

Orientation and reassurance (Psalm 16)

What more could one need than an encounter with the risen Christ?

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Gratitude and loyalty to God resound throughout Psalm 16, reflecting assurance and faithfulness. This prayer expresses orientation, a psalm category coined by Walter Brueggemann in his classic three-fold analysis in *The Message of the Psalms* (alongside disorientation and reorientation). Psalm 16 lists attributes of God that align with the feeling of Eastertide: Lent is over; it is time again to sing the praises of the Holy One!

Amid that joy, the psalm mentions the ancient culturally normative practice of making “drink offerings of blood” to a deity other than Adonai. Though this is one little phrase in an otherwise comforting psalm, it is worthy of explanation. Rituals of blood sacrifice were standard fare in the ancient world. This was also the case for our own ancestors in faith (Exod. 24:5–8; Lev. 1:5, 11, 15; 17:6–7; Deut. 12:27), though in ancient Israel it was strictly prohibited to drink or eat blood (Lev. 3:17; 7:27; 17:11–14; Deut. 12:23). While there was much variation among the type and manner of blood sacrifice—both within and outside ancient Israelite practice—such rituals were intended for relating to a deity. They marked appeasement, gratitude, purification, and obligation.

Indeed, those practices were later invoked to develop Christian theology, with blood as a longstanding seal of the covenant between God and the people. We find this spelled out in Hebrews 9, which transforms Jesus into both sacrifice and high priest. The psalmist’s concern is not about blood rituals; it’s that some ancient Israelites were sacrificing for other deities, a clear violation of “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3). The author of Psalm 16, in contrast, found upholding that commandment one more exercise in delight, one more way to experience orientation.

Thus Psalm 16 pairs well with the perspective of Mary and the disciples once they have clearly seen the risen Christ and have received the Holy Spirit directly from Jesus. What more could one need to drive gratitude and loyalty than an encounter with the risen Christ and the bestowal of Divine pneuma for all time? Like the confident words of Psalm 16, these experiences with the resurrected Jesus describe orientation.

Times of religious confidence such as Eastertide can and should be comforting, invigorating, and empowering. Never mind that the Sunday after Easter has often been called Low Sunday; this is time to celebrate, no matter how many people are present! Psalm 16 facilitates this celebration, as do the proclamations of Mary (John 20:16–18) and the other disciples after encountering the risen Christ.

A few words on Thomas. We need not castigate his infamous doubt. After all, he was absent when the others first saw Jesus, and he later received the same evidence they did. Overall, this passage focuses mainly on

assurance.

John's beatitude from Jesus, which praises "those who have not seen," mockingly undermines the resurrection appearances that precede it. The disciples all desired physical evidence, and they got it! Naturally, we want this too! And we, in a literal sense, are "those who have not seen."

Thus, we can legitimate questions about believing without seeing. There is no need to shame Thomas or others who share his skepticism. But ultimately, we do need to struggle with this beatitude, precisely because it does speak to our situation. How can we believe without seeing? And what, in a non-literal sense, counts for us as seeing?

Psalm 16 and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the disciples offer appropriate reassurance for the Second Sunday of Easter. Even amid that confidence, there is room for compassion for those who still await an experience with the risen Christ.