

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 [46]; Ephesians 1:17-23; Luke 24:46-53

While Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them

Luke 24:36 *While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 37 They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. 38 He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41 While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate in their presence.*

Luke 24:44 *Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46 and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*

Luke 24:50 *Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51 While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52 And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53 and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The first couple of verses are not given in the lectionary, but as they seem essentially part of the scene they are included in italics. The endings of all the gospels are especially significant (even Mark 16:8, the original, disconcerting "non-

ending"). There is a special flavour to the ending in Luke because it bridges a two-volume work, synthesising comprehensively yet unobtrusively the themes of the third gospel and leaving the reader in a mood of anticipation. Chronologically, the readings today are the wrong way around—it would make more sense to hear this reading first and only then to move to the one from Acts.

KIND OF WRITING

This is the last scene in the gospel narrative, so it conforms to the functions of a peroration—to summarise, to engage the reader one final time, to intensify the emotional impact. The passage summarises both the ministry and the Lucan interpretation of it, by means of the typical themes and vocabulary of this gospel (words, written, fulfilled, open, Jerusalem, taken up). The potent vocabulary of the early Christian mission (messiah, suffer, rise, repentance, forgiveness, proclamation, witnesses) will speak directly to the intended readership. Finally, to the inherently emotional scene of separation ("while I was still with you"), the writer adds intense expectation ("until you have been clothed"), "great joy" and the warm devotional atmosphere of Luke 1-2, evoked in the very last verse.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) By the time Luke was writing, Chris-



Thought for the day

As the Easter season draws to a close, both the liturgy and the lectionary point us towards the clothing with power from on high. In these days, our prayer is "Come, Holy Spirit." Each year, this prayer is of greater urgency, as we all try to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Our future being as Christians, as community, as church, all depends on our own deep attitude of listening and of openness. The future church will be a church of the Spirit, energised and exuberant, faithful and on fire.

Prayer

Breathe into me, Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy. Move in me, Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy. Attract my heart, Holy Spirit, that I may love only what is holy. Strengthen me, Holy Spirit, that I may defend all that is holy.

Protect me, Holy Spirit, that I may always be holy. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen

Pope Francis

tians were accustomed to reading the Jesus story in the light of the First Testament. From our historical-critical point of view, they faced a huge task because the messiah, God's anointed and the agent of final salvation, is not mentioned as such in the Hebrew Bible. To grasp the expectation of the time, today we turn to the writings "between the testaments", such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Psalms of Solomon and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. However, the first generation could find patterns like the Jesus story in prophets (especially in the Servant Songs of Isaiah) and in the psalms (especially Psa. 2, 22 and 69). Hence, Luke can summarise by saying "everything written about me".

(ii) "When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you

see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over." (2Kings 2:9-14)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) The scene invites comparison with the closing moments in Matthew 28:16-20 and John 20:30-31 (the original ending). Continued presence and mission are the themes.

(ii) Within the Lucan narrative, the text reminds us of the *tableaux* of Nazareth (4:16-30, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing") and of the road to Emmaus (24:13-35, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"), the two great theological bookends of this gospel. In between, you have the "passion predictions" (9:22, 43-45; 18:31-34). The preaching in Acts echoes the same theology of the suffering Messiah.

(iii) There seems to be a "pre-echo" of ascension itself, which comes only after 40 days in Acts 1:1-11.

(iv) The Holy Spirit, already the impulse behind Jesus' ministry, becomes in the Acts the energy driving the expansion of the Way from Jerusalem to Rome itself, from the heart of the Jewish world to the heart of the Gentile one.

ST PAUL

Who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? (Romans 8:34)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 44 God's word illuminates the ministry and person of Jesus. Notice the threefold contents: the Law (*Torah*), the prophets (*Nevi'im*) and the writings, (*Khethuvim*). Jews often refer to the Bible

as the **Tanakh**, an acronym taken precisely from **Torah**, **Nevi'im** and **Khethuvim**.

Verse 45 A straight echo not only of Nazareth (4) and Emmaus (24), but also of the intriguing story of Philip and the eunuch (Acts 8:26-40, "Do you understand what you are reading?").

Verse 46 Echoing the passion predictions and Emmaus, once more.

Verse 47 As usual, "repentance" is better translated "conversion". Very important in Lk-Acts as noun (2-1-5+6 [Mt, Mk, Lk, Act]) and as verb (5-2-9+5). The NRSV is wrong in talking about conversion *and* forgiveness. The Greek text speaks of conversion *for* forgiveness.

Proclamation (*kerygma*) occurs only here in the gospel, but the verb to proclaim is more common (9 in Lk, and 8 in Acts). See Acts 2:28 and 1:8. Jerusalem is symbolically important in Luke-Acts: the ministry moves to the city and the mission sets out from it.

Verse 48 Witness (Greek, *martyr*) is important as noun (2-1-2+13) and as verb (1 in Lk, 11 in Acts). See Acts 1:6-8, 22.

Verse 49 Father promised: used again for the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:4-5, 8 and 2:4, 17-18, 38. "Clothed" is not used again, but comes up in regard to Christ in Rom 13:12, 14; 1 Cor 15:53-54 and Gal 5:27. "From on high" takes us back to "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us" (Luke 1:78 NRSV).

Verse 50 Blessing is important in this gospel (5-5-13-2). Bethany was the point from which Jesus planned his messianic entry into Jerusalem (19:29); he departs from the same location.

Verse 51 The departing Lord leaves his blessing (and power) behind, just like the departing Elijah.

Verse 52 Joy is the special mark of this gospel, both as noun (6-1-8+4) and as verb (6-2-12+7). Great joy: Luke 2:10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: Acts 15:3 So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.

Verse 53 Just like Simeon and Anna in Lk 1-2. The Temple remains a place of prayer of the disciples throughout the

Acts.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The Ascension of Jesus was an important growth point for the disciples. Jesus would be with them in a different way from now on. Painful though it was, it was necessary for them to let go of his physical presence and adjust to the new reality. Perhaps you have known similar transition points in your own life.

2. Jesus invited the disciples to be witnesses to the good news they had learned. The way we live, speak and relate to others speaks of what we have learned about life. We all are witnesses. How have you been a witness to the goodness of life?

3. In particular, Jesus invited them to be witnesses to the good news of forgiveness. Recall people who have been witnesses to you of forgiveness and reconciliation. What effect did they have on your life? Have you been able to be a witness to the good news of forgiveness in your life?

4. In v. 49, Jesus instructs the apostles to wait patiently for the moment of grace. What been your experience of waiting for a moment of grace? What are the moments of grace that you particularly recall (a friendship, a new opportunity, birth of a baby, etc)?

PRAYER

God of majesty, you led the messiah through suffering into risen life and took him up to the glory of heaven.

Clothe us with the power promised from on high and send us forth to the ends of the earth as heralds of repentance and witnesses of Jesus Christ, the first-born from the dead, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

God raised him from the dead

Eph 1:15 *I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason* 16 *I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.* 17 *I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him,* 18 *so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,* 19 *and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.* 20 *God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,* 21 *far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.* 22 *And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church,* 23 *which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The readers of every generation feature in this marvellous reflection and prayer. The sense of awe before the transcendent is palpable.

KIND OF WRITING

In the genuine letters from Paul, the letter format has been adjusted to include a longer thanksgiving for the faith of the recipients. In 2 Corinthians this takes the form of a “blessing” prayer. In Ephesians, both styles are present.

vv. 3-14 Blessing prayer
vv. 15-23 Thanksgiving report

The introductory verses are included as usual in these notes. In contrast to the genuine letters, there is no “embedded” account of what is happening in the community. The other great prayer from Ephesians is offered in the next section.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

It is not quite sure if this letter should be addressed to the Ephesians, because some important manuscripts lack the expression “in Ephesus.” It has also proved difficult to establish the context in community which occasioned the writing. (i) Is it to do with the famous and flourishing Artemis cult? (ii) It is to do with proto-gnostic mythologies? (iii)

Or perhaps, some combination involving Jewish speculation on the heavenly journey? A clue is provided by the Dead Sea Scrolls, suggesting a Jew with a background in Jewish sectarianism. At the same time, the writing is very polished, so a Jew who enjoyed a good Hellenistic education (not unlike the apostle himself). Perhaps in a context of flourishing Judaism, the writer tries to bolster Christian identity. In any case, the vision is breath-taking, taking us well beyond the limits of the Roman empire to a global expansion of the Gospel.

RELATED PASSAGES

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:14–21)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 17 The writer moves from thanksgiving report to intercession. God’s wisdom was already mentioned: *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.* (Ephesians 1:7–10) The Spirit of wisdom probably ought to have a capital letter, pointing to a more than human wisdom.

Verse 18 The language here is very close to that of the Essenes: *May He enlighten your mind with wisdom for living, be gracious to you with the knowledge of eternal things, and lift up His gracious countenance upon you for everlasting peace.* (1Qs 2:3–4)

The eyes of your heart is unparalleled elsewhere but seems to suggest moral conduct. The content of that enlightenment is expanded in terms of Christian hope. Saints means simply fellow Christians, as opposed to angels or heavenly beings.

Verse 19 The prayer turns to God at work in believers, the shift signalled by switching from “you” to “us.” What is this power?

Verse 20 God’s great deed is the resurrection of Jesus. Cf. Dan 12:2–3; Acts 2:32–33; Phil 2:9–11. Cf. also: *In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.* (Colossians 2:11–12)

Verse 21 Being greater than heavenly powers comes up in Phil 2:9–11 again and also in Heb 1:4–5.

Verse 22 The expansion of the teaching in 1 Corinthians is evident: *When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.* (1 Corinthians 15:28)

Verse 23 The mention of the church as body reminds us of Paul again in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. “Fullness” does occur in the genuine Paul, usually in reference to the inclusion of the Gentiles. Here it is rather more cosmic: *With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.* (Ephesians 1:8–10)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. My own moments of awe before God and the resurrection...
2. My own sense of belonging and inheritance...

PRAYER

Mysterious God, nearer to us than we are to ourselves, we stand in silent awe before you and your deeds of power in the risen Christ. Amen.

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 1:1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; 5 for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

1:6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But 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." 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Prologue to Luke's second volume is Acts 1:1-14 (the remaining three verses are added here to complete the genre). This elaborate introduction unfolds in four distinct moments. (1) A summary of the Gospel story (vv.1-3); (2) two representative scenes from the forty days of Easter fellowship between Jesus and the disciples (vv. 4-8); (3) the ascension proper (vv.9-11); (4) a summary statement to lead us into the narrative of Acts (12-14). In effect, we have here a complex transition to the Acts, with many hints of what is to come.

KIND OF WRITING

This is both a prologue and a transition.

A prologue should intrigue the reader / hearer by presenting the context (Jesus' definitive departure), the protagonists (the apostles, Mary), and the "inciting moment", that is, suspense of the narrative (What will happen now that he is gone? The anticipated descent of the Holy Spirit). As a transition, the links with the Gospel are clear (Theophilus), the new situation is named (the time after the forty days), the potential error of looking the wrong way is acknowledged, and a summary prepares us to the real beginning of the story-telling in Acts 1:15.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The context is that of transition: how we the disciples "manage" after the departure of Jesus?

RELATED PASSAGES

Luke 1:1-4; 24:50-53.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The second volume begins with a summary of the Gospel, "all that Jesus did and taught." See Luke 4:16-30, for an anticipatory synthesis.

Verse 2 The ascension was already recounted in Lk 28:50-53. The promise of the Holy Spirit is made in 24:49. A tremendous role is accorded to the Spirit in Acts, starting with the Pentecost scene. Cf. "beginning" in Lk 1:2.

Verse 3 Luke has in mind his own story of Jesus eating after the resurrection in Lk 24:36-43.

Verse 4 The centrality of Jerusalem for the evangelist is clear. It is the historic city towards which Jesus turns his face (9:51), in which the events of salvation take place, and from which the "word" will be brought to the whole world (symbolised by Rome). Cf. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. (Acts 2:33)

Verse 5 The promised Spirit is given different names: clothed with power from on high (24:49); baptised with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-12). Cf. Luke 3:16.

Verse 6 The restoration of Israel was a key to Jesus' own ministry, as indicated by the choice of the Twelve, to symbolise the tribes, and by the apostles' desire to restore the number with the election of Matthias. The restoration of Israel was associated with the coming of the Spirit (cf. Ezekiel 37; Joel 2:28-32). The very same question of "when" comes up elsewhere in the New Testament. Cf. Luke 1:35.

Verse 7 Cf. a text omitted by Luke from Mark: Mark 13:32.

Verse 8 After Pentecost, Jerusalem will lose its central role in God's purpose. Cf. universalist texts in Isaiah, such as: 8:9; 45:22; 48:20; 49:6; 62:10-11.

Verse 9 The ascension metaphor echoes both exaltation and enthronement in power (see Psalm 110, used widely in the NT). There is a clear evocation of the departure of Elijah and the passing of the mantle to Elisha (here to the disciples).

Verse 10 The two men specifically call to mind Luke's account of the empty tomb proclamation.

Verse 11 In vv.9-11, the emphasis on "sight" (watching, sight, gazing, looking up, saw) prepares the apostles for their role as witnesses. Cf. Luke 21:27 and 24:5-6.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Significant transitions involved endings and beginnings. It may help to remember your own experience of this in ordinary life. Perhaps too, there have been significant moments of "before and after" in your discipleship?

2. In our culture, witnessing to the faith can invite dismissal, even ridicule. We can also meet welcome and encouragement. What has your experience been?

3. There is a palpable sense of anticipation in Acts 1:1-14. When you have waited on God, in prayer and in discernment? What did you learn? Prayer of openness to the Spirit.

PRAYER

O God, giver of the Holy Spirit, we open our eyes to your vision, we open our hearts to your gift, we open our lives to your direction. We await your promise to be clothed in power from on high, so that we too may truly bring your good news in Christ to everyone in our time and to the ends of the earth.

THE LITURGY

Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 [46]; Ephesians 1:17-23; Luke 24:46-53

READINGS 1 AND 3

The first reading and the Gospel match each other closely. Respecting lectionary tradition, the Lucan chronological order (Gospel-Acts) is inverted.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 47 (46) fits perfectly the feast and the readings: *God goes up with shouts of joy; the Lord goes up with trumpet blast.* The context of writing is mostly likely post-Exilic, when people had given up on earthly monarchs.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Acts 1:1-11

Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are a two-volume work as the introduction makes plain. First we hear kind of summary of the story thus far. Then the writer, in symbolic fashion, marks the end of the time of Jesus' appearances.

Second Reading

Ephesians 1:17-23

The whole reading is a beautiful, inspiring prayer. We too are mentioned and we may allow ourselves to be moved!

Gospel

Luke 24:46-53

The gospel of Luke closes with a great air of expectation, as the apostles wait to be clothed with power from on high. In this way, the writer prepares carefully for his second volume, the start of which was our first reading today.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 2 June

Ss Marcellinus and Peters, martyrs

Acts 19:1-8

Followers of John the Baptist who did not believe in Jesus as Messiah continued to exist for a long time.

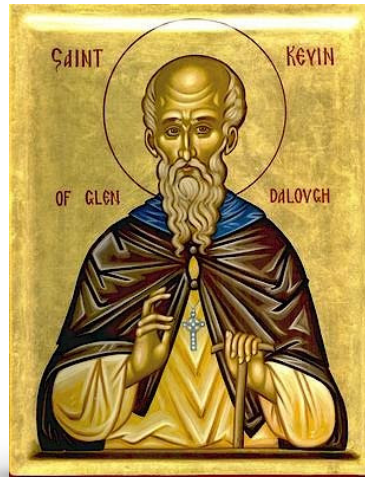
John 16:29-33

Although Jesus speaks plainly throughout this Gospel (unlike in Mark), nevertheless the slow journey of the disciples is registered. The overall tone is one of

encouragement.

Tuesday 3 June

St Kevin, abbot



Acts 20:17-27

Today's reading is a very touching scene: the final farewell of Paul to the faithful of Ephesus. It offers a kind of apologia for the Pauline mission.

John 17:1-11

Today we hear the start of the final prayer from the Farewell Discourse. It is, of course, a prayer; but it is also a kind of summing of the teaching so far and a looking forward to the time after the resurrection. *You may notice the typical "definition" of eternal life: And eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*

Wednesday 4 June

Ss Charles Lwanga and his Companions, Martyrs

Acts 20:28-38

Paul's last speech to the elders in Ephesus is full of still valid and good advice and the very last moment is very moving.

John 17:11-19

"Glorify" may sound strange to us, as if Jesus were looking for some kind of vain recognition. In this Gospel, however, to glorify point to the cross; specifically, it means that the heart of God, God's inner identity, is disclosed in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Thursday 5 June

St Boniface, bishop and martyr

Acts 22:30, 23:6-11

"Divide and conquer" is an old rule and Paul uses it cannily in today's vignette. Paradoxically, Paul is "rescued" by the very officials who hold him prisoner.

John 17:20-26

This heartfelt prayer will touch us all. Although conflict is normal, at every level, it cannot be normative. Therefore, we strive for forgiveness, reconciliation and true fellowing or oneness. May this great prayer be ours today!

Friday 6 June

St Norbert, bishop

St Jarlath, bishop

Acts 25:13-21

A key event in the life of Paul is recounted. He was under arrest in Caesarea. As a Roman citizen, he makes the fateful appeal to the emperor.

John 21:15-19

Because our reading of John is coming to a close as the Easter Season ends, the lectionary takes us forward to chapter 21. Here we read of the restoration of Peter. In the background, there is an oblique reminder of his betrayal (charcoal). But in the foreground stands the high call to love and the fundamental call to follow.

Saturday 7 June

St Colman of Dromore, bishop

Acts 28:16-20, 30-31

Today we hear the very last scene in Acts of the Apostles, drawing Luke's magnificent two volume work to a close. How does he choose to end? He shows Paul, under house arrest, still proclaiming Jesus. Very last word (in Greek) is "unhindered" — an invitation to the readers to continue the work today.

John 21:20-25

Our Gospel today is the second ending of John's Gospel. It is clear that by now, the great spiritual leader of the community (represented in the text as the Beloved Disciple) has died, causing distress and consternation. Finally, the writer frankly admits that he has selected stories in the Gospel.