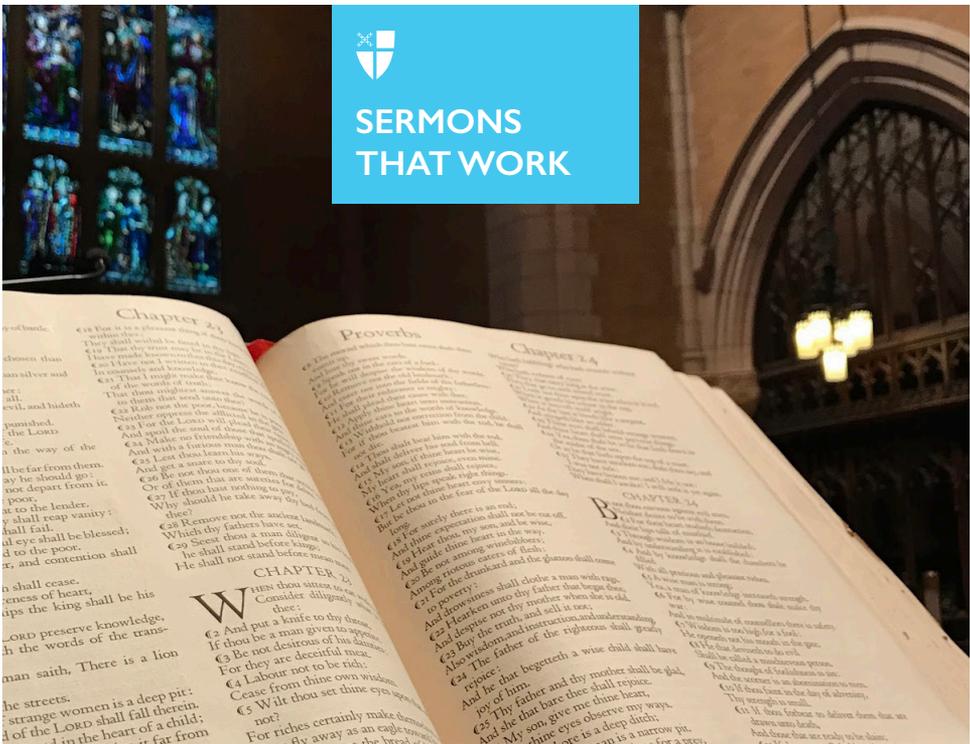




# SERMONS THAT WORK



# SERMONS FOR *Holy Week 2019*

An offering of  
The Episcopal Church's  
Sermons That Work

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## Holy Week 2019

DEAR READER,

Thank you for downloading **Sermons for Holy Week 2019**, a collection of sermons prepared by some of the best preachers from across The Episcopal Church.

Sermons That Work, a ministry of the Episcopal Church's Office of Communication, has provided free and high-quality sermons, Bible studies, and bulletin inserts since 1995. Every week, it is our pleasure to source, review, and publish these pieces; we hope they are edifying as you hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these and their corresponding scriptures.

One of the masterpieces of 18th-century sacred music is Johann Sebastian Bach's **Matthäus-Passion**, a setting of St. Matthew's Passion narrative. The opening chorus, **Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen**, sets the scene for the work. It is a noisy, chaotic, confusing, and beautiful piece. Like the events of Holy Week themselves, the piece seems to spiral out of control as more and more voices are added, frenetic layers of complexity stacking on top of each other, as the listener feels more and more helpless to pause the situation.

There is something for us in this piece, nearly 300 years later, as we commit ourselves to walking this way with Jesus. It is my sincere hope that as you read these sermons—alone, in a small group, over coffee in a crowded shop, perhaps with **Matthäus-Passion** playing, or in a quiet place—you would take stock of the reality of this most important story. While you read, I hope you would see the ways that Jesus entered and continues to enter this noisy, chaotic, confusing, beautiful, and beloved world. I hope you will walk humbly and bravely toward the cross, knowing that even when things are most out-of-control and confusing, that the love of God remains the most powerful force in the world. Above all – among the very real and very cruel and very painful events of this week – I hope that you will remember how the week ends: in majesty, in glory, and in new light.

On behalf of Sermons That Work and the Episcopal Church's Office of Communication, I wish you a blessed Holy Week and a joyous Easter. Alleluia, Christ is risen!

Your brother in Christ,  
**Christopher Sikkema**  
The Episcopal Church

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## The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

### READINGS

ISAIAH 50:4-9A

PSALM 31:9-16

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

LUKE 22:14-23:56 or LUKE 23:1-49

### COLLECT

Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

### PROTESTERS

*by the Rev. Anna Tew*

What comes to mind when you think of the word “protester”?

Regardless of what you may initially picture, there are many types of protesters, of course. There are antiwar protesters, Tea Party protesters, protesters for common sense gun legislation and gun rights protesters. There are protesters for liberal causes and conservative causes and everything in between. Sometimes, they clash with each other. Protests tend to make us nervous because they carry with them an inherent risk of instability.

Outside the United States, there are even more types of protesters: those who rally in favor of governments and those who seek to overthrow them.

Today, set your feet in the dust of Jerusalem and look across the sunny stone streets. Hear the cries of a different kind of protest in an occupied land: the people are waving branches and spreading their coats along the road. The crowd is pressing in, clamoring to see the one they've heard about: Jesus of Nazareth. They even dare to proclaim him “king.”

Hear the talk around you: “I heard he can make lepers clean,” says one man to another.

Nearby, a woman says, “I heard that his birth was announced by angels.” “That can't be,” comes the reply of another woman. “Who is he, anyway? Moses himself?”

“Well,” comes another voice, “I have some relatives in the north. They say that there was this widow whose son had died, and Jesus of Nazareth brought him back from the dead **at the funeral**. My relatives say they saw it for themselves.” Everyone’s eyes go wide.

Just then, there’s a commotion in the midst of the crowd. Jesus is coming closer. He’s riding... a **colt**? The people lay their coats on the road before him as they welcome him into the Holy City. They truly give him a royal welcome, reminiscent of the welcome that David got when he brought the ark into Jerusalem. They chant “Hosanna” together.

It seems almost docile to us now, but remember: Israel was **not** a free country. They were a country that was occupied by a foreign empire and bitter adversary. People did not have the right to peaceably assemble, much less assemble to declare a teacher to be a **king** over and above the mighty empire. There is not supposed to be any ruler of Israel except Rome’s emperor. And yet, here we are, gathering, chanting, cheering.

While we may think little of it today because we’re so familiar with the story, giving a royal welcome to a religious teacher and shouting, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” was a highly subversive act at the time. Rome ruled with an iron fist, and they took subversive action seriously. Those gathered on this first Palm Sunday were risking their lives, and they knew it.

But they still clamored forward to see, to shout, to protest the oppression and celebrate the one they thought might free them. And today, we stand with them. Today, we declare that we, too, have only one ruler, and that there is no person, economic philosophy, or political party that is above Christ. Only Jesus gets the royal welcome.

Welcome to Holy Week, friends. It begins with shouting.

Of course, we will learn later in the week that this royal welcome will not last. We humans are fragile creatures, and we often get it right before messing it all up again. Our momentary courage often precedes our running away. This is what will happen to Jesus. The crowd which today shouts, “Hosanna!” will on Friday shout, “Crucify him!” They will come to fully understand the danger that Jesus poses to their stability. They will see that he is not a military leader. And they will sacrifice him for continued peace with Rome.

Today begins Holy Week. Today, we again set our feet on the road to the Last Supper, to the garden to pray, to the cross, and to the tomb. And while you may already know the ending, pretend for a moment that you don’t. The disciples didn’t. When Jesus died on Friday, that was supposed to be the end.

If death is not real, then Easter is no miracle.

So, plant your feet in the dust of Jerusalem this day. Feel the palm branch in your hand and remember the teacher who rode through the subversive protest on a colt.

This Holy Week story is life. This story is **our lives**. Joy. Love. Fear. Grief. Betrayal. Pain. Even the ordinary: eating, drinking, washing. This place, beloved, is where we learn both joy and grief, celebration and pain: in church. During Holy Week. Here, we see our ordinary lives echoed in the life and love of Jesus Christ, the Eternal. We see our imperfect lives reflected in the perfect and saving love of Christ. And in it, may you, too, find some seed of hope.

This story is our story.

And every year, the Church gathers to tell it again, beginning on those dusty Jerusalem streets with the crowd that dared to gather to celebrate the teacher that many had only heard about. Today, the story begins again.

We tell this story of love, death, and resurrection, just as every year around this time the Jewish people gather in their homes for the Passover, to tell the story of God’s people journeying from slavery into freedom. Because the God of Israel saves. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, writing of the Passover, says, “Every Israelite must sing the [story] again, not only for what is remembered, but also for what is experienced directly, immediately, personally, at first hand.”

Beloved, we are invited to gather on Jerusalem’s streets and shout Hosanna and sing this story together again. May our lives reflect the protest that we have held here today: that despite what the world may tell us, our highest loyalty is to Christ alone, the one who died and lives again, the one who binds us to people of all races, nationalities, and affiliations. Christ, the one who joins us together with people we love **and** with people we’d rather not associate with.

We gather with the Church all around the world to tell the story, because every Christian must sing it again, not only for what is remembered, but for what is experienced.

We sing it again just as our ancestors in the faith have. We sing it again as the Church did last year. We sing it again as the Church will next year. Because this story is not just Jesus’ story. It is our story. We sing it again not only for what is remembered, but also for what we have experienced of this saving God in our own flesh.

And so, with our hands and our feet, with our sight and our senses, with our singing and our prayers, let us walk through Holy Week again.

We sing it again because it is our story, and we sing it again to proclaim it to the world. We sing it again because this week, in this time, we keep the rumor alive that there is a God in Heaven, and that despite the pain that we see every day, that God is a God of Love and Hope, and a God who cries with, loves, and cares for every person. Until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at the Heavenly Banquet. The story of Holy Week, this story, Jesus' story, is our story. It is the story of how love and grace became flesh and defeated death and changed everything. It is the story of every time you have experienced grace when you thought your world had ended. It is the story of how very loved we are.

So, let the Church rise up, imagining itself on the streets of first-century Jerusalem today, and let the Church shout: **Amen.**

The Rev. Anna Tew is a Lutheran pastor serving Our Savior's Lutheran Church (ELCA) in South Hadley, Massachusetts. A product of several places, she was born and grew up in rural Alabama, spent most of her early adulthood in Atlanta, and now lives in and adores New England. Educated at Troy and Emory, she has served as a parish pastor and a hospital chaplain since graduating from seminary in 2011. In her spare time, Anna enjoys running, climbing mountains, traveling, exploring cities and nightlife, and keeping up with politics and pop culture.

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## Monday in Holy Week

### READINGS

ISAIAH 42:1-9

PSALM 36:5-11

HEBREWS 9:11-15

JOHN 12:1-11

### COLLECT

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

### FAITHFUL FRIENDS

*by Susan Butterworth*

In today's gospel passage, we encounter the Bethany family: siblings Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. We have met Martha and Mary before, in the well-known passage from Luke's gospel (Luke 10:38-42) when Jesus and his disciples rest on the road to Jerusalem in the home of sisters Mary and Martha. Remember that Martha, doing all the work of the house and hospitality while her sister Mary sits at the Lord's feet and listens to his teaching, asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her. Jesus' reply, that Mary has chosen the better part, is often taken to mean that Mary is focused on what is holy, while Martha is distracted by the tasks of the world. Sometimes Mary is described as the contemplative sister, while Martha is contrasted as the active sister.

In the eleventh chapter of John, we learn much more about this family and their role in the last weeks and days of Jesus' life. This family is central in Jesus' final and pivotal miracle, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. We learn that Jesus loves the siblings, but when the sisters send word that their brother is ill, Jesus delays going to them. Also in John 11, we are introduced to the complex relationship between Jesus' followers and the Jews. When Jesus finally proposes returning to Judea to respond to the sisters' summons, his disciples warn him: "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" (John 11:8). In this passage Jesus and the Jews are antagonists. In contrast, we learn something important about the Bethany community of Jews. While Jesus delayed, Lazarus has died. In fact, by the time he gets to Bethany, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. John writes, "Many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them

about their brother” (John 11:19). Some scholars, including Adele Reinhartz in her **Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John**, suggest that the Bethany family were Jewish followers of Jesus, living in harmony in the Jewish community.

Are the Jews who tried to stone Jesus the same Jews who comforted Martha and Mary in their loss? Yes. And no. Let us simply say that there was diversity within the Jewish community, multiple ways of being Jewish. Some Jews were threatened by the popular young teacher; some Jews accepted him as Messiah; some Jews were willing to live in a society with a diversity of beliefs and practices.

With her brother in the tomb and her sister at home in the company of their Jewish neighbors, Martha goes to meet Jesus on the road. There she affirms her faith: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and those who believe in him will never die. Then Jesus, with Martha, Mary, and the weeping Jews, goes to the tomb, and the dead man is raised to life. The raising of Lazarus is pivotal both because it foreshadows Jesus’ own death and resurrection, and also because the miracle—and Jesus’ great love for his friends—persuades many of the witnesses to join his followers, thus further threatening the Jewish religious and political establishment. From that time forward, Jesus was a marked man. The scene is set in motion for his arrest and passion. He lies low for a while, but Passover approaches and Jesus has a destiny to fulfill. He turns toward Jerusalem.

As our gospel passage for today begins, Jesus has stopped in Bethany, seeking rest at the home of his friends Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, who provide a meal for him and his disciples. Mary, in an act of reverence and humility, anoints Jesus’ feet with costly perfumed oil, and wipes his feet with her hair. In the passage from John, Judas is named as the disciple who reprimands her, though in both Matthew’s and Mark’s versions of this scene, this rebuke is made by unnamed disciples. Jesus defends her and makes the enigmatic comment: “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” What could he possibly mean by this seemingly callous remark about the poor?

A little research into the family at Bethany is revealing. Mary and Martha appear to be unmarried, independent young women, unusual at the time. Scholars speculate that they may have belonged to an ascetic Jewish sect, possibly the Essenes. Evidence from the Dead Sea scrolls, as well as historians Josephus and Jerome, suggests that Bethany was the location of a hospice for lepers and the poor, a center of charity. In fact, Bethany – **beth ‘anya** in Aramaic – translates as **House of the Poor** or **House of the Suffering**. It is likely that the gospel references to the house in Bethany refer to a communal

home, of which Martha was the housekeeper. The costly nard perfume may have been a donation from a wealthy benefactor for the benefit of the poor. This would explain the disciples’ comment about selling the perfume and giving the money to the poor. It would also explain Jesus’ words about the poor being always with them.

What we do know for sure is that both Martha and Mary were women of great faith and devotion. Martha, even in the face of her brother’s death, declares unequivocally that she believes. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in him, even if they die, shall live forever. “Yes, Lord,” says Martha, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” Her declaration of faith is no less stunning than Mary’s act of devotion at Jesus’ feet.

And Lazarus. His love for Jesus will cost him dearly as well. As the man who has been raised from the dead, he is dangerous. Here we see the stark contrast between the chief priests and the Jews of the community. Since many of the people, on account of Lazarus, have deserted the priestly establishment to follow Jesus, the chief priests resolve to put Lazarus to death as well. The gospels do not reveal what happened to Lazarus of Bethany. According to tradition in Southern France, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were put out to sea by Jews hostile to the followers of Jesus, in a boat without sails or oars. They landed miraculously in Provence, where Lazarus went on to preach and convert many to Christianity, became Bishop of Marseille, and was later martyred during the persecution of Domitian.

Now, on the Monday of Holy Week, six days before Easter, we await with the Bethany family, Our Lord’s betrayal, arrest, and passion. Like them, we know what is coming. We will have great need of our faith during this week’s journey to the cross. May we, like Martha, offer our faith in the sure knowledge of resurrection and eternal life. May we, like Mary, offer our most precious gifts in devotion at the feet of the Master. May we, like Lazarus, offer our lives as witness to God’s word and deed. May we, in humility, love, and confidence, offer a place in our hearts for our dear friend, brother, and Lord, Jesus, to rest on his journey. Amen.

Susan Butterworth, M.A., M.Div, is a writer, teacher, singer, and lay minister. She leads **Song & Stillness: Taizé @ MIT**, a weekly ecumenical service of contemplative Taizé prayer at the interfaith chapel at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). She teaches writing and literature to college undergraduates and writes book reviews, essays, and literary reference articles.

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## Tuesday in Holy Week

### READINGS

ISAIAH 49:1-7

PSALM 71:1-14

I CORINTHIANS 1:18-31

JOHN 12:20-36

### COLLECT

O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life: Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ, that we may gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

### THE HERO REVEALED

*by the Rev. Amy Richter*

Sometimes our eyes deceive us. We think we know what we're looking at, but it turns out that reality is different than we thought, like our perceptions or expectations were off, there is more here than meets the eye. Sometimes, of course, we can't see something because it's hidden. Sometimes it's hidden in plain sight, and other times, it was waiting for the right time to be revealed.

Moviemakers know that the **hidden hero** can be a great character, a great type. You know, the person who turns out to be very different from our first expectations just when the plot demands it. Think of the bookworm whose quiet, nerdy nature could make her easily overlooked, but then it totally pays off when she knows the obscure fact that saves the day. Think of Hermione Granger (from the Harry Potter series) who is the brains of the bunch. You can tease her for being a know-it-all, but you want her recall of spells when fighting the bad guys. Think of Dr. Henry Walton Jones, Jr., who, if you only knew him from archaeology class, you would think of as a harmless bespectacled professor, but we know him as Indiana Jones, whose vision somehow improves when he fights Nazis and Soviet agents. Think of Princess Leia in **Star Wars—A New Hope** (the first one)—who is in a bind. Luke and Han come to rescue her, but when the rescue doesn't go as planned, she grabs Luke's blaster, shoots at the stormtroopers and declares, "**Somebody** has to save our skins!" There are even examples of movies featuring preachers who are quite mild-mannered but, threaten their congregation, and they will kick in the door and look like they spend as much time practicing marksmanship as they do in Bible study. If Clint Eastwood in **Pale Rider** is an extreme example,

think of salt-of-the-earth Father Barry in **On the Waterfront**, who advocates peaceful resistance to evil, but doesn't hesitate to punch Marlon Brando's character and send him flying across the room when he needs a little calming down.

We love the hidden hero, the person who becomes who we want them to be in the face of threat, danger, and the forces of evil. We love the moment when they are revealed as stronger, badder, braver, more durable than they looked, the person not to be trifled or messed with or taken for granted, or else, look out.

There's a lot about hiding and revealing in our lessons for today. In Isaiah, we hear about the servant of the Lord, "He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away." This hidden one would be revealed, and then "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Kings don't stand—other people stand in their presence. Princes don't prostrate themselves—people prostrate before them. But when the Lord reveals this servant "to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel," to be given "as a light to the nations," that God's "salvation may reach to the end of the earth," people will be amazed. Those who saw "one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers," will know that this servant is no less than the chosen of the Lord.

We love the hidden hero. And we love the moment when their power is revealed in all its glory.

It could be tempting to imagine Jesus that way. It could be tempting to want Jesus to reveal himself that way, to want him—the unjustly condemned, tortured, and crucified man hanging on a cross—to lose his patience, his temper, his restraint, and tear himself down from the cross and exact revenge on his captors; to want Jesus to summon some super-human physical strength, blast the cross into toothpicks, and go after the whole legion of Roman soldiers who now tremble in shock and terror when they see who Jesus **really** is; to want Jesus to stop being the weak, wounded, defeated man on the cross he appears to be—and be instead the kind of hero we want him to be.

We're not alone. Way before Hollywood, and in real life, people taunted Jesus to reveal his true self, or what they thought that would look like. Soldiers scoff, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (Luke 23:37); a criminal calls out, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself, and us!" (Luke 23:39); passersby

cry, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” (Matt 27:40); chief priests, along with the scribes and elders, mock, “He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him” (Matt 27:42). In other words, you don’t look like a king, a Messiah, a Son of God. Transform yourself into our version of a hero, and then we’ll believe.

But Jesus won’t do it. He won’t transform into our version, the hero we want him to be. He stays on the cross—the hero and savior we need.

When some Greeks come to Philip and say, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus,” we get all excited. What an evangelism opportunity! And people actually come asking, none of that messy going out to people where they are with the Good News! They just come!

Philip, along with Andrew, goes to Jesus to tell him about this great chance to impress. Jesus starts off in a promising way: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Excellent! We’ve been waiting for this moment! The hidden hero will peel off the outer layer, duck into the phone booth, find exactly the right words, cast the right spell, roll up his sleeves, pick up his weapon... But then Jesus starts talking about death: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” His glorification comes on the cross, not in spite of it. On the cross—not escaping from it. On the cross—not smashing, avoiding, outwitting, or faking it.

Notice this. Keep this in mind as this week unfolds: Jesus’ glorification comes on Good Friday when he looks like—when he is exactly who he is—a victim of torture and injustice, not when he strides forth in glowing robes. Don’t rush to Easter and miss this truth.

Don’t miss it, because Jesus says this is our path to glorification too: “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” This is the type of hero Jesus wants us to be. No secret powers or arsenals or strength. No place for them or need for them in the plot. Just the grace of God, the wisdom of God, the strength of God.

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Amy Richter is a priest who currently serves as an Episcopal Volunteer in Mission, working on the Galatians 6:2 (“Bear one another’s burdens”) project, focusing on theological education, and serving as a lecturer at the College of Transfiguration in Makhanda/ Grahamstown, South Africa. She and her husband, Joseph Pagano, blog at [www.amyandjoegotoafrica.com](http://www.amyandjoegotoafrica.com). They have a new book coming out in 2019 from Cascade Books, a collection of personal essays by Episcopal lay people and clergy, fiction and non-fiction writers, poets, musicians, and theologians reflecting on experiences of worship.

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## Wednesday in Holy Week

### READINGS

ISAIAH 50:4-9A

PSALM 70

HEBREWS 12:1-3

JOHN 13:21-32

### COLLECT

Lord God, whose blessed Son our Savior gave his body to be whipped and his face to be spit upon: Give us grace to accept joyfully the sufferings of the present time, confident of the glory that shall be revealed; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

### TWO RESURRECTIONS

*by the Rev. Jason Cox*

And it was night. Wednesday in Holy Week marks an inflection point between light and dark: halfway from dusk to dawn, midway between two resurrections. Yes, two resurrections: because you cannot understand Jesus’ resurrection in the Gospel of John without first knowing about Lazarus’ resurrection. Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is the catalyst that sets everything in motion this Holy Week.

And Lazarus is the mirror opposite of Judas. As Lazarus is raised from the dead and brought into the light, Judas descends further into darkness with every step, unable or unwilling to open his eyes and live in the light and truth of God’s love. Tonight, we consider Lazarus versus Judas, the light versus the night. And we wait in this darkness, in this night, for the light to come. If it does — when it does — how will we react? Will we walk into the light or turn away?

To know how we got here, we have to know where we’ve been. It was only a few weeks before this night that Jesus had been called to Bethany by Mary and Martha. Their brother Lazarus was ill. He may have had leprosy — Bethany was built to house a colony of lepers. The village of Bethany was just outside of Jerusalem, just out of sight of the temple, in fact. The name Bethany translates to something like “the house of affliction.” It was where the city of Jerusalem sent people who were poor or sick. Bethany was built out of sight of the temple so those coming into the city to worship wouldn’t have to see all that ugliness, that poverty and desperation.

All in all, not a very nice place. But Bethany is where Jesus chose to spend much of his time, in the house of his friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus. He got the sisters' message about Lazarus' illness but didn't arrive in time to heal him. By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been dead four days. Martha is upset, of course, and this causes Jesus to be upset. He weeps, standing before the darkened tomb. John tells the story this way:

“It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.’”

Jesus called into the darkness: “‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’”

The meaning of Easter isn't contained in just one resurrection. In John's Gospel, the struggle between light and dark — what we are living through during this Holy Week — is framed by two resurrections: first Lazarus, then Jesus. Jesus' raising of Lazarus is the catalyst that sets in motion everything that happens in Holy Week. News of the miracle spreads and brings Jesus many new followers — and it's these new converts who all turn out with palm branches to honor Jesus as he enters Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover week. These crowds bring Jesus to the attention of the temple authorities, and eventually the Roman governor.

The night before that Palm Sunday demonstration, the newly raised Lazarus hosted a gathering for Jesus in Bethany. Although Jesus raising Lazarus was astounding, the idea of resurrection was not entirely unheard of. In fact, Martha is exasperated with Jesus when he first tells her that Lazarus will rise again— “I know, I know,” she says, “at the last day,” as if to say, “of course he will live again — we all will.” For John, the point of Jesus' resurrection is not to impress on us how utterly unique Jesus is. John has other ways of making that point. In John's Gospel, the meaning of Jesus' resurrection is wrapped up with Lazarus': the point is that resurrection life starts now, and is meant for everybody.

John's other point is that resurrection always means the resurrection of the **body**. Bodies matter in the Gospel of John. When Jesus is standing outside Lazarus' tomb, Martha and Mary are careful to warn him that the corpse is four days old, so of course, there will be a stench. And at the gathering on the night before Palm Sunday, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with a pound of costly perfume, and then wipes his feet with her hair: you can't get more embodied than that. John emphasizes bodies in order to insist that resurrection life starts

now, while we still have bodies. The life of God's Kingdom begins in the here and now, and is meant to bring healing, comfort, and succor to all those whose bodies are suffering in this present age — especially the poor.

But Judas couldn't see this. His mind was in darkness: he couldn't see the meaning of Mary's anointing, and he objected to the extravagance, and accused Jesus of not caring about the poor. The darkness continued to grow in Judas all that week: while he watched the eager crowds grow, and the temple authorities struggle to contain them. Judas was quick to assume the worst about Jesus, to ascribe bad motives to every action, while he watched Jesus' open conflict with the authorities grow. At the same time, Judas was blind to his own faults, all the ways in which he failed to live up to the trust that Jesus and the other disciples placed in him.

Finally, on Thursday night, the darkness overwhelms Judas. For although today is Wednesday, the conflict between Judas and Jesus we heard in the Gospel reading takes place on Thursday, the night before the Passover, just after Jesus has washed the disciples' feet. This selfless act of embodied love is too much for Judas to take. It's too much love; it's too much light. It hurts his eyes and burns into his mind. If Judas had stayed, perhaps the light and the love could have healed him. But the pain is too great, and he flees, into the darkness and the night.

Friends, Jesus is calling us out of the dark and into the light, just as he called Lazarus. Even though there is darkness all around, God's light still abides. Come out of your dark tomb. Whatever shame is in your heart, whatever guilt you carry, however dead you feel, nothing you have done or ever could do can separate you from the love of God. Come into the light, even if it hurts your eyes. Come into the light, even if it blinds you at first. Come into the truth. Walk in the light of God's love. Take a deep breath and live the new life, the resurrection life that God is giving you today.

Amen.

The Rev. Jason Cox serves as Senior Associate Rector at St. Columba's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. Prior to working at St. Columba's, he directed the Episcopal Urban Intern Program (now Jubilee Year LA), an Episcopal Service Corps program for young adults in the Diocese of Los Angeles. Before ordination, he served as an intern with EUIP, working with the homeless in a transitional housing facility on L.A.'s skid row.

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# Maundy Thursday

## READINGS

EXODUS 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14      PSALM 116:1, 10-17  
I CORINTHIANS 11:23-26      JOHN 13:1-17, 31B-35

## COLLECT

Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood: Mercifully grant that we may receive it thankfully in remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life; and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

## A PEOPLE OF LOVE

*by the Rev. Deon Johnson*

It had been a busy week. We finally made it to Jerusalem with Jesus, and not a moment too soon. The city was crowded! It was the week of the Passover celebration and it seemed as though every man, woman, and child for a hundred miles was in the city of Jerusalem. People were everywhere. Every shop, tavern, and stall had a line of people just waiting to get in. The city was not built for this many people, and yet here they were. Luckily, we had a place to stay. Jesus had seen to that. He seems to have friends just about everywhere and we had a really nice, big room to celebrate the Passover feast together above the store of an oil merchant from Jericho, whose brother Jesus had healed.

When we first got to Jerusalem earlier in the week, Jesus was met at the Damascus Gate by a crowd of people singing, “Hosanna in the highest!” and calling him the “Son of David”. We were all afraid. Pontius Pilate and the army were showing the might of Rome as they entered the city from the main gate. But even with our little mocking parade, there were still some Roman spies keeping an eye on Jesus. And of course, Jesus was about his usual business of teaching, healing, and preaching—no matter how many times we told him he needed to be careful, he was determined.

We had heard rumors that the authorities were trying to find a reason to arrest Jesus. I mean, if you go around preaching that God loves everyone, calling out religious leaders, turning social norms on their heads, and challenging the authority of Rome, something is going to happen. So tonight,

here we are in the upper room with Jesus, sharing the Passover meal. A mixture of nostalgia and fear as we tell the ancient stories of our redemption and salvation.

In the middle of the meal, Jesus takes up the servant’s towel and basin and starts to wash our feet. We had eaten Passover with Jesus before, but somehow this one seems oddly different. Why is he suddenly wanting to wash our feet? Something must be wrong. This isn’t how things are supposed to be. Washing feet is a servant’s job, not a job for our master and teacher.

“Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”

I couldn’t let Jesus do it. I just couldn’t. He had taught me so much. I had left fishing to follow him and now he wants to wash my feet.

“You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

I’m not too concerned about later; I’m worried about now. None of this makes sense. The others might be okay with this, but I am not. Why is Jesus suddenly acting so strange? I won’t let this happen.

“You will never wash my feet.” I don’t believe it. After all the walking we had done today, our feet are tired and sore and now he wants to wash them like a common servant?

“Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” That’s not fair. I left everything to follow you. But if this is what you want...

“Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”

“One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.”

After he washed our feet, we were silent. A heaviness filled the air. We didn’t know what to do. Jesus starts speaking but I am really not listening; I am still trying to make sense of him washing our feet. Then he says something that makes my ears perk up.

“Where I am going, you cannot come. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Lightbulb. That is what all of this had been about. All the preaching, teaching, feeding. It’s about love. It’s all about love. It’s about how we love God, love our

neighbors, and love ourselves. His washing our feet, his sharing the Passover meal, his outrageous behavior all along was to show us what love looks like. Traveling with Jesus for so long, we can sometimes forget that his message is about loving deeply, truly, and earnestly. All of what we had done and seen in following Jesus suddenly made sense in this one moment at supper.

Now that I think about it, it was always there in the many miracles we witnessed, the people we saw healed and transformed. We saw that love in Photini, the Syro-Phoenician woman at the well, longing to be a part of a community who loved. We had our eyes opened when he healed Bartimaeus, who even in his blindness saw love so clearly in Jesus. Strangely now, in this upper room, having had our feet washed and having celebrated the Passover meal, it's starting to make sense.

And now that the food and dishes have been cleared away, we are supposed to go to Jesus' favorite place to pray, and here is Jesus coming to the table with a cup of wine and a loaf of bread...

On this night, the night before he died, Jesus reminds us again that our commission, our call, our command, is to be a people of love. Too often, we as the Church can, like Simon Peter, get so caught up in being the Church, in worrying about our worship, our ministries, our mission, that we lose sight of Jesus' command to love one another.

Loving one another is perhaps the most difficult of commands. It means that we have to first learn to love ourselves—see ourselves as worthy of accepting, giving, and sharing love. Jesus not only spoke kind words and did great deeds—he comforted and healed and gave hope for a brighter future. He embodied love. We are called to do the same. Our world cries out to see the face of Jesus, to walk the way of love, to experience a church that not only preaches love—but demonstrates love.

Singer and songwriter Tina Turner famously asked, “What’s love got to do with it?” For we who would follow Jesus, the answer is simple: **everything!** Our inability to live what we preach about love would remove Christ from our Christianity. If we as the Church are to be relevant or meaningful in our world, we must rediscover that hope-filled love that enflamed Jesus' first followers and inspired a movement that changed the world.

Our challenge is to be a people of love, to live the words we pray and sing a faith that loves. And perhaps we can embody the words of Peter Scholtes, knowing that together,

**We will work with each other, we will work side by side.  
We will work with each other, we will work side by side.  
And we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride,  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.**

A priest, a parent, and a (recovering) perfectionist, Deon K. Johnson is a native of Barbados who has questioned Michigan winters in his twelve years as rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Brighton, Mich. Deon's passion for inclusion, welcome, and worship geekiness has led him to be trained as a Liturgical Consultant, helping communities of faith re-envision their worship and worship spaces to better reflect the beauty, mystery, and all-around awesomeness of following Jesus. Deon graduated from Case Western Reserve University and the General Theological Seminary. When he isn't ruing temperatures below fifty degrees, Deon enjoys traveling, biking, hiking, photography and spending time with his family. Deon is married to Jhovanny Osorio-Vazquez and both are foster parents.

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## Good Friday

### READINGS

ISAIAH 52:13-53:12      PSALM 22      HEBREWS 10:16-25 or  
HEBREWS 4:14-16; 5:7-9      JOHN 18:1-19:42

### COLLECT

Almighty God, we pray you graciously to behold this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

### THE ROCK AND THE HANDMAIDEN

*by the Rev. Whitney Rice*

All week, we have grappled with our dual nature. It began on Palm Sunday. We started by shouting Hosanna to the Son of David and ended shouting for his crucifixion. It's bewildering and exhausting, being knocked from pillar to post, being confronted with our best selves and our worst selves, hardly knowing from one minute to the next who we will be. Are we Jesus' faithful disciples, pledging to be with him to the end and actually going through with it? Or are we his betrayers, selling him out to those who would kill him and running and hiding when the trial comes?

We face the dichotomy of our divided selves one more time today, on Good Friday. We are two people in this story. We are Peter, and we are Jesus' mother, Mary. We are the ones who deny him, and the ones who will not be kept away from him but stay with him until the bitter end. This is the price of sin, living a life divided, lost and broken since the Garden of Eden, unable to be whole people.

Peter is the most human of the disciples, and that is why we love him so. He is impulsive and loud to the point of being ridiculous and obnoxious, but he is also so passionate in his love for Jesus, on fire to be a good disciple. "Even if I have to die with you, Lord," he says, "I will never betray you." Peter says this and we say it too without thinking it through. It is a rash promise, a lightly made commitment that we say not as a promise to endure our own death but to prove to Jesus that we are appropriately emotionally demonstrative in front of him. No doubt Peter thinks he means it, but underneath that, he is trying to stand out in the crowd of the disciples.

But when the moment comes to live out our promises of loyalty, suddenly we do everything to make ourselves inconspicuous. Instead of loudly claiming our allegiance to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, we look around with Peter, hunch our shoulders a bit more, try to look ordinary and uninteresting, and say, "Who me? Jesus? Never heard of him." Or more likely in our day and time, "Well, I'm spiritual but not religious." Or, "Everyone knows it's rude to talk about religion or politics in public." Or when we meet a friend or a stranger, instead of saying, "What do you think about God?" we say, "Wow, this winter was awful. How was your March Madness bracket?"

Sometimes the denial can be as easy as simply not opening our mouths at all, not defending someone who is attacked, not speaking out when we see something unjust. Sometimes denying Jesus can mean not admitting that we have hard questions about our faith, that late at night, we wonder if we're the only ones who have doubts.

And no matter how it happens, eventually the cock crows. Somehow, in some way, we hear that dreaded sound, see Jesus look across the courtyard at us with hurt—but also with such tenderness and love in his eyes. And we go out and weep bitterly. We are all Peter.

There is someone else who weeps bitterly in this story, not because she has denied and betrayed Jesus, but because she is paying the price of having been the most faithful person to him on Earth: his mother, Mary. Mary has shown loyalty and love to Jesus since before he was born, since the day she said yes to the angel Gabriel.

In a very real way, she gave up her life for him before he gave up his life for her. She gave up her reputation and her respectability by getting pregnant out of wedlock and bearing the hostile stares and nasty comments of her community. She faced potentially not even being able to marry at all if Joseph didn't have enough trust in God to listen to his dreams. And for thirty long years, before Jesus set about his true work, she bore the knowledge every day that she had the responsibility for the safety and nurture of the Son of the Living God. This was in a day and age when she couldn't run her little boy over to the ER if he fell out of a tree and broke his arm, or was run over by a Roman chariot, crushed under its wheels, or succumbed to any one of a hundred fevers and plagues for which she had no medicine.

And now she must watch as he dies in front of her eyes. Did she feel like she had failed in her one task on Earth, to keep Jesus safe? She must have known there was nothing she could do to save or protect him, not against the full weight of both the religious and the Roman authorities. In fact, she

was in grave danger herself. She could have been condemned and executed for blasphemy, for insisting her son was the Messiah. Or she could have been used as leverage against Jesus. They could have arrested and tortured her to try and control him.

But she didn't care. She offered herself freely as the handmaiden of the Lord thirty-three years ago, and she is still doggedly carrying out that promise today as she walks the streets of Jerusalem and climbs the hill to Golgotha to see her son crucified. We have elements of her courage and her faithfulness within us as well. We are here today, witnessing with our eyes and hearts fully open to the pain, the crucifixion of our beloved Jesus. The aching, weeping heart of devotion that impelled Mary to stand at the foot of the Cross and see her worst nightmare come to life, beats within us too. That's why we're gathered here today.

Some of us will find it harder to admit that we are Peter, so convicted of our own awesomeness that we continue to insist we'll never deny Jesus. Some of us will find it harder to admit that we are Mary, so convicted of our own sinfulness that we continue to insist we are terrible people who will never measure up to God's demands, who could never be vessels of grace to the world.

The truth is, we are both Peter and Mary, and we have to bring both of our warring selves to the foot of the Cross. This deep chasm within us, that divides what we want to do with what we actually do, that divides our impulses toward holiness from our impulses toward sin, that divides our darkness from our light—this is our divided self. This is the legacy of our fallen nature, what makes us as human beings broken creatures. In this war within, we hope and pray and strive and try to be faithful disciples, and we falter and fail and hurt ourselves and others over and over again.

We can never heal this chasm through our own effort. There is no self-help book, no trick of psychology or medicine or therapy—as helpful as those tools are—that can reach the sickness of our souls that is the root of our addictions, our greed, our selfishness and our blindness. We must bring our broken and hurting selves to the foot of the Cross today and surrender ourselves to Jesus' healing grace. He takes on all of our sin, our pain, our lost and abandoned selves and treasures and cherishes us in the very midst of our mistakes and failures.

Does this mean that because we've come to church on Good Friday and offered our sin and pain to Jesus on the Cross, we'll wake up on Easter Sunday freed of all our sinful impulses and unhealed pain? No. That's why we come to church every Sunday, every Holy Week, every month, every year, every decade. The healing of our divided selves, the slow bringing-together of our sin and our glory,

the bringing of our Peter and our Mary into harmony, happens one slow drop of Jesus' blood on the Cross at a time, one first living breath of his in the tomb on Easter Day at a time. That is the Christian life. And it all starts here, at the foot of the Cross.

The Rev. Whitney Rice is an Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Missouri and currently the Associate Rector at Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Webster Groves, Missouri. A native of Lee's Summit, Missouri, she comes to ordained ministry by way of the University of Kansas and Yale Divinity School, where she won the Yale University Charles S. Mersick Prize for Public Address and Preaching and the Yale University E. William Muehl Award for Excellence in Preaching. She created and leads workshops and retreats such as Evangelism With Integrity, Sacred Body, Senior VBS, and Questions of Jesus. See [www.thehiveapiary.com](http://www.thehiveapiary.com) and [www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com](http://www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com) for more of her work.

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# The Great Vigil of Easter

## READINGS

EXODUS 14:10-31; 15:20-21  
LUKE 24:1-12

PSALM 114

ROMANS 6:3-11

## COLLECT

O God, who made this most holy night to shine with the glory of the Lord's resurrection: Stir up in your Church that Spirit of adoption which is given to us in Baptism, that we, being renewed both in body and mind, may worship you in sincerity and truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## THE ANGELS' QUESTION

*by the Rev. Joseph Pagano*

On the first Easter, very early in the morning, the women come to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body. They find the stone rolled away so they enter the tomb, but they do not find Jesus' body. Two angels in clothes that gleamed like lightning appear and the women bow down in fear, looking at the ground. Then the angels ask, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

That's a good question. Of course, it was a good question in the context of the story of the women going to the tomb on that first Easter. It's still a good question for us this Easter, living some 2,000 years later. Why do you look for the living among the dead?

For the women, this must have been a surprising question. Think about it. They had gone to the tomb to attend to Jesus' body. They had served their Lord during his earthly life. Now they would do one last act of service for Jesus. They had witnessed his death. They knew that there was no time for a proper burial. So, they came with spices to complete the burial rites. Their beloved Lord was dead. They could at least perform this one last act of love for him. But their hearts must have been heavy.

They must have thought their life with their Lord was over. His call to follow had been irresistible. Serving him was like no other service they had known. It was perfect freedom. But now he lay lifeless in a tomb. They had known perfect love in Jesus, and the world had killed him. The world can be a cruel and fearsome place. Well, they may have thought, at least they would have their memories of the past.

But something amazing happens when they reach the tomb. When they arrive at the tomb, they enter into the place of their deepest and darkest fears. They enter the very place of death. And, yet, what do they find when they enter this place of fear and death? Nothing. No body. No thing. Nothing.

We are told that they were perplexed when they did not find the body, which is understandable. They thought their life with Jesus was over and his dead body was the final coda. But the angels tell them that this is not the end of the story. They say, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

Wow! Astounding, overwhelming, world-turning news! A total change of orientation. Why are you looking for the living among the dead? That was then, this is now, and now there is new life, resurrection life ahead. They hear the good news that Christ is risen from the dead, and they need to change from people who perform burial rites for the dead to apostles who bear witness to the living Lord. They need to stop living in the past and start living in the future. They need to change from people who are bent over with fear, staring at the ground, to people who stand up, go forth, and boldly proclaim that God's life is stronger than any death, that God's love is stronger than any hate, that God's peace is more powerful than human violence, that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and is alive.

Why are you looking for the living among the dead?

The good news of Easter is that Jesus Christ, who was crucified, has been raised from the dead. This belief, this truth, this resurrection changes everything. Cruelty is not the last word. Sin and evil are not the ultimate powers of the universe. Death does not get the final laugh. Forgiveness and love and life are the final realities of the world. The power of God is stronger than any tomb. Jesus Christ is risen today.

And the good news of Easter is not only that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and lives, but also that the power of the resurrection can transform our lives as well. New life is possible, here, now, today. We can stop looking for the living among the dead. We can live new lives, here and now, by the power of the resurrection. The promise of Easter is that we can. We don't need to go about looking for the dead among the living and we don't need to go about like the living-dead.

But it's not easy, is it? We rather like living in the past. It is comfortable. It's what we're used to. Here's how a distinguished, older preacher, Edmund

Steimle, put it, commenting on the text, “God’s mercies are new every morning.” He said, “At my age, this promise of newness every morning is at best a mixed blessing. I have come to the point in life when I really don’t want anything new in the morning. I want my slippers right beneath my bed where I left them the night before. I want my orange juice and bran flakes for breakfast, as normal. In my advanced years, I can do without a lot of newness, especially in the morning.”

Okay, I get it, we get it, we have all probably felt that way ourselves at some point. But that’s not really what the promise of Easter is about. The promise of Easter is that we don’t have to look for the living among the dead. And if we are honest with ourselves, I expect we will recognize this tendency in our human nature. Even when the past is no longer life-giving, we seem to keep going back to it, thinking that maybe this time, we will find something there. But, the truth of the matter is that when we do so, we find the same old crummy, life-denying relationships and patterns of behavior. Same old compulsions, same old angers, same old anxieties, same old fears. Even so, it is such a powerful myth that for a myriad of reasons, some saner than others, we keep going back to the past, we keep looking for the living among the dead.

Why do we keep going back to the myth that says things were better in the past? You know the myth of the past where our children were better behaved; our families were all straight out of Norman Rockwell; our churches were all devout and holy. The myth says, if we could just get back to that past somehow, someway, then everything would be better.

It’s a powerful myth. Lots of people are looking for the living among the dead. But it is a different reality than the one proclaimed on that first Easter because the truth of the resurrection is that we are to live new lives, here and now, by the power of the future. That is, we are to find our true life meeting us from the future, somewhere in our own walk to Emmaus, not buried among the past or in any tomb. This truth terrified the women on that first Easter. Let go of the past and start living in the future. It may terrify us too. But just because we are terrified, doesn’t mean it isn’t true.

The women eventually got over their terror and started living the resurrection in their lives. We can too. We can stop looking for the living among the dead. The good news of Easter is that it is not just about Jesus but also about us. Jesus is alive and has gone ahead to prepare a way for us, and because of this, we can also claim our new life here and now, and move confidently into the future. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is literally true that our best days are ahead of us because the future is where our risen Lord is and where he promises to meet us, even now. And this is good news.

Now, what we do with this good news is up to us. We can ponder it. We can fret about it. Or we can accept it in faith and make it our own. Right here, right now, we can stop worrying about yesterday, we can stop looking for the living among the dead. We can claim the new lease on life that is given to us in the risen Christ, we can claim our second chance, we can forgive what is past, and we can get on with living the abundant life our risen Lord promises to us.

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. He is alive. He has gone ahead of us to prepare a place for us. He promises to meet us there.

Why do we keep looking for the living among the dead?

Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Joseph Pagano is a priest who currently serves as an Episcopal Volunteer in Mission, working on the Galatians 6:2 (“Bear one another’s burdens”) project, focusing on theological education, and serving as a lecturer at the College of Transfiguration in Makhanda/Grahamstown, South Africa. He and his wife, Amy Richter, blog at [www.amyandjoegotoafrica.com](http://www.amyandjoegotoafrica.com). They have a new book coming out in 2019 from Cascade Books, a collection of personal essays by Episcopal lay people and clergy, fiction and non-fiction writers, poets, musicians, and theologians reflecting on experiences of worship.

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**Christopher Sikkema**

Manager for Special Projects

The Episcopal Church Office of Communications

[csikkema@episcopalchurch.org](mailto:csikkema@episcopalchurch.org)

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