

Jesus Changes Everything 3

March-April 2023
Readings,
Reflections,
Prayers from Luke

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Caravaggio, "Supper at Emmaus"

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Monday, March 6: Luke 13:22-30

How do we read the Bible well? Sometimes people pull stories, parables, principles, or phrases out of context. If we're not careful, we can misrepresent what God is actually saying to us.

Principle 1 of good biblical interpretation is to think about the **context** of the reading: what comes before and after. What is Jesus talking about before this? Jesus has been telling people to repent (13:1-9). He has been challenging the work-for-your-salvation Pharisees and announcing God's good, gracious Kingdom (13:10-21).

Principle 2 is **what did this mean to those who first heard it?** Jesus spoke these words to specific people in a specific place and time. He has been telling his own people, First Century Jews, God has come among them, but they are missing Him. They believe many of the right things **about** the Messiah, but they are missing **knowing** the Messiah Himself. **JESUS IS** the Messiah, "Emmanuel" ("God with us").

Imagine you are with Jesus as He resolutely presses on toward Jerusalem (13:22). He is telling you there's an opportunity to experience the blessing of God's Kingdom, but the door is narrow (following Him and only Him) and the time is short (the door may close any time). If you ignore or reject Him, you will miss out on God's Kingdom. In fact, non-Jews/those-from-the-east-west-north-south may get in, while you, a Jew, may be left in the cold. As a First Century Jew, Jesus is challenging the foundation of who you think you are and who you understand God to be. Surely, your God is **only** the God of Jews.

Principle 3 is to think about **what the principles are in the original story**. What is Jesus' point? Jesus is saying the door to His Kingdom won't be open forever. At some point, it will close unexpectedly. Then, those who love Him, accept Him, and believe in Him will be in. Those who reject Him will be out. We balk at Jesus' words of either/or, in/out, and saved/not-saved. Whether we like Jesus' words or not, here they are.

Principle 4, in good biblical interpretation' is to reflect on **how those principles apply today**, generally in society, and specifically in our lives. What is Jesus saying to us? To me?

Everyone is welcome into God's family: people from the east, west, north, and south. That's good news. But the door is narrow: we enter the Kingdom of God through Jesus, and only through Jesus: *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). The time may be short; we don't know the timeline: *"No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows"* (Matthew 24:36).

Jesus' challenge is that kind of liking Him is not enough. We have to make a choice. Is He, or is He not, the Messiah, God-among-us? If He is, will we follow Him?

What will I do with Jesus? Will I follow Him? Will I pray for others, that they choose to follow Jesus, too?

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

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Tuesday, March 7: Luke 13:31-35

The Big Story of this half of Luke's Gospel is this: "*As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem*" (Luke 9:51). He is "*always pressing on toward Jerusalem*" (13:22).

Jesus is resolutely moving toward His destiny. In Jerusalem, Jesus will meet the forces of evil head on, fight His ultimate battle on the cross, and then rise victoriously. His people, who ought to be welcoming Him, rallying behind Him, supporting Him, and encouraging Him, are stubbornly turning their backs on Him, criticizing Him, and impeding Him. He is met by apathy, opposition, and outright hostility from His own people.

No wonder, then, as Jesus approaches Jerusalem, He weeps over the city. This is the City of David, home of God's Temple, heart of God's relationship with His people, but they are missing Jesus, Immanuel, God-with-us.

Jesus' heart goes out to the people of Jerusalem. Jesus wants to gather the people into his love and protection, under His wing. If only people could see who He is and how much He loves them? In the end, God's Temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed (in 70 AD). It's not God who turns His back on His people, but His people who turn their backs on God. God's love for His people never ceases, even when they continually reject Him.

What might Jesus be saying to us? His heart goes out today for everyone in every city, town, and countryside. He wants to gather all people, everywhere, under His love and protection. If only people could see His love. If only people would respond to His grace. Why don't they? What do you think?

Those of us who are parents know we can only do so much for our children. Ultimately, kids make their own choices, for good or for bad. And, though it may grieve us, there are consequences to their choices.

The same is true in our relationship with God. As a loving parent, God allows us to make our own choices, for good or for bad. He will not violate our right to choose. And, though it may grieve Him, there may be consequences to our choices.

- Look on our city. See it as Jesus sees it. Does He weep over us? Why? What causes Him grief?
- What can I do about it? What do I need to pray for? How can I make a difference?

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

Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

Wednesday, March 8: Luke 14:1-14

Jesus enjoys a good meal. In fact, He is enjoying good parties with shocking regularity. Jesus portrays the Kingdom of God as a party. Several of His stories end with a feast (for example, the prodigal sons). Many of the really significant moments in Jesus' life, ministry, and resurrection involve meals (the Last Supper and His post-resurrection appearances). The Bible portrays heaven as a wedding feast.

Today, He is off to eat with a prominent Pharisee and some of his buddies. On the way, He encounters a man

with abnormal swelling; he is critically ill. According to the Pharisees, Jesus' should not help him on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day of rest. To heal the man would constitute "work" on the Sabbath.

Jesus challenges the Pharisees' legalistic understanding of Sabbath (again). The Sabbath is NOT a burden with a rigorous checklist of don't's. The Sabbath is God's blessing. Sabbath is an opportunity to slow down, enjoy and savour God's presence among us, and rejoice in His good gifts. Jesus demonstrates this in a tangible, practical way. This man certainly experiences God's presence, power, love, mercy, and grace in His life. For this fellow, this Sabbath is a gift and a blessing of God's presence. Sabbath will never be the same again.

Jesus is pushing us to make sure we take time to experience God's love. Faith in God is not about following rules, but loving God, enjoying His blessings, and loving one's neighbour. Can we slow down to enjoy that?

At one level, this story gives us food for thought about hospitality. Do we like to be "seen" with certain people or in certain places? Do we only ever have friends over (friends just like us)? Do we expect a return invitation? Who could we have over, just because (who cannot reciprocate)? What else is Jesus saying?

At the meal, Jesus continues to push the Pharisees' buttons. They think they know who's in and who's out of God's favour and who should receive honour (and be seated accordingly). Most people – including the man Jesus just healed, the poor, women, and every non-Jew – are "out." The "in" group are a select company of **"good" people**. Good **Jews**. Good Jewish **men**, to be more precise. Good Jewish men **who follow every detail of the Law** (according to the Pharisees) to be most precise. How does Jesus respond?

Jesus is challenging the Pharisees to think more deeply about God and their faith. The metaphor of the coming of the Kingdom of God as a feast is straight out of the Old Testament (especially Isaiah).

"Within Luke's lifetime," writes Tom Wright, "thousands of non-Jews had become Christians – had entered, that is, into the dinner party prepared by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Many Jewish Christians, as we know in Acts, had found this difficult, if not impossible, to understand or approve. They were so eager to maintain their own places at the top table that they could not grasp God's great design to stand the world on its head. Pride, notoriously, is the great cloud which blots out the sun of God's generosity: if I reckon I deserve to be favoured by God, not only do I declare that I don't need his grace, mercy and love, but I imply that those who don't deserve it shouldn't have it ... The small-mindedness which pushes itself forward and leaves others behind is confronted with the large-hearted love of God."

- Do I need to slow down? To listen to Jesus? To worship Jesus? To spend time with Jesus?
- Who is my "neighbour"? Do we ever subtly **think** (hopefully never **say**) some people just don't deserve God's love? Who? Why? Is anyone beyond God's potential saving power? Really?

The truth is, we ALL need God's mercy, grace, and love. Only God's mercy, grace, and love save us. We're not saved by being "good." God gives us the GIFT of new life. In response, we're called to humility, thankfulness, and faith. We're also called to be and share God's good news with ALL people. Everyone. No exceptions.

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

Henry Suso (1295-1366)

Thursday, March 9: Luke 14:15-24

In Jesus' day, when an important person hosted a feast, he sent invitations weeks ahead, specifying the day, but not the exact hour. Guests were expected to keep the afternoon and evening of the banquet day clear. Before fridges and microwaves, you were never sure when food would be ready. When everything was prepared, a servant was sent with a second invitation, saying, *"Everything is now ready. Come on!"*

In Jesus' parable, the first invitations were sent long ago, the RSVPs were received, and the coming feast is the talk of the town. Everyone knows it's coming. Finally, the big day comes. But one by one everyone who had RSVP-ed comes up with excuses. On the surface each excuse is plausible, but in the end it's only an excuse. Someone has called an excuse, *"the skin of a reason, stuffed with a lie."* The truth is this: the guests simply don't want to come. The feast is not their priority. For them, the host's company is just not important.

When the servant comes back to his master, the gracious host is devastated. He has prepared everything. So he takes steps to fill the empty places. He sends his servant out to call in anyone and everyone from the streets and alleys. Even then there is room, so the servant combs the highways and byways to bring people to share the master's generosity. Scores of people who've never known a feast, are celebrating. Those who have only known pain and suffering, now experience blessing. But the invited guests miss out. It is their choice. In the end, the Master says, *"I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet."*

All people everywhere are invited to celebrate new life in Jesus. Whether or not we choose to accept the invitation and come to His table is a personal decision we all make. There are good excuses:

- I've just bought a new car/video game/cottage/boat/golf clubs/bike/skis/vacation ... gotta go. We are the first man: we have just bought a "field" and we can't tear ourselves away.
- I've got so much work to do/cleaning up to do/reading to do/driving to hockey to do/exercise to do ... In the future, are you going to say, "I wish I spent more time cleaning?" Or "I should have spent more time at work"? Or are you going to say, "My soul is empty, I need to spend more time with Jesus"? Like the second man, we say, *"I've just bought five yokes of oxen and I'm on my way to try them out."*
- I've got so much fun to have/things to enjoy/places to go/experiences to tackle ... We're scared if we stop and spend time with God we'll miss out on something great. But what matters more? The "fun" of the moment or the deep peace in your soul and spirit, knowing and being known by God? We're third man who said, *"I have just got married, so I can't come."*

These are all good things. They are good excuses. But GOOD things, when they become all consuming, interfere with the BEST things. And when those GOOD things keep us from enjoying the BEST things they become BAD things. Things that bring us happiness or fulfillment are good, unless they prevent us from recognizing, loving, and worshipping the Source of these things: our God.

The Kingdom of God is a party. Jesus describes life with God as a feast. To accept Jesus' invitation to be our Saviour, to be in the Kingdom of God, to follow His as Lord, and to experience His Spirit, are reasons to celebrate. Jesus comes that we might have life and have it abundantly.

When we allow the Spirit to fill our lives and we "walk with the Spirit," we experience the new life Jesus gives. We rejoice in relationships we have with family and friends. We celebrate the community we have at church. Our lives are not magically trouble-free, rather we discover joy, peace, and encouragement amid the challenges.

We become thankful people: Henri Nouwen writes, *"Gratitude ... claims the truth that all of life is a pure gift. In the past I always thought of gratitude as a spontaneous response to the awareness of gifts received, but now I realize that gratitude can also be lived as a discipline. The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy."*

Jesus' parable is an invitation to go for the BEST – life **with** Him. It's also a solemn warning: life **without** Him is empty. We're called to *"Go out to the roads and country lanes and bring them in, so that my house will be full."* We have a mission: to invite others to join the party.

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

Macarius of Egypt (330-391)

Friday, March 10: Luke 14:25-35

What happens if you don't count the cost?

In Jesus' day, many of the Jews were spoiling for war with Rome. They would love nothing better than to have another General Judas Maccabeus, leading a violent revolution. Jesus warns them to count the cost. What would be the short-term cost of war with Rome? The long-term repercussions?

Jesus is blunt about what it means to follow Him. On the one hand, the Kingdom of God is a party. You meet fantastic people. You have some great adventures. It is exciting experiencing what God is doing.

But you need to count the cost. You may not get rich. You may not be comfortable. You may end up volunteering more. In the short term, following Jesus may not "get you ahead." But in the long term, the benefits are (quite literally) better than anything this present world can offer.

Jesus is not literally saying we have to HATE our families. This is hyperbole (exaggeration to make a point). Jesus is challenging us to love God and His Kingdom so passionately, that the love we have for our families pales in comparison. It's not that we don't love our family less, but we REALLY, REALLY, REALLY love God more. That's Jesus' point. Paradoxically, my experience is that when we take the leap of faith to make Jesus the centre of our lives, we actually love our families better.

Tyler Ward writes about marriage: *"My recent pattern of caring about work over marriage had produced little more than paying bills and a miserable wife. I figured giving the philosophy (the more you give to marriage, the more it gives back) a test drive couldn't hurt ... A month later, I had a chart of data and a handful of ironic experiences to prove that the more you give to marriage, the more it gives back. Notably, on the days my wife genuinely felt valued, I observed her advocating for me to invest deeply in to my work. She no longer saw our relationship and my career pursuits as competitors for my attention, and as she partnered with me in my career, I have experienced the benefits of having the closest person in my life champion me."*

That is true for marriage. It's even more true for our relationship with God. The more we give to it, the more fulfilling, meaningful, life-changing – and world-changing – the power of God becomes in our lives

It is a leap of faith to trust Jesus. When we trust Jesus, what we gain is actually far more meaningful, much more fulfilling, and so much more satisfying than what we had before. We have a far richer, deeper, and more profound sense of God's blessing, provision, and love than ever before.

Are you willing to try an experiment: give more to your relationship with God – give it a test drive – and see what a difference it makes ...

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

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

Saturday, March 11: Luke 15:1-10 (Time change – spring forward one hour tonight)

George Carlin (1970's and 80's actor) writes: *"We've learned how to make a living, but not a life. We've added years to life not life to years. We've been all the way to the moon and back but have trouble crossing the street to meet a new neighbor. We conquered outer space but not inner space. We've done larger things, but not better things."* He's right. We need God. Only knowing God is the BEST "thing" of all.

Notice the context of our reading: *"The tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"* It's the same old, same old:

- Jesus is spending time with **everyone**. Especially those who need Him most.
- The Jewish authorities are sure that, if Jesus really is a man of God (let alone the Messiah), He should NOT be spending time with those people. He should be spending time with them, good Jewish men.

How do these stories speak to the Jewish leaders' grumbling? What is Jesus saying to them?

What is Jesus saying to the "tax collectors and sinners" of His world?

Like lost sheep, we can drift away. *"Sheep nibble their way to lostness. They move from one tuft of grass to the next. They keep moving, along from tuft to tuft, sometimes right through a hole in the fence. When they're done nibbling they can't find the hole and they're lost"* (Bruce Larson). What does it mean for a person to *"nibble their way to lostness"*? What would that look like? Have you ever done that? How does it feel?

What does the shepherd of a lost sheep do? He goes after it. This lost sheep isn't anything special. And yet it is special, just as all the others are special. The owner is willing to go after any and every lost sheep. What does this tell us about Jesus? Imagine the impact of this story on the people who are listening to Him, tax collectors and "sinners"? What does this parable mean today? What does it mean to you?

Like the coin, we can just get lost. It's only one little coin, right? No – this is important. In Jesus' day, women received ten silver coins as a wedding gift. Besides their monetary value, they held great sentimental value, kind of like a wedding ring. To lose one is very distressing, emotionally and financially. Have you ever lost something incredibly valuable? So valuable you stopped everything, lit every lamp, and swept every corner?

What does it look like to be lost? Maybe you chose the wrong friends? Made the wrong choices? You didn't mean to get lost. Now, as you "take time to smell the roses" you discover they aren't roses. You're in a mess. Picture yourself as the lost coin. You're stuck. You cannot help yourself. You certainly cannot find your own way back to where you belong. You cannot even bleat for help like a poor, lost sheep. You need your true Owner-Saviour to find you and bring you back where you belong.

The good news of these parables is that God is always seeking us out. When we (or someone we love) is lost, Jesus keeps coming after us (like the man who lost a sheep); the Holy Spirit will never stop searching us out (like the woman). When God finds us, He restores us to the place we belong.

Isn't it great news that our Saviour keeps after us? Isn't it great He restores us in His Kingdom?

Notice one other important detail: when the man found his sheep and when the woman found her coin, what happens? There is joy. There is another party. The celebrations seem out of proportion to what happened. They **ARE** out of proportion by our standards. What does this tell you about God? About the Kingdom of God? About what happens when one of us comes into His Kingdom? We just don't know how to party like God does!

- Maybe you know a lost sheep or two. How can you be good news to them?
- Maybe you know someone who is just lost and stuck. How can you be good news to them?

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

Sunday, March 12: Luke 15:11-32 (Time Change last night. One hour earlier 😞)

We know this story so well. Perhaps too well. Try to read it today as if you are reading it for the first time. This is the context: Jesus has just told stories about a sheep who nibbled its way to lostness and a coin that was lost by accident. Today's story is two stories about two lost people, whose lives are intertwined:

First, it's the story of a lost younger son. This son demands his half of the inheritance before his father is even dead. This horrible. The son is basically saying to his Dad, "I wish you were dead." He doesn't care about his father's financial security, only himself. He demands the family property be sold off to strangers to raise cash. These are despicable, shocking, unthinkable offences in a traditional society. The shame gets worse. The son squanders his capital in amoral pursuits, and (horror of horrors) this Jewish boy ends up feeding PIGS (very un-kosher). He is so hungry he wants to eat pig swill. He sinks as low as Jewishly possible. He is lost by his own deliberate, ornery choices. What might this look like today?

Second – just as importantly – it's the story of a lost older son. Remember Jesus is speaking to a mixed crowd of "sinners and tax-collectors" (like the younger son), **and** Pharisees and religious people. These folks are upset Jesus spends time partying with "lost" people. People are being healed, set free, transformed physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The religious men don't like it. After all, the riffraff haven't earned any of this.

"For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours," the older son complains. This is exactly what the Pharisees are saying. They are keeping all the commands. Now Jesus is welcoming sinners. Jesus is quoting the Pharisees' words back to them, linking the older son directly to these religious folks who were so faithful, so "good" – and so unloving. They are lost because they cannot see God's love. They can only see their own self-righteous, injured pride. What might that look like today?

"The older brother shows, in his bad temper, that he has had no more real respect for his father than his brother had had. He lectures him in front of his guests, and refuses his plea to come in. Once more the father is generous, this time to the self-righteous older son ... Jesus is not content simply to tell the grumblers that

they're out of line; he, too, wants to reason with the Pharisees and the lawyers, to point out that, though God's generosity is indeed reaching out to people they didn't expect, this doesn't mean there isn't any left for them. If they insist on staying out of the party because it isn't the sort of thing they like, that's up to them; but it won't be because God doesn't love them as well." (Tom Wright)

The remarkable character in this story is the father. The younger son has insulted him and disgraced the family. The father should have the son beaten and thrown out. The last things a dignified patriarch should do are run to embrace the reprobate, forgive him, and throw a lavish party. It's inconceivable.

What is this story telling us about ourselves? About who God welcomes into His Kingdom? About God – our heavenly Father? About God's response when one of us repent and turns back to Him?

This story remains unfinished ...

- What happens next with the younger son? How will he respond to the father's grace?
- What happens with the older son? Will he be reconciled to the father? To his brother?

Where do you fit in the story?

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

Monday, March 13: Luke 16:1-18

What's the number one issue facing Canada? What are we most concerned about? The economy? The cost of living? Inflation? If the economy is booming, then all our problems – environmental issues, inflation, health care, crime, opioid crisis, growing rich-poor gap, national security, violence against women, child pornography, First Nations' drinking water, gender gap in income – will all disappear. Right? If only it were so simple ...

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

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

In the Bible, from Genesis through Revelation, there is a constant concern for the poor and the vulnerable. God expects those with means to help those who are poor, with health issues, widows, foreigners, and refugees. In

God's Kingdom, we work together to ensure all people are cared for. In the prophets, in particular, one of Israel's BIG failings, is their lack of concern and lack of concern and justice for those in poverty. We live by a different set of values and a different kind of economics than the world around us (Acts 2:42-47).

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

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

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

Jesus is using divorce as another example, along with their poor financial stewardship, about ways in which the Pharisees were ignoring God's law. Rabbis allowed divorce by men under any circumstance (but never by a woman, for any reason). Jesus is not making a definitive statement on all divorces under all circumstances at all times. He is commenting on the Pharisees' cherry-picking certain teachings they like, while ignoring others.

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

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

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (executed in Flossenbürg Concentration Camp, 1945)

Tuesday, March 14: Luke 16:19-31

Jesus has just told 4 stories about lost things people (a sheep, coin, rebellious son, self-righteous son). He has taught about the need for faithfulness in ALL things, including our finances and our relationships.

Next, He tells this story about a man (rather like the older, proud son and the wealthy Pharisees, themselves) and a poor man (rather like the tax-collectors and sinners Jesus spends so much time with). The themes are similar to those in the parable of the lost sons ...

- At one level this is a story about financial generosity. Today, the wealthiest people continue to become wealthier and pay virtually no tax (top Canadian CEOs made the average Canadian annual income by in the first nine days of January). In Canada, middle- and lower- income people are becoming relatively poorer and poorer. More children live below the poverty line in Canada than ever before. What does this say about the moral and spiritual state of our culture? What is Jesus' clear warning?
- At another level this story is about spiritual health and wealth. The Pharisees poo-poo-ed the riffraff with whom Jesus spends His time. The religious leaders languish in their spiritual and (perceived) moral superiority. They're sure they're "in" and Jesus and those with whom He spends time are "out." Do we feel morally superior to other people? What is Jesus saying to us?

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

What might Jesus be saying to us?

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

*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)

Wednesday, March 15: Luke 17:1-10

Isn't God lucky that **I'm** on His side? Isn't He fortunate that **I** have done what **I** have done, given what **I** have given, sacrificed what **I** have sacrificed? **I** deserve God's blessing. **I've** earned it.

Do you know people who think that way? Do I ever feel like that? Jesus' sobering reminder in 17:7-10 is that God is never in our debt. God doesn't "owe" us anything. If we try to earn our way into God's good graces, it won't work. We serve Him because we **love** Him. We don't serve Him to **earn** His favour.

These verses help us get perspective on God and ourselves. God is God. We are His creations. He loves us and provides for us. All good things are His blessings. He calls us to trust, integrity, faithfulness, righteousness, compassion, and humility. Our response to His amazing love is to love and honour Him.

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

Jesus talks about forgiveness. Like God, we are called to forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive ... There is no limit. This offends us. How is that fair? Then I think how thankful I am that God forgives me, again and again and again – no limit. He is simply asking me to do unto others as He does unto me.

The disciples are struggling with this. Do they have enough faith? Can they live as generously as Jesus calls them to live (Luke 16)? Can they live in such a way they don't cause others to stumble? Can they really be as forgiving as Jesus is? Jesus reminds them, "*It's not great faith you need; it is faith in a great God.*"

Faith is not like gas, something we fill ourselves up with at some spiritual gas station. Faith just is. If we trust God, **He** will do the miracle, not us. **His** Spirit will do the transforming, not us. **His** Spirit will give us wisdom to live wisely, rightly, and justly, not us. **His** Spirit will give us strength to be faithful and just.

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

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

Thursday, March 16: Luke 17:11-19

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

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

In this story, Jesus is travelling along the border of Galilee (Jewish territory) and Samaria (non-Jewish territory). Remember the Samaritans were despised by the Jews (and vice versa). Ten lepers are calling out to Him, "Have pity on us." They are keeping their distance as required by Old Testament law. Do they want money or healing? We don't know.

The blessing they receive exceeds their wildest expectations. This is amazing. Can you imagine how their lives are transformed from having a death sentence to new life? From being outcast from society to being welcome back into community? From hopelessness to possibilities?

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

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

We believe in Jesus. Do we say it? Do we live it?

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

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

Friday, March 17: Luke 17:20-37

Jesus is establishing a "Kingdom of the heart," not a geographical nation or a physical entity with defined borders. Therefore, wherever anyone loves God and seeks to do His will, the Kingdom of God is present, in us and among us.

God's Kingdom transcends time and space. It can be in your home and mine, our workplaces, our schools, an Ethiopian prison, a Philippine office, a Mexican field, a Chilean mine, a Turkish factory, a Palestinian church, a Kazakh university, an Israeli kibbutz, a French school, a Canadian church – wherever people love Jesus and live for Him, the Kingdom of God is in us and among us.

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

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

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

Saint Patrick once told his companions, "*Be genuinely converted, with your whole heart, to the Lord our God, for nothing is impossible to Him ...*" That is good advice for us.

Patrick also said, "*The Lord is greater than all. There. I have said enough.*"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amen

attributed to Patrick (340-440?)

Saturday, March 18: Luke 18:1-8

How will I pray, today? What will I pray about? What will my attitude in prayer be?

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

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

Jesus' point, in both cases, is NOT that we have to nag a reluctant, heartless God into answering our prayers. This judge is completely unlike God: in fact, *not fearing God* is equated with *not caring about people* (18:2).

The corollary is also true: being like God **IS** caring about people. We don't have a grumpy unjust judge of a God. God loves us more than we can possibly imagine. And He does really, really, really care about us.

Jesus' point is that, **if even people totally unlike God** can give mercy and good judgments to those whom they don't care about, but who nag them enough, **how much more generous and gracious might we expect God to be**, who loves us and is VERY just, in His dealings with us.

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

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

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

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

Sunday, March 19: Luke 18:9-14

These men are as different as could be. One is a good man, a religious man. The other is an evil man, an amoral tax collector. Think of yourself as a First Century Jew hearing Jesus talk about these two people ...

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

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

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

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

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

What is **bad** about the Pharisee? Not his lifestyle, moral choices, or actions. The **tragedy of the Pharisee** is that he comes, prays, and goes home the same as he came. The Pharisee is so confident his spiritual life is just fine he doesn't confess anything to God. In fact, he reminds God of how much he has done for the Kingdom: God should sit up, take notice, thank him, and reward him appropriately. The pity of the story is that he goes home no different than he came. Unchanged. But God could change even this man to be even better.

Jesus' yearning is that we be people who come into God's presence with our prayers. And in that process, we are changed. Our attitude is important:

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

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

*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 face the truth about myself.
Help me to hear my words as others hear them.
Help me 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 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 115)

Monday, March 20: Luke 18:15-17

Mother Teresa said, *"A little child has no difficulty in loving, has no obstacles to love. And that is why Jesus said: 'Unless you become like little children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven'."* This little story is wedged between Jesus' experience with the Pharisee and the tax collector praying (remember, the proud, self-righteous Pharisee, yesterday?) and an encounter with a rich young ruler (who is also confident of his own "goodness" before God, tomorrow). Both the Pharisee and the wealthy young businessman are sure they're

doing all the right things to earn God's blessing. They are obeying the commands. What little children know however, is that love is not something you earn by following rules and regulations. Love is something more ...

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

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

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

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

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

Tuesday, March 21: Luke 18:18-30

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

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

Jesus defines things differently:

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

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

"Money demands your trust or faith. Money provides us with a sense of sufficiency and power. It takes

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wednesday, March 22: Luke 18:31-43

I can search a cupboard for something, from top to bottom, for hours, and not find it. If Marianne looks, she inevitably finds it in 10 seconds. For some reason, I can look and look and just not see.

In the gospels, some people look and look and look at Jesus, but just don't see who He is, the Messiah.

Since Luke 9:51, Jesus has been on a mission: "*As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, **Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.***" He is no longer wandering around Galilean villages. Jesus is on a focused journey to confront the powers of evil and death, symbolically centered in Jerusalem. Jesus tells His disciples, "*Listen carefully. We're on our way up to Jerusalem. Everything written in the Prophets about the Son of Man will take place. He will be handed over to the Romans, jeered at, ridiculed, and spit on. Then, after giving him the third degree, they will kill him. In three days he will rise, alive*" (18:31-33).

Do Jesus' disciples get it (18:34)? They can't make heads or tails of what He is talking about.

How about the ultra-Jewish Pharisees? They don't understand either. They are looking and looking for the Messiah. They don't see that Jesus is the One they've been looking for.

In a piece of dramatic irony, a **BLIND** beggar **SEES** exactly what is going on. He sees who Jesus is.

Wouldn't it be great to be as excited about Jesus as the blind man is?

This incident happens on the edge of town. In Jesus' world, that's where beggars belong. Perhaps it takes being pushed to the edge (metaphorically or literally) before we genuinely turn to God? When things are going well and times are good, we manage okay on our own. Only when we're faced with a challenge that we can't solve on our own, will we finally call out to Jesus. Why don't we come to Him sooner?

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

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

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

Thursday, March 23: Luke 19:1-10

Frank Doyle comments, "*Short in stature and big in greed – one description of Zacchaeus. Butty little*

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

We have run across several tax collectors in Luke's gospel. There are among the richest – and most hated – people in Israel. They sold their souls to the Romans, cheat people, and push people into impossible debt. Zacchaeus, like other people we've met in Luke, has all the money in the world, but is miserable. Something is missing. He knows that. But what's he missing? Could it be Jesus?

Jesus calls him by name, "*Zacchaeus*." He is not "*Sinner*," or "*Hey, you*," he is **Zacchaeus**, a real person. There is something about being called by name, isn't there? Then Jesus visits his home, "*Hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home*." This is unthinkable. It confirms the Pharisees' worst fears: Jesus has gone over to the dark side. He is cavorting with the enemy. He can no longer distinguish good from evil.

But Jesus is NOT giving in to the dark side. Instead, He brings God's light, love, and life into Zacchaeus' very wealthy, but very empty and very dark life. Look at the transformation in Zacchaeus' life. It's amazing. For a moment, forget you've ever read this before and be astonished. Speechless. Zacchaeus will be much less wealthy, but so much richer in what really matters. He knows Jesus. He is forgiven. He will have his integrity. He will be able to rebuild relationships with his neighbours. He has a new life. It's all good news.

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

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

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

Harry Bullis

Friday, March 24: Luke 19:11-27

When Jesus' tells parables about a king and his servants, his Jewish audience would have known He was really talking about God, the true King of Kings, and Israel, His people. This parable, then, is about how Israel has – or hasn't – faithfully handled God's blessings.

How do the subjects (Israel) feel about their King (God) in 19:14? As Jesus returns, people who are faithful will be rewarded. What does faithfulness look like? Jesus has already said the greatest commands are, "*You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind*" and "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" (Luke 10:26). Jesus has emphasized this is a matter of the heart, not outward religiosity.

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

The challenging aspect of this parable is the message of judgment. To those who don't accept Jesus as King, the consequences are dire.

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

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

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

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

Church of England General Confession

Saturday, March 25: Luke 19:28-38

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

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

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

We typically read this on the Sunday before Good Friday (when we recall Jesus' crucifixion) and Easter Sunday (when we celebrate His resurrection). This story did take place on the Sunday before those other events. So, to be strictly in sync, we should read it on Sunday, April 2. Unfortunately, so much happens between this event and the crucifixion we couldn't fit it all into 4 days, so we're spreading it out over two weeks.

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

How serious am I about Jesus? What am I willing to lay down before Him? How far am I willing to follow Him? When praise becomes persecution, where will I stand?

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

*Thank GOD because he's good, because his love never quits.
Thank you for responding to me; you've truly become my salvation!
The stone the masons discarded as flawed is now the capstone!
This is God's work.
We rub our eyes. We can hardly believe it!
This is the very day God acted. Let's celebrate and be festive!
Salvation now, God. Salvation now!
Oh yes, God! Give us a free and full life!
Blessed are you who enter in God's name.
From God's house we bless you!
God is God, he has bathed us in light.
Adorn the shrine with garlands, hang colored banners above the altar!
You're my God, and I thank you.
O my God, I lift high your praise.
Thank God! He's so good.
His love never quits!
Amen*

Sunday, March 26: Luke 19:28-40

Corrie ten Boom (1892–1983) was a Dutch watchmaker and later a Christian writer and public speaker. With her father, Casper, her sister, Betsie, and other family members, she helped many Jewish people escape from the Nazis during the Holocaust in World War II, by hiding them in their home. They were caught, arrested, and sent to the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp. Her father and sister died in the Camp.

Corrie Ten Boom found and shared hope in God while she was imprisoned at the concentration camp. Her most famous book, *The Hiding Place*, is a biography that recounts the story of her family's efforts and also her spiritual journey in the camp. She went on to travel the world as a popular public speaker, appearing in more than 60 countries. She wrote many best-selling books.

Ten Boom has many profound and memorable insights including these:

- *"If you look at the world, you'll be distressed. If you look within, you'll be depressed. If you look at God you'll be at rest."*
- *"Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?"*
- *"Worrying is carrying tomorrow's load with today's strength – carrying two days at once. It is moving*

into tomorrow ahead of time. Worrying doesn't empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength."

- *"Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God."*
- *"When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer."*
- *"The wonderful thing about praying is that you leave a world of not being able to do something, and enter God's realm where everything is possible. He specializes in the impossible. Nothing is too great for His almighty power. Nothing is too small for His love."*

She was once asked if it were difficult for her to remain humble, given her popularity. Her reply was simple. *"When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches and throwing garments onto the road, and singing praises, do you think that for one moment it ever entered the head of that donkey that any of that was for him?"* She continued, *"If I can be the donkey on which Jesus Christ rides in his glory, I give him all the praise and all the honor."*

What can you learn from Corrie ten Boom?

*Oh Lord, You're beautiful.
Your face is all I see.
For when Your eyes are on this child,
Your grace abounds to me.
Oh Lord, please light the fire
that once burned bright and clean.
Replace the lamp of my first love
that burns with holy fear.
I want to take Your Word and shine it all around.
But first help me just to live it, Lord.
And when I'm doing well,
help me to never seek a crown
for my reward is giving glory to You.*

Keith Green (1953-1982)

Monday, March 27: Luke 19:41-44

Back in Luke 13:34-35, we heard Jesus say, *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me. And now, look, your house is abandoned. And you will never see me again until you say, 'Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!'"* We have just heard that (Luke 19:38). Guess what? Jesus is back.

Once again, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem. People in the city don't understand who He is and the Kingdom He has come to establish. The Kingdom of God is to be a Kingdom of the heart, a Kingdom in which people love God, live His principles in their daily lives, united in their genuine love for God and love for one another. Many Jews, however, wanted a military Saviour who would raise an army and slaughter their Roman overlords.

In 66 AD, Jewish rebels would revolt against Roman rule (the First Jewish-Roman War). The judgment hinted at in the parable in 19:11-27 will be fulfilled in 70 AD. Roman legions will sack Jerusalem. An eyewitness to this event, the Jewish historian, Josephus, writes, *"The slaughter within was even more dreadful than the spectacle from without. Men and women, old and young, insurgents and priests, those who fought and those who entreated mercy, were hewn down in indiscriminate carnage. The number of the slain exceeded that of the slayers. The legionaries had to clamber over heaps of dead to carry on the work of extermination ... As soon as the army had no more people to slay or to plunder, because there remained none to be the objects of their fury for they would not have spared any, Titus Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and Temple ... The wall surrounding Jerusalem was so thoroughly destroyed, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe the city had ever been inhabited. This was the end which Jerusalem came to by the madness of those that were for revolution ..."*

As Jesus moves into Jerusalem, He is challenging the existing Jewish religious and political system at their very centre. Military-political revolution is not the way of God. Neither is religious ritual, corrupted by commercialization as it is. They need a revolution of the heart. Their hearts and souls need to change.

In a crazy, mixed-up world, we look for saviours, too. We look for a politician who can save our economy. We hope for leaders who can deliver us from our social problems. We would love a hero who could solve problems in Ukraine or the Middle East. We would be excited to hear about a researcher who found the cure to cancer. Sports fans are even looking for the perfect coach/general manager to transform their team into a champion. Jesus invites us to think about the hope our world really needs ...

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

What we all really need is a heart, changed through a relationship with Jesus. What we all really need is to recognize our actions are what transform the world. Those the little acts of love, kindness, righteousness, and holiness that we do day by day change everything.

The Christian church defeated the Roman Empire within 300 years (in 312 AD Emperor Constantine became a Christian). Christians did so by living out the love of Jesus and demonstrating the Kingdom of God in deed and word. There was no war or bloodshed. There was a lot of love in action.

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

*Lord, we would grow with you.
New shoots reaching out.
Hands stretched upward.
Like leaves newly formed,
soaking up your light and warmth.
Lord, we would grow with you.*

*Lord, we would grow with you.
In sunshine and rain.
In darkness and light.
In cold days and summer days,
from Springtime to Winter.
Lord, we would grow with you.*

*Lord, we would grow with you.
And bring forth fruit
that is pleasing to you,
fed by your living water,
giving sustenance to others.
Lord, we would grow with you.
Amen*

John Birch

Tuesday, March 28: Luke 19:45-48

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

The Temple in Jerusalem was the heart and soul of first century Judaism. It was the symbolic heart of Israel. When the Romans destroy the Temple in 70 AD, their sacrilege will not only shake the Jewish religious system to its core, it will devastate the spirit of the nation. When the Temple is gone, the nation is gone.

Jesus, as He comes into the Temple, challenges this icon of Jewish identity. Yes, it is nice He stands up to

charlatans making a dishonest shekel on holy ground. But more fundamentally, Jesus is symbolically saying the whole system stinks. The Temple and the leaders of Israel (priests, teachers of the law, and politicians) are fundamentally corrupt. Jesus challenges the injustice, corruption, rich-poor gap, racism, sexism, age-ism, lies, and other problems of His day. The entire society is rotten. He bluntly says everyone is complicit. Everyone is part of the problem. People don't want to hear that message.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*O Lord, who has mercy upon all,
take away from me my sins.
Take away from me the heart of stone,
and give me a heart of flesh.
Kindle within me the fire of your Holy Spirit.
Light within me a fire – a heart to love and adore You.
Light within me a fire – a heart to delight in You.
Light within me a fire – a heart to follow and enjoy You.
Light within me a fire – a heart to serve You.
O Lord, who has mercy upon all,
take away from me my sins
and light a fire within my soul.
Amen*

Ambrose of Milan (339-397)

Wednesday, March 29: Luke 20:1-19

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

Jesus challenged the order of things in the Temple by (literally) upsetting the apple carts. Now He is explaining His actions in no uncertain terms. The established order of things in Israel looks wonderful, religious, and godly,

but it's not just a bit corrupt, it's downright evil. Despite their "religiosity" they are rejecting God.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Now we pray to You Father for peace in the world,
For the right use of all You have given.
A respect for creation in us be restored.
Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.*

*And we pray for the poor of the world everywhere,
and for all those who suffer from hunger and fear,
for those who are homeless – for those who need care.
Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer,*

*Now we pray for those close to us, those who have needs,
for the friends that we love and for all our families,
for these loved ones we pray Jesus grant them Your peace.
Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer*

*And we pray for ourselves for forgiveness of sins,
for the evil around that is born from within,
and we ask You oh God that You heal us again.
Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer*

*Now, in closing, we ask You dear Father on our knees,
Lord, for mercy on all those we call our enemies,
So that all might be one in Your love and Your peace.
Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer.*

Amen

Steve Bell (1960-)

Thursday, March 30: Luke 20:20-26

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

This entire incident is a set up. With flowery, flattering words, spies set Jesus up for disaster. They put Him in an untenable situation. If Jesus opposes the tax, He will be speaking treason against Rome. The Roman authorities can arrest and dispose of Jesus as a seditious revolutionary. The Pharisees win. If Jesus supports the tax, He will be siding with the hated Romans. Jesus is a traitor to the Jews. The Pharisees win. Furthermore, Roman coins had an image of the emperor on them and a slogan claiming the emperor was divine. If Jesus were to endorse Roman money, He would also be supporting the claim the Roman emperor is God. Jesus is a heretic. The Pharisees win. They have Jesus over a barrel. Or do they?

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

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

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

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

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

*Forgive me for the things I have done
and not done.*

*Forgive me for the things I have said
and not said.*

*Forgive me for the life I have lived
and not lived.*

*That I might reflect the image
of the one I profess to follow,
in thought, word and deed,
and in discovering my true self
draw others into that light.*

Amen

John Birch

Friday, March 31: Luke 20:27-44

A young man was seeking wisdom for what to do next, so he opened his Bible, stuck his finger down, and hit the verse, "*Judas went out and hanged himself*" (Matthew 27:5). Rather discouraged he took another shot in the dark, opening his Bible to, "*Go and do likewise*" (Luke 10:37). Taken out of context, those verses can lead to disastrous results. The **context** of some Scriptures can make a big difference.

"Go and do likewise" is Jesus' conclusion to the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:37). In response to a lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbour?" Jesus tells the story of a Samaritan man who helps a Jewish assault victim, whom other Jews ignore. Jesus asks the religious leader: "Who was the neighbour to man who was attacked?" The scholar replied, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus then says, "Go and do likewise." Show mercy. Quite a different meaning than how our young man read it. Context matters. A lot.

Today's reading is good to keep in context. "The teachers of the law and chief priests" are out to get Jesus (see 20:1, 19, 20, 26, 27). They question His authority (20:1-8). They try to get Him as a heretic, acknowledging Caesar as a god (20:20-26). Now the Sadducees, one of the major Jewish factions, are trying to nail Him on the doctrine of the resurrection (the Pharisees, the major group Jesus interacts with, DID believe in the resurrection). The Sadducees believed you died and that was that. They felt the first five books of our Old Testament (written by Moses) were the real basis of Jewish faith. The later books were less important. Since the Sadducees do not clearly see evidence of resurrection in the first five books of the Old Testament, they argue a doctrine of resurrection was a later invention of prophets like Daniel. Daniel, they believe, is wrong.

The context, then, is the Sadducees want to entrap Jesus for heresy AND prove the impracticalities and impossibility of resurrection. They craft a hypothetical situation. They want to make Jesus look like a fool.

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

Jesus does go back to the first five books of Moses and emphasizes the doctrine of resurrection is present there. While Jesus does not go into detail, He does emphasize that God's faithful people are very much "alive in God."

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

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

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

*O God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, grant us, we pray,
to be grounded and settled in your truth, by the coming of the Holy Spirit into our hearts.
That which we do not know,
reveal to us;
that which is empty or insufficient in us,
please fill us up;
that which we know which is true,
confirm in us;
that which is evil and sinful,
forgive and remove from us;
that which is beautiful,
cause to shine through us for your glory;
and keep us blameless in your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen*

Clement (died 101 AD)

Saturday, April 1: Luke 20:45-21:1-4

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"There are very few people who realize what God would make of them
if they abandoned themselves into his hands,
and let themselves be formed by his grace." (Ignatius)
I ask for the grace to trust myself totally to God's love.
Where do I sense hope, encouragement, and growth areas in my life?
By looking back over the last few months,
I may be able to see which activities and occasions have produced rich fruit.
If I do notice such areas, I will determine to give those areas both time and space in the future.
I ask for God's grace to help me see the world through His eyes:*

- to see all of creation with His love;*
- to see all people with His love;*
- to be moved to compassion and action by His love.*

*I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him
and for any insights I may have been given concerning the text.
Amen.*

Palm Sunday, April 2: Luke 21:5-38

We Canadians don't really have an iconic building that represents our national identity – The Scotiabank Arena (where the Toronto Maple Leafs play)? Bell Centre (home of the Montreal Canadiens)? Someone has suggested *Canada's national religion is hockey* – we are more devoted to hockey, more decisions are based on hockey schedules, more conversations happen about hockey, more people get excited about hockey, families spend more time, money, and energy on hockey than anything else. What if Jesus were to say, *"The time will come when hockey will be no more ..."* how would Canadians react?

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

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

Some modern "prophets" try to read specific present-day events into this text: this is all about us, today, right?

Remember, Jesus is saying this to his own disciples in the shadow of the real Temple, just before His crucifixion. He is preparing them for what is about to happen in their own lifetimes in their own city. This is not primarily a prophecy aimed at Canada in 2023. It is a word for Jesus' soon-to-without-their-Lord followers for their time in their place. He is preparing them for the next years of their lives, without Him.

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

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

- Wars and revolutions happened throughout the first century. After Augustus died, the Roman Empire never experienced peace and security again. Between 66-135 AD there were three Jewish-Roman wars.
- After Nero's suicide in 68 AD, the entire Roman world fell into political chaos. Anarchy and fear swept through the empire, aptly described in Luke 21:25. For instance, 69 AD was "*the year of the four emperors.*" Four Roman emperor-wanna-be's, each backed by their own army, created a toxic year-long civil war filled with murder, treachery, bloody battles, and thousands of innocent victims.
- Earthquakes and other natural disasters happened, then, too (for instance, Ephesus, a city of 500,000+, was flattened by earthquakes in 26 AD and 163 AD). Major earthquakes also struck Pompeii, Antioch, and Laodicea. The Roman Empire area is prime earthquake/volcano country (think of Vesuvius [79 AD] and recent earthquakes in Turkey). The Dead Sea Valley in Israel is a major transform fault.
- Christians were brutally persecuted by Nero and other emperors: thrown to lions, burned alive as human torches, etc. They were blamed for everything from Nero's fire in Rome to crop failures. Many, like Paul and Peter, had the opportunity to share their faith during the persecution.
- Jerusalem was besieged, razed, and the temple leveled by the Romans in 70 AD during the First Jewish-Roman War. Smart people headed for the hills.

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

Before we try to apply these prophecies to our times, we need to realize they all fit perfectly the dramatic events Jesus' disciples will experience firsthand. This passage is, first of all, for people in Jesus' time, not Canadians in 2023. Jesus is preparing His followers for the danger, stress, and opportunity that will come in the next few years of their lives.

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

- Wars, earthquakes, famines, persecutions, betrayals and other dreadful things still happen. We should not be surprised. Does God cause them all now? Did God cause them all then? No ...
- When those dreadful things happen, what attitudes, qualities of character, and spiritual disciplines does Jesus encourage us to cultivate in those times?
 - Patience
 - Courage
 - Prayer
 - Compassion
- Jesus has just talked about the truth of resurrection. How does hope – hope of a future with Jesus – help us when these things happen?
- When dreadful things happen, how can we bring the love, comfort, peace, and hope of God?
- How can we encourage Christians in other places who do face persecution?
- When we are challenged about our faith, God will help us express our faith.

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

*In the silence of my innermost being,
 can I hear the whispers of God's presence?
 Can I remember when we walked together?
 Can I recall when I was embraced by God's love?
 Sometimes I wonder what I might say if I were to meet you in person Lord.
 I think I might say "Thank You, Lord" for always being there for me.
 I know with certainty there were times when you carried me, Lord.
 It was through your strength that got through the dark times in my life.
 In the same way, help me to be there for others.
 Help me to love others by extending God's love
 and by sharing the blessings God has given me.
 May I love others as unconditionally as you love 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.*

Monday, April 3: Luke 22:1-30

There are at least five major theories of "atonement." These are theological attempts to understand what Jesus' life, death, and resurrection mean for us. How does Jesus' death and resurrection actually save us? Some Christians get into heated debate about theological ideas like the "ransom theory," "penal-substitution theory," and the "governmental-justice theory" of atonement.

When Jesus wants to teach His disciples about what His life and impending death mean, He doesn't give them a theological treatise, or two, or three on "atonement." He doesn't hold a debate. He doesn't write a blog.

He gives them a specific thing to do. More specifically, He gives them a meal to share. Yesterday, we shared communion, our symbolic meal based on this example.

Here are some the things to think about as we reflect on the Lord's Supper:

- **It reminds us of God's deliverance.** Jesus shares this meal during Passover, when the Israelites remember God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Through the Lord's Supper we retell the exodus story of God's deliverance. But Jesus is going to save us from a greater enemy than Pharaoh. He saves us from the power of evil, sin, guilt, and death.
- **It reminds us of God's amazing love for us.** Jesus – God Himself – is with us. He takes upon Himself all our sin. He suffers as we deserve to suffer. He dies, abandoned, as we deserve to die. He sets us free. He is present still, in and through His Spirit.
- **It reminds us of the hope we have of eternal life with Jesus.** Paul says, "*whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*" (1 Corinthians 11:26). We are reminded Jesus has destroyed the power of sin and death because He arose. We look forward to a resurrected life with Him (1 Corinthians 15). In the meantime, He is with us always (Matthew 28:20).
- **It is a foretaste (symbolically) of heaven.** One of the great scriptural images for the Kingdom of God is that of a banquet to which we are invited. We arrive as cherished guests, to share in the richest foods and best wines (Psalm 23:5; Isaiah 25:6-8, Luke 14:15-24, Matthew 22:1-14). The New Testament describes this banquet more precisely as a wedding feast. We are preparing to celebrate the wedding of the Lamb (Christ) with His bride (His church). All barriers between us and God are gone. We are united with Him, once and for all, forever.

Jesus is trying to convey the cosmic significance of His life and death. This is BIG stuff. Imagine how He must feel, then, as (1) Judas agrees to betray Him (22:1-6), and (2) the other disciples begin to bicker over which of them was the greatest (22:24). They just don't get it.

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

*I need to close out the noise, to rise above the noise;
 the noise that interrupts, that separates,
 the noise that isolates.
 I need to listen to God again.*

*I remind myself that, as I sit here now,
 God is gazing on me with love and holding me in being.
 I pause for a moment and think of this.
 I ask how I am within myself today?
 Am I particularly tired, stressed, or off-form?
 If any of these characteristics apply, can I try to let go of the concerns that disturb me?
 In this expectant state of mind,
 help me listen to what God is saying to me.*

*I believe that the Holy Spirit is present
 and will reveal whatever the passage has to say to me.
 I pray through today's Scripture
 and I ask Jesus to teach me.
 Lord, speak to my heart.
 Lord, help me to listen.
 Lord, help me to obey.
 Amen.*

Tuesday, April 4: Luke 22:31-46

Do you remember the beginning of Simon/Peter's journey with Jesus? Way back in Capernaum, Jesus had healed his mother-in-law ([Luke 4:38-39](#)). Then Jesus commandeered his boat, taught the crowds, produced a bumper crop of fish, and promised Simon, "*Don't be afraid. From now on you'll be fishing for people*" ([5:1-11](#)).

Peter has been sent out on mission trips exactly as Jesus describes in 22:35-37 ([Luke 9:1-9](#), [10:1-20](#)). Peter and Jesus have been through a lot together over the years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Spend some time drawing strength from the past to make it through the present.

Know, with confident hope, that God will be with through all that is to come, as well ...

*Lord, our God, great, eternal, wonderful in glory,
you are faithful to those who love you with their whole heart.
You are the life of all.
You are the help of those who flee to you.
You are the hope of those who cry to you.
Cleanse us from our sins, secret and open,
and from every thought displeasing to your goodness.
Cleanse our bodies and souls,
our hearts and consciences.
May we venture confidently and fearlessly to live for you,
with a pure heart and a clear soul,
and with perfect love and hope.
May the power of God preserve us.
May the wisdom of God instruct us.
May the way of God direct us.
May the hand of God protect us.
May the host of God guard us against the snares of evil
and the temptations of the world.
Amen*

Basil (330-379) and Patrick (389-461)

Wednesday, April 5: Luke 22:47-71

Things in Jerusalem are speeding up.

In the heat of the moment, how does Peter react? Can you identify with him?

We are often hard on Peter, but at least we know Peter followed Jesus into enemy territory. Where are the other disciples? After their initial sword-wielding bravado, they are conspicuously absent.

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

- Judas: sweetness and light on the surface, but treacherous underneath.
- The disciples: full of chest-pounding enthusiasm until the heavy-lifting begins. Then they disappear.
- Peter: great intentions, lots of fine words. But in his moment of testing, he falls short.
- The girl (22:56) and others who identify Peter: jumping on the momentum of the mob, caught up in the bloodthirsty enthusiasm of the moment, going along with the crowd.
- The soldiers: gleefully, brutally beating a defenseless human being to a pulp, with no conscience.
- The chief priests and teachers of the law: "Religious" on the surface. But totally out of sync with God's love, mercy, and will. Angry. Judgmental. They shortchange justice. Ends-justify-the-means.
- Jesus??? He is speaking truth, amid it all. Modelling love, amid it all. Trusting His Father, amid it all.

We live in a world of people, just like us, who, if the circumstances are right, can stab others in the back, make great promises but fail to deliver, get caught up in the mob of the moment, beat on another person's reputation, twist the truth, and use the rationale of the-ends-justifying-the-means.

We can be hard on other people, but let's be honest: we are guilty of some of these behaviours at one time or another. None of us is perfect.

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

*How do I find myself today?
Where am I with God? With others?
Do I have something to be grateful for?
Then I give thanks.
Is there something I am sorry for?
Then I ask forgiveness.
Is there a burden on my heart?
Then I lay it at your feet.*

*Dear Jesus, today I call on you in a special way.
Let my heart respond to Your Love.
Help me Lord to be more conscious of your presence.
Teach me to recognize your presence in others.
Fill my heart with gratitude for the times Your love has been shown to me
through the care of others.
Fill me with compassion to see – and to respond to – the needs of others.
In your Name, may I care with genuine love, Your love.
Amen*

Thursday, April 6: Luke 23:1-25

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

The Jewish leaders finally have Jesus. But they don't have authority to execute a prisoner. Only the Romans can do that. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, won't kill anyone over something as trivial as a Jewish religious spat. So, when Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate, the Jewish authorities don't accuse Jesus of heresy, the real issue (22:54-71). Instead, they trump up political charges against Jesus. They accuse Him of political revolution: Jesus is undermining the Empire, opposing paying taxes to Caesar, and claiming to be king instead of Caesar. None of these is true, but truth is now irrelevant. The priests and teachers of the law are on a mission to destroy Jesus. Nothing – least of all the truth – is going to stop them.

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

Even Herod, the ruler of Galilee, finds no basis for condemning Jesus (Herod was a beastly man, the one responsible for beheading John the Baptist to amuse his step-daughter, among other atrocities).

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

There is another human drama taking place. Barabbas is in prison for revolution and murder. Barabbas is guilty of doing what some Jews wanted Jesus to do – violently attacking people. Jesus, instead, models the Kingdom of God as the way of love, peace, mercy, and grace. Barabbas is also actually guilty of the crimes Jesus is falsely accused of. It's ironic that people choose a genuine violent revolutionary over the Prince of Peace. The powers-that-be release a real terrorist while sending an innocent man of peace to His death. “Bar-abbas” (whose name literally means “son of the father”) is set free while Jesus, the true Son of God, is executed.

Barabbas deserves to die. But Barabbas is set free. Jesus, completely innocent, will die in Barabbas' place. He will die the death Barabbas deserves, at exactly the time, and in exactly the place Barabbas deserves to die.

If Barabbas were to pause and think about it, how might he feel about this?

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

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

*O Lord, we draw near to you,
 acknowledging our unworthiness.
 We ask that all the decisions and defects of our past
 may be freely pardoned and entirely done away,
 through the precious blood of your dear Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.
 Rouse us, O Lord, from the sleep of apathy and from tossing to and fro in our thoughts.
 May we no longer live as in a troubled dream,
 but as people awake,
 resolved to finish the work you have given us to do.
 Root out of our hearts all pride and haughtiness,
 that humble ways may content us,
 so that we may serve the humble.
 By a life of compassion for those who labor and are heavy laden,
 teach us to be concerned one for another
 and to bear one another's burdens.
 By your holy and most bitter anguish on the cross,
 help us to worship you,
 and love you,
 and follow you, O Christ.
 Amen*

Brigid (460-528)

Good Friday, April 7: Luke 23:26-56

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

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

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

This is important for what will follow, of course. Did Jesus just swoon? No. Will He revive in the tomb? Impossible. Will they go to the wrong tomb? Not going to happen. Will they mistake his body for another one in the tomb? Inconceivable. Too many witnesses. Too much evidence. Too much at stake.

The centurion, a Roman, sums up Good Friday well. He says, *"Surely this was a righteous man."* Jesus really is innocent. He really is the King, the Messiah. Unfortunately, as so often in the story of Jesus' life, a non-Jew acknowledges what the Jewish people cannot see for themselves.

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

*You were a man of suffering, acquainted with grief,
loved and despised in equal measure.
You understand humanity,
know our failings,
love us despite the people that we are.*

*When we, like Peter, deny you by word or action,
forgive us.
When we, like Judas, are tempted to follow a different path,
forgive us.
When we, like those in the crowd allow you to be crucified,
forgive us.*

*Bring us to the foot of the Cross,
to stand next to the one who,
looking into your eyes declared
'Surely this is the Son of God.'
Amen*

John Birch

Saturday, April 8: Psalm 22

Nothing happens on Saturday. The Jewish Sabbath began at dusk on Friday, so Jesus was buried by sundown Friday. On the Sabbath, Saturday, no one could do anything until dawn, Sunday morning (Luke 23:56).

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

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

The words of Psalm 22 might very well be running through their minds.

How about you? Can you identify with the psalm?

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

What verses do you need to hold on to?

*In our anxiety, fear and uncertainty,
when hearts are heavy with the loads we bear,
and there is no one to turn toward but you;
yours is the peace that calms,
the peace that comforts,
the peace that gives us strength to carry on.
Yours is the voice we long to hear,
the persistent whisper in our ear,
'Be still, and know that I am God'.
Yours is the presence in the dark
that banishes our fears.*

*Yours is the hand that guides,
the footprints in which I walk.
Yours is the hope that glimmers in my heart
when all the world seems dark and dead.
In my anxiety,
fear and uncertainty,
in confidence I turn to you.
Be the candle in my darkest hours.
Where else can I possibly turn?
Amen*

Easter Sunday, April 9: Luke 24:1-12

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

Jesus did speak of his resurrection several times (for the first time in [Luke 9:22](#)). Two of his greatest stories concluded with a strong reference to rising from the dead ([15:24 and 32](#), [16:31](#)). But nobody got it.

It wasn't that people didn't have faith in God. They just didn't understand God could possibly work in ***this*** way. It is outside the realm of the possible. Nothing like this has happened before.

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

In Luke's gospel, the men don't believe the women. And, after all, they are **women** (in that culture women weren't considered credible, legal witnesses – just a bit sexist). And this is too astonishing to comprehend. When Peter does go to the tomb, he is completely surprised, as well, "*wondering what had happened.*"

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

Have you experienced God's surprising grace in your life? In the life of a friend or relative? So often we take God's grace for granted: miracles of healing (through doctors/medicine or through an unassisted miracle) encouragement, provision (through other people or directly from the Lord). Often God does work through other people. It doesn't matter HOW God works. What matters is that He IS at work in our world.

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

Easter reminds us God works in ways we do not expect, through things we cannot believe, and in ways we cannot understand. God is so far beyond us.

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

Worship Him for His presence in your life.

*We praise you, our Father:
When we turned away you did not reject us,
but came to meet us in your Son.
You embraced us as your children and welcomed us to sit and eat with you.
In Christ, you shared our life that we might live in him and he in us.
He opened his arms of love upon the cross
and made the perfect sacrifice for sin for all.
Father of all, we give you thanks and praise,
that when we were still far off you met us in your Son
and brought us home.*

*Dying and living, he declared your love,
gave us grace,
and opened the gate of glory.
May we who share Christ's body, live his risen life;
we who drink his cup, bring life to others;
we whom the Spirit lights, give light to the world.
Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us,
so we and all your children shall be free,
and the whole earth live to praise your name.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen*

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Monday, April 10: Luke 24:13-35

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

Another person joins you and Cleopas. You tell him everything. Your hopes, dashed by the crucifixion. Your fears: did the Romans or Jewish authorities steal the body? Your dread: what's going to happen now?

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

The stranger leads you in a Bible study. He takes you on a guided tour of the big picture of Scripture: it's a story of God allowing His people, through their choices, to get into real trouble – slavery, defeat, despair, and exile. It's a story of God rescuing His stubborn people over and over. God rescues them from Egypt. He rescues them from Babylon. Passage after passage promises God's rescue from more than just political slavery: He'll save His people. They will go through dark valleys. But God will bring them out the other side.

What if God Himself, the Messiah, would go through the darkest valley of all, death itself? What if the Messiah were to come out the other side, victorious? What if God experienced the worst of all things Himself, overcome them all, and rise again, as the forever-Victor? What if evil, sin, and death could be completely defeated?

It all adds to your questions and confusion.

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

Jesus is risen. He is alive. Bring your questions, confusion, suffering to Him. Allow Him to speak to your heart.

Read Scripture. Open your eyes and see Him. He is with you today and every day.

You may not understand it all now, or ever this side of eternity. That's OK. No one of us really does.

Do know He is always with You. Even when you go through the darkest valleys. That's what really matters.

Invite Him to reveal Himself to you, personally. Get to know Him. Spend time with Him.

*It is only right, to praise You Father,
and to praise Your Only-Begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Dear Father, by Your wondrous lovingkindness toward us, Your servants,
You gave up Your Son.
Dear Jesus, You paid the debt of Adam for us to the Eternal Father
by Your Blood poured forth in love.*

*You cleared away the darkness of sin by Your radiant resurrection.
You broke the bonds of death and rose from the grave as a conqueror.
You reconciled Heaven and earth.
Our life had no hope of eternal joy before You redeemed us.
Your resurrection has washed away our sins,
restored our innocence, and brought us joy.*

*We pray, Lord:
preserve Your servants in the peaceful enjoyment of this Easter celebration.
We ask this through Jesus Christ Our Lord,
who lives and reigns with God, The Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
forever and ever.
Amen.*

Gregory (540-604)

Tuesday, April 11: Luke 24:36-48

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

Science is a wonderful God-given gift. It's not opposite of faith. As we study His creation, we learn about God. As a geographer, my experience is science and Christian faith complement each other beautifully. I have never found a conflict. But science is limited: it cannot teach us EVERYTHING. The scientific method – emphasizing what is observable and measurable – can help us understand a lot, but cannot help us know things that are real, but not "testable." Some things like love, beauty, ethics, goodness, etc., are real, but not scientifically verifiable. God's Word and science together help us learn about God and His creation. We need both types of knowledge.

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

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

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

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

*When I am invited into the presence of a friend,
I look forward to the event and feel honoured.
When God invites me to spend time in His presence,
He desires me to know and feel His love.*

*With faith and hope I turn my heart and mind to God,
and ask Him to help me become more aware of His loving presence.
I ask for the grace to let go of my own concerns and be open to what God is asking of me,
to let myself be guided and formed by my loving Creator.*

*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.*

*As I talk to Jesus may I also learn to be still and listen.
Conversation requires talking and listening.
I open up my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
I ask Him to help me place myself fully in His care,
abandon myself to Him, knowing He always wants what is best for me.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.
Amen.*

Wednesday, April 12: Luke 24:36-53

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

Notice that *“Jesus lifted his hands to heaven, and blessed them”* (Luke 24:50). “Blessing” someone is a concept we are not familiar with. Throughout the Bible, however, people bless others. Blessing someone is a way of praying over a person(s), placing them in God’s care. In Scripture, parents bless their children. Priests bless people. And Jesus blesses His disciples, followers, and family.

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

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

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

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

This is a blessing you can pray – silently or out loud – for significant people in your life, too. Try it.

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

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

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

Mother Teresa, 1910-1996

Thursday, April 13: Acts 1:1-11

The story does not end at Luke 24:53. Luke wrote a sequel to his gospel. Luke's second book is Acts. Acts 1:1-11 is a retelling of the same events recorded in Luke 24, as Luke introduces Jesus' succession plan – the church.

Jesus expands on the concept of being "*witnesses of these things*" (Luke 24:48). Being a witness means more than just knowing I've seen something, thus I know it's true. Jesus assumes His witnesses will **tell other people** the truth, ensuring the true story is told. And His witnesses will live their faith with integrity and love.

Where are they to do this? At home – in Jerusalem.

In neighbouring areas as well (even hostile ones, like Samaria: remember Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans [John 4:9]).

To the ends of the earth. Throughout the world. To ALL people. In ALL nations.

Jesus is **not just** Saviour of the Jews. As He made clear throughout His teaching, He has come for everyone. ALL are welcome. The Jews are invited. But so is everyone else. There is an open invitation. Everyone is just as equal as everyone else in the Kingdom of God. How is this good news?

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

Jesus promises, however, that we are filled with His Holy Spirit. Through His Spirit, God Himself, in all His fullness, is in us, too. We can do amazing things, because He is in us.

Unlike God, we are not perfect. We are not all powerful. We are not all wise. We are not present everywhere.

- But we are somewhere. We are present in the one place where we are. We can serve Him here.
- We do have some wisdom. The Spirit can give us more (James 1:5).
- We do have some power. God can give us more help than we can imagine.

In His Name, power, wisdom, we **can** make a difference, right here, right now ...

It will be God, working in us.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.*

*For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Amen

Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)

Friday, April 14: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Jesus has risen. Jesus is alive. That's good news. Great news.

The disciples couldn't keep quiet about Jesus' resurrection. The same people who were cowering after Jesus' crucifixion, are transformed into bold witnesses. They tell everyone about Jesus' resurrection. This upsets the Jewish authorities. It leads to violent persecution. But these witnesses know the truth: they are willing to put their lives on the line. No one risks their neck for a fairy tale. The resurrection is true.

In Corinth, people believe in **Jesus'** resurrection. They are not convinced **other people** will be resurrected. Paul responds to those who were saying that there is no resurrection for believers in three parts:

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

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

Of course, not everyone believes the truth of Jesus' resurrection (some people don't believe lots of things that are true, from the holocaust, to the death of Elvis, or that Shakespeare actually wrote his plays).

We simply keep telling the truth. We keep inviting people to meet Jesus for themselves. We keep encouraging people to discover new life through Jesus. We keep living the Kingdom of God by loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and loving our neighbours as ourselves. We keep loving as He loved. His Spirit is the One who convinces people of the truth. It's not up to us.

I find the more I reflect on the death and resurrection of Jesus, the more I am overwhelmed by the wonder of God's love. I am more aware of how little I deserve His love. I am more aware how it is His grace, His love, that transforms my life. I don't deserve it. God simply gives me, and all of us, new life in Jesus. He died the death we deserve: "*We are bought at a price*" (1 Corinthians 6:20, 7:23).

Like Paul, we respond: "*I am the least of the followers of Jesus and do not even deserve to be called His follower ... But by the grace of God, I am what I am*" (15:9-10).

By the grace of God, you are what you are. His beloved child. Forgiven. Free. Reborn. Praise Him.

*God of mercy and compassion,
weave your dream for the world into the fabric of our lives.
Remove the scales from our eyes and lift the indifference from our hearts,
so that we may see your vision –
a new reign of justice and compassion that will transform the earth.*

*Transform our lives, so that we may accomplish your purpose.
Anoint us with your Spirit that we might bring good news to the oppressed,
bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim release to the captive.*

*Give us a new urgency and a new commitment
to feed the hungry,
clothe the naked,
shelter the homeless,
and visit those who live in isolation.
Help us to reach out to those whom no one else will touch,
to accept the unacceptable, and to embrace the enemy.*

*Surround us with your love,
fill us with your grace,
and strengthen us for your service.
Empower us to respond to the call of Jesus –
to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow.
Make us your disciples.
Amen*

followingjesus.org

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

"If ... then" It's one of the logical propositions in philosophy. In today's reading, using some "If ...then" logic, Paul builds on the truth of Jesus' resurrection to establish the truth of **our** resurrections.

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Paul reaffirms Jesus has risen from the dead. The Corinthians apparently believed in **Jesus'** resurrection but didn't believe **Christians** would rise from the dead.

In 15:12-19, Paul argues that **if** the Corinthians who say we won't rise from the dead are correct, **then** Jesus must not have risen from the dead either. And **if** Jesus is not risen ... **then**

- Paul and his buddies (and all of us) are wasting their time. In fact, we are spreading lies and promoting the horrendous deception of hope, when there is nothing to look forward to.
- "Faith in Jesus" is pointless. Those of us who have sacrificed anything (time, money, morality) for God are pitiful. Everything we have done has been a waste.
- Sins are not forgiven. You once were lost and cannot be found. You are guilty forever.
- Death is the end, for you and everyone else. There is nothing more. There is no hope.

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

In 15:20-28, Paul states that **since** Jesus is in fact risen from the dead, **then** everything changes. The world and cosmic order of things are radically different as a result:

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

What does it mean to be **"in Christ"**? Paul contrasts this with being **"in Adam."** Just by being born into this fallen world, our nature is fundamentally marred by sin (we know we don't behave/speak perfectly all the time). Being **"in Christ"** means we are forgiven and "born" into a new humanity, a spiritually-redeemed humanity, a whole new nature. Jesus uses this image of being "born again" spiritually ([John 3:1-19](#)). Paul ([2 Corinthians](#)

5:17, [Titus 3:4-7](#)), Peter ([1 Peter 1:22-23](#)), and John ([1 John 5:1](#)) also use the metaphor of new birth.

When we put our faith "**in Christ**" we are born anew as spiritually-alive beings. The old "**in Adam**"-life is replaced by a brand new "**in Christ**"-life. We are forgiven. We look forward to a resurrected life with Jesus.

In 15:29-34 Paul tackles more, "*If Jesus were not raised ...*" issues. The first one is intriguing: baptism for the dead??? Apparently, some Corinthians were doing this. But **if** they do NOT believe in the resurrection, **then** this is stupid. Paul is not condoning the practice. Like Jesus, Paul always insists we are saved by FAITH, not works, including any form of baptism. He is simply asking why they are doing this crazy thing if they don't believe in resurrection in the first place.

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

- What difference does Jesus' resurrection make in your life? What would your life be like if Jesus had NOT been raised from the dead?
- What difference does knowing you will be raised and made alive in Christ? How does that change how you live?
- We all know people who have not experienced the transformation from knowing the power of Jesus' resurrection in our lives. Pray for them. If there is opportunity, share your faith with them.

*God of love, out of love you created the world, us, me.
You put everything together in detailed, delicate ways, knowing our every need.*

*Sustaining God, you provide:
food that nourishes,
water that refreshes,
rest that renews.*

*You give:
emotions that express,
art that uplifts,
history that reminds.*

*You prompt:
community that supports,
experiences that teach,
relationships that inspire.*

*God, in all these things, you sustain our being and well-being, together.
Your love, a resource for our relationships with others,
with creation,
with ourselves,
and with you.*

*Love, informing friendships,
joining sister with brother, and parent with child.
Love, the wellspring of tender, pleasure-sharing, intimate relationships.
Love, unconditional, forgiving and inspirational,
a love embodied in Jesus, which we seek to share.*

*God, thank you for your gift of love,
which encircles us, sustains us and from which nothing can separate us.
Amen*

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Sunday, April 16: 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Some things we struggle to get our minds around. For instance, my kids have tried to explain quantum mechanics to me. But I can't get my mind around it (check out "[quantum mechanics](#)" on Wikipedia – see how you do). It's just too difficult and mysterious for me to understand.

In a similar way, many people in Paul's day were struggling to understand resurrection. For instance,

1. They know a dead body rots and deteriorates. How could God reanimate a decaying body?
2. They are fascinated with the Holy Spirit. They seem to think physical bodies will hold them back from spiritual "completeness." Greek philosophy at the time said spiritual things were good, physical things were bad. The Corinthians are caught up in the dominant secular philosophy of their times, emphasizing "spirituality" while denying one's "physicality." Wouldn't it be best to shed our physical bodies and just be "spiritual" beings? Resurrection implies new **bodies**. This isn't what they want.

Paul deals with the first issue, by using analogies from the world with which we are familiar: seeds, animals, the cosmos. For instance, a seed "dies" to produce a beautiful plant. The seed is a shadow or promise of something just as physical but more glorious. Different kinds of creatures have different kinds of "flesh." Certainly, a God who can raise Jesus from the dead can raise everyone, into perfect, physical beings. They may be of a different "kind" of flesh than before, but they are no less perfect, beautiful, or physical ... just different.

He goes at the second issue by reaffirming resurrection does involve our bodies. That was the example set by Jesus. He was very much a physical being when He met His disciples after His resurrection. But exactly what our resurrection bodies will look like and how they will work is still a mystery. Our bodies will be physical, recognizable, imperishable, and immortal – beyond that we don't know all the details.

There is a lot of mystery around resurrection. Paul uses the word "mystery" to remind us some things are just beyond us (15:51). While he tries to describe it in metaphors we can understand, it's so far beyond our ability to comprehend, we must just accept it (like quantum physics to me). We know it's real. We know it's good. We know it's forever. We can't begin to understand all the details. That's OK.

In our attempts to get our minds around all this, let's not overlook Paul's conclusion: *"So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless."*

Jesus has been raised from the dead. That's amazing. We'll be raised from the dead. That's amazing. We know the ultimate future – and it's great. Now, be strong in your faith. Be immovable.

AND, make your life count for Jesus, today. Our lives matter now. We can make an eternal difference now.

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

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

*When we were walking in darkness
you were there, you were there.*

*When we were kneeling in weakness
you were there, you were there.*

*When we drew near feeling worthless
you were there, you were there.*

*When we were needing forgiveness
you were there, you were there.*

*When we were searching for your grace
you were there, you were there.*

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

Amen