



Mar/Apr 2017

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**FROM HERE
TO JERUSALEM
AND BEYOND**

ALSO: REJECTION AND REPENTANCE

Friends:

Last year I had the privilege of touring the Holy Land. I saw where Jesus rode the colt over the hill on his triumphal entry. I walked where he cleansed the temple. I worshiped among the olive trees of Gethsemane. I followed the narrow stone pathways of Old Jerusalem, imagining Jesus dripping blood as he carried his cross through the crowds. I stood where he was crucified and buried. I imagined the cold, dark dawn when the angel rolled away the stone and resurrection light filled the grave. Seeing the places where God powerfully changed history reminded me that these things really happened in a real place. God himself acts among us.



In March, Pastor Fred Bultman explores with us the hope of the open grave. In Jesus' time, many people plotted together to have him crucified. But in God's plan Jesus died in our place, taking what we deserve so that in our repentance we can trust that Christ will open all our tombs.

Then, in April, Chaplain Norman Brown walks us through the darkness of Lent and the light of Easter, remembering the events that turn our mourning into dancing and our darkness into light.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Koster". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

—Steven Koster

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**“Lent: Rejection
and Repentance”
Fred Bultman**



**“From Here to Jerusalem
and Beyond”
Norman Brown**

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Media

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Lent: Rejection and Repentance

Fred Bultman

In 2017 the beginning of March coincides with the beginning of the season of Lent (40 weekdays leading up to Good Friday and Easter).

One purpose of Lent is for Christians to remember the sufferings Jesus endured, especially in the final week of his life. So this month we will look back on the story of Jesus' suffering, concentrating first on the painful reality that the ones who should have protected and supported Jesus were among those who rejected, denied, and betrayed him.

Then we will take some time to engage in another purpose of Lent: to reflect on the meaning of true repentance. With Christians throughout the centuries, we are called to examine our own lives, confess our sins, and draw closer to our God and Savior with a repentant heart. Some examples of people who turned back to God will remind us also that the Lord is compassionate and gracious, forgiving our sins and equipping us to live by the truth, as Jesus himself did.

Fred Bultman began a second career as a pastor in 1997 after working in the banking business. He served as a pastor to congregations in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Edmonton, Alberta. In retirement, he continues to enjoy sharing in the ministry of the churches in and around his hometown of Fremont, Michigan.

HIS OWN TURNED AGAINST HIM

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.
—John 1:11

Not until several paragraphs into his gospel account does the apostle John name who he is writing about: Jesus Christ (John 1:17). But in his earlier sentences John does tell us a lot about Jesus.

Jesus was present in the beginning, from before there was time. He was not only in on every part of the creation of the universe, but he was also involved in ways beyond our imagining. Everything that came to be—even light, even life itself—owes its existence to him. He was and is God.

Then this same beyond-our-imagination being came into the world as a part of his own creation. He came within the limitations of time and space and was born a flesh-and-blood human being. He came especially as a member of a struggling and politically oppressed

nation—a people that the Father had chosen and had already guided for about two thousand years: Israel.

And what happened? When Jesus came into the world he had created, that world did not recognize him. Even his own people refused to receive him.

In the Christian season of Lent that begins today, we remember Jesus' suffering. During the first part of this month we will look not so much at the physical side of this suffering but at something even more painful: how Jesus was rejected, despised, and betrayed—by "his own."

Jesus, eternal Son of God and suffering, human Savior, you became one of us in the world you made. Help us to receive you for who you are. Amen.

MURDER MOTIVE: RELIGIOUS HATRED

The Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.
—Mark 3:6

When Jesus came, good things happened.

When Jesus opened the Scriptures and taught everyone what those ancient words meant for their own lives and times, “the people were delighted” and many were amazed.

When Jesus encountered people stricken by disease or paralysis, his word and touch brought healing. The reaction was often great enthusiasm, and thanks and praise to God.

But some who witnessed Jesus’ teaching and healing were not impressed. The religious leaders known as the Pharisees had built their reputation on their meticulous observance of hundreds of rules forbidding things that might be interpreted as work on the Sabbath day of rest. When Jesus refused to play by those rules (Mark 2:27), the

Pharisees took offense. They were especially perturbed that Jesus dared to help and heal people on the holiest day of their week, the Sabbath. They were also outraged by the positive responses Jesus got from the crowds.

So angry were the Pharisees that they claimed Jesus’ healing words and touch were from the devil (Mark 3:22-24). As a result, they were looking for ways to kill Jesus, the one who had come so that people could have life to the full (John 10:10).

Jesus, you brought healing to minds and bodies as you used creation power to help your people. And for this, some took offense to the point of hatred. This is still true today too, Lord. Heal your world, we pray. Amen.

MURDER MOTIVE: POWER POLITICS

"If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation."
—John 11:48

Jesus' popularity with the people had become a matter of great concern among the ruling Pharisees and priests in Jerusalem. Why? Because he had raised Lazarus from the dead! (See John 11:17-44.)

A number of Jerusalem residents had visited nearby Bethany to pay their respects after the funeral for Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary. Then they had watched as Lazarus, who had been dead for four days, walked out of his tomb alive when Jesus called his name. As they returned home, some of them shared this news with Jerusalem's religious leaders.

And those leaders felt threatened, thinking that too many people had begun to believe in Jesus. So they called an urgent meeting. It wasn't that they denied Jesus' miracles; they just

didn't want to lose their influence with the local power base.

See, the priests were not only religious leaders but also allies of Herod's dynasty, powered by the Roman Empire. They profited from the business of the temple complex. So they saw the popularity of Jesus as a threat to their political and economic power base. And they believed that holding on to that power was essential for the people's survival. So, together with the Pharisees, they plotted to murder Jesus.

Jesus, you brought life in place of death—and some people felt so threatened that they plotted to kill you. Help us to celebrate the life you offer. Amen.

WHAT JESUS WAS WORTH TO JUDAS

*“What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?”
So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver.*

—Matthew 26:15

Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus. The gospel accounts are clear about what led Judas to take this step: it was all about the money.

There had been other minor betrayals before this major one. In the circle of the twelve closest followers of Jesus, Judas had been appointed treasurer. As donations came in, Judas was expected to use the money for the group's expenses or to help people in poverty (see John 13:29). But Judas also took some of the money for himself.

Now Judas saw a better financial opportunity—a more lucrative way to take advantage of his relationship with Jesus. Judas investigated, and he learned he could collect thirty silver coins as a reward for turning Jesus over to the people who wanted him dead.

So Judas sold Jesus, his master and teacher.

But earlier Judas had been present when Jesus asked his followers this vital question: “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Matthew 16:26). What had happened?

Apparently Judas no longer valued Jesus as his master, or even as a fellow human being. When Jesus was teaching, Judas heard only the clank of silver coins; when Judas looked at Jesus, he saw only a chance to make some money.

Priceless Jesus, help us today to value you above everything. Help us trust in your love and power to provide all we need so that nothing comes between us and you. Amen.

“EVEN MY CLOSE FRIEND”

Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me.
—Psalm 41:9

In Psalm 41 we find David praying to God about the difficulties he was facing from political enemies. These were obvious enemies who openly proclaimed their malice against David and gloated at each trouble he was experiencing.

Then David described another enemy that troubled him more. A friend who had shared his bread—someone who had sat at the same table for meals and who accepted food from David’s hand—had turned against him. This was a friend whom David had trusted and loved.

The Hebrew words of this verse can also be translated this way: “he has lifted up his heel against me.” This friend had stomped on David to crush him and to try to raise himself higher. In David’s experience, the worst hurt had come from one whom

he had trusted, one who should have cared about him, a friend.

At his last supper with his followers, Jesus became very troubled. He quoted from Psalm 41: “He who shared my bread has turned against me.” Then Jesus offered bread once more to that friend.

Judas Iscariot took the bread from Jesus’ hand and ate it. And then he went out and betrayed Jesus.

You too have received good things from Jesus. How have you treated him in return?

Jesus, divine, trusted, loving Friend, you also value human friendship, love, and trustworthiness, and you are troubled by its absence. Holy Spirit, make us true and lasting friends, to Jesus and to each other. Amen.

PROMISES, PROMISES

Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

—Matthew 26:33

As the sun set over the walls of Jerusalem behind them, Jesus and his eleven followers walked up the slope toward the garden on the Mount of Olives. He told them that on "this very night" the disciples would scatter like sheep and desert him. He had also said earlier that he would be arrested and condemned to death (Matthew 20:18-19). But Peter and all the disciples objected, saying that they were not going anywhere, that they would remain with Jesus through whatever crisis might come.

As a pastor, I often presided at ceremonies where serious vows were spoken: weddings, baptisms, professions of faith, ordinations of church deacons and elders. As I would help to prepare people to make these vows, I would also try to persuade myself that they seri-

ously intended to keep their promises. Sometimes I would wonder whether they really understood what they were getting into.

Thanks to Peter, I don't have to wonder whether the disciples understood. Peter said, in effect, "I know that what happens tonight may be a life-or-death situation, but I will be there for you, Jesus, even if I have to die defending you!" The other disciples did not hesitate to make the same sweeping promise.

But did they keep their commitment? Do we?

Spirit of God, etch in our hearts and minds the promises we have made—to spouses, parents, children, friends, neighbors, and you. Help us to keep our promises. Amen.

THE KISS OF DEATH

The betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him."
—Matthew 26:48

Growing up in North America, I wasn't familiar with the custom in which two adult men would kiss each other in greeting. But as an adult I learned that it was common in many societies around the world. I remember television coverage of leaders of the former Soviet Union as they greeted the leaders of allied nations. In each greeting, the leaders would embrace, pinch the flesh behind each other's cheekbones, and then kiss one another on each side of the face.

However it's done, a kiss involves getting close to someone in a way that is meant to erase all fear of harm or ill will. A kiss is meant to express good things: a peace-filled greeting for the other party; the affection of two people who care for each other; the pledge of permanent love and friendship between a

bride and groom; or even the measure of reverence or respect that a bishop expresses when he kisses the ring of the Pope.

After Judas Iscariot made his financial contract to betray Jesus, his friend, master, and teacher, he deliberately chose the kiss as the way to carry out his part in the plot. He chose the symbol of peace, affection, care, friendship, and respect—and transformed it into a kiss of death.

Peace, affection, caring, friendship, respect—Jesus, you are the source of all these blessings. Yet a symbol of all these good things became a signal in the plot to kill you. We sigh with you, Lord. Help us to be faithful. In your name, Amen.

JESUS, THE WANTED MAN

Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?"
—John 18:4

They assumed that the man they were after was dangerous. They were told he was leading a rebellion, he was a threat to law and order, and he was a danger to the temple and to Jerusalem. They expected to encounter a hostile band of rebels and a leader who had "powers" from the devil.

The well-armed and trained security force that came to arrest Jesus may have included about 200 men. (The Greek word in our text for "detachment of soldiers"—*spiera*—was used in other contexts to describe groups ranging from 600 to 200 Roman soldiers.) These were the forces that guarded the Jerusalem temple. They advanced through the midnight darkness with torches and lanterns blazing. They also had the informer Judas with them to identify the rebel leader.

But Judas's kiss turned out to be unnecessary. As the armed force approached the olive garden, the wanted man calmly came out to meet them—alone and unarmed. He identified himself as the one they were looking for, Jesus of Nazareth, and their reaction was quite surprising: "They drew back and fell to the ground."

These unanticipated circumstances unnerved the armed detachment of soldiers into a strange silence. Jesus' calm presence changed everything, for a moment.

Lord Jesus, for that moment, the plot against you paused, stunned by the power of your calm, unthreatening meekness. Holy Spirit, bless your people today with that kind of power. Amen.

QUICK EXIT

Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

—Matthew 26:56

In a congregation that I served as a pastor, our membership included a large number of immigrants from Africa: refugees from deadly civil wars in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ethiopia/Eritrea, and Sudan. Adjustment to North American culture (and winter temperatures) was not easy, but there was gratitude and relief for a new opportunity in Canada. Slowly but surely, the immigrants found the church community to be a safe place to share stories and testimonies of what they had endured. Each refugee story was different.

But there was a common element in every story, whether the refugee came from a rural village, a town, or a city: the experience of feeling abandoned, deserted by people whom they had assumed would be there for them if trouble came. Sometimes the abandonment

was by a neighbor, or by one they thought was a friend, or by a small business partner, or a fellow worshiper, or even a family member.

When the temple guards came to seize Jesus, it was his closest followers who abandoned him, exiting quickly in a panic. One escaped only because his garment tore off as a soldier seized him. Jesus had to face the ordeal ahead of him alone.

Have you ever felt alone and abandoned? Please know that Jesus is there for you and can help to fill the emptiness with his presence.

Lord, help me to notice when someone feels abandoned. Then help me to know how best to be used by you to fill that void. In your name, Amen.

PROMISES BROKEN

Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow.

—John 18:27

Earlier that night, Peter promised to be there for Jesus, no matter what—even at the cost of his own life. Now, in the coldest hours before dawn, Peter stands idly by, warming himself at the courtyard fire outside the high priest's house. Peter is outside while who-knows-what is happening to Jesus inside.

While he waits, Peter has three opportunities to show some recall of at least a fraction of his promised support. "You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?" "You aren't one of his disciples too, are you?" "Didn't I see you with him in the garden?"

And Peter lets each opportunity slip by as he denies even knowing about Jesus. In Matthew's account of this scene, Peter's responses grow more forceful each time, and he finally calls down curses and exclaims, "I

don't know the man!" (Matthew 26:74).

This was the testimony of Peter, who previously had recognized Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Peter had also seen Jesus clothed in heavenly glory and had heard the voice of God speaking from a cloud (Matthew 17:1-5).

"I will always be there for you, Jesus," Peter had promised, in effect. Then he disappeared into the night.

Jesus, we know you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Holy Spirit, work in us so that the people around us will know that we are followers, disciples, and friends of Jesus. In his name, Amen.

LOOKING FOR EVIDENCE

Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.
—Mark 14:56

There was one defendant in the court: Jesus. There were 71 jurors who made up the court of the Sanhedrin. And the sentence had already been determined: death by execution.

The problem was that the religious leaders had not yet conducted a trial. They could not even pronounce Jesus guilty because he had not been charged with a crime. And it was difficult to charge Jesus with a crime because no evidence could be found.

The rules of the Sanhedrin—like the rules of any legitimate court—did not allow for prosecution witnesses who dreamed up evidence against a defendant. But this court was so convinced of the threat of Jesus that it brought in many false witnesses and heard contradictory testimony that was obviously full of lies.

What mattered to this court was not the presentation of evidence, nor the pursuit of truth or justice. What mattered to this court were the verdict and the sentence. For these religious leaders, the end justified the means.

Thus it was through lies and false testimony that the religious leaders of his own people condemned Jesus, the one who is “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6).

Jesus, because you are the truth, it was only through untruth that you could be condemned. True God and true man, let the light of your truth shine through the darkness of this world. In your name we pray. Amen.

BLIND INJUSTICE

They spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, "Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?"

—Matthew 26:67-68

The court of the Sanhedrin had standards for how it was supposed to operate. Sanhedrin rules prohibited meeting during religious feasts. And yet the meeting to condemn Jesus took place during the holiest of feasts—Passover.

Sanhedrin rules required that there be at least a day of deliberation between presenting evidence and rendering a verdict. And yet this hearing sped to a verdict of capital punishment in one sitting, perhaps even within an hour.

As in any fair court, the rules warned against any officer of the court attempting to bias the jury with courtroom drama. But the high priest of this court, at the crucial moment, jumped from the bench and tore his clothes to demand the verdict he wanted.

At some points during this travesty, Jesus the defendant was also blindfolded (Mark 14:65; Luke 22:64), struck, spit on, and challenged to say who had hit him.

Jesus was unjustly condemned, and the hands and fists of the guards and religious leaders assaulted him. So did their mouths—with mocking insults and spitting in the face of the Son of God.

How often do we turn a blind eye to injustice when it benefits us?

Lord Jesus, despising and rejecting you meant despising and rejecting justice itself. Unblind our eyes to unfairness and injustice in the world around us, and show us how to make things right. Amen.

BLAME THE VICTIM

"If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you."
—John 18:30

In one of the congregations I served, a young woman faced the terrible ordeal of being stalked over a long period of time. The stalker would even show up at church events in his pattern of harassing her. Looking back, I feel grateful that she did not have to face what too many in her situation have encountered: a "blame the victim" attitude. Instead, she received support from family, church, police, and the court system in her quest to make the stalking stop and to have the offender face the consequences of his actions.

If we had the Roman governor Pilate's report of what he saw when he first met Jesus, it might have said this: "Subject's outer garment ripped. Portions of hair and beard pulled out. One black eye. Lower lip bloody and swollen. Bruises and scratch

marks over entire facial area." Pilate might well have identified Jesus as the crime victim, until someone clarified that Jesus was the accused.

Indeed, Pilate asked the obvious question that any magistrate would ask: "What charges are you bringing against this man?"

Initially, the Israelite religious leaders had no answer to this question, except to blame the victim.

Father God, we pray for those who suffer from harassment and abuse, and then face the additional burden of being blamed for what has been done to them. Teach us how to help. In your name we pray. Amen.

NO BASIS FOR A CHARGE

He went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him."
—John 18:38

Historical sources outside the Bible inform us that Governor Pontius Pilate did not hesitate to suppress any threat to Roman rule in his imperial province of Judea. Pilate likely had a network of informers looking for signs of rebellion, no matter how insignificant.

That might explain his perplexity when Jesus of Nazareth was presented to him as a dangerous man worthy of execution. Jesus' name was not on any "most wanted" lists.

If there had been any report, it might have noted these things: Jesus was a friend of tax collectors (Luke 15:1; 19:1-10). He had stated publicly that people should give to Caesar what they owed to Caesar (Mark 12:17). As a healer, Jesus had drawn crowds of mostly down-and-out (and politically unthreatening) followers. One of the per-

sons Jesus had healed was the servant of a Roman centurion (Luke 7:1-10). These were not crimes!

From the biblical record of Pilate's legal interrogation of Jesus, we can sense that Pilate's evaluation of Jesus might have checked off this way: "Delusional, misguided—maybe; pitiful—certainly; but criminal or dangerous—no way!"

So Pilate came back with the most obvious finding from the accumulated evidence: "I find no basis for a charge" against this man.

Father God, we give thanks for principles and systems of justice that seek the truth, protect the innocent, and stop crime. Make us hungry and thirsty for righteousness, we pray. Amen.

NOT GUILTY, BUT SENTENCED TO DIE

Their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand.

—Luke 23:23-24

For the Roman governor Pilate, it was not that he might have known better if he'd just had more information. It was not that he might have acted differently if he'd had a better understanding of how things worked among the people he ruled in the province of Judea. The case that confronted Pilate was not vague or unclear.

Several times Pilate gave the Jewish high priests the chance to submit all the evidence they could. Repeatedly Pilate recognized that the evidence added up to no case at all under Roman law. Pilate had personally interrogated Jesus. Perhaps he figured that something Jesus might say would prove incriminating, even if the priests' evidence had not. After these thorough reviews, Pilate returned each time with the same judgment. There has been no crime; there is no basis

for charges, no reason for a sentence of any kind. The obvious legal outcome of this case was to release the defendant.

But Pilate sentenced Jesus to death by crucifixion. Why? Because he recognized the power of the priests. They could make or break his governorship; they could cooperate in keeping things running smoothly in Judea, or they could make things difficult. Jesus had no power that mattered to Pilate. Jesus could be discarded, dispensed with. And so he was. This was, in God's design, for our sake.

Jesus, we mourn that you faced this profound miscarriage of justice. Reassure your followers who are undervalued and powerless with the knowledge that you value and empower them. Amen.

LAW AND DISORDER

The governor's soldiers . . . twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head.
—Matthew 27:27-29

For some of the refugee immigrants in a church I served, it took years before they could bring themselves to share with me the stories of atrocities they had witnessed, and of the horrific physical abuse and torture they had endured. These incidents had led them to realize that there was no possible future for them in the village, town, city, and country of their birth. Why? Because the perpetrators of these atrocities and torture were the very people who were supposed to maintain order and protect their fellow citizens: the police, the national guard, the officers and soldiers of their homeland's army.

The Roman Empire prided itself on its claim that it brought peace, prosperity, stability, order, and the rule of law throughout its vast domain, from Gaul (France) to the

Persian Gulf. Key to its fulfillment of this claim was the supposed strict discipline and restraint of the soldiers in the imperial army.

Order and discipline disappeared, however, when Jesus came under the custody of the Roman army's garrison in Jerusalem. They seized the opportunity to beat and torture their helpless prisoner even before they led him out to the place of execution.

Again, Jesus suffered all this for you and for me.

Father God, we pray today for people around the world who are victimized by the very people and institutions that should be protecting them. Save them, Lord; bring them to safe places. Amen.

NOISY EXECUTION

Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying . . . "Save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!"

—Matthew 27:39-40

For most of my life, I've lived in states and provinces where capital punishment is illegal. Even in those North American jurisdictions where executions still occur, they are carried out in the inner recesses of prisons, with a minimum of witnesses, and in solemn, almost respectful, silence.

In most times and places in human history, this has not been the case—and perhaps it was especially so at the noisy scene of Jesus' execution.

It happened along a busy road leading to one of the city gates of Jerusalem. For maximum public exposure and shame, the naked, dying bodies of the condemned were displayed on crosses mounted on a roadside hill. Until they passed out from the pain and torture, the crucified ones would hear the jeers of people coming and going

from the city. Shame on top of death was the point.

This particular execution scene featured a special squad of jeer-leaders. The chief priests and others from the Sanhedrin mocked Jesus loudly, reciting their trumped-up accusations. They even piously quoted from Scripture (Psalm 22:8) as they made fun of Jesus' helplessness.

Jesus heard, and he cried out the opening verse of that same psalm: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Father God, creator of the human voice, too often the loudest voices shout lies and insults. Help us to listen wisely for those who are speaking your Word truthfully. Amen.

“ALL FOR SINNERS’ GAIN”

He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.
—Isaiah 53:5

From before I can remember, my parents spent part of each day teaching the stories of the Bible to their children. My fourth-grade school teacher often did the same, applying those stories so that his students could see how they fit into them.

A hymn helped make that happen for me. That hymn, “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded,” was originally written in Latin, then translated into German and set to majestic somber music, then retranslated into English and included in many Christian hymnbooks. I vividly recall a Sunday-evening worship time more than 50 years ago when the haunting music and lyrics of that hymn hit home for me. “My Lord, what you did suffer was all for sinners’ gain; mine, mine was the

transgression, but yours the deadly pain.”

So far this month, we have projected the guilt for Jesus’ suffering onto many people in the gospel stories: the Jerusalem religious leaders, the betrayer Judas, Peter and the other fleeing disciples, the Roman governor Pilate and his brutal soldiers. But we’ve been hinting at something else too: the Christian faith also teaches us to look in the mirror, and to see in our reflection one whose sins also nailed Jesus to the cross.

“Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon you? It is my treason, Lord, that has undone you. ‘Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied you; I crucified you.” Lord Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner. Amen.

“HOW GREAT MY SIN AND MISERY ARE”

He went outside and wept bitterly.

—Luke 22:62

Many Christians around the world use the Heidelberg Catechism as a guide to biblical teaching about the good news of Jesus, highlighting all that Jesus has done to bring saving grace to the world, and pointing out the ways God enables believers in Jesus to show their love to God and neighbor in lives of obedient service.

The catechism also identifies the essential “step one” that must be taken before the benefits of the good news can take hold. Each believer must come to realize and to say personally, I know “how great my sin and misery are.” Without this, we see no need to change the way we’ve been living. Without this, we see no need for the grace that Jesus offers. Without this essential step, we remain mired in the misery we do not acknowledge.

For Peter, the rooster crowed. Then, as Jesus turned and looked straight at him, Peter remembered that Jesus had said he would disown him. And Peter took that vital first step. He opened his eyes to his own sin and misery, and his tears flowed in bitter sobs of repentance. His confession may have been without words, but in that moment Peter began to receive forgiving grace.

Have you taken that first step toward repentance and forgiveness? Do you truly know your need for a savior?

Lord Jesus, I want to experience your good news. Open my eyes to see my own sin and misery. Help me to take that essential first step, to pray, “Lord, I am a sinner.” Amen.

IN SECRET NO MORE

Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council . . . went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. —Mark 15:43

Though the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus, not all of its members agreed with the verdict. One, Nicodemus, had previously gone on record in warning the Sanhedrin against running roughshod over court rules in their eagerness to condemn Jesus (John 7:50-51).

Another member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph from Arimathea, had not consented to what the court had done (Luke 23:50-51). But, out of fear of the other leaders on the court, Joseph had not spoken out. His voice was unheard, and he remained only a secret follower of Jesus.

But by the end of that terrible day, Joseph had resolved to make a public declaration: he went boldly and openly to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, demanding that the body of Jesus be given an honorable burial. In doing this, Joseph

courageously implied to Pilate that the execution had been unjust. He also courageously put the Sanhedrin on notice that their verdict against Jesus was a fraud, and he courageously admitted to all that he, Joseph, should not have been just a secret follower.

So Joseph and Nicodemus honored and buried the beaten, bloody corpse of the one their colleagues had condemned, laying Jesus' body in Joseph's "own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock" (Matthew 27:60).

Forgive me, Lord Jesus, for I have sinned. I was in a position to speak, but I felt intimidated, so I remained silent. Help me to know how to act faithfully in the future. Amen.

IN THE DARKNESS, FALSE CLAIMS

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.
—1 John 1:8

When I was growing up during the Cold War era, the term “Big Lie Technique” was used to describe how communist dictators deceived their people about what was really happening in the world. Or it was used to explain how Adolf Hitler was able to convince the civilized, cultured citizens of Germany to do unheard-of, inhumane things under the Third Reich before and during World War II. The “Big Lie Technique” involves saying something that is blatantly untrue loud enough and long enough so that eventually people come to believe that it must be true.

But what if I am the Big Liar? What if I have been successful in covering up the evidence of my wrongdoing, and then convincing myself that it never happened? What if I have been successful in shifting the blame

for what I’ve done, or even in blaming the victim of my sin—and then convincing myself that I was always in the right? What if I have the power and influence to deny responsibility, knowing that no one will call me to account?

Today’s Scripture verses don’t answer these questions, but they do state the frightening facts: until my Big Lie is acknowledged, there is no truth in me. I am walking in darkness, and I have shut God, the true light, out of my life.

Holy Spirit, confront us with our sin, even the sin we’ve taught ourselves to hide, overlook, or dismiss as insignificant compared to everyone else’s. Overcome our sin with your grace. Amen.

FIELD OF BLOOD

The LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" —Genesis 4:9

Let's consider the case of the original murderer: Cain, the son of Adam. Cain admitted nothing. Cain confessed nothing. Even when given the specific opportunity, even when confronted by God himself with the evidence of his brother Abel's blood on the ground, Cain admitted nothing.

"Where is your brother?" was God's simple question, and Cain answered that he had no responsibility to keep his brother from harm. This was the response of the man who had just murdered that brother.

To the God who knows all, Cain lied: "I don't know where he is." But of course Cain knew where he had left Abel dead.

And did you notice that Cain seems to have thought he should still have God's protection? Without confessing his sin,

or even being sorry for it, Cain thought it was unfair that he should be a cursed wanderer. He complained to God, "I will be hidden from your presence." But even that wasn't true, as God made clear to him.

Standing in that blood-stained field, claiming to be without sin, Cain deceived no one but himself.

Are we deceiving ourselves?
Are we repentant? Are we our brother's keeper?

From the beginning, Lord, it has been your way not to leave sin unchallenged. And it has been our fallen human way to act like it's none of your business. Keep after us, Father. Help us to see our foolishness and turn back to you. Amen.

IS PILATE INNOCENT? ARE WE?

Pilate . . . took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. —Matthew 27:24

Pilate was the chief judicial magistrate in the Roman province of Judea. At that time Rome did not allow local community courts, like the Sanhedrin, to execute anyone (John 18:31). So if Jesus was to be executed, the order had to come from Pilate.

Though he stated several times that he had found no basis for a charge against Jesus, Pilate eventually gave in to the Jewish religious leaders who wanted Jesus crucified. So while he made a show of washing his hands and saying he was innocent of Jesus' blood, Pilate wasn't fooling anyone. He was basically admitting that he let the Jewish leaders have their way, probably because he feared they could retaliate and cause political unrest.

So Pilate sanctioned Jesus' death. As chief of staff of the

Roman military in the province, he ordered the centurion and his soldiers to carry out the death sentence he had pronounced. It was also Pilate who ordered that Jesus' tomb be placed under guard and secured with an official seal (Matthew 27:65-66).

Still today, many Christians regularly recite the Apostles' Creed, which mentions that our Lord Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate."

Refusing to accept responsibility—that is not repentance.

But are we any better?

Forgive me, Lord, for I have sinned. Help me to accept responsibility for what I have done. Help me to repent, ask your forgiveness, and live faithfully for you. Amen.

WHAT'S DONE CANNOT BE UNDONE

Judas threw the money into the temple and left.

—Matthew 27:5

What was Judas trying to accomplish when he threw those thirty pieces of silver back at the priests who had paid him to arrange Jesus' arrest? Did Judas think he could throw his own guilt back at them? Or that he could unload the evidence of his guilt—that noisy, clanking evidence he'd been carrying around for the past 12 hours?

But the deal was done, and the betrayal of innocent blood could not now be undone.

I believe that even Judas, however, could have turned around where he was and confessed his sin before God, and that God would have forgiven him—just as God has forgiven so many other betrayers who have come back to him in repentance. No sin that we are sorry for is too great for God to forgive.

But what had seized Judas was not a spirit of repentance but

a spirit of remorse. Judas was sorry for himself. An old confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, describes repentance as running away from sin and finding whole-hearted joy in God through Jesus. Judas ran away, but as he fled, he tried to ditch the evidence of his sin and to run as far as possible from God and Jesus.

Feeling sorry for yourself—that is not repentance. Being sorry for getting caught or for causing someone hurt is not the same as saying "Have mercy on me, a sinner."

Forgive me, Lord Jesus, for I have sinned. Use my sorrow to turn me to you and your cross. Holy Spirit, please make the Lord, whom I betrayed, my Friend again. Amen.

CLAIMING IT NEVER HAPPENED

You are to say, "His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep."
—Matthew 28:13

The religious leaders had the opportunity to interview personally the guards who saw the events of that morning while memories were still fresh. They could ask questions to clarify what those witnesses had seen. Did this opportunity strengthen their faith? Did the eyewitness facts from the guards confirm for the religious leaders that Jesus was the Messiah they had heard him claim to be before his death?

No. The Jerusalem chief priests were committed to a different outcome and didn't want to let little things like the testimony of eyewitnesses change their minds. It just wouldn't work that the person the chief priests had rejected, the person they saw as a threat to their own power, the person they had come to hate, the person they had framed, the person they

had lied about, the person they had gotten condemned to capital punishment, could come back from the death sentence they had inflicted.

So again there was a need to withdraw some money from the temple fund—even more this time—to buy the silence and false testimony of the guards who had witnessed the events of Easter morning.

Claiming it never happened—that is not repentance.

But do we do that? Do we lie to cover up?

Holy Spirit, confront me again with the facts. Help me to get out of this state of denial, claiming it never happened, so that I can pray—forgive me, Lord Jesus, for I have sinned. Amen.

DON'T TALK ABOUT THIS!

"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said.

—Acts 5:28

For the Jerusalem priests and the court of the Sanhedrin, it was worse than déjà vu. They had thought that killing Jesus would close the book on his influence. But now, instead of just one teacher, there were many, increasing in number daily, offering healing in Jesus' name. And whenever someone received healing, they also were hearing the testimony from the healers about how the death of Jesus had come about, and about his resurrection.

The very same religious leaders who had publicly led the jeers and insults at Jesus' cross now found that Jesus' followers dared to remind people of what the religious establishment had done. So they threatened the apostles: "Stop now! Do not talk about this Jesus anymore! You're making us look guilty; you're causing trouble and dis-

sension." And they backed up their threats with brutal beatings and imprisonment.

Sometimes cover-up tactics work. Threats, favors, payoffs, blackmail, intimidation of all sorts—people in positions of power can often use these to escape accountability. In this case, power from the Holy Spirit emboldened the apostles to keep talking.

In any case, the cover-up approach is not repentance.

Do we engage in demanding silence and threaten retaliation to protect ourselves?

Forgive me, Lord Jesus, for the ways I've been trying to cover up my sins. Then release me to hear the good news and be healed. In your name, Amen.

TO ALL WHO BELIEVE

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. . . . —John 1:12

Today we return to the same Bible passage we used at the beginning of this month, with one additional verse.

As we have seen, a major part of the story of Jesus is the shocking, sad history of how the Son of God was despised, rejected, and betrayed. But, as today's verses also remind us, God's light shone in the darkness, and (good news!) "the darkness has not overcome it." Instead, the reverse is true: the light overcomes the darkness.

Amazingly, the Holy Spirit can use darkness to lead us to the light. This is the light that brings us back into God's presence as his loved children—the light of life that lasts forever. At the end of John's gospel, after he tells the story of Jesus' life, suffering, death, and resurrection, John clarifies why he has told Jesus' story: "that you may be-

lieve that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

That opportunity to receive Jesus, to believe in him, is for everyone. Revelation 7:9 describes "a great multitude . . . from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

Will you be part of that multitude on the day when Christ returns, or when he calls you home?

Lord Jesus, I receive you as my God; I believe in you as my Savior; I embrace your Father as my Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

AT THE CRUCIFIXION: CLOSE TO JESUS

"We are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."
—Luke 23:41-42

By their own testimony, the criminals who were crucified with Jesus had led unworthy lives. They were outlaws and rebels who were now simply getting what they deserved.

But one of them saw the innocence of Jesus and had a change of heart. The Holy Spirit worked miracles in that criminal's life even though he was in his last hour.

Somehow this career criminal was able to think past his own pain and to feel sorrow for the person hanging on the cross next to him. He became one of the few persons there who spoke the truth about the dying Jesus' innocence and sinlessness.

This man also—of all people—became one of the first to understand that the death of Jesus would not be the end of Jesus, and that the mocking

sign above Jesus' head was true: Jesus was the King and would soon come into his kingdom!

Further, the Spirit moved this man's heart and mind to grasp that the one who was being crucified next to him could forgive him, erasing every sin of his spent life and bringing new life beyond death. And, just as Jesus promised him, this man would soon experience everlasting life with Jesus in Paradise.

Have you asked Jesus to remember you?

Sinless, innocent Jesus,
remember me when you
come into your kingdom.
May that kingdom come
soon, on earth as it is in
heaven. Amen.

RECOGNIZING GOD

When the centurion . . . saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"
—Mark 15:39

The centurion, an experienced warrior, was the commander of about 100 Roman soldiers. As the officer ordered by Governor Pilate to carry out three executions that day, he was no stranger to violence and death, whether it was on the battlefield or at a crucifixion. With all the crucifixions he had seen, he would have been accustomed to the struggles and cursing of defiant condemned prisoners, along with their shrieks of agony on the cross. He would have been familiar with the trembling of those overcome by fear in their final moments.

Jesus was now as dead as all those others, his lifeless body still hanging on that middle cross. And yet, this centurion, after watching the drama unfold around Jesus' death, was moved to exclaim: "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

He had probably heard the conversation of the criminals and Jesus (Luke 23:39-43). He couldn't have missed the darkness that shrouded the scene for three hours after noon, or the earthquake that split rocks when Jesus gave up his spirit, saying, "It is finished" (John 19:30; Matthew 27:51-52).

That day, the Holy Spirit moved that hardened soldier to speak: the centurion knew he was in the presence of God.

Are you ready to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ of God?

Lord Jesus, when the sun you had created refused to shine, your Spirit moved even this centurion to recognize you. Holy Spirit, continue to draw people from all nations to the cross. Amen.

THE POWER OF THE TRUTH

The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. —Acts 6:7

It is tucked away almost like a footnote within the story of the rapid growth of the church of Christ in the first months after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven. And yet, recalling the rejection and betrayal Jesus experienced from his very own people, these few words in today's verse come as a surprise: "a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."

Perhaps for a while these priests had gone along with the efforts of their leaders, thinking that if they could force people to stop talking about Jesus, the whole matter would just go away. Perhaps for a while they had tried to go along with covering up the evidence of Jesus' resurrection. It was probably very difficult for some of these priests to change; after all, they had spent their whole lives serving

in the temple worship, bringing sacrifices and doing many other rituals on behalf of the people. But now they were called to new roles as believers in Jesus, whom they had opposed but who was also the Messiah they had been waiting for.

This little note reminds us how the penetrating virus of self-deception can be overwhelmed and healed by the medicine of simply admitting the truth. As Jesus himself promised, "The truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

Are you ready to acknowledge Jesus as God's Messiah?

Lord Jesus, it is because self-deception is so deadly that we need the truth to show us the way to life. May the light of your truth set us free. Amen.

THE REJECTED ONE RETURNS

"I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied."
—Acts 26:15

In our reading for today, Saul (also called Paul) shares the story of the great turnaround in his life.

A blazing light from the sky, brighter than the Middle Eastern sun at noon, stops Saul and his companions as they are traveling to Damascus to persecute Christians. They all fall to the ground, and Saul hears a voice speaking to him directly: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

But Saul doesn't know who might want to stop him in his tracks. He has rejected Christ so thoroughly that he doesn't know any heavenly being whom he could possibly be persecuting. And because he doesn't get it, Saul has to ask, "Who are you, Lord?"

Saul recalls his Lord's reply: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Saul also recalls the

commission he received from the Lord Jesus: to bring the message of Christ, the good news of God's salvation, to the Gentiles—that is, to the people of other nations beyond the Jews of Judea.

In this way Saul learned that Jesus is really the Savior, the Messiah he had said he was. Saul learned that he had been opposing and persecuting God himself.

That day Paul's life was changed by the miracle of God's grace in Christ.

Lord Jesus, we pray that people of all the world's nations may follow you as God and Savior. Please also protect them from persecution. We look eagerly toward your coming again. Amen.

april

From Here to Jerusalem and Beyond

Norman Brown

This year, April begins in the middle of Lent. Our reflections this month continue our Lenten theme as we approach the somber events of Holy Week, including Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. Then we'll celebrate Resurrection Sunday (Easter) and the events surrounding Christ's victory over death. We'll close out the month by looking at some of Jesus' appearances after rising from the dead, noting how the resurrection is really the central event motivating our life as Christians.

Why did God the Son leave the glories of heaven and carry out his mission here on earth? That is the question we will answer this month.

Norman Brown is a retired Navy chaplain. A graduate of the United States Naval Academy and Calvin Theological Seminary, he served as a naval officer and as a pastor in a Michigan church. He then returned to the U.S. Navy and served as a chaplain in various positions for 17 years, until his retirement from the navy. He went on to serve as the pastor of a church in New Jersey, and then as an interim pastor while taking up other chaplain duties. He and his wife, Ruth, have three grown children and nine grandchildren.

APRIL'S FOOL?

"The Son of Man must suffer many things . . . and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." —Luke 9:22

On this April Fools' Day we're in the middle of Lent. This month we'll recall Christ's journey to Jerusalem, where he was crucified for our sins. He trekked this hard road on God's orders, but at the time many saw it as a fool's errand. Even Peter, one of his closest followers, said, "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22). But Jesus didn't waver.

Why did God send his Son on this mission? The reason goes way back to the beginning of human history. In all creation, only humans bore God's image (Genesis 1:26-27). But they rebelled against their Maker (Genesis 3) and burdened all of the rest of us with the penalty for their disobedience (1 Corinthians 15:22). Thankfully, God had a plan, and his Son followed it through (John 3:16).

In today's verses Jesus forewarns his disciples about the end of his earthly mission. And after his resurrection he explained, "This is what I told you while I was still with you" (Luke 24:44). But his mission won't be fully complete until "repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations" (Luke 24:47).

Have we repented, and do we believe in Jesus so that we can share in his resurrection and tell others this good news?

Lord Jesus, to the world, your mission may seem foolish. But we're profoundly grateful you took it on. Give us repentant hearts and believing souls so that we can share in your resurrection and spread its joy. Amen.

“CAN THESE BONES LIVE?”

The LORD . . . brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. —Ezekiel 37:1

God showed Ezekiel a frightening vision and asked the prophet, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Man, had certainly read this passage before beginning his ministry. But unlike Ezekiel, Jesus knew that he alone had to restore life by putting death to death. So he headed to Jerusalem.

As a navy chaplain and a pastor, I’ve dealt with death often. The first time, holding the hand of a young man my age as he died of cancer, is a sacred memory. Years later, in a graduate course, a professor urged us to see loved ones as “dead bones” to fully appreciate what they mean to us alive. Painfully difficult, it nonetheless worked.

Later, at a friend’s funeral, God showed me that we’re all death in the making. Christ’s work at

Calvary and the empty tomb became extraordinarily personal. I realized anew that he’d raised our sun-bleached bones from the sin-scorched earth to eternal life (1 Corinthians 15).

“Can these bones live?” God’s question highlights the essence of Lent: walking with Jesus and following him as he dies and rises from the grave—so that our bones can come to new life. Our response to God’s question reveals whether we’ll spend today living for God or lying about like dead bones.

Almighty God, we are born as dead in sin as sun-bleached, dry bones. Grace us with faith to believe your Son died for us so that we might live forever with you. In his name, Amen.

“LAZARUS IS DEAD”

He told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.”

—John 11:14-15

Jesus knew his friend Lazarus was deathly ill. Jesus also knew what no one else did: God would raise Lazarus from his grave. Still, Lazarus’s sisters were pleading with Jesus to come and heal their brother. Instead, he waited till Lazarus died. Why? To show God’s power over death.

Lazarus probably didn’t appreciate Jesus’ delayed arrival. With his life slipping away, Lazarus may have wondered, “Where is Jesus? Why doesn’t he come?” But Jesus’ mission was not about his friends’ timeline. It was about God’s. The Lord’s timing is always right. And here, to demonstrate his dominance over death, Jesus waited till everyone could be absolutely sure that Lazarus was dead.

Now, Jesus’ intentional delay does not mean he was insensitive to grief. He too “was deeply

moved in spirit and troubled,” and he wept. While people then and now may reason that he wept because of Lazarus, it was surely even deeper than that. Jesus wept because death is still our enemy. Far from being insensitive about death, Jesus came to take on the curse of death for us. And his purpose in all of this was God’s glory, so that we might believe in God and in his power, through Jesus, to cancel our sin and give us new life forever in his presence.

Do you believe in this Savior?

Lord Jesus, we know you care because you came to die for our sake. Thank you for the promise of new life forever. In your name, Amen.

“JESUS WEPT”

Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”

—John 11:35-36

Many mourners attended Lazarus’s burial, but not his friend Jesus. Nonetheless, “Jesus wept.” Jesus’ gut-wrenching grief highlights the Savior’s sorrow over sin and death and what their curse does to us. Jesus was “deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” We can’t imagine the depths of divine grief buried in these words. And as he grieves death, sin, and evil, so do we.

We live near Plymouth, Massachusetts, where there is a cemetery of Europeans dating to the 1620s. We enjoy wandering among the headstones and wondering about the people buried there. Their lives were difficult. Many died very young. Death took its toll among the Pilgrims as it does among us. We mourn loved ones whom we will not see again in this life.

Jesus mourned a friend whom he would soon raise from

death. Lent invites us to grieve as Jesus grieved, and to glory as he gloried—in the death of death. May we all see the depth of the Savior’s grief over sin in order to glimpse his resurrection glory.

“Jesus wept” is Scripture’s shortest verse—and one of its most profound. Imagine the Son of God, who would defeat death forever, weeping with mourners at the grave of the man he was about to resurrect. Lazarus would die again. Jesus would soon die too.

Let’s grieve with Jesus over our sin, but let’s not grieve without hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). See how he loves us!

Jesus, comfort us with your grace. We grieve, but not without hope—all because of you. Amen.

THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die." —John 11:25

When Jesus finally made his way to Bethany, Martha greeted him with an accusation: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus then promised that Lazarus would rise again. And Martha said, in effect, "Yes, we know—someday."

As Jews, Martha and Mary believed that someday God would bring about a resurrection of the dead, but that probably seemed so far off that it gave little comfort for the present. The promise of the resurrection can seem that way to us at times too.

The sisters also believed, however, that Jesus could have kept Lazarus from dying. And when he did raise Lazarus (John 11:38-44), can you imagine the effects that had? What was it like for Lazarus after dying and then being raised? How was life

changed for him and his sisters? I'm sure they saw Jesus in a totally different light.

During Lent, as we trace Jesus' path to Jerusalem and beyond, we're compelled to hear Jesus' wake-up call about the purpose of his coming and what that means for us still today. If our faith is foggy and distracted by grief or sorrow, he shakes us once again with these astonishing words: "I am the resurrection and the life."

This is one of the "I am" statements of Jesus, each of which anchors Christ's identity as the one true God: "I am the resurrection and the life." And he asks us, as he did Martha, "Do you believe this?"

Jesus, give us firm faith that you will raise us too from death, because you are alive! Amen.

“HE WHO BEGAN A GOOD WORK”

He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.
—Philippians 1:6

My grandfather died some years before my parents were married. He was a lifelong worshiper but never joined the church. “Grandpa never felt he was good enough to take communion,” Mom said. He was a fine man, but he failed to appreciate grace—that we don’t come to the Lord’s Supper because we’re worthy but because Christ has made us righteous.

Lent teaches us that we who believe in the Son of God “have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:10). Grandpa was a hard-working, Scottish Presbyterian immigrant from Nova Scotia. He settled in New England and made a good life for himself and his family. But he didn’t think himself good enough for God’s company.

Grandpa was right; we aren’t good enough. In spite of that,

however, God wants us in his company forever. But as Paul and Grandpa agree, we can’t get there on our own.

God must make us acceptable. Christ took away the offense of our sin against God, and now the Spirit is at work reshaping us to be like Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). We are God’s imagebearers (Genesis 1:26-27), and he is making us whole. The good news of Lent is that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.”

Can you believe that?

Father, complete the work you began in us when you gave us faith in Christ. And when we have doubts and struggle to believe, assure us of your grace and forgiveness. Work on us today, we pray. Amen.

“I TRUST IN YOU, LORD”

But I trust in you, LORD; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in your hands; deliver me. . . .
—Psalm 31:14-15

Grace comes as what I call the Divine Adversative. Adversative conjunctions (*but, yet, still, however*) are words that connect opposing ideas. They indicate a reversal of direction or perspective. God turns us around from being hell-bent to heaven-bound. Amazing!

David’s enemies made him the object of derision and scorn by his neighbors. Worse, he felt ignored and forgotten, treated as worthless, like a broken plate or cup. And those who took notice threatened his life and wished him dead. Jesus quoted from this psalm on the cross when he cried, “Into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Why? Jesus experienced the Divine Adversative, but in the opposite direction. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

That transaction, with the Son of God taking on our sin, not only delivers salvation to us hell-bent sinners. God also takes the evil that befalls us and uses it to transform us. “We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3-4). The Divine Adversative delivers grace to God’s people—transforming, redeeming grace.

“I trust in you, LORD.”

O God of transforming grace, you take the worst in our world to make the best of and for your people, just as you turned your Son’s crucifixion into our salvation. Transform us today. Amen.

UNTAMED COLTS

“Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me.”
—Matthew 21:2

On this day before Palm Sunday, let’s look at the almost overlooked little animal that is so important to Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Jesus tells his disciples to go into the village, untie a donkey and her colt, and bring them to him. Mark and Luke describe it as a colt that “no one has ever ridden” (Mark 11:2; Luke 19:30). And selecting a donkey’s colt, Matthew explains, fulfills a prophecy (Zechariah 9:9). Ridding a donkey’s colt identifies the rider as coming in peace.

What’s striking is how that donkey, never before ridden, submitted to Jesus without resisting. Even the loud “Hosanna” shouts of the people seemed to have no impact on this animal. Such unnatural behavior of this donkey’s foal is as instructive as it is miraculous. Our God has

dominion over all of his creation.

Did Jesus look for the same submission from his disciples—total surrender to the Master? Paul wrote later, “I urge you . . . in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (Romans 12:1). Perhaps our thinking about this colt should prompt us to ask whether we’re submissive to the Lord. Or do we tend to act as might be expected of a stubborn donkey, braying in protest and pulling against the lead?

Lord, Master of all nature, lead us gently to surrender to your control, submitting our hearts, our minds, and our very lives to your perfect will. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

SHOUTING STONES

“Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” . . .

“If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” —Luke 19:39-40

Palm Sunday seems a misplaced holy day. The Messiah rides into Jerusalem on a donkey’s colt like a prince of peace, not a conqueror. Raucous crowds and jubilant disciples cheer Jesus on in sheer ignorance, waving branches (Matthew 21:8-9) and shouting “Hosanna!” (meaning “Save us!” see Psalm 118:25-26).

Yet we know, as Jesus does, that he will soon face betrayal, trial, torture, and the cruelest death. He rides through Jerusalem to the cross, where he will assault the gates of hell (Matthew 16:18). Palm Sunday isn’t the grand opening but the ironic beginning of Holy Week, which closes with Jesus’ death and burial on Friday.

I can’t imagine Jesus enjoying the celebration. His heart must be broken as he engages the deadly battle with evil. Like a soldier who must face the ene-

my, Jesus is prepared to give his life for us. Do we realize why he faced all this—for us?

Later that week Jesus would hear angry jeers—not these naïve cheers. But on this day he accepts the praise; otherwise “the stones will cry out,” he says. Does Jesus mean stones along the road or the stones that made up the temple? (See Habakkuk 2:11.) Whichever they were, the stones could cry, “Wave your branches! Cry ‘Hosanna!’ Enjoy Palm Sunday—but know why he comes!”

Today we bring “humble praises, Holy Jesus,” but soon you’ll hear angry voices shouting “Crucify him!” Today, we pray, accept our praise at the beginning of this most holy week. In your name, Amen.

BITTER TEARS OVER JERUSALEM

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace"

—Luke 19:41-42

Still riding on the donkey's colt, with cheering crowds and jubilant disciples urging him on, Jesus approached Jerusalem. The Pharisees were critical, or maybe cautious; they didn't understand what was happening. Maybe they were thinking Jesus would try to usurp their authority. Or maybe they feared that Pilate's soldiers would come down hard on the people for celebrating Jesus as a king.

When Jerusalem, which means "city of peace," came into view, Jesus wept, but not as he did at Lazarus's grave (John 11:35). This time he wept because God's people were about to reject his Son, who was bringing them salvation (John 3:16). Despite three years of ministry in their midst and so many prophecies fulfilled, they could not see what God was doing to

save his people from destruction. The Savior was bringing salvation, but they couldn't see their guilt, even when he died for them (Romans 5:8, 10). Jesus also wept over what was coming that week, when everyone would reject him, and he wept over Jerusalem's history of rejecting God. God had often sent messengers to remind them of his love, and finally now he sent his own Son. But they still didn't get it.

As we walk with Jesus this week toward his crucifixion, do we get it? Can we weep with Jesus that it took his death to gain us eternal life?

O Jesus, forgive us for not getting it. You came to die so that we can live. Teach us what all this means and what it cost you. In your name, Amen.

CHOSEN!

*This is what the Lord says . . . "the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."
—Isaiah 49:7*

We were lost. Dad left when I was four. I recall riding a bus with Mom and my little brother. Where were we going? "To Aunt Jessie's," she said. I liked Mom's sister but didn't understand we were moving there. My aunt and uncle had decided they had to help my now single, working mother raise her two sons.

Isaiah 49 brings that memory to mind, especially during Holy Week. My aunt and uncle didn't just give us a home; they embraced us as part of their family. With their daughter we became what today would be called a "blended family." It became quite happy. My uncle, who died years ago, wasn't religious; yet by embracing us he became a "God the Father" figure for me. And very late in life God raised in him faith in Christ.

God chose Israel before her birth. He remained faithful to

his people although they wandered, so that Israel could become "a light for the Gentiles." He made his people a nation that the world would know as God's chosen. Isaiah received God's promise some 700 years before Jesus fulfilled it on the road to Jerusalem. Now God's Son would bring salvation to all peoples, Gentiles as well as Jews. Jesus trekked resolutely toward Good Friday's cross to redeem his people and make them the light of the world. Chosen!

Thank you, God, for choosing us when we were lost and didn't know it! As Jesus approaches the cross to fulfill your promises, open our eyes and make us grateful believers. In Christ, Amen.

BETRAYED!

Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me."
—John 13:21

The navy taught me "command loyalty." Only loyalty to God, country, and family were more important than faithfulness to the command and its mission. Otherwise, the enemy could gain the advantage.

Jesus handpicked his disciples—including Judas the betrayer—for a three-year term of instruction on how God's kingdom was coming through Christ. Loyalty to one's rabbi (teacher) was expected without question. Yet Judas, who loved money, gave in to a temptation to betray Jesus to the religious leaders who wanted to kill him (Mark 14:1-11; John 12:4-6).

Midway through this Holy Week, as the Son of God journeyed from Sunday's "Hosannas" to the inhumanity of the cross, Jesus hosted his last Passover Feast and warned his disciples that one of them

would betray him. Oh, to reach back 2,000 years through history and warn the other disciples, "Stop Judas!" But Judas betrayed Jesus as planned.

Gaping in horror at my own history, I'm mortified at my betrayals of Jesus, breaking even God's fundamental commands to love him above all and my neighbor as myself. I bow before the cross, grateful that my Lord was willing to die in my place. Jesus was betrayed, but he never betrayed his Father or his people.

Christ Jesus, we call you Lord, but we can be so disloyal. We bow at your table, at the foot of your cross, and before your empty tomb, asking forgiveness and grace to be more loyal disciples. Amen.

WASHING FEET

"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet."
—John 13:14

The retreat we planned while I was a navy chaplain needed a concluding service that included everyone. Since participants would come from many faiths or none at all, it had to be something all could share in. We decided that a footwashing ceremony like the one Jesus led would yield the experience of giving and receiving grace.

The participants sat barefoot in a circle. After reading from John 13, I gave a brief message. Then, with a bowl of water and a towel, I began by washing the feet of the woman to my left. She then took the towel and bowl, knelt, and washed the feet of the person to her left—and so on around the circle. My feet were washed last. I thought some might find washing someone else's feet objectionable. Instead, several recoiled from having their feet washed.

Grace, I saw, can be more difficult to receive than to give.

Maundy Thursday commemorates the command Jesus gives in John 13. "Maundy," from the Latin *mandatum*, means "command." Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Christ didn't just wash people's feet; he humbled himself (Philippians 2:5-8) from his place as Lord in heaven to become a human servant, to grace us with eternal life. By washing feet, he showed us how to accept grace, in humility.

Lord, we are so proud. Thank you for not only washing our feet but also cleansing our souls through your broken body and shed blood. May we receive your grace and share it gracefully. Amen.

WHAT'S SO GOOD ABOUT GOOD FRIDAY?

Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.
—John 19:30

Today's reading is long, but it raises the question *Would anyone there that day have called it a "good" day?* The high priest Caiaphas and the Pharisees got rid of a popular, influential preacher—but at what price? Pontius Pilate, the hard-bitten Roman governor, reluctantly allowed Jesus to be crucified to appease the mob and their leaders demanding Jesus' life. Pilate turned him over to the execution squad, for whom this was just another death sentence along with two others that day—until the centurion realized they'd killed the Son of God (Matthew 27:54)!

If the disciples called it "good," it was only after encountering the risen Christ (John 21). And would Jesus say that Friday was "good"? Even the night before was agonizing, as Jesus begged his Father to spare him from his

awful mission (Luke 22:39-46). Maybe later, back in heaven with God, he could finally say, "Yes, Father, that was a good day."

The term "Good Friday" first occurred in the fourth century. Some think it was originally called "God's Friday." Today we can call it "good" if we appreciate the fact that Jesus' trial, punishment, and death brought our salvation. These truths are seen through the spiritual spectacles of faith. So in that sense it truly is "Good Friday"!

Is this Friday good for you?

On Good Friday, blessed Jesus, we lament the sin and evil that made this horror necessary. But we are also grateful for your sacrifice. Help us prepare for resurrected living. In your holy name, Amen.

BOLDLY BURYING THE DEAD SAVIOR

Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus . . . asked for Jesus' body . . . and placed it in his own new tomb.

—Matthew 27:57-60

It's Holy Saturday. Jesus was dead in the grave. He was buried by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (John 19:39), both Pharisees. Secretly they'd become followers of Jesus. His disciples had scattered, so these two Pharisees stepped forward. Joseph courageously asked Pilate for Jesus' body after most of the Pharisees had demanded his crucifixion.

Then Joseph contributed his own newly dug tomb. He and Nicodemus ensured that their crucified master was properly buried. Their generosity reminds us of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume (John 12:1-8).

Nicodemus and Joseph acted with no assurance of Jesus' resurrection, though he had said it would happen. But a new day would soon be dawning! Every disciple's life from now on

would be transformed. History itself would change. But on that Saturday, Jesus' body lay quite dead in a borrowed grave.

Joseph and Nicodemus buried the Savior as an act of loving devotion. That's all that every disciple is called to do: live today, obediently and devotedly, in the sure hope that God will make everything new. The dead Savior they boldly buried would soon rise as the Lord of new life!

Lord, it's hard to see you dead and buried, and it's harder still to wait for the dawn. Remind us that death is the judgment for sin and that we are sinners. Give us faith that tomorrow will come. In your name, Amen.

THE RESURRECTION: FRIGHTENING NEWS

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."

—Matthew 28:5-6

When an angel appeared to someone, it was usually a frightening event—but the Easter angel really shook things up. He caused an earthquake when he opened Jesus' tomb—not to let him out but to show that the tomb was empty. The Roman guards were scared stiff by the quake. The angel, however, urged the witnesses to spread the good news that Jesus had risen from the dead!

It's likely that both the earthquake and the angel's appearance frightened the women who had come to the tomb. The angel had to calm their fears so that they'd hear him: "I know that you are looking for Jesus. . . . He has risen."

Easter's new life collides with Good Friday's deadly cruelty! Remember the horror of that day?

The resurrection of Christ is earth-shaking news. Fear of the Lord is appropriate, along with life-changing joy.

"Come and see the place where he lay," the angel said. "Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead.'"

The witnesses saw and went and told, and witnesses have been telling ever since. Today, 2,000 years later, we also see, and we also must proclaim, "He has risen!" And if that news is both fearsome and joyful, we've got it right.

Hallelujah! You, Lord Christ, are risen from the dead. Restore to us the joy of your salvation even though we have long known the rest of the story—because it's true! In your name, Amen.

EMMAUS ROAD: WALKING IN IGNORANCE

As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.
—Luke 24:15-16

How could the disciples on the Emmaus road not recognize Jesus? They were returning from Jerusalem, where Jesus had been arrested, tried, tortured, crucified, and buried. Now his body was gone, amid rumors flying that he had risen from the grave.

Just a week earlier they probably had walked with Jesus as he rode a colt into Jerusalem. They had hoped he would declare himself king and take up the ancient throne of David. But instead he was arrested, sentenced, and then crucified. And now they heard tell of an empty tomb and a missing body! As they wandered home to Emmaus, they wondered about what might have been.

We know Jesus rose from the grave, yet we too can still live in the dark about his presence, or even ignore him. At this

point those two disciples were in the dark since Jesus hadn't revealed himself to them. They must have wondered who this person was who didn't seem to know what had happened in Jerusalem. So they filled him in.

Walking the resurrection road is still challenging today. Living consciously and intentionally in Jesus' presence is a daily challenge. We so readily miss the reality of Christ with us. Yet this is our hope: Christ is with us whether we recognize him or not. Don't intentionally ignore him. Look for him. Immanuel, "God with us," walks with us.

Immanuel, we easily fail to appreciate your presence in our life every day. Open our eyes and hearts to see you with us. Amen.

EMMAUS ROAD: WALKING ENLIGHTENED

Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

—Luke 24:27

Two disciples trudge home to Emmaus. As they walk, they discuss together the events of the past few days. They wonder what might have happened if Jesus had not died.

Suddenly Jesus joins them. He blesses them with his presence, and yet for some reason they're kept from recognizing him. The resurrected Jesus listens to their story as he walks along with them. Then he enlightens them, explaining what the Scriptures have said about him.

Jesus probably explained how the exodus from Egypt pointed to redemption from sin's slavery and how the many prophets pointed to the Messiah. He likely explained many things that would have opened their eyes to see that the Messiah himself was walking with them. They needed ears to hear, divine interpretation to help them

understand, and God-given faith. They still didn't recognize him—but they soon would.

No one can discover the Savior by themselves; he reveals himself to us. Faith is God's gift, enabling us to understand the Scriptures, which tell the story of our salvation. So let's learn all we can from this Word, trusting he will enlighten us as he did our friends on the Emmaus Road. Then we too can recognize our Savior walking with us.

Teach us, O Lord, how to walk our road in life. Forgive our failure to see you, hear you, and learn of you. Give us faith to live for you, we pray. In your name, Amen.

EMMAUS ROAD: WALKING ENLIVENED

Their eyes were opened and they recognized him. . . . "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

—Luke 24:31-32

The Emmaus road disciples were confused about what had really happened in Jerusalem until Jesus enlightened them. Yet they still didn't recognize him. As they approached Emmaus, Jesus seemed to be going further. Being hospitable, they invited him to dinner and overnight. But then their guest became their Host. He gave thanks, broke the bread, and served the meal.

Who was this who took on the role of host in someone else's home? He was the Son of God! He was exercising his right and responsibility to bless his own! Finally they recognized him, not just with their eyes but also in recalling their "hearts burning within." That had started as they walked with him and he explained the Scriptures.

The Emmaus disciples went back immediately to Jerusalem.

Their enthusiasm was infectious. Imagine faith so heartwarming that you must share the news! Or have modern marvels and today's skepticism doused the fire? Restoration is still found as we walk with Jesus, listen to his Word, and spend time with him in prayer.

We never hear about Cleopas and his companion again. Maybe they became missionaries of the good news. So could we. Our stories won't be written in Scripture, but they can be written in the lives of others, enlivening them with our witness by walking the resurrection road.

Lord, our hearts burn within us as we realize all you have done for us. Give us words to share the news—and courage to speak of you. Amen.

I BELIEVE; HELP . . .

“Everything is possible for one who believes.” . . .

The boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

—Mark 9:23-24

The desperate father’s plea reverberates down the centuries. Every parent understands. You’re desperate to help your child. Prayer isn’t so continual (1 Thessalonians 5:17) as involuntary: “God, please help!”

A son suffers seizures from demon-possession. As a mild epileptic, I know how terrifying seizures can be for my loved ones. No doubt in panic, the helpless father seeks the help of Jesus’ disciples. But they’re unable to help, and an argument with the local religious leaders ensues.

Though this happened before Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, we see the kingdom of God in Christ invading the kingdom of the world” (Revelation 11:15), conquering evil.

But the boy’s father doesn’t realize this. He’s just reaching out to

the Savior: “If you can do anything . . . help us.”

Jesus’ response—“Everything is possible for one who believes”—may sound trite. The father responds with uncommon honesty: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” Then “the God thing” happens. Jesus frees the boy of the demon, heals him of his seizures, and restores him to his family. The honest-to-God father with just a mustard seed of faith now has his son back—healthy and whole. This is resurrection life.

Father God, you loved us while we were yet sinners. Give us daily faith to seek you. Help us who struggle with faith to believe every day in the Christ who saves us. Amen.

THE HEALTHY SKEPTIC

"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands . . . and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."
—John 20:25

We often call him "Doubting Thomas," but he's more a healthy skeptic than an unbeliever. He's skeptical about the preposterous story of seeing Jesus alive again. We don't know where Thomas was on the night of Resurrection Sunday, but he wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus visited them in a locked room, showed them his wounds, and blessed them.

When Thomas returned, they told him they had seen Jesus. But after the crucifixion's disappointment, Thomas would have to see and touch Jesus' wounds for himself. Thomas wasn't being stubborn. His world had collapsed. He'd been all in for Jesus, ready to die with him (John 11:16). Now, still grieving, Thomas was skeptical about the disciples' bizarre story. Who could blame him?

A week later Jesus came to visit again, while Thomas was there. Thomas touched Jesus' wounds and professed in faith, "My Lord and my God!" It's the first record we have of any disciple calling Jesus "God." In an instant, skepticism became faith. Our gracious Lord answered Thomas's questions and made him a grateful disciple. Then Jesus added a blessing for all of us who cannot see and touch the resurrected Christ but must believe the disciples' testimony. Let's share Thomas's profession of faith, saying, "My Lord and my God!"

Dear Lord, sometimes the whole story of what you did for us is hard to believe. We're often just as skeptical as Thomas. Give us the faith to say with him: "My Lord and my God!" Amen.

SEALED AND SECURED

LORD . . . you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.
—Psalm 16:5-6

Symbols remind us where we belong. I wear three rings: my wedding band, my Naval Academy class ring, and my Grandpa MacKinnon's ring. Grandpa died long before I was born, but I'm named after him. His ring identifies me with him, my Scottish grandfather.

The Christian's symbol is Jesus' cross. It reminds us that we belong to God through Jesus' death on the cross, and the Holy Spirit, who comes to live in our hearts, is the seal of our inheritance with God. Because I come from a "broken home," the Lord's claim on me has become primary. Jesus promises that all who believe in him are secure: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28).

In Psalm 16 David prays for safety and security while

professing he is God's own. Knowing he belonged to God for eternity gave him a good and pleasant life in the present.

God seals and secures us in the most pleasant place, with him in Christ. As the apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 8:31-39, "If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution . . . or danger or sword? . . . No . . . [nothing can] separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!"

Faithful Father, we worship you. Your faithfulness secures and seals us so that we will never slip from your grasp. For we belong to you in Jesus Christ. Amen.

THE TRUE WAY TO LIFE

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well."

—John 14:6-7

After washing the feet of his disciples (John 13), Jesus tells them he will soon be leaving to prepare a home for them in God's presence. Thomas asks, "How can we know the way?" Jesus then reveals the central truth of his identity: "I am the way and the truth and the life."

Jesus says he will prepare places in his Father's house for all his followers. Some older Bible versions also translate "rooms" as "mansions." Growing up near Newport, Rhode Island, a place with many mansions, I often dreamed of living in one. But, of course, any place with God is infinitely better than the grandest castle without him.

Right now Jesus is preparing our eternal home with God. What really matters for us, though, is how to get there. Jesus says he is the *true and only* way to the Father. To our pluralistic world,

Jesus' claim sounds politically incorrect. But God gave his only Son (John 3:16) for salvation. And, on our own, we can't find our way to him; we just keep going our own way, astray from God. We must trust him to bring us home. For now, we follow his way "by grace . . . through faith" (Ephesians 2:8), by loving God wholeheartedly and loving others (Matthew 22:37-39).

If we belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ, we needn't worry. We are already with him, walking the true way to life!

Lord Jesus, you are the only way to the Father, the whole truth of God and eternal life. Help us to follow you as you lead us each day. Amen.

RESURRECTED!

If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.
—1 Corinthians 15:14

A friend of mine enjoys three-dimensional wooden puzzles. He says the key is to find the “lynchpin,” one piece that unlocks the pieces and allows him to solve the puzzle.

This same friend calls 1 Corinthians 15:14 “the lynchpin of the gospel.” As Paul writes, “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”

Without the resurrection, we have nothing on which to build our faith. All we have is a famous person who taught noble ideas about life and an ethical system on which to build our society. But that’s just for this life. Without the resurrection, we have no hope for surviving death. And if that’s the case, then why bother believing in Jesus?

Paul goes on, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the

dead.” And in the first sermon of the New Testament church, Peter preached, “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we all are witnesses of it” (Acts 2:32). Paul wrote that the resurrected Jesus “appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time.”

As we look back on Easter, we are called not only to profess our faith that Jesus was raised but also to understand that this is the lynchpin of our faith. Everything hangs together on Christ’s resurrection!

Lord Jesus, your resurrection is the lynchpin of our faith, our reason for living, our hope for eternal life. Keep us firmly fixed to the fact that you are raised from the dead. In your name, Amen.

THE DIVINE ADVERSATIVE

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.

—1 Corinthians 15:19-20

Scripture abounds with examples of what I call the Divine Adversative. This is about God intervening to reverse the effects of our sin.

Yesterday we noted an example of this in the resurrection of Jesus. Christ's resurrection has reversed everything! Life conquered death, good conquered evil, and love conquered all.

As Paul explains, if Christianity is no more than a "feel-good" faith that helps us behave better in this life, we're pathetically hopeless. If that is the case, then we have no help from God in this life and no hope for the next, if there is life after death. So it would be better to abandon all hope for ourselves as well as for those who've already died. All of this would mean the resurrection is merely a figment of desperate faith.

But then comes the thunderous Divine Adversative: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Hallelujah! We have a hope that extends from our life here on earth to eternity itself. Rather than being defeated by the curse of sin and death, "in Christ all will be made alive," just as Christ himself is alive for eternity.

All of our hope—and indeed all of our life—is certain, because God said, "But Christ!"

Father, thank you that your Son stepped into our painful history. If not for Jesus Christ, we would be most pitiable. May we honor you with gratitude today for all you have done for us. Amen.

FROM THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

"I will say, 'Salvation comes from the LORD.'" And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

—Jonah 2:9-10

Jonah's story challenges our natural skepticism. Imagine blaming an ocean storm on one passenger, though he admitted sinning against God. And how could tossing Jonah overboard calm the storm? Yet it did! And there's more: God sent "a huge fish to swallow Jonah," who survived in its belly for "three days and three nights."

Jonah confessed his sin, professed faith in God's power to save him, gave thanks for deliverance, and vowed eternal gratitude. Now God had Jonah's attention. He ordered the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land.

This story sounds bizarre. But Jesus used it in a discussion with the Pharisees. The Pharisees demanded miracles from Jesus to prove he was all he claimed to be. Instead, Jesus referred them to Jonah: "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a

sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matthew 12:39).

Jonah didn't dive voluntarily into the sea expecting a "huge fish" to save him; nor did he expect to be vomited from the beast onto the beach. But God used Jonah to point to Jesus' sacrificing his life and being sealed in the tomb for three days before God resurrected him. And we share his eternal life. Born in the belly of the beast called sin, Jesus freed us for eternal life. We can sing with Jonah, "Salvation comes from the LORD"!

Lord Jesus, you willingly came into our world of sin to save us. How can we thank you enough? Accept our praise. Amen!

LOVING THE UNSEEN SAVIOR

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him. —1 Peter 1:8

How amazing it would have been to have personally seen Jesus in action, walking on water, healing people, or raising people from death. And how astonishing to meet the resurrected Jesus outside his empty tomb! But today, 2,000 years later, all we have are the Bible's collection of testimonies.

And yet these are sufficient. Indeed, Peter commends all who believe without having met the resurrected Jesus in person. So we must accept as true what the gospel writers and others have reported. "Well done!" Peter commends his readers, not only for believing in Jesus but also for *loving* him!

If you've ever spent time away from loved ones, you know the pain of missing them. Technology narrows the gap, but it hardly lessens the longing for their presence. Having

spent many months away from home in the navy, I've experienced what it means to miss my loved ones. But I've never known Jesus' physical presence. In many a dark time I have longed for his loving touch. But for that we must wait. This is why Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, commends his readers—you and me. We love our Savior, despite the fact that we have not seen him or touched him or heard him speak.

Do you have that intimate love for your Savior?

If only, Lord Jesus, we could see your face and feel your touch. It's enough, though, that your Spirit assures us you are with us until that day when we will see you. Amen.

153 FISH!

"Bring some of the fish you have just caught." . . . It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.

—John 21:10-11

Here's the intriguing account of seven disciples catching 153 fish on Jesus' orders. Why report 153 fish? Scholars aren't agreed. Many meanings have been proposed, but (pardon my pun) all seem to be fishing for answers. It's better to admit we don't know why 153 fish are reported rather than to try to divine the Master's mind. Perhaps it's just a record catch.

Early one morning after his resurrection, Jesus finds his disciples back on their fishing boat. Having grown up on a lake where we fished often, I know Jesus' question made the disciples cringe: "Haven't you any fish?" They'd caught nothing after fishing all night.

"Cast your net on the right side." What difference would that make? Fish don't hide on one side of a boat. Yet immediately the net filled with 153

"keepers." And the net did not tear.

Remember, Jesus had drafted Peter and Andrew, as well as James and John, from the ranks of professional fishermen. Instead of catching fish for a living, he said, they'd become fishers of people for eternal life (Mark 1:16-20). Whatever 153 means, it tells us God would draw a great number of sinners to salvation through Christ. How do we know? That original band of twelve disciples has become a worldwide church of billions! Now, that's a haul!

Lord Jesus, you are fishing for humans to save. Make us your fishers and fill our nets with all whom you are bringing into your boat. We pray in your name. Amen.

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE BEACHFRONT BBQ

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."
—John 21:17

After Peter's triple denial of Jesus (John 18:15-27), the risen Christ appears one morning and invites Peter and his companions to a fish barbecue. After breakfast, Jesus asks Simon Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" Whoever or whatever "these" are, Jesus' meaning is clear: Does Simon, son of John, love Jesus, Son of God, above all?

The English language masks the distinction between Jesus' questions and Peter's responses. Jesus asks, "Do you love [*agape*] me?" referring to total, unconditional love. Peter replies, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love [*phileo*] you," referring to "brotherly love." He can't say he loves Jesus as Jesus loves him, so Peter professes the best love he has. Again Jesus asks, and Peter answers. Peter is hurt when Jesus asks a third time, but per-

haps he's not listening. With divine humility Jesus has used Peter's word (*phileo*) this time, as if to say, "OK, I accept the best you can give." Then Jesus says, "Feed my sheep" (see John 10).

Jesus is reconciling. Peter is being restored. Jesus' three-fold query mirrors Peter's triple denial. Peter's triple profession of love for Jesus shows that his restoration is complete. And Jesus repeats the first call he made to Peter and the others: "Follow me!" (see Mark 1:17).

Do we love Jesus above all? Then let's feed his sheep with the news of his resurrection.

Lord, we have denied you often. Please restore and guide us to love and serve you faithfully. Amen.

ALL WE NEED TO KNOW

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room

—John 21:25

It's April 30, two weeks after Easter. We've journeyed with Jesus from our world to ancient Jerusalem, and outside its gates, where he died for us, arose, and gave us new, eternal life. On April Fools' Day we began by wondering if God had sent his Son on a fool's errand, coming to live in our world as one of us. He had to go through Holy Week and the hell of Good Friday until he came to the glory of Easter.

From what we know of Jesus' life on earth, his days were filled with preaching, teaching, healing, raising the dead, and, of course, dealing with opposition. He didn't leave a diary or appointment book to tell us everything he did in his ministry, let alone during his childhood or teenage years. What did the gospel writers leave out? All we know is that they told us

what the Spirit prompted them to write.

John ends his gospel provocatively: "Jesus did many other things as well." But he gave us enough. "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." There was much more to tell, but what's recorded gives us plenty. Christ lived with us, died for us, and rose victoriously. Now he sends us to share his good news.

That's all we need to know.

Almighty God, you've given us the story of all stories to share with our broken world. Inspire and encourage us to tell others, for Jesus' sake. Amen.



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