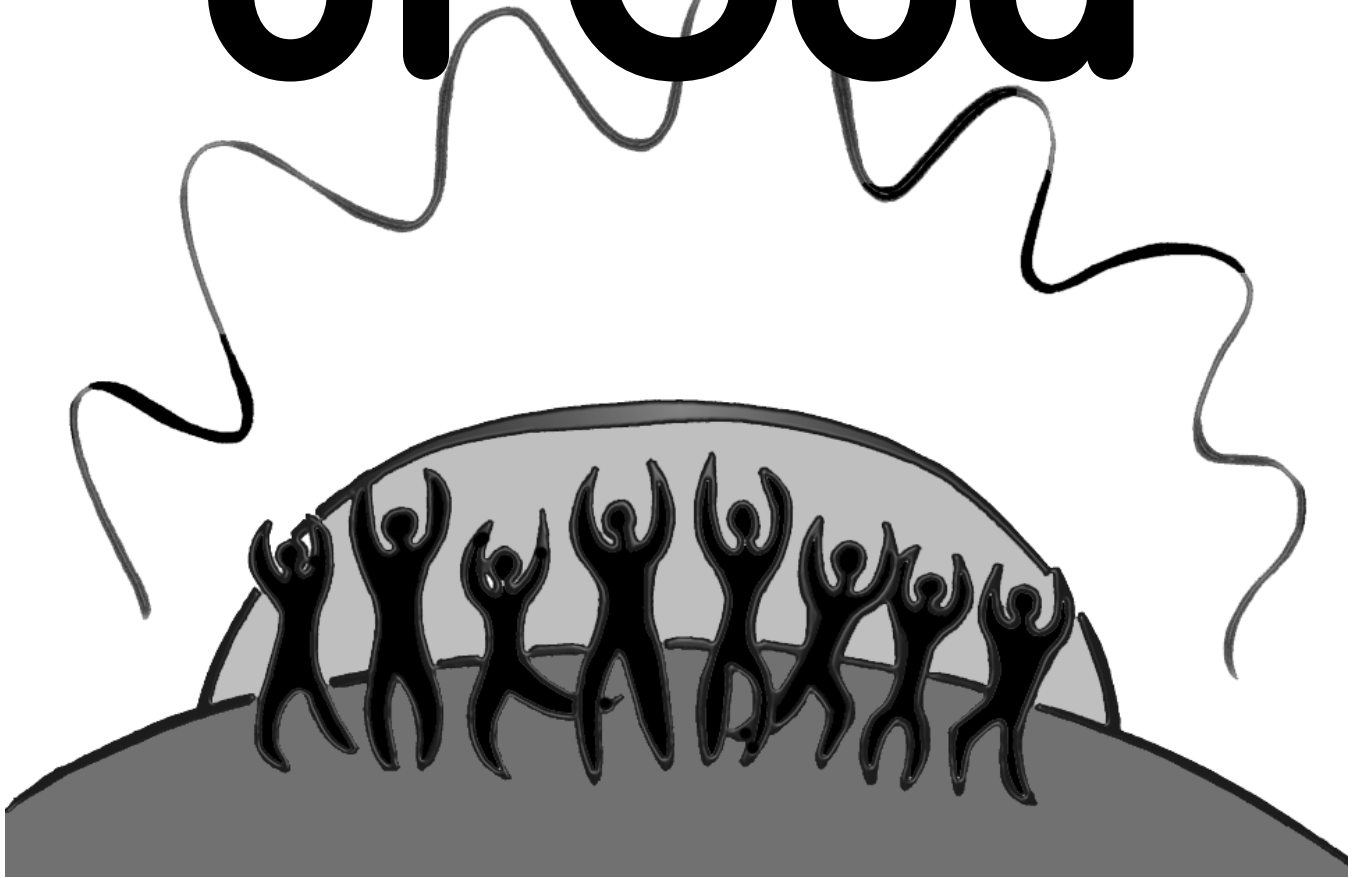


# Seeking the Face of God



## ***Creative Resources for Lent and Eastertide 2004***

Sacred Seasons, a quarterly series of worship packets with a peace and justice emphasis, from Seeds of Hope Publishers:  
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## *Sacred Seasons: Creative Worship Tools for Your Church*

*These unique worship resource packets are available for the liturgical year, four packets a year for \$120 (\$135 for non-US subscriptions), one packet for \$50 (\$60 outside of the US).*

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Seeds of Hope, Inc., is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for the poor and hungry of God's world, and acting on the strong belief that biblical mandates to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. The group intends to seek out people of faith who feel called to care for the poor; and to affirm, enable, and empower a variety of responses to the problems of poverty.

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# Seeking the Face of God

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## ***a word about this packet***

The quarterly Seeds worship resource materials have a name now; they are called *Sacred Seasons*. As always, with or without a name, these materials are offered to you on clean, unattached pages so that you can more easily photocopy anything you wish to duplicate. We are constantly looking for ways to make the pages more attractive and easier for you to photocopy. Feel free to copy any of this, including art, and adapt these tools to your needs.

The material in this packet is your congregation's to use freely. We have tried to pull together creative and inspiring resources that you can use to raise awareness of issues surrounding economic justice and food security (especially from a biblical perspective) in your congregation. We endeavored to choose a variety of age groups, worship areas, events, and angles, so that you would have a potpourri of art and ideas from which to choose.

We make a conscious effort to maintain a balance between the apostolic and the contemplative—on the one hand, the dynamic challenge to stay true to God's mandate to feed the poor and struggle for justice, and on the other hand, our own compelling need for nurture and healing while we work toward those dreams.

The cover art for this packet was created for you by Sharon Rollins. You will find the creations of several returning Seeds artists. One of the featured writers in this packet is Brett Younger, whose name will probably be familiar to you. Brett is a pastor in Fort Worth, Texas. He has contributed many sermons and meditations to *Sacred Seasons* over the past six years. Another featured writer is Charley Garrison, whose ideas you have seen in past resources. He is a pastor in Waco, Texas. Claire McKeever, a Seeds intern, has created an activity for youth. We hope that these resources will help you as you guide your congregation into a meaningful Lent and Eastertide.

# Seeking the Face of God

## *A Weekly Outline Based on Lectionary Themes*

by Charley Garrison

“Come,” my heart says, “seek God’s face!” Your face, LORD, do I seek.  
—Psalm 27:8

*Note: The following lectionary texts and themes (based on Year C) will take you through the first five weeks in Lent, the weeks before Holy Week.*

### **The Promise**

*First Sunday in Lent: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16*

Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation. (vv. 14-16)

*We experience the promise of God by adhering to the following steps:*

### **Petition**

*Second Sunday in Lent: Psalm 27*

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! (v. 7)

### **Meditation**

*Third Sunday in Lent: Psalm 63:1-8*

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night. (vv. 5-6)

### **Confession**

*Fourth Sunday in Lent: Psalm 32*

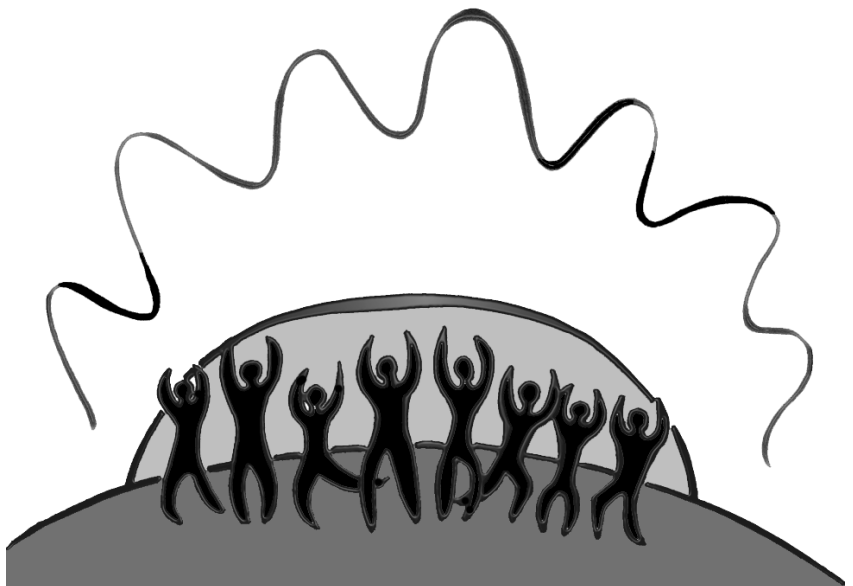
Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin. (v. 5)

### **Transformation**

*Fifth Sunday in Lent: Psalm 126*

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.  
(v. 5)

—Charley Garrison is a Waco, Texas pastor.



*art by Sharon Rollins*

# Some Thoughts About Lent

**D**o not bother looking for Lent in your Bible dictionary, because there was no such thing back then. There is some evidence that early Christians fasted forty hours between Good Friday and Easter, but the custom of spending forty days in prayer and self-denial did not arise until later, when the initial rush of Christian adrenaline was over and believers had gotten very ho-hum about their faith. When the world did not end as Jesus said it would, his followers stopped expecting so much from God or from themselves. They hung a wooden cross on the wall and settled back into their more or less comfortable routines...

...Little by little, Christians became devoted to their comforts instead: the soft couch, the flannel sheets, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. These things made them feel safe and cared for—if not by God, then by themselves. They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes.

**They decided to be nice instead of holy and God moaned out loud...**

...So the church announced a season of Lent, from the old English word *Lenten*, meaning spring—not only a reference to the season before Easter, but also an invitation to a springtime for the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves.

*—excerpts from Home by Another Way by Barbara Brown Taylor*



*art by Rebecca Ward*

# Bulletin Art

**"Come,"  
my heart says,**

**"Seek God's face!"  
Your face, LORD,  
do I seek.  
(Psalm 27:8)**

*art by Rebecca Ward*

# What Does It Mean To Be Me?

## *A Guided Meditation for Lent*

by Katie Cook



Frederick Buechner says that, during Lent, Christians are supposed to ask themselves what it means to be themselves. Using the following questions, provided by Buechner, guide your group through a time of meditation. You could pose all of the questions in one setting, or use one for each Sunday in Lent.

You will probably want to designate a room for this exercise—a cozy, peaceful room, with carpet or rugs on the floor and comfortable chairs or couches. If you have throw pillows, scatter a number of them around the room. Set up a table, and a few chairs, with things like writing paper, pens, art paper, colored markers, water colors, and modeling clay. If you have any control over the light, try to make it soft, but strong enough for participants to be able to see to write or draw. (Candles are always nice.)

It will be important to provide some silent time at the end for participants to write about their thoughts, or perhaps

explore their feelings with art supplies. During this time you may want to play some kind of contemplative music. There are many kinds of music designed for this purpose. Instrumental hymns played quietly would also be appropriate.

When you are ready to begin, explain exactly what will be happening so that no one feels confused or uncomfortable. Ask the participants to find a comfortable position in which lower backs, knees and joints will not be vying for their attention. Some of them may want to lie flat on the floor, with perhaps a pillow under their heads. (Contemplative leaders claim that this has a desired psychological effect on people who tend to be too cerebral.)

After the participants have gotten comfortable, give them a minute or two to relax, and then quietly present the question or questions, giving them time to ponder. Do not rush the process—especially if you do all the questions at once. After a few minutes, invite them to move to the art table in silence—if they feel like this would be helpful. Some may want to stay in their contemplative positions. Some may want to write in their journals. Others may enjoy making a set of six writings, based on the weekly sessions.

And so, in the words of Buechner:

- 1. If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn't, which side would get your money and why?*
- 2. When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?*
- 3. If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be, in twenty-five words or less?*
- 4. Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember?*
- 5. Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?*
- 6. If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?*

Buechner says of these questions (and of self-scrutiny), "It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end."

—Buechner quotes and questions are from *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973.)

# Dust in the Wind—But Wait...

## *An Ash Wednesday Meditation*

by Allen Grant

Text: Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18



*Editor's Note: It might be effective to play the Kansas song "Dust in the Wind" as a prelude to this service, and then, after the meditation, during the imposition of ashes, have a vocal ensemble sing (or an instrumentalist play) a traditional hymn like "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" or "My Hope is in the Lord." The old Shaker song, "How Can I Keep From Singing" would also be appropriate. (You can get a wonderful a cappella rendition of the latter from DE Adams, on his Songs and Hymns CD, at [www.dangerousfaith.org](http://www.dangerousfaith.org).)*

Tonight's service is a bit different from anything we have done before. The mood is more somber, so I thought it would be good for us to focus on what all this means.

Sometimes the rituals of the church offer little meaning for those of us who were not raised in a very liturgical congregation. So tonight, we offer to God a service for what is called Ash Wednesday.

Marked as the beginning of Lent, Ash Wednesday begins the time in our year when we traditionally do without—sacrifice—give something up. In fact, the *Mardi Gras* celebration in New Orleans is about doing all the things you cannot do during Lent.

Historically, on "Fat Tuesday" you were supposed to get rid of all the fat in the house. Then on Ash Wednesday, Christians all over the world attend church in the morning or the evening, and ministers sprinkle a few ashes from the branches of last year's Palm Sunday on their foreheads in the sign of the cross.

Just a few ashes, that's all it is. And what are ashes? They are the products of burning something away. They are what is left over after fire passes over or through something. They are the waste after the heat and light are gone.

After I became an adult, I wanted a fireplace. I had always enjoyed fireplaces in other folks' homes but we did not have one. So as soon as I could, I got a home with a fireplace. It was then I learned that someone has to empty the ashes after the fire is out.

Our ashes were shoveled down into a brick trough and packed until it was full. Then on the outside, I could open it up and shovel out the old, supposedly cold ashes. I quickly learned that sometimes ashes that are stored in a brick place can continue to remain hot for weeks. Nevertheless, I had to dispose of those ashes before we could build another fire.

But why, tonight, do we put this (for lack of a better word) garbage on our foreheads? Where did this strange tradition come from and what does it mean?

First of all, these ashes are a reminder of who we are.

The Bible tells us that we came from dust and to dust we shall return. God formed the first human out of the dust of the earth and then God breathed life into that dust. That is a powerful image—one that is meant to remind us that without the breath of the Spirit of God moving in us, we are just like these ashes: lifeless and worthless.

**But why, tonight, do we put this  
(for lack of a better word) garbage  
on our foreheads? Where did this  
strange tradition come from, and  
what does it mean?**

There is a popular song from twenty years ago that expresses Ash Wednesday's meaning. It is Kerry Livgren's "Dust in the Wind," performed by the rock group Kansas:

*I close my eyes  
Only a moment  
And the moment's gone  
All my dreams  
Pass before my eyes a curiosity  
Dust in the wind.*

Certainly no Christian hymn captures any better Ash Wednesday's liturgical refrain: *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.* As the words are repeated for each of us during the imposition of ashes, the words to that song also play in my mind:

*Same old song  
We're just a drop of water in an endless sea  
All we do  
Crumbles to the ground, though we refuse to see.  
Dust in the wind  
All we are is dust in the wind.*

All the things we do to build up treasures for ourselves on the earth ultimately crumble to the ground, consumed

by rust, or are stolen away by thieves. The locusts that devour the stuff of our lives come in the form of natural disasters and simple human evil. Even should we manage to safeguard our wealth, once we are confronted with the limits of our own mortality—in the words of another line from the song: all your money won't another minute buy.

Like these haunting lyrics, the words of the liturgy demand of us, *Remember that you are dust, and that to dust*

**You see, the song didn't get it exactly right, after all. We are dust, but it is not true that ALL we are is dust in the wind. We are also recipients of God's grace, mercy and steadfast love.**

*you shall return.* Not just dust, but dust in the wind.

These ashes are also a sign of repentance. Lent is a time of mourning for our sins. During this time we are called to repent and change our ways. In Bible times, it was common for people who were mourning to dress in sackcloth and put ashes on their foreheads. There are several stories in the Bible where people come to God and sit before him “in sackcloth and ashes” to show their repentance. It was a sign that that person truly sought to follow God's path.

The people in the Biblical stories probably put the ashes on top of their heads—so, why do we, instead of putting these ashes on our heads, put them in the sign of the cross on our foreheads?

We do so because it is a reminder that we are sealed in Christ. In many churches that practice infant baptism, when a baby is baptized, the minister or priest uses oil to mark the child with the sign of the cross.

This anointing, and the cross of ashes, are both reminders of the mark of the Lamb as it is described in the Revelation of John. The Book of Revelation tells of an angel marking the faithful before the tribulation. These faithful would then be protected. The mark of the cross is a mark of ownership. These ashes tonight remind us that we belong to Christ—and also that he died that we might live.

It is also significant that we use palm branches to make these ashes. The palms are symbols of victory. By making the ashes from the palms of Palm Sunday, we are reminded of how all our victories are but ashes before the glory of God. We are also reminded of the events of Holy Week—and, finally, of how Jesus won for us on Good Friday the victory over sin, over the ashes of life.

These may be just a few ashes but they symbolize something big. They are a symbol of our need for God. We are nothing but dust and ashes apart from God.

These ashes are also a way of showing on the outside what is happening on the inside. We are truly sorry and

mournful for the evil and hurtful things we have done. Our trust in our own powers and abilities has tarnished the image of Christ in us.

Yet, in the midst of our repentance, we are forgiven and marked as Christ's own. The very burning away of our sin by the fire of God's love makes us God's own. And as his own, we are stamped and certified as children of God through the cross.

You see, the song didn't get it exactly right, after all. We are dust, but it is not true that ALL we are is dust in the wind. We are also recipients of God's grace, mercy and steadfast love. If we live out the responsibilities of that relationship, and repent of our past failure to do so, then God will spare us from being devoured or scattered into nothingness like the dust of the wind.

So as you come today to have the sign of the cross placed on your foreheads, rend your hearts. Repent of your self-reliance and self-seeking. Accept the grace and forgiveness that marks you as a redeemed child of God. The good news is that salvation has only begun—it is not finished. Ash Wednesday is only the beginning of Lent and the transformed, resurrection life of Easter is still coming.

—Allen Grant is a pastor in China Spring, Texas. This meditation was inspired by a sermon by Rev. Alex Stevenson.

**Staggered by the brink of war  
and the unyielding demonic,  
Distracted by the daily daily  
and committee commitment,  
We come crawling to the God  
of the prophets.  
We would beg for some  
scintillating answer.  
But you answer,  
God of the prophets,  
that we are to be the prophets.  
We didn't come crawling for this,  
didn't want to be prophets.  
But there's this word in our mouths  
wanting out.  
And we're weary with holding it in.  
Okay.**

—George Williamson, from  
*“A Service of Commitment to the Prophetic  
Calling in a Demonic Time”*



# Ten Stations of Suffering:

## *A Holy Week Activity for Youth and Others*

by Claire McKeever

You can use the lists “Ten Required Questions,” combined with “The Ten Stations of Suffering” (roughly adapted from the Stations of the Cross) as an activity designed to help young people reflect on their personal lives, as well as on Jesus’ death and resurrection. (See page 10 for the two lists.)

In order to execute the activity successfully, you will need to make several preparations. First, you will need a large room, such as a fellowship hall or a sanctuary.

You may also choose to do this activity outside along a sidewalk or field that will lead to a sanctuary or place where insightful worship and discussion will occur.

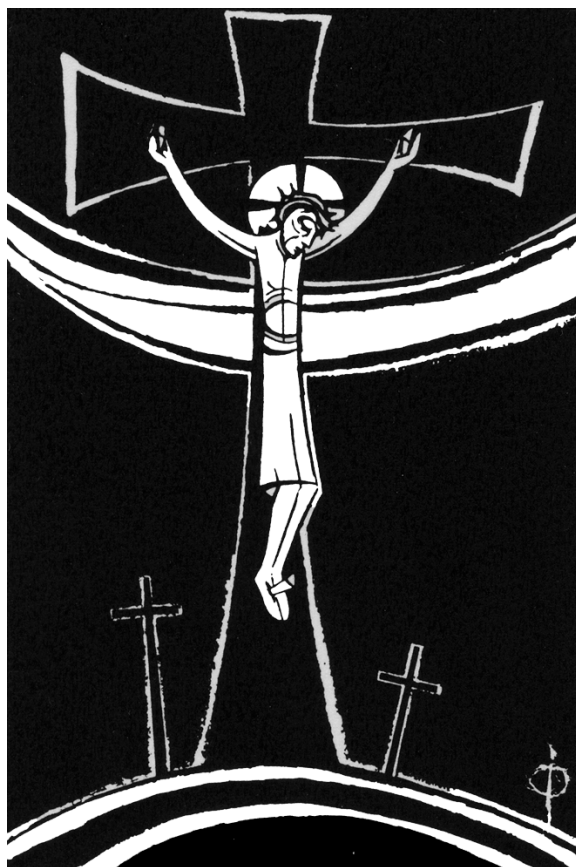
Second, you will need canned foods, of any kind, to serve as props at each station.

The canned foods will be placed at each station for each student to pick up and carry with them if they feel they have committed the particular transgression described at the station.

Thus, you will need enough cans for each student to take one at each station. In other words, if you have ten students and there are ten stations, you will need one hundred cans. (You can donate them to your local food pantry afterward.) You will also need a strong bag for each student in which to carry their burdens.

Next, you will need rectangles of posterboard, printed with large, easy-to-read letters, each containing a question or a meditation from the “Stations of Christ’s Suffering.” Depending on where you choose to hold this activity, you may need small tables on which to place the cans and the meditations.

You will also need large, printed numbers to help the youth find each new station. If you hold the activity outside,



it might be helpful to laminate the meditations and numbers and staple them to wooden stakes that could be placed in the ground. (We urge you to use your own judgment on this, and adapt these instructions to your own situation.)

Finally, you will need a large, rugged-looking cross that will serve as the final destination of the journey.

It would be best for the room or area to be dark, with lights at each station, with a brighter light on the cross. At the end of the journey, all of the students will be gathered at the cross.

Before you begin, make sure that each young person understands everything that is going on. Explain what is about to happen, and entertain questions until you know everyone understands.

The cans the students carry with them from station to station represent guilts or burdens, and the cross represents a place of grace and forgiveness, where they can put down their cans and feel what it’s like to lay their burdens at the foot of the cross. Instruct them to stay at the cross until all of the participants have arrived.

It is important, at that point, to lead the students in a debriefing session, allowing them to reflect on how they felt as they meditated at each station. In order to do this, you may want to lead them to a room where they can sit and talk—perhaps a room where this sort of discussion happens frequently. Create an atmosphere of comfort and security, in which the students feel free to speak candidly about their emotions during the experience.

The focus of this activity is on the practical application of the ten commandments to our lives, to help students realize that these are not mere age-old guidelines, but prevalent requirements for everyday life.

## The Ten Stations of Suffering

*(Adapted from the Stations of the Cross)*

1. Jesus is condemned to death. Jesus takes this death sentence to redeem you from your own humanity, imperfection, and ill-will.
2. Jesus carries his cross. Jesus carries not only the cross, but also all of our disasters, hurts, and pains.
3. Jesus falls. Jesus—tired, overwhelmed, and weary—falls to the ground under the weight of the cross.
4. Jesus meets his mother. Can you imagine the worry and anguish that fill both Mary's and Jesus' hearts as they listen to the crowd jeering, embracing each other physically for the last time? Jesus loves his mother, and by touching her on his trek to Golgotha, he shows his deep devotion for her.
5. Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry his cross. Even Jesus, God incarnate, needed help carrying the weight of the cross. Think of Jesus' ability to ask for help and accept it from another.
6. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem. Jesus instructs these women not to weep for him, but only for themselves. It is their sin, as well as ours, for which Jesus is to suffer and die.
7. Jesus' clothes are taken away. Can you imagine the embarrassment and humility Jesus experienced when he was stripped of his clothing? Standing in front of a great crowd, naked for the world to see, Jesus endured shame and scorn.
8. Jesus is nailed to the cross. Consider the physical pain Jesus endures as his body is stretched across the top beam. Consider the dread and agony Jesus feels as the nails pierce his hands and feet.
9. Jesus dies on the cross. After many hours of agony, Jesus

breathes his last breath with you on his heart and mind. He dies for you.

10. The body of Jesus is taken down from the cross and laid to rest in the tomb. Can you imagine the grief of those who take Jesus' body from the cross, as they prepare him for the tomb? Learn to revere Jesus through those who prepared Jesus' dead body for the tomb.

## Before the Cross

Why do you now stand before an empty cross with many sins, burdens, and cares? Why do you not stand at a tomb or a gravesite? You stand before an empty cross because Jesus' story does not end at the tomb. Jesus rose from the grave on the third day after his death, revealing to all that death can not hold God, destroy God, or diminish God.

## The Ten Required Questions

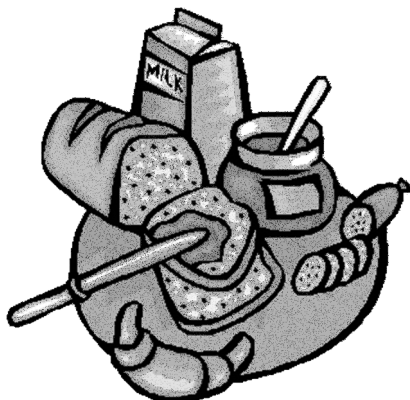
*(based on the Ten Commandments)*

1. Have you worshipped a friend, a music album, or a computer game more than God? Do you care more about what other things have to say about life than what God has to say about it?
2. Do you place people or sports or television or books before God? Do you turn to these things for comfort and security rather than turning to God?
3. Do you oftentimes make wrongful use of God's name by saying degrading things about others? When you say in one sentence that you love God, but in the next, you insult one of God's creatures, you also insult the name of God.
4. Do you set aside time to worship God every day? Do you remember God and celebrate the sacredness of God? Keeping the Sabbath holy does not mean you're going to hell if you miss one Sunday morning. It simply means to worship God continually, setting aside specific, holy time for this worship.
5. Have you dishonored your parents by not only getting into a fight with them, but by doing something of which they would disapprove? Let's face it, we all tend to disagree from time to time, but God provides parents so we may gain perspective and structure in our lives. Thus, are you obeying your parents with your actions and words in public and in private?
6. Have you killed someone's dignity with a sly comment or offensive joke? Have you destroyed another's ability to laugh? Do the things you say and the things you do edify your neighbors, or do they devastate them?
7. Have you looked at another person as an object, rather than as a child of God? Do you debase another's character by seeing them as an impure object?
8. Have you stolen another's faith, love, peace, or kindness by not supporting or believing in them? Do you steal a person's selfhood when you antagonize or cause them embarrassment?
9. Have you misrepresented one of your friends in front of other people to make them look stupid? Do you tell funny jokes about other people in order to make yourself look better and feel better?
10. Do you long so badly for what your friends have that you forget all that you have been given? Are you dissatisfied and discontent, always wanting more?

—*Claire McKeever, a native of Abilene, Texas, is a professional writing student at Baylor University. This activity is the brain-child of Susan Ballenger, a minister in Baltimore, Maryland. She was also the creator of the popular Easter Walk for children, printed in an earlier issue of Sacred Seasons.*

*A Meditation for Maundy  
Thursday Communion*

Text: Mark 14:12-25



A few days later, Bob's wife returned with her older child to the grave. The girl's younger brother had convinced her that there was nothing to fear. They went to the cemetery and had a picnic on Bob's grave. They told stories and learned

The communion table is a symbol of Christ's different way, of death and life, suffering and joy, defeat and victory.

Raymond Carver's short story, "A Small Good Thing," is difficult to read. Carver tells of a little boy hit by a car on the morning of his birthday. His parents' agony as they see their son fall into a coma is compounded by a series of bizarre,

horrible phone calls, asking why they have forgotten about Scotty.

They don't realize that they have neglected to pick up the cake they ordered for their son's birthday. It's only after Scotty's death that they understand that the baker has been inadvertently making the disturbing calls. Distraught at a loss they cannot yet begin to deal with, they rush to the bakery wanting revenge.

And yet, once they're standing in the baker's pitiful presence, the mother's rage becomes helplessness. The news of the child's death, the passion of the mother, and the incredible inappropriateness of his telephone calls torment the baker. He begs for their forgiveness.

The couple at first says nothing, but they allow the baker to feed them: "You probably need to eat something. I hope you'll try some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small good thing at a time like this." As the three of them eat his fresh cinnamon rolls and drink his coffee, they listen.

The baker is glad he isn't a florist. It's better to feed people. And baked goods always smell better than flowers.

"Smell this," the baker says, breaking open a dark loaf. "It's a heavy bread, but rich." They smell it. Then he has them taste it. It has the flavor of molasses and coarse grains. They listen and eat what they can. They swallow the dark bread. Misery has brought them together. Sorrow begins to lead to love, loneliness gives way to communion.

As the baker feeds the couple with repeated urgings to take and eat, as they share their sorrows, there is at least the

hope of hope. The moment of grace is a small good thing, and yet it is not a small thing.



**The couple at first says nothing, but they allow the baker to feed them:  
"You probably need to eat something. I hope you'll try some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small good thing at a time like this."**

This communion table before us is the invitation to share our suffering with God who understands our suffering and offers hope. We bring our whole selves, good and bad, sad as well as happy. And we discover that we are not alone in our sorrows.

—Brett Younger is a pastor in Fort Worth, Texas and a frequent contributor to *Sacred Seasons*.

## Some Thoughts About Eating and Drinking

by Katie Cook

When the first star appears in the sky on Nisan 15th, it is the beginning of Passover. At that precise moment, just after sunset, it was time for the Passover meal. Jesus told his followers that this meal was very important to him; he had been waiting to share this last supper with his friends before his death.

There is something about eating with people—especially in our homes and their homes—that causes us to relate to each other more deeply. It is more difficult to feel an "other" feeling about someone who has sat across the table from us. Some of the best moments of bonding happen over a sandwich and soft drink, or even over a cup of coffee.

I often teasingly say that I consider coffee to be a sacrament, but I suspect that there is some mysterious truth to the statement. The act of preparing a good, strong, fresh cup of coffee for someone and serving it, and the act of receiving it—somehow cause our hearts to be more open

toward each other. Sharing a drink or a meal with this kind of companionship is something like observing communion.

Eating with his friends seems to have been a significant part of Jesus' life. The gospels record innumerable times when he shares meals with all kinds of people. He becomes notorious for some of the people with whom he eats.

The feeding of the four thousand and the feeding of the five thousand are significant stories in the gospels. In one of the resurrection appearances, he walks and talks with two followers for quite some time without their recognizing him. Then, when he breaks the bread for supper, they suddenly recognize him (Luke 24:13-35).

"Eat. Drink. Remember who I am," Ann Weems paraphrases Jesus in a poem. Eat. Drink. Remember who you are. Remember to whom you belong. Know each other. Take off your shoes; it's holy ground.

# Good Mourning

## *A Meditation for Holy Friday*

by Charley Garrison

First Reading: Matthew 5:1-2, 4

Second Reading: Luke 23:46

I recently preached a sermon series that paralleled the seven last words of Christ with the Beatitudes he gave to the crowds. Toward the beginning of his public career, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” And at the end of his public career, he experienced that same comfort with his words, “God, into your hands I commend my spirit.” This beatitude of good mourning is just one more example of the topsy-turvy teachings of Jesus.

And that’s what it is, isn’t it? At the last supper with his disciples, he demonstrated by washing the feet of those who were with him, indicating that the one who leads should serve.<sup>1</sup>

He had been known to puzzle his audience with words like, “Those who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” And he overturned the teachings of his day – and ours – by preaching, that in order to be his disciple, we must learn to love our enemies.<sup>2</sup>

The Beatitudes hold more examples of this upside-down dominion of God. Those who are poor in spirit have access to the dominion of heaven; those who hunger for righteousness will be filled; and this evening, those who mourn will be comforted.<sup>3</sup>

And Luke’s gospel goes even further with these beatitudes. Luke said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the dominion of God. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” And then he says, “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. [But] woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.” And “Blessed

are you who weep now, for you will laugh. [But] woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.”<sup>4</sup>

For those of you who are familiar with *Alice’s Adventures Through the Looking Glass*, you might agree that this perplexing gospel of Jesus is just as backwards, just as puzzling, as was the land into which Alice entered.

Alice stepped through the looking glass in her room



**If our primary goal in life is to enjoy it to its fullest, then we’re going to be spending a lot of time in denial of those who are in need around us. But if our goal is to love others as God has loved us, then we’re going to be spending a lot of time crying over the inequities in our world.**

only to find a curious world that was at odds with the one with which she was familiar. It was a land with strange characters like a grinning cat that disappeared, and one in which the insects included the Rocking-Horse Fly and the Bread-and-Butterfly.

It was also a land with all kinds of topsy-turvy logic. For example, we hear the Red Queen explain to Alice, “Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

And then there’s the question she posed to the Cheshire Cat: “Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat. “I don’t care much where,” said Alice. “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

And let’s not forget the poetry of this strange land:

*The Sun was shining on the sea,  
Shining with all his might:  
He did his very best to make  
The billows smooth and bright.  
And this was odd, because it was  
The middle of the night.*

A topsy-turvy land of illogical logic. And that’s just what the teachings of Jesus may appear to be for us: illogical logic. Logic that goes against the grain of the world in which we live. Those who weep now will be comforted. And according to Luke, those who are laughing now will mourn and weep.

But we must not think that Jesus was glorifying a long face. In fact, his very first recorded miracle was to keep the supply of wine flowing at a wedding celebration.<sup>5</sup> Apparently he had even gained a reputation among some people as a “glutton and drunkard.”<sup>6</sup> And he criticized those who made a show of their fasting by disfiguring their faces.<sup>7</sup>

No, Jesus wasn’t saying that, given a choice, we should choose weeping and mourning. He was telling us to choose where we should put it: in this life, or the next. In other words, which comes first: laughter or tears?

And if you’re like me, you say, “Wait a minute! Does it really have to be an ‘either-or’ situation? Isn’t our life on earth one of both laughter AND tears?!” Although we will certainly experience both laughter and tears, Jesus calls us to choose a life which at first glance seems undesirable. But if we do, Jesus promises that we will be comforted.

Jesus calls us to be unpopular, to go against the grain, and to give away what we have worked for. He said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?”<sup>8</sup>

Much as we would like, we can’t seek both our souls and the material world. Much as we might try, we cannot serve both God and our own pleasures. Jesus said it was

impossible. It’s as impossible as shoving a camel through the eye of a needle.<sup>9</sup>

So this evening’s text tells us to choose how we will live out our earthly lives. We must choose whether we will focus on making as much money as we can—or living out our lives to the motto, “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” (Also, of course, as we accumulate our toys, we’ll need to make sure that we build bigger and better houses to store them in.)

Or we can focus our earthly lives on that which will be sure to bring tears to our eyes. Our lives can center on those who are sick and dying, on the hungry and homeless, and on the victims and perpetrators of hate. That’s the kind of weeping and mourning to which Jesus calls us, and that, he says, is blessed. That’s good mourning! It’s good because it’s the first step in making a difference in a world of injustice. It’s the first step towards loving our neighbor as ourselves.

**But it so happened that they both died. They both stepped through the Looking Glass, so to speak. Things became very different.**

That’s what I mean by making a choice. If your primary goal in life is to enjoy it to its fullest, then you’re going to be spending a lot of time in denial of those who are in need around you. But if your goal is to love others as God has loved us, then we’re going to be spending a lot of time crying over the inequities in our world.

Jesus once told the story of a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who, we are told, “feasted sumptuously every day.” We don’t hear that he did anything bad. He didn’t exactly mistreat the poor, and he didn’t cheat the system.<sup>10</sup> But he sure did enjoy life, didn’t he? This is an example of what I meant when I said, “If your primary goal in life is to enjoy it to its fullest, then you’re going to be spending a lot of time in denial of the world around you.”

Because he was, in fact, in denial. He was in denial of Lazarus, a man at his own gate—a man who was always hungry and covered with sores. Jesus said the village dogs were kinder to Lazarus than was the rich man, because they would tend to his sores by licking them. Some life, huh?

But it so happened that they both died. They both stepped through the Looking Glass, so to speak. Things became very different. Lazarus was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham for eternity—to be comforted. And the rich man spent his eternity begging for mercy from the flames of Hades—weeping and mourning.

You see, although the man had not actively done anything to hurt others, he had committed a terrible sin—the sin of indifference. And if we ignore those all around us who are in need, then we are guilty of the same sin. And if we reply that there are no needy people at our gates, it's

**That's the kind of weeping and mourning to which Jesus calls us, and that he says is blessed. That's good mourning!**

probably because we've moved to an exclusive subdivision in which they aren't allowed to enter.

So Jesus calls us to go to them, to mix and mingle with those who are in need. And to serve them. And if we choose to obey him, then we will find ourselves weeping at times.

We will join Jesus who wept and mourned—Jesus, who was known as the Man of Sorrows—Jesus, who wept over the city that was to kill him—this same Jesus who demonstrated the Beatitude of good mourning when he uttered his last words: “God, into your hands I commend my spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

You see, death didn't come to him; he came to death. Death didn't take his life away; he laid his own life down. Jesus didn't surrender to the power of death; he was victorious over it. His spirit didn't slip away; he gave it into the hands of God.

In so doing, Jesus experienced comfort—in proportion to his life of mourning, his life of sorrow. Finally, the spirit of Jesus, the human, and the spirit of God, the eternal, were together and united and in perfect harmony. Finally there was comfort, eternal comfort.

So this evening, as we remember this Man of Sorrows—this man who wept for those who would kill him—we are faced with a choice. And it's not whether or not we will experience sorrow. We will. There's no choice in that. The choice is whether we will spend our lives in ivory towers, skipping the part of the gospel that placed Jesus on a cross, oblivious to the world like

the rich man in the story that Jesus told—or whether we will spend our lives serving our neighbors.

May we all choose life, life that's a gift born out of the death of Jesus. May we choose the way of Jesus, the way of good mourning! Amen.

—*Charley Garrison is a pastor in Waco, Texas and a regular Seeds of Hope volunteer.*

#### *References:*

1. John 13:14
2. Matthew 5:44
3. Matthew 5:3,4,6
4. Luke 6:20-25
5. John 2:1-11
6. Matthew 11:19
7. Matthew 6:16,17
8. Luke 9:24, 25
9. Matthew 6:24
10. Luke 16:19-31
11. Matthew 23:37



**Holy Week  
should be hard  
because  
following Christ is hard,  
but if we take up  
our cross,  
then by grace,  
at the end  
of the journey,  
God will bring Easter.**

—*from a Holy Week booklet published by  
Broadway Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas*

# Out of the Depths I Call Unto You

## *A Service of Worship for Holy Friday*

by Katie Cook

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in God's word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning...*

Suggested Musical Invocation:

“Out of the Deep” from John Rutter’s *Requiem*

Scripture: Psalm 42

Responsive Reading:

LEADER: Deep calls unto deep in the roar of the waterfalls.

PEOPLE: Out of the depths I cry unto the Lord.

LEADER: Schedules and deadlines roar over my head, voices clamor around me, and old tapes keep running in my mind.

PEOPLE: I cry out to my God for a moment of peace, a season of silence, a glimpse of the holy.

LEADER: Pain comes crashing down upon me like angry waters, and despair wells up from deep within.

PEOPLE: I cry out to you, God, for healing; I cry out to you for hope.

LEADER: Just when I feel that I cannot stand the chaos,

PEOPLE: You whisper, softly, and my world is remade.

LEADER: Just when I feel that I cannot stand the pain,

PEOPLE: You come to me with healing in your wings.

LEADER: I wait for your touch. I hope in your word.

PEOPLE: More than those who watch for the morning,  
I watch for you.

LEADER: More than those who watch for the morning,  
I wait for your touch.

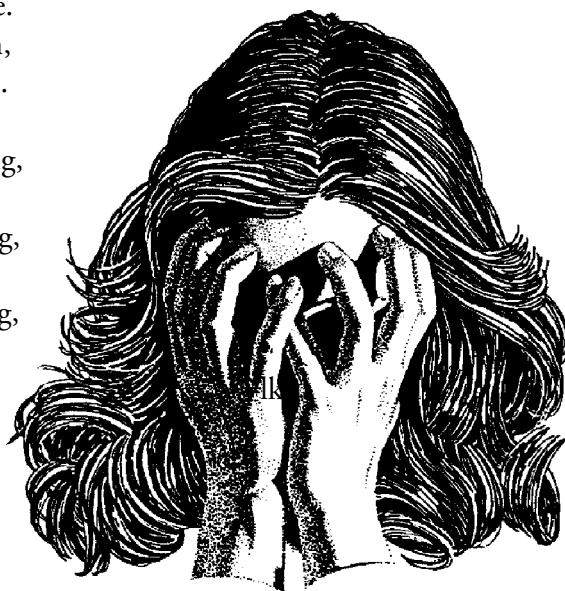
ALL: More than those who watch for the morning,  
I hope in your word.

Scripture: Isaiah 55:6-13

Suggested Musical Benediction:

“Non Nobis, Domine” (Patrick Doyle)\*

\*This is from the *Henry V* soundtrack by Patrick Doyle.





# Resurrections

## *A Sermon for Easter Sunday*

by Brett Younger

Text: John 20:1-18

When the doctor walks into the waiting room, the anxious couple stands. They can tell from the look on his face that it's bad news: "I'm sorry, but the cancer has spread. Your daughter doesn't have much time left. There's nothing we can do." And with that, the doctor turns and leaves. The mother and father fall lifelessly back into their chairs. They don't say anything. What do you hope for when you've been told there is no hope? Where do you look when it's so dark that you can't see anything?

He's thirty-one, has been married for eight years and has two small children. The marriage has been shaky from

**Despair is prevalent in cemeteries, hospitals, mental institutions, homeless shelters, prisons—and also in offices, shopping malls, classrooms, four-bedroom houses, and churches.**

the start, but he's been hanging on to a thread of wishful thinking. Then another man has come into the picture, and now his wife says it's over. He has no place to go but back to his parents' house.

Like in years before, he and his father sit on the porch: "Dad, the strange thing is that in spite of all she's done, I still love her." What do you do when you've been hanging by a thread and the thread breaks? What do you do when things are too broken to mend?

He's a Christian minister who has lived in Jerusalem for years. He's preached about peace and worked for peace. He's been a voice of hope for Arabs and Jews. But just before the Passover, a Palestinian carrying a suitcase of explosives has killed himself and nineteen others. Now a new Israeli offensive is under way. The minister thinks about canceling the Easter service, but he doesn't. What do you think he would say this morning? What do you say when death overwhelms life?

Mary Magdalene comes to the cemetery early in the morning, two days after the funeral of the finest person

she's ever known. It is still dark when she gets to the tomb. She isn't sure exactly why she's come. When there is finally enough light to see, she is devastated by what she discovers: "Oh, no, not this. Not only have they beaten him, not only have they murdered him, but now they've stolen his body. How could they do this?"

Mary Magdalene has spent most of her life too broken to mend, hanging by a thread, and looking for a light in the dark. Scripture says that Jesus healed her, not from one or two, but from seven demons. Tradition even says that she was a prostitute before she met Jesus. He was her glimmer of hope. Now she didn't have any hope.

Despair is prevalent in cemeteries, hospitals, mental institutions, homeless shelters, prisons—and also in offices, shopping malls, classrooms, four-bedroom houses, and churches. We've known hopelessness. Life can be excruciatingly hard. Things get too broken to fix. Sometimes it's so dark that we can't make out any light.

With tears in her eyes, with fear and anger, Mary runs from the tomb to tell her friends what has happened. They come back to the cemetery with her, but don't see any reason to stay, so they go home. Mary stays and cries. What is she waiting for? What does she hope to hear?

After his wife Joy died, C.S. Lewis described his despair in *A Grief Observed*. He wrote:

*One moment last night can be described in similes; otherwise it won't go into language at all. Imagine a man in total darkness. He thinks he's (alone) in a dungeon. Then there comes a sound. He thinks it might be a sound from far-off waves or wind-blown trees...and if so, it proves he's not in a dungeon, but free, in the open air. Or it may be a much smaller sound close at hand—a chuckle of laughter. And if so, there's a friend beside him in the dark. Either way, a good, good sound. I'm not mad enough to take such an experience as evidence for anything. It's simply the leaping into (imagination) of an idea which I would always have theoretically admitted—the idea that I, or any one at any time, may be utterly mistaken as to the situation we're really in...(we understand that when we hear) the sound of a chuckle in the darkness.*

Mary watched Jesus die and saw them bury him. She stayed in the cemetery because she had nowhere else to go. She looked into the tomb and was unimpressed with the angels. She saw only darkness.

Then Jesus spoke to her. She didn't recognize him at first: "If you're the gardener, why don't you tell me what's happened?" Then Jesus spoke her name. In a simple word, a single sound, a chuckle of laughter, darkness became light, and despair gave way to hope. When Jesus called her by name, Mary was transformed from the last mourner of the dead into the first witness of a living hope. She had been resurrected.

Jesus didn't leave any videotapes of the resurrection. What he left were resurrected people, a hopeful church. Whatever else the disciples came to understand about whatever happened, they knew from the start that the resurrection isn't just about what happened to Jesus; it's about the resurrection God works in all kinds of lives.

Twelve years ago a man who had been visiting our church for a couple of months came into my office. He'd moved to Indiana, where I lived then, to get away from a terrible marriage in Ohio. He and his wife had tried for years to make it work, but it had only gotten progressively worse. They agreed that they should never have gotten married and that there was no point in prolonging the pain they both felt.

He came not to talk about whether they should get a divorce; they had already made that decision. He wanted me to tell him what God thought about it. He described his marriage in horrible detail. I remember thinking that if there ever were two people that didn't belong together it was these two. So we talked about the sadness God feels when people hurt and the grace that covers everything.

Before he left I said a prayer that he and his wife would know God's presence as they went through the pain of their divorce. He wasn't at church for a while. I was surprised to learn that he'd moved back to Ohio. I didn't hear from him for at least a year, but then I got a letter. He and his wife had reconciled. They had never been happier. They knew that they still had hard work ahead of them, but they were confident. The last I heard they were doing great. I don't know how to account for that. I don't think they know how to explain it either. Every once in a while, God brings life out of death.

Resurrection happens when we open ourselves to God's hope. It may look like nothing is going on, but what's happening in the darkness of the tomb makes all the difference.

Two parents are devastated at the loss of a daughter to cancer. Life seems to have no meaning, but as time passes they find that life does go on. Hope and laughter cautiously, slowly return to their home. God brings light in the darkness.

A divorcing couple decides to continue as friends, placing their two small children first and working as a team rather than as adversaries. God brings life out of death.

In Jerusalem this morning, Christian ministers try to tell the truth: the darkness is great and seems overwhelming, but no matter how horrible the night, light will come in the morning. It will be hard to see at first and difficult to feel, but joy lies deep beneath the sorrow.



**Jesus didn't leave any  
videotapes of the resurrection.  
What he left were resurrected  
people, a hopeful church.**

Two friends have gone years without talking. They suddenly find themselves pushed together and as they choose to speak honestly, it's as if they've never been apart. God brings love that overcomes apathy.

A middle-aged man whose life isn't turning out like he'd hoped feels overcome by his troubles. His job no longer has any meaning for him. He feels trapped. But then as he's driving to work, he starts laughing out loud. As first he thinks it's for no reason but the absurdity of it all, but then he wonders if maybe there is a reason, if perhaps he's been found by a hope that he'd forgotten.

An old woman, bedridden for months, cared for by people too busy to care for her, is overwhelmed with depression. Then one morning she begins to softly sing "Amazing Grace" and a look of peace comes over her face. God brings life out of death.

The resurrection has meaning when we live it. God brings life when we offer unexpected forgiveness, when we step out of the ordinary to act with kindness, when we're moved to laughter in the midst of tears, when we find ourselves in a hopeless situation and discover that we're hoping anyway.

We've come to church on Easter for all kinds of reasons. Some of our minds keep wandering to other things—what's for lunch, what we'll do this evening, the work we need to get done. But then right here in the middle of worship, for just a moment, our hearts open and we feel God's grace. God brings life. God offers joy deeper than despair, light in the darkness, and life that overcomes death.

—Brett Younger is a pastor in Fort Worth, Texas and a frequent contributor to Sacred Seasons.

# quotes, poems, & pithy sayings

I met this preacher from Australia  
He'd read the Bible searching for its dominant themes  
And he counted 87 times when Jesus said, "Follow Me!"  
Well you know that got me thinking...  
Am I following Jesus or just believing in Christ?  
...If I'm a follower of Jesus,  
Then why am I such a good life insurance risk?  
And why, when I do my giving  
Do I still keep so much  
when so much hunger exists?  
And if I follow Jesus, why do I have so many friends  
Among the affluent and so few among the poor?  
And if I follow Jesus,  
Why do missiles and guns make me feel more secure?  
—*excerpts from "Follow Me" by singer/songwriter Bryan Sirchio*  
(For the whole song or to order a CD, see [www.sirchio.com](http://www.sirchio.com).)

I am a man who has hoped, in time, that his life,  
when poured out at the end, would say,  
"Good-good-good-good-good!"  
like a gallon jug of the prime local spirit.  
I am a man of losses, regrets, and griefs.  
I am an old man full of love. I am a man of faith.  
But faith is not necessarily, nor not soon, a resting place.  
Faith puts you out on a wide river in a little boat,  
in the fog, in the dark.  
Even a man of faith knows that...  
we've all got to go through enough to kill us.  
—*Wendell Berry, Jayber Crow*

The gospel is...a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. It is a truth that has been flattened, trivialized, rendered inane. Partly the gospel is simply an old habit among us, neither valued nor questioned. But more than that, our technical way of thinking reduces mystery to problem, transforms assurance into certitude, quality into quantity, and so takes the categories of biblical faith and represents them in manageable shapes.  
—*Walter Brueggemann, Finally Comes the Poet*

Chart the movements of the Big Dipper and soak in as much sun as possible. Live in a world that is bigger than my calendar—more permanent than my feelings, more glorious than my accomplishments.  
—*Rich Mullins, Goals and Resolutions*

You integrate the depths of the self by leaving self and entering into what you can see and hear and touch and feel and smell. God dwells in "deep down things," and you find God when God finds you loving the world he has created and redeemed.  
—*Murray Bodo, OFM*



Above the dark town  
After the sun's gone down  
Two vapour trails cross the sky  
Catching the day's last slow goodbye  
Black skyline looks rich as velvet  
Something is shining  
Like gold but better  
Rumours of glory

Smiles mixed with curses  
The crowd disperses  
About whom no details are known  
Each one alone yet not alone  
Behind the pain/fear  
Etched on the faces  
Something is shining  
Like gold but better  
Rumours of glory

You see the extremes  
Of what humans can be?  
In that distance some tension's born  
Energy surging like a storm  
You plunge your hand in  
And draw it back scorched  
Beneath it's shining like  
Gold but better  
Rumours of glory  
—*Bruce Cockburn, "Rumours of Glory"*

art by Sharon Rollins



# Room for Doubt

## *A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter*

by Brett Younger

Text: John 20:19-31

Texas A&M research psychologist Jeff Simpson and his colleagues studied 82 couples who had been dating for at least a year. They put the partners in separate rooms to respond to the same pictures of attractive people. Then each one was asked to guess what their dating partner was thinking as he or she looked at each picture.

You can guess the outcome. The couples who said that their relationship was “secure and close” knew each other well enough that they could guess pretty accurately what the other one was thinking. Couples do that all the time. You can also guess that partners in the couples that called themselves “close but insecure” did significantly worse when

they guessed what their partners were thinking.

When the psychologist showed a picture of one woman, a male respondent remarked how “cute the woman looked and how much he liked her hair.” His girlfriend guessed, “He’s thinking about what he’s going to have for lunch.” A woman looking at the picture of a handsome young man said, “Boy, is he attractive!” Her boyfriend thought she “sees something in him that she doesn’t really like.”

What we might not guess is that all the “insecure bad guessers” were still together four months after the study, while one-fourth of the more accurate “secure guessers” had broken up. The couples who knew everything about each other were more likely to break up than the couples who still had a lot to learn. This seems to indicate that doubt, if not actual ignorance, is bliss.

In their report on this study, *The Washington Post* (2/11/96) concluded that “couples who are ignorant of each other’s thoughts may stay together longer than those who are more tuned in to each other’s [opinions].”

It may be that Dr. Simpson and his colleagues are offering a clue as to why the great doubters of the Christian faith so often become the great believers of the Christian faith (*The Christian Century*, 3/6/96). Saints are usually people who recognize early on that they have a lot to learn.

One of our adult Sunday school classes is reading a book entitled *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups*. Each Sunday they discuss a couple of essays by great Christian writers. It would be easy to assume that contributors to a collection of devotional classics would be spiritual giants immune to everyday doubts. The editors must

have been tempted to select essays that show the writers at their most confident.

**Nobody else breathed a word, but Thomas didn’t hold back. He blurted out: “You’re wrong, Lord. We don’t have the foggiest where you are going or why you think we should know how to get there.”**

But most saints most of the time feel close but insecure in relation to God. *Devotional Classics* includes: Saint Augustine, who confessed in far too many details his struggle with his own desires; John of the Cross, whose dark night of the soul was a fight against depression; Henri Nouwen, who lived in the tension between success and authenticity; C.S. Lewis, whose wife's death called into question much of what he wanted to believe; Teresa of Avila, who had visions of Christ piercing her heart with a spear; Francis of Assisi, who had a love/hate relationship with the church; and Martin Luther, who doubted fiercely.

**Bumper stickers proclaim: "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." There ought to be bumper stickers that say, "The Bible has a lot of hard teachings that I'm struggling to understand."**



Luther even thought that God and not the devil sent the really interesting temptations. But like the rest of them, Martin Luther not only doubted fiercely; he also believed ferociously. Luther liked to talk about *Deus absconditus*, God hidden. A hidden God, a God of Mystery, does not necessarily make one feel "close and secure" all the time.

The ones who seek truth with the most diligence recognize that they don't already know all the truth. Frederick Buechner writes: "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." The best kind of doubt leads to faith.

That's why Thomas is my favorite disciple. Thomas had to finger the evidence for himself. That's how a lot of us feel. Do you remember that little chorus "Only Believe, Only Believe"?

Some of us never liked that song. Something inside us said, but why should I believe? On what basis? For what reason? Like our brother Thomas we love asking questions: What was God thinking when God created mosquitoes? How many angels can sit on the head of a bowling pin? When one of the disciples sneezed did Jesus say, "I bless you"?

If you don't like questions, then Thomas isn't your disciple. But if you are honest enough to admit that you don't know everything, then Thomas may be your patron saint.

Whenever anything came up that Thomas didn't believe or couldn't understand, his questions were direct. There was the last time the disciples and Jesus had supper together. Jesus talked about leaving them. He told them he'd get things ready for them as soon as he got where he was going, and that they knew how to get where he was going.

Nobody else breathed a word, but Thomas didn't hold back. He blurted out: "You're wrong, Lord. We don't have the foggiest where you are going or why you think we should know how to get there." There is more faith in insisting on an explanation than in glibly repeating things that haven't reached our head or heart. Thomas had the courage and the common sense to ask what all of them should have been asking.

Thomas was the voice of reason in a group a burrito short of a combination platter. When Jesus insisted on going back to Judea to be with the family of his friend Lazarus, who had just died, Thomas tried to talk him out of it. The last time Jesus had been there, the Jewish leaders tried to stone him.

When it became clear that Jesus was determined to go, Thomas agreed to go, too, but he was smart enough to know what was coming. The temptation for the unthinking follower is to cheerily believe that nothing bad will happen. Thomas said, "Let's all go, so that we can die with him." His eyes were wide open.

Thomas loved the other disciples, but somebody had to keep his feet on the ground. Especially after everything fell apart and Jesus was crucified. Thomas missed the Easter sunrise service. The disciples had gathered for a hush-hush meeting, but Thomas was being understandably cautious. Only after it became clear that the religious authorities were satisfied with having executed the ringleader did Thomas cautiously emerge to look for the others.

When he returned, Thomas found that the disciples were deep into what he quickly recognized as the denial phase of the grief process. They claim that Jesus is alive and that he has appeared to them. Thomas's reaction is what they should have expected. It would have been so simple for him to act like he believed, but Thomas wouldn't pretend. It had to be real to him.

He wanted to see the videotape. Thomas couldn't believe that what they had seen was anything more than the product of wishful thinking or an unusually vivid optical illusion. "Unless I put my finger into the mark of the nails in his hands, and unless I put my hand in his side, I won't really believe," he said.

A week later Jesus showed up again and said: “Okay, Thomas, let your fingers do the walking. Touch my hands. Put your fingers into my side.” Jesus called Thomas’s bluff.

And isn’t it interesting that, according to this gospel account, God raised Jesus from the dead, but didn’t heal the nail wounds in his hands? Was it an oversight? The power of death is conquered, but the wounds remain. When Jesus first appeared to the disciples, when Thomas wasn’t there, “he showed them his hands and his side.”

Why did Jesus do that? Nobody asked for that. Jesus was saying: “This is who I am. The wounds remain.” Thomas’ instinct was right in asking to see the marks of the nails and the spear. He didn’t say, “Unless I see his halo, I won’t believe.” The scars didn’t go away.

Thomas didn’t take Jesus up on his invitation to perform an autopsy. For all his misgivings about the resurrection, when Jesus confronted Thomas with the evidence he demanded—the nail prints and the wound—Thomas believed enough to change his mind. He unloaded one of the great confessions of all time. This is the biggest thing that anyone says in any gospel: “My Lord and My God!”

Thomas’s doubting faith lead him to greater faith. He offered the highest word of confession. Thomas came to amazing belief precisely because he refused to say that he understood what he didn’t understand. He wouldn’t claim to believe what he didn’t believe. He was uncompromisingly honest about his doubts and questions. Those who fiercely doubt believe ferociously.

Ever since that event, Thomas has carried the nickname “Doubting Thomas.” That nickname is not only unfair to Thomas; it’s also unfair to doubt. It’s considered an insult, and it shouldn’t be. Doubt doesn’t deserve its questionable reputation. Bumper stickers proclaim: “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.” There ought to be bumper stickers that say, “The Bible has a lot of hard teachings that I’m struggling to understand.”

Memorizing someone else’s answers isn’t believing. Have you noticed that many of the people who claim to know God’s opinion on everything, who look down on those who have questions, often drop out the first time it becomes clear to them that some of their opinions just aren’t so?

It may seem easier to coast through life without questions, but people with an unexamined faith never grow. It may look simpler to copy off your neighbor’s paper, but you can’t borrow someone else’s faith.

A childish religion is certain of whatever answers it’s been given. With adolescence comes the ability to question and to scrutinize what we’ve been told. As we grow, we move from an unexamined belief system to a reflective faith that leads to genuine investment. Maturing disciples ask hard questions: How can we find meaning in life? What difference does it make if we believe in God? Why is there so much

suffering? What’s the relationship of Christianity to other religions? How can we know what’s true? What about forever?

There is more belief in honest doubt than in all the easy answers. People of faith learn to factor in a lot of

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uncertainty. The poet John Donne wrote, “To come to a doubt ...is (to hear) the voice of God in our conscience: Would you know the truth? Doubt, and then you will inquire.” Our responsibility is to ask questions until the answers are ours. Faith is done with a pencil and eraser in a loose-leaf notebook.

The people who struggle to believe end up with a faith worth the struggle. There will always be mysteries that baffle our minds and problems that will make us doubt what we thought we had already decided.

We won’t understand everything that we want to understand, but we can know enough of God’s love to hold fast to the hope of grace. We can know that God is the one to whom we owe life itself. We can know God’s comfort in the midst of struggle.

One of the most compelling photos from World War II was of the side of a building in a ghetto in Warsaw, Poland. A young Jewish person had written on the wall: “I believe in the sun, even if it does not shine. I believe in love, even if I do not feel it. I believe in God, even if I do not see God.” Whatever else that persecuted individual may have thought or experienced, this much is certain. He or she had a faith that had been tested by the fire of doubt.

Jesus has a word for those who struggle to faith: “Blessed are those who come to believe.”

—Brett Younger is a pastor in Fort Worth, Texas and a frequent contributor to Sacred Seasons.



**God,  
you are our beginning  
and you will be our end;  
we are made in your image and likeness.  
We praise and thank you for this day.  
This is the day on which you created light  
and saw it was good.  
This is the day in whose  
early morning light  
we discovered the tomb was empty,  
and encountered Christ,  
the world's true light.  
For us your acts are gracious  
and your love endures forever.**

**—from the New Zealand Prayer Book**