

Today

March/April 2020

refresh, refocus, renew

FOUR TAKES
ON JESUS'
FINAL WEEK



ALSO: THEY MET JESUS

Friends:

Sometimes roads take us to new places, including where and how we serve God.

Since 2006, Steven Koster, who usually wrote the letter on this page, has been committed to increasing the faith formational impact of *Today*. He has led in a way that encourages others to follow Jesus, and he strives to do the same in his own life. Recently Steven saw that the time has come to focus on some new challenges, including research work and his family's bed-and-breakfast venture in Grand Rapids, Michigan. "I'd like to develop our bed and breakfast as a greater ministry opportunity," he says. "We've hosted some marriage retreats there, and I want to expand that with more retreats and other events for parents and pastors."



As I step into this role of executive editor of *Today*, I cannot thank Steven enough for his commitment to expanding God's kingdom through media.

In the next two months, we have the opportunity to focus especially on Jesus, the Savior, who walked the roads of Palestine two thousand years ago, bringing the good news of God's kingdom. In March, we focus on people who met Jesus during his three-year ministry, and we'll see their reactions and his words and love for them. Then in April, with the coming of Easter, we trace from the four gospel accounts a portrait of Jesus that can inspire and deepen our love for the one who gave his life for us and conquered death for our sake.

With these meditations, may you grow in knowledge and grace as you seek to follow Jesus and share him with others today. And may you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

—Kurt Selles

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"They Met Jesus"
Rebecca Jordan Heys



**"Four Takes on
Jesus' Final Week"**
Scott DeVries

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Media

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Four Takes on Jesus' Final Week

Scott DeVries

Each of the Bible books Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tells us about Jesus' ministry and his final week before dying and then rising from the dead. Though these books tell the same general story, they each tell it a little differently—often highlighting different details that show us slightly different angles on who Jesus was, what he did for us, and what our response should be. They're all true and all inspired by the same Holy Spirit of God. And when we take each of them the way they were intended, we grow in understanding the Savior of the world.

What's more, this Savior isn't some historical "dead guy." Jesus died—but then he also rose from the dead. And he is every bit as much alive today as ever. That makes these stories, which are told by Jesus himself through the gospel writers, something like letters from a friend who is saying, "Remember that time when I . . . ?" These stories help us grow to know the living Lord of the world in a wonderfully personal way.

So let's start by looking at Jesus' ministry and his final week in the book of Mark—and then peek at Luke, and then John and Matthew. We'll see how full a picture we get by reading from all four books.

Scott DeVries has served as a church pastor and as a ministry coordinator in the Holland, Michigan, area. He currently works at facilitating connections between the more than twenty ministries and 1,100 churches of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. He has a passion for prayer, church organization, and studying the Scriptures in their original languages.

JESUS' PRIORITIES

A man with leprosy . . . begged him . . . , "If you are willing, you can make me clean." . . . "I am willing," [Jesus] said.

—Mark 1:40-41

In this episode near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Mark is showing that Jesus' priorities are not the same as ours. People are looking all over for him, hoping to be healed. But Jesus knows that his main mission is to preach the kingdom of God. So he says, "Let us go somewhere else . . . so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

This may have confused Jesus' disciples at times, and Christians today continue to be shocked by it—we understand that preaching is important, but our physical needs are so urgent. We want Jesus to meet our immediate needs first.

So, like the man with leprosy, we ask Jesus for healing. We may even come to Jesus with the same sentiment: "If you want to, you can make me

clean." And Jesus does say, "I am willing."

Jesus wants to heal. But it isn't his *top* priority—his top priority is letting everyone know his kingdom is coming. He has come to save the whole world! But that doesn't mean he doesn't care for us individually.

Sometimes Jesus heals us right away, and sometimes Jesus asks us to wait. But Jesus is always working to bring about his kingdom, where "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4).

Dear Jesus, we are in a world of pain. Only you can fix it. We long for you to heal our needs right now. Help us to long even more for the healing of the world. Amen.

THE FARMER

"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground."
—Mark 4:26

Jesus often used pictures about farming to describe the kingdom of God. Here the mystery and excitement of farming helps us see something important about the kingdom. Once seeds go into the ground, the farmer has no control over them. It may help to provide water and sunlight, but the farmer must simply wait for the seeds to sprout and grow.

It's a relief and a thrill to see the first tiny shoots appear. Sure, the farmer expects it—seeds usually grow when the conditions are good. Yet the farmer doesn't control all the conditions. So when growth happens just as it should, it's amazing every time. And when the time for harvesting finally comes—when all the conditions have been met regardless of the farmer's lack of control—that's another thrill and another relief.

When we sow seeds of the good news of God's kingdom, we can trust they will grow if the conditions are right. Yet we don't have control over the conditions. So we have to wait. And what a thrill it is to see the first sprout of faith begin in a child, a friend, or even someone we have just met! Even if we didn't plant the seed, it's a thrill to watch it grow.

It's also another, deeper thrill when we see that a person's faith in God has grown to the point where they are ready to join in feeding others and spreading the seed of God's Word too.

Dear Jesus, please grow your kingdom. Grow faith and new life in me so that I may bear fruit. And please spread the growth of your Word where I have planted seeds. Amen.

THE MESSIAH

"Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." . . . Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." —Mark 8:27-29

Does it seem strange that the blind man in this story can't see clearly after Jesus first touches him?

If that seems strange, what if I told you that Jesus has touched *me* many times, and I *still* can't see perfectly?

I'm speaking of my spiritual sight. Jesus has touched my spirit over and over throughout my life. Because of that, I can see spiritual things much more clearly than at first. I am getting better all the time at seeing the difference between real joy and pleasure, between waiting to do something and procrastinating, and so on. And the more Jesus touches me, the better I can see. Yet my spiritual sight is not yet close to being perfect.

The people around Jesus also needed a lot of spiritual touches in order to see. This

was most true as it related to recognizing who Jesus truly was. Some people thought he was John the Baptist or Elijah returned from the dead. They had the spiritual sight to see Jesus a little but not clearly. Only Peter's eyes had been opened. "You are the Messiah," Peter said.

Later on more people would see that Peter was right.

Dear Jesus, you are more than just a prophet or a wise teacher. You are the Messiah—the one who was anointed to take away our sins. Help us to see you clearly. Amen.

GREATER THAN MOSES AND ELIJAH

And there . . . before them Elijah and Moses . . . were talking with Jesus. . . . And a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"
—Mark 9:4, 7

Jesus is greater than Moses and Elijah. That's a quiet theme running from beginning to end in the book of Mark.

Yesterday we saw that some people mistook Jesus for Elijah. And next Friday we'll see that people thought Jesus called for Elijah from the cross (Mark 15:35).

Elijah was a great prophet of the Lord in the Old Testament, and so was Moses. God had led his people out of slavery in Egypt through Moses, and Moses was the one through whom God had given his people the law. But now, one who was greater even than Moses was here (see Deuteronomy 34:12).

In the Old Testament one of the greatest honors God gave to a person was to call them "my servant." But here God speaks directly from heaven, saying, "This is my Son, whom

I love." The *Son of God* is far greater than a servant.

But Moses and Elijah were not in competition with Jesus. There was no jealousy on their part. In fact, they must have been *thrilled* to meet Jesus. Jesus was the whole reason for the ministries Moses and Elijah had. The law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah) all pointed to Jesus.

And now Jesus would complete what God had started through Moses and Elijah. "Listen to him!" said God the Father about his Son. Jesus would complete the message of God's salvation for the world.

Dear Jesus, you are not just a great prophet; you are the Son of God. You complete the Scriptures and bring salvation to us. Thank you!

THE KING

*"Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"
"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna
in the highest heaven!"*
—Mark 11:9-10

At a U2 rock concert the lead singer, Bono, redirected some of the crowd's praise. "This one's for God," I heard him yell. But I'm not sure how many others could hear him over all the noise.

That concert crowd reminds me of the crowd at Jerusalem as Jesus rides in on a colt. That crowd also misses that *this one's for God*. Instead, they seem pretty sure that Jesus is *for them*. But, as Mark tells it, this episode is rather anticlimactic. There's hardly any response after Jesus enters the temple courts. We don't see opposition from the government or the religious leaders.

Sometimes following Jesus can feel anticlimactic to us. We want Jesus to swoop in and face off with whatever troubles us. The crowd in Mark's account yells, "Blessed is the

coming kingdom of our father David!" They want an earthly kingdom like David's, and a king who will rise up and fight for them. Like us, they have missed what Jesus is really about.

Hosanna means "save us." As King, Jesus has done that. But saving us required more than setting up a new nation or religion; it meant Jesus had to die for all our sin. Jesus had to fight a spiritual battle. And because Jesus was victorious, we have a King who offers us not just a better life right now—but new life with him forever.

King Jesus, sometimes I just want you to fix what's broken *right now*. Help me to be patient and rest secure in your timing. Amen.

NOW'S YOUR OPPORTUNITY

[Jesus] said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." . . . Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" —Mark 11:14, 21

Here is an odd story about Jesus. Hungry, Jesus sees a fig tree in leaf, though it is out of season. Finding it has no fruit, he curses the tree, and it dies. Why does Jesus do that? Doesn't it seem unreasonable? Why does Mark tell this story?

That last question is the key. The gospel accounts are not collections of random stories of things Jesus *did*. Each gospel book is a revelation of who Jesus *is*. So either Mark wants us to think Jesus is an unreasonable tree killer, or something deeper is happening here.

Think of the tree as an illustration of the temple. It was not bearing fruit the way God intended. If a fig tree has leaves, that usually means it has some fruit. But Jesus found none. The same was true at the temple. It *looked* like a temple, but

instead of it being a place of prayer, the people had turned it into a marketplace. It had become a place that robbed God of the prayers of his people. So Jesus overturned the money tables and brought an end to the unfruitful distractions there, just as he brought an end to the unfruitful tree.

We have opportunities every day to serve God as he has created us to. Sometimes it's as easy as taking time to pray. Sometimes it's more difficult—maybe even impossible on our own. But there's never an excuse; even the impossible is possible with God.

Lord, help me to serve you faithfully. I want to be fruitful in whatever ways you ask me to be, whether that means something easy or difficult. Amen.

WHAT BELONGS TO GOD?

"Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." —Mark 12:16-17

People were finding out that Jesus aimed to teach the way of God rather than playing by the world's rules. That led the Pharisees and Herodians to think they could trap Jesus. Their question about paying taxes seemed to give him only two choices: play by the world's rules and ruin his reputation as a God-centered teacher, or reject the government's taxes and give the appearance of leading a rebellion.

They just didn't get it. And often neither do we.

When Jesus didn't play by the world's rules, it wasn't because he despised them; it was because he had a higher purpose. Jesus wasn't after Caesar's money or kingdom or anything prized by the world. Jesus had a higher purpose—a loftier goal that made taxes seem trivial.

Jesus was after what belonged to God because Jesus *was* God.

So the trick of the religious leaders became a perfect opportunity for Jesus to teach what he was really after. "Whose image is on the coin?" Jesus asks. If it has Caesar's image on it, he said, give it to Caesar. What God wants is what has God's image on it.

And what has God's image? Where has God inscribed his name? On us.

God doesn't want our money or stuff; he wants his children.

Dear Jesus, thank you for gathering us to your Father, our Father. Help us see that we belong to God, who wants us completely. Amen.

ANOINTED

"She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial."
—Mark 14:8

Earlier this month we talked about how Jesus doesn't always fix things now; instead, he prepares the way for eternal life. Mark builds on that point here. Jesus is the *heavenly* King who came to fight a *spiritual* battle for our sake.

"Christ" means "Anointed One." Prophets, priests, and kings were anointed by God in the Old Testament. Jesus was anointed at his baptism (Mark 1:9-11). Great triumphs were expected of him. And in the story we read today, Jesus was anointed, as he put it, *for his burial*. The anointing perfume for burial was extremely expensive, and this act seemed out of line to others who were there.

"Whoa, there! Think of the poor!" some of the others cried. They were expecting Jesus to be a king focused on the problems of the present world. But Jesus had a different

plan for fixing the world's problems. "The poor . . . you can help . . . anytime you want," Jesus said. As for the woman who anointed him, he added, "She did what she could."

The difference is striking. One woman, moved by God, took the action she felt called to do. And Christ praised her for it. The others said their hearts were moved to help the poor, but instead of taking action for the poor, they blamed *her* for not doing so. God used her small action to prepare for his *ultimate* action. What good did the others' inaction do?

Dear Jesus, what can *I* do? Should I help the poor? Should I pour out a year's wages as an act of worship? Tell me what I can do, and give me the courage to do it—for you. Amen.

GOD'S BATTLE

"Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?" —Mark 14:48

Jesus doesn't take up arms, and his disciples flee. This is an interesting scenario. The disciples were willing to fight for Jesus against an armed crowd, but they were apparently too afraid to stand by peacefully while Jesus was arrested.

This is especially interesting in light of the earlier part of the story, when three of the disciples kept falling asleep while they were supposed to be supporting Jesus as he prayed. The disciples did not do well at that time either.

Perhaps if the disciples had been able to support Jesus in his prayers, they would have known better how to support him in his arrest and trial. As it was, they weren't able to support Jesus on either occasion. They couldn't support him because they didn't yet understand God's battle.

The Son of God did not come to start a physical rebellion. Neither his enemies nor his disciples understood that. Jesus came to conquer the world spiritually. His enemies couldn't stand up to his teaching, and his disciples didn't know how to support his spiritual battle.

By willingly dying for our sins and then rising from the dead, Jesus won the spiritual war. Jesus proved that violence, war, and actions like that will not save the world. Jesus had the spiritual power to do good in the face of evil—and that's what saved the world.

Lord Jesus, you battled evil at the spiritual level, using your goodness. Help us to follow you in doing that. Teach us what is good, and guide us to do good when we face up to evil. Amen.

MORE THAN A HERO

Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. . . . Then they led him out to crucify him.

—Mark 15:19

As Jesus stands before the religious leaders and the Roman governor, the authority and power of God himself is on trial. And at the end of this trial God in Jesus Christ stands condemned of being useless as the kind of hero that the world wants him to be.

The world laughs at Jesus. The Romans think Jesus is the one who needs a hero. The world thinks the “weapons” of Jesus—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness—are a joke with no lasting value for a life that’s here today, gone tomorrow.

But here’s something that the world—as seen in Pilate, the Sanhedrin, and the Roman soldiers—has missed: Jesus’ power might not always seem as grand and glorious as the powers of this world, but the joke is on them.

Pilate felt sorry for Jesus, thinking he was no real threat to the Roman Empire. But Jesus felt the same way about him. Jesus didn’t threaten the Roman Empire because *it was no real threat to Jesus*. Nor were the religious leaders. Nor was the crowd. Nor was the cross. Nor is cancer. Nor are your finances. Nor are broken relationships. Nor are any of the pains and troubles we face in this world. If Jesus doesn’t seem to get as anxious as we do about our problems, it’s only because he knows they don’t win in the end.

Dear Jesus, you’re not the one the world wants. But you *are* the one we need. Thank you for going through all that suffering and mockery to save us—to save me. Amen.

CATCH THE SPIRIT

When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

—Mark 15:39

Inspiration is an important part of the Christian life. The word *inspire* literally means to have a spirit come into you—and for Christians that means having the Holy Spirit in you. In the ancient biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek) the word meaning “inspire” was also related to breathing, since they used the same word for “spirit” as for “breath.”

In this passage Mark does something interesting with this concept. Mark says that Jesus “breathed his last,” and the Greek word for this (*ekpneo*) is different from the usual word used for “spirit” and “breath” (*pneuma*). *Ekpneo* literally means “expired,” as in “breathed out” or “let out his Spirit.”

At first this may seem like just another way of saying that Jesus died. But then Mark tells

us that a centurion was standing in front of Jesus—right where Jesus’ last breath was aimed. And something interesting happens to this Roman commander, who probably didn’t even believe in the God of the Jews. The centurion exclaims, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

The centurion caught the Spirit—he was inspired. And when he caught the Spirit, he knew clearly who Jesus really was. Jesus was more than a great person, a prophet, or even a king. Jesus was God’s own Son—the Savior of the world.

Dear Jesus, you are the Son of God. Please put your Holy Spirit into us today so that we can be inspired to live as you lived. Amen.

JESUS AT LARGE

"You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here." . . . They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.
—Mark 16:6, 8

Some women watched from a distance as Jesus died on the cross. They had followed him for years and had "cared for his needs." They loved him. They also saw Joseph take down Jesus' body and wrap it in linen. They followed and saw Joseph lay Jesus in a tomb and then roll a stone across the entrance.

After the Sabbath they came back as soon as possible. They would care for him in death as they had in life. They were so intent they almost forgot about the stone blocking the tomb.

But when they arrived, they saw that the stone had been moved—and someone was *in the tomb!* "Don't be alarmed," said a young man dressed in white (an angel), but they had little time to be afraid of him. *Jesus was missing!* More accurately, Jesus had escaped.

The women did what anyone else would do in a tomb where a dead body had gotten up and walked away—they ran!

Every time we think we have Jesus figured out, Mark throws in a twist. That's because Jesus never follows our rules. He's powerful and unpredictable—and that's unsettling to the way we would like to live. That's why the authorities killed him. But that didn't stop him either—then or now. Jesus is alive, and he could turn up at any moment, anywhere, and turn our world upside down.

Dear Jesus, I have to admit there are times when you scare me. You change all of the things that need to change, and I'm scared to let some things go. Please be gentle and gracious as you change me. Amen.

TRUST

[Jesus] rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

—Mark 16:14

God promised Adam and Eve a Savior when they fell into sin (Genesis 3:15). Ever since then, many human beings around the globe have hoped for a “chosen one,” whether they thought about it in terms of following Christ or not. The stories we’re reading this month tell us that the chosen one—the one called the Messiah, or the Christ—has come.

Christ, the chosen one, has come to this earth and is saving us. His name is Jesus. But Jesus doesn’t save us in the expected way by conquering oppressive governments and tearing down unjust systems. Instead, Jesus suffered and died to pay for our sins, and he came back to life to conquer death itself so that we can have eternal life.

Even the disciples who lived with Jesus while he was on earth had a hard time trusting

this at first. Their friends who first saw the resurrected Jesus couldn’t convince them. They were only convinced by *meeting* Jesus.

Jesus now sits at God the Father’s right hand, and he and the Father have sent the Holy Spirit to live in us and guide us here on earth. The Spirit introduces us to Jesus, and we begin a relationship with him that—although it’s a spiritual relationship—is powerful and amazingly real. If you haven’t met Jesus yet, pray that the Spirit of God will begin to show him to you today.

Dear Jesus, knowing you is the greatest blessing. You are the Savior of the world. You died for my sins. And I want to meet you in new ways every day. Amen.

THE LORD

[They] began joyfully to praise God in loud voices . . . “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” —Luke 19:37-38

Let's take a look at Jesus' last week again—this time through Luke. Telling us about Jesus' ride into Jerusalem, Luke focuses on the people who got it right about Jesus. Jesus is “the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” Luke even points out that these people were praising God with their shouts.

The people are praising God, yet in the next scene the religious leaders (Pharisees) say to Jesus, “Rebuke your disciples!” Rebuke Jesus' followers for *praising God*?! Luke wants us to see the absurdity of that. The leaders who are charged with teaching the people to praise, those spiritual leaders in whom God has invested the most, can't even recognize God when he walks (or rides a young donkey) among them.

Before this event, Luke also includes a parable Jesus told about investing and using a

king's resources wisely (Luke 19:11-27). In the parable, the servant in whom the king has invested the *least* hides the investment and receives no return. But now we see the Pharisees, the servants in whom God the King has invested the *most*, acting the same way. The contrast is striking. They have hidden God's investment.

God loves to invest in his people. And when we recognize and follow the work of our Lord, we have many opportunities to make that investment work for his kingdom. Let's make the best of God's investment in us today.

Lord Jesus, please don't tire of investing in me. Help me to give a return of praise and a faithful witness of your love. Amen.

HARD TO HIDE

Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

—Luke 22:61-62

I feel for Peter. He can't completely abandon Jesus even though there's nothing he can do. He at least *tries* to be there. But being there puts him in a difficult position. If the people there find out he's with Jesus, who knows what might happen? Will he be arrested too? Whatever Peter's reasons are, he feels that his best option is to stay close to Jesus but to deny that he is a disciple.

But it's hard to hide one's love for Jesus. Peter tries to fit in; he gets right in the middle of the group by the fire. But he still sticks out. As the night wears on, the accusations grow stronger, and Peter's denials grow more desperate and anxious. Then he hears the rooster crow.

As Jesus turns to look at him, suddenly it's all clear to Peter. He remembers that Jesus knew

this was coming. He may even remember how Jesus had predicted his own death (Luke 18:31-34). This is more than Peter can take, and he runs out and weeps.

This story is here in part so that we can learn from Peter. Sometimes we Christians try to pretend as if we fit into the world. But it's hard to hide our love for Jesus. We might as well come right out with it and show that we believe and trust in him.

Dear Jesus, thank you for what you have done for us. Help me today to believe and to live my faith openly. Give me the courage not to fit in. Amen.

UNEXPECTED RESPONSES

The centurion . . . praised God. . . . The people . . . beat their breasts. . . . Those who knew him . . . stood at a distance, watching these things.
—Luke 23:47-49

The leaders thought they were in control of the situation. After all, they had gotten Jesus nailed to a cross. They mocked him and beat him, and he did nothing. What could he do?

I wonder when the soldiers first noticed the sun had stopped shining. I wonder how the Pharisees reacted when the temple curtain tore apart. Do you think any of them started to feel as if they weren't in control after all?

Did you notice how much control Jesus has even as he dies? In a loud voice and with one last breath Jesus gives his Spirit over to God the Father.

Compare that control to the unexpected reactions of the people nearby. The Roman centurion, of all people, is the one who praises God and remarks on Jesus' righteousness. Did he even believe in God?

The crowds beat their chests in lament. Why were they so sad? Weren't they the ones who were just mocking Jesus? And the people who had followed Jesus stood at a distance and watched as if they had no idea what to do. It doesn't seem that anyone there could even control their own reactions.

God is in control, even when it comes to how we react to him. Would you like to react favorably to Jesus, but maybe you don't know how? Let's pray, asking him to work in our hearts.

Dear Jesus, we don't have as much control as we like to think. Please move our hearts today so that your death for us makes a difference in all we do. Amen.

HE HAS RISEN

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you. . . ." —Luke 24:5-6

Mark's account of the resurrection left us unsure about Jesus on the loose. Luke agrees that the world can't control Jesus, and then Luke goes even further.

Luke makes clear that *Jesus* is the one in control. "Remember how he told you . . ." the angels say. But Luke doesn't focus on how unsettling it is to follow someone who will radically change our life. Rather, Luke aims to *inspire awe* in us for Jesus. Even though the odds seemed stacked against him, it turns out that everyone has played right into Jesus' plan.

The resurrection of Jesus is the most awe-inspiring event in the history of the world. It's not just that Jesus came back from the dead; Elisha had raised a dead boy to life, and Jesus himself had raised several people. The unique thing about Jesus' resurrection is that it is *perma-*

nent—Jesus is still alive! Jesus overcame death forever!

Because of Jesus, death no longer has the finality it once had. Jesus demonstrated his power over death so that we can have real hope that he will conquer *our* death as well. Like Jesus, many of his followers will die. But, because of Jesus, all who follow him will one day be raised back to life.

Dear Jesus, we praise you for taking control of this world. The world can be cruel sometimes, and life is fragile. But you are in control of our life, Lord, and you have defeated death. Amen.

A MYSTERY

They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the king of Israel!"
—John 12:13

In John's account of Jesus' ride into Jerusalem, the crowd shouts the right things about Jesus, but we soon find out that even Jesus' disciples really "did not understand all this." They didn't realize this event was a fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy (Zechariah 9:9) until after Jesus rose into heaven. The crowd had come out to meet Jesus only because he had raised Lazarus from the dead earlier. And the Pharisees saw Jesus' popularity as a threat to their own power and position (John 11:47-50; 12:9-11).

It's easy to think that we would do better. It's easy to think that we know who Jesus *really* is. But most longtime followers of Christ would agree that Jesus is a mystery. He is not any easier to get to know than anyone else we might meet. In fact, we wouldn't be wrong to assume that it would take *more effort* to

know the Son of God than to know anyone else.

And yet we *can* grow to know Jesus. It takes time and work on our part, and we are not alone. The Spirit of Jesus himself comes into our hearts and teaches us (see John 16:7-15). By the Spirit, John and the other disciples eventually did understand what was going on here. And as we study the Bible as God's living Word, asking for the Spirit's guidance, we can grow to know Jesus too. It can take some work, but the Spirit will help us, and there is no better relationship to invest in than our relationship with the King.

Dear Jesus, by your Spirit, help me to learn and grow to know you better and better. Amen.

THE MASTER

"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet." —John 13:13-14

Jesus takes the posture of a servant. But when Peter tries to tell Jesus what to do, Jesus speaks as a master. We saw yesterday that Jesus is a mystery, and part of that mystery is how Jesus handles his power.

Jesus teaches again and again that in the kingdom of God, the strong serve the weak, and "whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 10:44). It's not easy to understand this. It can seem upside-down to us, because it is the opposite of the way the world has worked since ancient times.

That's why Peter is confused and why many Christians are still confused about power today. Christians still struggle with how to act when they have power. Sometimes they act as if power signifies God's special favor and they can do whatever they like with it.

Other Christians do the opposite, as if using their power is something to be avoided.

Jesus gave a better example. He did not relinquish his earthly power. He used it to help people who had less power. True, the disciples could have washed their own feet, but Jesus used footwashing to illustrate how he came to serve and teach them. And once the disciples knew Jesus, they were to serve others and teach about him, using the power he gave. We can do the same, using the power he gives us to serve and teach people who don't yet know him.

Dear Jesus, empower me so that I can empower others. Help me to never abuse or neglect the power you have provided. Amen.

KEEPING COMMANDS

"If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you. . . ."

—John 14:15-16

Keeping Jesus' commands means obeying what Jesus tells us to do. That's simple to understand. Unfortunately it's very difficult to do.

The main command Jesus has in mind here is "Love one another" (John 13:34). That's a great-sounding command, and I really want to keep it. I think of myself as a loving person. But then I hear or read the daily news about all kinds of crimes and war and people's abuses of one another. Suddenly I'm struggling to love. How do we love criminals? How do we love oppressors? How do we even love people who simply disagree with us?

We also realize there is more to keeping Jesus' commands than simply obeying. Part of keeping commands means that we hold on to a command even when we have recently broken

it. It means that we should try again. And again. And again. Because of God's forgiveness, we're not lost forever when we fail. But we must also keep trying.

Thankfully, Jesus provides us with the help we need. Jesus promised an advocate—an encourager. Someone who will put his arm around us when we need comfort, and someone who will spur us on when we need to try again and keep trying. The advocate is the Holy Spirit. Jesus sent him to live in us so that we will never be alone in trying to keep Jesus' commands.

Dear Jesus, with your Spirit in me, help me to sense your grace over my failures and your power to help me obey. Amen.

NEW RELATIONSHIPS

Jesus . . . said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother."
—John 19:26-27

At first glance it seems that Jesus is simply taking good care of his mother in this passage. But there's a lot more happening. Mary, Jesus' mother, shouldn't have needed John to take care of her. Mary had four other sons (two of whom went on to write the books of James and Jude in the Bible), and it was *their* responsibility to care for their mother. Why would Mary need to live with John?

The real point is that on the cross Jesus changed human relationships. On the cross, Jesus made Spirit thicker than blood. Jesus paid for our sins. With our sins forgiven, God the Father reasserts his claim over us. In Christ, we become adopted children of God.

It's moving to think that God has claimed me as his child. It's also powerful to realize that he has claimed others. I didn't get a choice about who

else God has chosen; he claims them, and now they are my brothers and sisters—forever. The relationships based on God's choice are actually more permanent than the relationships based on blood relations. Tragically, sometimes blood relatives reject Christ, and those relationships end when we die.

Jesus says to us, "This is your new mother; this is your new son; this is your new brother or sister." And when he says that, these new relationships last forever.

Jesus, I love my blood relatives. I pray for you to work in each one's heart to become a child of the Father. Please help me also to love all your other children just as much. Amen.

THE FULFILLMENT

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

I have seen it so often that I almost missed it in this passage: when Jesus died for my sins, he *fulfilled all of the prophecies* that someday someone would rescue me—rescue all of us. I think I would have missed it, but I was feeling ill when I started writing this meditation, so I postponed writing until the next day, a Sunday.

That morning I went to worship, and then I saw again just how important this story from John really is. "Jesus said, 'It is finished.'" And that means that if Jesus had not done all that had to be accomplished, we could *still* be waiting for the Messiah to come.

John takes great care in this passage to state that the Old Testament Scriptures were fulfilled in Jesus. In fact, John points out some details here—details so small that I wonder if we ever would have noticed

them if Jesus hadn't fulfilled them. But Jesus *did* fulfill every little detail of God's plan to save us—and nothing was left unfinished.

There are many amazing things about Jesus' dying for us, and one of those is that our waiting is over. All has been completed. "It is finished." And with those words Jesus bowed his head under the weight of the world's sins. Giving up his spirit, he paid for those sins once and for all.

And the brokenness of the world began to heal.

Dear Jesus, there are so many details in Scripture that you have fulfilled—more than a lifetime could discover. Thank you for saving us so completely. May we never stop trusting you. Amen.

FRANTICALLY SEARCHING

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."
—John 20:13

Mary couldn't find Jesus. She looked in the tomb and checked with the disciples. By the time she turned to the man who she supposed was the gardener, she was in tears and nearly frantic. "Where is Jesus?" she wondered.

I know the feeling. In my youth I knew I needed Jesus in my life more. I went to church, I tried to be good, and I believed Jesus was real, was God, and had died for my sins. I trusted in him for salvation, but I longed for something more. I wanted to *experience* Jesus being right there with me.

Maybe you've felt that way too. Even people who are committed to Christ sometimes long for a more powerful sense of his presence—especially in times of loneliness, sickness, or grief.

Maybe you're just learning about Jesus and aren't yet sure

what to think about his death and resurrection or how to have a relationship with someone in heaven.

These are times when we can understand some of Mary's desperation. And we can learn from her. Mary didn't give up; after the two disciples left, she stayed. And then Jesus came.

Jesus eventually gave *me* a stronger sense of his presence too. I don't *always* have that, and it's certainly not something I can control. But I'm learning that I need to be patient. And those who earnestly seek him *will* find him.

Dear Jesus, we believe you love us. And we know you are always there. Please also let us experience you closely, Lord, and grow in our faith in you. Amen.

BLESSED BELIEF

Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

—John 20:29

Thomas literally couldn't believe the good news. From this story in John we can take some comfort that we're not the only ones who doubt Jesus at times.

Belief is a tricky thing. We like to pretend that we can control what we believe and what we don't. But that's not always true. Most of us have felt the pain of betrayal from a friend. Maybe you've responded to an apology saying, "I'd like to believe you, but I just can't."

It can be the same way with the world around us. After being disappointed so many times, it can be difficult not to grow cynical and say, "I've heard our leaders promise this before, and I just can't believe it anymore."

When we first hear about Jesus, we might have a similar reaction. How could this be true? How could a person rise

from the dead? How could a person pay for all my sins?

Thomas was fortunate. Jesus came to visit him and showed Thomas his hands and side. Jesus tells us how blessed we are when we aren't able to see him and yet we still believe.

If you're a believer, please pray for the blessing of belief for others. If you're not a believer, Jesus understands, just as he understood Thomas. Pray anyway, asking Jesus to remove your doubts.

Dear Jesus, we all experience some doubt about you sometimes. Please build our trust in you. And for all who are still wondering if you're real, please help them believe you are. Amen.

THE PROPHET

“Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

—Matthew 21:9

Did you notice that Matthew doesn't include the words *king* or *kingdom* in the crowd's shouting? He's the only gospel writer who leaves that out. This is interesting because in the rest of his account of this story, Matthew goes further than the others to show how Jesus was in charge of the whole event.

This odd omission is explained when Jesus reaches Jerusalem. “Who is this?” the city wants to know. “This is Jesus, the prophet,” the crowds reply. They're focused on Jesus as a prophet. The crowd in Matthew's gospel sees a different piece of the puzzle but still doesn't have the whole picture.

We sometimes talk about Jesus being a prophet, priest, and king. That's true, but the prophet part can be easily misunderstood. A prophet is a mouthpiece for God. But Jesus

is God! And that is Matthew's point. Jesus wasn't there to give new prophecies; Jesus was there to *fulfill* prophecies. That's a much bigger deal!

Jesus is such a big deal that in the original language the text indicates that he “shook” the city, as with an earthquake! I sometimes forget how big a deal Jesus really is. Sometimes I need to remember that approaching Jesus is far greater than what I can really wrap my mind around.

Dear Jesus: Wow! It's almost unbelievable I'm talking to *you*. You're a bigger deal than world leaders and celebrities, a bigger deal than professors and the wisest people. You are God. And you're listening to *me*. Wow! Amen.

WELL DONE

"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things."

—Matthew 25:21

Many Christians dream of what it might be like to stand before Jesus one day and hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Could any other affirmation be more important?

Can we be assured of receiving that kind of affirmation from Jesus? Yes, we can—through faith in him, as Ephesians 2:4-10 explains: saving grace comes through faith as a gift to us from God.

That's what Jesus teaches in this Matthew 25 parable. Two servants receive abundant gifts and trust their master enough to go out and invest those gifts. Any investment involves risk, and yet these servants are willing to take the risk because they trust their master. The third servant doesn't trust the master, doesn't invest his gift, and then loses his gift and his

job when the master returns. God—our Master—insists that we trust in him.

God gives all of us gifts to invest in the world around us, particularly in ways that show his love to others. But if you've ever been faced with the choice between stopping to help someone and getting to work on time, you might understand how the world doesn't always value our desire to invest our gifts for God's glory. Trusting him enough to use our gifts his way isn't always easy. But if we want to hear him say, "Well done," we have to trust him anyway.

Dear Jesus, help me to trust you and to be faithful with all you have given, and may I look forward to the joy of hearing you say, "Well done!" Amen.

FORGIVEN, WE SET THE TABLE

"Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

—Matthew 26:27-28

Before Jesus died, God's people sacrificed a lamb each year during the Feast of Passover to remind them that God brought them out of slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12). Jesus timed his death to take place at the beginning of Passover—when God's people were sacrificing their lambs. This would show that Jesus' death is the once-for-all sacrifice of God to save his people from their slavery to sin. Now we remember Jesus' sacrifice by celebrating the Lord's Supper, instituted by Jesus the night before he died.

We call this communion, the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist (which means "thanksgiving"). It is a celebration, but it is also a confession that we need to be forgiven. Matthew highlights this point as Jesus says that his blood is "poured out . . . for the forgiveness of sins."

Notice also that the *disciples* were the ones who prepared the meal. They gathered and prepared the food and set the table—as we also do for communion today.

Every time we take the bread and the cup, we remember together that we are sinners who needed Jesus to die for us. We had to set that table—we needed his sacrifice. But in the Lord's Supper our guilt is met by the saving grace of God. And as we eat and drink, we are assured that God's saving grace overcomes our guilt because of Jesus' sacrifice.

Dear Jesus, I am sorry for my sins. Thank you for dying in my place so that I could be forgiven. Your love is unquestionable. Amen.

EARTH-SHAKING FORGIVENESS

The curtain of the temple was torn in two. . . . The earth shook . . . and the tombs broke open. . . . People who had died were raised to life . . . and went into the holy city. —Matthew 27:50-52

When Jesus gave up his spirit—when he died—it set off a chain reaction, from the tearing of the temple curtain to people rising from their tombs and entering the holy city.

The beginning and end of this chain of events are significant. The temple curtain, which separated God's holiness from the world, tore open. And people who were dead—which, according to the law, meant they were unclean—entered the holy city. Matthew is showing that Jesus' death changed the relationship of the holy God to the world. Previously God and the world were kept apart—at least symbolically. But now things would be different.

At the moment Jesus died on the cross, our sins were paid for. That's earth-shaking, rock-shattering news. We're not guilty anymore. He took our guilt upon himself.

Since we are no longer guilty, God doesn't have to protect us from his holiness. Do you ever think some things are too good for you? Well, thanks to Jesus, even *God* is no longer too good for you—that's what the torn curtain means for us.

Many of the neighbors around my former church told me they felt they were too sinful—too unclean, you might say—to visit our church. Nope. "Unclean" bodies from the tomb went into the holy city. Jesus' death provides all the cleansing that anyone will ever need.

Dear Jesus, thank you for forgiving all my sins. Thank you for dying so that I could be in your presence and with your people. Amen.

A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES

Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. —Matthew 28:9

The women came to look at Jesus' tomb and to mourn.

Matthew interrupts the sadness of the story with a somewhat scary and somewhat comical scene. An angel comes to the tomb, with an appearance like lightning and causing an earthquake, and he rolls away the stone and sits on it. The soldiers guarding the tomb are so terrified that they shake and fall down like they are dead. And the women? They are scared too.

The women have come to the tomb to see it and grieve. But the angel tells them that the one who was in the tomb isn't there. And there's no need to grieve anymore because Jesus has *risen from the dead!* In fact, he's on his way to Galilee and wants his disciples to see him there.

So the women who have come to grieve hurry away "filled with joy." And if their joy is already full, what happens next makes their joy overflow: *Jesus* meets them. The person they have come to see dead is standing in front of them *alive!*

Do you remember when you first met Jesus? He takes our sorrow and turns it into the greatest joy. If you haven't met him yet, I hope you meet him soon—maybe even today. It is the greatest joy any of us has known.

Dear Jesus, our eyes are sore from the violence, injustice, sickness, and death in this world. Help us to meet you today so that we may see the joy and hope only you can give. Amen.

SPREAD THE STORY

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

—Matthew 28:19

The great plan has been accomplished; Christ has died and risen. Our sins have been paid for, death has been defeated, and eternal life awaits all who are joined to Christ.

Imagine being on that mountain in Galilee. You're up there waiting, having heard that the resurrected Jesus will meet you there. And then he arrives.

On a mountain you can see for miles all around—it feels as if you're looking over the whole world. Yet if you look up, you feel tiny and as if you could fall from your perch at any moment. Many ancient people believed that mountains were the place where heaven and earth met. Jesus has chosen the ideal spot to tell his disciples that he has *all authority* in heaven and on earth. Everything the disciples can see—around

and above them—belongs to the Lord and Savior, Jesus.

With the world spread around them, Jesus tells his followers they need to spread the news. They need to make new disciples of Jesus. They need to bring God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to new believers. And they can do all that because he will always be right there with them.

This story continues every day as we share with the world around us that our sins are paid for, death is defeated, and eternal life awaits us in Christ.

Dear Jesus, help us to see you with us as we see the world around us. Fill our hearts with joy, hope, and excitement for eternal life with you—and to share that with others. Amen.



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