

A LENT-TO-EASTER DEVOTIONAL FROM CHRISTIANITY TODAY

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in the

EVERYDAY

JOURNEYING FROM DEATH TO RESURRECTION

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EASTER IN THE EVERYDAY: A Lent to Easter Devotional from Christianity Today

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INTRODUCTION

Let's prepare our hearts together during this season leading up to Easter and beyond. The events of over 2000 years ago still reverberate through our bones and bodies today. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the most powerful, world-shaping reality in history, and we still find the truth transported into our everyday lives. It's up to us to remember, reflect, and abide in the everyday, glorious consequences of Christ's love for us, revealed through his humility and power, the crisis and the overcoming, the despair and the overflowing joy. He has died and he has risen indeed, and that changes everything—even the small parts of our daily life. As we prepare our hearts, this devotional invites you on the journey of Lent and Easter through the different stages of the emotional journey and theological truth of death, life, and everything between.

Easter in the Everyday is divided into three frames, each representing a different emotional reality along the Easter journey. The first frame leads us through the time in the church calendar called Lent, where we will confront the humility of our humanness, examine the limitations of our fleshly state, and embrace the call to sacrificial living, fasting, and self-denial. The second frame will take us through Holy Week and prepare us for Easter, leaning in the anticipation of hope. Finally, we will immerse ourselves in the turbulence and intensity of Jesus' betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection and reunion. Through this journey, love and awe has overcome the sting of sorrow and death on the eternal stage, as well as in our small lives that will one day be caught up in glory. **CT**

READING PLAN

LENT

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Heather Thompson Day: As Bodies Grow Cold

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EASTER

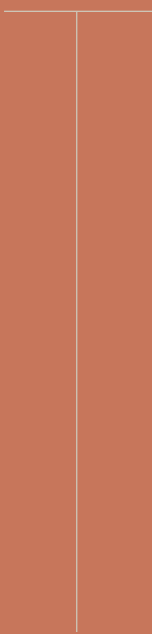
EASTER SUNDAY JOHN 20:11-18
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EASTER MONDAY JOHN 21:1-14
Mark Batterson: The Reflexive Response of Grace

ASCENSION LUKE 24:13-35
Jon Guerra: Were Not Our Hearts Burning Within Us?

*Therefore we do not lose heart.
Though outwardly we are
wasting away, yet inwardly we
are being renewed day by day.*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16



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The
HUMILITY
of
HUMANNES

*Examining the challenge
and limitations of being
human, the call to repentance,
and sacrificial living.*

LENT
ASH WEDNESDAY



Life as a Fading Flower

ASH WEDNESDAY BREAKS DOWN
OUR ILLUSION OF INVINCIBILITY.

BY AMANDA HELD OPELT

POPPIES & DOGWOOD BY ELIZABETH BOWMAN. OIL ON CANVAS. 2023

Every year around Ash Wednesday, a hillside near our home in the mountains of Western North Carolina erupts with the yellow of budding daffodils. These are the first of the spring flowers to bloom, and their golden hue stands in stark contrast to the grays and browns of the surrounding winter.

Brilliant as the blossoms are, they are short-lived. In the days after their arrival, the daffodils are windswept by the harsh mountain cold that always lingers longer than we hope. A late frost or snowfall will inevitably cling to the quivering petals, sometimes cutting their display of beauty short. After a few weeks, the flowers that remain shrivel and brown, eventually falling to the ice-hardened earth, frustrating our optimism that warmer days are near.

It is no wonder that Job—a man whose suffering looms large in the biblical narrative—compared the fragility of his fleeting life to that of a delicate flower. Even though he possessed extraordinary wealth, even though he numbered among the righteous, he was vulnerable. He was upright, prudent, and just as susceptible to calamity as anyone else. His possessions were destroyed by fire and warlords, his children were killed in a natural disaster, and his good health was lost to a painful disease. In the wake of these catastrophes, Job fully realized what is excruciatingly true for all of us: our days are windswept, ephemeral, lived in the aftermath of the fall.

It is easy for privileged Americans to feel a sense of control: Our generation has unprecedented access to food, water, shelter, and medical care. Our ability to make choices around what we'll do for work, who we'll marry, which communities we'll join is historically unprecedented.

Meanwhile, the self-help and wellness industry has infused in us the notion that we can circumvent any uncomfortable feeling or experience. Exhaustion can be mitigated by the right green

smoothie recipe or essential oil, chaos can be controlled by the perfect time-management app, sadness can be soothed through mindfulness or meditation, and boredom can be alleviated by a streaming service or social media platform.

Moreover, as Christians, we can believe that solid theology and steadfast commitment to the spiritual disciplines can serve as a bulwark against the buffeting of life. Perhaps Job's friends assumed the same thing about their righteous companion.

Slowly the lie creeps in: *I can control my outcomes. I can avoid suffering.*

This illusion of invincibility explains why so many of us feel bewildered—offended even—when hardship inevitably comes. It's humbling to realize that suffering and death are part of being human, no matter our virtues, vigilance, or privilege. Our lives are less like well-constructed fortresses and more like fleeting flowers. We are all painfully exposed, as vulnerable as those daffodils bursting forth into the brutal cold.

Jesus reminds us of the potentially unsettling reality that God “sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:45, NASB). But in the same sermon, Jesus tells us not to worry; to have no fear for what we will eat or drink or wear. “Notice how the lilies of the field grow,” he says (6:28).

The lilies are clothed in beauty by no effort of their own. They “do not labor nor do they spin” because God is the artist who oversees both their flowering and fading. And that same God knows what we need. The humiliation of helplessness can sometimes lead to an unexpected form of rest, a retreat from our efforts to control our outcomes, a respite from our own labors.

I make it my mission to notice how those daffodils grow, to admire their brilliance rather than bemoaning their brevity. Even though the lives of those flowers are brief, they are indeed a beacon of hope—a material reminder that seasons do change, that warmth always arrives, and that glory is possible even in the harshest of environments. God, and only God, makes it so.

There has never been a winter when that hillside has not been resurrected into beauty. Those daffodils feel like a miracle, a foretaste of a greater resurrection to come. And even the weakest of hopes, with God's caretaking, can blossom into eternal joy. **CT**

REFLECT

How is it unsettling for our lives to be compared to the flowers? How might it be comforting?

How is our illusion of control amplified by our privileges? How can letting go of that illusion of control lead to rest?

*Mortals, born of woman, are
of few days and full of trouble.
They spring up like flowers
and wither away; like fleeting
shadows, they do not endure.*

JOB 14:1-2

LENT
SUNDAY I



A Path Not for the Faint of Heart

THE COST OF THE CROSS IN A
WORLD THAT LOVES PLEASURE.

BY O. ALAN NOBLE

TABLE ASSEMBLAGE BY MICHELLE CHUN. OIL ON CANVAS. 60 X 50". 2020-21

In some of the most haunting words in Scripture, Christ tells his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24, ESV). At this point in the Passion story, the disciples don’t yet know the power of Christ’s words. They certainly understood what a cross was and knew something about the horrors of crucifixion, but they didn’t yet know that Christ himself would die on this instrument of Roman torture—or the various forms of suffering they each would face themselves.

At the core of Christianity is the command to deny ourselves. In a culture that revolves around affirming ourselves, it naturally becomes harder and harder to communicate that aspect effectively. The idea that we would deny ourselves as an act of spirituality is now counterintuitive. In Charles Taylor’s book *A Secular Age*, he touches on the challenge of self-denial in the modern age: “For many people today, to set aside their own path in order to conform to some external authority just doesn’t seem comprehensible as a form of spiritual life.”

Self-denial is not just hard; it feels incomprehensible in our time, an age in which self-fulfillment is the cornerstone of a good life. Yet our faith does not ask us to neglect self-fulfillment—it just redefines the terms. According to the biblical story, we were actually created to deny ourselves, and in denying ourselves, we fulfill our true selves.

The world defines fulfillment as flowing from the authentic heart of the individual, unrestrained by any external sources. Christianity teaches that our hearts are wicked and unreliable—that we desire things that are not just bad, but are bad for us.

Jesus teaches the paradox that self-denial is self-affirmation (Matt. 16:25). It’s just that the “self” and the “affirmation” are defined by God, not by our fallible human whims. Who we are (children of God) and what it means for us to be fulfilled (union

with Christ) isn't up to us. To be with Christ is to be without our selfish desires.

So we must ask: what does it mean to deny ourselves? It means that we turn from sin. All sin is the act of choosing our own path against God's will for us. It is a perverse affirmation of the self which puts its desires ahead of our neighbor and even God.

Obedience is a cross that we bear; it is a form of suffering, even though it is a suffering that brings healing, peace, and restoration. We like to imagine that obedience to God is painless, except perhaps in the case of persecution. But even when the world isn't punishing us for our faith, simply choosing not to sin involves suffering. In the case of persisting, deeply ingrained sins, repentance requires a tearing away from bad habits; a breaking of familiar rituals; a rending from disobedience. And that can hurt.

For example (we don't recognize this enough) choosing to be faithful in marriage requires that we deny ourselves the pleasure of intimacy with other people. For some people this is easy, but it can be a profound denial for others. After all, the world is filled with beautiful, interesting, lovely people. To say "I do" is to say "I deny." For the sake of this fulfillment, I deny myself the option of being with someone else.

In this season of Lent, we remember that this form of self-denial is a model for the Christian life. While the world reminds us how delightful its pleasures are—how much we "deserve" them, and why honoring our desires is loving ourselves—we instead pledge ourselves to Christ. Greed, pride, envy, lust, gluttony—all sins we find ourselves more than capable of embracing as pleasures, and which following Christ requires us to deny. They are pleasures that harm us, but initially, like bread eaten in secret, they are pleasant (Prov. 9:17).

The Christian path is not for the faint of heart. It demands a great deal of courage, humility, and self-sacrifice. But we have a faithful Savior who modeled this sacrifice for us, who knows the cost of denial and the beauty of faithfulness. And faithfulness *is* beautiful. The same Christ that suffered on the cross was glorified in his body. And likewise, when we deny ourselves we are glorified to God. We receive a peace that comes only from denying our sinful desires and delighting in God. **CT**

REFLECT

How does Christianity redefine fulfillment in contrast to the secular view of self-fulfillment?

During the season of Lent, what specific areas of self-denial were highlighted for you in the devotional? How can these areas be applied in our lives during this season?

*Then Jesus said to his disciples,
“Whoever wants to be my disciple
must deny themselves and take
up their cross and follow me.*

MATTHEW 16:24

LENT
SUNDAY II



*Be Still in the Middle
of the Battle*

WITH SO MUCH AT STAKE, HOW CAN WE
FOLLOW THE PSALMIST'S INSTRUCTION?

BY ELISSA YUKIKO WEICHBRODT

HOMETOWN HILLS BY CAROLINE GREB. OIL ON PANEL. 5 X 7". 2021

On a sticky, steamy night last summer, I sat on my back porch in the dark and stared at a gangly potted cactus. This *Epiphyllum oxypetalum*, commonly known as the “Queen of the Night” was a gift from an elderly gardener friend. He promised me that there would be spectacular, if short-lived, nocturnal flowers. “And it’s really easy to take care of,” he assured. “I get seven or eight blooms at a time from my other plant.”

And yet, five years later, I had only seen a single, spent bloom, hanging between the scalloped stems like a deflated balloon. It was not for lack of trying. I watered the cactus regularly, but not too often. I adjusted its position for indirect sunlight. I fertilized, and I pruned. I brought it inside faithfully before outside temperatures dropped. Its tentacle stems grew rapidly in all directions. But the promised late-summer buds never appeared.

Then, last spring, as my family floundered in wave after wave of traumatic loss, I stuck the plant on the corner of the front porch and turned to care for other, more pressing needs. So on that late summer evening, it was to my utter surprise that I found two swollen buds sheathed in twisting, pink sepals, ready to bloom.

The well-known instruction of Psalm 46:10, “Be still, and know that I am God,” is a popular refrain. It appears on bumper stickers, hand-lettered signs, and shareable social media content. We invoke it as an encouragement to slow our frenetic pace and trust God to care for us. But the CSB translation offers a slightly different take: “Stop your fighting, and know that I am God.”

Psalm 46 begins by describing a context of cataclysmic upheaval. Declaring that God is our refuge, strength, and helper, the psalmist holds to this truth even when the “earth trembles and the mountains topple into the depths of the seas, though its water roars and foams and the mountains quake with its turmoil” (v. 2). The text offers pictures of world-shattering destruction and violent conflict, both natural disasters and political chaos.

In the third and final section of the psalm, the psalmist describes God's intervention using wartime imagery: "He makes wars cease throughout the earth. He shatters bows and cuts spears to pieces; he sets wagons ablaze" (v. 9). In view of the whole psalm, it seems that verse 10 is not telling us to simply take a break from life's hustle and bustle. Instead, it is a counterintuitive command to cease desperately fighting for our own security and survival.

Last year my family's world did, indeed, feel like it was toppling into the depths of the sea. Everything in our lives was upended by the sudden deaths of two young friends and the fallout from those traumas. Every day I desperately fought to find safety, and to protect my children from darkness that threatened to pull them under. I trembled and raged and felt myself in deep need of refuge.

With so much at stake, how could I possibly follow the psalmist's injunction and stop my fighting? And yet, Psalm 46:10 insists that the middle of a battle is precisely the time to be still. The command is coupled with a call to contemplation: "Know that I am God."

God does not pledge to keep tragedy and turmoil away from us—we would not need a fortress if that were the case. Instead, he vows to be the strong tower that keeps us safe in the midst of the fiery battles and raging waters. Secure in that knowledge, we no longer need to punch and scrape and struggle on our own.

Lent does not deny our heart-piercing, bone-tired, chest-constricting reality. It does ask us to cease our struggling—not because we are giving up, but because we are choosing to bear witness to God's promise to his children.

On that muggy summer night, I sat quietly and watched the cactus's blush-colored sepals arc up and back, then stretch out like sun rays around the soft, unfurling petals. In the darkness, the pale blooms shone like stars, guiding me back to the God who says, "Be still."

CT

REFLECT

In what contexts have you previously heard Psalm 46:10 and the command to "be still"? How does the CSB translation—"stop your fighting"—change your understanding of this verse?

What is an area in your life where you feel like you are fighting? What would it look like to cease battling on your own? What promises from God can meet you in your stillness?

*He says, "Be still, and know
that I am God; I will be
exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."*

PSALM 46:10

LENT
SUNDAY III



*Living in a Season
Without Answers*

LEARNING TO HAVE A QUIET HOPE
IN THE MIDST OF HEARTACHE.

BY KAYLA CRAIG

— T —
EVENING ROMANCE BY CHERITH LUNDIN. OIL ON PANEL. 30 X 48". 2010

This year, I'm learning to have a quiet hope. My eight-year-old daughter has Down syndrome. Her already winding path took an unexpected turn at just six months of age, when a relentless storm of seizures wreaked havoc on her brain and body. The disabilities and delays left in the wake of her seizures touched every aspect of her life.

As my husband and I navigated her diagnosis, our family's journey became a slow, steady pilgrimage into the unknown. Week after week, my husband and I sat on the physical therapy mat with our daughter, willing her muscles to awaken from their slumber, praying for the static in her brain to quiet down. In the midst of her struggle, we fielded questions from well-meaning friends and family, asking when she would take her first steps or speak her first words. We didn't have answers.

Progress was achingly slow, and at times our efforts felt like a lost cause. During the pandemic we shifted to virtual therapy sessions, and clung to our computer screen, the lifeline to our daughter's potential. As the isolation deepened and our hearts grew heavy with uncertainty, I reached a point where hope seemed as fragile as my daughter's body, ready to bruise with the slightest touch. My husband persevered when I could not. Though I had slammed the laptop shut, finding that its quiet hum of hope had gone silent, he kept showing up for those virtual therapy sessions. He nurtured a flicker of expectation even when I had almost surrendered to despair.

As time passed and the world emerged from its slumber, we resumed our weekly treks to hospitals and clinics, parking our cluttered minivan in reserved disabled spots. Today, she's in second grade, still unable to pull herself up, but with the aid of a helping hand or a gait trainer, her feet are able to find solid ground. With some assistance and assurance, she steps forward, hope unfurling to the cadence of her steps.

Friends, family, and even acquaintances have had recurring dreams of her walking. The first time I had this dream, I awoke feeling foolish for imagining something so audacious. I wrapped my tender hope back up in layers of self-protective armor. However, the shields I've carefully held for so long recently came down: I held my daughter's hands as she stood before me, swaying to the worship band's melody. As we sang, she propelled herself forward, her leg braces and pink sneakers pulling me along, heading toward the front of the sanctuary with increasing speed. I scooped her into my arms and could see what I hadn't seen before—the profound truth that she was running into the loving arms of the Savior who cares.

The one who understands the depths of our humanity—who is well acquainted with our weary bones and aching hearts—calls her beloved, adores her, and, in a mysterious twist, also cherishes *me*—the doubter, the cynic, the mother who at times can only *whisper* the word hope.

God does not dismiss the desires we cradle in the quiet corners of our hearts. The God who spoke to Elijah in both the silence and the storm holds our fragile hopes and, as we see in Lamentations 3, calls our patience and perseverance *good*.

I may not know whether my daughter will run with abandon this side of heaven, but I do know this: the Lord is good to those whose hope is in him (v. 25). Lent beckons us to contemplate our fragility. Remember that even the *anticipation* of hope is a precious gift in this reflective season as we sojourn this weary world. When all you can see is unanswered prayer, do not despise the hints of hope while you wait.

When you wonder if even your faintest of cries for help are for naught, remember this: “It’s a good thing to quietly hope, quietly hope for help from God.” (Lam. 3:25–26, MSG) May our hearts be filled with quiet hope as a sacred gift. May the faint echoes of this hope sustain us as we take halting, wobbling steps with God into the waiting, the darkness, and the unknown. **CT**

REFLECT

When have you had just a whisper of hope in your life? What happened?

How does your definition of hope change when you consider not only the divinity, but the humanity of Jesus?

*The Lord is good to those
whose hope is in him, to
the one who seeks him; it is
good to wait quietly for the
salvation of the Lord.*

LAMENTATIONS 3:25-26

LENT
SUNDAY IV



Why Storms Are Necessary for Survival

LENT HELPS US SEE THE
TRIALS OF LIFE IN A NEW WAY.

BY ROBERT L. FULLER

THE STORM BY JOEL SHEESLEY. 40 X 50". 2002

You almost died, bro.”

The words had scarcely registered before my older brother slumped into a chair beside my hospital bed. I’d languished for days after a relatively routine surgery turned into a harrowing post-op full-body infection. My brother, a general surgeon, wasn’t one to mince words. His worn-out posture was evidence enough he wasn’t exaggerating.

My brother had brooded over my medical charts for days, ordering test after test in a desperate attempt to diagnose the bacteria trying to kill me. Though his mood was decidedly salty, he was the one who saved my life through a final corrective surgery. “You’re gonna be okay, bro. You’re gonna be fine.”

That evening, as I lay in my hospital bed, a storm rolled in over the city. The soothing sound of rain drew me out of my bed for the first time in days, and I ambled like an old man to a chair beside the window, hearing the raindrops pelt and then run in squiggly rivulets to the windowsill. Closing my eyes, I pondered the mystery of *trials* as a Bible verse echoed in my head:

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).

For me, this passage had often seemed like a sadistic pining for pain. As one who had lived much of his life determined to outrun discomfort, the notion of taking joy in struggle was anathema. Didn’t being a believer invite blessing? How on earth could the pain and suffering of trials be considered pure joy?

In the 1980s, a research facility called Biosphere 2 built a closed ecosystem to test what it would take to eventually colonize space. Everything was carefully curated and provided for,

and trees planted inside sprung up and appeared to thrive. Then they began to fall.

I imagine the botanists must have looked on in dismay, finding no evidence of disease or mite or weevil. There was nothing to cause the trees to topple; the conditions were perfect. And then they realized what was missing—something so simple, yet absent within the confines of the structure: *wind*.

The air was too still, too serene—an ease that guaranteed the trees were doomed. It's the pressure and variation of natural wind that causes the trees to strengthen and their roots to grow. Though the trees of Biosphere 2 had all the sun, soil, and water they needed, in the absence of changing winds they built no resilience, and eventually fell under the weight of their own abundance.

Could it be that our difficulties, more than our delights, are what drive us closer to God? They remind us of our desperation and lead us back to the sole source of abundant life. Romans 5:3–5 encourages us:

“We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”

I spent most of the night by that window as the rain continued to fall. Drifting in and out of sleep as my body continued to heal, I felt the peace of God like a warm embrace, reminding me that he'd been with me every step of my near-death journey, guiding my brother's hands as he saved my life, filling that hospital room with his Spirit.

As we journey through the struggle-filled season of Lent, we can begin to see trials and storms in a new way. Though we may still have a strong aversion to pain, we can see the hand of God when the winds of trial come to buffet, and we can take solace in the fact that our roots are growing deeper. **CT**

REFLECT

It's often difficult to perceive trials in a positive light while we endure them. As you think through your life, how have your difficult experiences changed you for the good? What did you learn?

In your darkest times, what did God teach you about himself? How did he comfort you and help you? Is there anyone in your life, be they friends or family, who you might encourage today through sharing your story?

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

JAMES 1:2-3

LENT
SUNDAY V



*Eyes on the Prize
of Faithful Service*

HOW RUGGED DISCIPLINE
PREPARES US FOR REWARD.

BY PHYLCIA MASONHEIMER

INTERSECTION BY CURTIS NEWKIRK. ACRYLIC ON WOOD PANEL. 24 X 24". 2021

The city of Corinth was the site of the Isthmian Games. Hosted every two years (instead of every four, like the Olympic Games), they celebrated Poseidon, the god of the sea. Athletes trained for months to prepare for the competition, to prove their prowess before a hungering audience.

When the apostle Paul challenged the Corinthian church to “run in such a way as to get the prize,” (1 Cor. 9:24), he used an instantly recognizable image: the athlete. “They do it to get a crown that will not last,” Paul wrote. “But we do it to get a crown that will last forever” (v. 25). Paul challenged his readers to treat their Christian life like an athletic feat: to train, run, fight, and finish well.

Western Christians frequently meditate on the gift of salvation. But there is a difference between a *gift* and a *prize*. A gift is given freely; a prize is earned and won. The prize Paul references in 1 Corinthians 9 is not salvation, but the reward for the works we do as saved people of God. How we live out our salvation on earth has real ramifications, both in the present and eternally. Earlier in his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul expresses this through the metaphor of home-building:

“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work” (1 Cor. 3:11-13).

Each follower of Christ receives a free gift of salvation by the grace of God (Eph. 2:8). How we *build* on that gift is the working out of our salvation (Phil. 2:12). If we build with hay and straw—worthless, temporary pursuits—there is little to be shown for our faith on earth. But when we build with the gold, silver, and costly jewels of a mature Christian life, of good works done for the world, the quality of our building will be revealed at the last.

To build in such a way, we have to be strong. Like an athlete training for the games, we must discipline our bodies and keep them under control (1 Cor. 27): not out of legalism, shame, or fear, but out of love for the God who saved us. Discipline—living a boundaried life—brings freedom. By saying no to unhealthy impulses and listening to the Holy Spirit’s leading, we are freed to have deeper relationships, better health, stronger faith, and a greater witness. The disciplined life is not aimless, but focused. We have set our eyes on the prize of “well done, my good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21) and can run with his approval in mind.

We do not choose discipline in order to earn salvation; we choose it because we are saved. Because we are in Christ, a new creation, we must choose to say “no” to some things and say “yes” to what is better—for the sake of our time, for rest, for connection, for discipleship, for health, and for growth. The season of Lent teaches us to say a temporary “no” so that we may experience a much deeper, more fulfilling “yes” to God. Any area in which we learn to delay gratification out of love for God (not out of legalism) leads us to a deeper experience of his affection and the profound impact of the Spirit-led life.

The crown of the Isthmian Games was made of pine. In Greek and Roman culture, pine represented eternal life. Still, the crown received by the winning athlete decayed within a few weeks. Those crowns did not last, but our prize will last forever (1 Cor. 9:24–25). The reward we receive for a faithful, disciplined Christian life is eternal and unchanging. The fruitful ways we build upon our salvation are seen and honored by our God, and when we stand face-to-face with him we can know every unseen effort, every hard-won trial, every painful surrender was worth the effort. May we be able to say with Paul: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7). **CT**

REFLECT

How is the season of Lent presented as a time to show discipline and say a temporary "no" for a deeper "yes" to God?

How does Paul use the metaphor of an athlete to convey a deeper spiritual truth? What are some examples from your own life?

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

1 CORINTHIANS 9:25

The
ANTICIPATION
of
HOPE

HOLY WEEK
PALM SUNDAY



*A Power Made Possible
Through Sacrifice*

PALM SUNDAY'S MESSAGE OF THE DONKEY,
THE LION, AND THE LAMB.

BY MICK MURRAY

HALL BY CLAIRE WATERMAN. OIL ON PAPER. 2018

To better understand Palm Sunday's stark contrast—Jesus the King riding through the streets of Jerusalem on a lowly donkey—we look to Revelation. In Revelation 5, John dictates a dramatic scene where God presents a scroll that cannot be opened due to the fact that no one is found worthy. The apostle is overcome with emotion at the impossibility of the situation and the inability to break the seven seals. Then an elder instructs John to stop weeping: “Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (v. 5, ESV). I picture the elder making this declaration with a booming voice and a sweeping gesture toward the throne—every eye in heaven expecting to see a roaring, flaming lion burst forth in a display of tremendous power. I imagine eyes scanning back and forth, bright and expectant, initially unaware of the creature that has stepped forward from the throne. Then they see him, the worthy one—not a lion, but a sacrificial lamb, whose throat has been slit, blood pouring down his chest, staining the pure white wool a deep crimson red.

It would have been accurate for Jesus to show himself as the lion of the tribe of Judah, in keeping with the way the elder announced his coming, but he doesn't. Instead, he appears as one of the most non-threatening creatures on earth. He is approachable. Humble. Meek.

This motif of power demonstrated through restraint and sacrifice spans the pages of Scripture. Jesus Christ continually reveals the majesty in humility: The King of Kings comes to the world not in a palace but in a barn reeking of animal waste. His glory is first made manifest not to Herod the Great but to lowly shepherds. He does not choose to mentor the academic elite but the commoner. He affixes himself not to the upper echelons of society but to the homeless, as he demonstrates the nature of an upside-down kingdom to his bewildered disciples.

This is the Messiah who rides into Jerusalem on a donkey to the sight of palm fronds laid before him. He proceeds not to the halls of power to topple Rome and satisfy the crowd's expectation of military victory, but to the center of Jewish worship to confront misguided notions of what it means to serve God. Jesus did not succumb to the accolades of the crowd and seek an earthly throne. Rather, he was enthroned on a Roman instrument of torture and execution, in obedience to the Father, and that we might be forgiven, cleansed, and reconciled to God.

Jesus embodied God's original intent from Genesis chapters 1 and 2: that mankind would exercise a dominion of stewardship over the earth to bring about life, as a gardener endeavors to cultivate fruitfulness and beauty through their efforts. Adam and Eve failed in this task, so a new kind of human needed to emerge—one who would crush the head of the Serpent, but who would also be bruised in the process. Jesus was a suffering servant; a lion who was also a lamb. He is the God of unmatched authority who would don the garment of a servant and wash the very feet of those who would abandon him. One who would ride into Jerusalem on the week of his execution to the acclaim of one crowd, days later to face another that would demand his crucifixion. We see him weeping over the crowds immediately after the triumphal entry, concerned for those around him even as his own life became cloaked in peril (Luke 19:41). Jesus was completely secure in the affection and provision of the Father. He saw beyond the veil of death to the Resurrection, and was, therefore, able to endure betrayal, scourging, and the horror of the cross.

As imperfect humans who are drawn in by applause and fearful of pain, we often seek to embody the power of the lion—but we follow a lion who became a lamb. May we follow in the footsteps of our master this Palm Sunday, pursuing the sacrificial way of the cross so that others may encounter the life found in the blood of our Savior. **CT**

HOLY WEEK
HOLY TUESDAY



Wasteful Worship

THE GRACE TO GIVE WHEN
GENEROSITY SEEMS ABSURD.

BY HANNAH WEIDMANN

OFFERTORY BY SUSAN SAVAGE. ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 32 X 26"

If there's one thing I love, it's an unexpected gift—whether given or received. Recently, I've found myself sending house guests on their way with things I've cherished: teapots, clothes, and even jewelry off my own person. I've felt the exhilaration and freedom found in the act of giving things away—things with real value. But extravagant and unexpected giving like this rarely comes from a place of natural generosity. There's a supernatural grace at work, like the grace we see in the story of the woman with her alabaster jar (Mark 14:3-9).

I know this is grace because I've spent most of my life suffering from a scarcity mindset: the idea that there's not enough to go around, and I'd be better off socking away what little I have. When I read the account of the woman anointing Jesus in the days before his crucifixion, my spirit wells with a resounding, *Yes!* and I wipe away tears in awe of this momentous act of worship. But I confess—and cringe as I do so—that my flesh still has the same response as those who were in the room, and I start to scrutinize her extravagance.

Against the protests of wastefulness and impropriety, Christ defends the woman, explaining to his disciples that she has prepared him for burial (v. 8). Her act of devotion and sacrifice will forever point to the Good News, and she will be remembered whenever it is proclaimed in all the world (v. 9). The woman anointing Jesus emptied out what could have been her most precious possession, pouring out her treasure for the sake of God incarnate. She anointed the Word before his burial, bringing about a tangible reminder of Jesus as the Anointed One, the long-awaited Messiah (Isaiah 61:1-3).

I imagine Jesus would still have been faintly fragrant with that oil as he was taken before Pilate. I imagine he would still have the sweet woody aroma of the nard on his hair, his beard—the lingering anointing. As he carried his cross, I wonder if the bystanders

caught the fragrance, beyond the smell of sweat and blood. Perhaps they smelled a sweetness in the air as Christ ascended Golgotha. I wonder if the men nailed to their own crosses on either side of him picked up the scent.

The sign of anointing was largely reserved for kings in ancient Judaism. This woman's bold act not only acknowledged Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, it also foreshadowed what Christ would do two days later as he poured himself out in a lavish, loving, and seemingly foolish way on the cross. By giving himself as an offering, Jesus accomplishes what we could never have done for ourselves. What can sometimes look like foolishness to us is faithfulness; what appears wasteful is worshipful.

My generosity is more a spiritual discipline than a virtue; I cannot boast in giving because it's against the will of my flesh. God, in his kindness, both invites me to give generously and empowers me by his Spirit to do so. I've come to realize that in teaching me to give things away he's healing the part of me that still believes there won't be enough. So I boast in this weakness, and I rejoice even though I still sometimes hear the voices directed at the woman at Bethany:

"How dare you do that?"

"This is irresponsible. You are irresponsible."

"You're giving away what you can't afford. And for what?"

Then comes Jesus, my defender: "She has done a beautiful thing . . . *She did what she could.*" And the voices hush. **CT**

REFLECT

What is your honest response to the scandalous generosity of the woman anointing Jesus? Who would you most likely resemble in the room?

How does lavish generosity challenge our instincts for financial or social self-preservation?

She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.

MARK 14:8-9

HOLY WEEK
SPY WEDNESDAY



The Fatal Fantasy

HOW JUDAS'S BETRAYAL REVEALS
THE HEART OF MISGUIDED HOPE.

BY ENIOLA ABIOYE

DEATH IS VAST AS A PLANET AT NIGHT BY CATHERINE PRESCOTT. OIL ON CANVAS. 20 X 25". 2009

"We may note . . . that [Jesus] was never regarded as a mere moral teacher. He did not produce that effect on any of the people who actually met Him. He produced mainly three effects— Hatred—Terror—Adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval."

C. S. LEWIS, GOD IN THE DOCK

We don't get to pick the version of Jesus we will worship. We love him as he is. Anything else is idolatry. Anything else is fantasy. Anything else is less than what Jesus died for us to have.

A man once followed Jesus, counted as one of his disciples. He was released to do works only Jesus could empower, and tasked with guarding the resources of their assignment. However, at some point on his three-year journey with the Messiah, he succumbed to the sickness of disenchantment. His life, which ended at *Akeldama*, or "the field of blood" (Acts 1:19) reveals both the limitations of our human perspective and Jesus' invitation to complete trust.

But let's take a step back from the famous fatality of his story, and observe the climate that seemed to surround him. How could life in proximity to the Source of all hope, all beauty, all joy, end with such anguish and despair? Could the poison of comparison have embittered his heart? Was his imagination captivated by a fantasy of a heroic monarch who would topple an oppressive empire? Did he see a disorienting contradiction in Jesus' gracious response to Mary of Bethany pouring out precious oil to anoint his feet?

Fantasy tethers a person to a false vision. It takes up the space faith and hope should fill. When things don't go as expected, spirals of disillusionment and disappointment unfurl. Someone is to blame. Although it's tempting to blame God for not bringing about

the good we imagined, if we catch a glimpse of reality in the mirror, it turns out we are the ones yielding to the seductive call of illusion.

When faced with the reality of Jesus, Judas's allegiance to his own aims ended up blinding him, and he missed the story that he could have lived. Jesus stays away from our pigeon holes and boxes. He continually shatters our expectations. His kingship is established in truth and grace, not in meeting our expectations. He has an intention, a goal, a gravity in his every step and every decision.

Grief, pain, confusion, unmet expectations, and unanswered prayers tend to reveal the depths of our hearts—do we love Jesus for who he truly is, or the fantasy we've created?

Jesus *was* the King who toppled an oppressive empire, but contrary to Judas's expectations that empire was not Rome, but sin, hatred, and, ultimately death. Jesus is not disappointing. He is the King who blasts our most exciting dreams to pieces and reveals a story rich with possibility, faith, and joy.

In the story of Judas, we grieve the false promise of the flesh and our desire for worldly gain. We also lift our eyes from the fantasy we built for ourselves, toward the One whose life provokes us to desire things that are more profound, more beautiful, more authentic, and more enduring than our minds can conceive.

When our fantasies shatter and we feel exposed, we can turn away in disappointment, or turn vulnerably toward Jesus and let his everlasting nature swallow up the make-believe and be our living, breathing, and resurrected hope. **CT**

REFLECT

Identify truths about Jesus that you've found challenging to agree with or accept. What aspects of his nature have you wrestled with?

Envision the impact on your life if you wholeheartedly loved Jesus for who he is. How would embracing and loving him authentically shape your daily experiences and overall perspective?

Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver.

MATTHEW 26:14

HOLY WEEK
MAUNDY THURSDAY



A Meal We Won't Soon Forget

THE HOPE AND ANXIETY INHERENT
IN JESUS' LAST PASSOVER FEAST.

BY WALTER KIM

COME TO THE TABLE BY KARI DUNHAM. OIL ON LINEN. 56 X 83", 2014

Can you remember what you ate yesterday? Maybe you had a bagel for breakfast or a burrito for lunch; whatever it was, the food most likely served as a transition to the next activity in your day. While most meals are uneventful obligations to fill our stomachs, some slow us down and feed our souls. The memory of a meal on November 20, 1993, still feeds my soul. It was a chilly, drizzly evening—typical for that time of year in Vancouver. At the end of a carefully choreographed day to optimize the conditions for my success, I asked Toni to marry me. After she said yes, we celebrated with a delectable salmon dish. The meal gave us the opportunity to remember why and how we fell in love. It was a moment of resolve, a time for making promises.

In the intimacy of an evening with beloved friends, Jesus hosted a meal with everlasting significance. Mark's account of the Lord's Supper sets the scene "on the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb" (Mark 14:12). The Passover meal commemorated God's great deliverance of Israel from its slavery in Egypt. As God's people practiced remembrance, it eventually became anticipation, whetting their appetite for deliverance from Roman oppression. The act of sacrificing the Passover lamb was freshly performed each year at the temple, and soon its meaning would be freshly presented in the Lord's Supper.

The story, however, moves from anticipation to anxiety. Jesus interrupted the dinner conversation by saying, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me" (v. 18). Whatever pleasantries shared at the table would have screeched to a halt. This stark proclamation subverted the peace that a meal together symbolized. Shared meals provided a time and place where covenants could be ratified, where friendships deepened, and where even enemies could lay their weapons aside. While all betrayal is bad, a betrayal in the context of such hospitality would have been appalling.

As the disciples digested his words, “Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them” (vv. 22–24).

Typically, the blessing and breaking of bread would have simply ushered in the next course of dinner—the equivalent of saying grace and passing the pita. However, Christ’s words in the context of this Passover meal, full of redemptive anticipation and personal anxiety, ritualized something essential about God, both for the disciples at the table and for all who have followed since. The fruit of salvation came from an ugly tree, the old rugged cross upon which Christ’s battered body would hang. And so, we “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

Yes, Jesus commanded the wind and waves to be still. He raised Lazarus from the grave. At his return every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord (Phil 2:10–11). Such visions of divine power inspire awe and adoration. But Jesus offers himself as a Savior broken and battered, memorialized in the hospitality of the table, and prone to betrayal even in the midst of blessing. We can come to him honest with and unafraid of our own brokenness. By his wounds we are healed, and through his blood we are made whole. In the Lord’s Supper, whenever we take the bread and drink the cup, we slow down to savor the divine gift of joy that came through the sorrows of our Savior. **CT**

REFLECT

Share a memorable meal from your own life. What made it significant, and how did it impact you emotionally or spiritually?

How does the Lord's Supper symbolize the essential aspects of God and the redemptive nature of Christ's sacrifice?

When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me."

MARK 14:17-18

The
PASSION
of
LOVE

HOLY WEEK
GOOD FRIDAY



As Bodies Grow Cold

THERE IS NO RESURRECTION WITHOUT DEATH.

BY HEATHER THOMPSON DAY

INTERIOR WITH CRUCIFIX AND NOTHING SPECIAL BY JOEL SHEESLEY. 56 X 70". 2001

It can be hard to hope and believe when everything you touch is cold. I've been praying about a certain situation for over three years. Recently, it has gotten to the point where I feel like I need to see movement. I haven't.

Movement brings heat. Movement keeps you warm. Jog in place for a few minutes and you'll feel your temperature increase. Your blood starts pumping. Your body activates. But how do you pray when your hands grow cold? How do you hold onto hope when everything around you goes still?

I don't know where you need to see movement. I don't know how anxious your heart feels. I don't know if you are waking up in the night because your body is processing what you didn't have time to confront during the day. I don't know if it's been three years of waiting, or ten. But I'll share with you what I keep saying to myself: surrender to the reality of Easter.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, the disciples had seen a lot of movement: the blind saw, the lame walked, the sick were healed. Jesus' teaching drew crowds and made converts. So much had happened in and around them over the span of three years, and they must have felt the heat of it everywhere. And then suddenly, everything went still. On Good Friday, everything went cold.

Good is an Old English term that means "holy." Good Friday is "Holy Friday," and on the day we remember the holiness in Christ's death that made a way for our salvation, there is awe even in stillness. God works even when the blood isn't pumping. God can move even when everything appears to be deathly still. Today, Good Friday is a symbol of hope for the entire world. But it was also the day before the disciples knew there would be a resurrection. We forget that sometimes: when they saw Jesus nailed to a cross, they did so without understanding the purpose of Calvary.

1 Peter 1:24-25 reads, "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the

flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.’ And this is the word that was preached to you.” Right now, if all you can see is withered grass, ask yourself whether it’s okay to sit and wait, as the disciples did. What if, today, we don’t look away from the lament of the Lamb? What if, today, we submit to the silence of Saturday? What if, today, we don’t jump to the joy that followers of God had no idea was coming on Sunday morning? What if, today, we surrender to the holy grief of Friday?

There is no resurrection without death; there is no Sunday morning without Friday night; there is no redemption without the One who redeemed. Trust the methods of heaven.

Maybe like me you are also watching sand pass through an hourglass; the sparse grains certainly don’t look encouraging. Surrender your emotions to the truth of Easter. Let Good Friday be Good Friday. Let death feel like death. Let the air be uncomfortably cold.

And we’ll see each other Sunday morning.

CT

REFLECT

How do you hold on to hope when everything around you goes still?

What does the symbolism in Easter remind you of and how can you apply it to your own life?

At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”)

MARK 15:33-34

HOLY WEEK
HOLY SATURDAY



The Glory of Weightiness

WHEN LIFE IS TOO MUCH TO BEAR,
OUR NEED FOR A SAVIOR BECOMES CLEAR.

BY KAITLYN ROSE LEVENTHAL

KITCHEN BY CLAIRE WATERMAN. GOUACHE ON PAPER. 2020

Have you heard the cliché Christian saying that goes, “God won’t give you more than you can handle”? It’s not that there isn’t some truth to this aphorism. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says that “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.” But it is misguided insofar as it places the emphasis on what *we* can manage—through our own strength and sufficiency—rather than what God will provide when we inevitably fall short.

I remember the late nights on my cold kitchen floor—my body frail from months without an appetite, rivers of tears, burning cheeks, and the feeling of being alone late into the night, every night. Even at a time of life filled with unexpected breakages, Jesus met me repeatedly on that floor as I cried out for him to reconcile, redeem, and renew. He listened to every spoken and stuttered prayer, my weakness on full display. Each minute felt like a marathon. But with every breath in and out, Jesus invited me into his sufficient grace strengthening my weakness with his perfect power. As the Lord said to the apostle Paul, I felt in my life too: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

Reaching the end of myself was exactly what created space within me for God to enter, and he washed me with his mercy and clothed me with *his* strength. My utter weakness became the dwelling place for his glory to reside. Yes, just as Paul declared, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (v. 9).

As a fallible human who has experienced suffering that many peers might not share, I know deep in my breath and bones that we are not meant to handle the weight of life’s hardship on our own. If God did indeed give us only what we could handle, there would be no need for a savior beyond ourselves, and the blood-drenched death of Jesus would be needless. The weight of the

world's brokenness would rest squarely on our shoulders as we struggled through the broken relationship that may never be mended, the ongoing illness we never imagined we'd have to bear, and every other unknown set before us.

And yet, if we experience hardships beyond what we can handle, the blood of Jesus is the greatest undeserved gift we could ever receive. Our absolute inability to save ourselves illuminates the reality of our absolute need for a savior.

With Jesus as our Savior, we can take great comfort in knowing his heart is tender toward our pain, as he too endured unimaginable sorrow. His innocence is evidence that he is the only one worthy of being the Sacrificial Lamb for our sins. It is a weighty truth that the one who is innocent must bear the weight and punishment of every sin, yet this is the very reason we must believe Christ when he says his grace is sufficient. The glory of God shines ever brighter when we allow our weaknesses to be a proclamation of his infinite grace, power, and strength.

Even with his sovereign strength, Christ did not reconcile, redeem, or renew the circumstances I once longingly prayed about on the kitchen floor. Instead, what I thought was solid eventually became dust. And yet, I found myself set free—free from the expectation of a life on my terms, where suffering was contained and relationships were guarded. On the other side of self-reliance, I found rest in relationship with Christ—in reconciliation, redemption, and renewal *in him*, not in my circumstances.

May our weakness—in the darkness of nights spent on the kitchen floor, and in all other places where our fallibility becomes undeniable—be a testament to the strength of Christ our Savior who dwells in the depths and heights. May we trust in his sufficiency, for when we are *weak*, then we are *strong*. **CT**

REFLECT

Is there a moment or season in your life when you felt at the end of yourself (physically, mentally, or spiritually), but Jesus met you in his grace, power, and strength? Share a bit about this experience, and what it taught you about Jesus' character.

In light of the gospel, how can you actively respond with honest delight in the midst of your weaknesses and hardships?

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9

EASTER
SUNDAY



To Be Met at the Garden Tomb

JESUS LINGERS WITH US IN OUR LOSS,
BOTH DURING AND BEYOND EASTER.

BY RACHEL MARIE KANG

DOUBLE TAKE BY CHERITH LUNDIN. OIL ON PANEL. 24 X 26" EACH. 2017



It's an eternal tension, a quintessential question Christians carry: *How do we hold on to joy though this world gives way to grief?* As believers, we hinge our hope on Christ's victory over death. We rejoice in our salvation—the gift of eternal life—yet grief grows wild, runs rampant in this life.

I wake each morning to new mercies, only to reckon with old wounds. I could read you my litany of losses, but I know you have yours too: The estranged daughter. The marriage in need of mending. The new diagnosis. The loved one lost too soon. The house that burned down. The pet that passed away. The love that betrayed you. The crowd that harmed you.

When the resurrected Jesus appeared at the garden tomb, as yet unrecognizable to Mary, he asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” (John 20:15). Christ, even in his moment of victory, made space for her grief. In this way, is not the Resurrection reminiscent of the Incarnation? That unfathomable mystery that Christ came as a baby, forsaking all power for the sake of propitiation, *yes*, but also simply for the sake of proximity to us.

Jesus, with the simplicity of a question, makes space for Mary’s sorrow. At the garden tomb—that place of both greenery and grave, of miracle and mourning—Christ’s compassionate moment with Mary demonstrates that we are chosen to know *and* to be known by him. We are not merely a people to rescue; we are a people, *yes*, saved and sent out (Mark 3:13–14), but also invited simply to *be* with him.

On Easter Sunday, I remember the first thing Jesus did after his resurrection. Though the God-man had just been raised to life, he continued to stoop down and stay low. This is how Jesus has always been. He is the Word become flesh, taking on human form to dwell and dine, suffer and celebrate with us. His is our risen Lord, bending an ear to Mary, lingering in the first moments of their reunion at the garden tomb. He is God, standing beside man in the garden at the beginning of time.

This was Mary’s joy when he spoke her name, and she finally recognized and reunited with her *Rabboni* (John 20:16). This is our joy, too. The risen Jesus brings salvation, and he brings himself. His victory will bring us from graves into glory, and he has come to be with us now, in the garden tomb of life on earth. He meets us, even as loss interlaces all we love and live by, both during the season of Easter and forever beyond. Hallelujah. **CT**

REFLECT

In this season, how are you holding on to joy though this world gives way to grief?

What would you say if Jesus asked you, "Why are you crying?"

At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

JOHN 20:14-15

EASTER
MONDAY



The Reflexive Response of Grace

HOW JESUS RECONDITIONS OUR LIFE
EVEN AFTER WE FAIL HIM.

BY MARK BATTERSON

BEDROOM BY CLAIRE WATERMAN. ACRYLIC ON WOOD PANEL. 2022

At the turn of the 20th century, a Russian physician named Ivan Pavlov won a Nobel Prize. Dogs naturally salivate at the smell of food, but Pavlov wanted to see if he could cause salivation with another stimulus. As you probably remember from a high school science class, Pavlov rang a bell before feeding the dogs. Eventually, the ringing bell caused the dogs to salivate. Pavlov referred to this as a conditioned reflex.

To one degree or another, all of us are Pavlovian. Over time, we acquire an elaborate set of conditioned reflexes. If someone slaps us on the cheek, our conditioned reflex is to slap back. Or is that just me?

The gospel is all about Jesus reconditioning our reflexes by his grace. The result? We love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and bless those who curse us. We turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and give the shirt off our back. Theologians call these the Six Antitheses, but I like to think of them as six counter-cultural counter-habits.

No less than six times in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said, but I tell you . . .” (Matt. 7–9). Jesus was reshaping Old Testament mindsets such as “an eye for an eye” (Matt. 5:38). He was challenging our ethic, starting with forgiveness.

Remember in Matthew 18 when Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive? He thought he was being generous by suggesting seven. Jesus ups the ante: seventy times seven. It’s on a beach by the Sea of Galilee (John 21) where this idea of forgiveness is personalized for Peter. This is a post-Resurrection appearance, which means it’s post-denial. Peter had denied knowing Jesus not once, not twice, but thrice, and it was after the third denial that the rooster crowed, reminding Peter of Jesus’ prophecy (Matt. 26:75).

Can I make a Pavlovian observation? I wonder if Peter felt a twinge of guilt every time he heard a rooster crow after that. Every

single morning, that rude awakening might have reminded Peter of his great failure, until the morning when Jesus reconditioned his reflexes.

Peter was out fishing when Jesus called out across the water: “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” The early morning mist made it impossible to see who said it, but a miraculous catch made it obvious. John said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” (John 21:4–7).

That’s when Peter jumped out of the boat and swam to shore. When he got there, Jesus was frying fish on burning coals. Let’s pause right there—how can we not love a God who makes breakfast on the beach for his disciples?

After breakfast, Jesus asks Peter a question: “Do you love me more than these?” (v. 15). He doesn’t ask it once or twice, but thrice. Coincidence? I think not. Three denials require three reinstatements. This is how and when and where Jesus reconditions Peter’s reflexes.

Have you ever noticed the time of day? John is precise: “Early in the morning” (v. 4). In other words, right around the time the roosters crow. The sound that reminded Peter of his greatest failure—the sound that had produced feelings of guilt—would now produce feelings of gratitude. Jesus did more than recommission Peter. Jesus reconditioned his reflexes with his grace.

Have you ever had someone love you when you least expected it and least deserved it? It’s life-changing, isn’t it? What if we loved others the way God loved us? The gift of Easter reveals that sin without grace equals guilt, but sin plus grace equals deep gratitude that we can carry and express every single morning, afternoon, and night.

We have a tendency to give up on God, but God doesn’t give up on us. He is the God of second, third, and thousandth chances. Even when we feel like we have failed God, this is the God who comes after us, who calls out to us across the water. This is the God who makes breakfast on the beach. This is the God who gives us a new lease on life.

CT

REFLECT

In what ways do you see conditioned reflexes operating in your own life or in the lives of people around you?

Discuss how Jesus' reinstatement of Peter serves as a powerful example of God's grace, especially after failure.

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

JOHN 21:12-13

ASCENSION



Were Not Our Hearts Burning Within Us?

GOD'S MYSTERIOUS WORK OF
CONSOLATION AND CONCEALMENT.

BY JON GUERRA

STREAM IN THE WOODS BY ELIZABETH BOWMAN. OIL ON CANVAS. 2023

One thing I love about the Bible is its tendency to simultaneously shed light *and* to obscure, to comfort *and* confound. We find this unique dynamic at play on the very day that Jesus rises from the dead, when the Gospel of Luke points our attention toward the road to Emmaus. Catching two of Jesus' unnamed disciples in the middle of a conversation, Luke describes them as being in a state of bewilderment, as they have started to hear rumors of Jesus' resurrection. As they walk along the road, the two process the heavy events of the last three days and the strange possibilities these new reports contain. Though they were not part of the original Twelve, they seemed to have been close enough to the inner circle to catch wind of the impossible news that Jesus was alive.

Then, things get interesting: "While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them" (Luke 24:15, ESV throughout). The resurrected Jesus interrupts their discussion—but they don't recognize him. Luke attributes their blindness to a divine intention; Jesus doesn't reveal himself. He simply walks with them on their long journey, incognito, discussing what's on their minds.

It would have been a long conversation over the span of the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. On average, people walk at a pace of three miles per hour, which means Jesus traveled with them for about two and a half hours. He ends up guiding the dialogue into a long, thorough Bible lesson. He makes a case from Scripture for why they were not mistaken about who they hoped Jesus would be. At some point on the journey, a light began to crack in the hearts of this somber pair.

Suddenly, Jesus' revelation occurs in the blink of an eye—summed up in only two short verses. When they finally arrive in Emmaus, Jesus pretends like he's going on farther, but they insist he stays, and he does. The three of them sit down at a table, and

Jesus takes bread and blesses it. He breaks the bread and gives it to them. Then they see. And then he vanishes.

Jesus vanishes at the *exact* moment the two disciples recognize him—it is a sweet, fleeting consolation. They're so overcome with joy that they decide to make the seven mile walk *back* to Jerusalem then and there, in the dark of night and in the light of faith.

What are we to make of this story? Note the two sad disciples. When they leave Jerusalem, they are disoriented and disappointed, carrying the heavy burden of abandonment. While a larger gathered group waits to see whether Jesus' resurrection is a reality, Jesus first reveals himself to those who feel alone, discouraged, and hopeless.

And yet, in certain ways, God is still in the business of concealing himself. "Truly you are a God who hides himself," says the prophet Isaiah (45:15). Perhaps some grace only works in secret. Perhaps some realities and wounds cause us to become so brittle that anything more than the patient, hidden care of God would crumble us like a dried-out leaf, returning us to the dust that we are. Whatever the reasons, we can trust that our Savior is close. The Great Physician is tending to us with gentle attentiveness and precision, and with the slow patience that allows our deepest healing.

Here, I believe we are given a vision of our own story. In this passage, we are given a God's-eye view of the situation—we know what's *really* happening, even as the disciples don't. Though we don't have the privilege of this perspective in our day-to-day lives, we do know something now that they didn't know then. The two disciples thought they were on the road to Emmaus, but they were actually on the road to a table: A table where the living Jesus fed their hungry hearts, healed their deepest wounds, and lit them ablaze in the confounding comfort of the Resurrection. That table is waiting for us too. **CT**


REFLECT

Do you think you would have stuck around with the other disciples to see about this wild news? Or do you think you would have moved on, like these two disciples? Why or why not?

Hindsight is 20/20, especially in our lives with God. Have there been times in your life when God has hidden himself, only to reveal himself or his plan much later in your story?

*Now that same day two of them
were going to a village called
Emmaus, about seven miles from
Jerusalem. They were talking
with each other about everything
that had happened.*

LUKE 24:13-14



*We fix our eyes not on what is
seen, but on what is unseen, since
what is seen is temporary, but
what is unseen is eternal.*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:18

CT