

Mar/Apr 2018

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



هو ههنا لأنه قام
كما قال
He is not here;
he has risen,
just as he said.

Mt 28:6

**LIVING
AS EASTER
PEOPLE**



ALSO: WHERE ARE YOU?

Friends:

On family vacations, as I pulled out my video camera, I'd often prompt my kids with the question "Where are you?" I wanted them to describe on-camera where they were, what they were doing, and what was happening that made this an important moment.

I hoped to preserve on video and for posterity their own narrations of excitement, trepidation, or even tedium as we visited seashores, mountaintops, or yet another graduation ceremony or other family event.



God asked that same question in Eden after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and God wasn't confused. "Where are you?" is an invitation to reflect on where we are in the midst of God's creation and what we are doing with God's gifts.

As we journey into Lent this March, Professor Arie Leder begins to explore our need for a Savior by reflecting on that very question from the early chapters of Genesis. *Where are we, and what are we doing?*

Then, in April, Pastor Laurie Zuverink invites us to take a step further and reflect on this question: *In light of Easter, how are we living into the reality of being resurrection people?*

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

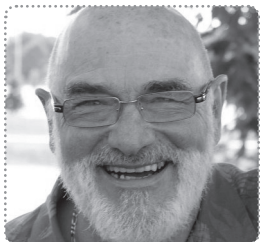
A handwritten signature in dark ink, which appears to read "Steven Koster". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping "S" at the beginning.

—Steven Koster

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"Where Are You?"
Arie Leder



"Living as Easter People"
Laurie Zuerink

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Media

april

Living as Easter People

Laurie Zuverink

With the celebration of Easter beginning on April 1 this year, we have the whole month to unpack the Easter story and engage with the question “What does it mean to live each day as people who claim the resurrection of Jesus?”

What was it like to be one of the first witnesses to meet Jesus after he rose in victory over death? Did encountering the risen Jesus affect the way those people lived each day and related to the world, or was it just a personal experience to celebrate, talk about with friends, and say how amazing it was? How do you think you would have reacted, and what would you have done with the experience?

The Bible shows us that for those first witnesses, the encounter with the risen Christ was an experience of love that changed everything. Through the resurrection of Jesus, God offers to us all the joy, power, freedom, and love that those first witnesses experienced. This month, as we focus on living as Easter people, let’s reflect together on the joy, power, and freedom of the resurrection and how we can live each day reflecting God’s love.

Laurie Zuverink is an ordained pastor who has served in several capacities of ministry in the Grand Rapids, Michigan, area. Her work ties into the lives of young people, and her passion is to empower and equip the next generation of servant leaders. Pastor Laurie and her husband, Mark, have three children—one in grad school, one in college, and one in high school. Pastor Laurie enjoys deep conversations, bike rides, exploring the shores of the Great Lakes, and watching well-played soccer.

HE IS NOT HERE!

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here."

—Mark 16:6

In many nations, April 1 is celebrated as April Fool's Day—a time for playing practical jokes on friends and unsuspecting individuals.

This year, April 1 is also Easter Sunday, and although the celebration of Easter is no joke, it is certainly full of joy! What we celebrate and remember today lies at the heart of who we are as followers of Jesus Christ.

Easter, Resurrection Sunday, is the day when Christians everywhere exclaim with joy and authority, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!"

But if we were to put ourselves as characters into that first Easter story, what would our reaction be to finding an empty tomb and a stranger sitting there, telling us not to worry? Would we think it was a cruel practical joke or some-

thing very real, powerful, and life changing?

That's what those first visitors to the tomb had to figure out. And everyone who has ever heard the story of Jesus must do the same. To believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus opens our lives to all the joy, power, freedom, and hope the resurrection has to offer. This is the gospel story. This is life-changing good news!

Will you claim this good news?

Dear Jesus, today we claim you, celebrate you, and proclaim you as the risen Lord. Today and every day, fill us with the hope, power, love, and joy your resurrection offers. In your name we pray. Amen.

RESURRECTION JOY

*They worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.
And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*

—Luke 24:52-53

Jesus' followers were trying to figure out what had just happened. On Friday they had watched as Jesus, the one they had come to love and trust, was crucified. On Sunday morning they had discovered his body was missing. And then, on Sunday evening, they were processing what seemed impossible—testimonies from friends saying they had seen Jesus alive. So the disciples got together and started discussing things. They wanted to believe Jesus was alive, but common sense would have made it hard not to be doubtful. Still, they experienced a sense of excitement as they pondered what the reality of Jesus being alive might truly mean.

Then Jesus showed up. He revealed himself in the middle of the messiness. He allowed for anyone with doubts and fears to come and touch him and to

see that he was truly alive. His followers responded with great joy and worship.

Our lives are often filled with doubts, burdens, and fears. At such times, Jesus does not abandon us. He comes to us in the midst of it all and invites us to come near. Jesus wants us to experience resurrection joy and to let his presence fill our lives with wonder, worship, and amazement—even amid all the messiness of life!

Ask him to come and visit with you today!

Lord Jesus, we praise you for your victory over death. Drive away our troubles and doubts, and fill us with joy in your presence, we pray. Amen.

A DEFINITION OF JOY

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.
—Galatians 5:22-23

I spend a lot of time with teenagers. I also spend time trying to figure out the words they're using sometimes, because teens like to give words new meanings and even come up with new words.

I like wondering what lies at the heart of a word. When I started to think about the word *joy*, I looked it up in the dictionary. The general definition of *joy* was listed as "an emotion evoked by well-being or success." So we can feel joy when we have good times with people we love, when we appreciate art or view some breathtaking scenery, when we accomplish something challenging, and more.

But where does joy fit in when situations are not happy, beautiful, or successful? Is joy just a happy response to good times?

Biblical joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, the evidence of God's love growing in us. For a believer in Jesus Christ, joy is more than a fleeting response to happy times. Joy is cultivated, pruned, and harvested throughout all the seasons and circumstances of our lives. Jesus laid the foundation of joy when he freed us from sin, with all its pain and suffering, and made new life possible for us. Joy in Christ's success lies at the heart of who we are in Christ. This is the joy we claim. This is the joy we cultivate!

Lord, joy is a gift you offer us through your death and resurrection. Continue to grow the gift of joy in us so your fruit is evident in our lives. In the peace, love, and joy of Christ we pray. Amen.

ULTIMATE BLESSING AND JOY

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.
—James 1:2

Today's Bible reading includes a section of Jesus' teaching that is often called "The Beatitudes." Beatitudes can be described as "ultimate blessings." These blessings refer to the glorious goodness of life with God in his kingdom and presence. And we can count on these blessings despite all the difficulties we may face in our lives, including persecution for being followers of Christ. All who claim God's promises in Christ can live in the hope of these promises. But the beatitude blessings are more than just promises for the future.

Notice how James talks about having joy in the midst of trials. Christian joy includes a profoundly deep sense of peace and comfort that sustains believers even in the midst of persecution, trials, and suffering. The blessedness of this

joy is the same as the ultimate blessedness of the beatitudes.

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God offers us a joyful, blessed spirit—not only in anticipation of the life to come but also in this life too.

A joyful spirit is not one that is happy all the time, no matter the circumstances. Rather, it has the firm foundation of peace and understanding that no matter what happens, God loves us, knows us, and will never leave us. This truly is the highest blessing.

Blessed Lord, you offer us ultimate blessedness in your presence always, and for that we humbly thank you. May our spirit reflect the joy of the hope we have in you. In Christ we pray. Amen.

GRATITUDE

Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind. . . . —Psalm 107:8, 15

A couple of years ago we decided to plant a garden. Our kids had been bugging us to try one, so we made it a family project. We did some research and got started, learning by trial and error as we went along. We took time to nurture the soil and worked hard to protect our plants from the various creatures that also wanted to eat from our garden!

One of the fruits we planted was strawberries. They did okay the first year, but much better the next year. Our time and energies paid off, and we had a nice crop of tasty berries.

It also takes time and effort to harvest a fruitful spirit of joy. One of the ways we cultivate joy is to practice gratitude, making an effort to be thankful to God and to others.

We cultivate joy when we spend time with God in his

Word and let him remind us of his faithfulness throughout the ages.

We cultivate joy when we recognize God's redemption story as our own story, pondering with gratitude the gift of salvation offered to us in Jesus.

Today, as you reflect on what it means to live as Easter people, take some time to give thanks. "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever." The Lord is indeed good!

Lord Jesus, we thank you for all you have done, all you do, and all you will continue to do. Help us to cultivate lives of thankfulness and joy as we live in your faithfulness. In your name, Amen.

“WONDER-FULL” JOY

Who is like you, LORD God Almighty? You, LORD, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you.
—Psalm 89:8

Our youngest daughter has always loved horses. One day, I asked her why. She answered, “Have you ever really looked at one? Muscles that are defined and powerful, rich manes that flow in the wind, unique personalities—they are beautiful!” Then she pointed out the passage from Job that we’re reading today.

Before that conversation, I had never really thought much about horses. So I started paying attention. I began noticing the lines of their muscles and looking more closely at each horse as an individual creature. As I came to think about horses differently, I also grew more in awe of who God is as the maker of horses and all other animals.

Sometimes life can be overwhelming and filled with difficulties. Satan tries to use our troubles to distract us from

living in the joy God offers through Jesus. God knows the struggles of living with pain and suffering, so he also gives us reminders of his mighty work through the beauty, majesty, and intricate designs of his creation. The same God who created this world and everything in it raised Jesus from the dead and gives us new life!

Today, if joy seems hard to find, humbly ask God to help you notice him in the details of life around you. May God fill you with “wonder-full” joy!

Almighty Creator, when we see the intricate designs of all that exists, we stand in awe of who you are. Lord, may we never cease to wonder and be amazed at you, our awesome God. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

JOY IN BELONGING

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel. . . . —Philippians 1:4-5

Sharing food together is an important part of belonging and celebrating in most cultures. Whether it is an elaborate meal prepared for a special occasion, or traditional holiday dishes for a family gathering, or simple snacks for friends to enjoy, sharing food together is good for fellowship and community.

On the evening before his death, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples. He took the bread and wine of that meal and gave special instructions so that when the disciples came together again, they could do the same and remember all that Jesus had done for them.

The Lord's Supper (also called Communion, or Eucharist) is the meal shared by believers today as a celebration of Christ's ultimate sacrifice of love for us. Through this meal, Christ graciously offers us a

place to belong. Calling us to live for him as Lord and Savior, he welcomes us with the open arms of grace.

The desire to belong is an important part of human nature. To be in relationship defines who we are as human beings. We engage in relationship with God, with humanity, and with creation. Sometimes in life we might feel as if there is no place where we belong. But know that at the table of Christ Jesus, you are welcome. There is room for you to seek new life, to celebrate, and to belong.

God of joy and welcome, thank you for your abundant grace offered to us through Jesus. Thank you for inviting us to be a part of your family. In Jesus' name, Amen.

JOY IN WORSHIP

Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.

—Psalm 98:1

Music has been a part of creation since the beginning of time. Birds sing their songs. Trees rustle and strain with the blowing of the wind. Seas pound or gently lap in rhythmic waves on the shores. In the human experience, music resonates with the depths of our souls.

With all its melodies and harmonies, rhythms and refrains, music is a fitting expression of worship. Worship of the holy, almighty, creator God reminds us who God is and who we are in relationship to him.

Psalm 98 is an expression of jubilant, joyful worship. With trumpets blasting, hands clapping, and people singing and shouting for joy, there is a great celebration of all the wonderful things God has done—and all creation joins in!

Every day our lives can show that we are bringing joyful worship to God. Our lives are the music that tells the story of the redemption and hope we have in Christ. Through our lives others hear the joyful music of what living in relationship with a loving God is all about. And hopefully they will want to be a part of that music too.

What music will your life express for the Lord today?

God, you compose the melodies and harmonies of our lives, and you invite us to move in rhythm with you. May the song of our hearts be filled with joy, and may the tune of our lives be pure and true. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

IN THE STILLNESS

After the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.
—1 Kings 19:12-13

Elijah had been overwhelmingly busy. God had just used him powerfully to defeat the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). But Elijah had no time to celebrate that victory, for his enemies now wanted to kill him. Exhausted and afraid, he fled to the wilderness.

The wilderness can be a lonely, desolate place. Yet it was here that God nourished and strengthened Elijah again. God came and spoke with Elijah, and his voice was not thundering or overwhelming. God did not shout to get Elijah's attention. When Elijah was ready to listen, God spoke in a gentle whisper.

Sometimes the noises of our lives—our many activities, hectic schedules, high-tech devices, or other distractions—drown out the voice of God. Sometimes it seems God is

far away, or altogether absent, and joy seems hard to find. Joy comes when our lives are centered in Christ. Satan works hard to keep joy away by filling our lives with noise. To hear the voice of God reminding us of his faithfulness, goodness, and love, we need to follow the instructions of Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God."

Let's take some time today to silence the noise and be still, listening for God's whisper.

Lord, we confess that we have often let the flurry of distractions in our lives drown out your voice. Quiet us and center us in you. Remind us of your goodness. Fill us with your joy. In Christ, Amen.

OVERFLOWING LOVE

"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."
—John 15:11-12

"There is nothing so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good humor," says Charles Dickens in his novel *A Christmas Carol*. Studies of the human brain show that laughter is contagious. Sometimes laughter is used to hurt others or to mask our hidden fears and insecurities, but sincere and joyful laughter is a gift. When a toddler's whole body shakes while laughing at a dog chasing its tail, or when friends cry tears of joy remembering good times spent together, these are beautiful gifts God gives us to experience his goodness.

And while laughter is a spontaneous expression of joy, the overflowing outward expression of true joy in Christ is continuous love for one another. Through the suffering and sacrifice of Christ, God gave us an expression of his great-

est love. And when the joy of forgiveness and new life fills our souls, it extends to others the gift of love, showing forgiveness and grace. Inner joy and inner peace go hand in hand, welcoming and embracing others in order to share the good news of Jesus.

Someone once gave me a poster that said, "The love in your heart wasn't put there to stay. Love isn't love until you give it away." May the joy of Christ in you overflow with love to others today.

Loving God, you fill us with your love, bringing joy and peace. May our love for others be an overflowing expression of the love you give to us. In Christ, Amen.

RESURRECTION POWER

"He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."

—Matthew 28:6

Today we return our thoughts to the Easter story. For the past several days we have focused on the joy that Jesus' resurrection brings into our lives. And now for the next several days we will focus on God's power displayed through the resurrection and what it means to live in that power.

Think about this for a minute.

God raised Jesus back to life from the dead.

It's almost unfathomable—so beyond normal that some people just cannot accept it.

But if we do accept it, if we have faith in the God who promises salvation and brings resurrection, as he said, and if we have entered into relationship with this God—then amazing power unfolds before us!

Amid all the chaos of the world around us, we cannot always

see or understand how God is at work in our world. Claiming the resurrection power of God gives us confidence to know that God has things under control and continues to work all things for his glory and for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28). The power of the resurrection offers us the assurance and conviction that God is always faithful and keeps his promises with those who cling to him.

What a mighty God we serve!

God, your power is great and awesome. There is no one like you! Make our faith strong and our conviction sure as we seek to live in your power. In the risen Christ we pray. Amen.

A DEFINITION OF POWER

Christ Jesus . . . being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. . . .

—Philippians 2:5-6

Power can be dangerous. History has shown that those who love power and seek after it can do tremendous harm in the world. Power and its pursuit have corrupted many leaders in all spheres of life, causing them to seek selfish gain at the expense of others.

The triune God holds the ultimate power to do anything in this world and beyond. God's desire could be to bring destruction on a rebellious world. But the Lord Almighty is also the God of compassion and love. He chose instead to offer redemption and reconciliation to the world. Jesus, the Son of God, chose to humble himself and take on mortal, human flesh.

Jesus came into this world, and he could have quickly claimed rightful kingship over all. But instead he chose the posture

and status of a servant, submitting to the suffering of persecution and death on a cross so that people could live once again in the full love of God. Rather than seeking favor with rulers and powerbrokers, Jesus sought out people who were poor, disadvantaged, outcast, and otherwise forgotten. By his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ defined ultimate power and modeled for us the loving posture of humility and service that true power displays.

Is the powerful and loving Jesus your Savior?

Lord Almighty, all power belongs to you. All glory and honor are yours. Yet you humbled yourself for our sake, and for that we are most grateful. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.

SYMBOLS OF POWER

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God. . . .
—Ephesians 6:10-11

Symbols of worldly power exist all around us. National flags and other symbols on government buildings and vehicles announce the presence of high-ranking leaders and officials. Uniforms and armor worn by police and military officers denote authority and a chain of command. Company executives work in corner office suites. Even at school, the group you hang out with can suggest your positioning among other students. Yet these are merely outward symbols. They do not ultimately define the character, strength, or virtue of the individuals who use them.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, instructs believers to “be strong in the Lord.” Do not worry about acquiring symbols of worldly power. Instead, seek after the inner strength and characteristics

that display God’s power in you. Only God’s power will defend you against the spiritual forces of evil seeking to separate you from the Lord. A life lived in step with the Holy Spirit, seeking truth and righteousness, leaving footprints of peace, and protected by faith and salvation through Jesus Christ, is fueled by God’s resurrection power. There is a mighty source of inner strength for all who call on the Lord.

We don’t know what today will bring. But whatever comes, we can have strength in the truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and Word of God.

Lord, make our faith strong and fill us with humble confidence to live by your power. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

THE POWER OF THE CROSS

What the law was powerless to do . . . God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.

—Romans 8:3

Laws and rules set standards of acceptable practice within communities, nations, and organizations. Laws set boundaries to try to create safe environments for all. But we all know that laws and rules have their limits. Laws are made by people in power. Laws can easily become forms of oppression, favoring some people while limiting and burdening others. What's more, laws do not make people good. Following a rule to avoid being punished does not make a person virtuous.

Romans 3:23 makes clear that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” But at the cross, Jesus took on himself the punishment for our sin. He paid the consequences of our lawlessness. And the power of the cross is not only in the payment of this debt but also in the freedom it offers. Jesus’ death on the cross opens up

for us the power to live full and holy lives, unburdened by the weight of guilt, shame, and human expectations. God is holy and good, and God created human beings as image-bearers of his own goodness and holiness. The cross frees us to live as God intended—humbly, joyfully, and lovingly.

Today, may the power of the cross release you into full living by God’s goodness, mercy, and love.

Jesus, you carried our burdens and guilt to the cross for us so that we can be free! Help us to live in your freedom and love. In the power of your resurrection we pray. Amen.

THE POWER OF THE EMPTY TOMB

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"
—1 Corinthians 15:55

Life on this earth is not without dark times. We can identify periods in history when evil and darkness seemed to be in control. We can look back on our own lives and recall times of grief, hurt, loneliness, or despair. Or maybe those times are happening right now, and life seems empty of meaning or purpose. Maybe all of life seems like a dark, empty space.

Jesus knows what that's like—and even more. On the cross he suffered the agony of complete separation from God (descending into hell) so that we wouldn't have to—and his body was placed in a tomb till he rose to life again on the third day. Jesus' work of salvation for us would not have been complete if he did not suffer the full punishment of "unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul" on the cross to pay the price for all our sins

(Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 44). And on Easter he rose in victory over death so that we might share in the power of his resurrection and enjoy new life with God. (See also Luke 23:42-46.)

Our journey into new life in Christ may take us through times of darkness. Yet, as hard as those times may be, we can be assured that death, loneliness, and despair do not have the final victory; Jesus conquered them. As you walk through valleys of shadow in your life, lean on Jesus, the Savior—who knows you and is walking with you into new life.

God of new life, assure us of your presence, especially when darkness and despair seem all around. In Christ we pray. Amen.

THE POWER OF VICTORY

Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. —Revelation 21:7

Our family is a soccer family. We love the game, and it is something we all enjoy both watching and doing. We spend a fair amount of time at soccer fields. Over the years our children have had the opportunity to play for several teams. Some of those teams won many games. Some did not. And while it always feels good to go home with a win in the scorebook, we also know that the final score does not always reflect which team put forth the best effort.

The power of Jesus' resurrection gives us victory over sin and death. The victory is secure because of what Christ did, not because of any efforts we put forth. All who trust him as their Savior and confess their sins are assured of this victory and all the benefits it brings.

One of the valuable lessons our children learned through

soccer is how to be gracious in victory. Similarly, it's important to be gracious to others in the victorious confidence in which we live each day because of Christ's victory. Our confidence is not an attitude of superiority and privilege but, rather, one of grace, humility, and love.

Today, know that the victory of the resurrection is yours in Jesus, and humbly live in the confidence of that victory.

Lord, there is no way we can repay you or thank you enough for offering us the victory over sin and death. Help us to live graciously and lovingly in the confidence of your strength. In the power of your name, Amen.

SERVANT POWER

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles . . . exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.”—Matthew 20:25-26

The family of Zebedee had a plan. Jesus was gaining a reputation. Word was getting around about his miracles and teachings. The Zebedee brothers, James and John, had been among the first to follow Jesus, and now they wanted to make sure they would have top positions in Jesus' kingdom. But Jesus was not impressed.

People spend a lot of energy seeking to establish themselves, trying to prove their worth, and seeking the best possible benefits and rewards. But Jesus teaches a radically different understanding of greatness and power. True greatness takes on the form of a servant, submitting to the will of God. True greatness in the kingdom of God recognizes that our salvation is secure and our sins are forgiven through Jesus' death and resurrection. We have done nothing to earn

it, and we can't do anything to deserve it.

True power in the kingdom of God lets go of the need to be noticed and the need to be first. True power seeks first a life of righteousness, healing, and restoration for all. This way of life will most likely not get you noticed. Neither will it make you first in people's minds. But a life lived doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8) has the life-giving power of the gospel.

Lord Jesus, may our lives reflect the power, greatness, and love you revealed to us through your life, death, and resurrection. Make us servants of justice and instruments of peace, we pray. Amen.

POWER IN COMMUNITY

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. —1 Corinthians 12:12

Toddlers and teenagers share a common trait. They like to declare their independence and want to prove they do not need the help of their parents, guardians, or others to be successful at life. Striving for independence is often a healthy part of growing up. But it can be unhealthy when people try to “do it all” and “be it all” by themselves—outside the context of community. Then, instead of being a good thing, independence is corrupted and driven by stubborn pride.

Living in the power of the resurrection means we recognize our need for God and for each other. God’s Holy Spirit empowers the community of believers with the spiritual gifts and abilities necessary to do the work of growing his kingdom. Individual believers cannot do this by themselves. The power of the resurrection

comes in living and working together in unity, recognizing and supporting the gifts, talents, and abilities of all others in the community of Christ.

We all have our place, and we all have purpose. We all have gifts to offer, and God values each one of us as his children. When we live in the unity and power of the resurrection, we celebrate and affirm the use of everyone’s gifts. Let us encourage one another today as we seek to live in the unity and the power of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Resurrected Lord, make us one in you. May our love for you and for one another witness to your love and grace. Grow us together by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

THE POWER OF LOVE

Love never fails.

—1 Corinthians 13:8

The Christians in Corinth had trouble getting along. Paul was urging them to work together, to affirm the contributions and value of everyone. God calls his people to enjoy full life in communion and unity with him and with each other.

So how does a community that has a history of not getting along learn to live together? As the apostle Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 13, we are called to love one another.

And the love that Paul is talking about here is unconditional, without strings attached or any expectation of favors done in return. This is the kind of love God shows us every day.

Love involves hard work. Love is patient and kind. Love brings honor to others without desire of recognition. Love rejoices in the truth and protects the vulnerable. Love forgives and,

when possible, offers reconciliation. None of this is easy, especially if we are dealing with people who have hurt us deeply and don't seem to care.

Through his suffering and death on the cross, Jesus revealed God's true character of love, paying the price for our sin "while we were God's enemies" (Romans 5:10). Through the power of the resurrection, God gives us the opportunity to share in the gifts of love that Christ's sacrifice offers us: the gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation, protection, honor, and truth. May these gifts of love flow through us today.

Lord, despite all we have done against you, you still love us. Fill us with the power to share your love with others. Amen.

RESURRECTION FREEDOM

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

—Galatians 5:1

Many of the apostle Paul's letters to the early churches describe difficulties that the church was struggling with. In his letter to the Galatian churches, Paul rebukes them for getting caught up in rules and regulations. They were so concerned with following the letter of the law that their legalistic attitudes and judgmentalism overtook their desire to live by and share in the love of Jesus. Paul wrote this to say it was not the way life in the church was supposed to be.

Living a life of obligation and requirements and trying to live into the expectations of others is a heavy burden to bear—even if those requirements and expectations have good intentions. The joy of resurrection life in Christ frees us to live with love for God and neighbor without the burden of legalistic expectations. No one

ever gets it right all of the time. But with the Spirit of Christ guiding us, we aim to live by grace and love in Jesus' name, following his example.

In the remaining days of this month, we'll reflect on what it looks like to live in the freedom of Jesus Christ. In this freedom we are released from the effects of sin and death so that we can live as God intends us to: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."

O Lord, your mercy has set us free. What a gift! May we accept the gift of freedom you offer us in Christ, and may we freely offer it to others as well. In the spirit of your love, Amen.

FREEDOM FROM FEAR

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you . . . you are mine. . . . I will be with you."

—Isaiah 43:1-2

"Do not be afraid. . . ."

—Matthew 28:5, 10

Fear comes in all shapes and sizes. Some people are afraid of snakes or spiders. Others may have a fear of heights, enclosed spaces, or public speaking. Many fear failure, change, dying, or being alone. Still others live each day in very real fear of persecution, oppression, discrimination, and physical harm.

This world can be a scary place, and fear is something we all must face.

The Bible tells us, "Do not be afraid!" Again and again we read of God's coming to his people with such comforting and empowering words as "Do not fear. I am with you. I am your God and will never forsake you. You are mine." In the story of Jesus' resurrection, both the angel at the tomb and Jesus on the road began their conversation with the

women by saying, "Do not be afraid. . . ."

The women's encounter with the supernatural was overwhelming, and their fear was real. But the power of the resurrection assures us that the Lord cares for his people and is with them in whatever times may come.

Because Jesus rose again and is with us always through his Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-20), we can have freedom from fear because we are never alone. In God's presence and strength we can face whatever comes.

Lord, you are always with us. Remind us of your power and fill us with your courage to face our fears, knowing we are never alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FREEDOM TO GO AND TELL

Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell. . . ."

—Matthew 28:10

Returning again to the story of Jesus' resurrection, we can see not only that both the angel at the tomb and Jesus on the road said to the women, "Do not be afraid"; they also said, "Go and tell. . . ."

Jesus' death and resurrection take his followers beyond their expectations. Christ's sacrifice for human sin and his victory over death give his followers not only freedom from fear but also freedom to tell others—so that they can share the good news about Jesus among themselves and then spread it to the ends of the earth (see Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8).

All who hear this good news and trust that Jesus is Lord and Savior can enjoy eternal life in God's presence forever. This stunning reality in Christ brings us into a full and complete relationship with God. The finished work of Jesus frees us for

a new life both in heaven and on earth to live fully with purpose and power in the love and righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ. What amazing grace!

Today may God release your fears, freeing you to share fully in his love and to share with others around you the good-news story of Jesus' salvation for all who hear and believe. Even more, you can tell people about the resurrection power of Christ at work in your own life!

Dear Jesus, through your resurrection you have given us the freedom to live fully in relationship with you. Release any fears that may hinder us from doing so, and reveal your full purpose and power in us. In your name, Amen.

FREE TO BELONG

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.
—Romans 8:16

When we find ourselves in a new job or a new school where we do not know anyone, it feels welcoming to have someone come alongside and help us become familiar with our new surroundings. A person who does that may show us around, introduce us to coworkers or friends, and help us to feel at home more quickly. That person is showing hospitality.

Hospitality helps to make people feel welcome. Hospitality invites people in and gives them a sense of belonging. We all seek a place where we can feel comfortable. We seek a place where we belong and where we are accepted for who we are. We feel secure when we're in a place where we do not have to pretend to be someone we are not.

Through the resurrection of Jesus, the Spirit of God offers us the gift of hospitality and

welcomes us into his family. God invites those who seek new life in Christ to come and make themselves comfortable in his presence.

Not all earthly families are welcoming and comfortable, but the freedom God offers us through the resurrection is the gift of belonging to his family, where we can come and share in all the privileges and responsibilities of being called God's children. As our loving Father, God accepts us and loves us for who we are in Christ. Through the resurrection we are free to belong!

Father God, thank you for accepting us as your children. Just as you invite us through the gift of hospitality, may we extend that loving hospitality to others. In Jesus, Amen.

FREE OF SHAME

What . . . shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?
—Romans 8:31

Shame is a heavy burden. Shame weighs us down and hinders us from being who God has intended us to be. Sometimes shame is raw like an open wound—and with terrifying memories. We can also carry shame for years, living with insecurities, fears, and a sense of self-disdain because of hurtful actions and exchanges from long ago. Shame holds us down with the weights of judgment, condemnation, expectations, disapproval, and more.

The freedom of resurrection life in Jesus, however, releases the burden of shame in our lives. Jesus carried our shame to the cross. He was betrayed, beaten, humiliated, and exposed, giving up his life to pay for our sin so that we might be released from the tyranny and shame of sin. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, when we ask God for forgiveness,

we are forgiven. God's love frees us to let go of the ugliness of the past and move forward in confidence, knowing "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). And nothing can separate us from God's love.

Learning to live in the confidence and acceptance of this new identity takes some time to figure out. While you work through the process, know that God is on your side, desiring that you live in the freedom and fullness of understanding who you are as a holy and dearly loved child of God.

Lord, the burden of our shame from things we have done, said, or experienced pulls us away from you. Help us live fully in the confidence and freedom of your love. Amen.

FREE TO LIVE

Since . . . you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

—Colossians 3:1

In my work, I often come alongside young people as they begin to seek out their identity and figure out who God created them to be. We talk about different types of personalities and learn about different career paths and vocations that might fit well with those personalities. We work through assessments and think about life experiences as we identify individual passions, talents, gifts, and abilities. We reflect on the ideas of mission and calling.

Understanding individual gifts, passions, and callings helps an individual identify not only what they can and might do, but also what might not be the best thing to do. It frees a person from the notion of trying to “do it all” and allows them to let go of some things.

Resurrection living offers us a place to fully belong and

to find our identity in Christ. Understanding the freedom we have through Christ’s resurrection helps us focus on how to live fully. When we seek after God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, God reveals what is best for us and helps us recognize the dark places inside ourselves that draw us away from the full life he desires for us.

Today, let’s set our hearts and minds on seeking God so that we can discover the freedom to live fully in his love.

Our true identity is found only in you, Jesus. Align our hearts with yours and focus our minds on what you desire for us. Work in us whatever is pleasing to you. In the power of your Spirit we pray. Amen.

FREE TO FORGIVE

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

—Colossians 3:13

Jesus, in the ultimate act of selfless love, took all the hurt and pain of sin and death in this world and carried it to the cross. This was an extremely heavy burden to bear. Yet God's glory and power overcame this burden, conquering death and offering restoration, healing, and forgiveness to all who desire it.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God extends to creation the gift and freedom of forgiveness. Yet the gift of forgiveness is sometimes hard to accept, and oftentimes we do not want to give it freely. Sometimes the wounds of past hurts are deep, and the pain we have to endure from them is overwhelming.

Forgiveness is not easy, but it is powerful and beautiful. Forgiveness does not condone the hurt against you.

Forgiveness acknowledges the very real hurt you have experienced and then seeks to let go of feelings of anger and desires for revenge. Holding on to anger, harboring grudges, and wanting an offender to feel our hurt—or even more—can quickly consume our lives and trap us in bitterness and resentment. God wants so much more for us! Forgiveness opens up the door to fully live and experience all the joy, power, and freedom that God lovingly offers us.

May God's love free you to forgive today.

Forgiving God, you offer to us the beautiful gift of forgiveness. Work in us so that we can freely offer this gift to others. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

FREE TO SERVE

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.
—1 John 3:18

An old saying advises, "Put your money where your mouth is." The underlying meaning is that if we believe in something or if we believe something is wrong, we should not just talk or complain about it; we should take action to support the cause or to fix the problem.

This is what the apostle John teaches about love. Love is not some idealistic concept to sit around and talk about. Love is shown to be real by our actions.

Love can get messy. Love sees the hurt and the brokenness in our world and takes action. Love goes out and serves others.

At the cross, Jesus took action to show the greatest love of all. He gave up his life for us, and he also instructed his followers to go out and demonstrate sacrificial love for others. The

resurrection of Jesus empowers believers with the joy and freedom to live by his love.

God's love fills us with a desire for honesty, integrity, humility, justice, and respect for all people. Jesus' resurrection power frees us to go out and share the burdens of people who are suffering, to spend time with people who are lonely, and to seek justice for those who are persecuted and oppressed.

As you celebrate freedom in Christ through the resurrection, let God show you where you can serve and show his love today.

Lord Jesus, fill us with your love, justice, mercy, and compassion. Give us eyes to see the world as you see it, and give us the courage to serve others in your freeing love. Amen.

FREE TO BE INTENTIONAL

[Jesus] left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. Now he had to go through Samaria.
—John 4:3-4

This is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. It shows that although Jesus wasn't forced to do so, he "*had* to go through Samaria." This means he went intentionally, knowing he had a mission to fulfill. And that was unusual, for in those days Jews went out of their way *not* to go through Samaria because the Jews and the Samaritans despised one another.

Jesus, in his close relationship with his Father, knew he had a job to do. He had to go outside of the expected cultural and traditional norms to offer grace and eternal life to a Samaritan woman, who then shared the good news with her entire town (see John 4:27-32).

Living in the freedom of the resurrection allows us to be intentional. Jesus' death and resurrection restored our relationship with God and welcomes

us to a place of full communion with him.

In communion with God, we pray and listen to the Holy Spirit, who gives us renewal and strength to go out and live intentionally, as Christ did. We are to submit to one another and offer acceptance and grace to everyone, including people outside our normal comfort zones—even those who might be our enemies.

Today, may the freedom and grace offered to you in Jesus empower you to freely offer the same to others.

Jesus, we are grateful that you intentionally took on human flesh and came to live with us. May we follow your example and be free to love as you have loved us. Amen.

FREE TO LOVE

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. —1 John 4:12

The first thing to do when solving a word problem in mathematics is to figure out what exactly the problem is asking. We must figure out what information is given and what is not. What are the constants that never change and what are the variables? One of the secrets to setting up the problem is to know how specific words are used in the language of math. For instance, the word “is” means “equals,” and when you see the word “is,” you know you can set up an equation in which the parts equal each other. That’s very helpful to know!

In this passage on love, the apostle John sets up a simple, beautiful, and yet remarkably complex equation: *God is love*. And this helps us understand what it means to live into the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The story of the relationship between God and creation is

a story of love. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus tally up to the ultimate embodiment of love. And when we seek to live into the resurrection, we embody that love as well. God’s love frees us to live out that love in relationship with one another.

There is no fear in love. There is no shame in love. God and love can never be separated. This is the constant that will never change.

In what ways can you live out God’s love today?

God of grace, truth, and love, your perfect love makes us righteous in Christ. Take away everything in our lives that stands in the way of your love, and free us to love others. In Jesus, Amen.

LIVING JOYFULLY, POWERFULLY, AND FREE!

Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. —Jude 20-21

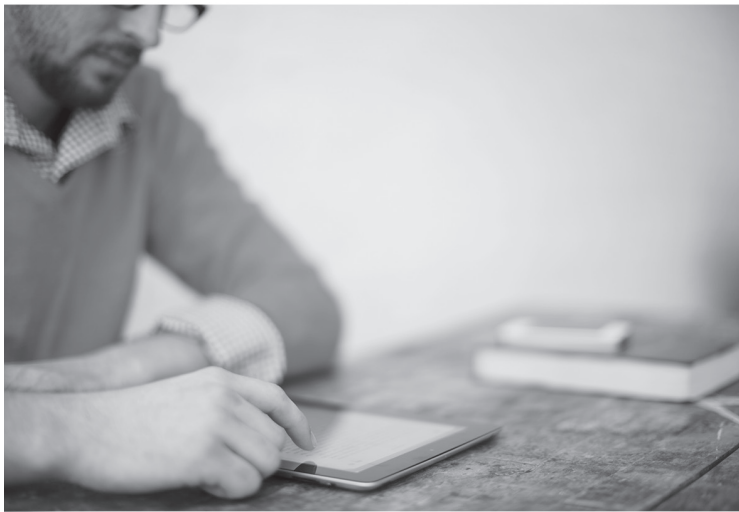
As our month of reflecting on living as Easter people comes to an end, we know that our time of actually living as Easter people will continue. For we are still waiting for Christ's return.

Though the effects of sin still harm and damage our world, we can live each day in the confidence and hope of knowing that God loves us and will never leave us. God is love, and his love is perfect, true, and good. We continue to persevere through struggles and trials, leaning into God, growing in our relationship with him through the Holy Spirit, wrestling with the difficult tensions in the world, and letting God lead us by his love. And even as we wait with expectancy and cry out for Christ to come again soon, we seek to live in all the joy, power, and freedom that the resur-

rection offers. The instructions Christ gave to those first witnesses remain the same for all who claim the resurrection today: "Go and tell the good news that Jesus is alive!" (see Matthew 28:7, 19).

Remembering with joy that "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" let us give thanks and praise the Lord for all he has done: "To the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen."

Glorious, almighty God, we praise you for your victory over sin and death, and we thank you for your love. May we live each day in the joy, the power, and the freedom of Jesus' resurrection. In his name, Amen.



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