

The background of the entire page is a reproduction of the painting 'Supper at Emmaus' by the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio. The painting depicts the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus, on the right, is shown with a human face, wearing a red tunic and a white shawl, seated at a table with a roasted lamb and a basket of fruit. He is gesturing with his right hand as if speaking. Two other men, his disciples, are seated at the table. One man in the foreground is seen from the back, wearing a dark green robe. Another man, wearing a white head covering and a dark vest over a red tunic, is looking towards Jesus. The scene is set in a simple room with a patterned tablecloth. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the figures against a dark background.

With Jesus from Christmas to Easter

**March 2018
Readings,
Reflections,
Prayers from Luke**

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Caravaggio, "Supper at Emmaus"

Monday, March 5: Luke 16:1-18

What's the number one issue facing Canada? The economy? What's the government most concerned about? Economic stimulus. If the economy is booming, then all our problems – environmental issues, crime, opioid crisis, growing rich-poor gap, national security, violence against women, child pornography, drinkable water in First Nations' communities, gender gap in income – will all disappear. Right? If only it were so simple ...

As Jesus tells this parable (16:1-9), He is not encouraging dishonest business practices. He is highlighting how easy it is to compromise. This is how the world around us works. He's telling us to keep our eyes open, maintain our integrity, and not compromise. Jesus also recognizes that, while we are called to the highest standards, we live in the real world. So don't make enemies. Find ways to build bridges to others around you.

Jesus goes on to talk about faithfulness. God gives us the opportunity, skills, and ability to earn an income (His gifts include where we are born, educational opportunities, employment options, health, brain power, security, etc.). God entrusts property to us and expects us to use it for His Kingdom, to help other people, serve others, and be a blessing. What we have is not "ours" to use all on ourselves. Money is a responsibility, given to us by God, that we are called to steward wisely, for His glory. He blesses us so we can bless others.

In the Bible, from Genesis through Revelation, there is a constant concern for the poor and the vulnerable. God expects those with means to help those who are poor, with health issues, widows, foreigners, and refugees. In God's Kingdom, we work together to ensure all people are cared for. In the prophets, in particular, one of Israel's BIG failings, is their lack of concern and lack of justice for those in poverty. We live by a different set of values and a different kind of economics than the world around us (Acts 2:42-47).

Jesus is also reminding us that we are fools if we think that money and the things money can buy can provide true happiness. REAL wealth and REAL joy come through living in God's way and for His Kingdom.

The Pharisees "*heard all this and scoffed at him*" (16:14). How about you? How do you respond to 16:13?

Jesus emphasizes that faithfulness to God's law is important; He is not wiping out the Law. However, the Pharisees were being sticklers on minor issues while selectively ignoring others, such as wise and benevolent stewardship and compassion (and divorce¹). Jesus is challenging their inconsistency.

It's important to be faithful to God in our finances by giving generously. It's also important to be faithful to God in other ways, including in our relationships. In what ways is it relatively easy to be faithful to God? In what areas of your life do you struggle to be faithful? Talk this through with Jesus ...

*Keep us, O God, from pettiness:
let us be large in thought, in word, in deed.
Let us be done with faultfinding and leave off self-seeking.
May we put away all pretenses and meet each other, face to face,
without self-pity and without prejudice.
May we never be hasty in judgment and always generous.
Let us take time for all things:
make us to grow calm, serene, gentle.
Teach us to put in action our better impulses, straightforward and unafraid.
Grant that we may realize it is the little things of life that may create division,
but in the big things of life we are as one.
O Lord, let us not forget to be kind.
Let us love one another as you have loved us.
Amen.*

¹ Jesus is using divorce as another example – along with their poor financial stewardship – about ways in which the Pharisees were ignoring God's law. Many allowed divorce under almost any circumstance. Jesus is not making a definitive statement on all divorce under all circumstances in this verse – He is commenting on the Pharisees' picking and choosing certain laws while ignoring other teachings. A full biblical theology of divorce and remarriage has to wrestle with other texts, including Matthew 5:32 and 19:19, 1 Corinthians 7, etc.

Tuesday, March 6: Luke 16:19-31

Jesus has just told 4 stories about lost things people (a sheep, coin, rebellious son, self-righteous son). He has taught about the need for faithfulness in ALL things, including our finances and our relationships. Next, He tells this story about a man (rather like the older, proud son and the wealthy Pharisees, themselves) and a poor man (rather like the tax-collectors and sinners Jesus spent so much time with). The themes are similar to those in the parable of the lost sons ...

- At one level it is a story about financial generosity. Today, the wealthiest people continue to become wealthier and pay less relative tax (top CEOs make more in 4 days than the average Bangladeshi does in a lifetime). In Canada, middle and lower income people are becoming relatively poorer and poorer. More children live below the poverty line in Canada than ever before. What does this say about the moral and spiritual state of our culture? What is the future? What is Jesus' clear warning?
- At another level this story is about spiritual health and wealth. The Pharisees poo-poo-ed the riff-raff with whom Jesus spent His time. The religious leaders languished in their spiritual and (perceived) moral superiority. They were sure they were "in" and Jesus and those with whom He spent time were "out." Do we ever feel morally superior to other people? What is Jesus saying?

The surprise in Jesus' parable is His clear warning that we cannot plead ignorance. We KNOW the problems. We are not unaware of the issues. The question is: will we choose to do anything?

What might Jesus be saying to us?

- About economic and social issues in our city? Our country? Our world? Who are the Lazarus-es in Lethbridge? In Canada? Globally? What is Jesus saying to us? Does this question make you uncomfortable? It should. Jesus was trying to make the wealthy people of His day squirm (and, by global standards, we are all wealthy people, too). What can we do – locally and globally – to seek justice and greater economic opportunity for those who are most vulnerable and most in need?
- About our attitudes toward other people? Who do we think are "outside" of God's love? Why? Are they really? How then should we respond?

*Glorious God, give me grace to amend my life,
and to have an eye to my end without begrudging death.
To those who die in you, good Lord, death is the gate to a whole life.
And give me, good Lord, a humble, lowly,
quiet, peaceable,
patient, charitable,
kind, tender,
loving, and pity-full mind.
In all my works and all my words and all my thoughts,
May I be led by your holy, blessed Spirit.
Give me, good Lord, a full faith, a firm hope, a fervent charity,
and a love of you incomparably above the love of myself.
Give me, good Lord, a longing to be with you,
not to avoid the calamities of this world,
not so much to attain the joys of heaven,
as simply for love of you.
And give me, good Lord, your love and favor,
which my love of you, however great it might be,
could not deserve were it not for your great mercy.
These things, good Lord, that I pray for,
give me your grace to labour for.
Amen*

Thomas More (1478-1535)

Wednesday, March 7: Luke 17:1-10

Isn't God lucky that **I'm** on His side? Isn't He fortunate that **I** have done what **I** have done, given what **I** have given, sacrificed what **I** have sacrificed? **I** deserve God's blessing. **I've** earned it. Do I ever feel like that? Do you know people who think that way? Jesus' sobering reminder in 17:7-10 is that God is never in our debt. God doesn't "owe" us anything. If we are trying to earn brownie points with God, it won't work. God is much more interested in the state of our heart: we serve Him because we **love** Him, not to earn His favour.

These verses are all about getting proper perspective on both God and ourselves. God is God. We are His creation. He loves us and provides for us: all good things in our lives are His blessings. He calls us to trust, integrity, faithfulness, righteousness, compassion, and humility. Our response, in love, is to honour Him.

Jesus talks about temptation. We might expect Him to encourage us to resist it – a very good thing. But He also talks about how we can cause others to stumble. We must be careful not to trip up other people. How might that happen? How might something I do or say lead another person astray?

Jesus talks about forgiveness. Like God, we are called to forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive ... There are no limits. This seems wrong to us. Where's the fairness? Then I think how thankful I am that God forgives me, again and again. He is simply asking me to have the same attitude towards others that He has towards me.

The disciples are struggling with this. Do they have enough faith? Can they live as generously as Jesus calls them to live (Luke 16)? Can they live in such a way they don't cause others to stumble? Can they really be as forgiving as Jesus is? Jesus reminds them, "*It's not great faith you need; it is faith in a great God*" (Wright, p. 204). Faith is not like gas, something we fill ourselves up with at some spiritual gas station. Faith just is. If we trust God, **He** will do the miracle, not us. **His** Spirit will do the transforming, not us. **His** Spirit will give us wisdom to live wisely, rightly, and justly, not us. **His** Spirit will give us strength to be faithful and just.

In the end, because it is **God's Spirit**, working in us, that does everything, we cannot begin to say, "*Isn't God lucky I'm on His side?*" It's **God**, working in us, who produces anything good in our lives. Thank Him for what He is doing in your life. And pray that He continues to form and transform you by His Spirit ...

*Lord, for tomorrow and its needs, I do not pray;
Keep me, my God, from stain of sin just for today.
Let me both diligently work, and duly pray.
Let me be kind in word and deed, just for today.
Let me be slow to do my will, prompt to obey;
Help me to sacrifice myself just for today.
And if today my tide of life should ebb away,
Give me Your love divine, sweet Lord today.
So for tomorrow and its needs I do not pray,
But keep me, guide me, love me, Lord, just for today.
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

Thursday, March 8: Luke 17:11-19

(12:00 Lenten Lunch at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church: everyone welcome)

"We know with our heads, if we have any Christian faith at all, that our God is the giver of all things: every mouthful of food we take, every breath of air we inhale, every note of music we hear, every smile on the face of a friend, a child, a spouse – all that, and a million things more, are good gifts from his generosity. The world didn't need to be like this. It could have been far more drab (of course, we often made it dull and lifeless, but even there God can spring surprises). There is an old spiritual discipline of listing one's blessings, naming them before God, and giving thanks. It's a healthy thing to do, especially in a world where too often we assume an absolute right to health, happiness and every possible creature comfort" (Wright, Luke, p.206).

It is good to remember that we are called to "*give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Ephesians 5:20). Every day is Thanksgiving, not just the second Monday in October.

In this story, Jesus is travelling along the border of Galilee (Jewish territory) and Samaria (non-Jewish territory). Remember the Samaritans were despised by the Jews (and vice versa). Ten lepers are calling out to Him, "Have pity on us." They are keeping their distance as required by Old Testament law. Do they want money or healing? We don't know. Certainly, the blessing they receive exceeds their wildest expectations. This is amazing. Can you imagine how their lives are transformed – from having a death sentence to new life? From being outcast from society to being welcome back into community? From hopelessness to possibilities ...

But notice how the story develops: only one of the ten healed people returns to thank Jesus. What happens to the other nine? Are they too afraid to be seen with Jesus? Are they so eager to get back to their families? Do they just not care? Do they take it all for granted?

The one who comes back, Luke is eager to mention, is a **Samaritan**. The implication is that several (or all) of the other nine were Jewish (17:18). The story is a familiar one by now, isn't it? Foreigners, outcasts, and the most unlikely candidates are those who recognize, respond in faith to, and worship Jesus. Those whom we might expect to recognize Him as the Messiah completely fail to see Him or worship Him.

We may say we believe in Jesus, do we really? Do we show it? Do we say it? Do we live it? If we really do believe Jesus saves us and gives us new life, now and hereafter, are we thankful? Do we really worship Him and glorify Him (or is worship something we evaluate critically based on what **we** get out of it for own emotional needs)? What does true thankfulness look like? How can I be more thankful?

*Grant us, O God, your protection;
and in your protection, strength;
and in strength, understanding;
and in understanding, knowledge;
and in knowledge, hearts of justice;
and in hearts of justice, love of mercy;
and in love of mercy, the grace of God,
and in the grace of God, all thankfulness,
and in thankfulness, genuine love of others.
Amen*

Friday, March 9: Luke 17:20-37

Jesus is establishing a "Kingdom of the heart," not a geographical nation or a physical entity with defined national boundaries. Therefore, wherever anyone loves God and seeks to do His will, the Kingdom of God is present. God's Kingdom transcends time and space. It can be in your home and mine, our workplaces, our schools, an Ethiopian prison, a Philippine office, a Mexican field, a Chilean mine, a Turkish factory, a Palestinian church, or a Kazakh university – wherever people love Jesus and live for Him, the Kingdom of God is there.

Following Jesus is a matter of living for Jesus. As Jesus warns His disciples about being ready for His return, He reminds them that it's not just about "talking the talk" – it's also about "walking the walk."

Jesus is inviting us to be mindful of and intentional about how we live every moment of every day. Our faith is not something we neatly trot out for one hour on Sunday morning, then put in a box for the remaining 167 of the 168 hours in a week. Our relationship with Jesus transforms how we live all 168 hours, each and every week. "Follower of Jesus" is who we are, not a creed to which we give verbal assent.

Our whole being – mind, body, soul, spirit, relationships – is formed and nurtured by the Holy Spirit so we become "whole" people in Christ. Every moment of every day we live in Jesus' presence. We would live no differently today if we knew He was returning tomorrow than if we knew He was returning in 12,467 years (I just picked a random number.).

"The Kingdom of God is already among you ..." (17:21). What does that mean for you? How is that good news? How is that challenging?

*O Lord, grant me to greet this day in peace.
 Help me in all things to rely on Your Holy Spirit.
 In every hour of this day, reveal Your will to me.
 Bless my dealings with all who surround me.
 Teach me to treat all that comes to me throughout the day with peace of soul,
 and with the firm conviction that Your will governs all.
 In all my deeds and words guide my thoughts and feelings.
 In unforeseen events, let me not forget that You are always with me.
 Teach me to act firmly and wisely,
 without embittering and embarrassing others.
 Give me strength to bear the fatigue of this coming day with all that it shall bring.
 May Your Spirit fill every corner of my being and life.
 Direct my will,
 teach me to pray,
 help me be obedient in all things.
 Amen.*

Patriarch Philaret (1553-1633)

Saturday, March 10: Luke 18:1-8 (Time change – spring forward one hour tonight ☺)

This widow is a young woman who is denied justice. As a widow she has the right to a widow's inheritance. But in a world dominated by men and male judges, many women lost their rightful inheritance to a male member of the family. Widows were left destitute, to beg, starve, or sell their bodies. As a first century woman – and a penniless one at that – she approaches the judge with the only resource she has, her stubborn persistence. The judge, a nasty fellow, eventually gives in. What is Jesus' point?

Back in Luke 11:9-13, Jesus had said, *"So I tell you, keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. You fathers – if your children ask for a fish, do you give them a snake instead? Or if they ask for an egg, do you give them a scorpion? Of course not. So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."*

Jesus' point, in both cases, is NOT that we have to nag a reluctant, cruel God into answering our prayers (the judge in Luke 18 is as unlike God as you can get!). His point is that, if even people totally unlike God can give good judgments and mercy to those whom they don't care about but who nag them enough, how much more generous and gracious might we expect God, who loves us and is VERY just, to be in His dealings with us.

We don't have a grumpy unjust judge of a God. This judge is completely unlike God: in fact, *not fearing God* is equated with *not caring about people* (18:2). The corollary is also true: being like God **IS** caring about people. God loves us more than we can possibly imagine. And He does really, really, really care about us.

So ... when we feel like this woman, what should we do? Pray. How might we expect God to respond?

If being like God means caring about people, with compassion and justice, then what is Jesus saying to us?

Of course, God does not always answer our prayers as **we** might like. If He doesn't give us what we want, we might feel He is like this ornery, crusty judge. But we don't know the whole cosmic scope of things. We don't understand why sometimes God says "No," or "Wait." There is a tremendous mystery inherent in prayer. We can be confident, however, that whatever God's answer is, He will respond with love, mercy, compassion, and justice. God is still God. He knows best. We don't.

Pray boldly. Be thankful in all things. Trust God's answer is really the best of all possible answers, even though we may not appreciate it. And be a compassionate person, today.

*Father, make us more like Jesus.
Help us to bear difficulty, pain, disappointment and sorrows,
knowing that in your perfect working and design
you can use such bitter experiences to shape our characters
and make us more like our Lord.
We look with hope for that day when we shall be wholly like Christ,
because we shall see him as he is.
In the meantime, help us to so live with Jesus,
that we live for Jesus,
and people see Jesus in us.
Amen.*

Ignatius (martyred in 107)

Sunday, March 11: Luke 18:9-14 (Time change last night. One hour earlier today)

These men were as different as could be: one was a good man, a religious man and the other was an evil man, an amoral tax collector. Think of yourself as a 1st century Jew as you hear Jesus talk about these two people ...

The person you would love to be. The Pharisee is a godly, good person. He is a model of religious zeal in a nation where most people are nominally "religious" but few actually practice their faith. Pharisees yearn for spiritual revival among their people. They teach the Scriptures, encourage people to pray, and try to renew and revitalize worship. Pharisees are passionate people who walk the talk. They try to obey every detail of the Old Testament Law and the traditions and interpretations of the law ... and then some. The Law requires one annual fast day on the Day of Atonement: this fellow fasted twice a week: 104 times per year. You can identify with this man. You love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Your life mission is to serve God as faithfully as you can, living as morally purely as possible, trying to be faithful to all God's commands (tithing, reading the Bible, praying). You have a passion to see God's will done on earth as it is in heaven.

The last person you'd want to be. Then there is the tax collector. He has sold his soul to the Romans (whom you see as the devil incarnate). He collects taxes for Caesar from you, your family, his own family, and merchants passing through town. He earns his money by adding an exorbitant commission to the taxes he collects; you know he overcharges you and pockets the excess. Like most Jews you hate him: he is a symbol of occupation, corruption, extortion, and abuse of power. He has brought shame on his family. He has been excommunicated from the synagogue. He may be Jewish in name, but you know he has turned his back on his people and his God; he is an outcast. Thank God you are not this guy. You have not betrayed your country and abused your own people. There but for the grace of God go you.

You hear Jesus talk about the tax collector: "*The tax collector stood at a distance (good thing). He would not even look up to heaven, (good thing) but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, **the** sinner'*" (the original Greek does have the article, "the" – this man is not just "a" sinner; he is "the" ultimate sinner.) Should this wretch even be in the temple? Does God hear the prayers of people of such a bad person?

Sometimes we take this parable and make simple equations: Pharisee = bad guy; Tax collector = good guy. Jesus does not say that. Jesus does not criticize the Pharisee's zeal for God, passion for righteousness, or spiritual discipline. Nowhere does Jesus say the tax collector is good: stealing, abusing, lying, cheating.

What is ***good*** about the tax collector? Not his lifestyle, moral choices, or actions to date. But now he humbles himself before God. He confesses everything to God. No pride. No attempt to bargain with God. He's spiritually bankrupt. He does the only thing he can do: he throws himself completely on God's mercy. That is good. And God forgives him (he is "*justified before God*"). The ***good news about the tax collector*** is that he comes, prays, and goes home justified before God – forgiven – a changed person. God changes his life.

What is ***bad*** about the Pharisee? Not his lifestyle, moral choices, or actions. The ***tragedy of the Pharisee*** is that he comes, prays, and goes home the same as he came. The Pharisee is so confident his spiritual life is just fine he doesn't confess anything to God. In fact, he reminds God of how much he has done for the Kingdom: God should sit up, take notice, thank him, and reward him appropriately. He's good, God could change even

this man to be even better. The pity of the story is that he goes home no different than he came. Unchanged.

Jesus' yearning is that we be people who come into God's presence with our prayers ... and are changed because we share our lives with the living God. Our attitude is important:

- *Honesty.* We admit we have issues and we need God to speak into our lives.
- *Humility.* We recognize **only God** can change our lives; and we dare not sit in judgment on others.
- *Simplicity.* Our prayers do not need to be profound; just honest and humble.

"*God be merciful to me, a sinner ...*" I identify myself without excuses and I address myself to God, confident of being met with love and mercy ...

*Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.
Loving heavenly Father, I give my soul to your care.
Protect me from the temptations of sin.
Protect my mind and my will so that all my thoughts and desires will be pleasing to You.
Protect my desire to serve You and be holy in my soul.
Jesus, Son of the living God, I give my heart to your care.
Let me love you with all my heart.
Let me always try to love my neighbour.
Help me be strong around friends who might lead me away from You,
And instead be a light of Your life in a darkened world.
Holy Spirit, I give my body to your care.
Let me always remember that my body is Your home.
You dwell within me.
Let me never sin against you by any impure actions alone or with others.
Loving Lord, Three-in-One, I give my whole self to you.
And if I do fall and fail, help me to quickly confess and repent
That I may know the freedom of Your forgiveness.
Amen*

Monday, March 12: Luke 18:15-17

"*A little child has no difficulty in loving, has no obstacles to love. And that is why Jesus said: 'Unless you become like little children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven'*" (Mother Teresa). This little story is wedged between Jesus' experience with the Pharisee and the tax collector praying (remember, the proud, self-righteous Pharisee, yesterday?) and an encounter with a rich young ruler (who is also confident of his own "goodness" before God, tomorrow). Both the Pharisee and the wealthy young businessman are sure they are doing all the right things to be blessed by God. They are obeying the commands. What little children know intuitively, however, is that love is not something you earn by following rules and regulations. It is love.

A child loves her father because she experiences his loving care. A child loves his mother because she provides for his needs. It's about the loving grace of the parent, not what the child does for the parent. In the same way, Jesus says, we should love God because of His loving care and His provision of our needs (no, not necessarily our wants). It's about us responding to God's love, not about what we do to earn God's love.

The Pharisee and the rich young ruler cannot grasp God's love for them. They do not know, personally, that God loves them. They haven't spent time talking with God and getting to know Him. Instead, they created a long list of do's and don'ts, were dutifully checking off the boxes, and figured that, if they got enough checkmarks, they would be in God's good books. Where's the love?

God yearns for us to have a personal relationship with Jesus. He wants us to get to know Him. He wants to get to know us. Have you ever just had a genuine heart-to-heart conversation with God? Try it. Ask God to speak to you. Talk to Him as you would to a (really good) father or (really amazing) friend ...

Share. Listen. Share. Listen. Step out in faith ...

*Dear Jesus, help me to spread your love everywhere I go.
 Flood my soul with your spirit and life.
 Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly
 that my life may only be a radiance of yours.
 Shine through me,
 and be so in me, that every soul I meet
 may feel your presence in my soul.
 Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus.
 Stay with me, and then I shall begin to shine as you shine;
 so to shine as to be a light to others;
 the light, O Jesus, will be all from you, none of it will be mine;
 it will be you, shining on others through me.
 Let me thus praise you in the way you love best,
 by shining on those around me.
 Let me preach you without preaching,
 not by words but by my example,
 by the influence of what I do.
 Amen*

J.H. Newman (1801-1890)

Tuesday, March 13: Luke 18:18-30

The rich young ruler knows all about God. But He doesn't know God. He doesn't have a personal relationship with Him. And the tragedy of this poor rich man's life is that the deepest, most desperate need of His soul – to know God as His own Father, mentor, and friend – is unmet. He has all the wealth in the world, but he is destitute in the way that matters most: he has no peace, no joy, no sense of God's love, and, ultimately, no hope. How sad. To me, this one of the saddest conversations in Luke's gospel.

The young man is a GOOD man: he keeps all the commandments. Isn't that enough? Isn't it enough NOT to do bad things (18:20-21)?

Jesus defines things differently:

- First, it's not just about NOT doing bad things: He challenges the man to actively DO good things.
- Second, it's a matter of the heart: who do you really love more: money or God? We're reminded of Luke 16:1-18, where Jesus says to the Pharisees (*"who dearly loved their money"*[Luke 16:14]), *"No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money"*(Luke 16:13).

Money is not simply a neutral resource to be used in good or bad ways depending on your attitude. Jesus is saying money is a power – a person almost – that seeks to dominate us. Peter Ma observed that ...

"Money demands your trust or faith. *Money provides us with a sense of sufficiency and power. It takes the place of God because money claims to give us assurance and security for tomorrow. Just as we put our faith in God, we can put our faith/trust in money. If you have enough money, tomorrow will be taken care of. Money allures us to think that it can take care of us. Money says if you follow me, I will take care of you. I will shower you with blessing. I will give you status. I will give you power. I will be your assurance. I can make your rainy days disappear/I can brighten them up. ... But money cannot give us what it promises. God tells us that if we are honest we can recognize the lie and we know that Money cannot provide us with significance, joy or security. On really rainy days, when tragedies strike us, when we are faced with things like death, sickness, disease, depression, accidents, money can only sit on the sidelines. Money has never had the power to address our deepest needs, our loneliness, our sin and guilt. It has no power to bring us significance, because the significance money brings comes with strings attached. When the money runs out, remember the prodigal son, so does our significance and status and power.*

"Another way that money is like a god is that money demands your loyalty and time. *When we serve money, money shapes and orders our lives. There is a little cliché saying that asks: how much is enough? And*

what is the answer? ... a little more. When one falls under the spell of money, contentment is always an illusion. Contentment is always the promised goal when it comes to the allure of money but contentment is never reached. We know that in our hearts ... don't we ... I know it but it is so easy to fall into the trap of thinking that if only we could get that little more our lives will somehow be more fulfilling. ... Other people always seem to be better off than we are. We almost never think about consuming less and just being content ... Money is like a god. Money demands your loyalty and time. Money shapes and orders one's life."

Do you sense the tension? How do you experience it in your own life?

It's easy to dismiss this story – it's not relevant to me, is it? Luke records the incident because he believes it is relevant to each one of us. Whether we are rich or poor, we all have to wrestle with our attitude to money. The people who heard the dialogue understood how serious this is: "*Then who can be saved?*" (18:26). We all struggle to love God more than our money (or our **desire** for money, even if we don't have any).

"*What is impossible for people is possible with God*" (18:27). As we get to know Jesus, He helps us re-order our priorities so the things of God really do become central in our lives.

*As I rise from sleep, I thank You, Holy Trinity,
for Your loving-kindness and patience.
You are not angry with me, even though I am lazy and full of sin.
You have not destroyed me for the wrongs I have done.
Rather, you have shown unchanging love for me.
When I was bowed low in dark despair,
You raised me up to sing a morning hymn and glorify Your Lordship.
Now give light to the eye of my mind,
and open my ears to hear Your words and learn Your commandments.
Help me to obey Your will,
sing to You with all my heart,
and give praise to Your Holy Name,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
now and ever and unto ages of ages.
Amen.*

Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

Wednesday, March 14: Luke 18:31-43

Since Luke 9:51, Jesus has been on a mission: "*As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.*" He is no longer wandering around Galilean villages. Jesus is on a one-way journey to confront the powers of evil, sin, and death ... symbolically centered in Jerusalem. Jesus reminds his disciples: "*Listen, we're going up to Jerusalem, where all the predictions of the prophets concerning the Son of Man will come true. He will be handed over to the Romans, and he will be mocked, treated shamefully, and spit upon. They will flog him with a whip and kill him, but on the third day he will rise again*" (18:31-33). That's a very accurate prophetic word, isn't it? (not that we should be surprised, from One who is fully divine)

The Pharisees certainly don't understand Jesus. Do the disciples get it (18:34)? Perhaps they are just in denial. Maybe it's just too bizarre to imagine. As if they are blind, the truth seems hidden from them, and they cannot grasp what is going on.

In a piece of dramatic irony, a BLIND man SEES exactly what is going on. Wouldn't it be great to get as excited because Jesus is near as the blind man does? He keeps shouting a welcome and a request to Jesus.

Sometimes it takes being in a desperate situation before we reach out to Jesus. This incident happens on the edge of town, where beggars belong. Perhaps it takes being pushed to the edge before we genuinely turn to God? When things are going well and times are good, we manage okay on our own. Only when we're faced with a challenge that our own strength, wisdom – and money – can't solve, we finally call out to Jesus. Why don't we come to Him sooner? Jesus is the most incredible companion during good times, too.

The challenge Jesus has been putting before us is to recognize who He is: God, Himself, walking with us every step of every road of every moment of every day. He is with us in the non-eventful times, in the great times, in the hard times, and in the desperate times. He is inviting you to open your eyes and see Him with you right now. He is inviting you to experience His presence – God’s presence – in a personal relationship ...

Don’t wait till disaster strikes before you call out to Jesus. Open your eyes to see that see that your Saviour – the One who loves you, died for you, rose from the dead for you – is with you right now ...

*Lord, you are the only and the true source of wisdom,
since you alone can restore faith and hope to a doubting and despairing soul.
In your Son, Jesus, you have shown me that even the most terrible suffering can be beautiful,
if it is endured in your presence.
The knowledge of your Son can help me find joy in my own suffering.
My dear Father, I kneel before you this day,
and pray for my present sufferings,
and give thanks for the sufferings of the past.
I now realize that all these sufferings are part of your love,
through which you purify me and help me grow.
Grow my roots deeper and my love stronger,
Nourished and nurtured by Your Spirit, O Lord.
Amen*

Henry Suso (1295-1366)

**Thursday, March 15: Luke 19:1-10
(12:00 – Lenten Lunch @ Lethbridge Mennonite Church: everyone welcome)**

"Short in stature and big in greed - one description of Zacchaeus. Butty little Zacchaeus was hated; in that wealthy city he had grown rich by extortion, but he was not happy, and sensed some need for a change in his life. If he mingled with the crowd, he would soon be black and blue with sly nudges and kicks. He had good reason to climb out of the reach of the crowd ... His motives were mixed in seeking Jesus. He wanted just to see him, not to engage with him. He aimed to be a curious observer of Jesus, and suddenly found himself called by name." (Frank Doyle)

We have run across several tax collectors in Luke’s gospel. There were among the richest – and most hated – people, because they had sold out to the Romans, cheated people, and caused people to fall into impossible debt. Zacchaeus, like many of the people we have met in Luke, has all the money in the world, but is fundamentally miserable. Something is missing, but he doesn’t know what. Could it be Jesus?

Jesus calls him by name, "Zacchaeus." He is not "Sinner," or "Hey, you," he is **Zacchaeus**, a real person. There is something about being called by name, isn’t there? Then Jesus visits his home, "make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." This is unthinkable. It confirms the Pharisees’ worst fears: Jesus has gone over to the dark side. He is cavorting with the enemy. He cannot distinguish good from evil anymore.

But Jesus is NOT overwhelmed by the power of the dark side. Instead, He brings God’s light, love, and life into Zacchaeus’ very wealthy – but very empty – life. Look at the transformation. It’s amazing. For a moment forget you have ever read this before and simply be astonished. Stupefied. Speechless. Zacchaeus will be much less wealthy, but so much richer in the things that really matter: He knows Jesus; he is forgiven; he will have his integrity; he will be able to rebuild relationships with his neighbours ... It’s all good news.

Compare Zacchaeus with the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-30). Which one is richer in the end?

Frank Doyle writes, "Zacchaeus used his imagination to see above the heads of those who came between him and Jesus. Do I allow someone stopping me from seeing Jesus? Jesus saw what was holding Zacchaeus back from living fully and freely. I ask Jesus to speak to me about my life, to help and to heal me."

*O Eternal God, King of all creation,
forgive me the sins which I have committed this day in thought, word, and deed;
and cleanse, O Lord, my humble soul from every stain of flesh and spirit.
Grant me, O Lord, to pass through the sleep of this night in peace,
that when I rise from my bed
I may please Your Holy Name all the days of my life,
and conquer the enemies, both corporeal and incorporeal, that contend against me.
Deliver me, O Lord, from the vain thoughts that stain me, and from evil desires.
For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory
of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.*

Macarius of Egypt (330-391)

Friday, March 16: Luke 19:11-27

When Jesus' tells parables about a king and his servants, his audience would have known He was really talking about God, the true King of Kings, and Israel, His people. This parable, then, is about how Israel has – or hasn't – faithfully handled God's blessings. How do the subjects (Israel) feel about their King (God) in 19:14? As Jesus returns, people who have been faithful will be rewarded. What does faithfulness look like? Jesus has already said the greatest commands are, "*You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind*" and "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" (Luke 10:26). Jesus has emphasized this is a matter of the heart, not outward religiosity.

There is great blessing and mercy to those who welcome the King. That is great news. May we be people who welcome the King into our hearts, our lives, our homes, our schools, our workplaces, and our world.

The challenging aspect of this parable is the message of judgment. To those who do not accept Jesus as King, the consequences are dire. In our contemporary version of "political correctness" judgment of any kind is not popular. Jesus warns us that sometimes our cultural scruples are not the way things really work. There are consequences to some choices and actions, whether we choose to acknowledge them or not.

For Jesus' first hearers, this is a parable about Jesus' coming: will the Jewish people accept Him or not? Are they doing the things God commanded them to do: being a blessing to others with what they had been given? Or are they holding onto their gifts so tightly it is doing no one (even themselves) any good?

What does it mean for us? As God's people, we are still called to love the LORD our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and all our mind and to love your neighbor as yourself. How are we doing at that? God has given each of us tremendous blessings, too: are we using them to bless others? Or are we holding onto our gifts so tightly they are not doing anyone (even ourselves) any good?

Jesus is challenging people, rich in material things, to recognize wealth ultimately does not satisfy. As we live in the Spirit of God's gracious Kingdom, our souls grow. This is what really matters. It truly is more blessed to give than to receive – Zacchaeus has realized this; the rich young ruler did not. What is God saying to you?

*Hands who touched the leper, touch my wounded heart;
Hands who healed the blind man, heal my aching soul;
Hands who cured the lame, mend my disjointed life;
Hands who embraced all life, enfold me in your peace.
Lord, merely touch and heal, cure and forgive.
This is my prayer to You, my Lord;
Give me strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows;
Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service;
Give me the strength never to disown the poor or bend my knees before insolent might.
Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.
And give me the strength to surrender my strength to Your will with love. Amen*

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)

Saturday, March 17: Luke 19:28-40

"Mile after uphill mile, it seems a long way even today in a car. You wind up through the sandy hills of Jericho, the lowest point on the face of the earth, through the Judean desert, climbing all the way. Halfway up, you reach sea level; you've already climbed a long way from the Jordan valley, and you still have to ascend a fair-sized mountain. It is almost always hot. Since it seldom ever rains, it's almost always dusty as well.

"That was the way the pilgrims came, with Jesus going on ahead, as he had planned all along. This was to be the climax of his story, of his public career, of his vocation. He knew well enough what lay ahead, and had set his face to go and meet it head on. He couldn't stop announcing the kingdom, but that announcement could only come true if he now embodied in himself all the things he'd been talking about. The living God was at work to heal and to save, and the forces of evil and death were massed to oppose him, like Pharaoh and the armies of Egypt trying to prevent the Israelites from leaving. But this was to be the moment of God's new Exodus, God's great Passover, and nothing could stop Jesus going ahead to celebrate it.

"Even when you drive, rather than walk, from Jericho to the Mount of Olives, the sense of relief and excitement when you reach the summit is intense. At last you exchange barren, dusty desert for lush green growth, particularly at Passover time, at the height of spring. At last you stop climbing, you crest the summit, and there before you, glistening in the sun, is the holy city, Jerusalem itself, on its own slightly smaller hill across a narrow but deep valley. Bethany and Bethphage nestle on the Jericho side of the Mount of Olives. Once you pass them, Jerusalem comes in to view almost at once. The end of the journey; the pilgrimage to end all pilgrimages: Passover-time in the city of God." (Tom Wright, Luke, pp.228-9)

We typically read this on the Sunday before Good Friday (when we recall Jesus' crucifixion) and Easter Sunday (when we celebrate His resurrection). This story did take place on the Sunday before those other events. So, to be strictly in sync, we should read it NEXT Sunday. Unfortunately, so much happens between this event and the crucifixion we couldn't fit it all into 4 days, so we're spreading it out over two weeks.

"As we arrive in Jerusalem with Jesus, the question presses upon us," Wright reflects, "are we going along for the trip in the hope that Jesus will fulfill some of our hopes and desires? Are we ready to sing a psalm of praise, but only as long as Jesus seems to be doing what we want? The long and dusty pilgrim way of our lives gives us plenty of time to sort out our motives for following Jesus in the first place. Are we ready not only to spread our cloaks on the road in front of him, to do the showy and flamboyant thing, but also now to follow him into trouble, controversy, trial and death?" How serious am I about Jesus? What am I willing to lay down before Him? How far am I willing to follow Him? When praise becomes persecution, where will I stand?

Jesus' epic trip to Jerusalem, began back in Luke 9:51. Now His journey is finally coming to its climax. At this point the crowd welcomes Him as King. They sing a great psalm of praise, Psalm 118, which pilgrims to the Passover always sang on their way up to Jerusalem. Our prayer this morning comes from Psalm 118:1, 22-29

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good!
His faithful love endures forever.
This is the day the Lord has made.
We will rejoice and be glad in it.
The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing, and it is wonderful to see.
Please, Lord, please save us.
Please, Lord, please give us success.
Bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.
The Lord is God, shining upon us.
You are my God, and I will praise you!
You are my God, and I will exalt you!
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good!
His faithful love endures forever.
Amen*

Sunday, March 18: Isaiah 54

What hope is there? The world is on the brink of nuclear war. Conflict in places like the Middle East seems to drag on and on. Climate change is irreversibly altering the climate in places like the Canadian Arctic and subtropical Africa. Every day the news records more stories of gun violence, sexual abuse, and serious social problems. Could it get any worse?

Jews in Jesus' day felt things were about as bad as they could get. They were occupied by the Roman army. Tax collectors extorted people into unpayable debt. Their leaders, from Herod to the chief priests, were corrupt and amoral. They saw no future and no hope.

To these people, God promises His Messiah, His suffering Servant (Isaiah 53). God suffers alongside His people and for His people – for ALL people.

But the suffering will not last forever. Just as Jesus will suffer in horrible ways, He will overcome the powers of sin, evil, and death on the cross and through His resurrection.

Isaiah 54 follows directly on from the suffering Servant/suffering Messiah passages in Isaiah 53. It is a hymn of hope. Ultimately God will save and redeem His people.

When we go through the best of times and the worst of times, Jesus is with us. He walks with us. He suffers with us. And He will get us through, to hope and healing – if not in this life than in the next. Sometimes we feel like a "storm-battered city, troubled and desolate" (54:11). God will get us through.

*O God, early in the morning I cry to you.
Help me to pray and concentrate my thoughts on you:
I cannot do this alone.
In me there is darkness, but with you there is light;
I am lonely, but you do not leave me;
I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help;
I am restless, but with you there is peace.
In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience;
I do not understand your ways, but you know the way for me.
Lord, whatever this day may bring, Your name be praised.
Amen.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (executed in Flossenbürg Concentration Camp, 1945)

Monday, March 19: Luke 19:41-44

"After telling this story, Jesus went on toward Jerusalem, walking ahead of his disciples ..." What story had Jesus just told? Quickly look back over 19:11-27 ...

Despite all the excitement of the parade, Jesus weeps over the city because they just don't understand who He is and the Kingdom He has come to establish. His is to be a Kingdom of the heart, in which people love God, live His principles in their daily lives, and create a godly nation through individual lives, united in their genuine love for God and love for one another. Many Jews, however, wanted a political-military Saviour who would raise an army and slaughter the Roman overlords.

In 66 AD, Jewish rebels would revolt against Roman rule (the First Jewish-Roman War). The judgment hinted at in the parable in 19:11-27 will become very real in 70 AD when Roman legions besiege and sack Jerusalem. An eyewitness to the collapse of Jerusalem, the Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote, "*The slaughter within was even more dreadful than the spectacle from without. Men and women, old and young, insurgents and priests, those who fought and those who entreated mercy, were hewn down in indiscriminate carnage. The number of the slain exceeded that of the slayers. The legionaries had to clamber over heaps of dead to carry on the work of extermination ... As soon as the army had no more people to slay or to plunder, because there remained none*"

to be the objects of their fury for they would not have spared any, Titus Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and Temple ... The wall surrounding Jerusalem was so thoroughly destroyed, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe the city had ever been inhabited. This was the end which Jerusalem came to by the madness of those that were for revolution ..."

As Jesus moves into the Jerusalem, He is challenging the existing Jewish religious and political system at their very centre: military-political revolution was not the way of God; neither was religious ritual (corrupted by commercialization as it was) – with no heart behind it.

In a crazy, mixed up world, we are looking for saviours. We are looking for a politician who can instantly “fix” our economy. We are looking for leaders who can clean up our social problems. We would love a hero who could solve problems in the Middle East. We would be so excited to hear about a researcher who found the cure to cancer. Sports fans are even looking for the perfect coach/general manager to make their team into a champion. Jesus invites us to think about the hope our world really needs ...

It's not about political revolution. It's not about military power. It's not about economic salvation.

What we all really need is a heart, changed through a relationship with God. What we all really need is to recognize that our actions – the little acts of love, kindness, righteousness, and holiness that we do day by day – are what transform the world. The Christian church defeated the Roman Empire within 300 years (in 312 AD Emperor Constantine became a Christian). Christians did so by living out the love of Jesus and demonstrating the Kingdom of God in deed and word. There was no war or bloodshed. Just love in action.

How can my life show the love of God today? What act or word of grace, kindness, love, forgiveness, mercy, justice, hope, or peace can I share today?

*Remind us often Lord,
when we are feeling
proud,
arrogant,
beyond reproach,
pleased with ourselves,
self-sufficient in our ways ...
that for such as us
and better
and worse
you walked a road
that took you to a cruel cross,
and rose again to show us where
we might look for rescue
as from this lofty perch
we fall.
Amen*

Tuesday, March 20: Luke 19:45-48

What is the heart and soul of Canada? What is our most treasured national icon? What, if you were to destroy it, would tear at the very identity/idea/principle of Canada?

The Temple in Jerusalem was the heart and soul of first century Judaism. It was the symbolic heart of the nation of Israel. When the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 AD, their sacrilege not only shook the Jewish religious system to its core, it devastated the spirit of the nation. The heartbeat of the country was broken.

Jesus, as He comes into the Temple, challenges the core of Jewish identity. Yes, it is nice that He stands up to charlatans making a dishonest shekel on holy ground. But more fundamentally, Jesus is symbolically saying the whole system stinks. The entire society is rotten. The Temple and the leaders of Israel (priests and teachers of

the law) are fundamentally corrupt. Jesus challenges the injustice, corruption, rich-poor gap, racism, sexism, age-ism, lies, and other problems of His day by inviting everyone to see how they are part of the problem. He is getting to the heart of the problem. It hurts to hear it.

What are the issues in our country/world today? Do we have injustice? Corruption? A rich-poor gap? Sexism? Abuse? Age-ism? Dishonesty? Other problems? How are we, or our lifestyles, part of the problem?

Back in 1st Century Israel, Jesus invites everyone to be part of the solution. He invites them to discover new priorities, new values, and a new lifestyle in the Kingdom of God. Some, like the tax collector, Zacchaeus, get it (19:1-10). They radically change their lives to align with God's Kingdom values: justice, love, mercy, generosity, and compassion. Most, like the rich young ruler, the Pharisees, and the businessmen and priests in the Temple, won't get it. They are amassing their personal fortunes and really don't care two hoots about anyone else ...

How about us? Is our number one priority Number One (me, myself, and I)? Is it all about amassing my own personal fortune? Or is my number one priority the Kingdom of God and His values of love, justice, and mercy?

What if God asks me, like he asked the rich young ruler (18:18-30) or the Pharisees ("*who loved their money*" 16:14), actually to give a tithe to His Kingdom? (Wait a sec – He does: Malachi 3:6-12)

What if He invites me to partner in His work and volunteer in some way? Can I find the time? (Wait a sec – He does: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31). What if? What if? What if?

My personal experience is that when we put God first, it all works out far better than we could have imagined. Even in our leanest financial times, Marianne and I discovered that when we are financially faithful to God, He has been MORE than faithful to us. When we have been generous with our time, He has richly blessed us. Whenever we have responded in faith, we have received more than we gave.

In God's economy, it really is more blessed to give than to receive. Can I really believe that? Can I step out in faith and try that?

*May all I do today begin with you, O Lord.
Plant dreams and hopes within my soul, revive my tired spirit:
be with me today.
May all I do today continue with your help, O Lord.
Be at my side and walk with me:
be my support today.
May all I do today reach far and wide, O Lord.
My thoughts, my work, my life:
make them blessings for your kingdom;
let them go beyond today, O God.
Today is new, unlike any other day, for God makes each day different.
Today God's everyday grace falls on my soul like abundant seed, though I may hardly see it.
Today is one of those days Jesus promised to be with me,
a companion on my journey,
and my life today, if I trust him,
has possibilities unspoken, undreamed, and unseen.
In Jesus, my life has purpose.
Amen*

Wednesday, March 21: Luke 20:1-19

Sometimes we read a Scripture passage, like this parable, and its meaning seems a bit obscure to us. But in this case, the people who heard Jesus' parable had no problem understanding His meaning (20:19). They knew exactly who the man who planted the vineyard was (God), the servants were (prophets), and who the tenants were (the Jewish people, especially the priests and teachers of the law). Jesus was not being subtle.

Jesus challenged the order of things in the Temple by (literally) upsetting the apple carts. Now He is explaining His actions in no uncertain terms. The established order of things in Israel looks wonderful, religious, and godly, but it is not just corrupt, it is evil. Despite their "religiosity" they are rejecting God.

- The vineyard owner, God, has sent messengers, the prophets, to the people in charge of His land. With what response?
- Finally, the owner, God, sends His own beloved Son, Jesus. With what response?

We read, over and over again, Jesus' warnings to the Jewish people that God has come among them. But they are missing Immanuel, God Himself. His own people reject Him. Meanwhile the outsiders recognize Jesus for who He is: a Roman centurion (7:1-10), a sinful woman (7:30-50), a non-Jewish demon-possessed man (8:26-39), a Samaritan (10:25-37), foreigners (11:29-32), the blind (18:31-43), tax collectors and sinners (19:1-10).

Are we ever like the chief priests and teachers of the law? Are we so certain we are being faithful to God, but we are missing His Presence? Are we loving, gracious, forgiving, and merciful?

What is Jesus' comment about the consequences for those who throw the Son out of the vineyard and kill him:

- in 20:16?
- in 20:17-18?

Jesus always expands the Kingdom of God to include ALL people. Anyone who accepts His gift of love, grace, forgiveness, and call to the Kingdom is welcome. There is no privilege status based on racial heritage, ethnic pedigree, income, ability, or status. It's about our hearts. It's about love. It's about relationship.

The "vineyard," God's Kingdom, is open to ALL. Isn't that great news?

Pray for those you know who need to know God's love in their lives. The gate to the Kingdom is open to everyone: the past can be the past. God invites ALL to come, with repentance and faith, into His Presence.

*God speaks to each one of us individually.
I need to listen to hear what he is saying to me.
Each day, I need to read the text a few times ... then listen.
Do I notice myself reacting as I pray with the Word of God?
Do I feel challenged, comforted, angry?
Imagining Jesus sitting or standing by me,
I speak out my feelings, as one trusted friend to another.
I pray for a deeper appreciation of Your love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness in my life.
I pause to reflect on your amazing grace and love.
I pray for a spirit of love, grace, mercy and forgiveness in my relationships.
I confess my struggles.
Save me, O Lord, from the poison of judgmentalism, anger, and bitterness,
And empower me, instead, with your love and compassion.
In the Name of Jesus, I pray,
Amen.*

**Thursday, March 22: Luke 20:20-26
(12:00 – Lenten Lunch at St. Augustine's Anglican Church – everyone welcome)**

What does it mean today to give to God what belongs to Him ...?

This entire incident is a set up. With flowery, flattering words, spies set Jesus up, then put Him in an untenable situation. If Jesus opposes the tax, He will be speaking treason against Rome, and the Roman authorities can arrest and dispose of Jesus as a seditious revolutionary: the Pharisees win. If Jesus approves of the tax, He will be siding with the hated Romans and be a disloyal Jew: the Pharisees win. Furthermore, Roman coins had an image of the emperor on them and a slogan claiming the emperor was divine. If Jesus were to endorse Roman money, He would also be supporting the claim the emperor was a god. Jesus is a heretic: the Pharisees win.

They have Jesus over a barrel. Or do they?

He asks **THEM** to produce a coin. These (apparently) super-religious Jews, themselves, are using the Roman coins. They are quite content themselves to use "Caesar-is-god" coins. What does that say about **them**?

Then Jesus challenges them: "*give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.*"

- Give Caesar back his blasphemous coins. He is challenging them, as He did the rich young ruler, to see just how attached they are to their worldly wealth. Can they do that?
- Give God what is rightfully His: our worship, our love, our devotion, AND our obedience. Do **they** love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength? Will **they** prove it?

Jesus challenges us to think about what this means to us, today ...

- As tax time approaches, give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Don't perjure yourself by trying to cheat. It shows your true character, it eats at your conscience, and, if you get caught, it is a terrible witness. You don't need to connive. God will provide for you.
- What does it mean today to give to God what belongs to Him ...? What does belong to Him?
 - *Who we are.* He designed, created, and sustains us. He gives us opportunity, ability, health ... These are His gifts to you. What does that mean for you, today, to give them back to Him?
 - *All we have.* All our possessions and savings have only been possible because of His blessings; we are stewards, not owners, of what is "ours" ... What does that mean for you, today?
 - *All our devotion.* We are called to love Him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength – to worship, love, and honour Him with our whole being ... What does that mean for you, today?
 - *All our obedience.* Because we love Him, we are challenged to obey Him and follow Him. No compromise. No excuses. What does that mean for you, today?
 - *All our relationships.* We are called to love our neighbour as ourselves ... What does that mean for you, today?

*Sovereign Lord,
your hand has touched
the dry bones of our faith.
Your Word has breathed
new life where there was death.
Your spirit raised
us up from where we lay.
Your love has brought
us home and to your Cross.
By your grace, we stand forgiven.
Free.
Hallelujah!
Amen*

Friday, March 23: Luke 20:27-44

The **context** of some Scriptures makes a big difference. When we yank a sentence or even a paragraph out of it's context, we can get some very bizarre results. An old story tells how a young man was seeking wisdom for what to do next, so he opened his Bible and noticed the verse, "*Judas went out and hanged himself*" (Matthew 27:5). Rather discouraged he took another shot in the dark, opening his bible to "*Go and do likewise*" (Luke 10:37²). Taken out of context, those verses can lead to misunderstanding and downright disastrous results!

² Luke 10:37 is Jesus' conclusion to the story of the Good Samaritan. In response to an expert in the Law's question about "*Who is my neighbour?*" Jesus tells the familiar story of a Samaritan man who helped a Jewish assault victim whom other Jews passed by. Jesus asks the religious leader: "*Who was the neighbour to man who was attacked?*" The scholar replied, "*The one who showed him mercy.*" Jesus then says, "**Go and do likewise.**" Quite a different meaning than how our young man read it! Yes, context matters. A lot.

Today's reading is helpful to keep in context, too. "*The teachers of the law and chief priests*" are out to get Jesus (read 20:1, 19, 20, 26, 27). They have questioned His authority (20:1-8). They tried to catch Him compromising his religion by acknowledging Caesar as a god (20:20-26). Now the Sadducees, one of the Jewish factions, are trying to nail Him on the doctrine of the resurrection. The Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection – they believed you died and that was that.³ They felt the first five books of our Old Testament (whom they attributed to Moses) were the real basis of Jewish faith: the later books, where a theology of resurrection is more developed, were less important. Since the Sadducees did not clearly see evidence of resurrection in the first five books, they argued that teaching about resurrection was an invention of later prophets, like Daniel. They believed that Daniel was wrong.

The context then is this: the Sadducees, eager to trap Jesus for heresy AND prove the impracticalities and impossibility of resurrection, craft a hypothetical situation. Jesus will look like a fool.

This is a passage intended to emphasize the FACT of resurrection. This is not really a passage focused on the NATURE of resurrection (what our bodies will be like, what our relationships will be like, etc.). It is not about marriage in heaven. It is a discussion of the basic reality OF resurrection.

Therefore, Jesus goes back to the first five books of Moses and emphasizes that the doctrine of resurrection is present there. While Jesus does not go into detail, He does emphasize that God's faithful people are very much "living" in Him. This is not the final resurrection in all its glory, but they are "alive in God."

There is a lot of mystery about the death, what it means to be "in God" or "in Christ" before the Day of Judgment, and full resurrection. The Bible does not give us all the answers. Jesus does assure us that:

- resurrection is REAL – His own life, death, and resurrection will prove that.
- resurrection is GOOD – whatever our life in God will be like, it will be wonderful. More wonderful than we can possibly imagine (happily married people don't have to worry)
- REAL life is something we look forward to, being fully with God, in the future. If we think life here and now is good, you ain't seen/experienced nothin' yet ...
- God is in control. Nothing and no-one can ever take us out of His hands.

We may have questions. We would like more complete answers. We'd like to know details. But we have to live with the mystery of not understanding it all. Perhaps we just cannot comprehend what life with God, in all His glory, could possibly be like?

*O sweet Saviour Christ,
in your undeserved love for us
you were prepared to suffer the painful death of the cross:
let me not be cold or even lukewarm in my love for you.
Lord help me to face the truth about myself.
Help me to hear my words as others hear them,
to see my face as others see me;
Let me be honest enough to recognize my impatience and conceit;
let me recognize my anger and selfishness;
Give me sufficient humility to accept my own weakness for what they are.
Give me the grace - at least in your presence -
to say, 'I was wrong - forgive me.'
God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
increase in me faith and truth and gentleness and grant me eternal life.
Amen.*

Polycarp (b.69-martyred for his faith in 115)

³ The Pharisees, the major group Jesus interacts with, DID believe in the resurrection.

Saturday, March 24: Luke 20:45-21:1-4 ⁴

Consider the contrast between the teachers of the law (20:46-47, 21:1) and the poor widow (20:47, 21:2-4).

These sayings follow Jesus' teaching about the true cornerstone of our lives – our need to build our lives on Him, and Him alone. How do these verses re-emphasize that truth?

"We need to stop giving people excuses not to believe in God," writes Francis Chan. "You've probably heard the expression 'I believe in God, just not organized religion'. I don't think people would say that if the church truly lived like we are called to live ... God doesn't call us to be comfortable. He calls us to trust Him so completely that we are unafraid to put ourselves in situations where we will be in trouble if He doesn't come through."

How does this complement what Jesus has just said about the truth and goodness of resurrection life with God?

What is Jesus challenging us to consider? How do we live wisely in this life? How can we take a small step – or a leap – of faith? What is He saying to you?

*I arise today, through a mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,
Through the belief in the threeness,
through confession of the oneness of the Creator of Creation.
I arise today through the strength of Christ's birth and his baptism,
Through the strength of his crucifixion with his burial,
Through the strength of his resurrection and his ascension.*

*I arise today through the strength of heaven:
Light of sun, radiance of moon,
splendor of fire, speed of lightning,
swiftness of wind, depth of sea,
stability of earth, firmness of rock.*

*I arise today through God's strength to pilot me:
God's might to uphold me, God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me, God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me, God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me, God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me from snares of devils, from
temptations of vices, from everyone who shall wish me ill,
afar and anear, alone and in multitude.*

*Christ to shield me today.
Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ in me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.*

*I arise today, through a mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,
Through belief in the threeness,
through confession of the oneness,
of the Creator of Creation.*

Amen

attributed to Patrick (340-440?)

⁴ The chapter/verse breaks were added in the 13th Century – neither Jesus nor Luke included them. They are not inspired parts of the Bible. Therefore, it is helpful sometimes to just ignore them. I think in this case it's helpful to look at these sections together.

Palm Sunday, March 25: Luke 21:5-38 (Kids' Programme at 11:00, regular service at 9:30)

Today is Palm Sunday, celebrating Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Luke 19:28-44). As Jesus was welcomed as King, He wept over the city. They just didn't understand who He was.

The Temple was the centerpiece of Jewish culture, identity, and religion. The Temple represented their history, faith, and hope for the future. It was the Westminster Abbey/White House/Eiffel Tower/Vatican of its day⁵ – no one could conceive of it being destroyed. It was the heart and soul of their national identity. Jesus is warning his disciples that the Temple, and the legalistic Judaism it represented, is doomed.

Some modern "prophets" try to read specific present-day events into this text: this is all about us, today, right? Remember, Jesus is saying this to his own disciples in the shadow of the real Temple, just before His crucifixion. He is preparing them for what is about to happen in their own lifetimes in their own city. This is not primarily a prophecy aimed at Canada in 2018. It is a word for Jesus' soon-to-without-their-Lord followers for their time in their place. He is preparing them for the next years of their lives, without Him.

Notice the context in Luke 21:5-7. Jesus is talking specifically about the destruction of the physical Temple in Jerusalem (21:6). The disciples are asking about that specific event (21:7). Other passages in Scripture talk clearly about Jesus' return and judgment, but this is not one of them.

Jesus' key message is courage and patience (21:9).

- Wars and revolutions happened throughout the first century. After Augustus died, the Roman Empire never experienced peace and security again. Between 66-13 AD there were three Jewish-Roman wars.
- After Nero's suicide in 68 AD, the entire Roman world descended into political chaos. Unprecedented anarchy and fear swept through the empire, aptly described in 21:25 (69 AD is "*the year of the four emperors*": four emperor-wanna-be's, each backed by their own army, created a toxic year-long civil war with murder, treachery, bloody battles, and thousands of innocent victims).
- Earthquakes and other natural disasters happened, then, too (for instance, Ephesus, a city of 500,000+, was flattened by earthquakes in 26 AD and 163 AD). Major earthquakes also struck Pompeii and Antioch. The Roman Empire area is prime earthquake/volcano country (think of Vesuvius [79 AD] and recent earthquakes in Turkey). Israel sits on a major transform fault along the Dead Sea Valley.
- Christians were brutally persecuted by Nero and other emperors: thrown to lions, burned alive as human torches, etc. They were blamed for everything from Nero's fire to crop failures. Many, like Paul and Peter, had the opportunity to share their faith during the persecution.
- Jerusalem was besieged, razed, and the temple leveled by the Romans in 70 AD during the First Jewish-Roman War. Smart people got out.

These events ALL occurred by the end of 70 AD – during the lifetime of many of those who heard Jesus speak.

Before we try to apply these to our times, we need to know they all fit perfectly in dramatic events which the people Jesus actually spoke these words to – His disciples – would experience firsthand. This passage is, first of all, for people in Jesus' time (not Canadians in 2018). Jesus was preparing His followers for the danger, stress, and opportunity that would come in the next few years of their lives.

Yes, there are dreadful things happening now. Yes, Jesus warnings still ring true, now. Does this passage still have meaning for us today? In general, yes. In terms of specifics, maybe not so much ...

- Wars, earthquakes, famines, persecutions, betrayals and other dreadful things still happen. We should not be surprised. Does God cause them all now? Did God cause them all then? No ...
- When those dreadful things happen, what attitudes, qualities of character, and spiritual disciplines does

⁵ We Canadians do not really have an iconic building that represents our national identity so completely – The Air Canada Centre? Bell Centre? (someone has suggested *Canada's national religion is hockey* – we are more devoted to hockey, more decisions are based on hockey schedules, more conversations happen about hockey, more people get excited about hockey than anything else). What if Jesus were to say, "*The time will come when hockey will be no more ...*" how would we Canadians react?

Jesus encourage us to cultivate in those times?

- Patience
 - Courage
 - Prayer
 - Compassion
- Jesus has recently talked about the truth of resurrection. How does hope – hope of a future with Jesus – help us when these things happen?
 - When dreadful things happen, how can we bring the love, comfort, peace, and hope of God? ⁶
 - How can we encourage Christians in other places who do face persecution?
 - When we are challenged about our faith, God will help us express our faith.

Lord, help me to be patient in hardship, to be courageous in my witness, compassionate in my generous love to those suffering, and persevering in prayer.

*"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you" (Isaiah 43:1-2).*

*Today is going to be a struggle, Lord.
The act of rising, journeying,
conversation, bustling crowds,
people I work with,
people I meet.
Be my confidence,
my assurance,
in the words that I speak.
Be my freedom,
my guidance,
as I walk through these streets.
Today is going to be a struggle, Lord.
Keep my head above water,
keep my eyes fixed on you.
Amen*

Monday, March 26: Luke 22:1-30

When Jesus wants to teach His disciples about what His life means, and what His impending death will mean, He doesn't give them a theological treatise, or two, or three on "atonement." ⁷ He gives them a specific thing to do. More specifically, He gives them a meal to share. Of course, the real place to learn about this would be for all of us using this guide to gather around the Lord's Table and do just as He did ... but that's not possible today. We will celebrate the Lord's Supper this coming Sunday, Easter Sunday, April 1.

Here are some the things to think about as we prepare for the Lord's Supper in 6 days:

- **It reminds us of God's deliverance.** Jesus shares this meal during Passover, when the Israelites remember God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Through the Lord's Supper we retell the exodus story of God, but Jesus is going to save us from a greater enemy than Pharaoh. He saves us from the power of evil, sin, guilt, and death.
- **It reminds us of God's amazing love for us.** Jesus – God Himself – is with us. He teaches us how

⁶ For ways you can practically help – whenever or wherever there is a disaster – visit Canadian Baptist Ministries' website, www.cbmin.org

⁷ There are at least five major "theories of atonement" – theological attempts to understand what Jesus' life, death, and resurrection mean.

to live. He takes upon Himself all our sin. He suffers as we deserve to suffer. He dies, abandoned, as we deserve to die. He sets us free. He is present still, in and through His Spirit.

- **It reminds us of the hope we have of eternal life with Jesus.** Paul says, "*whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*" (1 Corinthians 11:26). We are reminded Jesus has destroyed the power of sin and death. He arose. We look forward to a resurrected life with Him (1 Corinthians 15). In the meantime, He is with us always (Matthew 28:20).
- **It is a foretaste (symbolically) of heaven.** One of the great scriptural images for the Kingdom of God is that of a banquet to which we are invited. We arrive as cherished guests, to share in the richest foods and best wines (Psalm 23:5; Isaiah 25:6-8, Luke 14:15-24, Matthew 22:1-14). The New Testament describes this banquet more precisely as a wedding feast, for deep down we are beginning to celebrate the wedding of the Lamb (Christ) with his bride, the church. Any barriers between us and God are gone. We are united with Him, once and for all.
- As we were reminded when Jesus broke bread and fed 5000, we are reminded, too, that **it celebrates that, with Jesus, we are entering wonderful, but unknown territory.** Miracles happen. Things we don't expect – and can't explain – are now possible.

For Jesus, this is a hugely important time. He is trying to convey the cosmic significance of His life and death. Imagine how He must have felt as (1) Judas agreed to betray Him (22:1-6), and (2) the other disciples began to bicker over which of them was the greatest (22:24). They just don't get it.

Jesus continues to define the Kingdom of God in stark contrast with the values of the surrounding culture. Whereas our society define importance in terms of power, wealth, and prestige, in the Kingdom of God the important things are love, servanthood, and humility ... Do I understand this? How do I live it?

*"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.
In this world you will have trouble. But take heart!
I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)*

*This morning,
and all mornings,
as we face the day
daunted by expectations others place upon us,
weighed down by burdens,
unsure of outcomes,
opposed,
alone,
afraid:
remind us
that you faced all this and more,
that we might loose these chains that bind us,
rise above and beyond the troubles of this world,
and know peace.
To the one who has overcome
we bring our thanks and praise.
Amen.*

Tuesday, March 27: Luke 22:31-46

Do you remember the beginning of Simon/Peter's journey with Jesus? Way back in Capernaum, Jesus had healed his mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39). Then Jesus commandeered his boat, taught the crowds, produced a bumper crop of fish, and promised Simon, "*Don't be afraid. From now on you'll be fishing for people*" (5:1-11). Simon/Peter has been sent out on mission trips exactly as Jesus describes in 22:35-37 (Luke 9:1-9, 10:1-20). Simon/Peter and Jesus have been through a lot together over the years.

While Jesus (and we) know the end is coming, Peter doesn't understand that yet – how could he? How could Peter really understand that within a few hours Jesus would be arrested, brutalized, and executed ...

Jesus is warning His disciples of tough times ahead. While we don't always experience real persecution in our culture, around the world it is reality. Certainly, we can experience other hardships.

Jesus is also warning them about the reality of temptation. Temptation to what? To marginalize our faith? To hide our faith? To live just like everyone else? To put other priorities first? To compromise?

Why do we do it? Because we're afraid? Because we don't want to stand out (or be outstanding?)? Because we're worried about the cost? Because we like to fit in? Because _____???

Peter has invested 3 years into Jesus and His mission. He certainly has not become rich. But he has been on an exciting journey. Following Jesus will probably not make you rich, famous, or powerful either. There will be hard times. There will be temptations. It will not always be a bed of roses. You may think about giving up. But it will be an exciting journey. Are you willing to stick with it?

It's good to think about all that you have been through with Jesus. Where have you come from? How has He got you through? How has your relationship with Him changed your life?

Spend some time drawing strength from the past to make it through the present. Know, with confident hope, that God will be with through all that is to come, as well ...

*Lord, I give myself to You, whatever the cost may be.
Take every aspect of my life
and use me for Your Kingdom to glorify Your Name.
I'm not here on earth to do my own thing,
to seek my own fulfillment or my own glory.
I'm not here to indulge my desires,
to increase my possessions,
to impress people to be popular,
to prove I'm somebody important,
or to promote myself.
I'm not even here to be relevant or successful by human standards.
I'm here to please You.
To live like this, I yield myself to You,
to know You, to love You,
to obey You, and to grow in your Holy fear.
I desire to become a person who understands and lives in reverent awe of You.
I'll do anything that You want me to do,
go anywhere that You want me to go
and say anything that You want me to say.
Father, there isn't any gift that You have for me that I don't want.
If You want to use me in a way that I'm not used to, I yield myself to that.
Today, I affirm my love for You, my God,
and I choose to live and minister in Your way.
I trust You, Lord, to do that which I cannot do for myself.
Teach me, guide me, and empower me to fear Your name.
In the Name of Jesus,
by the power of the Holy Spirit,
for the glory of the Father, I pray,
Amen.*

Wednesday, March 28: Luke 22:47-71

Things are speeding up. In the heat of the moment, how does Peter react? Can you identify with him?

We are often hard on Peter, but at least we know Peter followed Jesus. What about the other disciples? After

their initial sword-wielding bravado, they are conspicuous by their absence ...

Take note of the people in the reading (am I like any of them?):

- Judas: sweetness and light on the surface, but treacherous underneath.
- The disciples: full of chest-pounding enthusiasm until the heavy lifting begins. Then they disappear.
- Peter: great intentions, lots of fine words. But in his moment of testing, he fails.
- The girl (22:56) and others who identify Peter: jumping on the momentum of the mob, caught up in the bloodthirsty enthusiasm of the moment, going along with the crowd.
- The soldiers: gleefully, brutally beating a defenseless fellow human being to a pulp, with no conscience.
- The chief priests and teachers of the law: shortchanging justice, ends-justifying-means, eager for revenge, boosting their egos. "Religious," but totally out of sync with God's love, mercy, and will.
- Jesus: speaking truth amid it all. Modelling love amid it all.

We live in a world of people, people just like us, who, if the circumstances are right, can stab others in the back, make great promises but fail to deliver, get caught up in the mob of the moment, beat on another person's reputation or character, twist the truth, and boost their egos. We can be hard on other people, but let's be brutally honest: we are guilty of at some of these behaviours at one time or another. None of us is perfect ...

The good news is this: we have a Saviour who does not abandon us, despite our sinfulness. He will not give up on us. He understands our weakness. He stands for truth amid it all. He models love amid it all. His invitation to ALL is that we are welcome to experience His free gift of mercy, forgiveness and life. Nothing is too heinous that He cannot forgive. No failure is so great, that He cannot forgive and give us a new beginning. As *"the Way, the Truth, and the Life,"* He always welcomes us in ...

*Gentle ... yet powerful.
Lowly ... yet almighty.
Shepherd ... yet King.
In your mercy, save us.
In your gentleness, guide us.
In your power, strengthen us.
In your lowliness, strip from us our selfish pride which only destroys us.
In your greatness, lift us up that we might aspire to greater things.
As a shepherd, call us to be your servants.
As a King, call us to be your royal priesthood.
O God, who is our shepherd and our King;
O Christ, who was crucified and is now risen from the dead;
O Spirit, who comforts and empowers;
O great One in Three, Holy Trinity, this hour, set us free to worship.
Amen.*

Thursday, March 29: Luke 23:1-25

What is truth? In a world of "fake news" who do we believe anymore?

The Jewish leaders finally have Jesus. But they have no authority to administer capital punishment; only the Romans can do that. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, will not execute anyone over something as trivial as Jewish religious "heresy." So, when Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate, the Jewish authorities say nothing of their accusations that Jesus is a religious heretic, the real issue (22:54-71). Instead they trump up charges accusing Jesus of revolution: Jesus is undermining the Empire, opposing paying taxes to Caesar, and claiming to be king instead of Caesar. None of these is true, but truth has become irrelevant. The priests and teachers of the law are on a mission, and nothing – least of all the truth or their own integrity – is going to stop them.

Three times, Pontius Pilate declares Jesus to be innocent: 23:4, 14-16, 22.

Even Herod, the ruler of Galilee can find no basis for condemning Jesus (Herod was a beastly man, the one

responsible for beheading John the Baptist to amuse his step-daughter, among other atrocities).

Pilate, however, bows to populism. He does what he knows in his heart is wrong, in order to be popular. How many politicians have done that over the years? How many of us have done that?

There is another human drama taking place, too. Barabbas is in prison for revolution and murder. He is guilty of doing what people wanted Jesus to do, but which He rejected. Jesus, instead, describes the Kingdom of God as the way of peace, love, mercy, and grace. It's ironic that people choose the violent revolutionary over the peaceful Saviour. The powers-that-be choose to release a vicious traitor while sending an innocent man to His death. "Bar-abbas" (literally "son of the father") is set free while Jesus, the true Son of God, is executed.

Barabbas deserves to die. But He is set free. Himself innocent, Jesus will literally die in Barabbas' place. He will die the death Barabbas deserves in exactly the place Barabbas deserves to be.

Barabbas represents each one of us. We may not be murderers or revolutionaries, but we have all committed sins and done evil things of one sort or another. All of us deserve punishment for our sins of omission and commission. Himself innocent, Jesus takes the punishment I deserve.

How does that make me feel? How do I respond?

*Oh God, I ask not for easier tasks.
I ask for stronger aptitudes and greater talents
to meet any tasks which may come my way.
Help me to help others, so their lives may be made easier and happier.
Strengthen my confidence in my fellow men,
in spite of what they may do or say.
Give me strength to live according to the Golden Rule,
enthusiasm to inspire those around me,
sympathy to help lighten the burdens of those who suffer,
and a spirit of joy and gladness to share with others.
Give me courage to share Your Good News with those who do not know it,
perseverance to pray for those who are far from You,
and hope to know that You work your good in all things.
Help me walk through the door of opportunity set before me
with Your courage, Your confidence, and Your power.
Amen.*

Harry Bullis

Friday, March 30: Luke 23:26-56 (Good Friday Service at St. Andrew's Presbyterian)

Tom Wright, Professor at St. Andrew's University, writes: *"At the heart of Luke's picture of the cross is the mocking of Jesus as king of the Jews, which draws into a single stark sketch the meaning expressed by the various characters and the small incidents elsewhere in the narrative. Jesus has stood on its head the meaning of kingship, the meaning of the kingdom itself. He has celebrated with the wrong people, offered peace and hope to the wrong people, and warned the wrong people of God's coming judgment. Now he is hailed as king at last, but in mockery. Here comes the royal cupbearer, only it's a Roman soldier offering him the sour wine that poor people drank. Here is his royal placard, announcing his kingship to the world, but it is in fact the criminal charge which explains his cruel death.*

"His true royalty, though, shines out in his prayer and his promise, both recorded only in Luke. Unlike traditional martyrs, who died with a curse against their torturers, Jesus prays for their forgiveness. Like a king on his way to enthronement, Jesus promises a place of honour and bliss to one who requests it ('Paradise' in Jewish thought wasn't necessarily the final resting place, but the place of rest and refreshment before the gift of new life in the resurrection.) The prayer shows that the promise is not to be taken as meaning that the only hope is in a life after death, vital though that of course is. Forgiveness brings the life of heaven to earth, God's future into the present."

Jesus died. A Roman centurion witnesses it. He comments upon it. The crowds witness it. They go home: some horrified, some elated. Jesus' friends and family witness it. Then the burial. Witnesses see it take place. They know exactly which tomb it is. His is the only body in it. Luke is clear to help us appreciate there is no doubt about any of these events. Jesus died. He was buried. Lots of witnesses. No doubts.

This is important for what will follow, of course. Did Jesus just swoon; will He revive in the tomb? Impossible. Will they go to the wrong tomb? Not possible. Will they mistake his body for another one in the tomb? Impossible. Too many witnesses. Too much evidence. Too much at stake.

The centurion, a Roman, sums up Good Friday well: he praised God and said, "*Surely this was a righteous man.*" Jesus is really innocent. He really is the King, the Messiah. Unfortunately, as so often in the story of Jesus' life, another non-Jew acknowledges what the Jewish people cannot recognize.

What will happen next? How can this dreadful wrong be made right? Somehow God's future has come into the present, but Luke leaves us hanging ... Who do you say Jesus is? What difference does that make?

*Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we have sinned against you and against our neighbour
in thought and word and deed,
through negligence, through weakness,
through our own deliberate fault.
We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
who died for us, forgive us all that is past
and grant that we may serve you in newness of life
to the glory of your name.
Amen.*

Church of England General Confession

Saturday, March 31: Psalm 22

Nothing happens on Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath actually begins at dusk on Friday; Jesus was buried by sundown on Friday). The Sabbath, Saturday, was day when no one could do anything (Luke 23:56).

Both Matthew and Mark record that Jesus, while He was on the cross, had cried out "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" which means "*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*" (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34). This is the first line of Psalm 22 in Aramaic (the common language of Israel in Jesus' day). They had seen Psalm 22:16 ("*they pierced my hands and feet*") and 22:18 ("*They divide my garments among themselves and throw dice for my clothing*") brutally acted out in their presence.

As Jesus' disciples "*rested as required by the law*" (Luke 23:56), what do you think would be going through their minds? They have not understood Jesus' teachings about the resurrection. As far as they can comprehend, the normal order of things is happening: Jesus is dead. That's it. It's all over. The ladies would go to anoint the body on the next "business day," Sunday. Then they have to pick up the shattered pieces of their lives. Their dreams are destroyed. Jesus is dead. There is no hope. It is finished. God has abandoned them all.

The words of Psalm 22 might very well have been running through their minds as well. How about you?

Can you identify with the psalm?

In the midst of the despair in Psalm 22, where is the good news? Notice the hope ... (knowing Jesus WILL rise from the dead, where is the hope?)

What verses do you need to hold on to?

*In our anxiety, fear and uncertainty,
when hearts are heavy with the loads we bear,
and there is no one to turn toward but you;
yours is the peace that calms,
the peace that comforts,
the peace that gives us strength to carry on.
Yours is the voice we long to hear,
the persistent whisper in our ear,
'Be still, and know that I am God'.
Yours is the presence in the dark
that banishes our fears.
Yours is the hand that guides,
the footprints in which I walk.
Yours is the hope that glimmers in my heart
when all the world seems dark and dead.
In my anxiety,
fear and uncertainty,
in confidence I turn to you.
Be the candle in my darkest hours.
Where else can I possibly turn?
Amen*

Easter Sunday, April 1: Luke 24:1-12

Surprise! Jesus is not in the tomb! No one is expecting this!

Jesus did speak of his resurrection several times (for the first time in 9:22). Two of his greatest stories concluded with a strong reference to rising from the dead (15:24 and 32, 16:31). But nobody got it. It wasn't they didn't have faith in God. They just had not understood that God could possibly work in **this** way. It was outside the "realm of the possible." Nothing like this had ever happened before. It was all new.

It's all a big surprise. The women obviously are not expecting it. They don't go to be told about a resurrected Jesus. They go to anointing a dead body, a process that had been cut short by the Sabbath. They are on their way to perform a brutally painful, sad, final-saying-good-bye task. The empty tomb is a complete surprise. A message about a risen Jesus is totally unexpected.

In Luke's gospel, the men do not believe the women. It is too astonishing to comprehend. And, after all, they are **women** (in that culture women were not considered credible, legal witnesses – just a bit sexist back then). When Peter does go, he, too, is completely surprised, "*wondering what had happened.*"

"Easter is always a surprise," writes Tom Wright, *"whether we meet it in celebrating the feast itself (i.e. in an Easter service), or in the sudden surges of God's grace overturning tragedy in our own lives or in the world."*

Have you experienced God's surprising grace in your life? In the life of a friend or relative? So often we take God's surprising grace for granted: miracles of healing (through doctors/medicine or through an unassisted miracle) encouragement, provision (through other people or directly from the Lord). Often God does work through other people. He IS at work in our world.

The resurrection reminds us that God works in ways we will not expect, through things we cannot believe, and in ways we cannot understand. God is so far beyond us.

Easter reminds us to be faithful, to wait, and to be open to surprises we cannot possibly comprehend.

Thank Him for His works in your life. Count your blessings. Worship Him for His presence in your life.

*We praise you, our Father:
When we turned away you did not reject us,
but came to meet us in your Son.
You embraced us as your children and welcomed us to sit and eat with you.
In Christ, you shared our life that we might live in him and he in us.
He opened his arms of love upon the cross
and made the perfect sacrifice for sin for all.
Father of all, we give you thanks and praise,
that when we were still far off you met us in your Son
and brought us home.
Dying and living, he declared your love,
gave us grace,
and opened the gate of glory.
May we who share Christ's body, live his risen life;
we who drink his cup, bring life to others;
we whom the Spirit lights, give light to the world.
Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us,
so we and all your children shall be free,
and the whole earth live to praise your name.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen*

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Monday, April 2: Luke 24:13-35

Two people are walking home. One is named Cleopas (24:18); the other is unnamed. Put yourself in the anonymous person's shoes. Nothing makes sense. It's all so confusing. Even the empty tomb was a surprise, but still a mystery (notice, in Luke's gospel, no one has yet **seen** Jesus; they have just seen *the empty tomb*). There is a glimmer of hope. But also a LOT of unanswered questions. And fear. And "What next?"s.

Another person joins you. You explain everything you know to Him. Your hopes: dashed by the crucifixion. Your fears: had the Romans or Jewish authorities stolen the body? What was going to happen now?

And the new fellow says, "*Haven't you read your Bibles?*" That's a bit much, don't you think?

The stranger leads you in a Bible study. He takes you on a tour of the big picture of Scripture: it's a story of God allowing His people, through their own choices, to get into real messes – slavery, defeat, despair, and finally exile in Babylon. And it's a story of God continually rescuing them. God rescues them from Egypt, He rescues them from Babylon. Passage after passage promises God's rescue from more than just slavery: He'll save His people from sin, and even from death itself. But first they have go through the dark valley of suffering. Then God will bring them out the other side.

Keeping with that pattern, what if, once and for all, God Himself, the Messiah, would go through the darkest valley, death itself? What if the Messiah were to come out the other side, victorious? What if God could go through it all Himself, and rise again, as the conqueror? What if evil/death could be completely defeated?

This is something no one has really begun seriously to consider ... yet.

You invite the stranger in for a meal. But He becomes the host, breaking the bread for you. And in the breaking of the bread, you get it. You recognize Him. He is alive. Jesus has risen.

Jesus is risen. He is alive. Bring your questions, confusion, suffering to Him. Allow Him to warm your heart. Read Scripture. Open your eyes and see Him. He is with you in your daily life.

You may not understand it all now, or ever this side of eternity. But know He is always with You. That's what really matters. Invite Him to reveal Himself to you, personally. Get to know Him. Spend time with Him.

*It is only right, with all the powers of our heart and mind,
to praise You Father,
and to praise Your Only-Begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Dear Father, by Your wondrous condescension and lovingkindness toward us, Your servants,
You gave up Your Son.
Dear Jesus, You paid the debt of Adam for us to the Eternal Father
by Your Blood poured forth in lovingkindness.
You cleared away the darkness of sin by Your magnificent and radiant resurrection.
You broke the bonds of death and rose from the grave as a conqueror.
You reconciled Heaven and earth.
Our life had no hope of eternal joy before You redeemed us.
Your resurrection has washed away our sins,
restored our innocence and brought us joy.
How inestimable is the tenderness of Your love.
We pray, Lord:
preserve Your servants in the peaceful enjoyment of this Easter celebration.
We ask this through Jesus Christ Our Lord,
who lives and reigns with God, The Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
forever and ever.
Amen.*

Gregory (540-604)

Tuesday, April 3: Luke 24:36-48

A few years ago, I heard a radio interview with Dr. Reg Bibby, sociologist from the University of Lethbridge. He was talking about and taking calls on the state of religion in Canada.⁸ Most of the callers were respectful, typically describing how they were still spiritual people, but struggled with what they perceived to be "institutional" religion. One caller, however, went on a rant about how he did not believe in "*the boogie man, fairies, and other kooky things*"— we just need science/facts. The implication was that anything spiritual was also ephemeral, fantastic (in the sense of being fantasy), incredible (meaning not credible), unprovable, and unbelievable. Science, supposedly, is the opposite. In his mind, only stupid people could be spiritual.⁹

Luke, a medical doctor, began his writing with these words: "*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*" (Luke 1:1-4)

This is not fantasy. Luke, a scientist, is recording real, credible, believable people meeting the risen Jesus. And this is the **risen** Jesus: check out His hands and feet. Check Him out, eating fish. This is no ghost. This is no dream. This is not some make believe story. Who could make this stuff up? This is reality.

The implications of this truth is that God's Kingdom has really come. God's power is real. We have a mission, to spread His good news of repentance and forgiveness to everyone, to individuals and to entire nations. God's message of love and reconciliation is for ALL people (we take that for granted, but this was radical to first century Jews, certain they were God's only chosen people.). How can we live the Kingdom of God today?

How can His love shine through my words? My actions? My choices? My relationships?

⁸ Bibby specializes in the sociology of religion. He has written several books including *Beyond the Gods and Back: Religion's Demise and Why It Matters*.

⁹ Science is a wonderful gift has given us. As we study His creation, we learn more and more about God. My experience, as a geographer, is that science and my Christian faith complement each other beautifully. I have yet to find a conflict. But science is limited: it cannot teach us EVERYTHING. The scientific method – emphasizing what is observable, touchable, testable, smellable, etc. – can help us understand a lot, but it cannot help us know other things that are just as real but not "testable": things like love, beauty, ethics, goodness, etc. God's Word and science each help us learn more about God and His creation. We need both types of knowledge.

*When I am invited into the presence of a friend,
 I look forward to the event and feel honoured.
 When God invites me to spend time in His presence,
 He desires me to know and feel His love.
 With faith and hope I turn my heart and mind to God,
 and ask Him to help me become more aware of His loving presence.
 I ask for the grace to let go of my own concerns and be open to what God is asking of me,
 to let myself be guided and formed by my loving Creator.
 In the presence of my loving Creator, I look honestly at my feelings over the last day:
 the highs, the lows and the level ground.
 Can I see where the Lord has been present?
 Lord you became human to communicate with me.
 You walked and worked on this earth.
 You endured the heat and struggled with the cold.
 All your time on this earth was spent in caring for humanity.
 You healed the sick, you raised the dead.
 Most important of all, you saved me from death.
 May the Holy Spirit enlighten my mind and my heart
 to respond to God's teachings through the Scriptures.
 Conversation requires talking and listening.
 As I talk to Jesus may I also learn to be still and listen.
 I will open up my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
 I will ask Him to help me place myself fully in His care,
 abandon myself to Him, knowing He always wants what is best for me.
 Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
 As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.
 Amen.*

Wednesday, April 4: Luke 24:36-53

The disciples are "witnesses" of these things (24:48). On the one hand, this simply means they saw them, and thus can believe them. On the other hand, it also means that they have a responsibility to tell other people the truth, to correct misinformation, to ensure that the real story – the truth – is told. What does that mean for us?

One of the interesting notes is that *"lifting his hands to heaven, he blessed them"* (Luke 24:50). "Blessing" someone is a concept we are not too familiar with. Throughout the Bible people bless others. It's a way of praying over a person(s) and placing them in God's care. So parents bless their children. Priests bless people. And Jesus blesses His disciples, followers, and family.

One of the familiar blessings in Scripture comes from Numbers 6:22-27. This may well have been the blessing Jesus gave to His disciples. *"The LORD said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron and his sons to bless the people of Israel with this special blessing:*

*"May the LORD bless you and protect you.
 May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you.
 May the LORD show you his favor and give you his peace."*

Whenever Aaron and his sons bless the people of Israel in my name, I myself will bless them."

This is God's blessing **for you** today. How does that make you feel?

This is a blessing you can pray – silently or out loud – for significant people in your life, too. Try it. If you are a parent, pray this (silently or, even better, aloud) over your child at bedtime. If you are married, pray it for your spouse. If you have kids away at school, pray this blessing over them. If you have any significant people in your life – parents, friends, nieces, nephews, cousins, colleagues – pray this blessing for them ...

*Take, O Lord, and receive all my understanding and my will;
 all that I have and possess.
 You have given them to me;
 to you, O Lord, I restore them.
 All things are yours:
 dispose of them according to your will.
 Give me your love and your grace; for this enough for me.
 Lord by thy grace, let the poor see me be drawn to Christ,
 and invite him to enter their homes and their lives.
 Let the sick and the suffering find in me
 a real angel of comfort and consolation.
 Let the little ones of the streets cling to me
 because I remind them of him, the friend of all little ones.
 Amen*

Mother Teresa, 1910-1996

Thursday, April 5: Acts 1:1-11

The story does not end at Luke 24:53. Luke wrote a sequel to his gospel. Luke's second book is Acts. Acts 1:1-11 is a retelling of the same events recorded in Luke 24, as Luke introduces Jesus' succession plan – the church. Jesus expands on the concept of being "*witnesses of these things*" (Luke 24:48). Being a witness means more than just having the satisfaction of knowing I have seen something, and thus I know it's true for myself. Jesus really does assume His witnesses will take on the responsibility of **telling other people** the truth, correcting misinformation, ensuring the true story is told, and living their faith with integrity and love.

Where are they to do this? At home – in Jerusalem. But in the neighbouring areas as well (even hostile ones, like Samaria: remember Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans [John 4:9]). And then throughout the world. Jesus is **not just** the Saviour of the Jews. As He made clear throughout His ministry, everyone is welcome. The Jews are invited. But so is everyone else. And everyone is just as equal as everyone else in the Kingdom of God. There are no barriers. There is an open invitation. How is this good news?

It seems a daunting task. How can ordinary people – people like you and I – carry on Jesus' mission? After all He was FULLY GOD as well as fully human...

Jesus promises, however, that we are filled with His Holy Spirit. God Himself, in all His fullness, is in us, too. We can do amazing things, because He is in us. We are not perfect. We are not all powerful. We are not all wise. We are not present everywhere. But we are present in the one place where we are (an in all the places other followers of Jesus are). We do have some wisdom. The Spirit can give us more (James 1:5). We do have some power. God can give us more help than we can imagine. In His Name, power, wisdom, we **can** make a difference, right now ... It will be God, working in us. Lord, open the door of opportunity ...

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
 Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon;
 where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope;
 where there is darkness, light;
 and where there is sadness, joy.
 O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
 to be consoled as to console;
 to be understood as to understand;
 to be loved as to love.
 For it is in giving that we receive;
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
 Amen*

Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)

Friday, April 6: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

After Jesus was raised, the disciples couldn't keep quiet about it. The same cowering disciples who were hiding after Jesus' crucifixion are transformed into bold witnesses, willing to die for the truth of Jesus' resurrection. This upset the Jewish authorities and led to violent persecution. But these witnesses knew the truth: they were willing to put their lives on the line. No one risks their neck for a fairy tale. The resurrection is true.

In Corinth, people believed in **Jesus'** resurrection, but they were not convinced **people** would be resurrected. So Paul responds to those who were saying that there is no resurrection for believers in three parts:

1. by reaffirming that Jesus has risen from the dead (15:1-11) – today;
2. by pointing out that we, logically, will be resurrected as well (15:12-34) – Saturday;
3. by discussing how – in what form – we are raised from the dead (15:35-58) – Sunday.

The Corinthians did agree Jesus rose from the dead. Paul is *not trying to prove* Jesus' resurrection, but he is reminding everyone it's a fact: lots of witnesses, lots of evidence, lots of proof. There are good resources on this (check out the writings of N.T. [Tom] Wright, Josh MacDowell, William Lane Craig, Lee Strobel).

Of course, not everyone will believe the reality of the resurrection (but then some people still don't believe lots of things – the holocaust, the death of Elvis, that Shakespeare actually wrote his plays). Our task is simply to keep telling the story. To keep inviting people to meet Jesus for themselves. To keep encouraging people to discover new life through Jesus. To keep living the Kingdom of God by loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and loving our neighbours as ourselves. To keep loving as He loved. His Spirit convinces people.

I find the more I reflect on the death and resurrection of Jesus, the more I am overwhelmed by the wonder of God's love. I am more aware of how little I deserve His love. I am more aware how it is His grace, His gift of love, that transforms my life. I don't deserve it. I haven't earned it. God simply gives me, and all of us, life in Jesus. He died the death we deserve: "*We are bought at a price*" (1 Corinthians 6:20, 7:23). Like Paul, we can only respond: "*I am the least of the followers of Jesus*"¹⁰ and do not even deserve to be called His follower ... *But by the grace of God I am what I am*" (15:9-10). By the grace of God you are what you are. Praise Him.

*God of mercy and compassion,
weave your dream for the world into the fabric of our lives.
Remove the scales from our eyes and lift the indifference from our hearts,
so that we may see your vision –
a new reign of justice and compassion that will transform the earth.
Transform our lives, so that we may accomplish your purpose.
Anoint us with your Spirit that we might bring good news to the oppressed,
bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim release to the captive.
Give us a new urgency and a new commitment
to feed the hungry,
clothe the naked,
shelter the homeless,
and visit those who live in isolation.
Help us to reach out to those whom no one else will touch,
to accept the unacceptable, and to embrace the enemy.
Surround us with your love,
fill us with your grace,
and strengthen us for your service.
Empower us to respond to the call of Jesus –
to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow.
Make us your disciples.
Amen*

followingjesus.org

¹⁰ Paul uses the term "apostle," referring to his specific role in the Christian community. But his principle is true for all of us.

Saturday, April 7: 1 Corinthians 15:12-34

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Paul reaffirms Jesus has risen from the dead. The Corinthians apparently believed in **Jesus'** resurrection, but did not believe **Christians** would rise from the dead. In today's reading, Paul builds on the truth of Jesus' resurrection to establish the truth of **our** resurrections as well.

In 12-19, Paul argues that **if** the Corinthians who contend that we will not rise from the dead are correct, **then** logically Jesus must not have risen from the dead either. And if Jesus is not risen ... well, Paul considers some of the logical consequences of taking this position:

- Paul and his buddies (and all of us) are wasting our time; in fact we are actually spreading lies and promoting a horrendous deception.
- "Faith in Jesus" is pointless. Those of us who have sacrificed anything (time, money, morality) for God are rather pitiful; it's all been a waste.
- Sins are not forgiven. You are a miserable wretch; you are guilty forever.
- Death is the end, for you and anyone who has died before you. There is no hope.

What Paul is describing is atheism at its most stark. No hope. No purpose. No point. No values. Life is an empty, meaningless existence ending in oblivion. Ouch.

In 20-28, Paul states that **since** Jesus is in fact risen from the dead, **then** everything changes. The world and cosmic order of things is radically different as a result:

- all who are "in Christ" will be resurrected, and
- death itself will be destroyed.

What does it mean to be **"in Christ"**? Paul contrasts this with being **"in Adam."** By virtue of being born into this fallen world, our nature is fundamentally marred by sin (think of this in very practical terms: we all know it's true that try as we like we just don't behave/act perfectly all the time). Being **"in Christ"** means we are "born" into a new humanity, a spiritually-redeemed humanity, a whole new nature. Jesus uses this idea of being "born again" spiritually (John 3:1-19). Paul (2 Corinthians 5:17, Titus 3:5), Peter (1 Peter 1:22-23) and John (1 John 5:1) all use the metaphor of new birth spiritually, too. When we put our faith **"in Christ"** we are born anew as spiritually-alive beings. The old **"in Adam"-life** is replaced by a brand new **"in Christ"-life**. Our sins are forgiven; we are saved; we look forward to a resurrected life with Jesus.

In 29-34 Paul tackles some more, *"If Jesus were not raised ..."* issues. The first one is intriguing: baptism for the dead??? Apparently some of the Corinthians were doing this. But **if** they do NOT believe in the resurrection **then** this is stupid. Paul is not condoning or commenting on the merits of the practice.¹¹ He is simply asking why they are doing this crazy thing if they don't believe in resurrection in the first place.

Paul is calling us back to appreciate the wonder, mystery, and power of the resurrection. *"Without the victory of the resurrection, the death of Jesus would have been in vain. For death by itself is no victory, no matter how well-meaning the sacrificial lamb, no matter how noble the cause. Through His resurrection, Christ broke the power of death once and for all time. Salvation was not completed only because of the cross. It was completed by the victory of the empty tomb"* (Katherine Walden).

- What difference does Jesus' resurrection make in your life? What would your life be like if Jesus had NOT been raised from the dead?
- What difference does knowing you will be raised and made alive in Christ? How does that change how

¹¹ Consistently the Bible emphasizes that **we are saved by faith in Jesus** not by works or spiritual rites (be it circumcision or baptism). It is a person's faith in Jesus, whether they are baptized or not, that saves them. So undoubtedly Paul would say that any sort of baptism for any other person is useless and foolish. Commentators have lots to say about this: they are unanimous in agreeing that Paul is not condoning this practice since it is at odds with every other teaching on baptism and salvation in Scripture. Salvation is always based on personal decisions of faith. Baptism is a public affirmation of that faith, but carries no "magical" or "salvation-effectiveness" in itself. Baptism for people who are dead is simply pointless: those who died with faith in Jesus are saved (15:22). Those who died apparently without faith are in God's hands. This is a real motivation to share our faith, isn't it?

you live?

- We all know people who have not experienced the transformation from knowing the power of Jesus' resurrection in our lives. Pray for them. If there is opportunity, share your faith with them.

*God of love, out of love you created the world, us, me.
You put everything together in detailed, delicate ways, knowing our every need.
Sustaining God, you provide:
food that nourishes,
water that refreshes,
rest that renews.
You give:
emotions that express,
art that uplifts,
history that reminds.
You prompt:
community that supports,
experiences that teach,
relationships that inspire.
God, in all these things, you sustain our being and well-being, together.
Your love, a resource for our relationships with others,
with creation,
with ourselves,
and with you.
Love, informing friendships,
joining sister with brother, and parent with child.
Love, the wellspring of tender, pleasure-sharing, intimate relationships.
Love, unconditional, forgiving and inspirational,
a love embodied in Jesus, which we seek to share.
God, thank you for your gift of love,
which encircles us, sustains us and from which nothing can separate us.
Amen*

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Sunday, April 8: 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Many people in Corinth doubted the resurrection of believers. Two issues seem to be driving this:

1. They knew that a dead body rots and deteriorates. So how could God reanimate it when it had decomposed?
2. They were fascinated with the Holy Spirit. They seemed to think that these physical bodies were holding them back from spiritual "completeness." Wouldn't it be good to get rid of the physical body once and for all and just be "spiritual" beings? Resurrection implies new **bodies**, which was not what they wanted. The dominant Greek philosophy of the time was that spiritual things were good, physical things were bad. The Corinthians were caught up in the dominant secular philosophy of their times, too, emphasizing "spirituality" while denying one's "physicality."

Paul deals with the first, practical issue, by using analogies from the world with which we are familiar: seeds, animals, the cosmos. A seed "dies" to produce a beautiful plant; the seed is only a shadow of something just as physical but more glorious. A snail has one kind of "flesh," but other creatures, like people, have bodies, too, but are of a different kind. Certainly, a God who can raise Jesus from the dead can raise others, into beautiful, physical people.

He goes at the second issue by reaffirming that resurrection does involve our bodies. That was certainly the precedent set by Jesus who was very much a physical being when He met with His disciples after His resurrection. But exactly what our resurrection bodies will look like, how they will work, etc. is very much still a mystery, just as we cannot necessarily guess from a seed what kind of a plant might arise when it's planted.

Our bodies will be physical, recognizable, “imperishable” and “immortal” – beyond that we don’t know much.

There is a lot of mystery around resurrection. Perhaps this is because we cannot possibly comprehend what resurrection life will be like. It simply is beyond our wildest imagination to envision. If you were to try to describe the internet to a first century Jew like Peter, his eyes would glaze over – it would be incomprehensible; it could not fit in his concept of what is possible. My kids have tried to describe quantum physics to me: I cannot even begin to get my mind around it (check out “quantum physics” on Wikipedia – see how you do.); it’s beyond my ability to even begin to comprehend.

The same may be true of resurrection and life in Christ. Paul uses the word “mystery” (v.51) to remind us that some things are just beyond us. While he tries to describe it in metaphors we can understand, ultimately – like the internet to the Apostle Peter or quantum physics to me – it’s so far beyond our ability to comprehend, we just must accept it. We know it’s real. We know it’s good. We cannot begin to understand. Yet.

In our attempts to get our minds around all this, let’s not overlook Paul’s conclusion: *“Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”* Since Jesus has been raised – and since we will be raised – stand firm. We know the ultimate future – and it’s great.

AND, make your life here count for the Lord; our lives here matter. We can make an eternal difference.

- **People need the Lord.** In our postmodern world where we don’t want anyone to feel badly about their own personal beliefs, we often downplay the reality that this glorious future is for those who put their faith in Jesus. We don’t understand everything about the judgment of God and the fate of those who do not place their faith in Jesus. But we do know for certain that those who do love Jesus are reborn into new life. So we have a motivation to invite others to find this incredible life in Jesus.
- **The “work of the Lord”** – the work Jesus modeled – **includes love, concern, and practical care for God’s creation and all people.** We can be those who bring hope, joy, peace, and love in our homes, communities, and the world.
- **The blessing of being reborn into the “in Christ”-life is not just the certain hope of eternal life with God: it begins NOW.** We experience the blessing of having purpose, meaning, and God’s presence in this life. How we live and what we do matters. It’s not pointless. This is not a “waiting time.” The Holy Spirit is within us today – inspiring, growing, challenging, empowering, changing us. We can partner with God today, building His kingdom. Your life – your time – your decisions – your contributions (of time, skills, resources, talents, gifts, education, experience) – all are significant today.

*We give thanks to you, Lord,
for you have done marvelous things!*

*When we were walking in darkness
you were there, you were there.
When we were kneeling in weakness
you were there, you were there.
When we drew near feeling worthless
you were there, you were there.
When we were needing forgiveness
you were there, you were there.
When we were searching for your grace
you were there, you were there.*

*We give thanks to you, Lord,
for you have done marvelous things!
Amen*