

Journey's End / A New Start

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the roller coaster we call Holy Week. We begin with a parade and then attend a dinner party that is followed by a trial and condemnation, an execution, and a burial. Then, there is an unimaginable surprise. Whew. Hold on to your hats. Even though we have been here before, we make this journey because he made this journey for us. We watch and we listen, and we follow at a distance because that is the best we can do. We shout and we sing; we weep, and we rejoice, because to make this journey is to embrace being alive with all the passion and the promise life offers. We make this journey because, once again, we need to learn how to begin again. Join us for the end and the beginning.

Liturgy of the Palms - March 29, 2026 - Sixth Sunday in Lent/Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday – **Marching Orders**

[Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29](#) [Matthew 21:1-11](#)

Liturgy of the Passion - March 29, 2026 - Sixth Sunday in Lent/Palm/Passion Sunday

[Psalm 31:9-16](#) [Matthew 26:14-27:66](#) or [Matthew 27:11-54](#)

Color – Purple

PLANNING NOTES

Holy Week begins with a journey—or rather, picks up in the middle of a journey to Jerusalem. Now technically, the liturgical calendar says Holy Week begins on Monday, not Palm/Passion Sunday. So, maybe today is not so much a beginning as a prequel, a setting up for the events of Holy Week to unfold. Either way, we've chosen to start this Holy Week worship series with Palm/Passion, because the palm procession gives us context for all that follows. Indeed, Palm/Passion Sunday is a day for joy, but not joy in the resurrection. That's next week. Today is a day for joy in the promise of salvation. As we journey with Jesus to the cross—the journey then and the journey now—we find our joy in the promise of salvation, a promise that will not fail.

Yet, this is also a journey that calls us to face the truth—the truth about religious- and state-sanctioned violence, the truth about sin and evil in our world, the truth about the distance between the power of this world and the kingdom of God, the truth about the harms we face and our complicity in harming others. What room is there for joy when faced with the truth of Holy Week?

The lectionary offers us a possible answer—sing! The psalm for Palm/Passion is Psalm 118, a psalm about God saving God's people from destruction, a song rooted in the promise of God's steadfast love. So, when stuck between the truth of sin and the promise of salvation, we join our voices in proclaiming God's steadfast love. As you plan worship for Palm/Passion Sunday, consider how you can speak, sing, pray, and/or preach Psalm 118. Perhaps you draw on a hymn that paraphrases Psalm 118, or you incorporate one verse as a repeated prayer response. Remember, this is also a psalm that Jesus and his disciples would have known. When we sing or read this psalm, we join with them, as well as generations of believers who came before and after them.

As we begin this series focused on the journey from palms to the cross to the empty tomb, think about ways you can use the worship service to move from the joyful palm procession toward Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. If you begin the service with a palm procession, perhaps you conclude with a silent recessional, carrying the palms, a cross, or a candle out of the space as a symbol of the journey ahead. If you do not have other services this week, consider how you might demonstrate the shift from the palms to the cross by stripping the altar and/or draping a cross on the altar with a black cloth. Holy Week can bring up difficult emotions for many congregants, so it's important that whatever we pray, sing, do, and preach this week tells the truth in love and invites us as a gathered body into prayerful reflection on God's steadfast love incarnate in Jesus Christ as we move toward the table, the cross, the tomb, and beyond.

PREACHING NOTES

Packing to leave is a harried experience. You're always worried you'll forget something. You're uncertain about what will be appropriate in the new place – what clothes, manners, and words. Certainly, there is some excitement too. We can't diminish that. But woven through the enthusiasm for the upcoming trip is the anxiety of uncertainty. There is fear of change. There is an overwhelming lack of confidence and disorientation in a new and unfamiliar place.

Maybe that's overstating it a bit. Yet you can't help wondering what was going through the disciples' minds as they packed for their trip to Jerusalem. Packing? Well, gathering the things required. Jesus sent them out to do a little donkey rustling. That surely added to the anxiety about going where they were considered unwanted agitators, stirring up the people against the status quo and the powers that be. Being sent to nab a donkey seems a bit sketchy. Perhaps it was prearranged: the directions given to the two who were sent might imply that this was all worked out ahead of time. There was a code phrase, a precise description; it was all set. Maybe it was something mystical, a knowing on Jesus' part. Or maybe it was a plan. We don't know for sure, and maybe it doesn't really matter. We don't have a lot of the backstory here. We don't have the conversation between the two sent on this donkey-procuring mission. There is so much we don't know, yet we are called to get in the car.

Or get in line. The bus is leaving; the train is at the station; the procession is happening. Where are you? That's the real Palm Sunday question, after all: Where are you? Where are we? There are so many roles in this drama, and we find ourselves flitting from one to another based on our mood or personal circumstances. But what if we got to choose? What if it isn't which one fits us, or which one others would choose for us, based on our personality profile or Enneagram number? What if we could choose?

Would we choose to tag along on the donkey mission? Would we go without questioning the rather odd and seemingly out-of-the-blue directive from Jesus and trundle off across the countryside to find a donkey and a colt tied and waiting for a Messiah to climb on board? Would we, in other words, decide to listen to what Jesus said and follow that path, even when it doesn't make sense or seems out of step with current political and social trends? Would we be willing to risk loving enemies, welcoming the stranger, and praying for those who persecute us, even when everyone else thinks we're crazy? And our only response is, "The Lord has need of it."

Or would we tag along with the other disciples, walking a risky road to challenge the center of power? Maybe we have a clue about what is happening, or maybe we're just caught up in the spirit of the event. It has a party feel, a parade vibe, so we go along. And for a moment, we stop worrying about what *might* happen and lean into what *is* happening. How many times have we heard Jesus say, "Do not be afraid"? And for a moment, we aren't. Fear has been replaced with love—our love for him and the word he brings, our love for one another, and the sense of wholeness that we are becoming has pushed aside personal fears of failure or inadequacy. This perfect love has cast out fear. So, we march along behind him, with him. We choose this.

Or we aren't ready for that. For donkey-hunting or parade-marching. It asks too much of us, we think. There is so much we don't know. There is so much we lack. And we are filled with fear. Yet, we feel called to something. So, we stand along the side of the road. Maybe we wave as the parade passes by. Maybe we find a branch and wave it, to extend our reach, to go higher, to be seen. And maybe we shout, "Hosanna!" As he passes by, riding that bemused donkey with its colt trotting alongside, we shout, "Hosanna!" Maybe it means hello, or hooray, or "Hi, Jesus." Or maybe, somewhere underneath all the excitement, there is a deeper memory that recalls the original translation of the word on everyone's lips: "Hosanna! Save us." Save us, please; save us now. We may not be ready for it all, but at least we are there. Along the road, waving and hoping, we stand and ask for salvation, whatever that means.

We're there, somewhere, on a mission or bystanding. We're there. That means we are there when the tone changes, as when a conductor calls for a minor chord, or there is thunder in the distance. There is change in the air. And the lips of those who shouted "Hosanna!" are now twisted in anger and disappointment and are saying, "Crucify him." It's as if something went wrong. It's as if the soundtrack is off and the instruments are out of tune.

And still, we hear the question, "Where are you?" Where do we stand when everything changes? Where are we when the parade moves from celebration to condemnation? Whose marching orders do we follow now?

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Lenten travelers, the journey to the cross begins with a procession into Jerusalem, a demonstration of Jesus' saving power.

We come to praise Jesus, the Messiah, the One who saves!

The crowds line the path and shout "Hosanna! Save us!" as Jesus rides in, not on a mighty war horse, but on the backs of a donkey and a colt.

We come to call on Jesus, the Messiah, the One who saves!

The city murmurs, wondering who this person is who demonstrates power through humility, strength without tyranny.

We come to witness Jesus, the Messiah, the One who saves!

Lenten travelers, will you come on the journey to Jerusalem, following a Messiah who saves us to live after the pattern of the kin-dom of God, not the kingdoms of this world?

We come to follow Jesus, the Messiah, the One who saves!

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2025.

Prayer for the Day

Humble God, you have shown us the way to enter all the Jerusalems of this world. You showed us not to enter our lives with fear, but with humility and courage. As we worship this day, we draw upon your example of Jesus on that humble donkey, and we raise our palm branches in rejoicing! We raise our voices, shouting along with your people of every age, "Hosanna in the highest!" Come and save us this day, O Jesus of Jerusalem. Amen.

Written by Rev. Dr. Chad Abbott on the Worship Ways website at <https://www.ucc.org/worship-way/palm-passion-sunday-b-march-24/>.

Prayer of Confession

Let us confess before God our tendency,
like the Jerusalem crowds,
to profess our faith in moments of enthusiasm
and deny our faith in moments of stress.

O God, we sing and praise you, happy of heart and strong of spirit, when we are among others who praise you too. But in times of stress, we seek scapegoats to be targets for our anger. We betray those we love and who have loved us, and we turn against you, too busy to seek you, too selfish to obey you. Your compassion is without bounds, O God, for you forgive us again and again. You restore us to a right spirit and bring us together to worship you again. God of steadfast love, teach us how to be steadfast; through Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Written by Ruth C. Duck in Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2012), 61.

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Benediction

Beloved, as we move into the week ahead, may God bless you with the insight to know the way of Jesus, the courage to hold firm to the way of Jesus when the crowds try to lead you astray, and the strength to follow the way of Jesus, the way of God's steadfast love that never fails. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2025.

Maundy Thursday/Holy Thursday—April 2, 2026—**Eat and Run**

[Exodus 12:1-4, \(5-10\), 11-14](#) [1 Corinthians 11:23-26](#) [John 13:1-17, 31b-35](#)

Color – Purple, No Color

PLANNING NOTES

"I hate to eat and run, but..." It's something we say or imagine saying. But it's not usually how we talk about worship. In fact, worship is for lingering, for gathering and reflecting. But there is something different about Maundy Thursday. We often focus on the meal Jesus shares with his disciples, but the "maundatum" or "mandate" of Maundy Thursday is linked to washing feet, because Jesus calls us to love one another in the way Jesus does when he washes the disciples' feet— to love one another like servants rather than masters.

I think of the show *Downton Abbey* when I think about servants, because you rarely see the servants sitting around doing nothing. While the family converses over a multi-course meal or entertains visitors in a sitting room, the servants are rushing around in out-of-the-way parts of the house, out of sight yet keeping the house running. There's a danger in today's world of glorifying busyness, of using the "eat and run" excuse to keep ourselves moving so we don't have to pay attention to the why or the how of what makes our lives so hectic. For congregations that rarely have worship services in the middle of the week, Maundy Thursday offers an opportunity to cut through the fast-paced noise of our lives and slow us down to pay attention. To remember why we celebrate the Lord's Supper as an outward sign of an inward grace. To feel the water wash away the dirt from our feet or our hands. To pray with Jesus at Gethsemane. To hear once again the mandate to love one another as Christ has loved us. To be ready to serve each other, not so we can be busy, but so that we can be active agents of love in the world.

These are the vignettes of Maundy Thursday that we invite our congregants to experience. Perhaps you move through the story chronologically. Perhaps you treat these moments as a constellation of experiences that center around Christ's mandate, or perhaps you choose one—the foot washing, the Passover meal turned Lord's Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane—to give particular focus. However you approach this service, find ways for your congregation to enact the story: to wash hands or feet, to share in a meal, to pray with those in distress. These are all ways we practice loving one another as Christ has loved us. I also encourage you to end the service by stripping the altar if you did not already do this on Palm/Passion Sunday. Removing everything but a single cross from the altar as part of worship helps symbolize the journey to Golgotha, preparing congregants for Good Friday.

PREACHING NOTES

“This month shall mark for you the beginning of months” (Exodus 12:2 NRSV). We’re starting over. That is what this night is: a restart to a whole new way of living. It is the inbreaking of a new reality, a new kingdom, a kin-dom of connectedness and mutual service. It is an opportunity to rethink, to reorient, to begin a new life. What it isn’t, however, is a time for a relaxing or leisurely reflection. You can’t read these instructions and get the sense that this is a casual dinner party or a quiet family night at home. No, there is urgency here, almost desperation.

But surely not, we think. This is a passage of protection. This is about God’s caring for the people of God in oppressive situations. There shouldn’t be a sense of desperation. There shouldn’t be a sense of doom surrounding those who partake in this meal. Should there?

Maybe we should ask, this Thursday evening, “What are we protected from?” Is the story on this night that all will be well? “Yes and no,” I suppose, is the best answer. In the end, of course, the kingdom will come. But there is much to endure before then. There is much to run from or maybe to run toward. This meal is about community, about family, about gathering and trusting in one another so that when the troubles come, there is solidarity and strength to endure together.

Then, when we eat in relative safety, we remember by being girded to flee. Translate the instructions into a modern-day experience. We perch on the edge of our dining chairs with our car keys in our hands and the sound of the idling engine in the drive outside the open door. We eat and run. We eat, prepared to run because the enemy is at the gate. However we envision that enemy—empire, demonic, even the forces within our own faith that distort and corrupt the message of the gospel into one of power and oppression—we are surrounded and need to be light on our feet.

What marks this night for us, though, is that we don’t run away, and we don’t run to hide. We run toward one another. We run toward those who are hurting, and we bring our towel and our basin. We run to help and to heal. We run to bind up and gather in because that was the command given this Maundy Thursday. The command is to love one another as he has loved us. The meal is in preparation for that task. The meal embodies love and service in how we include one another, make space at the table, and rise from the table to go out and live in a hostile world.

We may linger at the table for a few moments this evening. But we gather, already prepared to eat and run because the world needs us to be at work for the kin-dom.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Followers of Jesus, our lives are filled with stress and distress, disquiet and fear.

In the unrest and the fear, we gather to worship God who delivers us.

Like the disciples gathered with Jesus, we feel the turmoil of rumors and conspiracies, the grasping for power and security that threatens the lives and livelihoods of our neighbors.

In the suffering and the tumult, we gather to call on God who delivers us.

Facing an unknown future, the disciples gathered as we do today, to be surprised by Love, to share a meal, to remember their story, to receive a new story and a new meal.

In the uncertainty of these days, we gather to share the story of God who delivers us.

Followers of Jesus, come. Come to the basin and be washed. Come to the meal and be fed. Come to the table and be strengthened for the journey.

We gather together to remember the story of God's deliverance, that we may go from this place to heal the hurting, to tend the suffering, to love one another as Jesus loves us.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2025.

Prayer for the Day

Gracious God,

As those who strive to follow Jesus in our living

and to trust your power in our dying,

we gather to reflect upon the life that ended on a cross.

We recognize in ourselves

the strengths and weaknesses of Jesus' disciples:

although they loved him,

they disappointed and failed him.

And yet, gathering with these imperfect friends at this last meal,

Jesus washed their feet in service, and then

extended the bread and cup to each.

Jesus called them to love one another
and invited them to share in his very life
and in his acceptance of the road ahead.

We are humbled, honored, and inspired
by the deep love Christ extended to the world,
and we take seriously the calling
to be the body of Christ today.

Forgive us when we disappoint and fail you,
and guide us back to a place of trust and faithful living.
Grant us the vision to see the world as you see it,
with love and compassion for each creature and all of your creation.
We ask this in the name of Jesus,
who taught us to pray to you. . . [Lord's Prayer]

Written by Rev. Kelly Burd. Posted on the United Church of Christ website. <http://www.ucc.org/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2016/03/pastoral-prayer-for-maundy-thursday.html>.

Prayer of Confession

Holy Deliverer,

Tonight, we have reached the all-too-familiar story of the eve before the execution. While there are times when we relate very well to Jesus in this story, we forget that we have been Judas, Peter, and the disciples. We have allowed ourselves to become part of someone's story of pain. Our words have pierced another's hearts. We have betrayed our neighbor instead of filling this world and another's soul with love. Instead of living with the heaviness of guilt, allow us to create peace around us and within us. Invite us to share our repentance and to reconcile whenever possible. May we live into the mandate to love one another as you love us. Amen.

Words of Assurance

Through the redeeming love of Christ, God has poured grace upon us. May the mercy of God transform us into bearers of love in a wounded world. Amen.

Written by Rev. Michelle Torigian on the Worship Ways website at <https://www.ucc.org/worship-way/maundy-thursday-march-28/>.

Benediction

Beloved, may God bless you as you leave this place to run toward the hurting and the suffering in the world, sharing the steadfast love of God in service and solidarity as we build the kin-dom of God together. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2025.

Good Friday - April 3, 2026 – Reaching Destination

[Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#) [Psalm 22](#) [John 18:1-19:42](#)

Color – No Color

PLANNING NOTES

Good Friday feels like a stop sign, a period, a dead end. Literally. We often encourage worship planners and leaders not to jump ahead to Easter too fast, to sit in the narrative of Good Friday, to observe the period at the end of the sentence before going to the next one. We put ourselves in the mindset of the disciples who had no way of knowing what would come a few days later. We take in not just the facts of the story, but also the feelings; not just the events, but the experience. I wonder, though, what happens if we think of Good Friday more like a comma that pauses but does not stop the flow of God's story. What if telling the story year after year teaches us to draw on the promise of Easter, so we have the courage to face the reality of Good Friday? Each time we encounter the story of Christ crucified, we add nuance and richness to our experience and understanding of the crucifixion, but also, I think, to the depths of our encounter with God's steadfast and saving love.

So, as you plan for Good Friday worship, tell the story. Sing the story. Enter the story through confession. Above all, receive the pardon as a community that comes face-to-face with Jesus on the cross. It is the confession with the pardon that gives us hope that Good Friday is not the end of our journey. Remember, too, that it is not our job as worship planners to control how people experience Good Friday. We certainly want to make sure our words, songs, and actions align with our theology. As United Methodists, we draw on many images and understandings of atonement, all of which point to God, who desires to be in relationship with humanity. While some congregants may experience shame or guilt as they encounter the story of Good Friday, it is not our job to force shame or guilt on anyone. As worship planners, our role on Good Friday is to present the story and theology with consistency and care, trusting the Spirit to do the rest.

PREACHING NOTES

Read the story. That's the best preaching advice anyone can give for this day. Read the story. Certainly, there is an urge to explain, examine this event, and provide an interpretation. But resist. As much as you can, preacher, resist. Read the story. Let the story speak for itself. Don't assume everyone knows it. Because while they might have the outline in mind, it is the detail, the nuance that the gospel writers capture that will let the story seep into the consciousness of the hearers.

That's the risky part of this. When you let the story speak for itself, you are no longer in control of the message. Who knows what someone might hear? They might find it appalling. They might get angry at God. They might look for someone to blame. Or they might listen again and find themselves in the story. That will be the most harrowing part of the event. When you realize you were there shouting, "Crucify him," it is sobering. You might see yourself watching him pass by, staggering under the weight of that cross, and understand that you contributed to the weight he bears. And those words he utters through dry and cracked lips, words about forgiveness, just might be directed toward you. Who knows what people might hear when you let the story speak for itself? Read the story.

Better yet, tell it. Or at least read it as though it mattered, as though it were not scripture but a report from a witness. Tell it as if it were a story you were told by a breathless reporter live from the scene of the event. Tell it as though it is your story, because it is, and you were on the journey with him, all the way to this unimaginable ending. Tell it from your own despair and pain and the thin thread of hope that you desperately want to cling to even here at the foot of the cross.

As far as we know—as far as those first disciples knew—this is the end of everything. No power within us can undo this story. We've gone as far as we can. We have reached our destination, and it is this death. There is nowhere we can go from here. Tell the story.

The final verse of the passion story from the Gospel of John reads:

And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there (John 19:42 NRSV).

Tell the story. but leave room for hope. Tell of the destination to which we arrived, but hear the word that says even this was preparation. There is something more. But that is another story.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Followers of Jesus, today we arrive at Pilate's palace, hearing the cries of "Crucify! Crucify" from the crowds outside.

We come to witness Jesus, sentenced to death by religious leaders, government officials, and the crowd.

Today, we arrive at Golgotha, at the foot of the cross where only a few of Jesus' followers dared to gather to bear witness.

We come to witness Jesus, crucified for teaching love, speaking truth, and forgiving sins.

Today, we arrive at the tomb where Jesus' friends laid his body, a final act of love.

We come to witness Jesus, his death a testament to all that sin and evil will do to resist the power of Love to transform the world.

Today, we arrive at Good Friday to remember, once again, the story of Jesus crucified.

We come to witness Jesus, who, even in death, shows us the magnitude of God's steadfast love that never fails.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2025.

Prayer for the Day

Gracious God, we remember with love and tears the torture and death of your Son, Jesus. We believe that he was the rejected One, the despised One, the Man of sorrows bearing our griefs and wounded for the brokenness in humanity. We come to worship in deep personal repentance and recommit ourselves to recognize all crosses, ease all suffering and pain, and speak out against injustice in every time and place. Amen.

Written by Maren C. Tirabassi in Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2012), 58-59.

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Prayer of Supplication

O Holy God,
the hosannas have died away,
the palm branches have turned brittle.

Now, today, there is only this –
each of us,
all of us,
sitting in the darkness,
the hymns of lament in the air,
the mumblings of our own feeble confession,
on this Friday
which we tremble to call Good.

What is good about Good Friday?

What is good about the innocent one nailed to a cross?
What is good about the darkness of war that persists today?
What is good about our devastation of the planet?
... about people living in poverty?
... about the fog of addiction, depression, disease, and despair?
What is good about the crushing weight of hunger, racism, scapegoating, apathy?

No, there is nothing good and desirable in these things.

Yet you, O God, are Good.

When suffering reigns, yours is the first heart to break.

When despair lurks about, we remember that you were there first,
peering into the abyss and crying out, incredibly:
“Father, forgive them.”

When we feel forsaken, we remember that in your last moments,
you cared for your mother and your beloved disciple,
binding them to one another as a new family.

When we feel overcome by guilt, we remember that you spoke grace to a thief:
“Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Your love for us is just that boundless,
and ever-present,
and Good.

Thank you.
What else can we say here, in the dimness,
in the darkness,
but thank you.

Amen.

*Written by MaryAnn McKibben Dana, Posted on **LiturgyLink**,
<http://www.liturgylink.net/2012/04/04/good-friday-prayer-the-hosannas-have-died-away/>. Re-posted
on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2014/03/a-prayer-for-good-friday.html>.*

Benediction

May God bless you as you go from this place to reflect on the quiet of the tomb, the apparent end of the journey, as we wait and watch for God to do a new thing among us. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2025.

Resurrection of the Lord - April 5, 2026 - Easter Day – **A New Start**

[Acts 10:34-43](#) or [Jeremiah 31:1-6](#) [Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24](#) [Colossians 3:1-4](#) or [Acts 10:34-43](#)
[John 20:1-18](#) or [Matthew 28:1-10](#)

Color – White, Gold

PLANNING NOTES

It's Easter! We arrived! Or did we? As worship leaders, I'm sure we all hope we've arrived because that means the chance to rest is just within reach. We know how much energy we will put into planning and preparing for a joyous Easter celebration. We'll transform the sanctuary into a flower-filled and/or color-filled expression of joy and new life. We'll rehearse the choir, gather the musicians, prepare a special organ voluntary, add a few extra band members, and prepare a heartfelt Easter sermon. We'll plan for additional people and extra enthusiastic singing. We'll share traditions that hold meaning for our congregations. And then...what? We take a nap (hopefully), maybe take a day off, and then we go right back to planning worship for the next week.

I don't say that to discourage us—not at all! All the extra work and time we put into Easter is worth it. We are celebrating the Resurrection, the miracle that death is not the end, and God's steadfast love endures. This is worth pulling out all the stops! And Easter means a new start for all of us. Just as we journey with the disciples to the cross, we come with them again to the empty tomb, a turning point in our journey that redefines our trajectory, redirects our priorities, and realigns our love for God and neighbor.

So, as you plan Easter worship, add in a few hints about the journey ahead. Remind your congregants that Easter is not the end, but a new start, a time to recharge and prepare for the journey ahead. Talk about the guidance Easter gives us for day-to-day Christian life. Practice finding the joy of Easter in ordinary things. Enter into the characters of the Easter story and consider how their lives might have been changed by Easter in real and substantive ways. How might putting ourselves in Mary's or Peter's or the guards' shoes help us live as Easter people today? Above all, help those gathered know and experience that we don't go on this journey alone. Easter is a new start for all of us who journey together in grace as the Body of Christ, for it is the good news that binds us together and empowers us to continue on the path set before us.

PREACHING NOTES

I love comparing the four stories of Easter morning that the Gospels give us. Each speaks of the discovery of the empty tomb, and each tells of the effect of this discovery on those who were there that morning. But then each of them adds some nuances that differ. Why are they different? There could be many reasons. Perhaps the tellers of the story omitted some details when they recounted it to the writers. Or maybe the writers wanted to add some stuff to make their point clearer or to emphasize something. We don't always know why they wrote what they wrote. All we can do is try to figure out what it means.

There are some aspects of Matthew's story that are so amazing. Matthew was a Michael Bay kind of director: big explosions going off all around the action. He's got earthquakes on Friday and now this Sunday morning shake. He's got angels, well, *an angel* showing up. But it's not one of those nondescript, undercover angels. This one has a name tag or a spandex suit and cape rippling in the breeze. This angel's got strobe lights and blaring trumpets. There are no "Is that an angel?" questions from the onlookers. The figure shows up, tosses away a multi-ton stone like it is a pebble easily skipped across a pond, and then strikes a pose on top of the rock, as if it is waiting for the reporter from *Rolling Stone* magazine to take the photo.

In case you are still wondering if this is a dramatic entrance, Matthew has the guards—big, tough, soldier types—pass out from fear. "Wow," you say, "There's no scrimping on the special effects budget on this one!" Matthew isn't into subtlety. He doesn't want you to miss anything.

And yet we do. They do. The women, who didn't pass out like the big tough soldier guys did, get the message and run away with fear and great joy. I love that: *fear and great joy*. That sounds human. That sounds right for this incredible moment. It's unsettling enough to be frightening, but wonderful enough to lead to hope.

Everyone seems to be missing something. And it is the shiny one who points this out: *You're in the wrong place; you've got the wrong attitude; you're swimming with the wrong current*. The current they were in was the logical one, the human one. A man was crucified. A man was buried. Ergo, that man was dead, and this was the end, the destination arrived. It was the end of the line. Everyone out. That makes perfect sense—unless you factor in Easter. Why are you seeking the living among the dead? That was what they asked the women who had come to the tomb. You are in the wrong place; you are making the wrong assumptions. He's not here; he's there. Where's there? Home, where you live, right where you are, where you least expect him to be. You are missing what is right under your noses.

What was under their noses was a new start, a new beginning. It was nothing other than life itself—full, abundant, empowered life. That is what Christ came to offer us. He didn't come to give us the training regimen to get there. He didn't come to coerce us into becoming something better. He didn't come to drop some hints and then let us search through the clues to figure out what we are supposed to do and be. He came with a gift, and it is right there in front of us.

It is the gift of community. It is the gift of serving and caring. It is the gift of living in gratitude. It is the gift of hope. It is the gift of grace. We make things so hard. We want widescreen, can't miss it, knock-your-socks off experiences to convince us that we finally have found something of significance. What should knock our socks off is that there is someone who loves us even when we are unlovable, and we can

experience this love through a community that embodies love in everything it does. It doesn't get any more powerful than that.

Maybe that is what Jesus meant when he complained about those who were always seeking signs. "Show me something spectacular, Lord, and then I'll believe." "Come on down from that cross, and then I'll believe." He is asking us to live differently, to swim against the current, to be born anew. He is asking us to start all over again and to open our eyes to see what is there to see. When the smile of a loved one, when the music of the choir on Easter morning, when the smell of a flower, when the grace of a work of art, when an arm around our shoulders, when a lump in the throat, when a tear of joy traces down our cheeks - when these and a thousand more signs of life are right in front of us every moment of every day, all that we need to know is that *He Is Risen*, indeed. Then we'll know what he so desperately wants us to know.

When we embrace the new start, we taste life differently. We experience joy differently because Easter has come, and we live in that new reality. So, join us at the starting line. The journey of living begins again with joy and hope. Happy Easter

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Easter people, Christ is risen! God is doing a new thing!

Hallelujah! Christ is risen!

Life has conquered death! Love has overcome fear!

Hallelujah! Christ is risen!

God has transformed a dead end into a new start!

Hallelujah! Christ is risen!

Easter people, raise your voices! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2025.

Prayer for the Day

In thy hand, we see the whole cosmos,

Heaven and earth reflect

the mystery of thy handiwork.

In thy hand, we see a little child,

Men and women are recaptured

by the event of Bethlehem.
In thy hand, we see the scar of the cross.
Sin and death are vanquished
by thy suffering on Golgotha.
In thy hand, behold a new light,
Day and night are transformed
in the glory of Easter morning.

Written by Masao, Fumiko, Makoto, and Yukako in Takenaka, Japan. Printed in Gifts of Many Cultures: Worship Resources for the Global Community, ed. Maren C. Tirabassi and Kathy Wonson Eddy (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995), 164.

Prayer of Confession

O God, still creating,
we hear your promises of a new day of joy and peace,
and we are skeptical.
We expect things to go on the same as they always have,
from bad to worse.
The past will keep us guilty,
the future will make us afraid,
and the present will burden us
with too little time and too much to do.
Forgive our lack of faith,
our quickness to believe that you do not hear us,
and our pessimism about tomorrow.
Do a new thing in our hearts,
and let us be glad and rejoice in your abundant care;
through Christ, we pray. Amen.

Written by Dr. Tom Cheatham at <http://theconnection08.wordpress.com/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/11/prayer-of-confession-isaiah-65-17-25.html>.

Benediction

Go now in the blessing of God, who meets death with life, hatred with love, and hopeless endings with abundant possibilities, to build a community of life, love, and flourishing as Easter people, followers of the Risen Christ! Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2025.