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# Crocus Blooms in Wilderness Places



# CROCUS BLOOMS IN WILDERNESS PLACES

Sermons, Prayers, and Reflections during COVID-19

Wake Forest Univ School of Divinity Alumni

Jill Crainshaw, Editor and Lindsey Altvater Clifton, Editor

**Library Partners Press**

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*In honor of all religious leaders as they offer care  
through all of life's seasons.*





## from Isaiah 35

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God. . .*

\*\*\*\*\*

*For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water. . .*



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# Introduction

## **Lindsey Altvater Clifton**

### **An Unexpected Journey Begins**

In the middle of this year's Lenten wilderness (2020), the world was thrust into the unprecedented public health crisis of COVID-19. Grappling with how to respond and the complexities of ever-changing local, state, and national guidance, we all found ourselves in totally unfamiliar territory. It is no surprise that in such wild, strange times, people of faith looked to ministers across a variety of settings for words and rituals of assurance, for virtual community, and for compassionate, socially-distanced presence.

To adapt our inherently embodied, incarnational work into ministries requiring limited or no physical contact continues to be a challenge to which faith leaders rise. Through livestreams, recordings, and video conferencing; through postal mail and doorstep drop-offs; through phone calls, emails, and text messages; through art and music and stories. Using about any medium and platform imaginable, ministers are supporting people of faith of all ages as we try to navigate and make sense of this challenging season together, but apart.

Collected here are sermons and prayers, poems and rituals, reflections and musings gathered from a diverse selection of Alumni from Wake Forest University's School of Divinity. These pastoral words represent efforts to meet the varied spiritual needs of congregations, hospital patients, students, senior living residents, families, and individuals in the face of this pandemic. In them are moments of grief and longing, spaces of Sabbath rest, and even glimpses of hope. They span the period from the third week of Lent, when many limitations on physical gatherings began, through Holy Week, all the way to Easter.

In these words, we hope you find whatever it is you may need: a resource to use in your own ministry, an idea that inspires renewed creativity, a bit of comfort or peace. May this serve as a both a crocus bloom in the wilderness and touchstone to return to during this still-unfolding journey. May it remind us that we

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are not alone. That nothing can separate us from the love of God, and nothing can separate our hearts and lives from one another. Indeed, may the love of God, the compassion of Jesus, and the movement of the Holy Spirit guide us through these challenges we face together.

*Lindsey Altvater Clifton*

*Forest Hills Presbyterian Church, High Point, NC*



# Preface

**Jill Y. Crainshaw**

The Wake Forest University School of Divinity welcomed its inaugural class of students in the fall of 1999. Now, more than two-decades-worth of alumni are sharing their gifts and wisdom as leaders in diverse contexts.

From the moment the Covid-19 health crisis hit our communities and neighborhoods, School of Divinity alumni have been frontline responders. They offered from the outset and are still offering pastoral care to those who acquired the virus and their families, and they are providing wisdom and insight for those who feel overwhelmed and afraid. Within days of the start of social distancing and related shutdowns, School of Divinity alumni also began to imagine and create alternative modes of worship for their communities.

I relished gathering this collection of sermons, prayers, poems, and reflections crafted by some of my former students—Wake Div alumni—during the strange Lenten and Easter seasons of Spring 2020. The theological and pastoral insights the School's alumni have woven into Facebook posts, impromptu prayers, live streamed sermons, and lyrical reflections astound me, and I am excited to share some of them in this edited volume.

Two primary aims were the genesis for this collection. First, I wanted to provide other ministry leaders with a resource for the work they are doing in their communities.

Second, and most important, I wanted to preserve for the future some of the on-the-ground preaching and praying and ministering our alumni were providing for their ministry contexts and beyond. Without question, future historians, theologians, and religious leaders will want to look back on these days and gain wisdom from the theologies and practices that emerged during this crisis. This collection will be a valuable resource for that work.

Many School of Divinity alumni in addition to those whose voices are recorded

in this collection continue to preach and pray and lead in their communities. My only regret is that we could not include every voice.

The prophet Isaiah saw the desert alive with crocus blossoms and heard the wilderness rejoicing. Through the pieces collected in this volume, I hear School of Divinity alumni voices singing out God's promises for a wilderness time. Thanks be to God for their courage and wisdom.

*Jill Y. Crainshaw*

*Blackburn Professor of Worship and Liturgical Theology*

*Wake Forest University School of Divinity*

# **Journeying through Lent and Easter during COVID-19**



# You Are Here

**Andrea Simmonds**

You are here.

The place and moment you  
were trying to avoid.

The place and moment  
You hoped wouldn't find you.

Now you are here.

And all that you need to be  
Is here.

You do not have to be perfect.

Or have it all figured out.

Or be busy as you were.

While you are here it is ok

To rail and rave.

To be afraid, to grieve, to hope.

All of you is here. And

All of you is welcome.

May you find rest and peace.

May the light and warmth of love

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Surround you and keep you.

May you feel connected

while separate and

Know you are not alone.

All you need to be is here.

*Andrea Simmonds*

*Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center  
Parkway United Church of Christ, Winston-Salem, NC*

# The Third Week in Lent





# The Chill

**Duane Hudson Reid**

The eerie stillness of the moment  
compels me to grab my mask  
to go outside and see  
distorted sounds absorb the streets  
protruding, perverse words swarm like locusts  
air pollution is toxic  
liquid particles hijack streams  
Non-stop bad news invokes  
reminiscing of grandma rocking in her lazy boy  
chair  
clutching her sore, twisted knees  
watching soaps on tv  
to pass the time  
to occupy her mind  
bound at home  
with nothing to do  
but chew  
watch

and wait

Smoke is rising

confused words exude

mixed signals promote fantasy

contorted, distorted politicking

feverish realities

swing low, the new strange fruit

is

blue tape

hand protection gloves

church online

school online

virtual reality

no contact delivery

still

shattered, stained-glass remains

white sheets pulled all the way up over open

eyes, closed skies

I can't breathe

ICU

I see quarantines

jam-packed hospitals

caretakers, pushed-to-the-brim

people are sighing, alone

people are dying, alone

bodies are lying, alone

waiting for the curve to flatten

As the world turns

horror scenes spike

the Dow Jones drops

the feds can't print enough healing

the government can't give away enough cheese

silenced weeping, asymptomatic fears

muzzled voices wheezing

empty shelves?

empty streets?

globally

humans wander six feet apart

haphazardly wondering

The eerie stillness of the moment

compels me to go outside to hear

listening to ancestral tongues

stiff shells

fresh, rich soil smells

lilies bloom over perishable remains

forgotten souls still hum

a timeless tune

musings on a thought

thoughts we all think

behind closed doors

we reflect

quietly

about the what

the when

the why

what if I test positive?

when will a vaccine be made?

why is this happening?

this bugs me

so I sanitize my mind

wash my hands

and chill

*Duane Reid*

*Voorhees Township, NJ*

# All Y'All

## Nicole Newton

### John 4:1-30, 39-42

Prayer: Open our hearts, O Lord, that we may be changed by your word to us this day. Amen.

Jonathan looked at me late on Friday night and said, “Lord, this week has been a long year.”

Mercy, if that doesn't feel true.

When I think back to Monday and my first passes at this text, where I thought this sermon was going, it seems laughable. Then there was Wednesday, where I thought I'd have to scrap this whole scripture passage and start again because it just didn't relate at all to what was happening in the world.

Then Thursday, and Friday, even yesterday—things have been changing so quickly all around us this week it has made my head spin. The sermon I was writing in my head on Monday would be ludicrous now.

But this text, this text seems perfect. Put away the old baggage it may have for you, go ahead and lay down any notion that this text is about a sinful woman, or even a theological argument, set aside all the trivia about this being the longest recorded conversation Jesus has with anyone in all of the four gospels, and instead let's see it for what it is: a story about isolation, with questions about where we should worship, a revelation about who Jesus is, and a call for us to respond in real and tangible ways.

First, this is a story of isolation.

By the time Jesus meets the woman at the well, the enmity between Jews and Samaritans is ancient, entrenched, and bitter. The two groups disagree about everything that matters: how to honor God, how to interpret the Scriptures, and

how and where to worship. They practice their faith in separate temples, read different versions of the Torah, and avoid social contact with each other whenever possible. Truth be told, they hate each other's guts.<sup>[1]</sup>

On top of all of that, this Samaritan is a woman—common custom demands that Jesus, as a Jewish man, should not even speak to her in public, let alone ask her for help.

This woman in particular must be doubly isolated for some reason—or else she wouldn't be at the well in the heat of the day. She would have come with all the other women in the early morning, she would have been part of a group instead of alone.

But now here she is, high noon in the desert, heavy chores to do, and some man, some Jewish man, is breaking every rule there is, asking her for a drink and going on and on about "living water." She probably thinks he is crazy at first. She tries to remind him where he is, who she is, and just how out of sorts this whole thing is, but he doesn't seem to hear it. Then he stops her in her tracks by telling her about her personal life, by knowing things he should now know. Perhaps he is a prophet. Maybe he can settle the dispute between Samaritans and Jews that goes back hundreds of years—where are we supposed to worship? On the mountain, in the temple, what really counts in God's eyes?

It's no small question; not then, not today. Whether we're arguing over venues in 1st century Palestine or fretting over livestreams forced upon us by a global pandemic, where and how we worship has always mattered to us.

But beloved, hear Jesus' response to her:

But the time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you're called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter. It's who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly *themselves* before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.<sup>[2]</sup>

It is not the geography that matters, it's the authenticity and intentionality of it.

I have to admit that that is good news to me this week, beloved. As I stand here in the space that we usually inhabit together each week it seems so odd to be preaching to an empty room...but this room isn't empty. We are still gathered together as a body not by our geography, but by our intention to be in community together no matter what. The gift of that is overwhelming. And it's possible not because of who we are—but because of who God is. Because of who Jesus reveals himself to be. Ego eimi, he tells her there in the desert, I am he.

It's a phrase that takes us back to another deserted place, this one at the base of a mountain. Another isolated stranger, another revealing conversation. This time between Moses and a burning bush. Who do I tell them that you are, God? How will they know that it is really you?

I am who I am.

My favorite translation of that verse is Dr. Carson Brisson's — I shall be who I shall be. Tell them that—I shall be sent me to y'all.

From the garden of Eden, to the mount of Horeb, to the desert of Sychar, to right this very minute, and every second to come after, beloved. It's the same name. The same promise. The same God.

No matter how scared, how isolated, how alone we may feel, God's promise never changes. There is nothing—no disease, no disaster, no not even death, that can take that away from any of us.

I don't know about you, but I needed that reminder this week. In the middle of the chaos, God is with us. And because of that, we are called, just like the woman at the well, to leave our work and to go and tell the world—you are not alone!

I shall be sent me to y'all.

While the events of our world may make all traditional ways of doing that difficult, if not impossible, that doesn't absolve us from the call. It just means we must get creative—figure out how to use our gifts for the good of our neighbors in new ways.

I was reminded of that this week as I watched video after video of deserted streets in Italy being filled with song. A trumpeter serenading his neighbors, an opera singer filling the streets with her song, villagers joining their voices, singing together, cheering and clapping for the nurses and doctors headed into work, using their gifts in creative ways so that no one felt alone, being in community together, holding each other up even when they must be physically apart.

In the coming days and weeks, the world will need us to do the same in whatever way that we can. To find creative ways to meet those in isolation and fear and introduce them to the One who promises never to leave or forsake us.

There's a poem circulating around that says this more poignantly than I can.

*Lockdown – – Fr. Richard Hendrick, OFM<sup>[3]</sup>*

Yes there is fear.

Yes there is isolation.

Yes there is panic buying.

Yes there is sickness.

Yes there is even death.

But,

They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise

You can hear the birds again.

They say that after just a few weeks of quiet

The sky is no longer thick with fumes

But blue and grey and clear.

They say that in the streets of Assisi

People are singing to each other

across the empty squares,

keeping their windows open

so that those who are alone

may hear the sounds of family around them.

They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland

Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.

Today a young woman I know

is busy spreading fliers with her number

through the neighbourhood

So that the elders may have someone to call on.

Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples

are preparing to welcome

and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary



All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting

All over the world people are looking at their neighbours in a new way

All over the world people are waking up to a new reality

To how big we really are.

To how little control we really have.

To what really matters.

To Love.

So we pray and we remember that

Yes there is fear.

But there does not have to be hate.

Yes there is isolation.

But there does not have to be loneliness.

Yes there is panic buying.

But there does not have to be meanness.

Yes there is sickness.

But there does not have to be disease of the soul

Yes there is even death.

But there can always be a rebirth of love.

Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.

Today, breathe.

Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic

The birds are singing again

The sky is clearing,

Spring is coming,

And we are always encompassed by Love.

Open the windows of your soul

And though you may not be able

to touch across the empty square,

Sing.

That's it, isn't it, dear ones? In the days and weeks to come we may all find ourselves at some point just like the woman at the well—feeling cut off, alone in a desert place. But just like her, we will also find Jesus there. And he will not leave us in isolation but will call us again into relationship with him and with the world. Promising again and again that I Am that I Am — I shall be who I shall be, dwells with us and sends us out to care for one another even when doing that means keeping our distance. We are standing apart now, so that we can embrace each other later. While we wait, let's throw the windows open and sing.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

*Nicole Newton*

*First Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, NC*

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[1]Debbie Thomas, "Woman at the Well," *Journey with Jesus*, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2561-the-woman-at-the-well-2>, accessed 24 March, 2020.

[2]John 4:21-24, The Message.

[3]<https://www.irishcentral.com/news/coronavirus-lockdown-poem>, accessed 30 April, 2020.

# The Thick Darkness

**Erica Saunders**

**Exodus 19:6-20; 20:18-21**

*Note: This sermon was transcribed from a version recorded and shared with Peace Community Church on the Third Sunday in Lent.*

Friends, this Lent we have been traveling together through the wilderness. We've been traveling with the Israelites through the desert on the journey from escaping enslavement to finding liberation and freedom. And in the meantime, we've been paying special attention to survival each step of the way. And survival in the meantime means caring along the way.

God cared for the Israelites by sending them manna, grain from heaven, and we are the manna for one another, checking in with and serving our neighbor, those whom we love. Jethro cared for Moses as his father-in-law, and Moses cared for the whole people by embracing vulnerability and asking for help. Caring along the way means allowing ourselves to be cared for and asking for help when we need it just as we help others when they are in need.

This week's Torah lesson also demonstrates for us what it means to care for ourselves and one another on the way. It is in these two chapters that the book of Exodus reaches a sort of climax point. The whole congregation of Israelites finally reaches Mount Sinai, and Moses requests that they all keep a safe distance. They fast and they wash themselves and their garments repeatedly. The Israelites were following all the right CDC and WHO guidelines. They did this because Moses knew that God was about to appear on that mountain.

Moses knew that we have to get ready and pay attention to receive God's presence, but even if I had gotten ready, I still wouldn't be prepared for what happened on the top of that mountain. The crash of thunder and the flash of lightning. The thick dark cloud overtaking the area in a stormy blast. The peo-

ple all around me shaking with fear. I imagine that the congregation of the Israelites was at the same time confused and amazed and terrified.

Does that sound familiar to you? A people scared and confused by something they weren't quite prepared to experience? The pandemic of COVID-19 or the novel coronavirus certainly has me feeling scared sometimes. Not only am I scared of contracting this violent virus and suffering its flu-like symptoms, but I'm scared for our community. I'm scared that senior adults and immunocompromised people will become infected and die much too soon. I'm scared that the healthy practices of social distancing and self-quarantine will become unhealthy states of isolation and loneliness and fear.

At times I even find myself confused. What are the right steps to take in such a time as this? How can we reach out to our loved ones while staying safe and healthy? How do we, in the words of one author I read, come together while we stay apart?

I can tell you I certainly wasn't ready for worship to go digital all of a sudden. I swear I must have played with video software after video software and cursed its name for hours after hours this weekend trying to get them to work properly. I'm wondering. I'm asking myself where is God in all of this? How are we supposed to be the body of Christ in a pandemic among so many threatened, vulnerable, suffering bodies in our midst?

Then the people stood at a distance. Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was but an image.

God dwells in the thickest darkness in those places where we can't see anything and in those times when we can't even hear our own voices over the howling of winds and the clashing of thunder, when we feel most scared and alone. God lives there.

At this time, some of us may be drawing near to that deep thick darkness and beholding the awesome and terrible, the fiery and stormy presence of the Lord God. Some of us may take refuge at a distance, keeping the mountain a holy place, relying on others at our sides, in front of us, and behind us for love and support. And most of us I imagine are doing a little bit of both.

The thick darkness of pandemic looms over us still, and we will be dealing with its effects for a while yet as we wander in this new wilderness and sit in this thick darkness, socially distant with raw hands smelling like alcohol and antibacterial soap after 20 seconds of scrubbing to the chorus of Jolene. I mean "The Doxology."

God is still with us, holding us, supporting us, and protecting us. And God's Spirit is calling to us in her shouts and whispers, inviting us to daring new forms

of presence and relationship. In person visits may pause but conversations continue happening over the phone and over video calls. Socializing at restaurants and coffee shops and bars may not be happening as often but intimate walks with your beloved friends and family will go on. Physical presence may be interrupted for the temporary moments. But faith and love will remain, and the greatest of these is love.

Amen.

*Erica Saunders*

*Peace Community Church, Oberlin, OH*



# The Fourth Week in Lent





# Healing and Sheltering

**Christina Cataldo**

## **Psalm 23**

I read an article about four years ago and I've wanted to preach on it since. I just couldn't find the right time. Today might be a right time. As we are in a time of social isolation and maybe even of sheltering in place, as we are in a time of great need for prayers for healing, of the need for good leadership, this story might serve as a guide and a buoy for us. I hope you will hear this story about a basketball coach and her players and remember all the sheep and their shepherds and all the people who need healing and guidance through the valleys.

In 2016, Coach Pat Summitt, storied coach of women's basketball at the University of Tennessee, died after having been diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's. In the days and weeks after she died, I was not at all surprised to hear former players and rival coaches speak of her deep skill, tenacity, and fierce care for her players.

One of her former players, Abby Conklin, said, "There's something about that woman. She gets things out of you that you never knew were in you."

Another player, Candace Parker said, "She taught me hard work. She's the hardest-working woman I've ever met in my life. She just didn't just say things; she did what she said. That was evident in the way she lived and the way she taught us as players."

While I read those two quotes in an article by a journalist named Mechelle Voepel, they echoed something I always heard growing up in Tennessee. Pat Summitt was a really good coach.

Another article, though, showed me parts of Coach Summitt's career that I knew less about. Professor Jonathan W. Gray wrote about her for Fusion Network. He said, with a clarity that I appreciate as an East Tennessean, that Pat Summitt

was the greatest college basketball coach of all time. He also said that it wasn't just her impressive win record (She did lead the Lady Vols to 1,098 wins in her 38 seasons as coach) that helped her merit being called the greatest. He said that "her character and her quiet commitment to her players' well-being, both on and off the court" was what made her the greatest. You see, Coach Summitt cared deeply for her players. She worked for the well-being of their whole selves in a way that few coaches have reproduced.

Dr. Gray argues that you can look at the diversity of the background of her teams, teams that she began cultivating in the 1980's in East Tennessee, to see evidence of the trust she was able to build with each team member and their families.

She was able to convince black families from Chicago, New York, and Atlanta that her program would be a safe place where their daughters would flourish, even though it was in a smaller, less diverse, southern city. Many of these students flourished under her mentorship. Some of the players with the greatest legacies as Tennessee Volunteers are black women like Semeka Randall, Tamika Catchings, and Chamique Holdsclaw. They trusted her with their college careers, and she made sure they could thrive in Knoxville.

Coach Summitt would also find great players in rural and small towns across the country, many of them white, and convince their parents to send them to a city, any city, to play. They may have never even had a conversation with someone who was black, much less played on a team with black players.

Coach Summitt would take all these players under her wing and teach them to be a team.

Dr. Gray held up Chamique Holdsclaw as a particularly powerful example of Coach Summitt's dedication. While she was a Lady Vol, the team won three back to back national championships. Holdsclaw has also been called the best women's basketball player of the 20th Century. Holdsclaw played professionally after college, too, but struggled with physical injuries and significant mental health issues. At one point, she didn't believe she should live anymore. At her lowest, she was arrested and ended up on probation for three years for assault. She is doing better now. She has a treatment plan for her bipolar disorder and depression and has worked hard to help break the stigma around mental illness. In talking about her recovery, she has talked about Coach Summitt's role in her life.

Holdsclaw began to have depression symptoms while she was in college. She came to Coach Summitt and Coach made sure she could go to a therapist off campus, where she felt more comfortable. Holdsclaw herself talks about how hard it was for her to actually engage with that first therapist and she didn't go

for very long. She would have another low point several years into her professional career, disappearing into her home and not responding to anyone who came to check on her. Coach Summitt came to her city to try to help. Later, after Holdsclaw was arrested for assault, Coach Summitt asked her to come to Knoxville to check in. Holdsclaw credits that conversation as being a start to a recovery of her health. When Coach helped her see that she'd need to work hard to be well and work with a healthcare team, Holdsclaw began to put in the work she needed to with this different kind of team to get to a better place.

Also important to this story is that Chamique Holdsclaw had come out as a lesbian while in college. It wasn't widely known in the media, but her coach knew. It was not easy to be an out college student in the late 1990's, especially with all the attention that was on Holdsclaw for her basketball skills. Other coaches during that same era demanded that their players be in the closet and recruited players by assuring homophobic families that there were no lesbians on their teams. At least one division I coach actually had a reputation for forcing players who she assumed were gay off her team. Coach Summitt never did that. She never insisted her players remain closeted. She never chased them off her team. She just coached them.

Chamique Holdsclaw wore number 23 on her jersey when she played for the Volunteers. In that era, most people assumed she did so because it was Michael Jordan's number and he was her favorite player. But she actually wore 23 because of Psalm 23. Her grandmother June was deeply religious. She had raised Holdsclaw and had been a deep well of support for her throughout her life. Psalm 23 was her grandmother's favorite Psalm.

Today, when I hear these words from scripture about a God who is a good shepherd, I think of Coach Summitt's work as a shepherd to her players, to Chamique Holdsclaw in particular. Imagine what Holdsclaw's life could have been had she ended up with a coach who did not support her mental health or tried to run her out of basketball because she was a lesbian. Imagine how things might have been had her coach not continued to care for her long after her college ball days were over. It seems clear that, even when her life was the hardest, she was confident, with Coach Summitt, that she was always welcome at the table. She was confident that she would be offered mercy, confident that in their relationship she could find stability in the valley of the shadow of death. When I hear this story, and the Divine Spirit that connected these two women, I am sure that it is one place where scripture comes alive.

Right now, we are living in our own deathly shadows. Those of us who are lucky have safe homes to shelter in, flexible jobs, and family and friends who can run errands for us if we are sick or worried about getting sick. We have working phones and internet services to keep us connected. Even if we are lucky and

have these supports in place, we may still be fearful for our health, the health of the people we love, and the health of our nation and world.

It is good in these times to be reminded of the ways that we see the Good Shepherd reflected in the good shepherds in our midst, be they basketball coaches or the directors of the Maine CDC. It is good to be reminded that good shepherding looks like hard work and fierce care for the most vulnerable. And it is good to be reminded God is here, in our valleys, with us.

And if our Good Shepherd is here, we can find a way into the green pastures. May we find comfort in this valley as well as discover a path to get us out of it.

*Christina Cataldo*

*Winthrop Congregational Church, Winthrop, ME*

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Vic Vela's interview with Chamique Holdsclaw: <https://www.cpr.org/podcast-episode/ep-3-chamique-holdsclaw/>

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# A Campus Minister's Prayer

**Jasmyn Graham**

God,

Today we give thanks that our eyes have opened to the dawning of a brand-new day, understanding that this is due to no goodness of our own.

As we go forth into this day, we pray that you build a hedge of protection around those who work in our healthcare system. As they care for others, I pray you continue to stand with them, and alongside them.

God, we pray for families this morning who have to make hard decisions between staying home to take care of their children and going to work in order to make ends meet. We pray too for those children who will have to grow up too soon because of this moment and meet the demands of a society and world that is unkind in order to watch over younger siblings while parents are at work.

We pray for those who face being laid off and unemployed, and we ask, God, that you meet their needs in overflowing abundance.

God, we pray for those parents who are home-schooling children and who are struggling as their lives have been turned inside out. We pray for those single mothers and fathers today who are doing the best that they can.

God, we pray for our babies whose lives have been turned inside out, who were looking forward to graduation but are learning that none of these plans are certain. God, comfort their hearts, as they have worked hard to reach such an amazing milestone in their lives.

God, we pray for our educational system and for teachers and leaders who have had to adapt to this new normal.

God, we pray for those of us who are dealing with depression.

God, touch pastors and congregations, and let us be a light in the world that can't be hidden.

We pray for the lives being ravaged by this pandemic. We pray for our local and federal government leaders. We ask that as they make decisions, you will cause them to do it for the good of humanity. Don't let their moral compass be shifted by selfish or greedy desires.

God, we are grateful that we can take our burdens, concerns, and frustrations and leave them all in your hands. We and everything that concerns us are in your hands, and you, God, can make everything alright. You, oh Lord, are a shield around each of and a lifter of our heads. As we progress through this day, let us not forget to give thanks. Help us to focus on you, and let our hope be in you.

Give us wisdom as we continue to make decisions.

In Jesus' Name!

Amen!

*Jasmyn Graham*

*Virginia State University, Virginia Conference United Methodist Church, Petersburg,  
VA*

# One Thing I Know

**Patrick Cardwell**

## **John 9:1-41**

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.

Thus begins one of the most beloved hymns of the past two centuries, filling our sanctuaries, comforting our hearts, encouraging us in times of joy and sorrow. And the text for today's passage is what inspired John Newton to first pen those words in 1772.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.

We've certainly needed a little more of that this week, haven't we?

Grace for each other as we all adjust to a new, but temporary, reality for a while.

Grace for our brothers and sisters who need us to stay home so they can stay well.

Grace for restaurant workers and grocery store stockers and teachers and medical professionals who are overrun and overworked during long and demanding days.

Grace, grace, grace.

It's what we see at the beginning of the biblical passage, as the disciples question Jesus about a blind man and his connection to sin. Jesus immediately rebukes such a thought – this isn't about sin, folks – and he heals the man born blind.

And how Jesus does that exactly is at best gross and off-putting and at worst dangerous and invasive.

That kind of healing – spitting in the ground, mixing spit with dirt to create

mud, and then rubbing that mud on the man's face with his bare hands – would surely not be welcome in these days of social distancing and protective hand hygiene. I guess Jesus missed that memo from the CDC.

Now don't get me wrong, the guidelines we have in place are reasonable and fair and well-intentioned. But they can also leave us feeling isolated, left out, distanced and shoved aside – not totally unlike the man Jesus heals.

However, this man had been pushed to the very limits of society, his blindness seen as a sure sign of sin. So, he was passed by time after time after time by the people who knew him – but only by his lack of physical sight. They didn't see him for who he truly was. They failed to look past what they saw with their eyes to see who he was as a person, as a child of God.

We're reminded of our earlier reading from 1 Samuel, where God speaks to Samuel and reminds him that "the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

This brings us to a connecting point for our current climate: the challenge of bodily existence. Most of us face some sort of bodily challenge that has been brought to mind more recently. You may not be blind, but perhaps you are a person who is immunocompromised, or you have high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, anxiety, or difficulties with kidneys. The challenges that we face individually have been brought to the forefront of our lives if they weren't there already.

But what the disciples see, and maybe what we see in ourselves, as a limiting disability, Jesus doesn't.

"That God's works may be revealed" we hear Jesus say about the man's blindness (John 9:3).

A clarifying point here – this isn't a cheap and tawdry theological whitewash but instead an opportunity to name directly the way others have seen this man and reframe how we might see him anew – as Jesus does.

Here's what I mean: over the past week, we have all been confined to our homes for the safety of ourselves and others. Yes, there are limits as a result, and life looks different, but that doesn't have to be a bad thing. We have lived life differently this week, and hopefully we have seen and heard things differently than we might have otherwise.

More than once this week, I was overloaded by the increased amount of screen time that everyday communication has taken on. So, on those days, I took a little more time to sit with the TV off and my phone on silent and really listen to the sounds around me. I heard birds singing about the arrival of spring. I



listened to the reassurance of nearby church bells, ringing out in hope as they always have. I heard the laughter of children playing outside with their parents, spending more time at home. I took more time to talk to my own parents and check to make sure they have what they need. I felt the breeze on my face and stood in the sun for a few minutes.

These days are different, but they don't have to be debilitating or disconnected from the things that matter. In the extra time I had at home, I also found a great story to share about a man who is blind but hasn't let it stop him from seeing his own giftedness.

John Bramblitt lost his eyesight almost 20 years ago when he was a student at the University of North Texas.

"I relearned how to paint. I relearned how to do everything. And when you lose your eyesight, you have to learn a new way to do everything," he said.

And last May, John took on a tall task – quite literally. He decided to create a four-story mural in the Bishop Arts District of Dallas, Texas. Bramblitt's wife, Jacqui, gives him pointers, telling him where he needed to put the boom. From there, the blind artist said he feels the wall to make sure he is where he thinks he is.

Bramblitt also discovered a special black paint that he uses because it feels very slick and different from the brick. It also feels different than other colors. He can feel for the black lines to determine where to put his brush. The mural that he's working on depicts a woman who is sitting on a porch playing a guitar. It's bright and colorful. Bramblitt thinks it represents that area of the city.

"We're in the Bishop Arts District. It's a very fun, kind of laid-back place. It's full of art and music. And whenever I hear music, I see colors. So, I have to have bright colors," he said.

Bramblitt painted the design on canvas first and broke it down into stages. But now that it's on a wall, he often loses his place.

"The wonderful thing about art is that it's all about what you can do. What you can't do doesn't even enter the equation. So, you just figure out a way to do it and if that doesn't work try to find another way," he said.

Another way – of life, of meaning, of existence – is what Jesus gives to this unnamed man in John 9. No longer known only by his blindness, he is healed. And now, even the people of his town don't recognize him, and certainly not everyone rejoices with him.

That's been the most eye-opening part of the story for me this week. The miracle portion of the story comprises only seven (SEVEN!) verses of these 41.

What happens in the remaining verses? Lots of debate, lots of questions, lots of what-ifs and wondering about the unknown. If you go back through the passage with a highlighter or a pen, you can highlight 18 question marks in 41 verses.

There's so much time spent on the questions, and that's where I've found myself in the story this week. Not rejoicing, but mostly questioning and thinking, planning and praying, worrying and wondering. What if I can't hug a church member or make a visit in person for the foreseeable future? What if my own friends or family get sick? What about our finances? What if there isn't enough to make it through? Enough food, enough soap, enough creativity, enough hope?

We already know that Lent is a season for questions, but I didn't count on this many.

Preaching Today contributor Ted Olsen offers his thoughts on these questions with a relatable commentary:

This is how I tend to approach problems, too. Or any question, really: I want to know. I keep believing that if I can just gather enough information, it will protect me against suffering. When I'm in pain, yes, I want a shoulder to cry on. But I also want a really good library and access to Wikipedia. There's a lot of truth to the saying that knowledge is power. But it's a lie to think that if we just gathered enough information, then we'd have control.<sup>[1]</sup>

What are the things we know? Or don't know? That's been at the heart of our questions and worries and concerns this week.

Indeed, this is part of why we're shifting our traditional methods of worship to an online format that's new and uncomfortable. We don't know how long this outbreak will last. We don't know who might get sick if we gather in person. Maybe some of us don't know where we'll get toilet paper or hand soap or Clorox wipes or basic food items. I name those questions not to overwhelm us or to give even more space to fear and doubt but to be honest about the things that we bring with us into this moment.

But in the midst of so many things that we don't know, we can find a kinship with the people from today's passage. We can also see remarkable hope-filled, truth-filled, Spirit-filled things that we DO know and can claim fully this morning.

One thing we can know for ourselves today is that Jesus comforts us in our sickness and our fear.

"I am the light of the world," he says.

He's said it before, in John 8, and he says again here in John 9, reiterating and reinforcing his illuminating presence for our lives.

But look closer with me at what Jesus says – “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” That statement begs the question, “Is Jesus still in the world?” Is he still with us? Is he still here?

It may not always look like it, especially now, especially in these days. But surely Jesus is still in the world – through you and me. The light of Christ comes to us and surely shines through us, friends, especially in moments when darkness seems to engulf us.

Jesus' teaching at the end of the passage also clearly shows us that blindness is more than just physical.

Gail O'Day, a John scholar and my former dean at Wake Forest, writes that this is “one of the story's central theological themes: Blindness is not determined simply by seeing or not seeing, but by recognizing the works of God in Jesus.”<sup>[2]</sup>

All the questions from the Pharisees, from the townspeople, even from this man's parents – are asked out of worry and fear. So, blindness presents itself not only as physical, as with the healed man, but also as spiritual and emotional.

We've seen it for ourselves this week – the way fear spreads faster than this virus – with the hoarding of food and medical supplies and guns.

And even in the midst of that fear, in the midst of the questions, in the middle of our passage, the man speaks up: “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

“One thing I know” – right in the middle of the passage. As the voices around him hurl speculation and accusation and declaration, there is one thing that this man knows – “I was blind, but now I see.”

Can that be true of us today? Can we allow Jesus to stoop down before us, to make mud from the dust of the earth, and create a new person? Can we be people who are delivered from the worries of the present and fear of the future? Can our eyes be opened to see Jesus in front of us? Not just the Jesus from this passage, but the Christ who comes to us as our neighbors and friends who are more susceptible to COVID-19? The Christ who comes to show us another way, even in our shadows and uncertainty?

The shadows in this passage point to the cross. We are just a few short weeks from Good Friday, and the authorities' resentments are gathering like a storm.

But the good news of the Gospel this week is nonetheless clear, especially as a pandemic sets in around the world: Jesus comes to give us true sight and

insight; to make disciples out of ordinary, excluded, disinherited people; and to free us from the ways we blindly blame and scapegoat one another.

Think of the hardships of this time in another way, Jesus says – not as results of some sins in the past, but rather as occasions to see and to celebrate “God’s works” of amazing grace here and now. May that grace open all our eyes from the blindness of fear to know for ourselves that God is with us, even in this place and this time.

Amen.

*Patrick Cardwell*

*Lindley Park Baptist Church, Greensboro, NC*

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[1]Ted Olsen, “Well, What Do You Know,” *Preaching Today*, <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2017/august/well-what-you-know.html>, accessed 20 April 2020.

[2]Quoted by Frank Trotter, “That Which Blinds Us,” a sermon excerpted in “John 9:1-41 Worship and Preaching Resources, A Far Country (Blog), WordPress.com, <https://willhumes.net/2015/09/23/john-91-41-worship-and-preaching-resources/>, accessed 30 April 2020.

# The Fifth Week in Lent



# A Reflection

## Arthur Cameron Robinson

On Tuesday, February 25th, my wife stood at the stove flipping pancakes on a hot griddle. We'd invited around 10 folks over to celebrate Shrove Tuesday. This was a new experience for almost all involved, but they quickly picked up on the only requirement: Eat and be merry.

Joy and I have grown to love this preface to Lent, not only because we like Pancakes, but because it reminds us of the beauty of liturgical tradition, especially the season of Lent. With the arrival and spread of COVID-19, we have all unwittingly become participants in this same season. The difference is that we didn't have a Shrove Tuesday, a day that alerted us of the season of fasting that was about to come. No, for most of us, this happened pretty rapidly, and we weren't afforded true preparation.

So, we panicked, we bought toilet paper, and hunkered down, and now we find ourselves waiting.

We wait for that day when we can walk back into our favorite restaurant, or for the opportunity to give our elderly grandmother a hug. For some, we long to return to work, and some of us pray that the schools save us from our children. Regardless of what we're waiting on, for the first time in a long time, we are united through waiting, and united through hope.

Surprisingly, what accompanies my waiting is an ever-growing frustration. I am frustrated that it takes a global crisis for the loss of wages to matter. I am angered that even in the midst of thousands of lives being lost, the economy is what our leaders care about and not the death of citizens. I am frustrated that my career takes so many hours away from time with my children, something that I didn't value until COVID. I hate that I don't know how to farm and have to rely solely on the grocery store. I am deeply frustrated that it took three days of weaning from my regularly scheduled events to even be able to sit still and see the sunrise, showing my addictions to the speed of my previous life.

Waiting is apparently much more difficult than it seems, for it brings to the surface an awareness. Maybe that is intentional. Maybe the practice of fasting intentionally awakens us and causes us to change. Granted, this assessment is from a significant vantage point of privilege, but my frustration highlights for me what are systemic deficits. And anytime we see deficits, we unknowingly see solutions. Our unprobed solutions end up being the hope that unites us and helps us create a world of rightly ordered priorities.

I have hope that humans will begin to matter more than machines, as we lose humans due to the lack of machines. I have hope that “love thy neighbor” becomes more than a generic mantra but is consumed to the point of literal application. I have hope that the skies will remain clear, because we take the health of our earth seriously. I pray for more quiet nights where families play hopscotch, take long walks, and even learn a new hobby together. I have hope that we will slow down enough to notice the beauty of our daughter’s eyes or the infectious laughter of our sons.

Waiting awakens another component of our humanity. It is that shared humanity that draws us closer to each other. I suspect the full spectrum of human emotion is present in every living room where a loved one is absent, dependent upon a ventilator for survival. I also suspect that the full range of human emotion existed at the feet of Jesus on the Cross, and even in that huddled mess of leaderless disciples after Jesus’ death.

We are unified in our humanity, in our frustrations, and in our hope.

And today, we are unified in our waiting.

May we wait well, ever aware of the present need to simply be present, unsure of what tomorrow holds, but deeply aware of the moments that pass us by, awaiting to be taken advantage of.

May we not grow weary during this fast, for with every fast, there is a feast.

May the Resurrection of Jesus and the promise of defeat over death, sickness, and even poverty, empower us to step into the involuntary fasts of our neighbors and be light in what feels like darkness for so many.

*Arthur Cameron Robinson*

*Reformed Episcopal Church, Spartanburg, SC*



# An Untitled Sermon

**Jon Watt**

**John 11:1-45**

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

You can still hear the pain dripping from Martha’s, and then Mary’s voice; the longing; even the accusation. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

When you’re in grief – when the pieces of your life lie shattered around you so that you can’t figure out which one to pick up first, let alone how you’re going to get them to stick back together again, the world itself seems to stop spinning and time slows. Three days of grief can feel like a month of regular time, which converts to roughly one week of quarantine time.

I don’t mean to sound heretical, but I’ve always thought this was the one story where Jesus took things too far. Clearly, Jesus didn’t need to be there to heal Lazarus. He healed the Centurion’s servant, a man he didn’t even know, from the middle of the road without breaking stride. How much easier must it have been for him to do the same for someone he loved?

Besides, aren’t there perks to being on the inside? Shouldn’t having a good relationship with Jesus earn you some sort of extra favor? The lament rings clearly through the sisters’ pain: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

What do you do when you feel like even God has abandoned you?

This seems a particularly relevant question these days. Maybe it’s one you’ve asked. This would all be so much simpler if Jesus would just heal us, would just snap his fingers and put the world right again, would just allow our graduates to walk and our workers to work again, would invite us to lay down the mountains of anticipatory grief and anxiety which are slowly crushing us.

And so our voices join together within the great tradition of lament and we cry out with the sisters, “Lord, if you had just been here.”

We know that Jesus can heal him. He just chooses not to. John’s Gospel tells us Jesus delayed for God’s glory, but the delay doesn’t feel glorious. It feels like Jesus is forcing drama where none was necessary, grandstanding even.

Except that that’s not really Jesus’ way, so there must be something else going on here, something important. Something so important that it was worth delaying three days, even if that meant hurting people he loved, even if the tragedy of Lazarus’ death and the aching of his beloved’s souls would overcome Jesus so that he, too, breaks down.

Jesus needed those three days because without them we might have missed the point. Without them, his actions might have felt like business as usual, just another ordinary, run-of-the-mill miraculous healing.

But it’s been three days and healing is not an option here. Lazarus is gone. This isn’t *The Princess Bride*. Lazarus isn’t mostly dead. He is completely dead. Many Jews of that time believed that a soul hung around a body for three days before moving on. This meant that up until that third day, something might be done. A miraculous healing might occur. But Jesus stalls, so any type of healing, even a miraculous one, is off the table.

But this isn’t a healing. It’s a resurrection.

Jesus says to Martha, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’

It’s an odd thing to ask a grieving person, but he needs her to understand. The three days weren’t for naught. There’s reason to hope. There’s a method to the madness. More important, there is some unbelievably good news here.

Growing up, I was always taught that what happened next – Jesus miraculously raising Lazarus from the dead – was proof of what was awaiting each of us in the end times. If we would but believe and do our best to follow Jesus, this teaching said, we would one day be raised like Lazarus.

You can hear it clearly in Jesus’ words, “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. It is as if through his language Jesus is promising this pending resurrection and the life to come to Martha not once, but twice.

But what if there’s more to it than that. What if Jesus isn’t making a literary repetition, isn’t underlining the importance of the life to come with his use of lan-

guage, but is instead making a two-part promise: a promise of unexpected gifts – unexpected life – both in the life to come *and* now?

What if, as part of this promise, Jesus is offering countless mini-resurrections – times when we will die and be reborn, throughout the whole of our life, until we get to the final death and resurrection at the end of our lives? This is why the three days mattered.

Nadia Bolz Weber explores this idea in her book about being a pastor. We are all in need of resurrection, she says, both in the final sense and in the immediate sense. We all have tombs in our lives, caves within our heart. Each one represents an ending of something—a relationship, a belief, a moment—maybe even the end of this quarantine.

God has an amazing way of reaching into our tombs, Bolz Weber continues, and shining light on dark places. God has a way of resurrecting us from graves that keep us entombed. God just keeps loving us back to life over and over again.<sup>[1]</sup>

This is why the three days were worth it. Yes, Jesus could have healed Lazarus from afar, but he needed Mary and Martha—and us—to realize the lengths and depths to which God would go for sake of love. That there was nothing out of God's reach. And that means that we are never alone, even if we feel like we are, because hope was and is shining and always will shine through the darkness because there is no place God's love cannot go – even if we've put a giant stone in the way.

As we move through this last week of Lent and prepare for Holy week, even in the midst of unknown times and great anxiety, I invite you to be surprised by empty tombs, surprised by the thing you never saw coming. Be surprised by God's love showing up in unexpected places, surprised at being filled and comforted by unexpected grace. Be surprised that a relationship you thought was dead is not, surprised that a part of you, long dormant, might walk again. Surprised, as we say, at empty tombs and the suddenness of dawn.

Thanks be to God for this love which will never let us go.

Amen.

*Jonathan Watt*

*St. James Presbyterian Church, Jenks, OK*

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[1]Paraphrased from Nadia Bolz Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint* (New York: Jericho Books, 2014).



# An Untitled Sermon

## Analyse Triolo

John 11:1-45

*[At least 3 deep breaths]*

It's been another tough week hasn't it? We just completed our second week of our building closure at Holy Trinity, and it's been a week since Governor Cuomo issued his New York on P.A.U.S.E. order. With the number of cases skyrocketing here in New York and around the country, and the reports changing seemingly every minute, it's a lot to take in. Sometimes it's too much.

*[Breath]*

This morning we find Mary and Martha, two of Jesus' longtime friends, in a moment that is just too much. Their brother is very ill, and in desperation, they send for Jesus to come and heal him, knowing with every fiber of their being that Jesus could do what they ask of him. When Jesus receives their message, Lazarus' name isn't even given. He is simply told "he whom you love is ill."

The gospel says that though Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus dearly, he waited two days before returning to Bethany in Judea. Jesus tarried rather than going immediately to the aid of his friends and even says that he is glad that he waited. Then Jesus does go to Bethany and promises that greater things will happen because he waited.

As he travels to Bethany, Jesus learns that Lazarus died four days earlier and that Lazarus' grieving family wants an explanation for Jesus' delay in coming to them. Martha doesn't even wait for Jesus' arrival. She goes out to him, meeting him on the road, and in her anguish, she says "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Jesus promises her that her brother will rise again, and Martha resolutely

affirms her belief that one day that will be true. Jesus asks if she believes and she says that she does.

Then Jesus encounters Mary. When Mary sees him, she kneels at his feet as she has done so many times before and says to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Mary cries. We can almost feel the flood of emotions coming out in her tears: anger, disappointment, confusion, sorrow and more. We hear the unasked questions too: Why did you take so long? Why didn’t you help? Where were you?

I can’t help but wonder if we’ve been asking similar questions recently. Maybe you’ve been asking “Why is this happening?” or “Where is God in all this?” I know that these questions have been in my mind. In suffering, there’s a palpable feeling of separation, not just from one another but even from God.

When he sees the pain of his friends, Jesus is moved in heart and in spirit. Jesus, the embodiment of God’s own self, weeps. He weeps just like Mary and Martha do over the loss of his friend. Jesus allows himself to be vulnerable and to emotionally express the love, compassion, and pain that he feels. Jesus expresses anger while flipping tables in the temple, he expresses frustration with the disciples when they don’t understand the point he is making, and Jesus weeps at the grave of his friend.

These responses are so human. Jesus feels the same emotions that we do, even as the crowd gathers asks, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

While some questions don’t have easy answers, the question of where God is present in the midst of suffering is readily apparent. God is right here in the midst of our vulnerability. In Jesus, God joins Mary and Martha in their suffering. God joins us in ours too. God shows up in the tears.

But the story doesn’t end there. Jesus prays and gives thanks to God in the midst of the suffering of those gathered and cries out with a loud voice “Lazarus come out!” and miraculously Lazarus walks out of the tomb.

In the midst of his own deeply felt emotions, Jesus reverses illness and death. Illness do not get the final word.

The Coronavirus won’t get the last word either, beloveds, though the battle against it is far from over.

Lazarus coming back to life does not erase the pain those who loved him felt. It doesn’t make his death any less real. It doesn’t mean that Lazarus was never sick to begin with.

What Lazarus' resurrection does show us is that in the midst of all of that there is still life.

Jesus tells the people gathered to unbind him and to set him free. In the midst of disaster, not knowing what on earth has happened, the first thing that Lazarus experiences upon walking out of the tomb is help.

I can't help but think of a lesson I learned from Mr. Rogers:

Fred Rogers often told this story about when he was a boy and would see scary things on the news: "My mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers — so many caring people in this world."<sup>[1]</sup>

I have been brought to tears repeatedly this week reading stories of the helpers.

Those stories give me strength in the midst of all the horror we are witnessing. In the midst of this outbreak and the precautions we are taking to prevent the spread, it is important to make sure that we're taking care of ourselves and one another. That is why we will continue social distancing even during Holy Week and Easter, even though we deeply wish we could be together. That is why we call, text, and livestream to check in on one another. We are still connected in this crisis, and God is right here with us in the midst of every emotion and every question we have.

Growing up, one of the places I'd look for music to soothe my soul was in Broadway soundtracks. No matter what it was I was feeling in a given moment, there was always a showtune that responded to the emotion. Whether I was at my highest high or my lowest low, Broadway never let me down, no matter what life threw my way. This week was no exception.

"You Will Be Found" in the Broadway musical *Dear Evan Hansen* has some poignant wisdom to share with us:

Even when the dark comes crashing through

When you need a friend to carry you

And when you're broken on the ground

You will be found.<sup>[2]</sup>

Remember, beloveds, that God has found you in the midst of all that is going on in our world today. God has found you when what you're dealing with is just too much. God has found you in your brokenness, your anger, your fear, your questions, and your tears and will not let you go. You are not alone.

*Analyse Triolo*

*Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Bellarose, NY*

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[1]Family Communications, Inc., “Helping Children Deal with Tragic Events in the News,” North Carolina Department of Public Health and Human Services, 2004, <https://files.nc.gov/ncdhhs/documents/files/MisterRogersFINAL.pdf>., accessed 22 March 2020.

[2]Justin Paul and Benj Pasek, “You Will Be Found,” Dear Evan Hansen Original Broadway Cast Recording, Atlantic Records,Track 8, 2017, MP3.

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**Questions for Reflection on Facebook**

How are you caring for yourself today?

What are you doing to take a break from all that is going on?

How can we as a community hold each other up together?

Where do you see the helpers?



# **Palm Sunday and Holy Week 2020**



# From Crowds to Community

**Sabrina Nichole**

## **Gospel of Mark**

It had been days. Between gluing my eyes to news clips and scrolling my phone for social media highlights, I entered into my own world of internal chaos and uncertainty. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I couldn't handle what I was hearing, or so I thought. I watched. Prayerfully. Thoughtfully. As an empath and highly sensitive person, I had to give myself an extra dose of self-care because the images of sickness and suffering were becoming a bit too much. A new disease – well, new to me at least – was ravaging the global community. First, I read reports about China, then Italy, then the United Kingdom, and so on. But it was absolutely undeniable: a virus that once seemed a million miles away was now hitting much closer to home. The Coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, was just beginning to make its presence known and felt in the United States.

Day after day, I awaited the most recent updates and tuned in to North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper's press conferences like I was listening to my favorite radio station. Precautionary instructions were released to the public, including warnings to avoid crowds larger than 50 people...then 25...then 10. And before too long, the government released a "Stay-at-home" order to stop the spread of COVID-19. Businesses have either shut down or have been forced to innovate the delivery of their services to the public. Schools are closed, and caregivers are having to wade through the muddy waters of curriculum instruction in order to homeschool our children. Nursing facilities, prisons, hospitals – no institution has been untouched by this pandemic. Even some of the most primitive houses of faith have had to become acquainted with the power of technology to release messages of hope and inspiration in dark times. These days are unprecedented, at least for recent generations. Indeed, these days feel more like the start of endless nights. But like watching a tiny ember boldly and coura-

geously staying lit in a dying fire, I noticed a small piece of light. A tiny bit of warmth in the cold dark. Something else was and is unfolding in this new world.

I began to notice more acts of kindness. I began to see more intentionality around bringing people together in some manner since there is now so much physical distance between us. We are trying to figure out what to do, how to live *now*, and how to hold on to hope and each other. Hashtags declaring “together we can make it” and “take care of each other” accent my social media feed along with tips on how to take care of oneself during “Corona Quarantine.” I began thinking to myself: “What a phenomenon! Hidden gems of community have become more visible, even though crowds have gotten smaller.” I’ve been pondering this idea ever since. In fact, I find this concept repeatedly entering my thoughts and prayerful contemplations as I have visited the Gospel of Mark.

### *A Reading of Mark’s Gospel*

The Gospel of Mark is considered to be the first of its kind, a written narrative upon which the other Gospels are likely based. Despite what we now surmise as its first place in Gospel chronology, for almost two millennia this work was virtually ignored. As one scholar put it, “the Second Gospel was overshadowed by its neighbors in the canon” (Black, 2011, location 561). To put my spin on it, I would say that for quite some time, the other canonical works needed to make some room for their predecessor to sit comfortably at the table of hermeneutics and theology.

It seems that Mark’s Gospel was written to an audience facing a period of persecution, i.e., early Christians who were experiencing firsthand their own stories of family betrayal, injustice with courts and subsequent tragedies “for [Christ’s] name’s sake” (Mark 13:13a). Perhaps this connection to suffering is why “the Second Evangelist” (the author of the Gospel) presents the reader with a plot full of parables, misunderstanding, miracles, paradoxes, betrayal and tragedy in the story of Jesus. If such is the case, I propose that the subtle distinctions between crowds *gathering around* the good news of Jesus, and the formation of community *because* of this gospel should be explored. Suffering indeed creates conditions in which survival is in part contingent upon our communities of connection. Think back on the challenges of COVID-19, for example, and how a response to such suffering is the emergence of various pockets of supportive communities (or at minimum, greater visibility of these communities). Again, as the crowds diminish, more communities begin to form.

In the Gospel of Mark, there are several references to crowds gathering to experience a taste of Kingdom as presented by Jesus through his teachings and acts. Within the crowds are admirers – people who desire to hear more of the good news, to feel more of Jesus’s power and authority, and to encounter more of his welcoming ministry to those who are marginalized by society. So great is

the need for healing and deliverance that Jesus cannot evade the multitudes that search for him. Early on, Mark paints a scene in which a crowd so large fills a house where Jesus is teaching, and a set of friends climb to the roof to lower their paralyzed comrade before him (2:1-12). Mark 3:7-10 presents the reader with a flight scene in which Jesus attempts to stay ahead of the crowd and push off the shore with the disciples to avoid being crushed. In yet another text, we see a chronically bleeding woman come up from behind the crowd to touch the Teacher; the result is not only healing but a changing of labels from “unclean” to “daughter” (5:25-34). The list goes on that reveals interesting dynamics between Jesus (the gospel message and ministry), the crowd, and (eventual) community.

What distinguishes a crowd from a community? I propose that the difference between the two entities is found in their purposes and intents. Said differently, there are nuances in state of mind and condition of heart. In first reading, it seemed to me that crowds gathered to get what they could get from Jesus: healing, food, deliverance, etc. The miracles of Jesus and the authority with which he shared this radical and innovative message of hope attracted crowds. However, those whose hearts were longing and ripe for community also gathered among the crowd to receive the deeper thing that Jesus offered – good news and the ushering in of a “new way” of living, a way in which Kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. These people in search for community become family members with Jesus. In Mark, kinship is a theme. It is a concept in which Jesus identifies true followers/believers as members of his family and citizens of the Commonwealth of God. Being a member in the crowd doesn’t necessarily make one a member of the family. Family members are not related by blood, but rather by faith. Returning to Mark 5:25-34 for instance, we see that the crowd presses upon Jesus as he passes through; but only the seeking soul of a hemorrhaging woman actually *touches* him. From that touch came restoration of her place in society, and what’s more, new kinship in Jesus’s family

### *Gleaning Gospel Wisdom*

Considering the actions and non-actions of the crowds in Mark’s Gospel, we have been invited to evolve. Spirit gently beckons us to shift in mind and relation from being a casual gathering of crowded people to becoming a purposeful and intentional *koinonia*, or fellowship, in community. But how exactly do we do this? Jesus presents to us that there is mystery shrouding the Kingdom of God, and accessing that mystery requires a shift in mindset. We use his example of teaching the masses yet bringing together disciples in more intimate ways to learn of him and each other. We understand and lean into a truth that community is where we gain clearer insight into who we are in relation to God and the radical other. I argue that the point at which “You” and “I” cross is a sacred place – a holy ground – where God meets us with grace as we meet each other. We

set the intention of our ministries and sacred spaces to allow Spirit to bring us again and again to this cross so that our roots grow deeper in *koinonia* together.

We also borrow notes from the professional helping field. A good group facilitator will tell you that there are stages of group development that begin with a “joining” phase and last until a point of adjournment. Ironically, group work of this kind usually happens because members are facing some type of psychosocial suffering and can benefit from the support of a healthier community. Undergirding the whole process, however, are presence and authenticity that build trust and safety, and eventually lead to increased, appropriate vulnerability of group members with each other. There is usually a setting of intention toward purposeful togetherness, adorned with openness to the “other.” Said differently, the group facilitator skillfully and intentionally helps group members shift their thinking from “I” to “We.” This is important because the group – the community – is where we unlearn negative social patterns and put on newer, healthier ones that we practice with each other. We practice in the group until the NEW WAY truly becomes new life.

It’s funny really. Everything that I’ve penned above reminds me so much of the beautiful process and art of true worship! True worship brings us to a humble and solemn awareness of the greatness of the Divine, and how large the table from which we are free to sup. We tend to take up less space when we realize how small we actually are; we begin to see and respect that there is space enough for us all. We begin to conceptualize through the Spirit that we are but a drop of paint on the colossal canvas of God’s creation. This awareness beckons us to leave, and in many instances make, room for the rest of Her children.

### *An Invitation*

Hear me when I tell you that crowds in and of themselves are not bad. In fact, across all of the Gospels, we see and feel the many ways in which the good news has the power to draw the masses. Who doesn’t want to hear a radical message of hope and new life? Who wouldn’t want to have their immediate needs met in the form of healing, feeding, and deliverance? Besides, it is to the crowds that we’ve been sent. We’ve been instructed to go out to all the land, share the message of the Kingdom and Commonwealth of God’s people, and gather them for the harvest. May we forever gather around and lead people to “The Way” as a community. May we raise good news not only to light our individual paths, but to illuminate the beauty and mutual care of *koinonia* as kin to Jesus.

Dear Lord, let crowds come at the sound of the Gospel! But may the Church never settle for just the pleasure of seeing crowds gather. May we never prematurely end the journey to the Commonwealth of God because of our ability to build megachurches or amass enough followers to earn the blue check next to our Twitter, Instagram and Facebook handles. I pray that we do not cause the

Gospel to fall short of its transformative and transformational power to elicit from the crowd those disciples who long to enter into a new covenant of Kingdom kinship. I pray that as the Gospel does its work of drawing and setting people free, we will follow the example of Jesus and do the hard work to bring people together – not as crowds but as community.

*Sabrina Nichole*

*Right Moves for Youth, Charlotte, NC*

*Life of Worship Ministries, Kings Mountain, NC*

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*References*

Black, C.C. (2011). *Mark*. Abingdon New Testament Commentaries. Nashville: Abingdon Press.





# A Parade? At a Time Like This?

**Greg Dover**

**Matthew 21:1-11**

*Don't tell me not to live, just sit and putter*

*Life's candy and the sun's a ball of butter*

*Don't bring around a cloud to rain on my parade!*<sup>[1]</sup>

Who doesn't love a good parade? Certainly not the Dovers. We are a parade people. We will go to just about any parade that we can – the Saint Patrick's Day parade (except not this year), the Scottish Games Parade, the Greenville Poinsettia Christmas Parade, the Slater-Marietta Christmas Parade, the TR Christmas Parade. One year we went up to Landrum for their Christmas parade and saw a woman punch a horse in the face! (That's another story for another time.)

For the past several years, our daughter Lennon has been so excited to *be in* a parade. Technically it's the Upstate Pride March, but by calling it a "parade" we were able to convince a three (and then four and five) year old to walk the mile-and-a-half route.

And *every* year, our family gathers around the TV to watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade (Suzy's dream is to go one day), as it kicks off the holiday season.

Yeah, we are parade people.

But I know we're not the only ones.

William Stringfellow – a theologian and social activist and often-critic of the Church (and yes, all of those things can go together) – he used to say that Christians go to church on Palm Sunday because we love a parade. We call it Jesus's triumphal entry, but it's essentially a parade. It happens at the beginning of the

Passover festival, and Jerusalem is packed with people. Jesus and his disciples are just outside the city, and he sends two disciples to get two donkeys, “to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet,” the Gospel writer tells us. We read that Jesus rode “them” into the city, giving me the image of a rodeo stuntman with one foot on each animal. People line the streets and lay down a red carpet of sorts – putting green branches they’ve cut and even the cloaks off their own backs on the road.

We read that “the whole city was in *turmoil*,” which is actually the same Greek word for “earthquake.” So, you might say the city was a-rockin’ when Jesus came a-knockin’. (Or, you might not. Maybe that’s just me.)

As he enters Jerusalem, there are crowds in front of and behind Jesus shouting, “Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! *Hosanna!*”

And every year on this Sunday (maybe even this Sunday, today) churches try in some way to recreate Jesus’s parade into Jerusalem. At Augusta Heights, we’ve done that by having the children of the church march into the sanctuary at the beginning of the service, waving palms as we sing something like, *Hosann-a-a, loud hosa-a-nna...*

At Chicago’s Fourth Presbyterian Church a number of years ago, Pastor John Buchanan was gathered outside before the Palm Sunday service, getting ready for a similar procession. The children had filed into place, and they were raising their palms and practicing their lines. He walked through the crowd of kids as they said, “Hosanna!” and, “Hosanna in the highest!” Then he got to one little boy who was enthusiastically shouting, “O, Hosanna!... O, don’t you cry for me, for I come from Alabama with a banjo on my knee.”<sup>[2]</sup>

None of us really know what the word “Hosanna” means. Some think it’s a mashup of two Hebrew words that means “Save us!” Others think it’s a nonsensical word of praise, like “Yippee!” or “Yay!” But even though we may not know what the words mean, like that little boy, we all want to shout it out. We all want to be a part of the celebration.

This year, though... It feels different. It *is* different.

We can’t even gather in the sanctuary to watch the kids walk and wave and sing. In many ways, we’ve taken for granted the simple ability to be together, to celebrate. In fact, Suzy and I have been trying to plan our daughter’s sixth birthday, which is Saturday. And it breaks our hearts. I mean, what do you do? How do you celebrate? No family, no friends can come over. And forget the logistics for a moment: how can you get excited, or be joyful, or feel light-hearted? How do you have a *party in a time like this?*

Jesus may have been wondering the same thing as he entered Jerusalem. And we might wonder ourselves: a *parade*? *At a time like this*?

We love to celebrate this event, this Sunday – with palms and children and pomp and circumstance. And yet, this is the first day of Jesus’s last week. This is the beginning of the end. The betrayal and arrest of Thursday, the trial and crucifixion and death and burial of Friday, the stone-cold silence of Saturday – they cast an ominous shadow over our Palm Sunday celebrations. Because we know what’s coming. We know the road Jesus rides into Jerusalem, in just a few days, will lead him up to Calvary carrying a cross. We know how this week will end. There is a grim and gloomy reality that haunts even this triumphal parade.

So, most years, on this Sunday, I would read about the crowds that lined the street and praised Jesus and think, “Oh, if they only knew...” Because they don’t realize what’s going to happen. They have no idea how they will turn on him, turning shouts of “Hosanna!” into calls to “Crucify!” They don’t know just how bad it’s going to get. They just. don’t. get it.

If they did, then obviously they wouldn’t be doing all of this, right? The carpet of cloaks and cut branches, the shouts of praise, the parade, the celebration? Not with the dark clouds of death and despair hanging on the horizon.

Or maybe they would have.

Maybe they *should* have anyway.

And maybe *we* should, too.

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Like them, we don’t know what our future may hold. We don’t know what will happen, or how bad – how difficult, or depressing – our lives may get in the coming weeks. But this week, I’ve been wondering what we might be able to celebrate *anyway*, how we would and could and *should* celebrate – even with the ominous shadow of disease and death, and distance and disconnection, and unemployment and furloughs and unknown futures, and anxiety and uncertainty looming over us.

I don’t want to sound too Pollyanna here. Lord knows I’m not a silver- lining, gumdrops-and-rainbows, eternal optimist. I know that what I am asking might be hard for many of us. For some of us, it might feel impossible. I think about people who have lost their jobs and are worried about making next month’s rent. Or people who live alone and were already lonely, and now feel completely cut off and isolated from others. I think about people who have loved ones in the hospital that they can’t even visit, or people whose family members

have died, and they can't go to the funeral – what we often call a “*celebration of life*.”

I'm not suggesting that we can make these difficulties any different. Our celebrations can't change the circumstances in which we find ourselves. But they can change us.

In the past, whenever I've read this story of Jesus's triumphal entry, I've always pitied the Jerusalem crowd for their ignorance – because they don't know what's going to happen in the days ahead, and here they are, rejoicing and praising Jesus and celebrating.

But this year, I've come to realize that what's really pitiable is waiting until we *can* know what's going to happen in the days ahead – until everything is absolutely just right and all good – before we give ourselves permission to celebrate anything at all.

I was talking with one of our church members this week, about what we've been learning through our experiences over the past few weeks, and what we want to be able to hold on to when all of this is over. He and his wife are social animals, and love to host cookouts and have people over and throw big parties. But what this church member said was that they've come to realize that they don't have to make sure the house is spotless, or that they have a minimum of 20 people come, or that they've got the best charcuterie board. In his words, “Everything doesn't have to be perfect. It doesn't have to be a big production to celebrate. You just take advantage of the chances you get.”

The people who paraded Jesus into Jerusalem did just that. They took advantage of the opportunity to celebrate, using whatever they had on hand – branches from the bushes around them, even the coats off their backs.

And maybe we can find ways to take advantage of the opportunities we have, too – to look for chances to celebrate; for moments when we can open ourselves to gratitude and praise and joy. Like those days when we can remove our coats and cloaks as the weather grows warmer; or when we see the branches of azaleas and dogwoods around us reminding us that light and life and beauty are coming into the world again, just as they always do every year, even *this* year.

Or take, for instance, a friend of mine that lives in Greensboro, North Carolina. He and his family are dealing with a lot of the same kinds of things many of us are—the disruption of life, the feelings of distance and disconnection, concerns about public health and people's lives and livelihoods, the feelings of anxiety and worry about family and friends and the future. And like many of us, they have been trying to get out of the house every day, which, with four children under the age of 10 is an accomplishment in and of itself. So maybe they

shouldn't have been surprised to hear applause as they stepped onto the sidewalk for their family walk last weekend.

Curious, they rounded the corner to see where it was coming from, and as they did, they saw Magnolia Street full of neighbors. The crowd was clustered in their household groups standing in their yards and on sidewalks in front of their homes (all appropriately distanced from one another). They had arms raised, or were applauding, or waving noisemakers, all directed toward the porch of a yellow 1920s bungalow, from which he heard Father Milton's unmistakable baritone voice, "I now pronounce you..."

"A wedding?" my friend asked some of the neighbors standing in their yard. "Is this a wedding?!"

"Yeah!" they said. And they told him about the groom, who'd grown up in that very house, now standing with his bride on its porch, surrounded by neighbors who'd known him all his life celebrating and shouting "Congratulations!" and "Cheers!" and "Mazel Tov!" 4

They might as well have been shouting, "Hosanna!"

I can't help but think about being at the hospital with some of our church members as they grieved yet again the loss of a daughter (and granddaughter) before she even took her first breath. Another church member was there, too. And they were sharing stories from the past, laughing to keep from crying and, at times, crying because they were laughing so hard. In their own way, they were celebrating friendship and family and memories made, even in moments of deep pain and unimaginable grief, even in the almost-literal shadow of death.

As we live in these uncertain, anxiety-inducing, lonely, loss-filled, frustrating, depressing days, it can feel like an ominous cloud is hanging over us – if not of death, then of fear or despair or grief or just some nondescript sense of "ugh." I've felt it. I'm sure you have in one way or another.

But I have found chances to celebrate in a few, small ways...none of them world-changing or life-altering:

- waking up early to have a few moments to myself, and getting to see the sun come up;
- sunny days that we're able to be outside more;
- having the chance to read more and cook more;
- getting to sit at the dinner table each night;
- realizing how much I miss people, and a deep gratitude for the relationships and love that make me miss people that much;

- seeing and hearing of the compassion of others (and how you are caring for each other!);
- opportunities to continue to connect (even if it is through a screen);
- and...our QT.

I'm not talking about a devotional *quiet time*, nor the ubiquitous gas stations. I'm talking about what I have affectionately dubbed our "Quarantine Trampoline." After a few weeks of staying at home, everyone in our family is struggling a bit, including our kids. They're sad. They miss their friends. They don't get to see their cousins or their grandparents like they usually would. Lennon won't get to have a birthday party. They are grieving all *they've* lost, just as we grieve all we have lost.

The trampoline, though, has offered moments of pure joy, as we have intentionally played with our kids in ways that – sadly – we never really had before. We jump and bounce and fall down, laughing the whole time, except when Suzy *may* have broken her toe. The laughter and shouts of joy are a defiant celebration in the face of despair.

And in a time like this – on the first day of Jesus's last week – isn't that what we need? Desperately? Joy. Celebration. Hope.

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The great preacher and minister at Harvard's Memorial Church, Peter Gomes, used to talk about Palm Sunday as a "dress rehearsal" for Easter – a celebration, even as suffering and death hang on the horizon, because we know that the end of the week is not the end of the story...because we know that beyond the betrayal and desertion is forgiveness and redemption, and after the cross and the grave is an empty tomb and new life.

In one of my few, necessary trips to the store this past week, I saw they had Easter lilies for sale. And I felt this wave of sadness and frustration wash over me. In that moment I felt the weight of the distancing and our inability to be together. It's like it hit me right there: we're not going to have our Palm Sunday processional with the kids, we won't be able to share communion with each other on Maundy Thursday, we're not even going to be able to be together on Easter!

I was frustrated, too, that they would even have those for sale this year. I scoffed as I kept shopping, thinking, "Who in their right mind is going to buy those? You can't give it to anyone. It's not like it's going to be the centerpiece for your big Easter Sunday brunch. There's not even going to be *church* on Easter. No full pews. No flowering crosses. No lilies in the sanctuary."

So – of course – when I was checking out, the woman in front of me was buying one. And at first, all of those thoughts rushed back into my mind. But then it struck me: she knew all that. She knew she wouldn't have church services or family gatherings or flowering crosses. But she was getting one anyway – a defiant celebration, even at a time like this, *especially* at a time like this.<sup>[3]</sup>

So...

Easter lilies and trampolines?

Hospital comedy and front-porch weddings?

Blooming azaleas?

A six-year-old's birthday?

A Palm Sunday *parade*?

*At a time like this?*

Absolutely, faithfully, YES.

Let us pray:

Jesus, *rain on* our parade–  
with a downpour of mercy and a deluge of grace.  
Flood our lives with the joy of your presence.

Jesus, *rein in* our parade...  
restraining the anxiety that often runs wild,  
and the fear that carries us away from you.

And Jesus, *reign over* our parade...  
rule in our lives as we learn to place our hope and trust in you.

And lead us along the route to the very heart of God,  
all the way to the cross...and beyond.

For it is in your name that we live, worship, celebrate, and pray.

Amen.

*Greg Dover*

*Augusta Heights Baptist Church, Greenville, SC*

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[1]"Don't Rain on My Parade," music by Jule Styne, lyrics by Bob Merrill, written for the 1964 musical *Funny Girl*.

[2]Quoted by John Buchanan, "No Day Like This One," 13 April 2004, Fourth Presbyterian Church (Chicago, IL), <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2003/041303.html>, accessed 29 March 2020.

[3]This story is a mash-up of my own experience that of my dear friend, Emily Hull McGee.



# A Meditation

**Jessica Chapman**

Breathe in deeply through your nose (4 seconds)

Hold (7 seconds)

Exhale through your mouth (8 seconds)

Again...

Breathe in deeply through your nose (4 seconds)

Hold (7 seconds)

Exhale through your mouth (8 seconds)

I encourage you to keep that breath pattern throughout our meditation.

We breathe in peace. Peace that allows us to serve others with fullness and grace (4 seconds).

We hold that peace in our spirits (7 seconds).

We then breathe out anxieties and worries that don't serve us as we do our work in the world (8 seconds).

We breathe in hope. Hope that this too shall pass, and we will rejoin one another without barrier (4 seconds).

We hold that hope in our hearts (7 seconds).

We then breathe out hopelessness and despair and any doubt of things getting better (8 seconds).

We breathe in acceptance. Acceptance of what was, what is, and what it is to come (4 seconds).

We hold that acceptance in our bodies (7 seconds).

We then breathe out fear of the unknown, fear of uncertainty, fear of chaos, fear of grief (8 seconds).

We breathe in love. We breathe in love for ourselves, our families, our patients, our communities (4 seconds).

We hold that love for the world that is broken yet healing (7 seconds).

We breathe out all that limits our ability to give love, receive love, and to embrace love during such a time as this (8 seconds).

Amen.

*Jessica Chapman*  
*Kaiser Permanente Orange County Anaheim Medical Center, Anaheim, CA*

# Do You Hear the People Sing?

**Darrell Hamilton**

## **Matthew 21:1-11**

*They said to Him, “Do You hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes. Have you never read, “Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise?” (Matthew 21:16, NKJV)*

### Do You Hear the People Sing?<sup>[1]</sup>

It's stating the obvious that we are in confusing and untenable times. Our economic and political apparatus are in a tailspin. People are reeling from the effects of social distancing and isolation. The Church is assessing the vitality of its future. All the while a global health crisis has exposed and exacerbated a broken state of affairs that for too long continues to leave too many people subject to the perils of injustice.

Rev. Liz Theoharis makes the point poignantly that “[A]s the current public health emergency deepens its revealing and worsening broader economic and social emergencies . . . caused by a lack of health care, affordable housing, living wages, labor rights, voting rights, and environmental protections.”<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, in the wake of this most critical health emergency, and as the Church finds itself entering into the most prescient of Holy Weeks, we must grapple with the question: *how do we wish to fashion our world in the aftermath of this crisis?*

As Christians across the nation think critically about new and innovative ways to meet the immediate needs of the people in their congregation and community, we must also seek a long term vision for the transformation of a political, social, and economic system which has too long thrived on the proliferation of injustice. On the heels of Palm Sunday, one thing is clear, this current state of affairs cannot be left to remain if we wish to finally be free from this seemingly never-ending cycle of calamity and deprivation.<sup>[3]</sup>

Therefore, what this prescient *Holy Week* helps us see is that moderate approaches to freedom will not do! And like the multitudes who thronged Jesus on His way into Jerusalem, we must wave our palms of protest, we must shout our discontent, we must organize and march inside the halls of power, and we must fight for a needed revolution to transform the values and the institutions of our nation that has failed too many of God's people.

When we visit the sacred text of our tradition, we recognize Matthew 21:1-16 as Jesus' Triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of His fateful journey to Golgotha. Although His journey ends with him being socially distanced, betrayed, and crucified, His journey begins by being surrounded by a multitude of the marginalized, cleansing the Temple of the those who would desecrate the house of God, and ministering to the outcast as a sign of a monumental shift to the status quo of the nation that He is poised to lead.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey and on a colt – signifying His humility. And Matthew quotes the prophet Zechariah to describe Jesus' entrance into the city in order to evoke an image of the kingship of Jesus juxtaposed to the reign of kings present and past.

*First*, Jesus's ride into the city recalls the coronation of King Solomon who rode on a mule to be anointed King over Israel and Judah following a shrewd political ploy by his mother Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan, and the high Priest Zadok to undermine the attempted monarchy of Solomon's half-brother Adonijah (1 Kings 1:1-36).

*Second*, Matthew's story of the crowds spreading their clothes on the road and cutting down branches from trees to welcome Jesus into the city recalls a similar act 200 years prior when people celebrated the purification and reclamation of the Temple following their revolt against foreign control that was led by Judas Maccabeus (2 Maccabees 10:7).

Therefore, what Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem means for the multitude is a call for revolution to supplant and purify their government from corrupt, imperialist control, and from its policies of evil and sin that have neglected the people of God. Likewise, Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem signaled that the time had come for the people to impeach *and remove* leaders who are no ally of poor people, working-class people, immigrants, who would willingly sacrifice the vulnerable on the altar of profits and economic stability, and who attempt to disguise clear political malfeasance through gaslighting of their constituency.

Contrary to a sanitized Palm Sunday narrative, Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem was a moment of protest as the palms the multitude carried were the protest signs of discontent. Shouts of "Hosanna" were the "songs of angry people" pleading for healing and salvation. Moreover, Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem was good news

of the reign of a new King, whose administration would prioritize care for the poor, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, giving sight to the blind, offering release of the captives, and proclaiming a never ending year of Jubilee (Luke 4:16-18).

What should the Church learn from this while walking our own path of Holy Week?

First, we must take our cue from the multitude and we must mobilize around Jesus as the symbol of our hope. Next, we must no longer stand by idly as those who claim to be Christians hide behind their faith as a cover up for evil. Third, we must listen to the songs of angry people who have been neglected, excluded, and marginalized by the purveyors of power. And, ultimately, we must fashion a world rooted in justice so that all God's people will be saved.

We must mobilize around our hope because too many are organizing from a posture and spirit of fear which has brought us short of legitimate, revolutionary change. We end up excited for crumbs when what we truly deserve is an entire loaf!<sup>[4]</sup> In our stress, anxiety, and panic we end up settling for candidates who – once they get our vote, support, and indifference – end up betraying us or abandoning us or both; we end up in a political ground hog's day reliving the same experience again and again, and our efforts to outsmart our opponent in a game of political chess only ends with us playing ourselves.

But when we mobilize around our hope rather than our fears then nothing less than true and genuine justice will do! When we mobilize around our hope it does not matter what type of difficult days may lay ahead because the will of God and the full promises of democracy are too good to sacrifice on the altar of moderation.

We mobilize around our hope so we can boldly stand in the face of power, in the face of a false moral narrative, and like a tree planted by the water we shall not be moved.

Likewise, we must follow Jesus' example to call out those who would use their faith as a "den" to shield them in their acts of evil and injustice.

Jesus' casting out of the Temple those who bought and sold and turning over the tables of the money changers gives us a good example of this. As New Testament scholar M. Eugene Boring points out, what we are to take from this is not a critique of the money changers and sellers "robbing" people in the temple, per se. Rather, through the context of Jeremiah 7:11, Jesus directs His words at those who worship in the Temple yet oppress the stranger, the fatherless, the widow, and shed innocent blood; who steal, murder, commit adultery, lie, practice idolatry and hypocrisy, and use the house of God as a "den" to shield them in their acts of injustice.<sup>[5]</sup>

Said differently, Jesus uses the text in Jeremiah to call out those who practice evil whilst hiding behind their faith. And as Jesus points out, these are robbers. These are crooks. These are thieves. These are hypocrites! They may be children of God, but they are not followers of God. Thus, like Christ, it is our responsibility to call out and cast out any person attempting to hide behind their faith as a cover up for their blatant acts of evil and injustice!

As followers of Jesus *we must no longer call things Christian that are not Christ-like!* Instead, we must call out, and if necessary, cast out, those whose actions and/or rhetoric support the maintenance of an economic system that serves the rich at the expense of the poor.<sup>[6]</sup> We must call out churches and their leadership who jeopardize the health and safety of their congregations because they have no vision of church unbounded by its walls. We must no longer stand by as the progenitor of our faith is caricatured as some prosperity gospel pimp and manipulated into a mascot for a superficial pro-life theology that ignores the lives of women, mothers, immigrants, black and brown people, and queer and transgender youth.

And most importantly, we must not only flip over the tables but also the values and the patterns of our world by listening to the songs of the oppressed, the disenfranchised, the disinherited – those whom Victor Hugo describes as *Les Misérables* – by drawing near to hear their pleas and crafting a world that address their desires for healing and salvation.

In the world renowned musical, *Les Miserable*, adapted from the tale by Victor Hugo, the major climax dramatizes the true story of the June 1832 Uprising in Paris when tens of thousands of poor people, students, low wage workers, and immigrants from around Europe revolted against the monarchy in France.

In the true story of the Uprising, what is understood as having precipitated the revolt was that for decades after the French Revolution, the government in Paris was in constant flux and disarray. Government officials had shown themselves to be corrupt and untrustworthy. The nation was shackled with severe debt and was riddled with an economic crisis. And to make matters worse, the country was in the troughs of a global health pandemic – cholera – which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Parisian people.

In one of the most famous scenes of Act I, while preparing to launch their rebellion in the streets of Paris, the characters perform one of the play's most recognizable songs "Do You Hear the People Sing?", and the lyrics are:

Do you hear the people sing?  
Singing the songs of angry men?  
It is the music of the people  
Who will not be slaves again!

When the beating of your heart  
Echoes the beating of the drums  
There is a life about to start  
When tomorrow comes!

Will you join in our crusade?  
Who will be strong and stand with me?  
Somewhere beyond the barricade  
Is there a world you long to see?

Then join in the fight  
That will give you the right to be free!

Thus, on June 5, 1832, gathered at the funeral of General Jean Maximilien Lamarque, widely respected as a champion of the people, thousands of Paris's poor and disposed engaged in a violent revolt which gave them control of important sites and major districts in Paris. However, after 24 hours, the rebels were unable to advance any further and the uprising was ended by the French military. In the end, hundreds of rebels were killed, and the monarchy was able to keep its power.

However, this does not have to be our fate! Unlike the rebels of the June 1832 Uprising, we do not have to succumb to the temptation of an armed and violent revolution in order to bring to pass a change of the status quo in this country.

Instead, like our Lord Jesus Christ, we are on the precipice of a non-violent revolution that does not have to recycle the patterns of injustice that we are vehemently fighting to overthrow. Like our Lord Jesus Christ, we are not mobilizing out of a posture of fear, but we are marching with our head held high in the confidence of our hope that one day, soon on the horizon, will come down the reign of the justice of God.

In our hope we can say in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, "I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land." Therefore, we need not worry about anything! We need not fear any person. Because our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord<sup>[7]</sup>

Thus, like our Lord Jesus Christ we must listen to the people sing. Listen to the people in our nation as they sing for universal healthcare, living wages, liberty to the captive, forgiveness of debts. We must listen to the sounds of the vulnerable who have perfected praise and trust that beyond the barricades of the triple evils of racism, militarism, and greed we will find the world we have longed to see—

A world where those who are persecuted are healed from their afflictions. A

world that brings about a revolution proclaiming the sacredness of all life. A world where betrayal, death and the grave are not the end, but where all who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved!

*Darrell R. Hamilton*  
*First Baptist Church, Jamaica Plain, NY*

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[1]From the musical *Les Misérables* (“À la volonté du peuple”, *The people’s will, in the original French version*)

[2]Liz Theoharis, “Plagues expose the foundations of injustice,” *Sojourners Magazine*, March 18, 2020 <https://sojo.net/articles/plagues-expose-foundations-injustice>, accessed 6 April 2020.

[3] Richard D. Wolff, “COVID-19 and the Failures of Capitalism,” April 6, 2020, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/04/06/covid-19-and-the-failures-of-capitalism/>, accessed 6 April 2020.

[4]Heather Long and Renae Merle, “Many Americans’ biggest worry right now is April 1 rent and mortgage payments,” *Washington Post*, March 22, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/03/22/april-rent-due-coronavirus/>, accessed 29 March 2020.

[5]Boring, M Eugene. *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*. Vol. 7. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015.

[6]Teresa Lockhard Sticklen, in *Preaching God’s Transforming Justice: a Lectionary Commentary, Year A*, eds. Allen, Ronald James., Dale P. Andrews, and Dawn Ottoni. Wilhelm, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 174.

[7]“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop’ by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” *AFSCME*, [www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop](http://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop).



# A Reflection Shared on Facebook

## **Jenna Sullivan**

My heart is still hurting for so many whose jobs and lives have been tragically affected by this nasty, nasty virus. The theologian in me is quick to make eschatological meaning in all this but the pastor in me is just heartbroken. We are in the wilderness folks. And it seems it will last longer than 40 days.

I am not ready to rush to the resurrection. This is a tragic cross that our world is bearing and while I deeply believe good fruit will come from it one beautiful day, for now, it is just tragedy.

So, may we linger— in the holy darkness. In the waiting. May we stare down the Terror in our lives with a relentless belief in the solidarity and love of Christ, who faced so much terror and uncertainty, and physical pain.

May our collective suffering remind us how fragile and interconnected we are. Even our sneezes change the course of history. It's tragic and scary and hard. And God is still in it.

Prayers and deep, deep solidarity with each of you.

*Jenna Sullivan*

*Magnolia Road Church, Jonesboro, AK*



# Remembering Judas

**Chelsea B. Yarborough**

**Matthew 27:3-10**

*“I mean Judas needed some consequences. Betrayal is not a joke and certainly putting up innocent blood is not something that goes without having to be held accountable in some way. But why do people think that suicide was good ‘payment?’ That’s ridiculous. Nobody won. Everybody lost.”*

*“I remember when I wanted to kill myself. It’s crazy that you’re asking me this because I remember looking for like reasons not to do so in the Bible and such and I saw this story of suicide. When I looked it up it seemed to be either like not a big deal or celebrated. I remember thinking that if nobody knew what I did, then at least they couldn’t hate me. I felt like I couldn’t be forgiven... In the end, it was somebody saying “it matters what you did but also it matters that you want to change” that helped me. So... I don’t know. When I read how this story has been told I wonder what the people, the ones who think this was what Judas deserved, would say to me?”<sup>[1]</sup>*

In high school I attended a leadership workshop that shifted my existence in the world. During our discussion of mental health, the presenter paused before stating, “Suicide is always a tragedy.” They went on to discuss the ripple effects inevitably caused by an individual’s suicide and explained that death always impacts the greater community, no matter how isolated the individual may have appeared. This was the first time I heard suicide discussed with compassion rather than condemnation. The presenter didn’t blame the individual or attempt to understand all that had occurred leading up to their death or to their attempted suicide. It was the first time I heard of suicide as a tragedy for both the person and the community, and not as an action that sentenced people to hell. It was the first time any discussion of suicide resonated with me and my own secret moments of considering suicide which were piercingly prevalent during this season of my life.

As I read and reread this pericope, I was troubled – I couldn’t remember any sermon or study on this scripture that discussed Judas’ suicide through a lens of compassion, or even acknowledged the tragedy of Judas’ loss. I googled the text, pouring through dozens of sermons, and I was surprised that Judas’ suicide was either never mentioned, glanced over, or deemed a necessary consequence for his actions. Everything seemed focused solely on his betrayal. With that said, I take a seemingly unpopular approach to this text: I read it through a hermeneutic of compassion, even for the one who betrayed Jesus. This lens of compassion is complicated. However, I believe compassion necessarily acknowledges and addresses the humanity of Judas and considers not just his actions, but the surrounding systems and circumstances that contributed to his story. With this in mind, I aim to advance a framework of transformative justice and to offer strategies for reconsidering and proclaiming this text.<sup>[2]</sup>

### *The Possibilities of Transformative Justice*

Judas’ story calls into question the model of “justice” and deservedness that has been preached and proclaimed around this passage of scripture. It is clear that Judas experiences regret and remorse as he attempts to repent and alter the narrative before Jesus is executed. However, based on the responses of the leaders and the depths of his own remorse, he saw no way out of the situation.

Within this narrative, what chance does Judas have at change? Should there be an opportunity for repentance? For me, this transformative justice calls for both accountability and compassion.

A blog focused on transformed justice offered this statement as one of its core beliefs:

The conditions that allow violence to occur must be transformed in order to achieve justice in individual instances of violence. Therefore, transformative justice is both a liberating politic and an approach for securing justice.<sup>[3]</sup>

This framework does not allow those who have committed violence to escape accountability and consequence; rather, the framework pulls in those who are hurt and in need of help while also making space for those who have hurt others to make a change as an approach to justice.

I wonder how different Judas’ story would have been if he had felt he had a community that would allow him to repent and foster his potential for change.

For Adrienne Maree Brown, “transformative justice [can] yield deeper trust, resilience and interdependence. All these mass and intimate punishments keep us small and fragile. And right now, our movements and the people within them need to be massive and complex and strong.”<sup>[4]</sup> I hear Brown naming that living without community contributes to fragility, and if we can find ways to

hold together, even through our horrendous mistakes, we will be stronger for it.

This framework does not equate to care without consequence; however, it does mean that community is a part of the equation. I wonder if any of the disciples wondered where he was? What was their reaction to his suicide? What made him decide that this was it? What has to occur in our communities in order for the possibilities of transformation to arise, even for those that we deem to be the least deserving? This is difficult work that requires complex contemplation and a framework of transformative justice offers a means for leaning into an array of possibilities.

### *Strategies for Proclaiming*

If you are going to use Matthew 27:3-10, I invite you to sit in its complexity and make room for your hearers to do the same. This text is difficult. Far too many innocent people are being executed at the hands of a system that wants them dead simply because they subvert normative ideas. Far too many people in our world are being killed because someone betrayed them, the system is rigged against them, and the powers over those systems are more interested in declaring someone guilty than any sense of justice. Jesus was murdered and executed, and Judas played a role in that. However, if we consider that Judas was also a product of this horrific system and was preyed upon as well, there is room for a form of redemption that includes accountability and consequence. This is brave preaching. It requires a type of bravery that moves beyond a shallow caricaturizing of Judas and instead uplifts his humanity. I caution preachers and proclaimers not to use this text to demonize or glorify the character of Judas, but to unpack the difficulties of the situation and consider the possibility of redemption.

I also urge you to remember that suicide is a real narrative that has affected some, if not most, of your hearers in different ways. They may have had a friend or relative commit or attempt suicide. They themselves may be wrestling with the idea of suicide. Therefore, preaching a narrative that claims this was “God’s judgment” on Judas, or arguing he deserved his fate, tells people that there are things for which they cannot be forgiven or redeemed. It also deeply misrepresents a God of grace and love that is often spoken of in the same breath. That message is dangerous and harmful. Attempted suicide is accompanied by a depth of sorrow and other emotions that cannot be easily understood and does not need to be simplified from any platform. When one thinks the only way to achieve peace in life is to not have life, that is not something to celebrate as a community. We know different mental health issues and other circumstances can exacerbate these feelings, and we know that those left behind with grief are often filled with confusion. This topic must be approached with care.

If possible, I think this text is best unpacked through Bible study, small group discussion, individual conversations, or sermonic moments that offer an opportunity for individuals to talk back, as opposed to one voice preaching to many. These environments facilitate conversation and allow participants to wrestle with the text and come to a conclusion birthed from their own thought processes. These environments also give both the facilitator and the participants permission to wonder. Finally, if you are going to approach this topic it is critical to offer resources for help both in and beyond your community.

### *Wondering Beyond the Norm*

My mentor, the late Dr. Dale P. Andrews, used to end all of his classes with this saying: “I have more questions than answers and more problems than solutions; from these gifts, I freely share.” I bring that wisdom with me to this text. Through the conversations I shared with my collaborators and through my own engagement with the text, I’ve realized we must bring these gifts of wrestling, vulnerability and narrative to the text, rather than abiding by a stagnant and inhumane reading of someone taking their own life.

The Lenten season offers us an opportunity to think through the passion narrative – we are invited to consider and reconsider all of its details. We don’t have the luxury to treat this text as anything other than a complex narrative that deserves in-depth reflection. This narrative shows us the bitter end for someone who believed that there was no place for their guilt and shame to be held, and in this case, Judas took his own life. We must imagine beyond the normative readings and consider the many ways this text speaks to hearers today in order to engage a possibility transformation. Where this is present, both community and justice can be as well.

*Chelsea B. Yarborough  
Nashville, TN*

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[1]As I wrestled with this text, I used the collaborative preaching model found in John McClure’s Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet. As I thought about the role of community and sought to consider this text through a hermeneutic of compassion, I deemed it important to reflect upon more voices than my own. These two anonymous quotes and the concepts, which emerged from our conversations on Matthew 27:3-10, have been used with permission from the conversation partners.[2]Many commentaries provide textual analysis, language studies of the Greek words, and other tools for unpacking the text. My aim is to focus on these two aspects as a complementary tool.

[3]*Prison Culture » Transformative Justice*. [online] Usprisonculture.com. Available at: <<http://www.usprisonculture.com/blog/transformative-justice/>> [Accessed 30 April 2020].

[4]Adrienne Brown, 2020. *What Is/Isn’T Transformative Justice?* – Adrienne Maree Brown. [online]

Adriennemareebrown.net. Available at: <<http://adriennemareebrown.net/2015/07/09/what-isnt-transformative-justice/>> [Accessed 30 April 2020].





# Holy Week at Home: Maundy Thursday

**Lindsey Altvater Clifton**

One of the stories we read and remember on Maundy Thursday is that of Jesus gathering with his disciples before Passover; Luke's gospel (22:7-23) focuses on the shared meal and reflects our practice of the Lord's Supper, while John's gospel (13:1-17; 31-35) focuses on the washing of the disciples' feet and reminds us of our baptism. Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the end. And as a sign of that love, the Servant Lord leads by example yet again. He is showing them what it means to live out the new commandment he gives: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also much love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.

As an invitation to reflect on the servant love that is at the heart of our faith, you're invited to practice a hand washing ritual. We are washing our hands a lot these days! And while many of us are singing 20 seconds worth of songs to make sure we do the job well, this invitation is different. It is a slow, gentle, intentional washing of hands. So, find your favorite soap; maybe it's a scent that reminds you of someone you love, maybe it's a fragrance that soothes you, maybe it leaves your hands feeling moisturized and nourished. And warm the water to that just-right temperature. As you begin to lather the soap around your hands, consider who has shown you love with their hands. How have you received servant love from another person recently? Offer gratitude for them and the experience you've had of being seen and cared for. Take your time and keep making suds until you can't think of any more people. Then rinse your hands slowly and with care. Use a favorite towel to dry your hands; maybe it's sentimental because someone gave it to you or maybe you just enjoy the texture. As you dry your hands, consider how they have offered servant love to others. Remember recent experiences of using them to show care in preparing food, offering prayer, holding another hand. And offer gratitude for your gifts of love offered, as well.

As you conclude this prayerful ritual, offer these words of prayer and blessing:

May my hands be gentle and open, O God.

May they be grateful to give and grateful to receive.

May they be sources of your servant love in the world.

May they bring hope and joy, peace and compassion.

To my life and to the lives of others.

In the way and name of our brother Jesus, we pray.

Amen.

*Lindsey Altvater Clifton*

# Coronavirus and Crucifixion: Community and Forsakenness

**Kenneth Pettigrew**

At its best, a day like Good Friday could, and maybe should, invoke a visceral sense of discomfort in considering the events that transpired in the midst of a state-sanctioned lynching high above Jerusalem. We often manage to negotiate our way through this day beckoned by the hope of Sunday morning, but ultimately arrive at a prettier and curated experience of this day as a result of our cultural diluting and disinfection of difficult realities. The gore of the cross cannot be lost on us, especially as an instrument of capital punishment, in a time when the insatiable appetite of colonialism and empire in the named “Greatest Country in the World” has allowed for the most vulnerable and afflicted amongst us to fall victim, not only to physical disease, but to the ravages of the cultural diseases of poverty, misinformation, serpentine immorality, continued mass incarceration, and the effectual return of “separate-but-equal” schooling parading under the suburbanized euphemism of “school choice.”

This Good Friday feels so different to so many as the foundational elements of their existence are crumbling under the equal opportunity demon of COVID-19—but to so many, these feelings of terror and unpredictability are so normal. They’re so real. While maybe heightened, the feelings are not unfamiliar, as they are a lived reality for the poor, the elderly, the Black, the brown, and the marginalized everywhere.

But what do we say of a community’s response that, while on the surface seems robust, is still stamped with the control and approval of white supremacy, in determining who requires the most help, when they need it, and why they need it? As we wait with bated breath for stimulus checks, few voices are crying in the wilderness that our streets have become for significant investment in our cultural capital. Empty streets are deceiving. It may help flatten the curve and slow the rate of infection, but it has left many isolated. This isolation is not superfi-

cial but has a completeness to it that many of us have never experienced. Folx have been cut off from resources, left without any significant human contact, and possibly very, very alone. The consequences of our own privilege can show up in the most difficult ways and show how little we actually value the idea *and* the practice of community.

Genuine koinonia, or community, is something with which most of us are strikingly unfamiliar. Jesus saw his mother. Jesus saw his beloved disciple. Two people of significant value to Jesus are standing before him at his execution. In true totality, however, they are actually witnesses to the failure of community to truly embrace and support its own. Jesus comes and declares that his ministry is to those who are poor, bound, oppressed, and left out—but how is it that the entirety of his ministry has been dedicated to the building up of these people and it ends with his death?

We cheapen this question with talk of providence and determinism, as it is, at its core, the result of an empire missing its opportunity to do right by the poor and the oppressed, and feeling threatened by a lowly man, with a menacing royalty, marked by his service to those the empire, and the religious establishment, disregarded.

“Woman, here is your son.”

Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.”

Many have regarded this moment as Jesus taking care of his final acts of earthly business, but that seems to oversimplify the depth of what is happening in this moment. For those who were witnessing his death, it is logical that Jesus would ensure this mother’s well-being, but in doing so, he redefines the role of community to care for those who are the most vulnerable. Scripture reveals that Jesus had siblings, but it is not to his siblings that he says, “Take care of mama,” but to the beloved disciple. His act, of course, is one that keeps the ravaging of a patriarchal society from possibly leaving her destitute, but it also proves that community is defined by the commitment of the people in it. Jesus did not solely give a role to the beloved disciple, but he also gave one to his mother. There’s a mutuality of care that must be highlighted as we find ourselves attempting to overturn centuries worth of individualism that has stunted our communal growth in the face of the growing number of crises.

The cracks in our community are rapidly filling with those left without the care required to build safe and safe-determined communities. Hourly workers are struggling because governments did not have enough care to put protections in place years ago in case this happened. We’re finding that the school systems could have long provided hotspots and laptops to students and families still trapped in the digital divide. We’re finding that sensible legislation is actually

possible, but it took the demon to land on the doorstep of power before anything significant could happen. We're trapped in a dystopia where the appearance of community is more valuable as it preserves the power of those who wish to keep pimping the poor and vulnerable, but still claim Jesus.

But I wonder how one whose entire life is defined by the preservation of power can identify with a forsaken savior. It requires a particular kind of theological incongruence to hold firmly to power and a savior whose life was defined by his existence on the margins of society. It doesn't work.

But that's it, isn't it? The folks wearing the crowns (and fake tans) were threatened by the populist prophet praised by the marginalized. Their grasp on power was quickly slipping away, as the masses were empowered to live their lives again with the value and humanity—the *imago Dei*—that had been stolen from them.

This is how we arrive here—watching Jesus struggle to take each breath and wondering where God, his parent, his keeper had gone. The God whose throne rests, in the words of the Psalmist, on righteousness and justice seems to have walked away from him.

“My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus is in a position where we often find ourselves. We are looking at a world whose heart is broken by abandonment. We ourselves are crushed under the weight of betrayal we have experienced at the hands of those who claim to love us the most.

It is a world broken by the inability of some to maintain bodily and spiritual autonomy. It is broken by vicious hate speech that incites violence against Black and brown bodies, immigrants and refugees, and an overwhelming sense of self-righteousness that still makes it okay for a woman to be subjected to vulgarity from men—and worse having her body, her wellbeing, her livelihood, and the parameters of her career determined by cisgender, straight, white men who would rather sell their daughters up a river than to have her make the same, dollar for dollar, as the crop of mediocre, undereducated, unprofessional, racist, homophobic, deaf-eared white men who've managed to take control of our government!

Like Jesus, we still choose to stand against the status quo, even as the status quo tries to break our bones. It tries to break our resolve. It tries to destroy our spirits. We look around and seeing no change, we exclaim, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

We are looking for God's justice to prevail. It has failed to explode onto the scene of the collective crucifixions of the oppressed. The absence of justice

makes it appear as if God has walked away and let go of us all. We lament—for what else is one to do on a cross? We lament because our lives have been upended—our plans, our hopes, our dreams have been greeted with the glaring realities of a pandemic. We lament the failure of community to support the most vulnerable amongst us. We lament the inability of churches to see the value of existing outside of four walls until they are forced by circumstances out of their control. We lament the mediocre response of our community institutions to the well-being of its constituency. We lament that tomorrow is drastically different because we still can't make sense of yesterday and today is simply too much to bear.

But we cannot underestimate the power of Jesus' lament—neither can we underestimate the power of our own. It is in Jesus' example that we must realize that one laments because one knows that better is possible. Even in our weariness, our lament keeps pushing us to stand up even when the weight of communal forsakenness makes it all the more difficult to stand. We keep pressing on because we KNOW that we are better and worth more to God than what we are experiencing. We KNOW we are worth more, and that's why we still have hope. The spine, the essence of lament is hope.

That's why Jesus cries out—because there's still hope, even in his pain. He takes the words of the Psalmist, and unable to sing them as he was taught, he just cries out!

We might not always be able to formulate the verses to the song, but we can cry out. We might not even know what might happen if we do. But if someone didn't cry out, slavery would still be reality. If someone didn't cry out, the principalities and powers of Jim Crow would never have fallen.

With that one cry from the cross, the voiceless and forsaken ones among us have a voice that still rings through eternity. The lament hangs in the thick air of our lives and somehow manages to bring perspective to a moment in time when the talking heads would rather us acquiesce to the powers that be—having our destinies controlled by the power players—but the cry of forsakenness breaks the chains off of our imprisoned goodwill and shakes the world, forcing it to pay attention to the pain it tries to hide. It forces attention upon the misguided intentions of those still attempting to limit the rights of women to choose, the rights of LGBTQ persons to live fully and without fear, and the continued conspiracy to pommel the voices of those whose laments have taken to the streets to demand equity in our schools, the cessation of police brutality, and the willy-nilly participation of elected officials right here in this city to actually do what is right.

Community cannot function without mutual care and forsakenness can only endure where care is absent. The role of God's Church is not to play into the

hands of power and suppress lament, but to hold space where the forsaken can find community and care in the outstretched arms of the one who was lynched for teaching us that

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

The forsaken are called in to the kinship community of God—that beloved community where moderates and fake allies will cease from troubling. Where tyrannical leaders are brought down by their own pride. Where economic injustice is vanquished as the wealth is shared amongst the nations. Where Beckys and Karens will cease from troubling those gathered in the name of sacred community around the grill. Where the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will break forth into the world and shut down the turbulent waters of trouble that have swept too many away. And like Jesus, we will cry out in the midst of our forsaken places:

The Lord is my light and my salvation! Whom shall I fear?

Lord, you have been our dwelling place for all generations!

Walk together children!

*Kenneth Pettigrew*

*Winston-Salem Urban League, Winston-Salem, NC*





# Holy Week at Home: Love Gets Buried

**Lindsey Altvater Clifton**

On Good Friday, we remember the story of Jesus' crucifixion and burial. Immanuel, God with Us, Incarnate Love, is lynched at the hands of the world's powers and made a martyr. With the disciples, we mourn and fear what comes next. And so, we live out this story by remembering that on this day that Incarnate Love is buried... But that's not the end. So, we watch and wait for what is to come. Resurrection. New Life.

To embody this story, you're invited to take the hearts paper clipped to the baggie of soil. In the paper's fibers you can see a few flecks of color; these are wild-flower seeds. Find a small mug that you can live without for a few weeks.

Put about half of the soil from the baggie on the bottom of the mug, and then arrange your seed paper hearts to cover the surface of the dirt.

Cover the seed paper hearts with the remaining soil (they need about  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch), and give them a bit of water.

Find somewhere warm and sunny to place your mug.

Each time you see this, may it remind you that in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and by God's abundant grace:

Love lived and taught, healed and reconciled;

Love was crucified, died, and was buried;

Love was resurrected to new life;

Love lives and moves, breathes and dances among us still;

Love wins.

*Lindsey Altvater Clifton*



# **Easter Sunday 2020**



# A Resurrection Acclamation

**Kenneth Pettigrew**

In empty streets may it echo—reverberating on walls of wood and stone, metal and concrete: Christ is risen!

In empty sanctuaries, let the empty pews clap their hands and windows show forth the glory of God and proclaim, “Christ is risen!”

In the isolation of our homes, where fear and our anxieties have been our returning company, let them be vanquished by the resounding chorus: “Christ is risen!”

For those who are without shelter—whose needs have yet to be met—let this cry build shelter where all are welcomed and fed: “Christ is risen!”

Surrounded by death and saddened by its gaze, let those who know the story proclaim from living rooms, front porches, offices, and dining tables everywhere that death has lost its sting, because Christ is risen!

Though victory seems distant and justice a long way off, let valleys and hills re-echo our resurrection hope that death is swallowed up in victory, and all nature proclaim, “Christ is risen!”

May the people of the resurrection, called by God, redeemed and sustained by grace, tell forth the story from an empty grave that Christ is risen!

Let the voices of God’s people gather in distant lands and proclaim in lamented praise that Christ is risen!

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

*Kenneth Pettigrew*

*Winston-Salem Urban League, Winston-Salem, NC*



# A Sermon for Easter Sunday

**Laura Mayo**

## **John 20:1-18**

Peace be with you. It is Easter Sunday morning. As I have prepared for this day, I have asked myself, “How can we celebrate Easter in the midst of a pandemic? How can we shout Hallelujah when thousands have died from COVID-19 and the death toll continues to rise? How can we celebrate, isolated as we are?”

As I have read and reread the Easter story in the Gospel of John, I have become convinced that tears are as much a part of Easter as any shouts of Alleluia. Easter does not require us to be other than we are, it does not need us to be happy, it does not ask us to pretend everything is okay, it does not even depend upon us leaving our houses. Easter comes to us, comes to our tears and our isolation, comes to our fears.

In the Easter narrative we read this morning from John, Mary returns to Jesus’ tomb alone, and she stands there crying: “But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’”

The angels ask, “Woman, why are you weeping?” They don’t tell her to stop weeping; don’t tell her to wash her face; don’t tell her to behave as though her world is not crumbling and things will never be as they were. “Why are you weeping,” they ask, and she tells them: “They have taken him away. I don’t know where he is.”

After this explanation, she turns away from the empty tomb and sees a stranger, the gardener, she assumes. She is still crying. The seeming stranger asks the same question as the angels, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

She explains that Jesus is missing, and then he says her name: “Mary . . . Mary.”

Hearing her name, she knows this seeming stranger to be Jesus. Like the angels, Jesus doesn't ask her to stop weeping. No one in this Easter story tells her to stop weeping and there is no suggestion that she stops.

Jesus says her name and she knows him. Rabbi, Teacher she calls him. "Do not hold onto me," he responds.

"Do not hold onto me."

These words take on new meaning in these days of social distancing. We are not holding onto anyone outside our own houses which for some means there has been no physical touch: not a hug, not a handshake, not a pat on the back, no physical touch for weeks.

"Do not hold onto me."

We walk to the other side of the street if a neighbor is walking toward us. We wait for someone else to finish shopping before we enter the aisle. In public we cannot even see friendly smiles, veiled as they are behind masks.

"Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to my heavenly parent. But go to my disciples and say to them, 'I am ascending to my heavenly parent and your heavenly parent, to my God and your God,'" Jesus tells the weeping Mary.

And then he asks her to go to the disciples. To tell them her experiences. While our scripture reading stops at Jesus' request that Mary preach the good news to the disciples, the story does not end here, it continues: "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the heavenly parent has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (John 20:19ff).

It is the evening of the first Easter and the disciples are afraid. So afraid, they are locked in a house, shut in together. They are not going out and they are not letting anyone in. Into their fear and isolation, "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'"

Holy peace makes its way inside. Their fear and their isolation are not barriers to holy peace. This is the promise of Easter. Easter finds a way. Easter sees the graveyard, the isolation, the fear. Easter sees the despair and uncertainty and it moves through any boundary to bring holy peace.

"Peace be with you."



The disciples need not go anywhere to receive this peace. The door can stay locked. They can remain isolated even while they begin to experience anew that they are not alone.

May it be so with us this Easter Sunday. We cannot touch Jesus. We cannot hold onto each other. We are separated into our houses.

And that is not the end of the story. Easter comes with holy peace into each space and every place. It comes no matter where we are. It comes shining hope into every corner. It comes even when we don't feel ready, perhaps especially when we don't feel ready. That first Easter, they were not ready. The flowers were not decorating the sanctuary; they hadn't dressed in their Easter best; they were certainly not prepared for peace, no, they were afraid, prepared only for death. They were holding tight to what they experienced with Jesus, unsure of how to consider new possibilities. Jesus seems to tell them what he told Mary, "Do not hold onto me."

Perhaps this has been part of his message all along – do not hold onto my earthly body, do not cling to your certainties, your unyielding theologies, your proof-texts. Let me go. We've tried to block Jesus, pin him in place with pastors and politicians, guards and soldiers, with tombs covered with stones, with cathedrals and church walls...but nothing has contained him. Not the cross, not the grave, not the church.

Jesus is not where we expect – we cannot define or contain him, but that doesn't mean he's missing. He's here. Not here in this building, here everywhere. Jesus comes into the locked house where the disciples are closed in fear and says, "Peace be with you. As the heavenly parent has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Hold onto my spirit. Here it is breathed on you and everyone else who knew me. Through you, I will be known to those who never met me.

"Peace be with you."

Jesus is no longer constricted by time and space – Easter is the promise of holy peace available in every time and every place. The peace that Jesus embodied on earth was a peace that knew no limits and no boundaries, broke through prejudices, was withheld from no one. And that peace is loose in the world. That peace is made known again and again.

Holy peace does not end despair, it does not ask us to stop our weeping, it does not offer all the answers. The story of Easter points us to peace -always present always available, ever surprising us in new and unexpected ways.

These days of sorrow are also days of creativity; these days of isolation are also days of radical connection; these days of uncertainty are also days of innovation. Just as peace came to those locked in fear that first Easter, so too it comes again and again in our time, in every place.

Reagan Miller and the stories he told us with his voice and instruments are a part of our story, a part of our sacred story. Reagan once gave a call to confession about one of his guitars. He wrote: “I own a 1943 Gibson LG-2 ‘Banner’ guitar, It’s a mahogany, small body guitar, the ‘L’ stands for ‘Lady’ (Gibson marketed its smaller ‘parlor’ guitars to women) and the ‘Banner’ refers to a decal on the headstock of the instrument which is unique to Gibson guitars made during the war years of 1942-1945, the decal reads ‘Only a Gibson is Good Enough.’ My guitar was made in the original Gibson plant in Kalamazoo, Michigan and based on serial dates, it was likely made in the Summer of 43.” Reagan wrote that for those who know their history, 1943 was a grim year; all nations suffered with shortages and austerity measures.

As American men went off to war, women stepped in to fill in the jobs left behind, such was the case with the Gibson Company. My guitar was made by women. Women who weren’t trained luthiers but mostly housewives who transferred skills developed from crocheting, sewing, and needlepoint to create what some consider the best guitars ever made. Historian John Thomas wrote about the characteristics of these instruments: “The women’s guitars were more refined. Every little plate, every little brace, every little piece of material in the guitar is sanded just a tiny bit thinner, just a tiny bit smoother, and that’s the difference. And I contend that people can hear this. That’s why they sound so great.”

Reagan went on to describe how scarcity of materials in the war years led to design changes that gave his guitar “a distinctive woody growl.”

Reagan concluded: “What captures me about this story is how adversity, perseverance, and everyday hope could create a transcendent object, something with its own unique beauty and voice.”

These days are hard. We have known hard days before. These days will require from us things we did not even know we were capable of. Once again people are turning skills developed for one task into skills for a world in need: sewing face-masks, teaching, shopping for a neighbor already in poor health, restaurants transforming into farmer’s markets, selling their meat and produce, therapists are working with phones and facetime, medical personnel and engineers creating ventilators from repurposed parts – we are adapting just like those women who turned their skill with a needle into skill with a guitar string.

We’ve known many losses this year as a congregation and now, as a world, we

are experiencing a staggering loss of life. We are being pushed to our limits and Easter's promise is much like those Lady Banner guitars, beauty is being created as well. Beauty and new life surround us. Music and poetry shared through social media, families smiling at each other through zoom calls, justice sought and created in ways never before imagined – for those of us who can stay home, our staying is beautiful, it is life-giving, it is an Easter act of hope.

Holy peace finds its way in. It can pass through locked doors. It can make its way into any isolation. The holy peace of Easter flowers beauty, it creates compassion, it inspires creativity.

And so, this Easter Sunday, peace be with you. Alleluia.

Amen.

*Laura Mayo*  
*Covenant Church, Houston, TX*



# A Pastoral Prayer for the Strangest Easter Since the First One

**Franklyn Pottorff**

With *fear and great joy*, O God,  
That is how the Good News was first shared that day,  
In Matthew's gospel;  
By the two women who fled from the tomb.  
They told the other disciples,  
But even now we suspect they may have first whispered it,  
Afraid of those who would hope to silence such foolish talk:  
Christ is Risen!  
We whisper it too, now.  
In the worried silence of these strange and foreboding days.  
But we will need to learn to shout it,  
If we hope to be heard at least six feet away:  
Christ is Risen!  
For all of the sadness and grief, loss and hopelessness  
That surrounds us in this time of pandemic,  
We will need to be reminded  
Of what it means to proclaim it:

Christ is Risen!

To be sure,

Today is not the end of suffering and scarcity.

Yet it is a reminder that suffering and scarcity will not be the end.

So help us, Holy One, to be healers in a time of brokenness;

To be compassionate to our neighbors who are anxious and hurting;

To remember those who are without jobs or homes, health or food;

To reach out to loved ones who are in isolation;

To hold in our hearts those who are dying without us near.

Inspire us, with your divine creativity,

To find ways of caring for your world and all its creatures.

In our forced stillness,

Let us look at the face of this good earth,

And marvel at that which in our hurried pace we have ignored.

Help us, in our whispers *and* our socially-distanced shouting,

To declare that truth which gives us hope in the midst of despair,

And gladness in these moments of viral sorrow.

Help us to proclaim the cornerstone of our faith, which illustrates that nothing in life or death can separate us from God's unfathomable love.

May we do so with great joy, even in our fears: Christ is Risen!

For these things, and the quiet offerings known only within our hearts, we lift them to you in the name of Jesus our Risen Christ, Amen.

*Frank Pottorff*  
*Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, Bryn Mawr, PA*

# God's "No"

**Katie Callaway**

## **John 20:1-18**

There are some things God just cannot do. There are some things with which God cannot be associated.

When you woke up this morning, you likely didn't think you would hear a sermon later about the things God cannot do. Easter doesn't seem like the best time to talk about God's limitations especially because this is the day that we celebrate God's action in our world symbolized by an empty tomb.

We will get to the amazing things God can and is doing in our world in a moment, but we need to linger with Mary at the empty tomb. We need to hear her cries; we need to feel her breathlessness when she first sees the stone rolled away; we need to gasp with her as she hears her name with that familiar intonation that her friend Jesus uses.

What was going through her mind throughout all of this?

The stories we tell of the first Easter morning are often an amalgamation of all of the gospel stories. In today's story, we read of Mary going early in the morning, while it was still dark. This detail is important as it reminds us of the mystery of this whole day.

Pastor and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us

By all accounts, a stone blocked the entrance to the cave so that there were no witnesses to the resurrection. Everyone who saw the risen Jesus saw him after. Whatever happened in the cave happened in the dark.

The darkness in this text is gloomy only because the grief was so heavy. But, the darkness of the tomb is mysterious and beautiful. The resurrection had already

happened before Mary arrived as the stone had already been rolled away from the tomb.

When she arrived at the tomb, fear filled her being. And she ran. It was this fear that made her assume the worst. Rationally, she made sense. If the stone had been rolled away and the body not present, of course someone must have stolen Jesus' dead body. She notified the other disciples, who by the way, were cowering in a room in fear that they would be met with the same fate as Jesus if someone found them out and about. Several of them ran to the tomb, though the writer of this Gospel—the one Jesus loved—ran the fastest.

When they arrived at the tomb, the men took a look. With very little dialogue, they left almost as fast as they arrived. But Mary remained. And wept. Through her tears, she encountered a man she assumed to be the gardener and when he called her name, she realized it was the one for whom she was crying.

When we think of the Easter celebration, we often think about lilies and trumpets. We think about joy and celebration. We think about flowering the cross and pastel colors. But as Ignatius of Antioch said, "Christ rose in the silence of God." We don't think about grief and exasperation. We don't think about silence and darkness. Though we read this text or one similar to it every Easter Sunday, it is rare for us to consider the weight of the trauma these disciples experienced over the course of the weekend. That is until we experience trauma of our own.

The last several weeks have been traumatic for us. We've felt fear and uncertainty about our future. We've had events canceled and families have had to live separated. And it is through our own trauma and pain that the disciples' feelings become ever so present to us. When they have finally begun to come to terms with Jesus' death, with the end of this movement for which they risked their lives, with the end of their hopes for a new existence, with the end of this vision of a God whose love is bigger, grace is wider and compassion is deeper than anything they've experienced...when they finally came to terms with this end, they learn that God has said "no."

On Easter morning, they learned that God just can't put up with some things. They learned that there are some things that God just cannot do. They learned that there are some things with which God cannot be associated.

On Easter morning, alongside the disciples we learn of God's no to systems that injure — emotionally, physically, spiritually. Through Mary's tear-filled eyes, we learn of God's no to patriarchy as Jesus entrusts her with the message of his resurrection. Through Jesus' wounds he still bears all over his body, we learn of God's no to the physical violence of the empire. Through the disciples' fearful cowering in the room where they had been just days before celebrat-



ing Passover with their friend, we learn of God's "no" to violent empires that oppress through fear, exclusion, terror, and spectacle.

There are some things that God just cannot do, and oppression is one of them. The resurrection is God's no to systems that injure.

On Easter morning, alongside Mary, we learn of God's "no" to abandonment. Her grief overwhelms her. She feels alone. When she arrived at the tomb to find it empty that morning, her first instinct was to go and get her friends. So she does. Once they observe it, once they take it in, they leave. They don't even recognize their grieving friend just steps away from where they were. Mary misses Jesus. She remembers that he promised to never abandon them; to never leave them alone. Perhaps she begins resenting her friends who just left. Perhaps she even begins resenting Jesus who left her alone. But then the gardener shows up and calls her name. As the name reverberated in her ears, her heart was warmed. She was no longer alone. He kept his promise.

Theologian Jonathan Walton says, "Even when personal circumstances are far from ideal, and it is difficult to discern God's presence, Jesus told his followers he wouldn't leave them as orphans."<sup>[1]</sup>

The sound of Mary's name; the recognition that it was not the gardener after all showed that there are some things God cannot do and abandonment was one of them.

And finally, we learn as we run to and from the tomb with Mary and the other disciples of God's "no" to understanding. No one was there to witness the resurrection and as a result no one has ever settled on an absolute account of what happened, why it happened, and what it meant. On Easter morning, we move into the realm of faith, a realm that is not verifiable despite our best efforts. It is a realm that is mysterious and ambiguous. It is a realm that asks more questions and receives few answers. It is a realm in which every time we return to it, we receive a new meaning. We find new depth. We hear a new Voice.

Theologian Serene Jones reminds us of the mystery here and of God's resistance to understanding saying, "We are obsessively committed to telling and retelling this story...all the time hoping that if we repeat it often enough, we might succeed in unlocking its secret."<sup>[2]</sup>

In the darkness of the tomb, we are reminded of God's "no" to understanding. Though we—like the disciples at the tomb—have been traumatized by the death that surrounds us among other things, God's "no" gives us hope for God's "yes."

Amen.

*Katie Calloway*

*First Baptist Church, Savannah, GA*

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[1]Jonathan Walton "Easter Day/Resurrection of the Lord: John 20:19-31, in Joel B. Green and Thomas G. Long, eds., *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019).

[2]Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019).

# God's "Yes"

## John Callaway

### John 20:1-18

Can I just start by saying that the phrase “Jesus died for my sins” is not enough for today? That tired, old phrase comes nowhere close to having enough meaning for today. If Jesus simply died on Friday, if Jesus was just another political threat crucified by the empire, if the story ends with Jesus dying, we are not here today. We are not celebrating Easter. We are not Christians. We are not Baptists. We are not standing in a church building. And you are not watching this on your computer, tablet, or smartphone.

If Jesus just died for your sins or for my sins, that is the end of the story.

My friends, we are gathered here on this day—Sunday, the first day of the week—because God said “no” to death and God said “yes” to new life.

God said “yes” to resurrection. God said “yes” to you. God said “yes” to me. God said “yes” to creation. God said “yes” to the world moving forward. God said “yes” to forgiveness. God said “yes” to hope. God said “yes” to peace. God said “yes” to love. God said “yes” to joy. God said “yes” to a new way of being in the world. God said “yes” to the beginning of a new story. The same old story simply won’t do today. Today, we are talking about a new creation.

The gospel writer of John has given a formally Jewish and a new Christian audience all kinds of hints at this new creation. In John 18, Jesus and his disciples are in a garden when the soldiers come to take Jesus away. In John 19, right before our scripture today, Joseph of Arimathea, one of Jesus’ disciples, comes to take away the body of Jesus. Nicodemus helps Joseph prepare the body for burial and Verse 41 says, “Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid (NRSV).” They close the tomb with a stone, sealing the body into the earth.

Reading the first chapters of Genesis, which were extremely familiar to this audience, where does creation begin? Where does God touch the earth and speak to creation? In a garden.

So when Mary comes back to the tomb distraught and saddened by the body of Jesus not being in the tomb anymore, she encounters the resurrected Jesus where? In a garden.

Jesus says to her “Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?”

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’”

Friends, the garden is blooming. New life is all around.

Theologian Jonathan Walton says, “Resurrection is the perennial promise of God’s provision that blooms through the concrete cracks of grief and despair.”<sup>[1]</sup>

New life is blooming right in front of Mary Magdalene. New life is blooming right now in the midst of our own grief and despair.

Wasn’t that really Jesus’ message all along? God is still moving. God is still working in the world. God is still calling us forward. This is the new, old story. Throughout Jesus’ life, he showed all who witnessed that there is another way of ordering the world. New creation is a possibility. He lived this out until the very end of his life. When Peter pulls out a sword to meet violence with violence, Jesus says, “put away your sword.” That’s the old story. We are bringing about a new story.

The old story, the old way of ordering the world is full of violence, death, and empire. Everybody knew that story all too well. And today, we know that story all too well. The old story is a call to arms and an eye for an eye. You chop off an ear, we chop off an ear. You kill someone, we kill someone. You bomb a building, we send a missile. You send a plane, we send a drone. That’s the same old cycle of violence. But a new creation is blooming.

Jesus shows that new life breaking the cycle of death and destruction is possible. As Rob Bell says, “If a new creation can be birthed on the other side of death, it means that this world is worth saving and everything in it.”<sup>[2]</sup> The gardener has been pruning and cultivating, making new life spring forth all along. Of course, Mary thought he was the gardener because he was. In that garden, he was making new life rise. The risen Christ is the gardener and is still gardening in our world today.

Through the power of the risen Christ, people are experiencing new life in the midst of this terrible pandemic. The Gardener is tending to his garden, nurturing us, speaking with gentleness to us, giving us nourishment for today. The

Gardener is tending to us through the still small voice, calling our names with the same intimacy and gentleness that he used to call out to Mary. He is meeting us where we are, making us feel as though our roots stretch far and wide connecting us to one another.

Isn't it interesting that what we are experiencing is happening in this part of our church calendar? In this time in our seasonal calendar we find ourselves in a peculiar situation, grieving the hurt in the world while doing what we can to shelter ourselves from further harm. Isn't it interesting that we are having this experience during this season of renewal, during this season of new life? The contrast is stark. The contrast of the season and our predicament highlights our calling.

The risen Christ is calling us to be gardeners as well, tending to creation, pruning, nurturing, and cultivating to bring about blooms of new creation. At the beginning of this season at our Ash Wednesday service, worshipers were invited to grasp a handful of earth—a handful of dirt—to remind us of our finitude to remind us of our limits.

But that earth—that dirt—can also remind us of the possibilities. Endless possibilities to create life and newness.

This Resurrection Sunday, you are invited to participate in tending to our garden, to dive deep into all of the newness that life has to offer, to be a part of the new story that is moving the world forward, to be fully alive in this movement that is so much bigger than one individual. You are invited to participate in a reshaping of the world, recognizing all of the good that is a part of creation, and working to prune and cultivate the rest of the parts that aren't life-giving. You are invited to say "no" to the same old story of Jesus dying for your sins and all of the guilt, shame, and death, and to say "yes" to participate in reshaping, reordering, and resurrecting the world with Jesus Christ, the gardener.

God is saying "yes" to a new creation. God is saying "yes" to a new story. God said "yes."

How will you respond?

*John Callaway*

*First Baptist Church, Savannah, GA*

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[1]Walton.

[2]Rob Bell, "She Thought He Was the Gardener, 2020, [online], available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-p2v1vNPW4>, accessed 30 April 2020.



# **An Ongoing Resurrection Journey**





# A Prayer for Those Who are Lonely

**Andrea Simmonds**

Holy Creator, when creating us you knew that it wasn't good that we should be alone.

You created a companion and populated the earth.

Come near to those who feel the contradictions

To their created nature.

Who are feeling the pull of missing,

Physical touch.

Who are aching to have another human,

Face to face.

God let them feel Your presence.

Let them know that You are near

And they are not alone in their loneliness.

May they find solace in seeing through a screen

Though dimly now, with lags, and freezes will

Once again be seen close and clear.

Amen.

*Andrea Simmonds*



# A Prayer for Those on Birthing Journeys

**Sophia Russell Hall**

*Hello Kind Father –*

There are so many birthing persons who need your strength and love during this time. Not all have persons who love them. Not all have persons who care. Not all are experiencing the greatest of times.

Not all are able to enjoy their birthing journey due to worry, fear, anger, distrust, isolation or simply loneliness.

However, dear Father, my prayer is that they see themselves in new light-

That they recognize and know that NO one has the authority to enforce their thoughts upon their journey-

That they take ever breathing moment to speak over their body and to their unborn child-

That they speak strength, speak encouragement, speak truth-

That they realize that they are able and capable of carrying excellence –

*Precious Mother,*

Please exude your love to the one who is experiencing violence or mistreatment during their birthing journey-

My prayer is that they cry loud and spare not for fear of safety-

That they embody the strength of the grace that is within them-

To know they are beautiful – are worthy – are strong – they CAN – they WILL.

*Wonderful Creator,*

Please be comfort and presence to the one who has experienced loss during their birthing journey–

It ended before time–

May they be encouraged to honor their feelings–

Write to their unborn child–

I pray that life givers who will hear their hearts surround them–

Father, lastly, I ask that your eyes and hands be upon us who are in various stages of our birthing journey during this time of calamity in the earth. May your written words shine light in places of darkness. May your heard word remove thoughts of defeat – May we ever feel the warmth of your comfort.

For God's Grace, we ask in the name of His precious, comforting One who sees, the One who heals, the One whose arms are outstretched....

Amen.

*Sophia Russell Hall*

# Tidings

**Jesse Sorrell**

*for Brigid*

I am floating between the past and the future,  
floating along tides of my birth  
as death ripples near . . .

The past undertows beneath me,  
a river swallowing division,  
capital and greed.

Rivers speak more than what we hear.

Their language veins into ocean,  
their words branch earth like lungs.

Lungs are ancient groves, breathing  
oxygen into grief, love blown  
to blood and bone and memory.

The tide delivers me to shore, drenched  
silent inside language. The moon  
pulls the sea inside us, creatures . . .

So as we lose breath  
while the whole world gasps,

120 Crocus Blooms in Wilderness Places

are we alone

or are we alive, together

breathing forest into sky.

*Jesse Sorrell*

*Chapel Hill, NC*

# Contributors

*Listed in the order in which they appear in the collection. Biographies are in the writers' own words.*

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**The Reverend Lindsey Altwater Clifton** is the Co-Pastor of Forest Hills Presbyterian Church in High Point, NC. She's a self-proclaimed nerd who enjoys life's simple pleasures: hammocks, a good book, laughing until it hurts, bike rides, growing flowers, and writing liturgy. A lifelong North Carolinian, Lindsey is an alumna of Elon University (BA; English Education, 2009) and Wake Forest University (M.Div., 2016). Lindsey's faith journey has been rather ecumenical, so she has served as a lay leader and staff person in a few denominational traditions. She also taught high school English for four years before going to divinity school. Lindsey is passionate about intergenerational ministry and community engagement, and she finds joy in helping folks of all ages connect to the life of the church at Forest Hills and beyond its walls.

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**Andrea Simmonds** has a B.A. in Media Communication Studies from Young Harris College in Young Harris, GA. She also holds a Master of Divinity degree from Wake Forest University School of Divinity in Winston Salem, NC. She has served as a chaplain resident and currently serves as the Palliative Care Chaplain Fellow at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston Salem, NC. She also serves as the Youth Minister at Parkway United Church of Christ. She is originally from Gainesville, GA, but grew up in the mountains of Georgia in a town called Suches. She currently resides in Winston Salem, NC with her two chihuahuas, Harley and Bear.

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Faith-based innovator **Duane Hudson Reid** is a pastor, author, poet and performer. He is the co-host of ON THE BLOC with Duane and Sam – a men's show featuring candid conversation on Instagram Live (@ontheblocwithduaneandsam) and author of Righteous Anger: Outcries for Justice – a collection of prose and poetic musing set in spoken word pieces. Duane has a Master of Divinity degree from Wake Forest University and a Bachelor of Arts Degree

in Psychology from North Carolina A&T State University. An avid community servant and runner, he resides in New Jersey with his wife and children.

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**The Reverend Nicole Newton** serves as the Associate Pastor for Children & Youth at First Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, NC. She holds a Master of Divinity degree from Wake Forest University School of Divinity and a Master of Christian Education from Union Presbyterian Seminary. She is the mom of two wild and wonderful daughters and the wife of the most patient husband known to humanity. In her free time, she enjoys growing flowers, cooking for large crowds, traveling the world, and having silly dance parties in the kitchen.

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**The Reverend Erica Saunders** (she/her/hers) is pastor of Peace Community Church in Oberlin, Ohio. She holds the Master of Divinity degree from Wake Forest University. Erica's passions include preaching, the study of Christian origins, and lame puns. You can usually find her in one of Oberlin's coffee shops, a Lorain County Metro Park, or watching Netflix.

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**The Reverend Christina Cataldo** ('05) served as a medical chaplain in hospice before being called as pastor and teacher of Winthrop Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, a small, vital congregation in Winthrop, Maine. She and her wife, a geology professor, live in an old farmhouse with five cats and one nervous dog. The chickens and guinea fowl keep an eye on the yard. In this time of COVID-19, well, really, most of the time, Pastor Chrissy wants to figure out what it means to love God and love our neighbors in this particular moment, in this particular place.

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**The Reverend Jasmyn C. Graham**, a native of Cordova, South Carolina, is the youngest daughter of Ms. Linda M. Graham. She is sister to two older siblings, brother, Tyrus V. and sister, Jacquitta, and a proud aunt of two nephews and one niece with whom she loves to spend time with—Tyrus Jalen Graham and Josiah Graham Huggins and Zoey Ava-Rose Tyler. Rev. Graham is a 2012 graduate of Morris College, having earned a Bachelor of Arts in Christian Education, and a 2017 graduate of Wake Forest University School of Divinity, having earned a Master of Divinity degree. In April 2014, she was licensed for ministry at the St. John Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Winston–Salem, North Carolina, under the pastoral leadership of Rev. Omar L. Dykes. Within the church she has served as a preacher, Bible study teacher, congregational care minister, youth minister, and worship planner. Outside of the church, she has clinical pastoral education experience having served as a hospital chaplain for one year at the Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston–Salem, North Carolina. Rev. Graham is currently Campus Pastor/Director for Wesley Foundation of Virginia State University.



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**The Reverend Patrick Cardwell** is an ordained minister and 2016 alumnus of Wake Forest Divinity School. He currently lives in Greensboro, NC, serving as Pastor of Lindley Park Baptist Church and Homebound Minister at First Baptist Church of Greensboro. When he isn't writing sermons or making pastoral visits, you can find him with a cup of coffee, at a local sporting event, or spending time with his partner, Lauren.

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**The Reverend Jon Watt** is the pastor of St. James Presbyterian Church in Jenks, Oklahoma, where he has served for the last seven years. When he is not writing or serving on a Presbytery Committee, Jon enjoys cooking for his family, working in the garden, and coaching his daughter's basketball team, as well as other pastors and executives seeking personal growth and development.

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**The Reverend Canon Cameron Robinson** is a priest in the Anglican Church of North America. He is a full-time educator in the public school and views that space as the most critical mission field in the country. As an English teacher, he teaches the ability to articulate experience through the pen. As a priest, his greatest desire is to help people connect their lived experience to the centuries of theological research, bringing muted voices to the conversation that shapes the future of theology as a field. He catalogs his own journey on his blog: [www.arthurcameronblog.com](http://www.arthurcameronblog.com)

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**Pastor Analyse Triolo** (she/her/hers) grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina. She earned her Master of Divinity degree from the Wake Forest University School of Divinity in 2015 and her Master of Arts in Ministry at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in 2016. She is a member of Proclaim (a program of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries), a professional organization for publicly identified LGBTQIA+ rostered ministers and seminarians in the Lutheran church. Pastor Analyse serves as the pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Bellerose, New York, located at the center of New York City's COVID-19 crisis.

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**Sabrina Nichole Gilchrist** is an author, public speaker, Clinical Mental Health Counselor, ordained Christian minister, and aspiring crochet queen. She earned the Bachelor of Arts degree from Winston-Salem State University and the dual Master of Arts (Counseling) and Master of Divinity degrees from Wake Forest University. She serves the Charlotte community through her work with Right Moves For Youth and works in private counseling practice with Reconciliation Counseling and Consulting, PLLC. She also teaches aspiring helping professionals at Queens University of Charlotte. Finally, Sabrina is an Associate

Minister at Life of Worship Ministries (Kings Mountain, NC; Pastors: Ricky and Shirley Beatty).

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**The Reverend Dr. Greg Dover** is the pastor of Augusta Heights Baptist Church in Greenville, SC, where he has served since 2015. He is a graduate of Furman University (B.A., 2009), the Divinity School of Wake Forest University (M.Div., 2009), and Drew University (D.Min., 2015). Greg has served as chair of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Ministries Council (2017-18) and was recently selected to be a Riley Fellow in the Diversity Leadership Initiative of the Richard W. Riley Institute of Furman University (2019). He is married to Suzy, and they have two children, Yates (8) and Lennon (6).

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**Jessica Chapman** is an alum of Wake Forest University School of Divinity and currently attends Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, CA pursuing her PhD in Practical Theology. She is an advocate for cultural compassion among healthcare professionals and hopes to promote healthcare justice within the American healthcare system. Jessica is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and serves as a clinical chaplain with both VITAS Healthcare and Kaiser Permanente Orange County. Jessica takes pride in being an interfaith chaplain who uses interfaith and ecumenical methods to care for diverse populations.

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**The Reverend Darrell R. Hamilton, II** is a graduate of Wake Forest School of Divinity where he attained his Master of Divinity degree May 2017. Darrell is originally from Edmond, Oklahoma, and in 2012 received his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the University of Central Oklahoma. Darrell serves as Pastor for Formation and Outreach at First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain and Director of the Urban Pastoral Ministry Program at City Mission Boston.

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**The Reverend Jenna Sullivan** is an ordained Baptist preacher, minister, writer, and yoga instructor originally from Little Rock, Arkansas. She loves to seek wisdom and style tips from her grandmother and is constantly learning how to be a grown-up without losing wonder, joy, and play.

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**The Reverend Chelsea Brooke Yarborough** was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland. In 2012, she graduated from Elon University and then went on to receive her Master of Divinity degree from Wake Forest University School of Divinity in 2015. Rev. Yarborough is currently pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy in Homiletics and Liturgics at Vanderbilt University. Her research centers on expanding the genre of preaching through non-pulpit preachers, interrogating whiteness in multicultural worship, and pedagogical development for theolog-

ical education. She is an ordained minister, a poet, an enneagram enthusiast, and a lover of leadership development. Chelsea's motto is "live to love and love to live each day" and is excited to continue her journey of cultivating and engaging curiosity in all that she pursues.

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**The Reverend Kenneth A. Pettigrew** is the Chief Operating Officer of the Winston-Salem Urban League, supporting the organization's work of advocating for civil rights, employment opportunities, economic opportunities, affordable housing, health and wellness, voting rights, food security by managing its operations, programming, and community and civic engagement. Before joining the Winston-Salem Urban League, Kenneth served as United Way of Forsyth County's first Coordinator of Faith-Based Community Engagement and staff lead for the Place Matters Initiative. Kenneth is an ordained minister in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME) and has served two churches in Winston-Salem, NC as lead pastor or associate. He has given numerous presentations on missional realignment, worship and community engagement, and preventing toxic charity. He serves on multiple community boards and is an active member of the NAACP and the Ministers' Conference of Winston-Salem and Vicinity. He is a music graduate of the University of North Carolina School of the Arts and holds a Master of Divinity from the Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

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**The Reverend Laura Mayo** is the Senior Minister of Covenant Church: an ecumenical, liberal, Baptist congregation in Houston, TX. She is a graduate of Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee and Wake Forest University Divinity School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Laura is active in Houston interfaith work and is regularly published in the Belief section of the Houston Chronicle and Baptist News Global and has been interviewed several times on Houston Public Media's "Houston Matters" radio show. Laura and her partner, Nicholas Stepp, have two sons, Owen & Grayson, who bring them such joy. Laura, Nick, Owen, and Grayson enjoy sailing, camping, projects, and cooking together.

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**The Reverend Franklyn C. Pottorff** is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and currently serves as the Pastor for Congregational Life and Stewardship at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Before that he served as a solo pastor in eastern Kentucky. He matriculated at Franklin College, studying editorial journalism and religion, before attending Wake Div. He is now enrolled in a doctoral program at Union Presbyterian Seminary. Frank and his spouse, Abby, feel fortunate (most days) to be parents to Charlie and Ollie.

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**John and Katie Callaway** are Co-Pastors of First Baptist Church, Savannah, Georgia. John was born and raised in Boiling Springs, SC. He completed an undergraduate degree and a master's degree in education at Clemson University and then attended the Wake Forest University School of Divinity and completed a Master of Divinity degree. Having worked in and alongside churches across the Southeast preaching, teaching, and leading music, John feels called to help others recognize the "burning bushes" in their lives and to help them grow along their faith journeys. John enjoys hiking, reading, playing music, and walking with his wife, Katie, daughter, Sophie, and dog, Lily.

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**Jesse Sorrell** graduated from Kenyon College and received his MDiv with a concentration in Religious Leadership in Food, Health, and Ecology from Wake Forest University School of Divinity. He went on to provide spiritual care in trauma and palliative care hospital settings while he discerns ordination with the United Church of Christ. He writes poetry, creative nonfiction, and sometimes fiction to explore human experience related to the body, earth and cosmic form. He and his partner, Matt, and their cat, Milo, live and create in Chapel Hill, NC.

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**Sophia Russell Hall** is a native of North Carolina. She is a licensed minister. She received a Bachelor of Science degree from Winston Salem State University, where she majored in Business Administration. She earned a Master of Healthcare Administration degree, also from Winston Salem State University, and a Master of Divinity degree from the Wake Forest University School of Divinity. Sophia completed one unit of Clinical Pastoral Care Education (CPE) at UNC-Rex Hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina. Additionally, she has completed internships at Repairers of the Breach with Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, NC Council of Churches in Raleigh, NC, and United Cornerstone Missionary Baptist Church in Winston Salem, NC. Sophia currently works as the Executive Director of a local non-profit. Sophia has always had a heart for teaching and serving which has been displayed through her various roles and activities throughout the years. Sophia has worked as a Coordinator of a Mobile Health Clinic and a professor of Healthcare Management and Health Science courses. Min. Russell Hall is ALSO blissfully married to Mr. David J. Hall and is expecting their first child this year.