Worship Resources for June 2nd, 2019—Seventh Sunday of Easter, Ascension Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary

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

Seventh Sunday of Easter: Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

Narrative Lectionary: Hope of Resurrection, Romans 6:1-14 (Matthew 6:24)

For those choosing to observe Ascension Sunday, we begin with the beginning of Acts. The author of Luke begins with a similar introduction, and as Luke concluded with the ascension of Jesus into heaven, Acts begins with a very similar version. Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the disciples ask if this is the time when the kingdom will be restored to Israel. The disciples are still thinking of a worldly kingdom, with a throne in Jerusalem. Jesus tells them it is not for them to know. Instead, Jesus is sending them to be witnesses, in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Then Jesus is taken by a cloud from their sight, and while the disciples stare up into the sky, two angels ask them why they’re staring up. Jesus, who has been taken up into heaven, will return in the same way. In other words—unexpectedly.

Psalm 47 is a song of victory after battle. The psalmist calls upon the people to praise God, who is the great king over all the earth. God is over all the nations, and the people of Israel have triumphed because of God.

Psalm 93 is also a song of praise to God who is the king over all. The psalmist invokes the image of floodwaters, that God is more powerful than the floods and the sea—a reminder that God led them out of Egypt through the Red Sea into freedom. God is majestic, ruling on high from ancient times, and speaks truth to the people.

In the address to the listeners, the writer of Ephesians 1:15-23 (possibly Paul or one of his disciples), commends the church in Ephesus (or other locations—many scholars believe this may have been copied from a letter to another church originally) for their faith, but also prays that they will be open, to have a spirit of wisdom and revelation, to know the work of Christ. The writer uses this moment to encourage them but also to state what he believes: that God raised Christ from the dead and seated him in heaven, putting all things under his feet and setting Christ as the head of all things, including the church.

Mirroring the passage from Acts 1, the writer of Luke shares the story of Jesus’ ascension at the end of Luke’s Gospel account. In this version, Jesus reminds them that they are witnesses of his death and resurrection. He tells them to stay in the city to be “clothed with power from on high,” in the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus blesses the disciples as he ascends into heaven, and the disciples return to Jerusalem, praising God and worshiping in the temple.

For the readings for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, the readings continue in chapter 16 of Acts with Paul’s journey that began last week in visiting Lydia. Paul and his companions come across a slave girl who is being used by her masters to practice divination. But she begins to follow Paul and his companions, proclaiming that they are slaves of the Most High God. Paul is annoyed and casts the spirit out of her, which makes her masters angry, and Paul and the others are arrested for disturbing the peace. But while they are in prison, they pray, and there is an earthquake. All the doors are opened and the chains broken, but Paul and his companions refuse to leave, saving the jailer who planned to take his own life. The jailer asked Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved, and Paul tells him to believe in Christ. The jailer and his entire household were baptized after that, and they celebrate that the he has become a believer.

Psalm 97 describes God in terms that the ancient near east would understand—a God who breathes fire, whom clouds form around, for whom the earth trembles. Those who worship idols are shamed, because God’s image cannot be captured. God is above all gods, and guards those who are faithful. God is with the righteous, and the righteous can call upon God and give thanks.

These select verses from Revelation 22 are part of Jesus’ final words in John of Patmos’ vision. Jesus is the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the bright morning star and the root of David. Jesus is coming soon. The Revelation of John, and the end of the Bible for Christians, concludes with Jesus’ words, “Surely I am coming soon,” and John stating, “Amen! Come, Lord Jesus,” followed by his benediction and ending of his letter.

In Jesus’ final discourse in John’s gospel account, Jesus prays that “they might be one, as we are one.” Jesus prays that the disciples as well as all those who will believe will be in unity, so the world will know that they were sent by God. Jesus prays that the disciples will know the love he has for them, so that the world might know him through the ones who were sent to him.

The Narrative Lectionary continues with Paul’s letter to the Romans. In chapter 6, Paul argues that the believers have been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. Christ’s death frees us from sin, and sin no longer has a hold on us. But if we have died to sin, we cannot go on living in it. We have died to the ways of the world. The old self is crucified. We are no longer under the law but under grace, and we are now alive in Christ.

Matthew 6:24 is Jesus’ teaching on wealth, that one cannot serve two masters. One cannot serve God and wealth. Paired with the Romans passage, one cannot serve God and abide in sin.

Ascension reminds us that the ways of this world are not the way of Christ. Jesus didn’t come to establish a worldly kingdom on earth. Jesus didn’t come so that we could continue in our old ways. Jesus came so that we might die to sin and live for love, for one another. As Christians, we expect Jesus to come again—but as Christ came into our world in an unexpected way—arriving as a helpless baby, and leaving us with the Holy Spirit—Jesus is coming into our world and our lives in an unexpected way. Come, Lord Jesus.

Call to Worship

It is written, “Christ suffered and died, and rose on the third day.”

 **We are witnesses of these things.**

It is written, “Repentance and forgiveness of sins are proclaimed in his name to all nations.”

 **We are witnesses of these things.**

Christ told us that the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, would come.

 **We are witnesses of these things.**

We are told that Christ will come again.

 **We are witnesses of these things.**

Christ is coming into our world, into our community, into our lives in a new way.

 **We are witnesses of these things.**

 **Come, Lord Jesus, Come.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Risen Savior, we know the promise of Your return. However, we have failed to notice that You are already at work. We have failed to see Your peace at work when communities come together and make changes to welcome the stranger. We have failed to take note of the signs of hope as we offer sanctuary and refuge for our neighbors in need. We have failed to watch for opportunities that You are giving us to participate in the work of justice happening in community centers, in urban gardens, in peacemaking efforts, in rallies and protests, and in the hands of volunteers in our schools. Instead, sometimes we’ve focused on how hard it is, or the rejection we have faced, instead of seeing the work You are doing despite what the world says. Holy One, You are at work all around us but at times all we do is despair. Help us to shed our doubts and fears and cling to the living hope found in You, our resurrected Savior. It is in Your name we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

There is new life all around. The resurrection is still happening. Christ is at work in our world, in our communities, and in you. Search your heart, and find the goodness, the love, the life that is there. Christ is coming again, doing a new thing—can you not perceive it? You are forgiven. You are loved. You are very much needed for the reign of God, which is being built up now. Go and share the good news, and roll up your sleeves; for if you have breath, God still has something for you to do. Amen.

Prayer

Holy One, we recall that the work of sharing the Gospel, the Good News, has been entrusted to us. You called us to be Your witnesses. You called us to abide in Your love. You called us to love one another, and You told us you were coming again. Help us to trust in You. Guide us to find the holy in the world around us, the places where You are already at work. Lead us to give in to hope, and to give up on despair. Hold us accountable to the work of the Gospel, the sharing of the Good News, and the hope found in You. For You are our Way, our Truth, and our Life—and Your way is love eternal. In Your name we pray. Amen.