

The turn in the path: Sunday, May 20 (John 14:23-29; Revelation 21:10)

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [May 9, 2001](#) issue

In garden design, gates and curved paths and alcoves satisfy a human desire for mystery and resolution. A well-planned garden mirrors the invitation to pilgrimage and spiritual completion. Ascensiontide—this most profound time of the Christian year—invites a man or woman of prayer to make a turn on the path that reveals that he or she has only been idling near the gate, and is only now beginning to explore the vast richness of the garden.

This Sunday finds the Christian world poised upon the edge of Ascension's night of the soul. We hear the resurrected Jesus say to the disciples, "I am going away." He has been with them 40 days. Jesus will take them once again to the Mount of Olives, that threshold between desert and city, sacred and profane, where the cloud of Divine Presence will absorb the risen Lord and leave his friends bereft once more.

The disciples have just gotten used to recognizing him again. He is teaching and breaking bread with them at Emmaus, appearing suddenly in the Upper Room, showing his wounds to Thomas, eating a fish. On the Sea of Galilee he calls out to the fisherman to "try the other side of the boat." He cooks breakfast for them. Finally, after 40 days, they are getting used to his presence among them.

And now he says, "I am going away."

Could the extraordinary circumstances of resurrected encounter have lasted forever? Could these men and women have remained in that first union of intimate and personal friendship with the risen Lord? He tried to tell them, of course. "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you: but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). Winding through those last discourses in John is this message: You must go on. There's more. You are not finished with your journey, you are not yet mature apostles. This is merely a resting place. I go to prepare another place for you. "I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:3).

Easter is not the end after all. Easter is not the final destination for the disciples, and not the final destination of the soul. Nor is Easter the final destination of the church.

Easter begins the transition between one reality and another. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit cannot take place in that outer garden where Jesus has not yet ascended to the Father, where he has presence and voice, wounds open to the touch, where he is the risen Lord of a hot breakfast and a marvelous catch of fish. The disciples must once more taste emptiness and detachment, and open again the once-broken heart yet to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Only then will they go to “the ends of the earth.”

We know what’s going to happen. After Jesus is taken into the cloud the disciples go back to Jerusalem. Ten days later, while observing the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes upon the company. And because we know what is going to happen, we tend to lose this crucial season of the soul—like decorating the house for Christmas and skipping Advent. I’ve actually heard Christian educators say, “There’s no point in having church school after Easter—we’ve come to the end of the church year, and besides everyone is so busy!”

When I was a little girl, the Paschal candle was extinguished in Ascension as a sign of the mystery of Christ’s departure. Basic to all prayer is the observance of cleansing purgation and ablution upon the threshold of fulfillment: Advent for the incarnation, Lent for the resurrection, Ascension for the Coming of the Holy Spirit. Ascension recognizes the separation of the Risen Lord from the disciples as he goes to dwell at the right hand of the Father. The cloud that takes him symbolizes the practice of a dark night of the soul. By practicing the seasons we know how to be in prayer. Why do modern Christians tend to dismiss Ascension? Is it part of our American denial of death? Is it fear and awe—the *mysterium tremendum*—of ascending in heart with Christ to the throne of God? Would we rather not accept the responsibility of apostleship at Pentecost and its radical implications?

St. Augustine urges, “Today our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven—let our hearts ascend with him.” But we must also enter that cloud, that ancient euphemism for the unknowable Divine presence. The walk through Ascension may not be peaceful or beautiful or clear. But it is the way home. “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” The indwelling of the spirit will become home.

“I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings

of the earth” (Rev. 21:22-24).

The temple *is* the Lord God almighty dwelling within us. Our home will be wherever the Spirit sends us as apostles to the ends of the earth. But we don’t know all that yet. To find our way home we must go where Jesus has gone. We must take that surprising turn in the garden path. At the edge of Ascensiontide, we know only the threshold beyond which Jesus has gone, into a cloud of luminous darkness.