



Resurrection Hope

A few weeks ago Pastor Michelle and I were talking when I said something like, “It doesn’t feel like we need to emphasize Lent as much this year.” To which she replied, “Because we’ve been living Lent for the past couple of years!”

She was kidding, but maybe not completely. These years have felt Lent-like in the way we’ve found ourselves longing for God to intervene in dire and desperate circumstances. We’ve been made especially aware of our need for salvation as well as our inability to save ourselves.

So this year we’ve decided to turn the volume up a bit on the season of Easter. Marked by the church calendar, Easter lasts seven Sundays. In a manner similar to how Lent invites us to reflection and repentance, these Easter weeks are meant for purposeful and extended celebration. These are the weeks when Christians around the world make it plain that we are a resurrection people, that death has truly lost its sting.

To this end, we’ve invited seven members to share a written meditation followed by short daily reflections and questions. In the following pages you’ll find thoughtful invitations to hope - resurrection hope - which outlasts even the harshest of this world’s circumstances.

I’m grateful for these meditations and to the women and men who offer them so graciously to us. I hope you will receive their gifts as a way to plant the seeds of hope.

- Pastor David

First Week of Easter

Scripture Passage: 1 Corinthians 15:19-26

¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. ²⁴ Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Reflection: Resurrection Hope

This world is a strange paradox of joy and sorrow, beauty and brokenness, freedom and bondage, creation and repair. Yet, while the fallen nature of this world evokes feelings of despair, the foretaste of God's coming kingdom stirs up a holy discontent that aches in our souls. Our faith is weary yet hopeful as we cling to God's promise to make all things new; our hearts are shattered yet longing with anticipation for the dawning of a new day. A day when there will be no more shame before God and conflict among nations. A day when hospital rooms won't hold the tears of grieving mothers or capture silent ultrasounds confirming barren wombs. A day when the dreams of a flourishing marriage won't end with tear-stained divorce papers or the disappearing acts of an apathetic father. A day when brown skin won't evoke the irrational fears of those who have embraced false notions of superiority. A day when those who once anxiously walked streets of blood-stained concrete will joyfully stroll down streets of gold.

We long for this day with an unshakable hope—a promise which rests not on blind optimism or wishful thinking but on an event in history. A plan crafted in eternity, worked out in time—the resurrection of Christ. Paul affirms that when Jesus rose from the dead, he was the “firstfruits” of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). Before Israelites harvested their crops, they were to bring a symbolic portion, the “first fruits”, to the priests as an offering to the Lord (Lev 23:10). This was done in anticipation of the full harvest that was to come. Thus, the resurrection of Christ is the promise that believers will one day be raised, for Christ's resurrection is not isolated from ours. His resurrection requires our resurrection. When the believer's soul makes the pilgrimage home, the body of the believer prepares for the resurrection.

In verse 22, Paul continues to explain the hope of the resurrection. *“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ, all shall be made alive”*. When Adam rebelled against God, sin entered the world, burdening us with shame, condemning us to death. But through his resurrection, Christ made reconciliation with God and eternal life available to all. As a result, enemies of God can now become friends of God. Those who once wore the stigma of sinners can now wear the badge of saints. Through his sin Adam brought death, but through his resurrection Christ brings life. Adam brought defeat; Christ brings victory.



Richard Wilson - husband, father, avid reader, history buff, jazz aficionado.

First Week of Easter - Meditations

Reflection #1: His resurrection restores our relationship

In the book of beginnings, we witness Adam and Eve hiding from God. Their act of rebellion had broken their relationship with God, sin had hindered their fellowship. How would it be restored? The answer would not lie in human wisdom or righteousness. Instead, the remedy would be found in the person and work of Jesus. Those weighed down by the burden of guilt find that hope for Jesus has fully borne our guilt. Those tempted to construct a false facade of righteousness find rest for Jesus has given them his righteousness.

Meditation Question: Jesus has willingly carried our shame. Why do we often hide, excuse, or shift the blame when faced with our sin?

Reflection #2: His resurrection emboldens our witness

In 2 Corinthians 3:12, Paul proclaims, "Therefore since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech." Paul's hope is the hope of the gospel, the good news that we were chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and sealed with the Holy Spirit. A hope made alive and vibrant through the resurrection of Christ. As Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians 15:17, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins." But the risen Christ inspires hope, empowering us to be unashamed of the gospel, proud of the faith that we hold, enthusiastic about the message we proclaim.

Meditation Question: There is a correlation between the strength of our hope and the strength of our witness for Christ. In what ways have you resisted setting your hope on the gospel? How has that impacted your witness for Christ?

Reflection #3: His resurrection fosters our faithfulness.

The hope of the resurrection reminds us that God will be victorious. Sin will be defeated. The sting of death will be removed. God's truth will endure. God's plan will be accomplished. Therefore, we should be "steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, because we know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Meditation Question: In our labor for the Lord we often grow weary. During seasons of discouragement, where do you turn for hope? How can the hope of the resurrection serve as daily encouragement for you?

Reflection #4: His resurrection requires our resurrection

While chaos marks this world, we find hope in the truth that God is ultimately in control. Our lives are marching toward a glorious end. There will be a moment when God will raise us out of this broken world, and sin and suffering will be no more. The resurrection is not only an essential theological truth. It also provides a lens through which we see our lives.

Meditation Question: How does the hope of the resurrection shape and reshape the way you see your life and our world?

Reflection #5: His resurrection prompts our praise.

Through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, we have been welcomed into the most extraordinary story ever told. We have received a righteousness that won't be tarnished, a love that can't be defeated, a grace that won't be limited, a joy that can't be taken, a peace that can't be disturbed, a hope that won't be disappointed, an eternity that won't be voided. Praise God! This story has an end that never ends.

Meditation Question: Every physical blessing is purposed by God to point us to the spiritual provision Christ made through his life, death, and resurrection. What are a few of the material blessings provided by God that point you to his spiritual provision? Write them down and offer them as praise to God.

Second Week of Easter

Scripture Passage: Psalm 118:14-29

¹⁵ The Lord is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation.

¹⁵ Shouts of joy and victory
resound in the tents of the righteous:

“The Lord’s right hand has done mighty things!

¹⁶ The Lord’s right hand is lifted high;
the Lord’s right hand has done mighty things!”

¹⁷ I will not die but live,
and will proclaim what the Lord has done.

¹⁸ The Lord has chastened me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.

¹⁹ Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.

²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord
through which the righteous may enter.

²¹ I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.

²² The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;

²³ the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴ The Lord has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.

²⁵ Lord, save us!
Lord, grant us success!

²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
From the house of the Lord we bless you.[b]

²⁷ The Lord is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up[c] to the horns of the altar.

²⁸ You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.

²⁹ Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

Reflection: Jesus is our Resurrection HOPE. He is our Salvation.

I want to hope that by the time we read these devotional writings on our Resurrection Hope, current violence around the world will be peacefully resolved. I confess my hope isn’t very strong.

As I write, Ukraine is being bombed, while societies and people groups around our world live under horrible oppression and violence, suffer famine, drought or monsoons, disease. Our country’s habits of sinful injustices stir our despair. Personal heartaches and needs can leave us discouraged and feeling hopeless. We desperately need God’s Resurrection Hope.

One way God disciplines us is to let us experience our needs before He meets them. To help us understand our need for His Resurrection Hope, He allows us to experience discouragement and even despair. Without hopelessness we would not know we need hope. We would not desire God’s Resurrection Hope if we were not faced with hopelessness.

Psalm 118:14 says, “The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation.”

It is easy for us to believe these words in a half-hearted way when we feel strong, when we don’t need a song to comfort our hearts, or feel the need to be saved.

- We depend on our own strength until we are in situations where our strength isn’t strong enough. We appreciate God’s strength from a completely different perspective when we are weak.
- The joy of song is most deeply expressed from hearts that have known great sorrow.
- Jesus becomes our salvation only when we acknowledge our need to be saved.

Jesus, our strength, song, and salvation, is our Resurrection Hope.

Psalm 118 is thought to be written by King David and sung at the founding of the Second Temple. King David felt great joy and happiness after experiencing very dark times. In verses 14-29, King David tells of God’s faithfulness to him, how God saved him when he felt weak, helpless, discouraged. You can hear his joy and thankfulness that he is alive and not dead, hope in his Lord who is good, whose lovingkindness is everlasting.

King David’s joy and thankfulness births hope for more than just present salvation. He hopes, too, for future salvation when the Messiah will come. He exclaims with joyful expectation that the Lord, who is coming, is our Salvation.

Jesus, of course, knew this Psalm well. He wove it into the parable about the landowner whose son was killed when he tried to confront evildoers at the family’s vineyard. Jesus knew the parable was foretelling his death and in Psalm 118, He knew the meaning of the stone being discarded. During the days right before His crucifixion, is it possible Jesus found strength, resolve, and Resurrection Hope through the truth of Psalm 118? May we, too?

For what do you need God’s Resurrection Hope? How would you define God’s Resurrection Hope?

Linda Swanson - Linda likes to enjoy her favorite roles of wife, mom, grandma, daughter, sister, aunt, spiritual director, artist as creatively as possible.



Second Week of Easter - Meditations

Reflection #1: Psalm 118:16-17

The right hand of the Lord is exalted; The right hand of the Lord performs valiantly. I will not die, but live, And tell of the works of the Lord.

Things have looked pretty bleak over the last few years. That isn't new for our God who has always been there for His people in every kind of grief and trauma. When we remember His faithfulness in the past, we face the present with hope because of Who He is. His character, behavior, what He has done for us in the past gives us Resurrection Hope.

Meditation Question: Take a moment to remember a time when you experienced God's faithfulness. What can you take from that experience to help you live your current challenge?

Reflection #2: Psalm 118: 21

I shall give thanks to You, for You have answered me, and You have become my Salvation.

When King David fought for His Kingdom's survival, he sometimes wondered if it would endure. After the kingdom was secure and the temple built, David remembered the dark days and celebrated God's salvation and gave thanks. He reaffirmed God as His hope. When we feel hopeless, we hope again when we look back, remember God's faithfulness, celebrate His goodness, and give thanks. He is our Resurrection Hope no matter our circumstances.

Meditation: Take a moment to remember and give thanks for how God came alongside you during a dark moment from your past.

Reflection #3: Psalm 118: 22

The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone.

When the temple was being built, a rejected stone became the most important construction element. Jesus quoted this verse knowing He, the best and only choice for Messiah, would be rejected. We, like the temple builders and the people who crucified Jesus, often reject Jesus when He fails to meet our criteria. He is exactly what we need, we've just not learned how to see Him, believe Him, receive Him. Jesus is our Resurrection Hope even when we set Him aside.

Meditation Question: Where do you need to see, believe and receive Jesus as your Resurrection Hope? How could you trust in Him?

Reflection #4: Psalm 118:24

This is the day the Lord has made; Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

The Message translation says, *This is the day the Lord acted, let's celebrate and be festive!*

When hope is realized, it's time to rejoice. When God acts on our behalf, it's time to celebrate! Celebrations become monuments to what our faithful God has done. Past celebrations help us face our present troubles with hope because God acted on our behalf in the past. We can rejoice today because God has been faithful in the past and will be faithful again today. What will you celebrate today?

Meditation Question: When we take a moment, we usually can find reasons to celebrate God's faithfulness in our current life situations. What will you celebrate today?

Reflection 5: Isaiah 118: 28-29

You are my God and I give thanks to You; You are my God, I extol You. Give thanks to the Lord for He is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting.

The war in Ukraine, troubles around the world and in our country remind us of our need for God. In the darkness of all that is wrong, we choose to praise Him, give thanks to Him, and place our Hope in Him because He is good, His lovingkindness is everlasting no matter what is happening around us, to us. He is our resurrection Hope, the counterbalance to all that is wrong.

Meditation Question: Jesus is our Resurrection Hope. He delights in being our Hope. Where would you like to invite Him to teach you how to hope in Him?

Third Week of Easter

Scripture Passage: John 21:1-19

¹ Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

⁵ He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered.

⁶ He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." ¹⁷ The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."

¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

Reflection

John tells us that this was the third time that Jesus was revealed after the resurrection. The first time, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and the disciples so as to tell them that he was raised from the dead, because "as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead." (John 20:9) Eight days later, he appears to the disciples while Thomas was with them, because Thomas missed the first visit and doubted that it had really happened. The third time, he guides this group of disciples to catch a large number of fish, eats with them on the beach, and has a personal conversation with Peter.

It seems interesting that John wants to highlight for us that this was the third time Jesus visited his disciples after being raised. The other two visits are close enough in the text to be on the same two-page spread, in my Bible, so it's not like we would have forgotten that they happened by the time we got to this third one. Not only are the visits somewhat numerous, they are repetitive: the second visit seems like a repeat of the first. They seem unhurried: Jesus takes the time to share a meal with his disciples before having his conversation with Peter. The visits seem sometimes aimed toward individual disciples, whether in Jesus' previewing his first visit to Mary Magdalene by herself, or his second visit being seemingly just for Thomas, or in this third visit's talk with Peter.

Jesus is not an efficient administrator who groups his visits so that he can show up once when everyone is already available, say all he needs to say, check off the box and leave the disciples to work out the rest. In repeating his visits, in taking his time with the disciples, and in taking time to talk with individual disciples, building faith in Thomas and encouraging Peter, Jesus shows himself to be very present to them. He even visits these same disciples multiple times after he imparts the Holy Spirit to them, who already does a lot of encouraging and guiding work.

Just as Jesus doesn't leave the first disciples to figure out the post-resurrection Christian life on their own, he doesn't leave us to figure out the Christian life in our age, even this much later. He is present to us, just as he promised when he said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28:20) Jesus treats us as the humans we are, who need to hear things more than once before we know what to do about them, who need to be encouraged sometimes even though we were feeling pretty good last week, and whose faith can ebb and flow even if our circumstances haven't changed. In Jesus, we have our older brother to love us and help us along, who does not tire of our needs but loves us through them and, mercifully, keeps showing up.



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Third Week of Easter - Meditations

Reflection #1

Jesus' conversation with Peter doesn't translate easily to English. The first two times he asks Peter "Do you love me," he uses a word for an intense, unconditional love, like is used to describe God's love for his people. Peter responds saying he loves Jesus with more of an affinity-based kind of friendship love. The third time, though, Peter is grieved because Jesus asks using the lesser, friendship word for love. In the hearing of the other disciples, Jesus exposes Peter's limitation but does not let it disqualify him. Jesus calls Peter to serve and follow anyway.

Meditation Question: What limitations does Jesus not let disqualify you, and what does he call you to anyway?

Reflection #2

The disciples didn't recognize Jesus. At 100 yards, maybe they couldn't see him clearly and he had to yell too loudly to be recognizable. The flash of recognition came most clearly when they caught the fish. But later, when they were on the shore, none of them "dared ask him, 'Who are you?'" Why would John say they didn't dare to ask unless they were still not completely sure? Jesus is present to them in unrecognizably new ways, but he still persists in presence with them, blesses them, and calls them forward.

Meditation Question: How might Jesus be present in unrecognizably new ways in your life right now, and how might he be blessing and leading you?

Reflection #3

If Jesus had told the disciples, "There are 153 large fish off the side of this boat. Cast your net and try to catch them all at once," the disciples, as experienced fishermen, might have thought that sounded impossible—their net would break with that big of a catch. Instead, Jesus kindly gave them fewer details and the net held up fine, which John makes a point of mentioning. The net's strength is part of what makes the event miraculous, and the disciples are graciously not given a chance to say they think it's impossible before they've even gotten started.

Meditation Question: Are there places in your life where your reaction to Jesus is to tell him what he's asking is impossible? How does he help you in these moments?

Reflection #4 (Psalm 30)

This psalm worships God for the good he has done. The psalmist credits God with having given him protection from his enemies, healing and help in time of need, for replacing his sadness with joy, and strengthening him. So complete is the work God has done that the psalmist speaks of it amounting to raising him from the dead to new life. He takes no credit for any of these good things—he gives it all to God. The only thing left for the psalmist is to praise and worship God and give thanks to him.

Meditation Question: Are there things that came up in the past few days' reflections that you could praise God and thank him for, giving God all the credit?

Reflection #5 (Revelation 5:11-14)

In this vision, Jesus's presence as the lamb who was slain immediately becomes an occasion for worship by literally everything: the angels, the other heavenly beings, and all the creatures from all the places creatures can be. We often worship God for the good things he has done, just as the psalmist does in yesterday's passage. Here, though, this worship happens before Jesus opens the scroll that he has come to open, as the only one worthy to do so. The kingdom of God is full of worship that comes easily and spontaneously, as a response to Jesus's very being.

Meditation Question: What could it look like to practice the kingdom of God in this way right now—to worship God easily and spontaneously, in response to God's very being as well as for the things God has done, throughout the normal days of your earthly life?

Fourth Week of Easter

Scripture Passages

Psalm 23:1-2

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

John 10:11-15

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when

he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep."

Revelation 7:17

For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.' And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Reflection

I always knew what to expect during Easter weekend. Friday, I attended a quiet service where we sat in the dark and were somber and repentant. Saturday, I attended a praise night which began reflectively and ended with a dance party (which predictably made me feel awkward). Sunday, I attended a tri-lingual baptism service, sang "Because He Lives", and felt grateful while listening to a sermon about how the resurrection changed everything.

Reflecting back, there's nothing wrong with these Easter traditions that reminded me of important theological truths. I appreciate how the traditions led me through the emotional journey of Jesus's closest friends, from somber grief to grateful celebration, during the crucifixion and resurrection. However, Jesus' teachings before his death also point to truths about the new kingdom his resurrection ushers into reality. For example, there is the narrative of the Good Shepherd who sacrifices himself for his flock. The Good Shepherd who was spoken of in an ancient song (Psalm 23), was referenced by Jesus in parables (John 10), and is seen by John in his vision (Revelation 7). It is the story of the Good Shepherd who cares about us, his flock, who cares about our hunger and thirst, who doesn't want us to be afraid, who knows us, who comforts us when we are scared and sad, who gives his life to protect us when the hired hand runs away. This is the story of the gentle shepherd who becomes king and uses his power to ensure that his flock is never hungry or thirsty again. Our shepherd, who knows us and loves us, becomes the one in charge of all.

For us, the flock, the story of the Good Shepherd reminds us how Jesus' resurrection not only gives us forgiveness and eternal life, but moves us from a state of fear, anxiety, and scarcity into a state of flourishing and abundance. When I forget that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, I collapse inward and become increasingly anxious and self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency drives me away from God and from community. I find it difficult to be vulnerable, even with God, which leads me to feel unknown and unseen, which can spiral on and on. Jesus, my Good Shepherd, breaks me from that cycle. In His kingdom of abundance, I do not need to rely on myself. Sheep, after all, are infamously incapable of self-sufficiency.

The aftermath of the resurrection affects us now. Knowing that Jesus is our Good Shepherd should fundamentally change the way we orient our lives. In abundant green pastures we are led into community, as we don't need to compete with one another for scarce resources. Let's spend the week exploring and reflecting on what it means to live in abundance.

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Fourth Week of Easter - Meditations

Reflection #1: Abundance and Privilege

I am unfortunately confident that people conflate God's abundance with their social privilege; just because we have something doesn't necessarily mean that it is good. God's abundance is for all, and privilege often arises from having an advantage that someone else does not have. As you consider God's abundance, also reflect on the following questions:

Meditation Questions: What are ways that we rely on our privilege (proximity to wealth, whiteness, power, education) instead of God's abundance? How might God be calling you to use your privileges to benefit the flock? Forego one thing you think you deserve today.

Reflection #2 Abundance in Dryness

Sometimes God feels far and our souls feel dry and we don't feel particularly shepherded. The reality of God's abundance does not change, but we feel as though we are unable to enjoy it. God does call his people into deserts and wilderness, for reasons we don't always understand. In these times, submitting to the Good Shepherd's lead can mean clinging to spiritual disciplines that have sustained us in the past.

Meditation: Devote some time today to a spiritual discipline that you may not necessarily feel like doing.

Reflection #3: Abundance in Friendship

I often feel God's abundance through friendships. I think we can sometimes neglect friendships as life becomes busy, but living in the reality of God's abundance means that we can prioritize time with friends, even if that time is not always efficient or productive. Long conversations over coffee are restorative for my soul!

Meditation: Take some time to reflect on your friendships, to thank God for where He's placed you, and to text or call someone you love.

Reflection #4: Abundance and Empire

The story of America has always been framed to me as a story of abundance. After all, the American dream is that anyone can come here with nothing and make something of themselves. This promise of overflowing resources can lead to a false confidence in meritocracy, distorting how we view our neighbors, both locally and globally.

Meditation Questions: Are there areas in your life where you feel elitist and superior? How is God calling you to give generously and love your neighbors? Practice one act of unexpected generosity today.

Reflection #5: Abundance and Burnout

I once heard a sermon that said if we run out of energy, we just need to ask God for more and He will always provide it. This view of God's abundance can be misleading and harmful, leading us to glorify a lifestyle where being totally exhausted, yet somehow productive, as being the most spiritual. God's abundance does not transform us into superheroes with unlimited energy. Our Good Shepherd leads us to green pastures, and we must remember to partake.

Meditation Question: What does rest look like for you today? Commit to one small way of caring for yourself, thanking God for His abundance.

Fifth Week of Easter

Scripture Passage: Psalm 148

¹ Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights above.

² Praise him, all his angels;

praise him, all his heavenly hosts.

³ Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars.

⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens

and you waters above the skies.

⁵ Let them praise the name of the Lord,

for at his command they were created,

⁶ and he established them for ever and ever—

he issued a decree that will never pass away.

⁷ Praise the Lord from the earth,

you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,

⁸ lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
stormy winds that do his bidding,

⁹ you mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars,

¹⁰ wild animals and all cattle,

small creatures and flying birds,

¹¹ kings of the earth and all nations,

you princes and all rulers on earth,

¹² young men and women,

old men and children.

¹³ Let them praise the name of the Lord,

for his name alone is exalted;

his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.

¹⁴ And he has raised up for his people a horn,

the praise of all his faithful servants,

of Israel, the people close to his heart.

Praise the Lord.

Reflection: For These Words are Trustworthy and True.

Last fall, during one of my small group's conversations at Wednesday night Bible Btudy, a question was asked about spiritual disciplines and which areas we feel like we need to grow. I was easily able to identify my need to embrace silence and to practice stillness. This area is a constant struggle for me. I am a doer by nature and always on the go, constantly checking off things on my weekly to-do list. My need to do or produce while self-inflicted, is often accompanied by a lack of quiet or stillness, since I always desire to feel connected to something. This usually manifests itself in watching TV, listening to music, scrolling through social media, talking on the phone, or connecting with people in-person.

I know these things aren't bad, but it has taken me some time to figure out my motivations behind the consistent engagement in noise and distraction. I know that this propensity to be consumed with activities is a really effective form of distraction from my fears, worries, and from hearing the voice of God more clearly. I firmly believe the voice of God is good, but I am not always patient enough to discern what all he has to say to me. So, in contributing to this Easter devotional, I am taking steps to be more self-reflective and embrace the stillness and silence that writing requires.

The cross opens our eyes and hearts to see Jesus for all that he is, invites us to know him more, and welcomes us to be his ambassadors. Ambassadorship invites us to do the often slow and steady work of ushering in the new heavens and new earth. In Scripture, one of the overarching narratives of the people of God is that we are exiles, living in a strange land where we know that all is not right and hold out hope for what all could be. In this spiritual exile, we are called to be faithful in our praise and worship of Yahweh, the one and true God, in a land full of many idols. We are called to loyally seek the welfare of our communities and subvert the power structures that dehumanize the image of God in ourselves and our neighbors. This calling of living as an exile manifests in many different ways in our many different lives. This Easter season, the resurrection reminds us that our lives can be marked by unashamed praise for our God and King, radical love for one another, our neighbors, and the ability to labor towards the reality of the new heavens and new earth.

“And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’” - Revelation 21:5

The passages in each of the following devotionals connect to the narrative of Scripture that culminates in the ushering in of the kingdom of God. The devotionals all highlight the character traits of what we will experience in the new heavens and new earth: unashamed praise for Christ and radical love for one another. The worship song at the end of each devotional is to help facilitate deeper personal reflection and meditation. I hope these reflections inspire moments of quiet and opportunities to commune with the Holy Spirit and to clearly hear the voice of God in your life.

Dayna Appiah is new to New Com and Chicago, having moved here last summer from Michigan. She currently works remotely for the U. of Michigan (Go Blue!) and is looking forward to the weather turning this slow corner into something warm.



Fifth Week of Easter - Meditations

Reflection #1: Unashamed Praise. (Psalm 148)

Have you ever been to a college or professional football or basketball game? What about a concert for one of your favorite artists? In both spaces, the audience is laser focused on what is going on at the center of the stage or field and are fully invested in and consumed by every move, play, or note by the athlete or artist. The psalmist who wrote Psalm 148 had the same energy. You can tell that in these psalms of praise that the psalmist's proclamations are not meant to be read sitting down, but seek to capture the heart, and be exclaimed with reverence, as the psalms deserve.

In Luke 19: 36-40, on Palm Sunday, Jesus makes his way down towards Jerusalem. Many followers of Christ along the road loudly rejoice and praise God for all the mighty works they have seen Jesus do. When the Pharisees, standing amongst the crowds, asked Jesus to rebuke them, Jesus' response was "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out." (19:40). Even the very stones would cry out. Can you imagine? Creation in its very existence cries out in praise about the wonders, glories, and mysteries of God!

Because of the suffering and resurrection of Christ, we are invited to shout and praise God for all he has done.

Meditation Question: How do you express and embody your praise and worship due to God for what he has done in your life? *Worship Song: The Earth Shall Know- The Porter's Gate & Urban Doxology*

Reflection #2: Unashamed Praise. (Psalm 148:13 & Philippians 2:8-11)

For those of us who have been following the way of Jesus for a while, the concept of the holiness or set-apart-ness of Christ can almost feel like common knowledge. Some passages become so familiar, we can easily feel like we "got it" and quickly move on. In this Easter season, my hope is that we pause and continually ask the Holy Spirit to give us eyes to see and for our imagination and awe to be fully captivated by the beauty and supremacy of Christ. And also, for us to humbly ask the Spirit to remove barriers to this vision and to remind us of the world-altering work of the cross. We ask and pray these things because the day is drawing near where everyone will bow down and confess Christ as Lord over all.

My prayer is that God in his grace through the power of the Holy Spirit will continue to draw us in and captivate our hearts to see Him for all that He is.

Meditation Question: What area(s) of your life and worship is God asking you to experience more of Himself? *Worship Song: Come Tear Down the Walls - Common Hymnal*

Reflection #3: Our Role in Community: Love One Another. (John 13:31-35)

It is powerful to remember that the mark of a true disciple of Christ is not how much control, influence, or authority we have over others. Nor is it about winning arguments or measuring the validity of our faith by what we know. The evidence of Christ's discipleship in our lives is exemplified by how well we love one another in the body of Christ. In John 13, Christ leaves the disciples with the commandment to love. It seems simple, but in reality, love can be a difficult and complex emotion to show and behavior to express. Even to our favorite people.

Executing this command to love is made even more complex because some of the people we are commanded to love, our fellow disciples in Christ, are not always easy to love or comfortable to embrace. Yet thankfully, God does not leave us to strive to manifest this love of Christ out of our own strength, but graciously pours out on us the power of the Holy Spirit (14:15-17). The Holy Spirit is ever-present with us. He supernaturally works in our lives to desire to live in obedience, to love one another and glorify God by drawing us nearer and nearer to the heart of Christ.

Meditation Question: Who is it more difficult for you to move towards in love? *Worship Song: Pour Out - Urban Doxology*

Fifth Week of Easter - Meditations, continued

Reflection #4: Our Role in Community: Love for our Neighbors. (Matthew 22:34-40 & Jeremiah 29:7)

Jesus taught his disciples to center love above all else. To love and serve our neighbors well, knowing only their problems or needs isn't enough. That may leave us with a one-dimensional view of their humanity. Rather, we need to truly know and be known by them. The church is not perfect and the neighborhood/communities we seek to serve and be a part of are more than news headlines of pain and suffering.

This act of love for our neighbors requires us to actively seek the welfare and peace for our communities. God, through Jeremiah, told the Israelites to settle into Babylon, plant gardens and to genuinely care for the welfare of their exiled home. Similarly, Jesus knew that his disciples (then and now) will also experience spiritual exile from the world and communities we live in. Instead of sheltering in place, we are called to go out, live amongst our neighbors and be used by God to do the slow and faithful work of unveiling aspects of Christ's upside down kingdom in our daily lives.

Meditation Question: Do people in your communities see you, your home or church spaces as places of welcome? *Worship Song: Establish the Work of Our Hands - The Porter's Gate & Urban Doxology*

Reflection #5: Looking back at the Cross to Look Forward. (Revelation 21:1-6)

Reflecting on the kingdom of God finally arriving in full often seems like a far-away reality. However, by God's grace, there are sacred moments of overlap, where heaven meets earth, where the Holy Spirit reveals the attributes and realities of the kingdom that is to come. It can be the moments during a church worship service where the undistracted heart captures the holiness of God and the depth of his love. Or moments in our relationships with dear friends, spouses, partners, and siblings where we feel deeply loved and deeply known, or in nature where we witness awe-inspiring sunsets that we cannot look away from. All of these are glimpses of the new heavens and the new earth where God fully dwells with his people and there is no place for suffering or death. In this kingdom, mourning and tears are replaced with praise and rejoicing.

The Easter season reminds us that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is essential; it establishes this reality and provides us with the hope we have to look forward to. The cross speaks the truest narrative that all we see is not all that there is. God has designed us to wonder, to know him and be known by him, and Christ is our hope for the future and our peace for the present.

Meditation Question: Where in your life does this Easter season remind you to hold on to hope? *Worship Song: Before The Throne - Kings Kaleidoscope*

Sixth Week of Easter

Scripture Passage: John 5:1-9

¹ Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed—and they waited for the moving of the waters. ⁴ From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease they had. ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

⁷ “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

⁸ Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath.

Reflection

There are times when the Bible suffers from the difficulty that plagues all written communication: the inability to definitively ascertain tone. This passage is one of those times.

In its story, Jesus is heading into Jerusalem for a feast via the Sheep Gate. Why of the 10 city gates did Jesus choose the Sheep Gate? Because if there are two things Jesus can't get enough of, it's symbolism and foreshadowing. The Sheep Gate was how sheep were brought into the city to be sacrificed and the it was also the gate that led to Golgotha. Near the Sheep Gate was also the sheep pool for cleansing the sheep before they're sacrificed.

The sheep pool was eventually renamed Bethesda and was a pilgrimage site for “invalids,” people debilitated by sickness or injury. It was believed that an angel would randomly come down and make waves in the pool. The first person to get into the water after that would be healed. So, at a given moment there could be hundreds of people sitting around the pool waiting for their chance to receive healing.

Is it a coincidence that the healing lottery angel visits a former sheep bath outside the city near one of the less desirable gates? Is it a coincidence that some well and resourced person built giant pavilions around the sheep bath to shield the invalids from the sun, so they could remain comfortable and stationary? This reminds me of when I lived in Washington, DC, and there was a plan to centralize all the services and shelters for the homeless on one campus on the outskirts of the city for the homeless people's convenience. I can almost hear the ancient Israelite city planners high-fiving.

Anyway, Jesus walks by the pool and notices a man who had been sick for almost 40 years and had obviously been at the pool a long time. Jesus asks the man, “Do you want to be healed?” Here's where tone becomes an issue. Is Jesus saying, “May I please heal you?” or “Are you even trying?” Not surprisingly, given my tone, I lean toward the latter. The man answers with excuses about others repeatedly beating him to the pool because he doesn't have help. He clearly has faith in the healing lottery angel, but it leads him to wait and watch from a distance. He's spent years sitting in the shade with everyone else, when he could have sat uncomfortably for a few weeks or months closer to the pool and gotten in the water first and without help.

Jesus shows him that none of that matters. The wasted years are behind him. He doesn't need the healing lottery angel or the pool or the helpers. Jesus embodies all these things, a heavenly and an earthly manifestation of God's power and the only hope a broken person has of accessing either of them. Jesus invites him to stand up, pick up the mat, which had become like a grave, and walk into a new life. And, he does.



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Sixth Week of Easter - Meditations

Reflection #1:

Jesus spent most of His ministry preparing His disciples for His death—in some big ways, and in some small ways. Using the Sheep Gate was a small way, maybe even just an inside joke with Himself. Regardless, He entered the city like a sheep purchased at the market, cleaned and ready to be sacrificed for the healing and forgiveness of others. It was a reverse commute from Golgotha, where He would later be crucified. Maybe retracing the path He would eventually take carrying the cross. As with most things Jesus does, it only makes sense to us in hindsight.

Meditation Question: What is God doing in your life right now that doesn't quite make sense? How can God build your faith using your confusion?

Reflection #2:

"Invalid" refers to a person who is debilitated by sickness or injury. Pronunciation aside, the word suggests that being impaired nullifies their humanity. It's a modern, English word that too accurately reflects the way people in Jesus' time would have viewed them. In my telling of the Bethesda story, I described the pool and the associated superstition as a way of marginalizing undesirable people. Placing them in a ghetto. Shrinking their world to the size of a city block. Distracting them for decades with illusions of relative comfort. Pitting them against one another in a zero-sum game of chance, where the prize is becoming an acceptable member of society. A tale as old as time...

Meditation Question: Are there things about you, things you've done, things done to you that make you feel like less of a human? Are there ways that you've been complicit in owning an identity as less than what God created in you? Are there ways that you've been complicit in dehumanizing others? What does resurrection from this look like?

Reflection #3:

The man in the story was stagnated by his faith in something that was God-adjacent. He was committed enough to it that he spent years waiting inactively for a miracle. That God-adjacent thing had the power to inspire faith, but it didn't have the power to inspire works. However impotent the God-adjacent thing was in producing healing in the man's life, it put him in the path of Jesus passing by. And, in Jesus he found everything he had been hoping for.

Meditation Question: Are there things that are tangential to your faith that are taking up too much of your time and your heart? How can Jesus use these things to lead you closer to Him?

Reflection #4:

When Jesus asked the man if he wanted to be healed, the man responded with reasons why he hadn't been healed yet. Like a politician, the man dodged Jesus' question, and answered the question he was prepared to answer. Jesus said, "Two can play that game," and ignored the man's answer. It's possible the man wasn't ready to be healed. He wasn't prepared to fight to get to the pool. He wasn't able to just say "yes" or even "yes, but..." to Jesus' question. Regardless, Jesus was ready for him to be healed. So, He healed him.

Meditation Question: Is there a question that God or life is asking you right now that you don't feel prepared to answer? Do you need to ask God to be patient with you and give you wisdom or do you need to ask God for his answer to the question?

Reflection #5:

Jesus is both God and the Way to God. There are lots of Rubik's-cube-like aspects to Christian life, and some of them feel unnecessarily complicated. But, that's because God knows how easily we get bored and complacent when we have the control we crave. It's also one of the reasons the analogy of romantic love fits. There is in romance, really any relationship, a mystery and a constant unfolding. With every new situation, there's a new thing to learn about yourself and your loved ones. And, if you've run out of riddles to solve, it's because you've stopped paying attention.

Meditation Question: How does God love you through mystery and adventure? What aspects of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection (and your own) do you find the most mysterious?

Seventh Week of Easter

Scripture Passage: Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

¹² “Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. ¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

¹⁴ “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.

¹⁶ “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”

¹⁷ The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

²¹ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.

Reflection

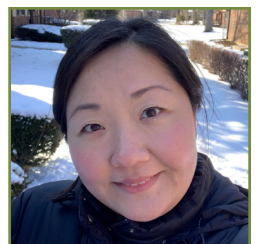
Behold, I am coming soon! This is how our passage begins in Revelation 22:12-14. The Book of Revelation is not an easy book for me to understand because there is so much symbolism, much of which goes over my head. But this is very simple: “Behold, I am coming soon!” These words capture my imagination and fill me with hope: I will get to see Jesus, and finally meet my Lord and Savior.

He says: “Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.” I know that this is our Lord telling us that he is coming back to us, and that we should eagerly await him. But I read and interpret this verse in two ways. The first is that Jesus is coming soon, after suffering, and after he is crucified, dead, then buried. He will rise again to life on the third day, returning to us and bringing us salvation. Then, there is the second meaning, which is that there is a greater coming, when we will go through the gates into the city to be with God. I experience again the duality that comes as part of the Christian life—the already, but not yet—where we are with Christ now and enjoy His resurrection, but anticipate there is also something greater, a time where we are with him ultimately.

The word “come” or “coming” appears 6 times in these verses. Whether you view them in the English Standard Version, or New International Version, King James, or the Message, the word is the same. What does the word “come” mean? As a verb, it means to move, or travel toward to a place near or familiar to the speaker. It occurs to me also whether I can replace the word with something similar, and I find the words “approach” or “draw near,” which resonate with me also. It seems to me that in Revelation 22:17, the Spirit and the Bride not only yell Come! or Draw Near! to Jesus, but they are also calling out to us. Whoever is thirsty, let him approach. Whoever wishes, drink freely of the water of life. As Jesus comes, we come too. As Jesus approaches, we can approach too. I am filled with wonder and gladness that we are invited so easily, repeatedly, to be with Jesus.

I earnestly pray, as John does in Revelation: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

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Seventh Week of Easter - Meditations

Reflection #1: Revelation 22:12-14; Psalm 97:10

In Revelation 22:12, Jesus says “My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.” Instead of “reward,” the ESV version uses the word “recompense” which means compensation given for loss or harm suffered or effort made. Psalm 97 says God guards the lives of his faithful ones, and to love the Lord by hating evil.

Meditation Question: How have you loved the Lord, and hated evil?

Reflection #2: Revelation 22:13; Psalm 97

I wish the whole world would acknowledge His glory, because He is the First and Last. I am waiting for the time when fire would consume our foes, the earth would see and tremble at his lightning, and the mountains would melt like wax.

Meditation Question: When did you last contemplate God’s glory?

Reflection #3: Revelation 22:13-14; John 17:20-26

Sometimes I have trouble picturing heaven. But John 17 gives me a better idea, when Jesus says: “I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.” I want to be in glory where Jesus is.

Meditation Question: In what ways do you picture heaven?

Reflection #4: Revelation 22:16-17; John 17:20-26

In both Revelation 22 and John 17, there is an ongoing invitation to come to Jesus. Jesus prays not only for the disciples, but for those who will believe in the future, through their message. Jesus also says He will continue to make God known to us so that we would have God’s love in us.

Meditation Question: Who have you invited to Christ? How have you shared the message?

Reflection #5: Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Near the end of these verses, there is an open invitation to partake of Jesus. Come whoever is thirsty, take the water of life. Come and take. I sometimes forget that I am thirsty for Jesus and His word.

Meditation Question: Have you forgotten your thirst? What keeps you from coming to Jesus?