

LECTIONARY GUIDE for Acts 2:14a, 22-32 and John 20:19-31

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

For this season of Eastertide (before Pentecost), we temporarily suspend the reading of our Hebrew Bible, excepting the designated Psalm. Instead, we turn to the Book of the Acts of the Apostles (sometimes referred to as the Book of the Holy Spirit), which we presume to have been written by Luke (and his community).

We hear the story of the disciple Peter, speaking to eleven **other** disciples. (Note that, compared to last Sunday's Easter reading, this post-Easter reading shows that Peter has already taken leadership and the remaining disciples are counted as eleven.) Referring to Luke's Gospel, Peter professes God's power that was demonstrated through Christ. He tells about Jesus' crucifixion, but makes clear how he could not be held down. Luke lifts up King David, who affirmed that God would not abandon him to Hades or the Holy One to corruption; instead, God would raise up the Messiah and open up the ways of life and gladness.

Ten Questions

1. After Easter, we pause from our readings in the Hebrew Bible and turn to those from the Book of Acts, which describes the disciples' ministries. Why do you think this has become customary?
2. Many commentators understand both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts to have been written by the same author and (his) community, as in volumes one and two. For, they noticed important similarities in religious beliefs, understanding of who Jesus was, and style of writing. (Consider this as you read the opening of the Book in Acts 1: 1-2.) In addition, the Gospel covers the birth of Jesus to his death; Acts continues with what happened after Jesus' death to the spreading of his message. Do you see this continuity?
3. Last week's Easter reading from John described Mary Magdalene, the Beloved Disciple and (Simon) Peter. All seemed of equal importance, each in their own way. Who has emerged as the leader here? What do we know about him?
4. Acts says that Peter preached to "the eleven." How many tribes made up the people of Israel? Why might it have been important for Luke to designate Peter and the eleven for a total of twelve?

5. Luke seems to describe “Jews” as those from the Temple, but “Israelites” as those living further away from the Temple. If Luke had been a Gentile, why might he have made these distinctions? With these different identifications, do we begin to get a sense of how a part of Judaism was evolving into (inter-testamental) Jewish Christianity?
6. According to Peter, David’s description that God was always before him, at his right hand (the better hand), and keeping him safe is uplifting. Yet, he goes further to say that God did not allow him to be corrupted or leave him in Hades (*Sheol*, Hebrew), where those who died unjustly or violently were sent. Why was it important for Luke to cite David to “the eleven”? If we were teaching an audience from a certain background, might we cite as a figure who was well-known to them in order to persuade them more easily?
7. Peter makes clear that David died and was buried in a tomb, which still exists. But Jesus was killed and was resurrected so had no tomb. He adds, “Since [David] was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn an oath to him that [God] would put one of his descendants on the throne.” (v. 30) How might this show that Luke felt it important to include David’s foreshadowing of Jesus?
8. Luke shows an undeniable order and clarifies the roles within it: God...David... Jesus...disciples/witnesses...us. Do we know of churches which have tried to maintain this hierarchical order...” apostolic succession”? What disadvantages and advantages can result from this practice? Do we do this in the United Church of Christ? Why, or why not?
9. What might it be to be a “witness”? Must you have been at the scene of the event or at Jesus’ death? Could we have heard the report of what happened from one of the disciples or apostles? What if we heard the report in the form of the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles? Are these sources believable?
10. Whether we were in Jerusalem at Jesus’ time or separated by time and space to the Easter event, what gives us confidence in our faith? Family tradition, an experience of God (Creator, Redeemer and Holy Spirit), Scripture, the Church, a particular local church...more?

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John 20:19-31

John's Gospel tells about Jesus' post-Resurrection appearance on the first day of the week, first, to the eleven disciples (excepting Thomas), and second, to the twelve (including Thomas) in the same house. Strangely, the story makes clear that the doors to the room were locked "for fear of the Jews," but Jesus still appeared them. He said, "Peace be with you." Then he showed them his wounds, and repeated "Peace be with you." Finally, he breathed on the eleven, and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." When Thomas returned, the disciples told him what had happened and how they had "seen and believed" (Christ). Thomas expressed his need to, like them, see Jesus' wounds. A week later, the twelve gathered in the same house "and the doors were shut." Somehow Jesus reappeared, and said "Peace be with you." Then he invited Thomas to touch his wounds so that this disciple cried, "My Lord and my God."

Jesus asserts, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (v. 29) John ends, this is written so you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have new life.

Ten Questions

1. This story about Jesus appearing to his disciples after his Crucifixion is well known. What did we bring to it when you read it this time? What did we notice that was new and different?
2. John makes it clear that the event took place on the first day of the week and in the evening. We might assume that the time is accurate. But why might it have been important for John to note this particular time? When did the Temple worship? When do our churches usually worship?
3. John suggests that the disciples seemed to meet regularly at that same time and place. Note that the place was in a house and the doors were "locked" or "shut." Was it because as they wrote they feared the (Temple) Jews? At the same time, how could Jesus appear to them twice if the doors were locked? Was his appearance physical and/or spiritual?
4. This story contrasts physicality and spirituality: For example, the house with locked doors did not prevent Jesus from appearing either physically or spiritually to the disciples; Jesus showed his (wounded) hands and side, then breathed on his disciples to give them the Holy Spirit; all "saw" what was physical then came to

“believe” in Jesus’ physical and spiritual presence. What do we think John was trying to say to us or show us with this dichotomy?

5. How are we both physical and spiritual beings? During the current pandemic, how have we become more aware of our physicality (virus, protein, heart, lungs, breathing, touching, marketing, eating properly, exercising outside)? More aware of our spirituality (peace, mindfulness, praying, Scripture, saying table graces, singing, listening to music, gardening, enjoying nature)?

6. During this crisis, most of our churches, “the Body of Christ,” are forced to be physically closed. But some are still spiritually open by the power of “the Holy Spirit,”? What are some ways that our local church deals with the tension between the physical and spiritual?

7. “Peace be with you (shalom)” are the first words that the disciples hear Jesus say. It is repeated three times in this story. What does this mean to you? When we say it at worship, are we aware that these words go back more than 2,000 years to Jewish and Christian worship? What difference does this make for us?

8. Have you noticed the “International Peace Pole” outside of our meetinghouse? Try to say, “peace” in five other languages; otherwise, learn new words for peace as we all agree that we need peace in our world.

9. Verse 29 about seeing and believing is powerful (“*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet...believe.*”) As with our first reading from Acts 2, how close to Jesus’ death do we need to be to truly “believe”? Do verses 29 and 31 speak effectively about believing to us, who live in the 21st century?

10. Given these reading from Acts and John, what is a prayer that we might say to end our reflection time? What might be the important messages that Luke and John conveyed to us that addressed our current condition?

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