



SERMONS FOR

Holy Week and Easter 2023

An offering of
Sermons That Work

Holy Week 2023

Dear Reader,

Thank you for downloading Sermons for Holy Week and Easter 2023, a collection of materials 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.

I spent some of my most formative years at a small, Calvinist liberal arts college in west Michigan, where I was surrounded by people whom I loved dearly and often disagreed with on matters of theology. I grew up in The Episcopal Church but was drawn to this school by any number of its charms, including the beautiful campus, the marginally better weather, and my family's long association with the place—but even then, there was a good dose of culture shock, being among young evangelical Christians every day of the week. What struck me most about the religious lives of my fellow students was not the arm-waving in chapel, not the weekly Bible studies set up by students, not the “alternative” spring breaks, performing mission service around the world while high school classmates were partying in much warmer climates. No, what struck me the most was the seriousness with which these groups of young adults comported themselves on matters of their faith. There was joy, of course, but to my mind, it was always tempered with severe anxiety about whether one could ever really know oneself “saved.”

When I started reflecting on this letter, I played a favorite (and suitably dour) hymn to put me in the right mood for Holy Week: “A Hymn to God the Father,” written first as a poem by Anglican divine John Donne. The text is a prayer for forgiveness and a reflection on the fallen human condition. In turn, he asks God whether he can be forgiven for a sin he regrets but continually commits, a sin that enabled others to sin more, and a sin “which [he] did shun a year or two, but wallowed in a score.” He assures God that once those sins are forgiven, there are plenty more where they came from. But finally, Donne names a sin outright: fear. He fears that, upon his death, he will be abandoned because his sins are too serious and too numerous for even God to forgive. Who has not felt this anxiety? Who has not asked for an ironclad, physical, literal word from God reminding us that we are forgiven, that we are not abandoned?

I think Donne is right when he names this fear as a sin. It isn't a particular wickedness—but it is a shortcoming that orients us away from the ineffable joys of life with God. And this, believe it or not, is Good News, because God is always willing to forgive sins and continues to call you and me—and my classmates, and our friends and families—to come back. In a world that delights in having you in fear, this is a reason for courage: that God's love is so great, he offers us a teacher, a friend, and a redeemer in Jesus Christ. Throughout the horrors of Holy Week and the triumph of Easter, may we let go of our failures and our anxieties and rest, secure that our Lord loves us “to the end” (John 13:1).

On behalf of Sermons That Work and The Episcopal Church's Office of Communication, I bid you a blessed Holy Week and a joyous Easter.

Your brother in Christ,
Christopher Sikkema
The Episcopal Church

The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

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.

READINGS:

ISAIAH 50:4-9A; PSALM 31:9-16; PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11; MATTHEW 26:14-27:66 OR MATTHEW 27:11-54

VICTORY

by the Rev. Bertie Pearson

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, the triumphal procession of Christ through the streets of Jerusalem, when the men and women of the city shouted out “Hosannah!” to the Son of David, and laid at his feet... cloaks and branches? Why do we call it Palm Sunday when St. Matthew tells us that they laid out their winter wardrobe and yard trimmings? Shouldn’t this be called Down Coat Sunday? Brush Cutting Sunday?

If we turn to the Gospels of St. Luke and St. Mark, they also mention nothing but outerwear and tree limbs. It’s not until we reach St. John’s Gospel that we are told that the people were waving branches of palm. Why does St. John make such a point of this? And why skip the cloaks and oak limbs, to wave palms today? What exactly would the palm branch have meant to the people of Jerusalem?

We sometimes retain a symbol but forget its meaning. We all know what a trophy represents: it’s the symbol of victory. But if 1,000 years from now, archeologists began digging them up, they might just see them as meaningless, decorative objects. “Gosh, 21st century Americans just loved these gold-painted figurines — little golfers, ladies doing karate, soccer balls – what funny taste they had.” To them, a trophy might be no different from a Picasso or a Bob Marley poster. And so it is with our branches of palm. We imagine them to have been nothing more than the branches most readily available for waving, but to ancient people, this would sound ridiculous, because, for Greco-Romans, the palm had a very definite symbolic meaning: the palm shouted — VICTORY!

A victorious athlete in the ancient world would be given not a trophy but a palm branch. An ancient lawyer would affix palm branches to his door after winning a case, and most of all, a general, returning to the city in a triumph, in the Roman version of a post-war ticker tape parade, would hold a palm branch in his hand, and might even wear the toga palmata, a special toga, covered with palm branch designs. These are not simply objects to wave or leaves to soften the road; instead, the palm is the symbol of the victory of Christ, for this is the Lord’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Today, he is pictured as a conquering general, as having utterly routed and defeated his enemies. But what exactly is this victory? Who has been defeated and when?

To answer this, we must look not to the past three years of his preaching and teaching, but to today’s second reading: the three days of his death and resurrection, for it is in his passion and death that he meets the forces of evil face to face, and the radiance of Christ, the love of Christ, the goodness of Christ utterly vanquish and forever break the emptiness, coldness, and darkness of death itself.

The palms of the people of Jerusalem are an expression, both of faith in this unconquerable King of Glory — they are so sure of his victory that they give him the triumphal parade before he goes

off to war rather than when he returns — and a recognition of the eternal nature of his defeat of the enemy, for from his entry into Jerusalem, from his incarnation, even from the creation of the world, it was already a foregone conclusion that evil didn't have a chance.

We join the people of Jerusalem in this celebratory parade and then bring these blessed branches of palm into our homes to serve as reminders throughout the year that Christ is utterly victorious, and that no suffering, no horror has a chance at lasting, because Jesus Christ has defeated evil for all time.

But we say this... in a world where missiles rain down on civilians in war zones, in which Turkish and Syrian families continue to mourn and rebuild after the deaths of thousands in a catastrophic earthquake. We say that Christ has defeated evil in the midst of mass shootings and rampant racism, we say that Christ has defeated death in the face of cancer and heart disease.

What exactly does the victory of Christ look like in this kind of world? It looks like the faith of the people of Jerusalem: in this inspired moment, they know that the raging of the enemy, the horrors of death, the sufferings of this life are not true reality, but a momentary blip on the screen, soon to be wiped out forever. We as Christians are called to live in the light of this victory. Not by sugar-coating life and pretending it's all hunky-dory, but by looking death in the eye and not flinching. We as Christians are called to see the sufferings of the world, and not run from them, but towards them — not to escape suffering, but to see how we can comfort, serve, and help.

Where in your family, in your neighborhood, or in the world is someone battling sickness? How can you as a Christian be a comfort to them? Be an agent of their healing? Where is someone isolated and alone? How can you as a disciple of Jesus bring them

joy? Where is someone hungry, homeless, anxious? How can you proclaim the victory of Christ by feeding them, sheltering them, and bringing them peace? We are called to live here and now, in a world of death and corruption, but also to wave our palms. To show sin, evil, and death that they no longer have power, but have been defeated by the Lord Jesus Christ, and that, at any moment now, the eternal victory celebration will begin.

But this, as anyone who has tried it can tell you, is easier said than done. This is why the people of Jerusalem also cry out, "Hosannah!" to Jesus. We often imagine that Hosannah means something like "Hooray!" or "Fantastic!" as though it were a shout of rejoicing, but this is not the case at all: "Hosannah" is a request, a petition, a prayer, and means it "Oh God, make speed to save us!" For we on our own don't have the courage, the grace, or the power to joyfully wave a palm in the face of evil, but Jesus, God the Son incarnate, working in us and through us does.

This Easter, how is God calling you to change? To be less anxious and more joyful, to be free to serve others in the light of Christ's victory? Shout out Hosannah to Jesus, invite him into your heart to transform you by his grace, and then take your triumphal victory over evil and death.

Fr. Bertie Pearson serves as rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Georgetown, Texas, and as dean of the Austin Area Convocation of Clergy. He also produces the popular podcast The History of Christianity with Bertie Pearson. This podcast is an exploration of the ideas and themes which continue to shape the Christian faith, and is available on Spotify, iTunes, and wherever fine podcasts are distributed. Before his current parish, Bertie served both Spanish and English-language churches in Austin and San Francisco, played

“We as Christians are called to see the sufferings of the world, and not run from them, but towards them — not to escape suffering, but to see how we can comfort, serve, and help.”

– THE REV. BERTIE PEARSON

1. When in your life have you felt victorious? Are you able to recreate the feeling or does it seem distant?

2. Our Lord is victorious over the grave – note the tense; he remains victorious even now. Does remembering this affect your observances during Holy Week?

Monday in Holy Week

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.

READINGS:

**ISAIAH 42:1-9; PSALM 36:5-11; HEBREWS 9:11-15;
JOHN 12:1-11**

LEAVE HER ALONE. SHE IS TELLING THE TRUTH

by the Rev. Ada Wong Nagata, 2018

In our Episcopal tradition, it was Palm Sunday yesterday. Jesus has entered Jerusalem. We are beginning Holy Week, and Jesus is walking closer and closer toward the cross.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is at Bethany, attending a dinner party hosted by Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead a few days earlier. This must be a big party to celebrate the miracle. Jesus must be treated like a king.

As usual, Lazarus' sister Martha is busy cooking dinner and serving the guests. Mary does something unlike her sister. Last time when they were hosting, Mary was sitting by Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching instead of helping Martha. That made Martha mad and she complained to Jesus. This time, Mary disappeared and then came back with "a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (John 12:3). This time, it is not Martha who complains, but Jesus' disciple, Judas. He complains that Mary is wasting the perfume, which could have been used for the poor.

Usually, an anointing would be on the head, but Mary anointed the feet of Jesus. If she anointed his head, that might really look like she was treating him like a king, since he raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. However, she anoints his feet! She then wipes his feet with her hair. What an unusual thing Mary has done!

The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, a well-known preacher and Episcopal priest, says what Mary has done is a prophetic act. Mary is foretelling Jesus' death and his washing of the disciples' feet.

When feet are anointed, it usually happens when the person is dead. Jesus has been telling his disciples that he will suffer and die soon, but the disciples have been in denial. Jesus scolded Peter, even calling him "Satan," because he cared only for earthly and not heavenly things. Mary believes in Jesus and accepts his upcoming death. Mary does this to affirm the message that Jesus has been delivering. If you have been to a funeral home, you will notice it is often filled with the fragrance of flowers. This house must smell like that, a sign of Jesus' upcoming death.

In a few days, Jesus will have his last supper. Before the supper, he will wash his disciples' feet. This foot washing is the prelude of Jesus' new commandment to them, that they love one another as he has loved them. Mary is carrying out what Jesus will teach his disciples by washing his feet with perfume and her precious hair.

She is both prophesying and being a good disciple, loving Jesus as he has loved her, and her brother, Lazarus, and her sister, Martha.

Mary is doing strange things, and so is Jesus. Jesus has been advocating for the poor and the oppressed. However, when Judas complains about the wasting of the expensive perfume, which could have been sold to benefit the poor, Jesus tells him to leave Mary alone. According to some scholars, three hundred denarii would have been about a year's wages for a regular worker in Jesus' time. That certainly is a lot of money. The Gospel tells us that Judas is a thief and will eventually betray Jesus, and he may not be sincerely concerned about helping the poor, but he does have a point; there are a lot of poor people around who need help—why not sell the perfume to help them instead of spending it on one person?

However, who is this one person? This person is Jesus, the Son of God, the Christ.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the author describes the Christ as one who has entered the Holy Place to obtain eternal redemption, and who comes with his own blood through the eternal Spirit to purify “our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!” (Hebrews 9:12-14). That is what Jesus does. Jesus the Christ sheds his human blood on the cross but also sheds his metaphorical blood through the Holy Spirit to purify our conscience and to offer eternal redemption. Jesus' human death leads to his resurrection—and our resurrection.

On Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, we are invited “to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.” “And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature,” we are reminded of our mortality by the ashes imposed on our foreheads (Book of Common Prayer, p. 265).

We have been walking on this spiritual Lenten journey for more than five weeks and are now on the last leg. During this journey, we have been reminded of the temptation of Jesus, the foretelling of his passion, the cleansing of the temple as a house of worship, and the fact that a grain has to die to bear fruit. These messages all point to his upcoming death. The most important lesson is that God loves God's people, and Jesus becomes incarnate to redeem God's people, and Jesus' death will lead to his resurrection. If we follow the way of Jesus, we will have our conscience purified by the metaphorical blood of Jesus and lead to new life and eternal redemption.

That's why Jesus stops Judas from complaining about Mary's actions: so that she can continue the message of his upcoming death—an important message. His death is to carry out his mission on earth, so as to purify our conscience, so as to lead us to redemption. Three hundred denarii may be a lot of money, and helping the poor is important, and in a way, we do need money to help them. However, what is the meaning of doing so? Doing it for the glory of being charitable, as dead work? Or for the sake of loving God and loving God's people? To love God and to love God's people is the reason for Jesus' death and leads to resurrection. What is three hundred denarii compared to Jesus' life?

Remember, we all face death once in baptism: “In [the water of Baptism] we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit” (BCP, p. 306). We have died with Jesus and accepted new life. Have we been carrying our own cross and following Jesus, so as to love others as God has loved us? Have we been living the way of life that Jesus wants us to live?

This sermon was written by the Rev. Ada Wong Nagata for Monday in Holy Week in 2018.

“If we follow the way of Jesus, we will have our conscience purified by the metaphorical blood of Jesus and lead to new life and eternal redemption.”

– THE REV. ADA WONG NAGATA, 2018

1. What is your understanding of the difference between “dead works” and “worship [of] the living God” in the Christian life?

2. Put yourself in the positions of Mary and Judas in this scripture. What are your motivations for saying and doing what you did?

Tuesday in Holy Week

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.

READINGS:

ISAIAH 49:1-7; PSALM 71:1-14; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31; JOHN 12:20-36

LET GO INTO JESUS

by the Rev. Cn. Whitney Rice

Being there for one another in times of trouble is harder than it appears on the surface. We often define a friend as someone who will be there for us when we need them, but what does that really mean?

Our first instinct when something terrible is happening is to turn away, to run and escape, to get out before the terrible thing can suck us in as well. Car accident, cancer diagnosis, job loss, lingering battle with grief—we shy away as if they were contagious.

If we make the decision that we're not going to run away but instead stay with our friend who is suffering, our next instinct is to try and fix it, to say, "No, look, do this, change this, fix this and you'll be fine." It takes a very disciplined and patient sort of love to truly be there for someone in crisis without trying to fix it, an art that many of us sometimes despair of ever mastering.

It is exactly that sort of love that we can often look back and recognize in God's response to our own dark moments. God

doesn't abandon us, but neither does God very often step in and fix us or our circumstances. God stands with us with the bravest and strongest love of all, the love that undergoes suffering with us rather than sparing us or Godself.

Holy Week is the test of whether we can summon that sort of love within ourselves for Jesus. The Greek visitors to Jerusalem for the Passover in our Gospel today say something that has the potential to convict us in our relationship with Jesus.

They come to Philip, one of the disciples, and say to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." We have to ask ourselves, is that statement true of us? Do we wish to see Jesus? Do we really wish to see him completely, in his fullness, in his moments of glory and his moments of pain?

Each of us will find one aspect or another of Jesus difficult to want to see. Some of us find ourselves drawn to Jesus most in his times of humanness and trial. We love him most when we see him summon his courage in his moments of human vulnerability. Others find themselves drawn to Jesus in his moments of glory and power. They love the heavenly Christ, the cosmic Word who undergirds creation and subdues the raging waters and scatters miracles from his fingertips. Jesus is all of these things. He is fully human and fully divine.

We see both sides of his nature in this very Gospel story. You can find which part of Jesus you relate to and which part seems foreign to you by how you react to his words in different parts of this text. When do you love Jesus more? When he says, "Now my soul is troubled"? Then you're probably in closer relationship to the human side of Jesus. Or do you find yourself thrilling when he says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified"? Then you're probably in closer relationship to the divine side of Jesus.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with finding yourself touched and moved to see Jesus as a man or Christ as God, one

more than the other. But it is important for us to reach for understanding and encounter with the opposite side of Jesus, the part we don't understand and identify with as much. And that is because we want the words of the Greeks in Jerusalem to be true of us. We want to be able to say, "We wish to see Jesus," Jesus in his fullness, Jesus in his complexity, Jesus as all he came to us to be and do.

What can the parts of Jesus we neglect teach us about the parts of ourselves we neglect? Are we comfortable with our own power? Are we comfortable with our own weakness? Which do we run from when we see them in ourselves? Which do we run from when we see them in each other?

It is a lifelong quest of spiritual growth to step into our fears rather than running away from them, to step into what we perceive as darkness that should be hidden away and find it the very path to resurrection and new life. If we can learn to embrace the wholeness of Jesus, the parts of him that we understand and identify with, and the parts that seem mysterious and foreign, we are one step closer to embracing the sun and the shadow within ourselves and each other. We are one step closer to seeing that humility and glory each have their place and their value.

There is something about approaching this precipice with Jesus during Holy Week, entering these days with him that are literally a life and death situation, that should make us want to abandon all our complex plans for ourselves and our churches and our loved ones. As Jesus' allies and earthly power are stripped away from him and he bears it with such grace—more than that, he uses the lessening of these extraneous things to drive him to the center of his purpose on Earth—it leads us to repent of our attempts to control people and events around us. It leads us to let ourselves be willingly stripped of the illusion of power and control. We long to be reduced to the simple and heartfelt and honest desire in the Gospel, "I wish to see Jesus."

For what is Holy Week but Jesus letting go of all control of his life and his power? We know he could have swept away all resistance to his rule, saved himself from trial and execution without breaking a sweat. But he let go. He abandoned himself, not to hopelessness and death, but to hope and faith. He let go and believed that his love for us was worth sacrificing everything, and the love of his Father would call him back to life on the third day.

Can we approach these final days with Jesus that lead us to such a terrifying and painful place with the same faith that he displays? Can we really be there for him with the faithfulness that a true friend shows in time of crisis, the ability to be present through suffering without trying to fix it? Do we really want to see Jesus as he is in all his glory and all his pain?

The answers to those questions will be the answer to a deeper quandary, whether we're ready to submit ourselves to death and resurrection, our full selves, the spectrum of our strength and weakness, to the cleansing and purifying fire of Calvary.

Can we let go of our plans, our defenses, our precious control, and go to the Cross with naked honesty, nothing hidden and nothing denied?

It becomes clear that we cannot force honesty or courage on ourselves. We cannot force ourselves to be faithful to Jesus or to ourselves or our friends.

We have to follow Jesus' example and let go. Let go into what? Into the one whose every human cell and every divine power was filled with one compelling purpose, to love us. Let go into our beloved Jesus.

Amen.

This sermon was written by the Rev. Cn. Whitney Rice for Tuesday in Holy Week in 2017.

“Can we approach these final days with Jesus that lead us to such a terrifying and painful place with the same faith that he displays?”

– THE REV. CN. WHITNEY RICE, 2017

1. Write out the following phrase and keep it at your desk or in your pocket for at least the week ahead, referencing it when you feel tempted toward an unwelcome behavior: “We wish to see Jesus.”

2. Letting go of fear, anxiety, and anger can be a profound expression of hope and faith in the living God. Where can you undertake that letting go in the season ahead?

Wednesday in Holy Week

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.

READINGS:

**ISAIAH 50:4-9A; PSALM 70; HEBREWS 12:1-3;
JOHN 13:21-32**

LOVE AND BETRAYAL

by the Rev. Marcea Paul

It is Wednesday of Holy Week, and Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem with waving palm branches and cries of "Hosanna" is a distant memory. Our ears will soon be assaulted by the cries of "Crucify him!" as we journey to the dark day the church has named "good."

If we look back to the beginning of chapter 13, John tells us that Jesus has just performed an act of love by washing his disciples' feet. Our lectionary provides us with a portion of the chapter as the text for this emotionally complex day. As Jesus prepares to share a meal with his closest friends, he declares, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." Jesus was troubled in spirit and the disciples' jaws dropped in astonishment.

Love and betrayal. The two always exist side by side. Authentic love always risks betrayal. Betrayal cuts deep, especially when it comes from a friend with whom we have an intimate relationship. True betrayal is a blade that can only cut into the closest of relationships.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Edmund, who is one of the main characters, betrays his family. When he entered Narnia for the first time, Edmund encountered the White Witch who had secretly laid out an evil plan for him and his siblings. While they sat in her sleigh, the Witch promised to make Edmund king and to provide all the Turkish Delight he can eat, if he would deliver his siblings to her. The offer seemed too good to be true, which should have alerted Edmund to proceed with caution. But he agreed and kept their plan from his brother and sisters. The next time they arrived in Narnia, Edmund slipped away from the group to notify the White Witch. The family was heartbroken when they learned of Edmund's betrayal.

Betrayal always comes as a surprise. If we could see it coming, we would undoubtedly do our best to avoid it. The sting of betrayal hurts because we cannot imagine a friend, family member, or someone we work closely with treating us like that. We tend to believe that only frightful, heartless individuals would be capable of such acts, and that everyone would know and be on guard. Yet that is not always true. Think back to some acts of crimes that have been committed in recent years. In most cases, when the news gets out and neighbors of the perpetrator are interviewed, they are surprised by what they learn. They are often shocked. You might hear comments like, "He seemed like a really nice, quiet guy who loved his family," or "I never would have thought she could do something like that."

Betrayal comes in many forms, and some of us have experienced betrayal in our own lives. Whether it is a friend who breaks our trust, a family member who lets us down, a partner who is unfaithful, or a financial advisor who runs off with our retirement money, the experience of betrayal can shake us to our core. We can feel hurt, angry, and disillusioned by those we thought we could count on. Nothing prepares us for betrayal and the unique pain that it brings. It can take many years to recover from the sting of betrayal.

Only Jesus knew the heart and mind of Judas. Jesus knew who would betray him. It was his friend, the one that had accompanied him as he traveled around the lake teaching, the one who had met his family. In fact, it was the one he trusted to hold the purse that bought them small but nourishing meals – the one who budgeted the money so they could travel to Jerusalem. Yes, Jesus knew who would betray him. When Jesus gives the bread to Judas and tells him, “Do quickly what you are going to do,” the other disciples do not understand. They believe that Jesus has asked Judas to go and buy more supplies for their feast or to give money to the poor. They are too preoccupied with trying to figure out who the betrayer is and trying to make sure that it’s not them. Isn’t that what we would do?

Even in the midst of betrayal, Judas is quietly obedient, leaving immediately, as Jesus instructed. Jesus knows his betrayer and yet kneels to wash his feet and gives him bread to eat. The love Jesus expects from his disciples and from us is modeled in these actions. Showing love even for the one who betrays is the kind of love that binds communities together, even when the shadow of death looms: when betrayal hovers and division threatens the family.

St. John the Evangelist is not simply stating the time of day when he writes, “And it was night.” Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the one that brings light into a world consumed by darkness. Judas chose darkness but the other disciples could not see betrayal coming from him. It is easy for us to imagine ourselves among the other eleven disciples, but could it be that we all have a little Judas in us?

There are times when we might choose darkness either intentionally or unintentionally – times when perhaps our greed or fears drive us to choose the security of wealth or our own self-preservation over trust in Jesus. There are times when our blindness toward others compels us to choose our own personal

bread, rather than contributing and sharing in a community feast. And there are times when even our love for Christ is so wrapped up in the darkness of greed and in a mindset of scarcity and selfishness toward others that we once again hand him over to be crucified in our hearts. As painful as it is, we must admit that we are also capable of betraying those we love, and even our savior.

We really don’t know why Judas betrayed his friend and teacher for thirty pieces of silver. Perhaps he had become disillusioned with Jesus, no longer believing that he was the Messiah. Maybe in his own misguided and controlling way, he was trying to leave an opening for Jesus to prove that he was God. But Jesus was not there to prove anything; Jesus was there to redeem.

When our prayers are not answered as quickly as we might have liked and we do not receive the answer we had hoped for, we sometimes become disillusioned, and our faith is tested. Yet God loves us because of who we are – the betrayer and the beloved – the Judas and the one whom Jesus loved. God loves us with an unlimited, unconditional love. None of us is innocent. All of us are forgiven. God’s unfathomable grace and God’s forgiveness are bigger than our own selfish betrayal. And forgiveness is our chance to begin anew.

Holy Wednesday does not end in betrayal; it ends in love. Jesus knew that his time on earth was limited, and he knew that he would be betrayed. But he did not let this knowledge stop him from carrying out his mission. Instead, he used his betrayal as an opportunity to show us the power of his love, forgiveness, and redemption. And that is indeed Good News.

The Rev. Canon Marcea Paul serves in the Episcopal Diocese of Texas as the bishop diocesan’s chief of staff. She was previously the priest for pastoral care at Good Shepherd, Austin. Prior to attending seminary, Marcea had a career in accounting and served on several committees in the Diocese of Southeast Florida.

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– THE REV. MARCEA PAUL

1. Betrayal is one of the most painful experiences we can have as humans.
What does it mean to you that our Lord experienced it as intimately –
and perhaps more! – as we have?

2. Do you find it hard to love and trust others easily?
What can Jesus teach us on this topic?

Maundy Thursday

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

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

REMEMBER

by the Rev. Dr. Joshua Samuel

Remembering is an essential aspect of human nature. We remember a number of things, both good and bad, but we remember especially those things that influence and affect us and make a difference in our lives. This is why we are able to see much importance being given to remembering in several religious traditions and cultures. Still, remembering is not simply a cerebral act. When we remember religious stories, myths, and songs, it is a way of reembodying and reliving the past. When we perform rituals of remembrance, the ancient becomes intimate to and within us. This embodiment of the past in religious rituals doesn't happen simply for the sake of it, but rather in order to make a difference in the present.

This power of remembering becomes evident on Maundy Thursday. As we know, Maundy Thursday is the day when the Church recalls the Last Supper of our Lord, the event in the life of Jesus which forms the basis for the sacrament of the Eucharist. One of the key elements in the theology of the Eucharist is captured in the Greek word “anamnesis,” which means “remembrance.” Anamnesis comes from the words that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). We also see this being emphasized in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. We can see that the early Church clearly recalled that when Jesus blessed the bread and the wine and shared them with his disciples, he had asked them to do it in order to remember him. It is precisely because of this commandment of Jesus that we celebrate the Eucharist and regard it as one of the two great sacraments, along with baptism.

However, to be clear, Jesus did not invent an entirely new tradition here. This idea of remembering goes back to the Passover. In the first lesson, we read about Moses instituting the first Passover among the people of Israel who were in bondage in Egypt. He instructed them to slaughter an unblemished lamb, smear its blood on the doorpost, and eat the roasted meat with unleavened bread and bitter herbs in a hurry before they set out on the long journey toward freedom. It was a tradition that was to be passed on and followed by all generations to mark the night of their escape from slavery. Thus, among other things, the Passover is the remembrance and celebration of God's liberation of his people from the powers of slavery and oppression.

Jesus, being a good Jew who would have certainly heard this story from his parents as a child, also remembered and celebrated this great thanksgiving for God's salvation on the night of his arrest. Using the bread and wine as symbols of sacrifice and suffering, on his last supper before he was killed, he helped his disciples to trust in and envision God's liberation, even when sin, evil, and death seemed to triumph. In the events that followed the Last Supper – the Crucifixion and Resurrection – they were able to witness the historical demonstration of what was professed at the

Passover. In other words, the Passover, which was remembered during the Last Supper, became a reality on Easter Day, even though they had difficulty accepting and believing it. This is why the followers of Jesus took seriously his commandment to remember (anamnesis) him as they broke the bread and shared the cup. It is also why we believe that Christ is present with us in the bread and the wine. We bow to the host and keep it in a special place because we believe it to be the real presence of Christ himself. On Maundy Thursday, we place the host at an altar of repose, which reminds us of the garden of Gethsemane. We watch and pray because we believe that the presence of Christ is as real today. Anamnesis is not simply recalling and reenacting things from the past. It is to remember and relive past events in a way that matters to us in the present. Anamnesis then, in its truest form, should make a difference in our world today. In other words, it is a conscious recognition of the presence and application of the past to transform the world in the present. This means that Eucharist is more than blessing the bread and wine. It is more than breaking the bread and sharing the cup as Jesus did. It is also more than acknowledging the presence of Jesus in the host. So, what is it then? This is where we find the gospel lesson for Maundy Thursday helpful.

While other gospel writers and Paul remembered Jesus blessing the bread and the wine and proclaiming that the bread was his body and the wine was his blood, the author of the fourth gospel, John, notices and writes about something different and deeper. He recalls that, during the supper, Jesus had done something unthinkable. He humbled himself like a lowly servant (actually a slave, “*doulos*”) and washed the feet of his disciples, including the one who was going to betray him, reminding them of the importance of humility and love. Thus, John seems to tell us that perhaps the most important aspect of the Last Supper which we remember and celebrate on Maundy Thursday, more than the bread and the wine, more than the rituals, is love: loving one another as Christ has loved us. Not sentimental, self-centered, and self-pleasing love, but self-sacrificing, self-emptying, and self-giving love. It is a love that goes beyond our narrow human-made

boundaries and walls and builds bridges across differences while respecting those differences. It is a love that even bends down and washes the feet of those who may hate us. Love is exactly what Christ wants us to do! In fact, this is what the word Maundy stands for; the Latin word “*mandatum*” means “commandment.” On this night, Jesus gave a new commandment to his disciples: to love one another. This means, as important as the bread and the wine are to the Eucharist, as necessary as our traditions and rituals of the Triduum are, we cannot overlook the crucial significance of love. In fact, without love, God’s love for the world that brings us together, and our love for one another, there is not and can be no meaningful celebration of the Eucharist.

Often the church gets too tied up in ritualism and traditionalism, too tied up in the “proper” way to do things, that we end up forgetting the most important reason and objective for Maundy Thursday, which is to love one another. This is why, in many of our churches, we practice the tradition of foot washing, to remind ourselves to love one another as God has loved us. As we break the bread and share the cup, as we experience or witness the foot washing, we are reminded to go beyond the many barriers that divide us, transcend the hate that often surrounds us, and serve our fellow sisters and brothers in love. As we remember this Last Supper and the humble act of our Lord, and as we gather at the Lord’s table to receive his body and blood, in person or in the spirit, may we remember to follow his command to love one another. Amen.

This sermon was written by the Rev. Dr. Joshua Samuel.

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– THE REV. DR. JOSHUA SAMUEL

- I. Our Lord’s instruction on loving one another is a commandment and not a suggestion. Commit today to loving someone it is difficult to love.

2. Make a concerted effort this week to pray for revival – of yourself, of your congregation, your diocese, and the whole church – that our remembrance would be more than empty actions and instead reorient us to connection with God.

Good Friday

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.

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

THE HOUR HAS COME

by the Rev. Kellan Day

The hour has come.

For much of John's Gospel, it was not the hour. It was not the hour when Mary, his mother, told Jesus about wine running out at the wedding. It was not yet the hour when Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well. It was not quite the hour, as Jesus preached and healed and made his way toward Jerusalem.

But the hour finally came; it arrived as Jesus said it would. The hour of the Passover, the hour of Jesus' suffering, the hour of Jesus' sacrifice.

Yet, in this "hour," that time is warped. The hour unfolds and doesn't it feel like eternity? An eternity that passes like a millisecond. We know not how it began, only that it did, and suddenly too: an arrest, a trial, a betrayal, a flogging, an execution, a death, his death. The hour has come, the Lord confirms for us, when he offers: "It is finished," and he breathed his last.

It is an hour, a time, a moment, that our lives are forever marked by. How could it not change everything? It is during this hour when our humanity is revealed, exposed, unmasked.

Our humanity is revealed in Judas, who gives Jesus up to the authorities for a sack of silver. Greed or cowardice or infidelity, pick the one that fits you best. Which one is it: profit or fear or fantasy that has power over our lives?

We hear an echo of our own voice in Pilate's famous question: "What is truth?" a question reverberating throughout the halls of time. We ask the question in college seminars and in moments of confusion and as mass media empires regale us. We love to ask the question, but I wonder whether we're as interested in the answer.

We see in the mirror, looking back at us, a version of Peter, fearful or embarrassed or nervous to be associated with the recently arrested Jesus, denying our involvement, protesting our connection. We, too, would rather not be related to those other Christians or with religious people in general, and so we never let Jesus' name slip off our lips. We deny our involvement.

And yet, there we are also, present with the women at the foot of the cross. Sorrowful and shocked. Overwhelmed and nauseated by the violence but unwilling to move away, bearing witness to his life and now his death, for where else could we go, to whom else could we go?

We see in Mary's eyes, our own anguish. We see in her exhausted body our own defeats. Our own nightmares made real. We see her, and we stand near her, we bear her weight, we hold her tight. We refuse to leave.

We, too, are Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, showing up at the eleventh hour, but showing up nevertheless, bearing the weight of his corpse, anointing his stiffening body with spices, wrapping it in linens, laying it, ever so gently and tenderly, tears rushing forth as his body is placed into the hewn rock.

What has this hour revealed us to be? Who have we been?

We are fickle and violent and tremendous and terrible and loving and paralyzed and overwhelmed and cowardly and touchingly gentle and intrepid and filled with an astonishing sorrow.

Because of the truth of ourselves, because of what we uncovered at this hour, and what we discover still to this day, our next question is all the more essential: What has this hour revealed about God?

If we are who we are, who has God been for us?

Jesus, in light of the many faces we humans can put on, shows us his face: a face set, with resolute conviction, toward our redemption. He is unmoored, resolute, afraid yet willing. He is pure love, love to the bitter end.

John's Gospel narrates Jesus' commitment to our redemption with precision and craft.

Jesus, in John's Gospel, is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. He is the one who will be killed for our redemption, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world. The timing of his death means everything. The hour is here, and Jesus is executed on the day of preparation, when all the unblemished lambs were sacrificed, in preparation for the Passover. He is the lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

And yet, there's more.

John's Gospel tells us that Jesus wears a tunic with no seams. A detail most of us quickly gloss over, given the powerful presence of the cross and the tomb. But let us linger on this seamless tunic for just a moment. The soldiers cast lots for it; it was a prize to be won. It was likely beautiful, like he was beautiful, but it was also in one piece. A singular garment for a singular ministry. But more importantly, it is the tunic of a priest, the seamless garment that a priest would don on the Day of Atonement. Such a day was when Israel's sins were wiped clean, forgiven by the sacrifices made by a priest.

Jesus goes to the cross as a presider, as a priest. He presides over his own passion with tears and lamentation, with grief and pain, with struggle and anguish, but he presides, nonetheless. It is the liturgy of heaven on earth, it is the mass unfolding, and Jesus is our great high priest through it all. The one who offers earth to heaven and the one who brings heaven to earth. In such a liturgy, at such an hour, salvation has arrived.

Jesus goes willingly, he chooses this path, he drinks the cup, he faces the hour. He is not coerced but freely offers himself. A priest who offers a lamb, a priest who offers his own life.

This willingness on Jesus' part, this offering of himself, does not just reveal a piece of who God is. It reveals God himself. It is an apocalypse, the Temple curtain torn in two, it is heaven split open. We see on the cross the One who set the foundations of creation, the One who created humanity, the One who drew Israel into a Covenant, the One who spoke through the prophets, the One who came as babe, wrapped in cloth.

The One on the cross is the One we worship, the One who long ago, set out to save us, who has saved us, who continues to save us.

We are who we are, and thankfully God is who God is: Devoted to us, in love with us, one of us. As lamb and priest, as host and meal, as human and divine, Jesus spends every breath of his life, until the very last one, redeeming and forgiving and saving us.

The hour has come. It is here.

Come to the foot of the cross, then, and behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Behold our high priest who intercedes for us in heaven. Behold our Savior and our God.

The Rev. Kellan Day is the assistant rector at Church of the Incarnation in Highlands, North Carolina. She is a graduate of The School of Theology at the University of the South. Kellan and her spouse, Kai, relish time outside – climbing, hiking with their dog, and sitting on porches with friends.

“It is an hour, a time, a moment, that our lives are forever marked by. How could it not change everything?”

– THE REV. KELLAN DAY

- I. For love of us – of you, too! – Jesus was willing to be betrayed and mocked and murdered. How then ought we live?

2. Most of our churches have a central cross on or behind the altar. When you look at it, how can you remember both its horror and its joy, the crucified Christ and the risen Christ?

The Great Vigil of Easter

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.

READINGS:

**ACTS 10:34-43 OR JEREMIAH 31:1-6; PSALM 118:1-2, 14-24; COLOSSIANS 3:1-4 OR ACTS 10:34-43;
JOHN 20:1-18 OR MATTHEW 28:1-10**

IN THE DARKNESS

by the Rev. Lucy Strandlund

The Easter Vigil is a dramatic service.

It is the first service of Easter Day. In this holy night, before the lilies, the brunches, and the flowered crosses of the morning, we begin quietly, in near darkness.

With the scratching of a match or flint against steel, we ignite the new fire, and from that fire, the Paschal Candle is lighted. The Paschal Candle, drawing our attention to the light of Christ, is the focal point as we share aloud the stories of how, over and over, God creates order out of chaos, liberation out of oppression, hope out of despair, and life out of death.

These stories culminate in the one that finds Mary Magdalene and Mary diligently approaching the tomb, expecting to find no life, only a continuation of their grief in an oppressive and chaotic world.

Instead, something has happened in the darkness. In the darkness of the tomb, something wonderful, something hardly believable, something earth-shattering, has happened. Jesus is no longer there; he has been raised and is on his way to Galilee.

While so much of our focus is on the light, let us not forget where it all began.

As Barbara Brown Taylor writes in *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, “As many years as I have been listening to Easter sermons, I have never heard anyone talk about that part. Resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies, the sound of trumpets, bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way. If it happened in a cave, it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air.... new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.”

As Christians, we are prone to talking about dark versus light—more specifically, to see the light as a conqueror of the dark. But to pit the two against each other is to miss the ways God is present and working in both.

We tend to think of darkness only as periods of despair, hopelessness, or confusion—times when God feels far away or at best unknowable. In darkness, we hit our shins on the coffee table; in the darkness, we don't know what might jump out to get us.

But there is also goodness in darkness. It is the condition necessary for restorative slumber. In the dark and quiet, we can rest and replenish. In the dark and quiet of the earth, bulbs wait quietly for warmer temperatures. In the dark and quiet, seeds germinate before pushing green shoots up above the soil, ready for the sun.

God works marvelous wonders amidst darkness. As the familiar words of Psalm 139 remind us, “Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike. For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”

God creates in the darkness—in the soil, in the womb, in the cave.

Though periods of grief, hopelessness, and confusion might seem like the moments God is the farthest away, if we observe closely, we can see signs that God is quietly present, sowing seeds, working wonders, and inviting us into growth and new life.

Our reading from Exodus tells of the fear and disarray of the Israelites trying to flee generations of enslavement in Egypt, and though they are pursued by Pharaoh’s army, God creates a way, a path forward into new life.

Our passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans proclaims that though Christ was crucified and died, his resurrection means that death no longer has dominion over him. What could have been the end of the story is only the beginning. In Christ, “we too might walk in newness of life.”

And in the Gospel from Matthew, Mary Magdalene and Mary meet an angel from the Lord who tells them the good news and invites them to go and share it too. And so, “they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.” It is this fear and great joy that can be instructive for us modern-day followers of Christ—yes, there is much to fear in this world. The news every day reminds us of the many dangers around us—the persistent hatred, apathy, and despair that we cannot afford to

ignore. And yet, even with this fear, there is great joy. We can hold great joy because we know that God is present, working wonders and inviting us into new life.

The joy of Easter is no shallow joy. It is a joy grounded in the depth of knowing that God is with us and always opening a path to walk in newness of life—with us in the dark and quiet, with us in the unknown, and with us in the bright light of day.

And so, on this holy night that shines with the glory of the Resurrection, let us give thanks in the dark and quiet, amidst the light and fanfare, and in all the moments in between, knowing that God is steadily present, creating, inviting, and restoring. In this service of the Easter Vigil, we have been witnesses to the fullness of that truth, and soon it will be time to go forth from here, sharing what we have seen. May we follow in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene and Mary and tell the good news, with our fears cushioned by great joy in the knowledge of the wonders God works.

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

Amen.

The Rev. Lucy Strandlund is the Associate Rector for Liturgy & Pastoral Care at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Winston-Salem. She has a Master of Divinity and Master of Arts in Spiritual Formation from the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. In her free time, she loves to be outside, eat good food, and learn new things.

“The joy of Easter is no shallow joy. It is a joy grounded in the depth of knowing that God is with us and always opening a path to walk in newness of life.”

– THE REV. LUCY STRANDLUND

1. Jesus Christ is raised from death tonight – not in a metaphorical sense, but a literal one. We are used to affirming it week after week and might forget the sheer boldness of such a claim. How can you keep this at the front of your mind for the next week, the next season, and the next year?

2. The following Old Testament scriptures are assigned for the Great Vigil of Easter: Genesis 1:1-2:4a, the Story of Creation; Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18, 8:6-18, 9:8-13, the Flood; Genesis 22:1-18, Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac; Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21, Israel’s deliverance at the Red Sea; Isaiah 55:1-11, Salvation offered freely to all; Baruch 3:9-15, 3:32-4:4 or Proverbs 8:1-8, 19-21; 9:4b-6, Learn wisdom and live; Ezekiel 36:24-28, A new heart and a new spirit; Ezekiel 37:1-14, The valley of dry bones; Zephaniah 3:14-20, The gathering of God’s people. Which of these readings speaks to you this year? How is the Holy Spirit calling you or your community to a transformed life after Easter?

Easter Day

COLLECT

O God, who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS:

EXODUS 14:10-31; 15:20-21; PSALM 114; ROMANS 6:3-11; MATTHEW 28:1-10,

RESPONDING

by the Rev. Warren Thomas Swenson

Easter is one of those occasions on which most folks come to church already knowing the story. Due to their familiarity with the Easter narratives, some in our number might be tempted to let their minds wander during the reading of the scriptures. There is certainly no shortage of auxiliary matters competing for

our attention on Easter morning: congregants dressed in vibrant pastels; the smell of lilies wafting from the altar; perhaps even a brass instrument or two. Still, as Christians, we ought not to underestimate the power of scripture, no matter how familiar it may be.

For example, each of this morning's readings declares something of the richness of that eternal life into which we walk with the Risen Christ this day—and every day—of our lives.

From the Acts of the Apostles, we hear Peter preaching the message of God's peace in Jesus Christ. "God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear . . . to us who were chosen by God as witnesses . . . He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify." Here, in the full light of the Resurrection, Peter is doing precisely what Jesus told him to do—witnessing to it.

From the Letter to the Colossians, we hear the assurance that we are raised with Christ. There is no more waiting. We are inheritors of resurrection life now. So, when it comes to being compassionate, kind, humble, patient, and loving, there's no time like the present.

Both of these readings are to be commended for further prayer and study. But this morning, the resurrection account from John's Gospel deserves a more fulsome exploration, especially given its relative familiarity to us.

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and sees that the stone has been rolled away from it. With the news that the Lord's body is gone, she runs to Peter and John (or, as he's called here, "the disciple whom Jesus loved"). Deciding that they need to see it for themselves, these two disciples run to the tomb and find it empty, just as Mary said they would. The linen wrappings are lying right there inside, but there is no body to be found.

One thing we might miss because of our previous experience with this passage is that Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John each have a different reaction to the empty tomb.

John, the text tells us, “saw and believed” as soon as he entered the tomb. Until this point, the disciples had not understood what had been told to them—that Jesus must rise from the dead. Apparently, this is when it clicks for John—right as it’s unfolding before his eyes.

As for Peter, the scripture isn’t as explicit. Maybe he gets it. Maybe he doesn’t. It would seem as though he has some more thinking to do. He and John both return home.

Mary, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to get it at all. At least, not yet. And can she be expected to, amid the shock of these pre-dawn hours? It’s no wonder she remains at the tomb to weep. Thinking his body has been carried away, she is left to lament the fact that she has lost Jesus a second time.

It can be tempting for us to try to identify with the major players in this or any of our more familiar scriptures. In search of a way to connect at a deeper level with prominent biblical figures, we may find ourselves wanting to determine which ones we are most similar to and why. This is the sort of thing we do when we ask ourselves, “Am I a Mary or a Martha?” upon hearing the familiar account of Jesus visiting the sisters’ home in Bethany.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the desire to relate to a particular individual in this or any other biblical passage. But by doing so, we may run the risk of limiting our perspective when instead we are called to expand it—perhaps in this case by finding points of connection with several of the people we encounter.

Take for example the three disciples we meet today. Are we not, each of us, some combination of John, Peter, and Mary Magdalene? It might depend on the season of our life, or our time and location along the path of our Christian journey.

We are John when we see something and believe it. We are John when the object of our heart’s desire dawns on us in real-time, when the realization of it causes all the puzzle pieces to fall right into place. We are John when we arrive on Easter morning without one shadow of a doubt that Jesus is risen.

There was a woman who, not too terribly long ago, sat alone by a hospital bed where her husband of 61 years lay dead. It had only been a few minutes since his passing when the chaplain walked in to see her, but before he could speak, she put her hands up quietly and gently shook her head. “I know where my husband is,” she said, sternly. “If you want to find somebody who needs convincing, you’ll have to go someplace else.”

We are John when we rest certain and secure in the bonds of our belief.

We are Peter when we are not quite as certain. Peter when it takes just a little longer to sort it all out.

The story is told of a young girl, maybe three or four years old, who went to Sunday School and church with her grandmother one Easter morning. On the way, her grandmother explained to her the story of Jesus’ resurrection, including his death on Good Friday. “Then, early on Sunday morning,” she said, “he came back to life!” The little girl stared up at her grandmother with a look teetering on the soft edge between innocence and confusion . . . “Yeah right!” she exclaimed.

Apparently, she needed a little bit more time to think it over.

And we are Mary when our grief overcomes our ability to make sense of the mystery of eternal life. We are Mary when a loved one dies and our grief overwhelms our other senses. From time to time, and for good reason, we all lose the ability to perceive something that is right in front of us, even if that something is the presence of God.

We find ourselves, each of us, in different places on our Christian journey at different times. That's just fine. Even on Easter. You might well be able to run toward the empty tomb with an undefended heart, predisposed to belief even before you get a look at the evidence. Or perhaps once you arrive, you'll need to turn away in confusion. You simply might need to take some time to sort out what's happened and then come back later. That would be fine, too. Lord knows there are those of us who will need just a little bit more time to hang around outside and cry.

None of our possible responses changes the truth of the matter—that whoever you are, wherever you are, Jesus is right there by your side. You may not always perceive him. He is there, nonetheless. He is waiting to say your name, and—even when you least expect it—to remind you of the faith you have deep inside. That faith which can only have been instilled by the one through whom all things were made. That faith which is all that is necessary to go out and proclaim the One who lives.

The Rev. Warren Thomas Swenson is a priest of the Diocese of West Missouri, currently serving as associate priest of Southeast Tennessee Episcopal Ministry (STEM), a system of yoked congregations in the Diocese of Tennessee. Warren is also a Ph.D. student in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester and has served as Visiting Instructor of Rhetoric at The University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn. His research interests include queer theology and homiletics. Warren holds both Master of Divinity and Master of Sacred Theology degrees from The School of Theology in Sewanee, where he lives with his husband, Walker.

*“None of our possible
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– THE REV. WARREN THOMAS SWENSON

1. Read St. John Chrysostom's Paschal Sermon.
Write out your favorite line below.

2. How will you keep this feast? Over the next several weeks especially, set a reminder to try seeing your world with new eyes, enlightened by the resurrection of our Lord.

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