Him and serve Him in His kingdom of grace.

214. Paul said that the Church is the Body of Christ in the world, through whom Christ continues to carry out His saving work through the proclamation of His Gospel. More striking than that, Paul said that the Church is “the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” In being His Body in the world, His saved ones carrying out His saving mission in His name, we become His “fullness,” fulfilling His purpose as the Christ through the power of His Spirit so that He is given full glory as the Lamb who was slain and is now sitting on the throne of heaven.