



April 2019

HE IS RISEN!

**Readings,
Reflections,
Prayers on the
Gospel of John (4)
Titus**

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Monday, April 8: Titus 2:1-10

I could say: how I live is my own business; if I don't want to live by biblical morality, that's my problem, not yours; I'm not accountable to anyone else; whatever I want to do, I am free to do. Right?

Many people in our culture – and back in Paul's society – would have agreed with that (for the record, I don't). But Paul wants us to stop. And think. Whether we realize it or not other people watch how we live. They look at us as examples of grandparents, of parents, of singles, of married people, of young adults, of youth ... Especially if we are known as "Christians" people are also looking at us as examples of people who follow Jesus. How we live affects other people. And how we live affects the reputation of Jesus and His church.

I may not want people to look at me as an example of a "Christian." I may not want people to look at me as an example of a good husband, father, son, and whatever else. But I don't have a choice. None of us does. Whether you like it or not, someone looks to you as an example of a Christian, of a youth, of a young adult, of a single, of a married person, of a parent, of a grandparent ...

We cannot choose whether other people look at us as examples or not. Given they are watching us, we can choose what kind of an example we will be. This is what Paul is encouraging Timothy to talk about with the people in Crete. Non-Christians and younger Christians were looking to others as examples of people who followed Jesus: Paul wants them to think about the kind of example they ought to be.

We don't have to be perfect. We dare not be superficial or put on a false front. We need to be authentic and honest about our successes and our failures. Modelling Christian values includes being truthful about our problems, including modelling genuine confession and repentance. We are also called to demonstrate the resiliency, self-control, and determination to aim to do better next time.

What is God saying to you?

Lord,

*I won't conform to what I see (Romans 12:2),
Let the truth of your word mould and sharpen me.*

*Your promises are not just words on a page (Psalm 119:89),
But signs of your faithfulness from age to age (Psalm 33:4).*

*Never will I fear financial insecurity (Hebrews 13:5).
You provide for the sparrows – how much more so for me (Matthew 10:29).*

*When I look at everything that Christ has given (Ephesians 5:2b),
I can't fail to be content with all your provision (Hebrews 13:5a).*

*My days now on earth are for pursuing the King (Philippians 3:14),
For those who seek him lack no good thing (Psalm 34:10).*

*No more will I worry about being alone (Hebrews 13:5b),
For now I can boldly approach your throne (Hebrews 4:16).*

*Now can I declare this so confidently:
'The Lord is my helper; what can man do to me?' (Hebrews 13:6).*

*No more will my days be filled up with dread.
It is a good and hopeful future that lays ahead (Jeremiah 29:11).*

*My sin has been dealt with, for now I'm set free (Romans 6:18).
May faith, hope and love characterize me (1 Thessalonians 1:3).*

*As I soak in your truth, I'm renewed all of my days (2 Corinthians 4:16),
And the only right response is to live for your praise (Hebrews 13:15).*

Amen

Tuesday, April 9: Titus 2:11-15

A 1971 Coca Cola jingle became a bestselling pop song:

*I'd like to build the world a home and furnish it with love,
Grow apple trees and honey bees and snow-white turtle doves.*

*I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony;
I'd like to hold it in my arms and keep it company.*

*I'd like to see the world for once all standing hand in hand,
And hear them echo through the hills for peace through out the land.*

It is a wonderful – idyllic – vision for a new society. Unfortunately, it has never come to pass.

Paul is telling us that because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we actually do live in a new order of things: To encourage us, Paul writes, "*For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people ... He gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing good deeds*" (2:11-14). This is our new reality. It's great news.

Notice the phrase "*totally committed to doing good deeds*" ("*eager to do good*"). Because of this new reality in which we live, we ought to live differently. "*We are instructed to turn from godless living and sinful pleasures. We should live in this evil world with wisdom, righteousness, and devotion to God, while we look forward with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed.*"

We are to live *with wisdom/self-controlled/sober lives* – we are created to find fulfillment in being wise, thoughtful, intentional, generous, and kind to others, not by satisfying our base passions.

We are to live *righteous/upright/just lives* – we are to live "good" lives, including a desire to see others treated justly and well. "*The word Paul uses is a profoundly positive one, and designates a life that has been both put to rights itself and is devoted to working so that the world may be put to rights as well*" (Tom Wright).

We are to live *in devotion to God/godly lives* – genuine love for God reveals itself in a natural love of worship, prayer, study, and reflection that inevitably leads us to be more and more like Jesus.

Paul is talking about a new way of life – a way of life for which Jesus has set us free. We are invited to a life of holiness and mission; in which we live godly lives AND we desire to contribute positively to people and society around us. We don't just do "good deeds"; we are "good news" to our world.

What is God saying to you?

Thank you, Lord, that

- *I am never alone (Matthew 28:20)*
- *My salvation is totally secure (John 10:28)*
- *I have peace (John 14:27)*
- *God always provides (Philippians 4:19)*
- *I can overcome temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13)*
- *Everything that God has promised will take place (Luke 1:37)*
- *I can do even greater things than Jesus did (John 14:12)*
- *Jesus has overcome every difficulty I face (John 16:33)*
- *I have eternal life (1 John 2:25)*

Lord, I believe; help me in my unbelief.

Lord, help me live my faith, in action as in word.

Amen

Wednesday, April 10: Titus 3

This is the good news: *"When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of his grace he declared us righteous and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life"* (3:4-7). What a wonderful summary of what being a Christian is all about.

It's a far cry from the complicated dogmas other teachers taught, adding to Jesus' message. They were insisting you had to be circumcised, follow all the Jewish laws, believe all the right this-es and that-s about one thing and another. In reality, the good news is scandalously simple and yet incredibly profound.

Paul is very blunt about those were insisting on all these "additions" to the faith: *"Do not get involved in foolish discussions about spiritual pedigrees or in quarrels and fights about obedience to Jewish laws. These things are useless and a waste of time"* (3:9). I suspect Paul would say similarly strong words to some people today who add all sorts of extra requirements, doctrines, and stipulations to the faith. *"If people are causing divisions among you,"* Paul adds, *"give a first and second warning. After that, have nothing more to do with them. For people like that have turned away from the truth, and their own sins condemn them"* (3:10-11).

Paul wants us to know that we are saved by Jesus' mercy and grace. There are some practical ethical consequences of this (as he outlined in Titus 2), but these do not save us. They are the inevitable **results**, the logical overflow, the natural fruit of the love and grace we have received from God. We are certainly not saved by adding all sorts of extra doctrinal or dogmatic hoops for ourselves – and others – to jump through.

God saves us. God forgives us. God fills us with his Spirit. Our responsibility is simply to let His Spirit so fill us that our lives naturally overflow with the same mercy, grace, love, and purity that flow from Jesus ...

*Jesus, You are the peace of all things calm.
You are the place to hide from harm.
You are the light that shines in dark.
You are the heart's eternal spark.
You are the door that's open wide.
You are the guest who waits inside.
You are the stranger at the door.
You are the calling of the poor.
You are my Lord and with me from ill.
You are the light, the truth, the way.
You are my Saviour this very day.
Amen*

Gaelic Prayer

Thursday, April 11: John 18:1-11 Lenten Lunch @ St. Basil's Church

We're returning to the Gospel of John, today, to journey with Jesus through the events of Easter.

Think back – way back to Genesis – to the **Garden of Eden**. In Eden we celebrate a wonderful picture of God, walking in the garden at evening, looking for Adam and Eve, so they can enjoy one another's company. Like a spouse coming home, God is looking for them, as if to ask, "So how was your day?" It's a beautiful picture of love, vulnerability, trust, compassion, and joy. This is human life as it was intended to be. But having disobeyed God by eating fruit from the forbidden tree, the people hide from God ...

Rush ahead – to the **Garden of Gethsemane**. Judas is bursting into the garden looking for Jesus – God – but with a very different agenda. It's a twisted nightmare of betrayal (by a kiss of all things), violence, lies, greed, and hate. Jesus, being obedient to His Father, doesn't hide ...

Two gardens. Two pictures of what a person's relationship with God has the potential to be like. What makes the difference?

In Gethsemane people are looking for God – Jesus. "*I AM he*" Jesus says twice (18:5, 8). This is Jesus clearly identifying Himself as God ("*I AM*," in Hebrew "YHWH," is the name God chooses for Himself, considered too holy for Jewish people to actually speak out loud). In the midst of the lynch mob of Roman soldiers, (Jewish) Temple guards and blazing torches, lanterns, and weapons, Jesus says "*I AM*" twice. They have found God.

The Jewish folks among them would immediately think of a burning bush, and God proclaiming to Moses, "*Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. I am the God of your father – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob ... I AM who I AM. Say this to the people of Israel: This is my eternal name, my name to remember for all generations*" (Exodus 3:5-6, 14-15). When Moses heard this, he covered his face because he was too afraid to look at God. In Gethsemane, people stepped back and fell to the ground, too. Something more mysterious than they imagined is happening here ...

Imagine yourself in each garden. Imagine being in Gethsemane – the noise, the fear, the pain, the smell, the anger, the brutality. This may be what life seems like these days. But notice that in the chaos of your life, Jesus is there – serene, solid, dependable, loving. He is at peace in the midst of it. He is in control. He will give up His life, but it will be His choice. It will be at His will. Why? Because of love ...

Imagine being in Eden (before the Fall) – the peace, the joy, the love, the security – this **IS** the new life in which we now live (a little bit) as those who put our faith in Him. Of course life is not completely Eden-ic yet, but thanks to Jesus, our relationship with God is free, open, and honest again – with love, vulnerability, trust, compassion, and joy. He wants us to know God – Father, Son, and Spirit – as intimately as Adam and Eve knew Him. And that will happen as He destroys the power of sin and death once and for all on the cross.

Find God in the midst of your crazy life. And be encouraged. He is with you, always ...

*Jesus, enfold me,
Jesus, surround me,
Jesus in my speaking,
Jesus in my thinking.
Jesus in my sleeping,
Jesus in my waking,
Jesus in my watching,
Jesus in my hoping.
Jesus in my life,
Jesus in my lips,
Jesus in my soul,
Jesus in my heart.
Jesus in my sufficing,
Jesus in my slumber,
Jesus in my ever-living soul,
Jesus in my eternity.
Amen*

Gaelic Prayer (*Carmina Gaedelica*)

Friday, April 12: John 18:12-27

Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* begins, "*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way ...*"

We could almost paraphrase this passage as *A Tale of Two People* – Jesus and Peter. Jesus is the best of people, Peter is (maybe not quite) the worst of people; Jesus is the pinnacle of wisdom, Peter the epitome of foolishness, and so on and so on ... (poor Peter)

Jesus, enduring the physical abuse of soldiers, guards, and priests, stands firmly in His identity, His mission, and His trust in His Father. He is Light in a place of deepest darkness. He is hope amid gravest despair. He is everything in a world of nothingness. He is a breath of Heaven – the presence of Heaven – in the centre of hell.

Peter, answering the questions of a few women and slaves, denies his best friend, mentor, and companion. Peter gives in to the darkness in his own heart, he succumbs to despair and fear, and he can see no hope, only disaster and death. It doesn't get much worse than this. I can identify with Peter. How about you?

We know how this story ends for Jesus. It has the best, wisest, Light-est, most incredible of all endings as He rises – triumphantly – from the dead. But there will be a lot of hell to go through to get there.

We will come to know how the story ends for Peter (spoiler alert – it ends well). Peter will be fully forgiven and restored by the risen Jesus. But there will be some tough times to go through to get there, too.

As we journey toward the fulfillment of time – when Jesus returns – our lives are rather like Peter's. Things can be rough. In our better times we will stand up for our faith. In our worse times we stumble and fall, also. We need to know God can fully forgive and restore us, too.

Paul writes, *"The God, who said, 'Let there be light in the darkness,' has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.*

"We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies. Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be evident in our dying bodies" (2 Corinthians 4:5-11). May the Lord help us to live faithfully for Him. (And when we do fail, know that He fully forgives and restores you ...)

*May you have –
Walls for the wind
And a roof for the rain,
And drinks bedside the fire,
Laughter to cheer you,
And those you love near you,
And all that your life may need to serve your Lord.
Amen.*

Celtic Blessing

Saturday, April 13: John 18:28-32

Have you ever felt like a stranger in a strange land? You were in a place where everyone else seemed to speak the same language and share a culture that you just didn't understand? You knew you didn't fit in? No matter how hard you tried to blend in, you stuck out like a sore thumb? And some things that went on – whether it was the jokes you missed, or the feeling people were laughing at you – really irritated you?

Welcome to the world of Pontius Pilate and the Romans in Jerusalem – they didn't fit in either. Of course the Romans had absolute power so they could afford to ignore most of the Jewish culture swirling around them. But there were things the Jews did that the Romans found incredibly irritating. For instance, no self-respecting Jew would enter the home of a Roman – not even the Governor (certainly not at Passover). Despite being conquered, the Jews looked down their noses at the Romans, their overlords. Very aggravating.

In the wee small hours of the morning, the Jewish leaders are making such a ruckus outside the governor's mansion that he, Pilate, the Governor, the supreme authority, **had to go out to them**. Seriously? If you were Pilate – with all the authority and might of the Roman Empire behind you – and you were woken up by these ornery nobodies, how would you be feeling? If you knew they would not come into your palace because they would be “defiled” by you, how would you be feeling? If you knew they had trumped up charges against Jesus to meet their own twisted ends, how would you be feeling? I would be very grumpy.

Pilate was not a nice person. Pontius Pilate, prefect of the Roman province of Judaea (in power from AD 26–36), seemed to go out of his way to offend the religious sensibilities of his Jewish subjects. Jewish historian, Josephus, recounts an incident in which Pilate spent money seized from the Temple – money consecrated to God – to build an aqueduct. When the Jews protested his actions, Pilate had soldiers hide in the crowd. His soldiers randomly attacked, beat and killed innocent people to silence Jewish complaints.

A couple of year after Jesus' death, Pilate would be ordered back to Rome after harshly suppressing a Samaritan uprising. A large group of Samaritans had been persuaded to go to Mount Gerizim in order to see sacred artifacts allegedly buried by Moses. On the way, Pilate sent in *“a detachment of cavalry and heavy-armed infantry, who in an encounter with the first comers in the village slew some in a pitched battle and put the others to flight. Many prisoners were taken, of whom Pilate put to death the principal leaders and those who were most influential”* (Josephus). There is no report of any reason for this – Pilate just did it.

Philo, another early Jewish historian, describes Pilate's *“vindictiveness and furious temper”*; he was *“naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness.”* Pilate feared that the Jews might complain to Tiberius about him, exposing his horrible conduct, including *“the briberies, the insults, the robberies, the outrages and wanton injuries, the executions without trial constantly repeated, the ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty”* (Philo). Pilate was not a nice man. And yet Pilate is reluctant to get involved (18:32).

Given how nasty Pilate was, the fact that the Jewish leaders would disturb him like this shows how deep the evil in their souls must be. It's chilling. Yet as we read/watch/listen to the news not much has changed. People still do horrid things to other people. If they could, they would still do horrid things to God.

What do we do? Pray for our world. In and out of Roman prisons himself, Paul writes, *“Pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth”* (1 Timothy 2:1-4). Pray for our leaders nationally, provincially, and locally ...

*May the light of Jesus guide you.
May the light of Jesus bless the work that you do.
May you see in what you do the beauty of His love.
May the sacredness of your work bring healing, light and renewal
to those who see and receive your work
and to those who work with you.
May your work never weary you.
May it release within you
wellsprings of refreshment, inspiration and excitement.
May you be present in what you do.
May you never become lost in bland absences.
May the day never burden.
May dawn find you awake and alert,
approaching each new day with inspiration from His Spirit.
May evening find you thankful and fulfilled.
May you go into the night blessed, sheltered and protected by His love.
May Jesus calm, console and renew you this day and every day.
Amen*

Irish Blessing

Palm Sunday, April 14: John 18:33-40

"*What is truth?*" Pilate asks (John 18:38). It's a poignant question. We live in a time when "truth" is negotiable – at least among politicians (of all political parties). And yet we know there actually are some things that are true. We know historical events (like the holocaust) are true. We know statements people have made (accurately recorded) are true. We know scientific observations (properly made) are true. We could go on and on. There *is* truth. Truth matters.

Jesus says, "*I was born and came into the world to testify to the **truth**. All who love the **truth** recognize that what I say is **true**.*" Is Jesus the King of the Jews? Is He the Messiah? Is that true?

Over the past few years Jesus has faced that question time and time again: "*The proof is the work I do in my Father's name ... Don't believe me unless I carry out my Father's work. But if I do his work, believe in the evidence of the miraculous works I have done, even if you don't believe me. Then you will know and understand that the Father is in me, and I am in the Father*" (John 10:25, 37-38).

Jesus is challenging us to use the "duck test." The "duck test" is a humorous term for a form of inductive reasoning: "*If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck.*" If you want to know the truth about Jesus, look seriously at His life, His work, His words, His character. If He looks like the Messiah, acts like the Messiah, speaks like the Messiah, then He is the Messiah. That's truth.

Believing Jesus is God is not "**truthy**" – something expressed as a truth because it is a feeling from the heart *without* evidence or logic. Believing Jesus is God is absolute **truth** – that which is true or in accordance *with* fact or reality.

Since Jesus is truly God, what does that mean for your life – today? Tomorrow?

*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 the 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,
the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,
now and ever and unto ages of ages.
Amen.*

Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

Monday, April 15: John 19:1-7

Alan Turing was an awkward – brilliant – mathematician, recruited by the British intelligence service to break the code used by Nazi "Enigma" machines during World War 2. The Academy Award winning movie, *The Imitation Game*, tells his story. Turing is a bona fide genius – but he looks like anyone else. No one would notice him in a crowd. He is a complex character – sure of his abilities, but unsure of his personal self-worth. He is told, "*Sometimes it is the people who no one imagines anything of, who do the things that no one can imagine.*"

From what we know of Jesus, to simply see Him in a crowd, people would not notice him either. Isaiah, looking forward to His coming, writes, "*There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him. He was despised and rejected – a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care*" (Isaiah 53:2-3). It wasn't

Jesus' tall, dark, handsome, physical appearance that drew people to Himself.

What drew people to Jesus was His character, His teaching, His manner, and His mission. When people saw Jesus, they – in truth – saw God's character, God's Word, God's manner, and God's mission.

Pilate – rather despicable wretch that he is – is struggling because he sees more to Jesus than meets the eye. He seems to sense that maybe, just maybe, Jesus is who He says is. And Pilate is trying to create some wiggle room to let Jesus go: *"Understand clearly that I find him not guilty"*(19:4).

Isaiah goes on to say, *"Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins. But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the sins of us all"*(Isaiah 53:4-6).

Jesus, this person the Jewish leaders did not imagine anything of, did what no one could imagine: He destroyed the power of sin and death.

"Sometimes it is the people who no one imagines anything of, who do the things that no one can imagine." None of us is fully human and fully divine like Jesus was. But we all are filled with His Holy Spirit. Each of us is capable of far more than we – or others – can imagine, too. This is not because we, in our own power, are so wonderful. It is because we can love and live, can encourage and inspire, can share and bless – empowered by His Spirit. In us and through us, He can do amazing things ...

*You are holy, Lord, the only God,
and Your deeds are wonderful.
You are strong.
You are great.
You are the Most High.
You are Almighty.
You, Holy Father are King of heaven and earth.
You are Three and One, Lord God, all Good.
You are Good, all Good, supreme Good,
Lord God, living and true.
You are love.
You are wisdom.
You are humility.
You are endurance.
You are rest.
You are peace.
You are justice and moderation.
You are all our riches, and You suffice for us.
You are joy and gladness.
You are beauty.
You are gentleness.
You are our protector.
You are our guardian and defender.
You are our courage.
You are our haven and our hope.
You are our faith, our great consolation.
You are our eternal life,
Great and Wonderful Lord, God Almighty,
Merciful Saviour.
Amen.*

Francis of Assisi

Tuesday, April 16: John 19:8-16

How does a person become a king (or a queen)? In most European monarchies, the crown passes from father to son (and the occasional daughter). In other cultures, it can be a bit more complicated (Saudi Arabia's King Salman named his nephew his heir, ahead of his own sons). Does one's bloodline make all the difference? Is that all that matters?

If genetics were the only prerequisite, Jesus certainly was not the King of the Jews. True, he was a distant descendant of King David – but very distant. Israel actually had a history of thinking outside the box when it came to royalty. King Saul – Israel's first king – was a great soldier and general. His successor, King David, was no relation – but was chosen by God as a "*man after His own heart.*" When the Jews revolted under Judah Maccabee, the Maccabees became the royal line because of their military leadership credentials. The Romans appointed Herod the Great as king of Judea in 37 BC – but Herod wasn't even Jewish; he was of Arab (Nabatean) and Edomite descent, whose ancestors converted to Judaism.

The people **God** directly called to be kings – Saul and David – were called because of character. They did (initially anyway) what kings were supposed to do: under God's wise rule they governed in the best interests of all the people, they protected the people, they ensured the poor and suffering were cared for, and they kept foreign gods and foreign armies out of Israel. Even Saul and David, however, found out that power corrupts – and absolute power corrupts absolutely. They both lost their way in their later years. They were tempted by wealth, power, pride, sex, and their own success (sounds like a lot of contemporary politicians).

Jesus, however, reasserts what kingship, as God intends it to be, really is. It's not about personal glory. It's not about personal power. It's not about being in control. It IS about doing what is best for His people. It IS about looking out for the needs of others before oneself. It IS about self-sacrifice. It IS about servanthood. Kingship, as Jesus defines it, IS about servant leadership, not power and indulgence.¹

Pilate, the real authority in Israel, chooses to do what is best for his own political career: he will sacrifice justice to stay popular with the crowd, the local big wigs, and the emperor in Rome. The Jewish leaders choose to do what is best for their comfortable lifestyles: they will blatantly lie and incite murder to ensure nothing upsets their cozy positions and close relationship with the Roman powers-that-be.

Do I ever compromise my integrity – shortchange my beliefs, values, and principles – to protect my own personal comfort level? Do I ever do or say something I know is wrong – to stay popular with the "right" people? When I have the opportunity to speak up for my faith – or what I know is right and true – do I take it? Or like Pilate, do I wash my hands and walk away?

Lord, help me to truly live my faith with integrity ... Lord, prepare me now for the tough times ...

*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)

¹ We sometimes speak of politics as "public service" – although the cynic in me is a little unsure how much "public" service – as opposed to self-rewarding "personal" service some politicians seem to be motivated by (personal power, personal perks, personal advantage).

Wednesday, April 17: John 19:16-24

Louisbourg, Nova Scotia, is a reconstructed 18th Century French fortress perched on the edge of Cape Breton. It is a fantastic historic park. You park a couple of kilometres away and are bussed to the gates. A uniformed guard challenges you in French. If you answer in French, he will admit you easily. If you respond in English, he will give you a hard time: why is an Anglophone trying to gain admittance to a French fort? Inside, everyone is dressed in period costume. There is no "fast food" – it is all authentic 18th century cuisine served on pewter plates. Periodically there is a procession down the street. Soldiers loudly proclaim that a "voleuse" – a thief – is being marched off to trial. And a lady, with a sign around her neck – "voleuse" – is paraded down the street for all to gawk at. 200-300 years ago people would have thrown rotten fruit, sticks, stones, and all sorts of other abuse at her, too.

It's a very public way of punishing the individual and of making a statement about law and order to potential criminals ... This is what your fate could be if you get out of line.

In exactly the same way, Jesus is being taken off to pay for his alleged crimes. And His crime is there for all to see: "*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.*"

- To Hebrew-speaking Jews – who had a history of being rebellious against Rome – this is what happens if you get uppity, so tow the party line;
- To other cultures (Greek was the "universal" language in the Middle East) – don't even think about rebelling against Rome or this will happen to you, too.
- To Latin-speaking Romans – a clear message that Rome is very much in control; all is right in their world. The tough Roman "law and order agenda" is right on track.

Pilate has this sign made as an insult – to Jesus and to the Jews. The Jewish leaders certainly understand it as such – they did NOT consider Jesus their king. And yet, paradoxically, Pilate is absolutely bang on about who Jesus is. Unwittingly he broadcasts the truth to all the world in the three best known languages of his day – anyone and everyone in Jerusalem could read it: "*Jesus of Nazareth, **IS** the King of the Jews.*"

Isaiah comments, "*He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. Unjustly condemned, he was led away. No one cared that he died without descendants, that his life was cut short in midstream. But he was struck down for the rebellion of my people ...*" (Isaiah 53:7-8).

As I ponder the depths of God's love, what is He saying to me ...? How should I respond?

*Lord, I can see plainly
that 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 in obedience to your will.
And so the knowledge of your Son
has enabled me to 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.
Amen*

Henry Suso (1295-1366)

Thursday, April 18: John 19:25-30

"It is finished." Can you think of something in your life you had spent ages doing that was finally done? You finally finished the 5000 piece puzzle? You completed the triathlon? You received the high school diploma or university degree? You finished the renovations? You retired? How did you feel? Relief? Satisfaction? A sense of loss? What do I do next?

Imagine Jesus' emotions as He cries out, *"It is finished."* John has already given us insight into Jesus' troubled soul. I cannot begin to comprehend the sense of abandonment, betrayal, and alone-ness Jesus is experiencing. I certainly cannot begin to imagine the excruciating physical pain He is going through.

Yet Jesus is still caring for other people. In the midst of His agony, He is still loving others.

We have a God who knows the challenge of battling through the toughest of times – much tougher times than we can possibly comprehend. Nothing I could possibly experience could be anything close to what Jesus is going through. And yet when I do go through difficult experiences – troubled relationships, health problems, feeling abandoned or betrayed, in physical pain – I know I have a Companion who understands. He walks with me. He never leaves me. He comforts me. He really does know what I am going through.

Jesus challenges me that when I am going through stressful experiences, I need to keep looking outside myself. Even though I may be suffering, who can I still care for?

My friend Irene, a dear saint in a seniors' home in Edmonton, had serious health problems. But Irene was always the first person to welcome one of her fellow residents back from a hospital visit – with a bowl of chicken soup. I remember her saying to me, *"There's always someone worse off than I am."* I need to remember that. Rather than getting into a self-pity party, I need to love people outside myself.

Paradoxically, when I do notice the needs of other people, my own problems seem a little less all-consuming. When I choose to care for someone a little bit worse off than myself, I also have a sense of self-worth and value. No matter how badly off I am, there always is someone worse off than I am. And when I care for them, I make a difference in this world in profound ways ...

*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 (martyred for his faith in AD 115)

Friday, April 19: John 19:31-37 Good Friday Service @ First Baptist, 10:30 a.m.

"This report is from an eyewitness giving an accurate account. He speaks the truth so that you also may continue to believe." John, the author of this Gospel, was there. This is not a third-party description. This is not hearsay. This is the evidence of an eye witness. Could you possibly imagine how horrific – heart-wrenching – overwhelmingly exhausting – painful beyond belief – it must have been for Jesus' friends and family to

experience this firsthand. How do you even begin to find words to describe it?

For those who wish to cast doubt upon the reality of Jesus' death and resurrection, here is a firsthand account. One theory to "explain away" the resurrection is that Jesus was not really dead – He just swooned and then resuscitated in the cool of the tomb. Does this seem plausible given John's description?

New Testament scholar Tom Wright gives a rather graphic analysis: *"Crucified people often remained alive, or half alive, for some days; Jesus was unusual in that, after his long ordeal, he had died within a few hours. The way crucifixion usually killed people was a form of torture. Suspended by the arms, you wouldn't be able to breathe; so you would push yourself up with your legs in order to take a breath. People would go on doing this until they ran out of strength, and then they would suffocate. So the quick, and typically brutal way to finish it off was to break the legs. Suffocation would then follow quickly.*

"That's what they did to the other two. The crack of a spear-butt on human bone; a half-scream of agony; convulsions; then silence. But when they came to Jesus, he was already dead. The soldiers were puzzled. That was quick. Was he, perhaps, just faking? No Roman soldier would let a condemned criminal escape death. His own life would be forfeit if he did. So, just to be sure, he stuck his spear hard up into Jesus' ribs; either it would kill him, or it would prove he was already dead.

"The test was negative. After death, the body fluids separate out. The medical details have been interpreted in different ways, and we don't know whether the spear might not have pierced Jesus' heart. The point seems to be, though, that whereas a living body would have produced blood, a dead body, from somewhere in the chest or stomach, would produce a mixture of clotting blood and a watery substance. Jesus really was dead. The writer saw it, and insists upon the truth of his evidence."

Passover was the time of year when the Jewish people remembered that they were saved from slavery and death in Egypt by the blood of a pure, unblemished lamb. Here is Jesus, the pure, unblemished Lamb of God, whose blood is saving His people – all people – from the power of sin and death.

Peter describes it this way: *"He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly. He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed"* (1 Peter 2:23-24). We are healed – we have eternal life – thanks to Jesus' death for us. That is worth much reflection and thanksgiving. Take some time to pray ... and give thanks.

Peter combines His encouragement to thoughtful prayer with a call to a certain kind of life (*"be dead to sin"*) and to action (*"live for what is right"*). Because of this incredible, amazing, astounding, earth-shattering act of love, we are challenged to live our faith. Peter's reflection on Jesus' sacrificial death, quoted above, is in the midst of a long passage about practical ways we need to embody our faith in Jesus: from obeying government authorities, respecting others, loving fellow believers, enduring suffering, non-retaliation, even having healthy marriages. *"For God called you to do good,"* Peter says, *"even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps"* (1 Peter 2:21).

- Take some time for worship and adoration, reflecting on the amazing love of God, embodied in Jesus.
- Take some time to reflect on what it means for you to be dead to sin and to live for what is right ...

*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.
Amen.*

Ignatius (martyred for his faith in AD 107)

Saturday, April 20: John 19:38-42

When I was in Lebanon, I was part of a conference where the topic of "*Muslims who follow Jesus*" came up. When Muslim people in the Arab world become believers in Jesus, it can be an instant death sentence. Certainly you will be ostracized from your family and community. You become an outcast. As a result, many Muslim-background people who believe in Jesus keep the cultural label "*Muslim*" (not describing their religious convictions, but their people group) but "*follow Jesus*" – they believe in Him as you and I do. But by choosing to self-identify as "*Muslims who follow Jesus*," these folks maintain their relationships, move freely about their countries, and have a Christian witness throughout the Arab world they would never have if they only used the label "Christian." We think of "Muslim" as an exclusively religious term, but for many people in the Middle East and North Africa it is simply a cultural designation – in the same way that many Muslim people consider anyone who is from Europe or North America to be "Christian" (we know that's not really accurate.).

As westerners – in a religiously tolerant country like Canada – this may confuse us. Are these people ashamed of Jesus? Not at all. In fact, they are endangering their family/social/employment connections – and their lives – by following Jesus at all. They are far, far braver about their religious convictions than many of us are (who hum-and-haw about our faith when it's a topic of conversation around the water cooler). They may have more faith than us: they literally put their lives on the line for Him every day.

Interestingly, the first believers in Jesus never used the word "Christian" to describe themselves either – that word was a label coined by the Romans who needed a category in which to classify those who loved Jesus (Acts 11:26, 26:28). Followers of Jesus called themselves "*followers of the Way*" or "*followers of the Way of God*" (Acts 9:2, 18:25-26, 19:9, 19:23, 22:4-5, 24:14, 24:22).

Joseph and Nicodemus are followers of the Way – "*Jews who follow Jesus*." Dusk had fallen, the Sabbath had begun, and no more work should be done. So amid the chaos surrounding Jesus' arrest and crucifixion they come by night to get His body (breaking the Sabbath). As leaders in the Jewish community they will have profound opportunities to tell others about Jesus – if they keep connected. By coming at night these men are not compromising – they are risking their lives to bury a body on the Sabbath and to care for Jesus, even in His death. Everyone else, including Peter, John, Philip, Andrew, Nathanael, and Jesus' family ran away. Would I risk my life for Jesus? I would hope I would be willing to stand up for Him.

Every day I am called to follow Him. What difference does it make if I describe myself as "*a follower of the Way*" or as a "*follower of Jesus*" rather than as a "Christian"? "Christian" is a static term – it reinforces the notion that I can make a one-time decision to believe in Jesus and that's it; I'm saved; I'm "in." It *is* essential we do decide to believe Jesus died for our sins, rose again, and saves us. But do you know people who are "Christian" – they made a decision and know they will go heaven – but that's all? Nothing changes in their life. Is that really – fully – what it means to believe in Jesus? I like to think of that decision to be a Christian like the day of one's birth – it's critical, but it's just a starting point ... We have to grow beyond infancy.

What would happen if we talked about being "*followers of the Way of God*" or "*followers of Jesus*" instead? "*Follower of Jesus*" is a dynamic term – it's something I choose to do (or not) every moment of every day. If I am a "*follower of Jesus*," then I choose to take every step in step with His Spirit. Yes, I do know I will be with Jesus when I die, but in the meantime I choose to let His Spirit guide my life (Galatians 5:22). It's crucial I was born, but I have to choose to live every moment of every day. I choose to be dead to sin and to live for God, for what is right, right here, right now, today ...

As Jesus is laid in the tomb – with a hundred times more spices than the amount Mary poured over Jesus at Bethany (John 12:3)² – think about the last time we read about Jesus and a tomb (John 11). What happened? Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus had died. He was laid in a tomb. Jesus waited two days. On the third day He came, and ...? He is risen. How can you *follow Jesus* today?

² People grumbled at Mary's extravagance. Now Nicodemus and Joseph bring 100 times as much – truly a burial fit for a king.

*O God, early in the morning I cry to you.
Help me to pray
And to 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...
Please give me your freedom.
Enable me to live now
To the fullest, for your glory.
Lord, whatever this day may bring,
Your name be praised.
Amen.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (executed in Flossenbürg Concentration Camp, 1945)

Easter Sunday, April 21: John 20:1-10

The first person to be raised from the dead was Lazarus (John 11). But he returned to this present life. He needed someone to untie him and take off his wrappings. He came back into a world rife with disease and danger. Ultimately Lazarus would get sick and die again (the poor guy had to go through it twice).

Jesus' resurrection is altogether different. His new life is qualitatively different than before. No one needed to unwrap or untie Him. His new life has passed beyond death: He is victorious over death. His new life is perfect: there is no threat from sickness or danger, from pain or death. Through His new life He has defeated – transcended – overcome – destroyed – all evil, destruction, sin, and death. A new era has begun.

Every Easter we celebrate Jesus' resurrection. But every Sunday is really a "mini-celebration" of the resurrection. The reason (most) Christians celebrate Sunday as our holy day rather than Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath), is that it was on a Sunday that Jesus rose from the dead. Every Sunday is a mini-Easter. Our holy day is no longer the last day of the week, but the first day of the week. We begin each week reminding ourselves that Jesus has destroyed the power of sin and death once and for all.

If you were to ask most people in the world which day is the most important in the annual Christian calendar, however, they would probably say "Christmas." But if Easter hadn't happened – if Jesus had not died and risen – no one would celebrate Christmas. Why would they? The significance of that baby born in Bethlehem only comes into focus when we experience the wonder and astonishment of Easter. Jesus' teachings and miracles were all wonderful, but His resurrection is the exclamation mark that proves He actually is who He said He was. Jesus' resurrection establishes the truth that the power of sin and death is destroyed! His resurrection gives us the sure hope of life now – and forever – with God. His resurrection begins the process of His Holy Spirit moving into each and every one of our lives ...

Tim Keller writes, *"If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead."*

He is risen. That changes everything ... What difference does it make in your life?

*If you are a devout lover of God, join with gladness in this fair and radiant feast.
 If you are a faithful servant of God, enter rejoicing into the joy of your Lord.
 If you have wearied yourself with fasting, now enjoy your reward.
 If you have laboured from the first hour, receive today your rightful due.
 If you have come after the third hour, celebrate the feast with thankfulness.
 If you have come after the sixth hour, be in no doubt, for you will suffer no loss.
 If you have delayed until the ninth hour, do not hesitate but draw near.
 If you have arrived only at the eleventh hour, don't be afraid because you come so late.
 The Master is generous and accepts the last even as the first.
 He gives rest to him who comes at the eleventh hour
 in the same way as him who has laboured from the first.
 He accepts the deed and commends the intention.*

*Let us enter then, all of us, into the joy of our Lord.
 First and last, let us receive alike our reward.
 Rich and poor, dance together.
 You who fasted and you who have not fasted, rejoice together.
 The table is fully laden: let all enjoy it.
 The calf is fatted: let none go away hungry.*

*Let us not lament our poverty;
 for the universal Kingdom of God is revealed.
 Let us not bewail our transgressions;
 for the light of forgiveness has risen from the tomb.
 Let us not fear death; for the death of the Saviour has set us free.
 He has destroyed death by undergoing death.
 Death received a body and encountered God.
 It received earth and confronted heaven.
 Death was filled with bitterness when it met You face to face;
 filled with bitterness, for it was brought to nothing;
 filled with bitterness, for it was mocked;
 filled with bitterness, for it was overthrown;
 filled with bitterness, for it was put in chains.*

*O death, where is your sting?
 O hell, where is your victory?
 Christ is risen.
 And you, O death, are annihilated.
 Christ is risen.
 And the evil ones are cast down.
 Christ is risen.
 And the angels rejoice.
 Christ is risen.
 And life is liberated.
 Christ is risen.*

*The tomb is emptied of its dead;
 for Christ having risen from the dead,
 is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.
 To Him be Glory and Power, now and forever, and from all ages to all ages.
 Amen.*

John Chrysostom (349-407)

Monday, April 22: John 20:1-18

Mary of Magdala (commonly called Mary Magdalene) is the first person at the tomb (John 20:1) and the first person to see Jesus, risen from the dead – all four gospels concur. That's unfortunate. Women were not accepted as legal witnesses by Roman and Jewish authorities. Peter and John would have made much better

witnesses. The fact that John (and the other gospel writers) all name Mary – a woman – as the first witness is strong evidence for the authenticity of this account. No one would make it up.

Mary is from Magdala, a town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. She is always referred to by where she is from to distinguish her from Mary (mother of Jesus), Mary of Bethany (sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 11-12)) and Mary (mother of James). Until Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection the only time we meet Mary of Magdala is in Luke 8:1-3: *"Jesus began a tour of the nearby towns and villages (in Galilee), preaching and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom of God. He took his twelve disciples with him, along with some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. Among them were Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons ..."* That's all we know about Mary of Magdala.

There are (6th century and later) traditions that suggest that Mary of Magdala was the anonymous "immoral" woman who brought a beautiful jar filled with expensive perfume, knelt behind Jesus at his feet, and wept, kissing his feet and putting perfume on them (Luke 7:37-50) – but the lady in Luke 7 is never named. It has even been suggested Mary had been a prostitute – but there is absolutely no evidence for this.

"She saw two white-robed angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying" – that's enough to shake you up.

"Dear woman, why are you crying?" the angels asked her. She replied, *"Because they have taken away my Lord," she replied, "and I don't know where they have put him."* Presumably the angels didn't reply, so she turns to leave. She sees someone standing there. John tells us, *"It was Jesus, but she didn't recognize him. 'Dear woman, why are you crying?' Jesus asked her. 'Who are you looking for?'"*

Quite logically, she thought he was the gardener. *"Sir," she said, "if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him."* Mary gets it all wrong. It is Jesus – risen and alive.

And yet Mary is right. Jesus is the ultimate Gardener. He is the One in whom we have life, who plants the seed of faith in us, cares for it, and brings us to maturity and fruitfulness in our lives (Matthew 13). He is the vine, we are the branches (John 15). The risen Jesus is so much more than a human gardener: He is our Lord and Saviour, with all the power in the universe to help us be born (physically and spiritually), grow (physically and spiritually), and bear fruit (physically and spiritually).

In this present age, *"the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22-23). These are qualities that are coming to bloom in Mary's life. And, I suspect, these are virtues that will grow in her more and more as time goes by.

Mary is one of those people to whom the gospel writers briefly introduce us and then she is gone ... Yet knowing her character, she will be telling lots and lots of people about Jesus. Many of us may be like Mary – we will never be rich, famous, or "successful" – but we can tell people about what Jesus has done in our lives. Ultimately it's what He does in us and through us that really matters ...

*Glory and praise to You, Risen Savior,
for You bring light to our darkness,
joy to our sorrow,
and the fullness of love to our reluctant hearts.
Once and for all You have conquered sin and evil.
In the glory of Your resurrection we have been set free
from all that keeps us from following You.
Fill our hearts with Your light and grace
that we might joyfully echo the words of Your angels:
"He is not here in the tomb: He is risen."
Alleluia. Alleluia.
Amen.*

Tuesday, April 23: John 20:19-23

Mary of Magdala had met Jesus early on Sunday morning. It's now Sunday evening. John doesn't tell us what has been going on all day, but imagine the kerfuffle ...

- Matthew records that the Roman guards had seen the risen Jesus, too. They "*shook with fear when they saw him, and they fell into a dead faint*" (Matthew 28:4). They were looking for the body to save their reputations (and possibly their lives – what will their commander say?).
- Unable to find Jesus, "*some of the guards went into the city and told the leading priests what had happened. A meeting with the elders was called, and they decided to give the soldiers a large bribe. They told the soldiers, 'You must say, 'Jesus' disciples came during the night while we were sleeping, and they stole his body.' If the governor hears about it, we'll stand up for you so you won't get in trouble*" (Matthew 28:11-14). The priests were also scouring the city for the body. Pretty soon everyone was talking about it – Jesus was not there. (Matthew 28:15)
- With a manhunt going in Jerusalem, not surprisingly, "*That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders*" (John 20:9).

What would Mary, Peter, and John have been doing all day? What about Mary, Jesus' mother? What about Nicodemus and Joseph (who had buried the body)? What about the other disciples?

The disciples were "*meeting*"/"*gathered together*"/"*assembled*" that evening. What were they doing? Imagine the conversation. People were talking of resurrection. It must have been a strange evening ...

The evening got even stranger. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them. They knew it was Him as He showed them His wounded hands and side. And they were filled with joy.

- "*As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.*" For what purpose did the Father send Jesus? "*I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do my own will,*" Jesus had said. "*And this is the will of God, that I should not lose even one of all those he has given me, but that I should raise them up at the last day. For it is my Father's will that all who see his Son and believe in him should have eternal life*" (John 6:38-40). We are called for that same purpose, to tell people of the love and grace of God through the forgiveness of sin and new life through the cross. Jesus also came to bring practical love – to heal, to feed, and to care. We are called to do the same.
- "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" Remember John 14-16? Jesus promised the Holy Spirit ("*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth*" (John 14:16-17)). Now that promise is fulfilled. We do not go about the business of sharing God's love in Word and deed in our own strength. We do so empowered – in-powered – by the real personal presence and power of God Himself. He is with us – always.

You are God's "sent one." He has called you to be His ambassador, His representative right where you are, today. You are not here by accident. Your life does not NOT matter. Your life DOES matter. God has placed you here, now – with a purpose – to live His love and share His love in Word and deed. You are not alone. God's Spirit is in you. You are in-powered – in-spirited – with God's Holy Spirit (we just invented two new words.). We can be confident knowing we can do all things through Him who is within us.

*Heavenly Father and God of mercy,
I believe that Jesus is alive and has become the Lord of life.
Increase in my mind and heart the risen life I share with Christ
and help me to grow in your wisdom and grace.
Lord Jesus, you appeared to your apostles after the resurrection
and filled their hearts with joy when you said to them, "Peace be with you".
May the peace of your presence abide with me
and make each day you give me the most beautiful day of my life.*

... continued

*Lord Jesus, you triumphed over death and destroyed the power of death in me,
may I live only for you.
Risen Lord, you brought confusion on the guards at your tomb, but joy to your disciples,
grant me the fullness of joy as I serve you in spirit and truth.
You promised to be with your disciples, Lord, to the end of the world,
stay with me today and remain with me always.
King of glory, center of my life, grant that when you come again, I may be one with you in glory.
Lord, remember me as in my own way I minister to your people,
may my life be holy and an example to your people.
Lord Jesus, purify my heart with your truth and guide me in the way of holiness,
so that I may always do what is pleasing in your sight.
Amen.*

Wednesday, April 24: John 20:24-31

History has not been kind to Thomas. Thomas is often presented as the least of the disciples. While the others believed in Jesus' resurrection, "Doubting Thomas" stubbornly refused to believe until cornered. But we are unfair to Thomas. First, the other disciples were really no better than Thomas. There is no evidence the others believed Mary's story of seeing Jesus in the garden. Until He actually appeared to them, they all may well have thought she was crazy and doubted Jesus' resurrection (Thomas just wasn't there).

Second, Thomas' doubt is delightfully human. I have been at least as doubt-full as Thomas was. Like Thomas, I like evidence for hard-to-grasp truths. I had a lot of questions about who Jesus was and what faith is all about. God understands. He was willing to give Thomas the evidence he needed. Jesus' willingness to speak to Thomas' unbelief is a reminder that God can handle our doubt. And God can help us work through our tough questions. Of course we cannot reach out and touch Jesus physically like Thomas could, but many of us stubborn skeptics have weighed the evidence, considered the facts, experienced the touch of God and come to the same conclusion as Thomas: "*My Lord and my God.*" There is much compelling evidence that Jesus truly was divine and that He really did rise from the dead.³

Jesus tells Thomas, "*You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me*" (John 20:29). This is not a plea to accept what goes against reason, but it is an invitation to discover a faith that goes beyond it. Peter Abelard (1079-1142), French philosopher and theologian, said, "*The key to wisdom is this – constant and frequent questioning, for by doubting we are led to question and by questioning we arrive at the truth.*" Questioning, studying, and doubting are all part of the learning process. Many of us continue to honestly and thoughtfully work through hard questions. That's great. This strengthens our faith.

The challenge for Thomas – and the other disciples – is this: now that they know the truth that Jesus is risen, what next? Jesus is sending them (and us) out – in faith – to continue to tell the world that God so loves His creation that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. They (and we) are to say that in word and share it in deed. That takes a lot of faith. But remember, He has also given us His Holy Spirit.

Tradition says Thomas became an evangelist to the Parthians (modern day Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan). The he sailed to Muziris, India in AD 52. He evangelized and planted churches along the Malabar Coast (modern-day Kerala) in southwest India. Later he crossed to the Coromandel Coast of southeast India to continue evangelizing and church planting. He preached to all classes of people and had more than 17,000 converts, including members of all four principal castes. He traveled thousands of kilometers in dangerous countries (these parts of the world were even less safe then than now), on foot, on horseback, on first-century boat. That took faith. Not bad for a guy who had snarled, "*I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side.*"

Thomas models following Jesus at its best. He may have his doubts, but he deals with them constructively.

³ See Josh McDowell, *Evidence that demands a verdict*; Lee Strobel, *The case for Christ*; William Lane Craig, *The Son rises* and <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-resurrection-of-jesus>

Then he takes up his cross and he follows Jesus – literally to the ends of the earth as people knew them in his day. Don't let your doubts today hamstring your tomorrows. Deal with them. They can make you stronger. Then get on with living. Follow Jesus ... who knows where He might lead you?

*It is only right, with all the powers of our heart and mind,
to praise You, Father, and Your Only-Begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.
Dear Father, by Your wondrous condescension of Loving-Kindness 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 loving kindness.
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 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 You, Lord, to preserve Your servants
in the peaceful enjoyment of this Easter happiness.
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)

Thursday, April 25: John 21:1-8

In Jerusalem, Jesus had appeared to the disciples and to Thomas. Now, they have all left the city. They have drifted 200 kms north, back to their old haunts in Galilee. Galilee was the "backwater" of ancient Israel – a rural, forgotten, relatively safe place far from the excitement and danger of Jerusalem. Notice who is here: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, John and James (the sons of Zebedee), and two other disciples. These are the people who will be the leaders of the church – *will* be. Not yet. Right now they are hiding about as far from everything as they can possibly get. They are right back where they started (John 1:35-51).

Simon Peter says, *"I'm going fishing."* Not only are they back where they started, they are back doing what they were doing when Jesus found them. They had dropped their nets and left everything to follow Jesus. Not anymore. They are back to their old lives. It's as if the last three years had ceased to exist.

The story could end here. It could end with Peter, Thomas, John, and the others back in their quiet fishing lives. They would have great adventure stories to tell their children and grandchildren. Time would pass. The stories would be forgotten. These men would be forgotten. Their three years with Jesus would be about as futile as fishing all night and not catching a thing. Nothing would matter. Nothing would change.

But the story doesn't end here. Jesus won't let them go back to the same old same old: *"Try something different. Throw your net out on the other side ..."*

It is possible to "just believe in Jesus." You believe He is the Son of God. You believe He died on the cross. You believe He rose again. If pushed, you may even say you believe He died for your sins and you'll go to heaven when you die. It is possible that nothing else changes in your life. Life is the same old same old. You go through a rather tiresome, boring, frustrating day-in-day-out grind and not much happens ...

But Jesus wants us to experience life to the fullest (John 10:10). He wants us to get out of the rut and experience the excitement of following Him – right now. James never travels far, but becomes a leader in the early church (and is martyred in AD 44). John will travel to what is now Turkey (Ephesus) and Greece (Patmos). Peter will travel into what is now Lebanon, possibly Egypt and Greece, and finally to Rome (where he will be martyred). Thomas will travel thousands of kilometres on the highways and byways of the ancient near east

and India; Thomas may or may not have been martyred (sources vary). It will not be easy for any of them. James writes a letter in which he talks about patiently enduring testing and temptation. Peter, in his two letters (1 and 2 Peter) writes a lot about going through suffering and persecution. John, in Revelation, speaks about keeping the faith through difficult times. Following Jesus can be tough. But not one of them ever expresses any regret for taking up the challenge of following Jesus with their whole lives.

All Jesus asked these fishermen to do was to throw out their net on the other side of the boat ... in faith terms that's just a small hop. But it began a new relationship with Jesus that changed everything, because they were willing to listen and obey. Is Jesus calling you to take a leap of faith – or even a small hop of faith?

Jesus may just be asking you to hop. Is He simply be asking you to get out of the bed with a different attitude? Is He inviting you to go down a new path? Maybe He will bring a new friend into your life? Perhaps He will give you an opportunity to be an encourager? Possibly open up a chance to begin a conversation? Will you step out in faith ...? In God's Kingdom, there is an exciting opportunity every time you walk out your front door.

*May the Holy Spirit enlighten my mind and my heart
to respond to God's teachings through the Scriptures.
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.
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.
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.
As I talk to Jesus may I also learn to be still and listen.
I can be totally honest with Jesus as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.
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.*

Friday, April 26: John 21:9-14

I'm a morning person. I was up before 6. I've done some exercise. I've gone to work. It's 8:17 a.m. but I haven't had breakfast yet ... I'm meeting a colleague at 8:45 for a breakfast meeting. I'm getting hungry.

Peter and his buddies have been up fishing all night. They've caught nothing. It's 8:17 a.m. and they're tired, grumpy, and very hungry. The last thing they want to do is cast their nets again. But they do. And their nets are bursting. When they get ashore, what do they find? "*When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them – fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread*" (21:9). Tongue-in-cheek, Jesus says, "*Bring some of the fish you've just caught*" – He doesn't need them. Somehow Jesus already has fish. Breakfast is ready.

Once before Jesus had fed people on the shores of the Sea of Galilee with loaves of bread and fish (John 6). Jesus is purposely reminding them of what happened before. After that miraculous meal, these tough fishermen were caught in a storm: "*A gale swept down upon them, and the sea grew very rough. They had rowed three or four miles when suddenly they saw Jesus walking on the water toward the boat. They were terrified, but he called out to them, 'Don't be afraid. I am here'*" (John 6:18-21). All those memories would be rushing back into their minds as Jesus serves them bread and fish on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Peter, John, James and the others had gone back to their old home and livelihood. But Jesus is not content to

leave them there. He has called them to follow Him. He has changed Simon's name from "Simon" to "Peter" – literally meaning "the Rock." He is no longer a fisherman (after all, he caught nothing on his own). Jesus has given him a new vocation. Peter needs to step up and be the Rock Jesus called him to be.

If you believe in Jesus, God's Holy Spirit is in you. That is the truth whether you "feel" Him or not. As you encourage other people, care for someone in need, help those suffering, smile at a checkout clerk, talk about your faith with your neighbour, call an old friend, volunteer in the community, and so much more, you are sharing God's love. You are building His Kingdom. If you come across challenges that seem overwhelming, remember God's Spirit – His presence and power – is within you. *"Don't be afraid. I am here."*

You are not a "mere mortal" simply going through the motions of life. You are God's child, you are His unique creation, you are His chosen one, you are the one in whom He chooses to reside. Live confidently. Live boldly. Live for Jesus ... *"for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light"* (1 Peter 2:9). What does mean in your life today?

*God of all ages, we bless you for the persistent love
which has sought us out and redeemed us.
We thank you that in the fullness of time your Son our Lord came to us
and brought us hope.
Almighty God, you have promised that the power of death shall not prevail.
Come and breathe your Holy Spirit afresh on us
so that we may work with you in the renewal of the whole creation.
Free us from greed and from all desire for power;
that being renewed in the image of our Creator,
we may take the path leading to the One who alone has the words of eternal life.
Glory to him who is the same yesterday, today and forever.
Amen*

Welsh Prayer

Saturday, April 27: John 21:15-19

During the Passover meal Jesus ate with His disciples (the Last Supper), Jesus said, *"The time has come for the Son of Man to enter into his glory, and God will be glorified because of him ... you will search for me, but you can't come where I am going."* Peter asked, *"Lord, where are you going?"* Jesus replied, *"You can't go with me now, but you will follow me later."* Peter blustered back, *"But why can't I come now, Lord? I'm ready to die for you."* Jesus answered, *"Die for me? I tell you the truth, Peter – before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will deny three times that you even know me"* (John 13:31-38).

Later that evening, Jesus was arrested. Peter tagged along and was standing outside the high priest's gate. A woman watching at the gate asked Peter, *"You're not one of that man's disciples, are you?"* He replied, *"No, I am not."* John records that *"because it was cold, the household servants and the guards had made a charcoal fire. They stood around it, warming themselves, and Peter stood with them, warming himself ... as Simon Peter was standing by the fire warming himself, they asked him again, 'You're not one of his disciples, are you?' He denied it, saying, 'No, I am not.' One of the household slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, 'Didn't I see you out there in the olive grove with Jesus?' Again Peter denied it. And immediately a rooster crowed"* (John 18:15-27).

Poor Peter. Imagine how he must have felt. He denied Jesus – three times. Have you ever disappointed someone or let someone down? Have you ever disappointed yourself? How do you deal with that?

In John 21, Peter is again warming himself by a charcoal fire. Jesus asks him three times, *"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"* Each time, as Peter reaffirms his commitment to Jesus, it is as if another of his three denials is swept away and his relationship with Jesus is completely restored. The past is forgiven.

In whatever way you have let yourself or others down, Jesus can forgive it completely. That is great news. If

there is something you need to deal with, bring it to Jesus. Give it to Him. Know that He forgives you.

More than that, Jesus expands on Peter's new identity. Not only does Jesus forgive the past, but He continues to call Peter to a new and exciting future. He calls Peter to love Him more "*than these*" – the fish he has just brought from the boat. He calls Peter to become a shepherd – a good shepherd – who takes care of and feeds His sheep. Peter is to share God's love and care for **people**. Peter's fishing for fish days are over.

Peter has no idea what the future has in store. Jesus' invitation is simply, "*Follow me.*" (21:19). For those of us who like certainty, this is hard to hear – we want to know where, when, how, and what we will be doing. We can make plans: God gives us brains for a reason. He wants us to think. We can be smart, wise, and astute. But at the same time, we need to be flexible, responsive to God's simple command, "*Follow me.*"

There is a dynamic excitement about stepping forward on a journey, trusting the One leading you, and not knowing where it will take you. When we decide to follow Jesus, we really don't know where it will lead, but when we trust the leader – Jesus – we can have a calm confidence. He is with us, always and everywhere.

*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 that 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.
Amen.*

Sunday, April 28: John 21:20-25

Your story is your story. It is not someone else's. God is leading you on a unique path that will be different from everyone else's. Don't be afraid to be different.

Today, April 28, 2019, a new page is being written in the book of your life. It's a page no less unique or special than a page in anyone else's life. Your today is precious. What will you and God write on today's page?

Sometimes we look at Christian "superstars" – the Billy Grahams, Timothy Kellers, Dee Hendersons, Chris Tomlins, Twila Parises – of the world and know we just don't rate. When we google ourselves, we are wayyyyyyyyy down the list – if we exist at all. We haven't written bestselling books (or any book), recorded a hit song (or any song), won world-class awards (or any awards), got our name in the news for our incredible deeds. In heaven those super-famous-folks will be the heroes and we'll be ... well, we'll just be there.

In fact, that's not true. Each of us can do what we can with what we have been given – no more. Billy Graham was responsible to be a good steward of the gifts, talents, abilities, resources, skills, and opportunities God gave him. So is Tim Keller. So is Twila Paris. It is very possible that a celebrity has not used much of their God-given potential; even though we admire them on earth, God may have hoped for more.

Each of us is responsible to be good stewards of the gifts, talents, abilities, resources, skills, and opportunities God has given us. If we do well with what we have been given (whether that amounts to much in earthly terms or not) God will say, "*Well done, my good and faithful servant.*"⁴ Each of us is responsible to God for what we

⁴ Jesus talks about this several times including comparing the gift of wealthy people to a widow's coins (Luke 21:1-4), and the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30).

are given, not for what others are given. I am responsible to be who God created me to be – nothing more. Remember, too – we are NOT saved by what we do. We are saved by God's grace. But God's sincere desire is that we do use the blessings He has given us to empower others. We all have ways we can make the world a better place through God's Holy Spirit working in our lives.

God believes in you. He created you. His Spirit is in you. Allow His Spirit to lead and guide you so you can be the person He created you to be ... What wonderful things might God want to write on today's page in your life?

*Disturb us, Lord, when We are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.
Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst for the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.
Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.
We ask You to push back the horizons of our hopes;
And to push into the future in strength, courage, hope, and love.
Amen*

Monday, April 29: Acts 1:1-11

What is Jesus saying in Acts 1?

1. He is promising the Holy Spirit – God's personal presence – for each of us. That's great news.
2. We don't know the times or dates of future events (good to remember when people today get caught up in End Times speculation, trying to read current events in between the lines of Scripture). Although Jesus was speaking particularly of the coming of the Holy Spirit, He said similar things about His return;
3. When the Spirit does come, His people will be His witnesses – at first locally (Jerusalem, where they were), then in the surrounding areas (Judea and Samaria), then everywhere.

This was fine in the first century, of course. But it doesn't apply to us, does it? Many of us are rather uncomfortable being called to share our faith (to use a word we rarely use anymore, to "evangelize": the word "evangel-" (in all its form) is from "euangelion" – a Greek word simply meaning "good news"). Of course there would be some "fulltime" evangelists (literally "good news"-ists) in the early church – Peter, Paul, and Barnabas – who we read about in Acts. But most of the sharing of the good news was done by ordinary people who simply talked about Jesus.⁵ Christianity mostly spread among the lowest classes by informal missionaries – ordinary people with ordinary jobs and ordinary families – simply sharing what Jesus meant to them.

Michael Green, writing about the early church, comments, "Here were men and women of every rank and station in life, of every country in the known world, so convinced that they had discovered the riddle of the universe, so sure of the one true God whom they had come to know, that nothing must stand in the way of their passing on this good news to others ..." Wouldn't it be great if this were true of us??? "What was the secret of such zeal?" Green asks. His answer: "They did it because of the overwhelming experience of the love of God which they had received through Jesus Christ ..." Do we even begin to understand the love that God has shown us in Jesus? If we do, then we would want others to experience that too, right?

David Watson writes, "People are no longer converted to a doctrine. They can only be attracted to a way of life which they can see as a practical alternative to the values and assumptions of our competitive, alienated,

⁵ Remember that even the apostles (with the exception of Paul) were "ordinary" people with no theological education, learning in how to share their faith, or anything else like that. They simply said what the Spirit inspired them to say and retold their own experiences.

materialistic society.” He goes on to say, “We have been presenting Christianity (the system) and not Christ the person ... We have to present to the world a living Christ, fresh, always life-giving and nourishing ...”

When our Christian faith is really about the love of God we have experienced in Jesus, the forgiveness we have been blessed with through Jesus, the personal presence of God we know through the Holy Spirit, and the call to live for Jesus we just naturally share the life we know. It’s not a “system” or set of beliefs we want people to agree to intellectually. It’s a new way of life we want people to experience for themselves.

Take a chance and invite a friend to discover the new life that comes through Him. What you know as “ordinary” Christian life is extraordinary to those who don’t yet know it. Or maybe you need to pray to really know that extraordinariness yourself.

*God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I pray constantly,
asking you to give me spiritual wisdom and insight
so that I might grow in my knowledge of God.
I pray that my heart will be flooded with light
so that I can understand the confident hope You have given to those You called –
Your holy people who are Your rich and glorious inheritance.
I also pray that I will understand the incredible greatness of God’s power for us who believe Him.
This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead
and seated him in the place of honor at God’s right hand in the heavenly realms.
Now He is far above any ruler, authority, power, leader or anything else –
not only in this world but also in the world to come.
God has put all things under the authority of Christ
and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church.
And the church is his body; it is made full and complete by Christ,
who fills all things everywhere with himself.
Amen*

Tuesday, April 30: Acts 2:1-13

Jerusalem was bustling with people – God-fearing Jews from all over the known world were gathering for the annual celebration to give thanks for the harvest and to celebrate the giving of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai (2:5). It is here – in the middle of mighty Jerusalem, bursting with people who have come to seek Him, not in a secret stable in obscure Bethlehem – that God shows up this time. God often contradicts our expectations.

God, creator of the universe, **is now present** by his Holy Spirit. We take this for granted. He is so much a part of our experience. But imagine a time before you could know Jesus personally in your life? Imagine a time when you could know ABOUT God, but not really know God? This is a radical change ...

“Wind from heaven fills the whole house. Wind, just like that Elijah felt in the cave. Fire, like Moses saw at the bush that didn’t burn up, like the pillar of fire that led the people out of Egypt, like the fire that consumed Elijah’s soaking sacrifice. And God speaks. Not through a prophet or priest singled out from others, but through 120 uneducated, uncultured Galileans, so that everyone can hear and understand in their own language (v 8).” (Stephanie Heald).

This coming of the Holy Spirit – Pentecost – is the story of the tower of Babel in reverse. At Babel, people were separated by their different languages. Now they are brought together as the apostles share the good news of God’s love, in their own unique languages. The good news is for ALL people.

For some, the meaning of the event was lost. It was an interesting morning out, but nothing more. For others, however, their lives were changed forever. God met them where **they** were. He came into **their** lives in power. God came to **their** town. Nothing would ever be the same again.

God meets you where you are. The Holy Spirit is in your life. God is alive in your town ... What next?

*O God, the lover of those who are unblemished and upright,
grant us perfection in our hearts.
Remove from us all evil and malicious thoughts.
O Lord, open to us Your merciful door, as you did to the thief.
Accept our repentance as you had accepted
the penance of the tax collector and the sinful woman.
O Lord, You are merciful and pleased with those who turn to You in repentance.
As You graciously pardoned Peter who came to you after he had denied you,
Lord cleanse us from our sins and follies.
O Lord, we acknowledge our sins, have mercy on us.
Amen*

Orthodox liturgy

Wednesday, May 1: Acts 2:14-41

Peter is not a great preacher. This is not a great sermon. But look at the response in 2:41. As someone who preaches I ask myself, "What's with that?"

What's with this, of course, is the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is just as real and just as present today, but for some reason (which we do not understand), rarely is the response to any sermon today similar to what it was back then. Frankly, the responses to many of the other sermons recorded in Acts were nothing like this, either. In this, the very beginning of the church, the Spirit works in amazing, incredible – unique – ways. We cannot manipulate the Spirit to replicate this kind of thing in our time. He does what He does. We pray. We reflect on Scripture. We commit ourselves to God. We do our best. And we leave the results to Him.

It is interesting to note that Peter talks about the difference the Spirit makes NOW in our lives (he doesn't even get to talk about resurrection and the hope of life with Jesus in eternity, although Peter certainly believes in that). People are excited that the Spirit can give them new life with Jesus now. Jesus is the Lord and Messiah/Saviour/Christ now. The Spirit has come now. That's the message people respond to.

Jesus is Lord and Saviour – now. His Spirit is with us and working right now. God is still doing amazing things now. He may not do some of the incredible signs and wonders He did back then, but He is still very active in ways we take for granted or subtle ways we don't even notice ... He is:

- providing forgiveness of sins and a new beginning right now;
- healing people physically, emotionally, and spiritually;
- bringing hope and healing to people and relationships;
- bringing justice and mercy around the world through His people;
- giving people hope for life now, and into eternity;
- providing counsel and direction for people who need it;
- blessing people with comfort and care;
- providing the practical things people need (a job, a friend, daily bread, much more) ...

We can think of real-life examples of each of these. And we can think of many, many more ways that the Spirit is active in our lives and our world, too. Take some time to reflect on how God is at work in your own experience and your circle of friends. What are your "God-sightings"? Thank Him. Praise Him. Pray for others.

*Lord God, forgive me for how I have sinned against you and against your people.
Have mercy on me.
Lord God, give me a short memory so this failure might fall away
and not encumber me.
Lord God, help me this day and the week to live with integrity and devotion,
with passion, patience, and perseverance..
Lord God, grant me the wisdom, the vision, the strength and the health
to serve you faithfully this day and every day.
Amen*

Thursday, May 2: Acts 2:42-47

These verses give us the first real picture of church:

1. There is teaching and learning;
2. There is fellowship;
3. There is breaking of bread (worship);
4. There is prayer.

I suspect most of you reading this know all about church. Over the generations it has morphed and changed, but these four basic elements remain. The church may have become more than this, but it cannot be less.

1. Constant, lifelong **learning** is critical – so that we remain true to the teachings, values, and principles of Jesus so we can speak relevantly in and to our culture, and not just absorb the latest cultural craze.
2. **Fellowship** defines who we are – deep caring for one another (modeled in the early church in very practical, financial ways), in which we live God’s Kingdom values of mercy and compassion.
3. **Worship** shapes us – symbolized by Communion, but so rich and deep as we give thanks, celebrate, and stand in awe of our Creator, Saviour, and the Spirit who is with us.
4. **Prayer** is fundamental – listening to God speaking to us and lifting our **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, and **S**upplication (needs) to God (note the helpful acronym **ACTS**, to help us have balanced prayers). In prayer we open ourselves up to God’s will for us, and we bring our issues to Him.

It’s interesting that “evangelism” is not listed and yet *“each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.”* As the early Christians simply lived their faith, others were drawn to the church as if by a magnet. The authenticity of their love for God and one another was irresistible. Evangelism or mission was not a programme. It was integral to who they were. They lived their faith in word and deed, and by their words and example, people were inevitably drawn to Jesus.

How can we live our faith – in word and deed – in such a way that people see our faith? *“They’ll know we are Christians by our love ...”* Do they? How can we model that love? How does this description of the church challenge you?

*Thanks be to You, O Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which You have won for us,
for all the pains and insults You have borne for us.
O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may I know You more clearly,
love You more dearly
and follow You more nearly, day by day.
Amen*

Richard of Chichester (1197-1253)

Friday, May 3: Acts 3

Sunday morning **IS** an important part of the whole “church” experience. It’s when we worship God and are reminded of His amazing love. When we talk about “church” that’s often all we think about. But church is much, much more than that. Peter and John are together, and it’s not a Sunday. “Church” happens when we keep connected – Sunday at worship, Sunday over lunch, Monday watching the playoffs, Tuesday on the phone, Wednesday at Youth Group, Thursday going for a walk, etc., etc. – *if we CHOOSE to see and live life that way.*

They are going to the temple – the institution that represented established religion. They had every reason not to go. Worship was old-fashioned and boring. But Peter and John kept on going. They kept on praying. I’m sure they prayed for their non-Christians friends, family, and neighbours; they didn’t give up. They prayed for their country; they didn’t give up. They prayed for their church; they didn’t give up. What else do you think they prayed for? This sounds like a crazy question, but it needs to be asked: Do you pray? Really? Regularly?

We are the church when we see people's needs. You may not think there are too many needs in church Sunday morning, but there are – beside us/behind us/in front of us – if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. But it's not just here. There are also oodles of needs in your neighbourhood. At school. In your workplace. In your condo building. Next door. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear them. We are the church when we ask the Spirit to help us see the needs of others.

We are the church when we do more than see needs, when we – each one of us, in our own circle – begin to meet those needs. I was asked, *"What is our church doing in the community?"* In other words, *What are we doing? Are we making any difference? What mission are we involved in beyond ourselves – both in Word (evangelism, sharing our faith) and deed (caring for hurting people, the poor, the needy)?* It's a great question.

To answer, picture the faces of those in formal programmes – the babies and children you see in the church (nursery, children's programmes, Vacation Bible School), AND kids we will never see in the community (food banks, etc.) and in other countries (through our support of missions like Cuban churches, etc.). The youth you see at church, AND many other students at LCI, the University of Lethbridge, and Lethbridge College (LCI outreach, IVCF, Camp). The families who are a vital part of our church life, AND families in our community around the world (through our Cuba teams, Days for Girls, Lisa Ratzlaff, CBM, and our support of ministries like the Soup Kitchen, Benevolent Fund, etc.). The seniors who are part of our church community AND seniors you may not know (through our services at lodges, visitation, and the drop-in).

Can we do more of these "programme"-type things? Of course we could. But programmes are not really what the church is all about. They are just the tip of a much bigger iceberg. When you parent your children or grandparent your grandchildren – you are the church. When you coach hockey – or go watch your child/grandchild/niece play hockey – you are the church. When you see people with eyes of compassion, volunteer or visit at the hospital, school, or in the community – you are the church. When you go to work/school/golf/the seniors centre/YMCA/coffee – you are the church. When you live the hope and joy of Jesus as you walk around your block, talk to your neighbour, visit your relatives – you are the church ...

It takes a different worldview – or "church view" – to see church – life – this way. *The church is people of God, intentionally choosing to live their faith, day-by-day, moment-by-moment, in their communities, 24-7-365¼.* Do you want to know what our church is doing in mission? Look around you – think of all the lives, homes, schools, and workplaces we all can touch for Jesus, with Jesus' love – if we choose to see it that way. I am the mission of the church. You are the mission of the church. Together we reach so much of our community and beyond ...

Church does happen on Sunday mornings – a little bit. But in this time – less than 2% of your week – we cannot expect too much (if you expect it "all" you will be disappointed). Church is much more than Sunday mornings. Most of "being church" happens the other 98+% of the week ... How can you be church the other 98% of the week?

*Shame on my thoughts, how they stray from me.
During the psalms my thoughts wander on paths that are not right:
they run and misbehave before the eyes of my great God ...
My thoughts chase through wild parties, woods, cities, worries, fears –
swifter they are than the wind.
One moment they follow ways of loveliness,
and the next ways of riotous shame - no lie.
O beloved Christ, to whom every eye is clear,
may the grace of the Holy Spirit come to keep my mind.
May Your Spirit hold my wayward thoughts in check.
Rule this heart of mine, O God, that you may be my love,
and that I may do your will.
May I reach Christ that we may be together.
Lord, help me master my thoughts, in the power of Christ.
Amen*

Irish Prayer, 9th century

Saturday, May 4: Acts 4:1-22

The Sanhedrin was the Court of Jewish leaders. It was made up of as many as 71 men. In the past most had been Sadducees, the politically savvy, upper-crust priestly group. They wanted as little problem as possible with the Romans, so they were fine with compromising aspects of the Old Testament Law. They also didn't believe in any form of resurrection. The idea that Jesus was alive and active in the world challenged everything they cared about and believed in – and was causing conflict and problems with the Romans. They were not happy.

The Sanhedrin also included Pharisees and Scribes – who took the Old Testament Law VERY seriously, were not afraid of offending the Romans to be faithful to their teachings, and did believe in the resurrection. Their issues with Jesus included His breaking of Sabbath laws (healing on the Sabbath), fraternizing with “unclean” people (Romans, Samaritans, women, lepers), and, most importantly, His claims to be God. They were not happy.

"I wonder how Peter and John must have felt as they were questioned by the High Priest's court," writes Andrew Graystone. "Once again they found themselves standing where Jesus had stood before them. It must have occurred to them that they could suffer the same fate that he had. When Jesus was hauled before the priests he spoke very few words. But Peter and John couldn't help themselves. They couldn't stop speaking about Jesus.

"There's a glorious naivety about Peter's message. He told them that the healing of the lame man was a picture of the salvation offered to everyone through Jesus alone. Either he didn't know what trouble he was getting himself into or else, more likely, he didn't care."

"There is salvation in no one else." Peter says, "God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved" (4:12). This kind of exclusive claim is not popular with many people in a multi-cultural, multi-faith world. But that's what Jesus insists upon (John 14:6). We always treat people from all (and no) religions with dignity and respect but that does not mean we have to agree with everything they believe (or don't believe).

Peter also says, *"Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard."* Our calling is simply to be faithful to what we know and believe. To do the right thing (like helping out a crippled person in need). It's just the right thing to do.

Just as the Spirit could inspire and equip Peter and John, He can give us the wisdom we need to do the right thing. Just as God can get them through the “fiery furnace” of the Sanhedrin, He can get us through whatever challenges we have, too. In a clash of loyalties, where does your first loyalty lie? Do you live like that?

*Jesus, our Master, meet us while we walk in the way,
and long to reach the heavenly country;
so that, following your light we may keep the way of righteousness,
and never wander away into the darkness of this world's night,
while you, who are the Way, the Truth, and the Life,
are shining within us; for your own name's sake.
Look upon us and hear us, O Lord our God;
and assist those endeavors to please you
which you yourself have granted to us.
As you have given the first act of will,
so give the completion of the work.
Grant that we may be able to finish
what you have granted us to wish to begin,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Ancient Spanish Liturgy

Sunday, May 5: Acts 4:23-37

This passage echoes back to the coming of the Holy Spirit recorded in Acts 2:44-45. It goes further back to the Old Testament "Year of Jubilee" – every 50th year debts were to be forgiven, forfeited property restored, with the vision that "*There should be no poor among you ...*" (Deuteronomy 15:4).

While God's plan for Israel was that they should care for one another and provide for one another, they never lived up to that ideal – there is little evidence they ever even tried very hard. The Year of Jubilee never happened. The Old Testament prophets routinely challenged the rich-poor discrepancy in Israel: the rich got richer, the poor poorer. God was not pleased. Sounds eerily familiar ...

The early Christians did take God seriously. They really did believe they should have compassion on the poor. They chose to demonstrate the kind of practical faith and Kingdom of God living that the Jewish priests, scribes, and Pharisees should have practiced, but didn't. Luke is emphasizing that the real Kingdom of God is now the Christian church (at its best) ... not the Temple, the Jewish authorities, or the nation of Israel.

People did not sell the roofs over their heads. People still had places to live (and places for the church to meet), and food to eat. But generosity to one another – and people beyond themselves – came to be a hallmark of the early church. Joseph, nicknamed Barnabas – literally "Son of Encouragement" (what a great nickname.) – was one of these generous people. He sold a field (not his home), a significant piece of his net worth, and gave the revenue to bless to others. "*No wonder they were able to give such powerful testimony to the resurrection of Jesus,*" comments Tom Wright. "*They were demonstrating that it was a reality in ways that many Christians today, who often sadly balk at even giving a tithe (10%) of their income to the church, can only dream of.*"⁶

As we continue to reflect on the resurrection, notice 4:33: "*The apostles testified powerfully to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus ...*" An essential part of their testimony was the way they lived: they lived the values of the Kingdom Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount and modelled in His life. Their lives were changing the tone/character of their nation. And it was changing their own personal lives. "*God's great blessing was upon them all.*"

What is God saying to us?

*Jesus waits silent and unseen to come into my heart.
I will respond to His call.
He comes with His infinite power and love.
May I be filled with joy in His presence.
I try to let go of concerns and worries
that may be dragging me down at this present moment.
I place any concerns I have in God's hands –
at least for these few minutes of prayer.
At this moment Lord I turn my thoughts to You.
I will leave aside my chores and preoccupations.
I will take rest and refreshment in your presence Lord.
I take my time to read the Word of God, slowly, a few times,
allowing myself to dwell on anything that strikes me.
Jesus you speak to me through the words of Your Word.
May I respond to your call today.
Teach me to recognize your hand at work in my daily living.
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.*

⁶ According to the Government of Canada, the average Canadian gives about \$300/per year (about 0.6% of their income) to charitable organizations (including churches and mission organizations). Less than 10% of Canadians give more than \$750/year to charitable groups.