

# Another Advocate: Getting Ready for the Holy Spirit

by the Rev. Dr. J. Ted Blakley



## YEAR A • THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

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Acts 17:22–31 • Psalm 66:7–18 • 1 Peter 3:13–22 • John 14:15–21

## HISTORY

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A. D. 2014, Sunday, May 25th

- ☞ 8:00 a.m. • St. John's Episcopal Church; Wichita, KS
- ☞ 10:30 a.m. • St. John's Episcopal Church; Wichita, KS

## The Sermon

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.  
Take our lips and speak through them.  
Take our hearts and see through them.  
Take our souls and set them on fire. *Amen.*

It's the Sixth Sunday of Easter, and I have finally gotten our Christ is Risen response in the bulletin. So if you will turn to the beginning of the announcements, let us proclaim together the good news of Easter.

Χριστός Ανέστη! Αληθώς Ανέστη! (3 times)  
Christos aneste! *Alethos aneste!*

## WHAT WAS JESUS DOING FOR THOSE FORTY DAYS?

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Jesus was arrested on a Thursday night, executed on Friday afternoon, and resurrected early on Sunday morning. And then, for the next forty days, he appeared to his followers. And that's where we are today. We are still in that forty-day period between Easter morning and the Ascension, when the resurrected Jesus is taken up into heaven and his resurrection appearances cease. Today is day thirty-six of Easter, which means that this coming Thursday is day forty, and we will celebrate Jesus ascending into heaven and being seated at the right hand of God.

So what exactly was Jesus doing during those forty days between his Resurrection and his Ascension. According to Acts, Jesus was “presenting himself alive to [his disciples] by many convincing proofs” (1:3). In other words, Jesus was offering evidence to counter the rumors that his body had been stolen from the tomb. His resurrection appearances were also proof that he was not a ghost,

not a disembodied spirit, but that he had, in fact, been raised from the dead, flesh and blood, body and all.

Jesus also spent those forty days talking about the kingdom of God and preparing his disciples for his final departure. And that's what he is doing in today's gospel as well. Today's reading from the Gospel of John is a continuation of last week's gospel lesson. It takes place during Jesus' final meal with his disciples. Last week, Jesus told his disciples that he was going away, that he was returning to his Father's house in order to prepare a place for them. One day he would come back and get them so that they might be with him and his Father forever. But in the meantime, they needed to carry on. Instead of being overcome by loneliness, despair, and fear, they were to put their trust in God and also in Jesus. They were to continue the work that Jesus had begun. And, if they did this, if they stepped out in faith, they would find themselves performing the same works that Jesus did. They would proclaim the gospel; they would welcome sinners; they would cast out demons and heal the sick. In fact, Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me... will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father" (JOHN 14:12).

But how is that possible? How could Jesus' followers do greater works than the Son of God—than he who walked on water and turned water into wine, he who fed thousands with just a few loaves and fish, he who laid down his life for the sins of the whole world. And more to the point, what does Jesus mean when he says that his disciples would do greater works than he did *precisely* because he is going away?

That doesn't make *any* sense.

## ANOTHER ADVOCATE

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The answer comes in today's gospel reading. Jesus says,

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you (JOHN 14:15–17).

Jesus is going away, but he is not going to abandon his disciples. He is not going to leave them as orphans. Instead, his heavenly Father is going to provide for them by sending them *another* Advocate. The first Advocate was the Son, the second Advocate will be the Spirit.... The very same Spirit that filled Jesus and animated his ministry, will empower his disciples to say and do the very things that Jesus said and did, but on an even grander scale.

Before Jesus was taken up into heaven, he ordered his disciples not to leave Jerusalem. They were to wait there for "the promise of the Father" (ACTS 1:4), that is, the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (ACTS 1:8). The coming of the Spirit, of course, took place on the Day of Pentecost, which we will celebrate in two weeks.

## GETTING READY FOR THE SPIRIT

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But if that's the case, why are we talking about the Spirit today? Why are we focusing on the Spirit, when Pentecost is still a fortnight away? For the same reason that Jesus spoke of the Spirit before he left—so that his disciples would be ready for the coming of the Spirit.

You see, Easter is a season of transition. On the one hand, Easter is the season when we celebrate the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead; that Jesus is alive and death has lost its sting. Easter is the season when we proclaim to the whole world that Jesus is Lord of all, that he has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. At the same time, Easter is the season when we get ready for life with the Holy Spirit. Of course, the transition was much different for the first disciples, than it is for us. The disciples had Jesus with them for three years. They had lived with him, talked with him, and served with him. Yet, he was no longer going to be with them, at least not in the same way. His absence and the Spirit's presence would require some adjustment. So Jesus does what he can to prepare his disciples.

We, however, have never experienced Jesus the way that the first disciples did. Yet, it still takes time and effort for us to become accustomed to living in concert with God's Spirit. You see, when we become Christians by putting our trust in Jesus, God gives us what he gave those first Christians on Pentecost. God gives us the Holy Spirit, to be with us and to dwell in us. We who are spiritually dead because of sin, the Spirit makes alive. We who are estranged from God, the Spirit draws into intimate fellowship with the Father and the Son. In short, the Spirit makes everything new.

Yet, we do not experience this newness all at once. We are new creations in Christ, yet we still have old habits, old ways of being and thinking and doing. We have been adopted by God, and so we are God's sons and daughters, yet we don't automatically bear the family resemblance. It takes time to learn God's ways. It takes effort to live and love as Jesus did. But above all, it takes the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is like our tutor in the Christian life. The Spirit teaches and guides us. But the Spirit is more than a tutor. The Spirit not only teaches us what is good, the Spirit also inspires us to long for what is good and then equips us to do it (cf. PHIL 2:13).

But you may well wonder, as I often do, if the Holy Spirit is real and responsible for all of this, then why am I not more mature? Why am I so irritable so much of the time? Why don't I treat my children better? Why am I filled with so many judgments and prejudices? Why am I beset by doubt and fear? If the Holy Spirit actually dwells within me, then why is my faith not stronger, why am I not better able to love God with my whole heart and to love my neighbor as myself?

Now, I am sure that there is more than one answer to this question, but I think part of the answer lies with this one important truth: the Holy Spirit dwells within us, but it does not *possess* us. When the Spirit takes up residence inside us, the Spirit does not take over and dominate us. Rather, God's Spirit works in concert with our spirits to bring about our transformation into Christlikeness. We are not able to transform ourselves without the Holy Spirit's assistance. By the same token, the Spirit is not able to affect our growth and transformation without our cooperation and participation.

So how do we participate with the Holy Spirit in our transformation? What does it look like, and what does it take? It is a relationship, and like any relationship, it takes trust. We can only participate with the Holy Spirit to the extent that we trust that the Holy Spirit is real, enough trust to think and act as though the Spirit were present and active in daily life. And one of the best ways to cultivate such trust is through prayer. And by prayer, I have at least three things in mind. First, we should

pray with the conviction that God is listening and the expectation that God will speak to us, be it through thoughts, feelings, or images, through other people, or through circumstances. Second, our prayers should consist of relatively few words and lots of listening. In order to trust the Holy Spirit, we need to become attuned to the voice, movements, and promptings of the Spirit, which is very hard to do if we are doing all the talking. Third, and this is very important, we should act on what we have heard, for this is what energizes and strengthens our faith. Now at times, it may be prudent to share what we have heard from God with other Christians in order to get their input and support before we act. But, in the end, whatever we determine God has said, we must act on it, we must put it into practice otherwise we will short-circuit our faith and inhibit our spiritual growth.

But if you find all of this too much. If you feel that your faith is too weak, if you feel worn down by past failures, then let this be your first prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for faith, just enough to get through the day, or the next hour, or the next five minutes. Let your prayer be that of the distraught father in Mark's gospel, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." And then sit back and listen. Just listen. For the act of listening is an act of trust. And you will hear the Spirit speaking to you. It may take time for you to recognize the Spirit's voice, but the Spirit will speak and the Spirit will give you the ears to hear and the will to act. So again, just pray and listen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

# The Scriptures

## YEAR A • THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

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Acts 17:22–31

Psalm 66:7–18

1 Peter 3:13–22

John 14:15–21

### THE COLLECT

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O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding; Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

### ACTS 17:22–31

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<sup>22</sup> Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup> For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. <sup>26</sup> From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, <sup>27</sup> so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’

<sup>29</sup> Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. <sup>30</sup> While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

### PSALM 66:7–18 • JUBILATE DEO

BCP 674

- 7 Bless our God, you peoples; \*  
    make the voice of his praise to be heard;
- 8 Who holds our souls in life, \*  
    and will not allow our feet to slip.
- 9 For you, O God, have proved us; \*  
    you have tried us just as silver is tried.
- 10 You brought us into the snare; \*  
    you laid heavy burdens upon our backs.

- 11 You let enemies ride over our heads;  
we went through fire and water; \*  
but you brought us out into a place of refreshment.
- 12 I will enter your house with burnt-offerings  
and will pay you my vows, \*  
which I promised with my lips  
and spoke with my mouth when I was in trouble.
- 13 I will offer you sacrifices of fat beasts  
with the smoke of rams; \*  
I will give you oxen and goats.
- 14 Come and listen, all you who fear God, \*  
and I will tell you what he has done for me.
- 15 I called out to him with my mouth, \*  
and his praise was on my tongue.
- 16 If I had found evil in my heart, \*  
the Lord would not have heard me;
- 17 But in truth God has heard me; \*  
he has attended to the voice of my prayer.
- 18 Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer, \*  
nor withheld his love from me.

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## 1 PETER 3:13–22

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Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, <sup>15</sup> but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; <sup>16</sup> yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. <sup>17</sup> For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. <sup>18</sup> For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup> in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup> who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. <sup>21</sup> And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

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## JOHN 14:15–21

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<sup>15</sup> “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup> This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

<sup>18</sup> "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup> In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup> They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."