Worship Resources for May 8th, 2016—Seventh Sunday of Easter, Ascension Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary: Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

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

Narrative Lectionary: Death Swallowed in Life, 1 Corinthians 15:1-26, 51-57 (Mark 12:26-27a)

The first set of readings from the Revised Common Lectionary are for the Seventh Sunday of Easter:

We begin with Acts 16:16-34, a story in which Paul and company cause trouble and end up in jail. They cause trouble because they cast a demon out of a slave, and by doing so, end her owner’s way of making money off of her labor. She was declaring that Paul and his companions were slaves of the Most High God, who has proclaimed a way of salvation, but this annoyed Paul until he cast the demon out of her. The slave owners brought Paul and company before the local authorities, and Paul and Silas were thrown into prison and placed in the stocks—but are freed by an earthquake. However, they do not escape. Their jailer is about to kill himself, thinking they have escaped and concerned about his own fate—but instead, Paul and Silas end up baptizing him and his whole household.

Psalm 97 sings of God who is the creator of the earth and has dominion over all the earth. The images of God in the clouds and fire are reminiscent of the images of the pillar of fire and the cloud that traveled with the people through the wilderness after their escape from Egypt. God is the protector not only of the people of Israel, but the God of the whole earth.

The verses from Revelation 22 contain the invitation of Jesus, along with the Holy Spirit and the Church, to come to the heavenly city, to prepare to enter a new home with God. John of Patmos shares the vision of Jesus, preparing to come again, to take us home.

Jesus prays for the unity of the followers, the disciples, the believers, in John 17:20-26. If they would understand that Jesus and the Father are one, they may be one themselves. If they understand that they are all one in Christ, as Christ and God are one, so they are also one in him. In their oneness, they would understand that God’s love is within them.

The second set of readings from the Revised Common Lectionary are for the Ascension:

We begin in Acts with Luke continuing his saga—part two is all about the church. The disciples have gathered with Jesus and it is time for him to leave them. Jesus tells them that the Holy Spirit will be coming to be with them very soon, and the disciples ask if this is the time when he will restore the kingdom to Israel. Even though Jesus has died and risen, they are still thinking in worldly terms, in a worldly kingdom. Jesus instead tells them to focus on the Holy Spirit, and as he leaves them to ascend, two angels ask the disciples, “Why are you looking up? Jesus is going to return the same way you saw him go to heaven.”

Psalm 47 is a call for congregational praise to the God who has led them to victory in battle. The psalmist acknowledges that God is their king, and is the king over all the earth, over all the nations. God is the God of not only Israel, but the one God over all princes, over all people.

Psalm 93 praises God as the king who has established the world. The floodwaters rise up to meet God, lifting up their voice to God; but God is even more majestic than the ocean, than all the waters of creation.

Ephesians 1:15-23 describes the church as the body of Christ, in which Christ is the head, and the church is the fullness of Christ. Paul speaks to the early Christians at Ephesus (or another church—Ephesians in many ways is an old chain letter that was probably copied and sent to many churches) who are new believers and prays that they will come to know the fullness of Christ, and that they will come to know hope in Christ as they believe in the power of his resurrection.

Luke 24:44-53 is Luke’s first account of Jesus’ ascension, reminding the disciples of all they have learned, and that the Holy Spirit is to come to them. Jesus has now opened the scriptures to them, and it is up to them to live it out, and live out the promise of resurrection and new life in Christ.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the last chapter in 1 Corinthians about the power of the resurrection. There were many controversies in the church in Corinth, but there were still some who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, although they accepted Christ’s resurrection. Gnosticism had made its way through many of the early churches with the belief that Jesus didn’t really die on the cross because he wasn’t really fully human, and everything human and earthly was bad and only those who were divine were good. Paul declares that as death came through a human being, so does resurrection. The enemy here is not the body, not the flesh, not the earth, but death itself. In Christ, however, we will not all die, but we will be changed. Death does not have a hold on us, but rather life does. The line between mortal and immortal will be erased.

In Mark 12:26-27, Jesus recounts that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To the Sadducees, who said there was no resurrection, Jesus points out that even their own naming of God shows that God is not God of the dead, but of the living.

What happens after we die? What happens after the Ascension? In this world, we know that life goes on, that Christ goes on as the Church, the body of Christ. And we know that Christ has prepared us for the Holy Spirit, which dwells among us. What happens after we die? Our oneness with Christ is fulfilled. But it has already begun with the Holy Spirit among us now. It has already begun when we are part of the Church. We have already experienced death and resurrection, new life now, and eternal life has been prepared for us.

Call to Worship

Why are we looking up to heaven?

 **Christ has come; Christ has risen; Christ will come again.**

Why are we looking ahead to the future?

 **The Holy Spirit is among us now. In our baptism, we have already died and risen with Christ.**

Why are we afraid of death and dying?

 **God’s love casts out our fear.**

Why are we afraid to follow Jesus?

**In Christ, we have the promise of new life now, eternal life to come.**

**In Christ, we join our hearts to worship, God who has prepared for us to enter the reign of God.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Eternal God, we live as if our time is more important, more precious, than anyone or anything else. We forget that You have created us all as a people for eternity, but we have prioritized our own desires. We have believed that life is short and we must do what we want to do, rather than living for Your reign that is eternal. Forgive us. Call us into good stewardship of Your time, to live for You and for others as the body of Christ, and not for ourselves. In the name of the One who has called us to be One, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

Love, Hope, and Peace are all gifts from God that cannot be contained in time. So is the gift of Life—it cannot be contained by death. Christ has freed us from the constraints of worldly time. Christ has freed you from sin and death forever. Go, live into the Good News, live into God’s reign, and give over your time to loving God and loving your neighbors as yourself.

Prayer

Creator God, You have molded and shaped the earth to be filled with life, and You have molded and shaped us to be filled with Your love. Create in us new hearts when they become stagnant and hardened by the world we have built. Unmake the hurt, the anger, the hate that can fill and consume us, and instead make us new, open to Your love, trust, and assurance. In Christ, who has come to show us Your love in the way we know best, in our own human life, we give thanks and praise, and lift up our prayers. Amen.