

From the April 4, 2009 Issue

Easter and Ascension Commentaries

Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3

Acts 4:5-12 – Psalm 23 – 1 John 3:16-24 – John 10:11-18

Jesus, his Dad, and their Spirit eternally lay down their lives for one another. They know and abide in one another (Jn 10.15,17). Jesus extends this dynamic by laying down his life for us, knowing us, and coming to abide in us (Jn 10.11,14; 1 Jn 3.16). We come to “know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us” (1 Jn 3.24). From there we receive “his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another” (1 Jn 3.23). Note that “commandment” is singular, not plural. To believe in Jesus is to love one another (3.17-18). To believe in Jesus is to believe that he was being sensible when he laid down his life for us, to believe that he is correct in valuing every individual to such an unthinkable degree. This belief has consequences. By loving/healing/saving a sick man, Peter incurred the wrath of the wolves (Acts 4.7; Jn 10.12-13). This made sense only in the light of his [accurate] belief that it was in the presence of those enemies that the Lord would prepare a table for him (Ps 23.5). Believing Jesus means laying down our lives for others, based on nothing but his unlikely claim that this is the only way to wholeness/salvation/healing (Acts 4.12).

Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 10

Acts 8:26-40 – Psalm 22:25-31 – 1 John 4:7-21 – John 15:1-8

Because Father loves us, he longs for the Triune love to be earthed in human relations. To reveal his love to us, Father “sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (1 Jn 4.9). This Son is the Savior of the world (1 Jn 4.14), the One whom “all the ends of the earth shall remember,” the One who draws to himself “all the families of the nations” (Ps 22.27). Through his atoning work (1 Jn 4.10), the Son has included all peoples into the Triune life of mutual indwelling. “Because he has given us of his Spirit,” we come to realize the truth “that we abide in him and he in us” (4.13). As we believe this truth and respond by “abiding” in him, engaging him within this relationship he has forged, the result is a life of love (Jn 15.5), love that springs forth as naturally as grapes from a healthy vine.

And as we love one another, Father’s love is living through us, perfectly achieving its desired effect (1 Jn 4.12). The degree to which we love is the degree to which we are experiencing the reality of the God who is with us (4.7-8). When non-Christians meet Jesus, they are “remembering” the One who has always been active in their living and loving (Ps 22.27). As they grow to understand the gospel, their love is “perfected” because they gain assurance and “boldness” regarding God’s judgment of them (1 Jn 4.17). But how can they understand unless someone guides them? (Acts 8.31). This is where we come in; like Phillip we use scripture to explain the gospel, bringing to their remembrance the One who has accomplished their salvation.

Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 17

Acts 10:44-48 – Psalm 98 – 1 John 5:1-6 – John 15:9-17

“Whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith” (1 Jn 5.4). The birth of New Creation means the conquest of darkness—the death of Adam and Eve’s distorted vision that drove them to hide in the bushes from their loving Father. Light Incarnate entered our darkness and defeated it. Now through the testimony of the Spirit (5.6) he shares with us his knowing of our Father (Jn 15.15). This is the victory “the LORD has made known...in the sight of the nations” (Ps 98.2). His royal coming/arrival/presence shines light on the world, judging it and saving it (98.3). As we hear the Word, the Holy Spirit enables us to believe (Acts 10.44), and we begin to share in the Word’s victory over Adamic blindness (1 Jn 5.5). We begin learning to be loved (Jn 15.9-10), which turns out to be much harder than it sounds. But as we learn to spread our leaves to the Son, fruit springs from us, fruit that lasts (15.16).

Ascension Sunday, May 24

Acts 1:1-11 – Psalm 47 – Psalm 93 – Ephesians 1:15-23 – Luke 24:44-53

“While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven...and a cloud took him out of their sight” (Luke 24.51; Acts 1.9). “God has gone up with a shout” (Ps 47.5). The Father “raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly place” (Eph 1.20). But we misunderstand if we think this makes Jesus an absentee landlord whose hands are tied because of his distance from us. No, it is because he is ascended that the man Jesus “is king...robed in majesty...girded with strength” (Ps 93.1). It is because he is ascended that he is now “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named” (Eph 1.21).

Heaven is not a faraway place. To use N.T. Wright’s analogy, heaven is earth’s control room. It’s the ship’s bridge, where we find our captain in the captain’s chair, doing the captain’s job. And because we trust him, we are set free to do our job on his ship—making disciples, precisely because all authority on heaven and earth have been given to him.

~ John Stonecypher