

Living the Resurrection

Of all the high holy days on the calendar of faith, Easter is by far the highest and the holiest. There is no exuberance that is too loud, no expression of joy that is over the top, no exercise of new life that can be shut down. Easter calls for excess. Don't let it slip in silently; it needs brass accompaniment. And not just on one day. Easter is not a day; it is a season. That is why our worship series grabs hold of Easter and runs all the way to Pentecost, breathless and panting for the Spirit to come and breathe new life into our lungs so that we can endure the journey through the long season after Pentecost. The joy of Easter needs to sustain us until the Spirit can launch us into the next phase of experiencing the kin-dom of God.

The twentieth-century humorist Evan Esar said, "Easter is the only time when it is perfectly safe to put all your eggs in one basket." Who knows what that means? It is about leaning into Easter with all your faith, with all your hope. "Living the Resurrection" is about putting all your spiritual eggs in the basket of new life, new hope. It is our hope that through this long, but important series, the congregation can try on their new Easter clothes, living into what this gift is all about.

We call ourselves Easter people, but what does that mean? How do we live in the real world as those who are fully committed to the promise of Easter? What does it look like for a community of faith to grab hold of this new way of living, this new way of being a part of the kin-dom of the Resurrected One?

We focus on the gospel text for this season, but the other texts might also help us illuminate these stories. But our question is always, "How does this help me live today?" Grasping a historical understanding of the text is always a valuable exercise, and we'll do some of that as we go through this series. But in the end, it is about application. It's about more than just understanding what happened; it is really about living the Resurrection, right here and right now.

Resurrection of the Lord – Terror and Amazement

April 4, 2021 – [John 20:1-18](#) or [Mark 16:1-8](#)

Color: White or Gold

INTRODUCTION

It's Easter! End of planning notes.

OK, not really. But Easter, like Christmas, has so many local traditions that it almost plans itself. Except when it doesn't, or can't, because of outside problems. Last year's Easter was . . . wait for it . . . unprecedented. There was nothing like it before, and we hope there will be nothing like it again. However, this year may be similar. There are projections that a vaccine will be available, but how is the distribution going by this time? Who knows? (I'm writing months ahead, so I can't even speculate.) But it is possible, even likely, that there will still be some restrictions to observe – not to mention the knock-on effect of all those months of virtual worship. Some may have decided that they prefer virtual worship and decide to not return to in-person worship even when it is safe to do so.

Suffice it to say, this year may be different too. So how do you celebrate Easter in all its glory, despite the restrictions? The first thing to keep in mind is that attitude, not accessories, makes Easter the celebration that it needs to be. Perhaps the first questions are, "Who will bring this great good news to the congregation? Who can express the joy of this moment? Who can bring enthusiasm to the proclamation of the Word? Who will speak into the glory of this moment?"

We don't ask for the impossible, for accomplished performers only to take the stage. We ask only for those who can let this moment speak through them. One place to look is children. Let children lead on this day. For "to such as these," says our Lord, "belongs the kin-dom." Find a child to read the scripture text. Find a child to sing. Invite children to speak of the joy within them.

The colors of Easter are white and gold; the lights should be bright; the music should be loud and joyous. But maybe none of this is possible. Instead, let the faces of the congregation be the color and the light; let the laughter of the children be the music of joy.

If people desire a re-enactment of the story, then emphasize the running and the surprise. Focus on the response, the wonder, the amazement, the incredulity. Our problem these days is that we've heard the story so often that it no longer stuns us. We nod along as if this is what we knew was going to happen all along. It's old news, not necessarily startling news. That's why we focused on the end of Mark's Gospel, the terror and amazement of this moment. Amazement, sure, we get that; it is surprising and startling. But terror? Sure, that's what Mark said, but why? Because everything has changed. Everything is uncertain. Everything is new. Do you remember being new in this congregation? Do you remember the newness of the pandemic? There is terror in that. We've entered into a new world, a new reality. Grab hold of how this event has made everything new. We've lost our grip on that, it seems.

So, let there be joy – however it takes to project it, whether in person or through a screen or even in print. Tell jokes, funny stories; let there be laughter. Easter is a day to feel, even more than to understand. It is a day to accept more than a day to explain. Even though our foundations have been shaken, we move forward, because that is where the Risen one is going. He is going ahead of you. Let's keep moving forward.

PREACHING NOTES

Most scholars agree that this is the original ending of the Gospel of Mark. Verses nine through twenty were added later, on at least two different times – probably because the church was uncomfortable with the original ending. "And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8). Kind of a damp squib of an ending. A what? A damp squib. It means a dud, a firework that didn't go off. A sputter instead of an explosion.

You'd think Resurrection calls for fireworks at the end, wouldn't you? A big, wide-screen, special effects kind of moment. Filmed in "Vista-Vision!" In "Technicolor!" In hi-def 3D! In IMAX. But no, we get, "they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

And who are "they," in this case? Well, the women, who went to do something. At least they tried to do something, to care for the dead body. To anoint him,

Mark says, forgetting that he was already anointed back in chapter fourteen, by an unnamed woman with an alabaster jar. Maybe it was Mary – Mary Magdalene, or Mary who was Martha's sister, or some other Mary, the mother of James, perhaps, Jesus' mom, maybe. There were just too many Marys. Mark couldn't keep them straight; no wonder we get confused. And Salome? Wasn't that Herod's daughter who danced a dance that won her a prophet's head? Surely not. Another Salome, thought to be the mother of James and John, Zebedee's wife. Mother of James? Isn't that Mary? Or is it a different James? *Arghh!* We need a cast list. We don't know who's who in this story. We know what they did. Or didn't do. Or tried to do. Don't we?

They intended to anoint the body, to prepare it for burial. The practice was actually to aid in the decay process. The spices were to help with the smell, but also to accelerate the decomposition. Bodies would lie in the tomb for a year and then the family would go and collect the bones and put them in a box, called an ossuary, that would be stored in a different section of the tomb. So, when Joseph loaned his family's tomb to the family of Jesus, it was only supposed to be temporary. But little did he know how temporary it would be.

"They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." It was what they *didn't do* that Mark was interested in. They didn't anoint the body because there wasn't a body to anoint. So they were given a different task by the young man in the tomb. A young man who seems eerily familiar. A young man in a garden tomb reminds us of a young man in a garden of violence and betrayal. And yet that young man ran off without clothes, and this young man was dressed in white. That young man was scared to death; this young man was filled with the confidence of life eternal. He's not here; look; see that empty spot? He has been raised. He wasn't interested in tombs, but in what came out of one, or rather who came out of one. Who's who? We aren't introduced to this young man, because it isn't his story. He's a pointer, a reference to another. He's not here.

But go and tell his disciples. A new mission was given. They came with one task, and they didn't do it. They couldn't. It was no longer necessary. The things of death are no longer necessary. The attitude of death, the victory of death was no longer. So, a new mission was needed. Go and tell his disciples and Peter.

And Peter? They had to blink at that. The last we saw Peter he was collapsed, sobbing in the courtyard of the high priest's house. The last we heard from Peter he was spouting curses and swearing oaths that he didn't have a clue who this Jesus person was. The last we knew of Peter he was condemned by a rooster crowing in the dawn of a terrible day. It was the worst day of Peter's life. And he knew he had failed. He had failed to keep his word that he had so vehemently declared mere hours before that damnable rooster. "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you" (Matt. 26:35, NRSV). And die he did—inside, in his soul, in his sense of self. Who's who Peter? Who's you? Nobody, that's who.

But now, "go and tell his disciples and Peter." What did Peter do to deserve this? What did he do? Nothing. What did the women do? They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Nothing. What did any of them do to make this Easter moment happen? Nothing. What do any of us do to deserve Easter? Nothing. What do we do to receive Easter? Nothing. Who's who in the Easter story? Not them. Not us. Only him.

And Mark doesn't even have Jesus appear in this original ending. Jesus doesn't pop up from behind a rolled away stone and shout, "Surprise!" He doesn't encounter anyone wandering in the garden. It is just a presence. No, a Presence. He's not here. He will meet you, though. He will meet you where you live. He's already there, ahead of you. Get moving. Get going, or Easter will go on without you.

That's what we do on Easter. We run to catch up. We run to find the one who has gone before us. The one who was raised for us. What did we do to make Easter happen? Nothing. What did we do to deserve such a gift, such a moment? Nothing. What can we do to stop it or to make it better? Nothing. Easter is. Easter was and is and always will be. And we did nothing.

That's Mark's way of telling the story. It isn't our story. It isn't our doing. It is God. God is the actor. God is the doer. We barely appear. It isn't a human story; it's a divine one. It isn't our story. And yet. And yet.

Who's who in Easter? Why we are. We are someone because of Easter. We are who we are not by our doing, but by the grace of God. We are made new, not because we earned it, but because God gives it. We have hope, not because we are strong enough to work it, or respond to it, or claim it. We have hope because

God gives it. And because the Resurrected Jesus leads us home. You will see him; he told you that, remember? You will see him. And in seeing him, you will know who's who.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

We advocate pulling out all the stops for the Easter celebration, whatever that means in your context. It might be big and loud and lots of extra musicians and dancers and dramatic readers. Or it might be adding food and extra hospitality to the welcome center of your building. It might mean bringing the children into the full worship experience and letting them lead when appropriate. It might be something radically different or familiar and loved traditions wrapping the worshipers in comfort and welcome. Whatever says "Christ is Risen" with passion and enthusiasm in your context should be considered.

Of course, we don't know at this time what restrictions will still be in place in April 2021. And even if you are fully back with in-person worship, perhaps your online experience opened doors that you want to keep open. So, considering what works online and not just in the sanctuary is always an important consideration.

Whatever speaks of joy on this day is important – not a false joy based on performance or spoken lines, but a genuine joy that grows out of a love for one another and for the Christ we worship together. Bring your whole self to worship this day. And, lest it be forgotten, every time you gather for worship!

Christ is Risen!

A Choral Call to Worship for Four Voices

Voice 1: Christ is risen!

All Voices: Christ is risen indeed!

Voice 2: Christ is risen!

All Voices: Christ is risen indeed!

Voice 3: Exhale. [*pause*] Go ahead, exhale. Breathe out. Let go. On this Easter Sunday, allow your souls to be replenished. Take in the joy. Take in peace. Take in the togetherness. Take what you need.

Voice 1: And wonder. Wonder, and imagine, and reflect, and question, and listen. Listen deeply to the words and the songs. Listen deeply to the Holy Spirit. And hear the words that God has for you.

Voice 4: We emerge from the long days of Lent; our journey through the wilderness. And we acknowledge that there is a darkness that seems to loom in this world. And we remember that nestled within the great mystery of the Resurrection is a great light. Search for that light, that hope on this day.

Voice 2: So, we come into this space, this *sacred* space, and we bring ourselves; our *whole* selves. We encourage you to embrace your body and we invite you to use your body to give God a hand clap of praise, to sing, to jump around, to dance, to celebrate. And, as we celebrate the Risen Savior, we invite you to bring your full selves into worship because Christ is risen!

All Voices: Christ is risen!

All Voices: Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

*Ashley Johnson, **Easter Liturgical Resources from Africana Writers**, edited by Safiya Fosua, 2020.*

Call to Worship for Easter

Christ is Risen: The world below lies desolate
Christ is Risen: The spirits of evil are fallen
Christ is Risen: The angels of God are rejoicing
Christ is Risen: The tombs of the dead are empty
Christ is Risen indeed from the dead,
the first of the sleepers,
Glory and power are his forever and ever

written by Hippolytus (AD 190-236), reposted <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2016/03/easter-call-to-worship.html>

Prayers of the People: Easter

Sing aloud, O mothers and sons!
Fathers and daughters, sisters and brothers,
rejoice and exult with all your hearts!
Let us offer our prayers and thanksgivings with one voice,
calling out the good news —

The tomb stands empty!

We look for our Savior among the living.

Jesus Christ is alive and in our midst today.

We pray for all faithful people —
for every human soul that turns to God in longing and in love.
Today and every day, pull us out of our graves and into your life.

The tomb stands empty.

We look for our Redeemer among the living.

Jesus Christ is alive and among us today.

We pray for the nations of the earth —
for those in authority, and for those under authority.
Come from the four winds, O Breath of Life,
and we shall live together in peace.

The tomb stands empty.

We look for our Mediator among the living.

Jesus Christ is alive and within us today.

We pray for this world, our garden home —
for the rain and the snow, the seed and the sprout —
for the birthing room and the last place of rest —
for every new creation.

The tomb stands empty.

We look for our Gardener among the living.

Jesus Christ is alive and beside us today.

We pray for those who are sick or suffering —
for anyone who needs extra help just now.

We pray especially for those named here today,
aloud and in our hearts . . .

(pause for names to be said or remembered)

Living Lord, renew them in Your love.

The tomb stands empty.

We look for our Sustainer among the living.

Jesus Christ is alive and with us today.

We pray for those who have died, and for all who mourn.

We pray especially for those named here today,
aloud and in our hearts . . . *(pause for names)* . . .

Eternal One, bring them home and gather them in.

The tomb stands empty.

We look for our Beloved among the living.

Jesus Christ is alive and in the midst of us today.

With joy and exultation,
we give thanks for the triumph of life over death,
offering special thanks for those joys, sorrows,
challenges and delights named here today,
aloud and in our hearts . . . *(pause for thanksgivings)* . . .
We are amazed at what has happened.

The tomb stands empty!

We look for our Creator among the living.

Jesus Christ is alive and in our hearts today.

Holy One, even before we call, you answer;
while we are yet speaking, you hear.

We offer up these prayers in the name of the Risen Christ —

our Savior, Redeemer, and Friend.

Amen.

~ written by Margaret D. McGee, and posted on *In the Courtyard*. www.inthecourtyard.com, reposted <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/02/prayer-for-others-easter.html>

Crying is Welcome Here

A prayer inspired by John 20:1-18

Mary cried.

She wept.

She had the courage to cry.

So, we can cry like Mary.

Even on this Easter Sunday, we can cry like Mary.

Crying is welcome here.

In fact, we must cry.

We must cry when we're hurting.

We must cry with the missing.

We must cry with the dead.

We must cry with those who suffer.

We must cry with the marginalized, the silenced, and the forgotten.

We must cry with those who lack bread.

We must cry.

Crying is welcome here.

If we don't cry, if we don't cry out,

If we try too hard to be strong for too long,

If we don't release the pain,

We will hurt only ourselves.

We must cry.

How else will we be able to see our need for the Resurrected Savior in our midst?

Crying is welcome here.

*Ashley Johnson, **Easter Liturgical Resources from Africana Writers**, edited by Safiya Fosua, 2020.*

Easter Confession

Christ, we come to the empty tomb,
we see our own death,
we see our own tomb, we see our own emptiness.
And we remember how we have treated other people—
members of our family, friends and neighbors.

**Lord, we come to your tomb,
we see a hungry world before us,
the pain of starving children,
the guilt of war on our hands,
and we know that collectively we share in those injustices.**

Lord we come to the empty tomb,
we search within ourselves and we cannot escape what we are,
people caught up in the pain of our own wrongdoing,
for some a deep sense of loneliness
and a frustration of what we would be but are not.

**Lord, when we come to the empty tomb,
we lay before you our pain,
our emptiness and look to you for hope.**

People of God,
why do you seek the living among the dead in an empty tomb?
Are you afraid, are you uncertain, and are you uncomfortable here?

**Our wounds are deep,
we have turned away from that man,
we have broken with him
and seek his fellowship.**

Do not dwell on your wounds any longer
for he has risen to heal you,
he has risen to forgive you;
he has risen to change us all and bind us together now.
Christ has risen to forgive us.

Thanks be to God.

— excerpted from *Service of Holy Communion 2010*, posted on the [River of Life](http://riveroflife.org.uk/) website. Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/02/easter-confession.html>

Easter Benediction

May the loving power of God,
which raised Jesus to new life,
strengthen you in hope,
enrich you with his love,
and fill you with joy in the faith.

~ posted on the Third Space website. <http://third-space.org.uk/blog>, reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/02/easter-benediction.html>

Second Sunday of Easter – Unless I See

April 11, 2021 – [John 20:19-31](#)

Color: White or Gold

INTRODUCTION

Low Sunday: At least that's what some call this day. On the Sunday after Easter, there is a general let down. It is hard to maintain the heights that we attain on the celebration of Resurrection Day. The pastor is often on vacation; the choir scales back. Even in this still uncertain time of pandemic, there might be a tendency to relax a little bit on this week. Resist that tendency!

Certainly, we can understand the need for rest and recuperation after a busy season. The calendar may not be as full as the previous weeks, or even season. But that doesn't mean the enthusiasm and the hope needs to diminish.

The theme for the week is Thomas and his need to see something real before his belief can kick in. Well, let's admit, we all want that. We all find it easier to believe when we can see something. So, let this service be a time of showing. But what do we show? We show the gospel at work in people's lives. We show the difference it makes in how we live each day. We show a motivating hope that keeps joy at work in the community of faith.

In other words, you show your own story, your own people, your own mission and service. What stories of transformation can you tell? What examples of hope clinging in difficult situations can you show? What can people see that shows that faith is alive in this people of God? This can be done with testimony from individuals or groups; it could be a slide show of a local mission or service project; it could be a children's choir or pictures from the virtual VBS you ran last summer; it could be a listing of all the discipleship/Bible study groups at work in the church. Do whatever it takes to announce to the gathered congregation that we are alive and hands on in our faith – even with physical distancing! What Thomas cried for was something real, not just empty words. Thomas's question is the world's question: "What do you have to show us about your faith? How can we see the risen Christ through you?" *Unless I see.*

PREACHING NOTES

You know what? There is simply way too much stuff in these verses to adequately deal with it all in this space. Way, way too much. We need to look at Thomas, since it is his words that give our title for this week. But we'll come back to him in a moment. There is also the whole Pentecost theme that appears here in John's Gospel. "He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (20:22). This is very different from Luke's version that appears in Acts, with tongues of fire and mighty winds. It is a quieter, gentler Pentecost perhaps. But we'll leave that one too.

Then there is that pesky, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (20:23). Yeah, like that hasn't caused centuries of abuse of power from the hierarchy of the church or caused self-righteous Christians to think it is their job to be judgmental and to point out specks while conveniently overlooking logs. But hey, he said we have the power to determine what sins are the bad ones and which ones don't really matter all that much. Right? Well, no. But we'll have to return to this one at another time. Sorry.

And then there are those curious verses at the end that seem to open the door to all kinds of stuff. Like maybe it is possible that Jesus kinda sorta wants us to think for ourselves sometimes? That we've got to take his life and teaching and apply it to stuff he never took the time to tell us about? Or that John and the others didn't take the time to write down about what Jesus said about hedge funds and immigration? You think, maybe? Well, someday we'll come back and cover that.

But right now what occupies our thinking are those doors. On Easter evening, they were locked. Locked for fear, John says. But they were locked up tight. The disciples were locked in, behind doors, behind piles of furniture too perhaps. Blinds may have been drawn on the windows, and nobody moved much in case someone below heard the footsteps on the floors. They were huddled, hunkered down. Behind the doors. And who was there? Well, Thomas wasn't, we learn that later. So, what does that leave now? ten? Maybe ten. But maybe more. See, in the Gospel of John, the word *disciples* is a slippery term. It's not just the twelve, usually. John rarely just talks about the twelve. He's interested in a bigger crowd. The twelve, now ten, plus the women who were there. And maybe others. At one

point, Jesus sent out seventy. Maybe there were seventy, or sixty-eight, in that room, crowded in, avoiding eye contact (which would be hard if there were seventy) Maybe less, maybe ten, maybe a few more.

And if the women were there, did they try again? “Look,” Mary of Magdala says, “It was him. He’s alive!” “Yeah, sure Mary. Maybe your demons have come back? Just sayin’. And didn’t you think it was the gardener? You have no idea who it was, do you? It was early; you were up all night; none of us slept. You must have been dreaming.” “No, it was him. He said my name. When he said my name, I knew it was him.”

She crossed her arms and turned to Peter and John who were trying really hard to be interested in the pattern of the rushes thrown on the floor. “You were there. You came running in like your shorts were on fire and dashed into the tomb. What did you see?” The silence hung in the air behind the locked doors. Nothing. They saw nothing. Not what they expected to see. Not what they hoped to see. They saw nothing. Now they sit, comforted by nothing, afraid of everything, hoping locked doors would save them.

They didn’t. Jesus came. That’s what John says. The doors were locked and Jesus came. How did he come? Dunno. John doesn’t say; he just came. “Peace be with you.” He had to say it twice, because the first time they didn’t hear it for fear of . . . him. He sighed (must have) and showed his hands and his side. Then, John says, then they rejoiced. How long did he stand out there banging on the doors hoping someone would let him in? Jesus, who had earlier that morning burst through a stone door, now appeared through a locked door and said, “Peace be with you.”

Then Thomas shows up. How much later? We don’t know. Later. They tell him, those almost seventy or maybe ten disciples tell him, “We saw the Lord.”

“Yeah, sure,” says Thomas. Ah, Thomas, why did you doubt? Because the doors were still locked. “We saw the Lord! He showed us his wounds by which we were healed. He offered us peace. He gave us power, he sent us out to forgive!” Yeah? The doors are still locked. A week later, the doors are still locked. The truth is, none of them believed. They saw, but they didn’t believe – not enough to open a door anyway; not enough to venture out. Seeing isn’t always believing. Or maybe

there is seeing and there is *seeing*. Seeing with our eyes doesn't always lead to seeing with our faith.

A week later the doors were shut, but Jesus came anyway. With a sigh, undoubtedly, but he came. He came to show them what they needed to see. Just like he shows all of us what we need to see. Remember? That's the Easter proclamation. He is going before you, going back home, going to familiar territory, going where you belong, where you live and work, and there you will see him. That's the promise. That's what they were offered, what we are offered. We will see him.

But wait. What about that "blessed are those who haven't seen and yet believe"? What about that? Well, I think he threw that in because he heard the locks turning on our own doors. And he wanted to pry them open. Maybe coming through locked doors was strenuous; maybe it was painful. Or maybe he wanted to spare us the false security of locked doors and just be open enough to see him in our midst, showing us his wounds, the brokenness of this world, the suffering of Christ on the backs and sides and hands of our brothers and sisters. But also, to see the grace and the forgiveness that is poured out even on us just when we're sure we won't get it, just when we are afraid we can't have it and we turn to push the doors closed against a world too cruel to live in, too empty of him. Or so we think. But he's there.

He doesn't like your locked doors. We try to shut him out like we shut out a cat on the wrong side of the door. We act like we don't see him. But Jesus is persistent; he keeps banging; he keeps coming through. And in our darkness, he appears with a shaft of light that's almost blinding. And he says, "Peace be with you."

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Churches tend to pull back a little bit (or a lot) on this Second Sunday of Easter. Surely, we cannot sustain the energy and passion past the day itself, can we? Well, maybe there are some aspects of post-Easter worship that would be hard to sustain, but we need to avoid sending the message that the fun is over and we are back to “ho hum” or “same old, same old” again. Find something unusual to do on this “Low” Sunday, something that stands out and announces that the Resurrection continues. Now we want to see it.

Like Thomas, we want to live our resurrection faith outwardly. So, what can we do in this time of worship that is an outward expression of our belief in the power of Easter? What hope, what joy, what grace can we show to one another and then to the world as we gather for worship? We cannot define your context for you, but you are no doubt full of the ways that your congregation helps people get past their doubt by seeing the person of Christ in the love and caring and service of the congregation individually and collectively. Today is the time to draw attention to those ways. Remember, this season is an “of” season and not an “after” season. That seems to mean that we maintain the Easter experience throughout. Let us keep celebrating.

Call to Worship

Last Sunday was Easter, a day on which the only fitting call to worship was an announcement of the Event – the resurrection, the greatest act of life-saving imaginable. Through it God let us laugh at our death sentence by punctuating it with a living exclamation mark. On this day and in days to come may we remember that there are times when God restates the joyful resurrection proclamation.

Abilities faded and forgotten are channeled toward new creativity – that’s resurrection.

Friendships once killed by frosty misunderstanding bloom again in warm reconciliation – that’s resurrection.

Hopes glimmering and gone are rekindled by expressions of caring – that’s resurrection.

Faith, dulled by lack of exercise, dances again to God's everyday rhythms – that's resurrection.

*Glen E. Rainsley, **Flames of the Spirit**, Ruth Duck, ed., Pilgrim Press, 1985, p. 40*

Alone with our Faith –

A Call to Worship for Easter 2B

It's the Sunday after Easter; the lilies are gone.

And we are alone with our faith

Thomas said: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." (John 20:25b NRSV)

Easter is past, and we are alone with our faith.

On this Sunday after Easter, help us grow into the faith that we confessed and celebrated last week. Reveal evidence of your resurrection for the days when we feel that we are alone with our faith.

Safiyah Fosua, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/21st-century-africana-liturgy-resources-for-april-23-2006-the-second-sunday>

Prayer before the Reading of Scripture

(inspired by John 20:19-31)

Resurrected God,
though we have hidden ourselves in a locked room
and huddled together as ones who build barriers,
send your Living Word through our locked doors
and into our guarded hearts
that we might be witnesses of your grace
and couriers of your goodness.

By the power of your Holy Spirit,
grant us the trust to believe the Gospel
not because we see it

but because we have been seen by it
and transformed through it. Amen.

~ written by Stephen M. Fearing and posted on **Wild and Precious Life**. <http://stephenmfearing.wordpress.com/category/easter/> Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2015/04/prayer-of-illumination-john-20-19-31.html>

Congregational Prayer for Doubters

You call us to be people of faith,
yet we are often people with doubts.
We doubt that love can grow again in relationships
where anger and bitterness reign supreme.
You know the strength of love and the power of prayer:
help us to be faithful lovers.
We doubt that peace can come in the Middle East, in Syria, in Palestine;
where hatred and racism reign supreme.
You know that peace is growing there:
help us to be faithful peacemakers.
We doubt that the hungry can be fed in Africa,
where despair and hopelessness reign supreme.
You know that there is enough food in the world;
help us to be generous and faithful.
You specialize in impossibilities;
you walked on water,
you heal the nations
you forgive sins
you set the captive free,
you set us free from our captivities.

This morning we pray for people here who are filled with doubts,
who wonder whether you exist and whether you are listening to our prayers,
who wonder what this whole community is about.
We pray for people who doubt the purpose of life,
who wonder whether to end it all,
who face feelings of meaningless and despair.
Even when we have that sinking feeling,

give us the wisdom to turn to you.
Lord we want to believe, help our unbelief!
Give us faith, small as a mustard seed,
so that we can be your faithful people,
believing in your power to save,
believing in your power to reign supreme,
believing that we can share this good news
with everyone we meet.
We ask all this in Jesus' name, Amen.

written by Carol Penner and posted on her **Leading in Worship** blog. <http://carolpenner.typepad.com/>.
Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/10/prayer-for-doubters.html>

Prayer of Confession:

Holy God, we confess our doubts.
When our childhood understandings fall away,
we feel naked.
When our long-held beliefs seem to crumble,
we feel lost.
When our convictions are questioned,
we feel ashamed.
Guide us into right paths, O God.
Guide our feet into the way of peace.
guide our hands to care for others.
guide our hearts to love our neighbors.
Call us back to You, O Christ, and renew our faith.
When the ground is unsteady,
loving God, put us back on right paths
by doing justice, loving kindness,
and walking humbly with You. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon (from Psalm 16):

The Lord is our chosen portion and our cup.
God binds us in, counsels our minds and instructs our hearts.

God helps us to stand firm for justice, mercy, and peace.
When we fall, God lifts us up, forgives us,
and remembers our sins no more. Amen.

Worship resources for Easter 2 from Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell, Rev-o-lution.org: Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2011/04/worship-resources-for-may-1-2011.html>

Commission and Benediction

(inspired by John 20:21-22)

Jesus said: "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am now sending you."

He believes in you. The busy world awaits your compassion.

God believes in us.

Sometimes you will give your best yet fail.

God believes in us

At other times you will succeed in spite of your stumbling.

God believes in us

Go gladly, daring to succeed or fail to the glory of God,
and then at the very end, nothing shall dismay you.

God believes in us

With Christ's own breath within us, we shall travel well.

The help of the saving Christ,
the wisdom of the Living God,
and the support of the loving Spirit,
will be with you
every step of the way, now and always.

Amen!

~ written by Bruce Prewer, and posted on Bruce Prewer's Homepage. <http://www.bruceprewer.com/>.
Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/03/sending-out-peace-be-with-you.html>

Third Sunday of Easter – Touch and See

Native American Ministries Sunday

April 18, 2021 – [Luke 24:36b-48](#)

Color: White or Gold

INTRODUCTION

This could be a continuation of the previous week's theme. There the emphasis was on seeing; here it is on touching. Jesus is trying to ground the disciples' faith in the reality of his presence, in the concreteness of his being. He told them to touch him; he ate in front of them. He was announcing that he was real. What can we provide, what hands-on proof can we give that Jesus is alive among us? Of course, we have been in a pandemic and touching is still not something we want to engage in. But we can still give examples of lives being touched, hearts being touched.

Maybe the emphasis is on feeding, since Jesus ate that piece of fish as a way of proving his presence. Maybe we talk about food banks or feeding programs; maybe we remind our members of the tradition of potlucks – perhaps they began right here as part of the Resurrection story of Jesus! Who knows what has happened to potlucks in our current climate, but there are safe ways of sharing meals together. Maybe an at-home potluck could be a common menu that everyone prepares on their own, and pictures are shared of each family or individual partaking in that “shared” meal. Or maybe you could put together packaged meals to share in your neighborhood, especially in those areas of food insecurity, as a way of letting people touch and see. Meals could be dropped off at each house with a note and a wave.

But that would be outside of the context of worship, so what could be done in the context of worship around these ideas? One of the functions of worship is to inspire people to service. So, if the church hasn't settled on a specific program or project, then worship could be a place to raise ideas, to challenge worshipers to think creatively about feeding programs.

The emphasis of Native American Ministries for this week will affect some congregations more directly than others. Every congregation can become more aware of the real situation of First Nations people in various parts of the country, and every congregation can certainly participate in supporting vital ministries in

those areas. Provide information about various ministry opportunities. Here is a link to ResourceUMC's information about previous Native American Ministries Sundays, <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/native-american-ministries-sunday-pastor-and-leader-kit-2>

We hope to provide liturgical resources from our Native American brothers and sisters. Incorporation of these prayers or litanies would help bridge the understanding gap between our churches. This is part of what it means to touch and see. Touch another tradition; touch another perspective; take hold of something that takes you out of yourself long enough to embrace the realities of another's existence. Overcoming racism is an ongoing process of education and a constant reminder that embracing those of a difference race or ethnicity involves stretching ourselves and our practices to include and embrace diversity. We are challenged by our bishops to continue the task of ending racism in us and in our society. This emphasis is an important opportunity to embrace that challenge. Again, our world is asking us to show our faith by how we choose to live it. The way we encounter those unlike us is one way we have of grounding our faith in the reality of this world. *Touch and see.*

PREACHING NOTES

Now we have Luke's version of that locked room encounter with the Resurrected Jesus. Well, Luke doesn't emphasize the locked doors as much as John does. But there is a scene of confusion and a faint tinge of hope sneaking in around the corners. They have gotten together in that room, maybe the Upper Room, maybe another gathering place where the hurting and the hopeless gathered together not knowing what to do. They were pooling their experiences, what they had heard and seen. Their hearts were pounding, and their eyes were bugging out. They didn't dare hope. Even though there was a fire in their chest, that wasn't leftover pizza.

Then suddenly, he is there. No one saw him come in; no one met him at the door or grabbed a towel and offered to wash his feet. He was just there. "Peace be with you." That's what he said, and they picked themselves up off the floor and wondered if they'd ever know peace again. They were haunted by him, by the idea of him, by the blood of him. They were terrified of their shame, of how they

had abandoned him, of how they wouldn't believe in what he had told them before or what the women said they saw.

"Why do doubts arise in your hearts?" What kind of question was that? Surely he knew why doubts were rising in their hearts. Surely he had an inkling of just how incredible this event was. Sure, he had gotten used to the idea, but they never let themselves hope. So they were gasping for air and clutching their chests while he stood there asking them if they were ok.

He decides to ground them in some fleshly reality. He says, "look, I've got hands; I've got feet. Touch me, I'm real," he says. "I've got flesh and I've got bones. I'm real, like the Velveteen Rabbit," he smiles at them. "Like Pinocchio," he grins, "I'm a real boy!"

Of course, he didn't say that. But he's talking about being flesh and blood like them. Luke says he showed them his hands and feet. How did he do that? Was he showing them the marks in his hands and feet? John says he was. But Luke is a bit more reticent about those specifics. He does say, "Touch me." "Touch me and see." Actually, if you dig a little deeper, he doesn't just say, "touch me and see." He says, "grab hold of me, handle me, or even grope around." John says that Jesus says, "don't hang on to me," when he meets Mary in the garden. But in Luke, Jesus says to the disciples—the reeling from the shock disciples—"grab hold of me. Ground yourselves in me." And the verb, *ψηλαφήσατέ*, is a second person plural. All y'all, grab hold and hang on. Grab hold of me and "behold!" The see, *ἴδετε*, is imperative, also second person plural. Imperative. Grab hold and see! As if your life depended upon it. As if your hopes would be found in it. Grab hold of the reality of Christ and see not just him but you too. See your path, your future, your mission, and your reason for being.

And then he asks for something to eat. Like a ventriloquist drinking a glass of water, or a magician pulling up his sleeves to show nothing hidden there. This is real, folks. Watch me eat this piece of fish. I'm no ghost, no figment of your imagination, or delusion brought on by a lack of sleep and constant terror. I'm as real as you. I am here with you. And I am who I said I am.

That's where our text ends this week. We don't go into the mission, into the sending. We leave it with the declaration. We leave it with the reality of the Resurrected Jesus and the promise that life, the life we know, the life we

experience, is stronger than death. It doesn't avoid death, because he didn't avoid death. But it goes beyond death. The implications are as staggering as his appearance was to those cowering followers moments ago. But now is not the time to unpack all of that. Luke has a whole second volume for figuring out what it means to have a savior risen from the dead.

But here's the point of this text. It is real. It is grounded in the reality in which we live. *Touch and see*. The gospel, the life of faith has to be grounded in reality. That's why he dwelled on this moment. That's why we can take a breath at this point before we launch into a life of going to the ends of the earth to tell the story. If we don't start here, if we don't watch that piece of fish being eaten, if we don't grab hold, we won't see. And if we don't see, then we are likely to turn our message into one of the hereafter, the sweet by and by and not the here and now. We're liable to think that all the Resurrected one cares about is getting souls into some spiritualized heaven somewhere else, instead of feeding those who are hungry for breakfast right here in our own neighborhoods. We're liable to think that injustice here doesn't matter because it will all be sorted out one day instead of advocating for the oppressed and working for justice in our own communities. Take hold of me and see is about wanting to live in the world that he lived in and bring hope to our reality every day.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

From seeing, we now move to feeling, to touching as the means by which we experience the risen Christ. With the remnants of the pandemic around us still, touching might be problematic. Perhaps making contact or making an impact would be a way of understanding touching in this new world in which we live. What are the communities around us in which we can make an impact for Christ? Where can we connect with real people with real needs, people who are on the margins of our society? Where can we connect with communities looked down upon by many, but that could be lifted by our attention, our touch?

Native American communities throughout our nation could use our attention. You may not live where there is a strong First Nation presence, but a little research might surprise you and your congregation. The land where your church sits might have been a part of tribal lands at one time.

If you wish to make more of the Native American Ministries Sunday, you can check out worship resources here:

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/21st-century-worship-resources-for-native-american-ministries-sunday>.

You might be thinking, however, that the text is more about touching in order to believe. The touching is for me! Here is one of those paradoxes of our faith. The best way to grow in faith is to reach outward and help another grow. The best way to confirm your experience of the risen Christ is to lift another into the light. Acts of mercy are never one way. We are built up as we build up others. That is just how it works.

So, when Jesus tells us to touch and see that he is real and he is alive, we touch those we serve and discover the Christ present in that touching.

Call to Worship: Witnesses

(inspired by Luke 24:45-48)

We are witnesses,
to the love God has poured into us.
We are witnesses of God's love,
sharing it with each person we meet.
We are witnesses to everyone we encounter,
little children like us,
sisters and brothers in God's family.

~ written by Thom Shuman and posted on **LiturgyLink**. <https://www.liturgylink.net>. Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2018/04/call-to-worship-witnesses.html>.

Call to Worship

One: When we are confused

Many: Lord, give us peace.

One: When we are afraid

Many: Lord, give us peace.

One: When we are lost in grief

Many: Lord, give us peace.

All: O God, meet us in this room

And grant us peace!

Safiyah Fosua, **The Africana Worship Book for Year B**, Discipleship Resources, Valerie Bridgeman Davis, and Safiyah Fosua Eds., 2007, p.60.

Prayer of Intercession

(based on Luke 24:36-48)

Lord Jesus Christ, the light of your love shines on, illuminating the places where you are present. As the bewildered disciples pondered the stories of your appearance, you penetrated the darkness of their fear and doubt with your word of peace. You showed them the appalling marks of evil pierced on your hands and feet. You opened their minds to understand why you had to die to defeat such evil and death. Increase our understanding, we pray, and open our minds and hearts to receive you . . .

Lord, hear our prayer . . .

Bring to us O God, the sense of your living presence as we go into this new week. Renew in us the faith you want us to have, the faith that is not afraid to reach out in your name and to share the treasure you have given us, that treasure which is greater than silver and gold . . .

Lord – you know our hearts, you know our needs, and you know the hearts of those around us and their needs. We lift ourselves and them before you at this time . . .

Lord, hear our prayer . . .

Lord, we specially hold before you today...

(intercessions are shared)

Lord hear our prayer . . .

Finally, O Lord, we ask that you would bless us at [local congregation] with vision for the future and reverence for the past. Guide us each day as we minister to one another and to world for which you gave yourself. Help us each day to bear witness to your name and to do that which you would have us do. We ask it through Christ Jesus our Lord. **Amen.**

— written by Rev. Richard J. Fairchild and posted on his [Kir-shalom](http://kir-shalom.com) website. Opening paragraph written by Moira Laidlaw, on [Liturgies Online](http://liturgiesonline.com). Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/prayers-of-people-easter-3.html>.

Look at My Hands and My Feet

A Prayer for Luke 24:39-43

When Jesus appeared to the disciples, he offered his nail-scarred hands and feet as proof that he was, indeed, the Risen Lord. Then, he ate in their presence (from Luke 24:39-43).

Lord, we are living in a world that behaves as though you never lived. Our eyes behold atrocities and insults that we never thought possible and that our grandparents thought they would never see again. We live in a world that is longing for proof of the Resurrection, proof of the Living Lord.

Lord, show us how to prove your living through our lives. Put our hands to doing what you would have done were you still on this earth. Place our feet on a path that leads others to salvation. Pull us out of our caves of isolation so that we might be seen as ordinary, living, breathing, caring people of the Resurrection.

When the people of the land cry out for proof that you are alive, or even that you ever existed, may we be able to offer our hands and feet and our lives as living proof. **Amen.**

*Safiya Fosua, **Easter Liturgical Resources from Africana Writers**, edited by Safiya Fosua, 2020.*

Prayer of Confession

(based on John 20: 24-29; Luke 24:36-43)

Wondrous God, we confess that at times our doubts and fears override our hope and faith. Forgive us when we lose sight of the joy of Your love and instead fall into despair and gloom. Lift up our spirits, Lord, and help us to remember the promise of new life here and now, not just the hope of resurrection for the future. We give thanks for Your Son, Jesus the Christ, who continues to offer us new life, who continues to turn us around and upside down, who continues to break down

the walls of death in our own life. Forgive us, restore us and renew us. In the name of our risen Savior, Jesus the Christ, we pray. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

The tomb is empty. The stone is rolled away. There is no darkness now, only light. God continues to renew us and restore us. We are forgiven, loved and restored, receiving the gift and promise of new life and resurrection now. Go and share the wondrous news of God's love in Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell, Rev-o-lution.org: Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/prayer-of-confession-doubt-faith.html>.

Commission and Benediction for Easter

Go now as God's chosen witnesses
to testify that Christ has been raised
and that we are raised with him.
Do not look for him among the dead,
but be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

And may God raise you from all that would entomb you;
May Christ Jesus call you by name and go ahead of you;
And may the Holy Spirit empower you for all that is good.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,

. . . In the name of Christ. Amen.

— Copyright © 2003 Nathan Nettleton <http://www.laughingbird.net/>. Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/easter-commission-benediction.html>

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Listen to My Voice

Festival of God's Creation

April 25, 2021 – [John 10:11-18](#)

Color: White or Gold

INTRODUCTION

Continuing the sensory journey, we now go to hearing. In Jesus' parable of the good shepherd, he says that the sheep listen to his voice. Now, what is interesting is that he is speaking of the sheep of other folds, not the ones in front of him. It is in the first part of the chapter where he talks about us hearing and knowing and following his voice. This is definitely a continuation of that idea, but now others are included. Who are these others? We don't really know. There is lots of speculation about who these other folds might represent. But the truth is, we don't know. Jesus often hints that determining who is in and who is out is not really our job. We are to invite and include as widely as possible.

So, how do we create a worship experience for listening for the voice of God? Let's start with silence. How do we give space for those who have come to worship to spend time in contemplation and silence? We sometimes think that we have to fill the hour of worship with sound or with action or movement. If there is a lull, we fear that folks will drift away. But what if the "lull" is intended? The space to think, to pray, to just be for a few moments can be a gift and an opportunity to listen to voice of God.

Another arena for listening that could be modeled in worship is creation. Today is the Festival of God's Creation. April 22 is Earth Day, and this is the Sunday designated for the observance of that event. We don't advocate politicizing this subject, but we assert that we are called to partner with God in the stewardship of all creation. Too often, we see our worship space as the be all and end all of our responsibilities when we seek to encounter God. But we can hear the voice of God through the natural world. If we are to take seriously hearing God through the world around us, then we have to take seriously the care of the planet.

But how do we hear the voice of God without sounding crazy? Maybe a little crazy is OK, but certainly not dismissible. So what does the voice of God sound like? How do we hear that voice? It has to begin by listening to the scripture text that gives us an idea of how God speaks, the kinds of things God is interested in, what

God seeks from us. Encouraging Bible study and conversation groups around biblical texts is an appropriate element of worship this week. To hear the voice of God, we must draw closer to God through our attention to the Word.

Of course, another avenue for hearing the voice of God is other Christians. We hear God's truth through those around us. Sometimes revelation comes through something a friend or leader says. Sometimes this is through preachers and teachers, of course, but often the surprising one can startle us with a truth. This is why we need to recover the practice of testimony. We need to listen to one another; we need to hear the faith struggles and the understandings that come from those who occupy the pews next to us, from those who are viewing a screen at the same time we are viewing it. We need to be open and in the habit of listening to those who are different from us, who have a different perspective, who come from a different background, are of a different race. This is so we can cultivate ears for hearing the voice of God in different people and in different settings. We want to round out that voice and hear it in its fullness.

The invitation is to listen, to carefully listen. But not only listen, we expect to hear. What a radical thought that is for those who gather to worship this day. God is speaking to you! Not just to followers with more authority, not just to those who are farther along the journey of faith, but to you as well. The real question for us today is not, "Will God speak to me, to us today?" Instead, will we listen for that voice that is speaking? Jesus doesn't say, "Listen and maybe I'll have something to say." He says, "Listen to my voice." "I am speaking" is the implied message, so pay attention.

PREACHING NOTES

This is a continuation of the earlier passage in the tenth chapter of John. There Jesus said "I am the gate for the sheep." Now he says "I am the good shepherd." So, which is it? Well, are you an offspring or a parent? Are you a sibling or a neighbor? We've all got multiple roles to play. Jesus is searching for images that will make sense to us, that will connect with us. We need access and acceptance. Jesus is the door, the entrance, the way into an experience of love and transformation. We need guidance. Jesus is the one who leads us.

And there it is. It seems innocuous to us. A no brainer to most of us. But we live in an “I got this” culture. “We don’t need no stinking leaders” is the mindset. I once heard a commentator sneering at the passage in Matthew where it says that Jesus had compassion on the crowd “because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Mt 9:36) “Paternalistic” was the cry. “That’s the problem with religion,” the commentator said. “It is a crutch, something to keep us down. We are meant to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Our heroes are the ones who made it on their own, the self-made men and women who take what is a raw deal and turn it into gold. Those who push themselves, who claw their way up, who . . .”

Whoa, slow down there, Sparky. OK, sure there are those “dog eat dog” types out there, but surely none of them are reading these preaching notes. We know better. We are ready to follow the Shepherd. So, no controversy here.

I know that. Just making a point. Just engaging in some literary banter. I know that we always turn to the Shepherd when it comes to making decisions about how we will live our lives. I know that we will follow wherever he leads us and do whatever he tells us to do. I know that we are ready and eager to live the life of faith that we are called to live – when we get a moment, in our spare time, Sunday mornings for sure, most of the time anyway, when we can squeeze it in. It is a busy life we lead, and we don’t always have room for everything that we would like to be able to do. Some days we are just getting by with the necessary stuff and are worn out before the extras. Like faith. Like life, abundant life.

Hmm. OK, maybe we all struggle with the idea of a shepherd—of needing one, instead of being one, I mean. Maybe we, too, are more likely to say we can do it on our own more than we need a savior. Maybe we are part and parcel of our culture more than we really want to admit.

I like the band *fun*. That’s how you have to write their name by the way: *fun*. Apparently, there is a Scandinavian death metal band called *Fun*, so the pop group *fun*. had to change its name. Lower case f with a period at the end: fun. We haven’t heard much from them lately. They sort of disappeared once they got famous. Anyway, I liked them, but I confess I was caught out by one song. It is titled “One Foot,” and the refrain repeats the phrase, “I’ll put one foot in front of

the other one.” Catchy; it has this “just keep swimming” feel to it (*Finding Nemo* - keep up here). But when I listened closer, I was disturbed.

The second verse goes like this: “Happiness stumbled upon a chapel last night / And I can't help but back up when I think of what happens inside / I've got friends locked in boxes, that's no way to live / What you calling a sin, isn't up to them / Afterall, I thought we were all your children / But I will die for my own sins, thanks a lot / We'll rise up ourselves, thanks for nothing at all / So up off the ground, our forefathers are nothing but dust now.” Then the refrain: “I'll put one foot in front of the other one / I don't need a new love, or a new life / Just a better place to die.”

Another slam against the church, and maybe we deserve it. We've spent more time calling out sins than we have claiming all as God's children. But along with throwing off the authority of the church, comes the decision that we don't need a savior — “I'll die for my own sins, thanks a lot.” OK, I get that. Again, we probably need to take some of the blame for that kind of attitude. If we don't live as though we are following a savior, but instead are relying on our own righteousness, then what else can we expect from our children?

But what really got me was what we are left with when we stand on our own: “I'll put one foot in front of the other one / I don't need a new love, or a new life / Just a better place to die.”

The one who came that we might have life weeps when his children have aspirations only for a better place to die. These are the ones for whom he was willing to lay down his life. These are the ones he wanted to gather in. These and so many others who are wandering around out there harassed and helpless are in need of shepherd.

All of which says we won't hear the voice of the shepherd if we don't think that we need to listen. We often struggle with how to hear the voice of God in our lives. But determining that we do need to be listening for that voice is a major step that far too many skip. So how do we let others know that this voice is a voice worth hearing?

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

The text we have chosen to focus on is the continuation of the good shepherd image. It begins earlier in the chapter and talks more there about listening to the voice of the shepherd. You might consider a review of the text, or simply expand the text when you read it to get the full flavor of the idea. Listening to the shepherd is key to understanding the image. Following flows from hearing the voice that we recognize. The ability to recognize comes from getting to know the one we seek to follow. This enables us to sort out the voices that we hear calling us this way and that and to discern which one is most like the voice of Christ.

This text does, then, deal with those outside the flock and says they need to listen to the voice of the shepherd too. This means that we are called to speak in that voice. We are called to reflect the voice that we follow in our speaking and our living. We are that voice at work in the world.

So, our worship this day is about hearing and about speaking. A part of what we might want to speak about is creation care. This Sunday is also the “Festival of God’s Creation.” So, emphasis could be given to environmental issues. Worship is not the place to have a lesson on creation care, and, far worse, a debate. But what you can do is raise the issue as a part of our obedience to God to be stewards of all creation. Here is a place to get some further information that might be shared with the congregation and from which you might develop some liturgy: <https://www.umc.org/en/what-we-believe/umc-topics/social-issues/creation-care>.

Sometimes to listen to the voice of the Creator God we must listen to voices within creation. What is creation saying about our stewardship? What peoples are being harmed by our misuse of the resources of creation? What would God have to say to us today? That is our guiding thought as we approach worship on this fourth Sunday of Easter.

Easter 4: Call to Worship III

(with allusions to Psalm 23, John 10 and I Peter 2)

We gather together to worship God,
the Shepherd of our souls.

The one who has created us,
who sustains us,
who redeems us,
who walks beside us in good times and bad,
and who calls us to follow.
This is our God!
Let's worship Him together!

Worship Resources for Good Shepherd Sunday, <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2011/05/worship-resources-for-may-15-2011.html>

Call to Worship

(inspired by Psalm 23, John 10)

I AM the good shepherd
(the one who tends us,
guides us into pastures,
who recognizes the sounds of our names).

I AM the good shepherd
(the one who bends to heal us
travels through the deepest valleys with us
who gives up everything for us all).

I AM the good shepherd
(the one whose rod and staff comfort us
whose strength and love holds us
whose cup of love runneth over).

I AM the good shepherd
and we will dwell
in the house of the Lord
forever

Let us gather here
God's People
in God's love
for God's world.

~ posted on the New Kilpatrick Parish Church website. <https://www.nkchurch.org.uk/> Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2017/04/call-to-worship-i-am-good-shepherd.html>

Prayer of Confession

O God who labors without ceasing, to bring all people into wholeness and into oneness with you, we confess our reluctance to live in unity with all your people. Help us to overcome the scandal of our pride – the pride of race, creed, class, and color – that your church might be a worthy witness to your good news of love and forgiveness, through Jesus Christ, our risen Head. Amen.

*Ruth Duck, **Bread for the Journey**, Ruth Duck, ed., Pilgrim Press, 1981, p.46.*

Prayer of Confession

Gentle Shepherd, You guide us in right paths, You lead us in the ways of righteousness, but we have allowed our anger, our rage, our greed, and at times even hate, to direct our paths. We have overreacted, we have taken more than our share, we have despised others that seem to have it all. Forgive us, God, for not following Your ways. Forgive us for not remembering that we are Your sheep, and You are our Shepherd. Forgive us when we have not listened for Your voice and instead have acted in the ways of the world. Guide us back to Your path, to loving You and loving our neighbors. Help us to unclench our fists and lend out our hands in hope and healing, forgiveness and love. In the name of Christ our Shepherd we pray. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The Good Shepherd knows the sheep, and the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep so that the sheep may live. We are part of the flock; we are part of Christ's body. In Christ we find wholeness and restoration. Go forth and share this Good News. Amen.

Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell, Rev-o-lution.org: Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2011/05/easter-4-confession-assurance.html>.

Commission and Benediction

(based on Psalm 23, John 10, 1 John 3:16-24)

Go now with your trust in the good shepherd,
and let us love, not just in words,
but in truth and action.

Believe in the name of Jesus Christ,
and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

And may God be at your side, even in valleys of death.

May Christ Jesus be the cornerstone of your life.

And may the Holy Spirit abide in you

. . . and tend you with love and mercy all the days of your life.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,

. . . In the name of Christ. Amen.

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Prayer of Thanksgiving

O God,

We thank you for this earth, our home;
for the wide sky and the blessed sun,
for the ocean and streams,
for the towering hills and the whispering wind,
for the trees and green grass.

We thank you for our senses
by which we hear the songs of birds,
and see the splendor of fields of golden wheat,
and taste autumn's fruit,
rejoice in the feel of snow,
and smell the breath of spring flowers.

Grant us a heart opened wide to all this beauty;
and save us from being so blind
that we pass unseeing

when even the common thorn bush
is aflame with your glory.

For each new dawn is filled with infinite possibilities
for new beginnings and new discoveries.
Life is constantly changing and renewing itself.

In this new day of new beginnings with God,
all things are possible.

We are restored and renewed in a joyous awakening
to the wonder that our lives are and, yet, can be. Amen.

~ written by Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918). Posted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/search/label/Creation%20care> (Follow this link for lots more "creation care" ideas for worship.)

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Abide in Me

May 2, 2021 – [John 15:1-8](#)

Color: White or Gold

INTRODUCTION

Abiding in the presence of Christ is our call this week. How do we abide and how do we encourage abiding behavior in the worshiping congregation? And perhaps most important, what does *abide* mean? We need to consider some sort of teaching by example in this service. Let's spend some time abiding in Christ. You can probably think of many ways where we can cultivate the ability or the tendency and desire to abide in Christ. But let's consider three to start with.

Silence is a good practice. It's true, we have mentioned that before in previous weeks. Silence shouldn't be an occasional and unusual event in our worship practice; it should become a habit. Silence is a space where God takes control, where we surrender ourselves to the working of the Spirit and the voice of God. So, carve out some time for silence.

An important key is the lead into the time of quiet. You don't just stop and say, "Be quiet." That would lead to discomfort within a congregation unused to silence. Take a few moments to talk about the *why* and to give some guidance on how to enter into this time. Invite the worshipers to sit as comfortably as possible, to breathe deeply, and to say a simple prayer. "Speak Lord, your servant is listening" is a good one. And then let the mind drift.

Some might find this distracting and a waste of time. Some might revel in the moment and be reluctant to return to other parts of the service. But make it a dedicated moment within the worship experience on a regular basis. We can learn to be silent; we can learn to abide, but it takes practice.

Second, though it might sound opposite, music can be a way to abide in Christ. Opposite because we are filling ourselves up with sound instead of silence. But this is a directed sound, a sound that leads us into deeper communion with Christ and one another. The music may be instrument, or there may be singing. It is also important to not simply get through the music, but to dwell in it, to let it wash over, to let people lose themselves in the sounds and the words.

Here again, some instruction would be helpful. Invite the congregation to read the words before singing the, or to listen to and follow the melody or the rhythms of the music. Ask them to set themselves aside and just lean into the moment and be alive to what might happen inside of them in this moment.

The first two are instances of surrendering, of setting self aside and entering into the moment. This third one is different. It is a heightening of focus. It is attention to the Word. As the reading of the scripture is introduced, let there be instruction that all tune in and listen deeply. In hearing these words read, people are listening as if to the very words of Jesus. Read them with intensity and passion, not necessarily loudly or with a lot of exaggerated emphasis or movement. But read them as if these were important words that people need to hear, instructions on how to live fully and deeply in a complicated and sometimes threatening world. Let these not be words that people have heard a hundred times and barely pay attention to, but the words of life they need today. Encourage them to lean into the reading of the scriptures.

The continuation of that, of course, is that when people read scripture at home they read it with the same passion and intensity. Like with some singing, we often think our goal is simply to get through it. Let's spend some time on the Word. Maybe repeat some phrases for emphasis. Pause often so that words can ring in our ears for a moment before moving on to the next thought.

We are practicing this abiding in Christ as we worship together with the hope that it will continue after the benediction is pronounced and the postlude ends. Cultivating habits for lifelong worship is a part of what we do when we gather for worship – however we gather these days.

PREACHING NOTES

Jesus is on his way out. On his way to suffering and death and life and ascension. Out. Away. Apart from them. And he knew it and told them. Over and over he told them. Did they not get it? Did they just glaze over whenever he talked about that departure? Did they live each day of their new and exciting lives thinking that it was always going to be like this? Probably. Do any of us imagine life without us in it? Only on our sad days. And if we try to talk to those we love about this departure, they won't want to hear. Can you see a field full of disciples with

fingers in their ears loudly singing, “la la la la, I can’t hear you!!” when Jesus started his “the Son of Man will be lifted up to die” routine?

But he knew it. He knew it as surely as he knew he was breathing now. And he faced it with the same confidence with which he faced drawing that first ragged breath in a barn in Bethlehem, with the same sense of presence that he faced when he rose from the muddy waters of the Jordan with a beaming John the Baptist trembling beside him. He faced it with the same sense of possibility and responsibility that brought a sigh out of him when he healed in the face of doubt, or the groan that came when he tossed out a demon that thought it was secure with claws deep in the human psyche. He knew what was next, and he wanted to prepare them. “Abide in me,” he told them, as an antidote to his absence. “Abide in me.”

Wait. What? He was leaving so he wanted them to abide in him? What? Did he mean that the time is short, get your abiding in while abiding is possible? Or worse, was it a “look what you missed! You should have gotten closer! You should have taken up residence, you should have gotten on board, you should have been on the team!” But now the game is over. The clock is ticking. The last second shot will probably fall short, as they do more often than not. And you will have missed it. Too bad for you. I’m on my way out. You could have had more. You could have been a contender. But no.

No. That can’t be it. Jesus didn’t taunt in that way. Jesus wept for missed opportunities, yes. But he didn’t wag his finger at those who just didn’t get it. No, this had to be a real opportunity, a real commandment. Like the other commandment that is about to come in a few more verses, the love one another one. That wasn’t a taunt. Neither is this. Abide in me. Not you should have, you could have, but you didn’t abide in me. No, there is still time, the clock hasn’t yet run out. Abide. Get in there and abide; there is still hope; we are still alive.

But how? Jesus is annoyingly short on detail, even as he is rich in imagery. Vines and branches, fruit and gardeners: there is a secret here. Not a hidden code, but an obvious puzzle that, if we could but glimpse it, it would explode in our consciousness like a lightning bolt. It doesn’t need a degree in ancient languages, but an “a-ha” moment that unfolds the truth that was always there.

I like a good metaphor as much as the next guy. Jesus could have just mentioned the whole vine thing and left it at that. “I am the true vine” was a powerful statement to those first hearers. Because the image of the vine wove all through the scriptures of the day. The prophets loved to talk about the vine. But for them, it was Israel— vine uprooted from Egypt and planted in the Promised Land. A vine that bears fruit to feed many, but also a vine that withers when it neglects the source of strength, when it becomes unconnected. This sounds surprisingly like what Jesus says here in this farewell discourse. Stay connected. Remember the source of strength, bear fruit. What changes is that instead of a nation, the vine is now a person. “I am the true vine” says Jesus. Startling, no doubt. And maybe offensive to a degree? How could one man replace a nation?

But look again. Jesus differentiates between vine and branches. “I am the vine, you are the branches.” He is simply bringing the source closer to us. Instead of the people being uprooted and planted by God and sometimes withering when they forget that, now that source of strength is right there with us. We are connected to it. It is right there, right here. We abide in it.

The people of God still produce the fruit, that is how God decided that it would work; God just moved a little closer because we could use the help. Apart from God, apart from the source of strength, the vine, we can do nothing. And we have to stay close.

“In a vineyard, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine.” Stay close. Because we need to be pruned. We wish it weren’t so. But we do.

Pruning is an art form as much as a horticultural technique. It looks like you are killing the plant or bush or whatever you are pruning. But if pruning is done right, then the plant always comes back stronger. Always. It produces more; it flourishes; it grows beyond where it was cut back. Pruning, I’m told, is necessary for a certain kind of plant or it will wither and die. Because it is trying to sustain something that isn’t necessary, or isn’t healthy, or is a distraction from its true function of bearing fruit or flower.

Step away from the metaphor for a moment and realize that pruning hurts. Cutting away what we’ve become attached to, no matter how unhealthy it is for us is hard and painful. And it makes us ask that question that we don’t like to admit that we ask: “Is it worth it?” Is it worth the struggle, the pain, the self-

denial, to live this life that Jesus offers us, to enjoy this abundance that he wants to pour down on us? Is the fruit that we bear - this commandment to love, God and neighbor with equal amounts of passion and service - worth the effort it takes to bear it?

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11, NRSV). He says it is more than worth it, and we have chosen to trust him. And the moments of real joy that we have experienced in life are always caught up in loving and being loved. So, we know we want more. More of him, more of love, more joy.

So stay close. “Abide in me,” is the way he says it. We are learning to abide, to seek those moments when we can be in Christ’s presence, can soak up that word, can sing of praise and healing, loving and reconciling. We want to stay close. But how?

That is too big a question for the space that is left. But the short answer is, “We need to be grafted into the vine.” True, there is nothing about grafting in these verses. Vines and abiding, pruning and being cut off, yes. But not grafting. So, we’ll venture out a little further on this limb. Grafting is a process whereby one plant, the scion (or offspring) becomes a part of another, the root stock (or the vine). The process allows the plants to become one. But the only way for the scion to be grafted into the root stock is if the stock or the vine is cut, is pierced to make room, to allow entry. By his wounds, we are healed.

Look again, “abide in me as I abide in you” (15:4). As I abide in you. He’s leaving, but he’s not leaving. He is with us, even to the end of the age. That means we are with him, come hell or high water, when the chips are down, or our ship has come in. We are with him, and he is with us. We remember the events of Holy Week, that divine drama that is acted out as a historical remembrance year after year to our great appreciation. Except that it isn’t a historical remembrance. It is the rhythm of our faith. Christ comes to us. And for joy, we ask him to save us, because Christ comes to us. To us. With tears streaming down our faces, we embrace him and hope for a new start and new opportunity and new outlook on life.

But when the glow dies down and the new outlook looks a lot like the old look and takes just as much effort to hold onto, if not more, our disillusionment grows

and we look for someone to blame, a scapegoat who must be at fault for the rotten life we've been given. We lash out and cast aside that which only recently seemed so full of possibility and hope and now tastes like ashes instead of bread and wine. And we turn our backs on the one we wept over, and we flee in fear and shame and doubt. And in the darkness,, we feel so alone. Again, so alone. Like no one understands. Like no one is on our side. Like no one . . . there's just no one. For us. No one.

We are apart from him and can do nothing. Or nothing that we can do seems worth doing. Or nothing that we have done seems to amount to anything anymore. Apart from him. Life is emptier. The colors are muted, the air is heavy and gravity seems stronger. Apart from him.

Instead, we are grafted into the vine and receive the strength we need to bear fruit. Instead, we abide in him.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

There is a change in metaphor in this week's text for worship – at least somewhat. What is consistent is that we are still living out, or even embodying, the Resurrection. But we have moved away from the specific senses that help us access the risen Christ. In the fifth Sunday of Easter, we move to sustaining what we have seen and touched and heard.

How do we hold on to the Easter experience and live as those who have been resurrected with Christ? This is where John 15 comes in. *Abide*. That is how we do it. We abide in Christ. And it is the only way to do it. We must stay connected to Christ, connected to the vine.

While worship this week begins with that declaration, it will be most helpful if we give some hints as to how that is done. How do we abide in Christ? How do we stay connected? Here is where we can point beyond the worship hour to some of the other ministries of the church. What other opportunities do we provide to keep people connected? What Bible studies and mission opportunities are available for members of the congregation and the wider community as a whole to stay connected?

Another way of giving people insight in what it means to be connected is through testimony. Who in your congregation could talk in a few minutes about devotional practices or the benefits of service? Who can talk about knowing Christ in their daily lives, not just on mountaintop moments? Mountaintop moments are great and wonderful to hear about during worship. But most of our lives are spent in the valleys. So, how do I abide in Christ as I live and work each day of my routine existence? That's what folks want and need to know.

A Vineyard Call to Worship

(For John 15:1-8)

God is the True Vine,

And we are the branches.

Connected to God.

Connected to bear fruit!

Connected to God.

Or we wither away.

Connected to God.

Or useless!

We come to worship God, who is the True Vine.

God, teach us how to remain connected so that we might bear good fruit!

Safiyah Fosua, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/god-is-the-true-vine-21st-century-worship-resources-for-the-fifth-sunday-of>

Prayer of the Church – Easter 5B

Jesus said, *'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.'* Let us now approach him with confidence.

Risen Lord, you came as a sacrifice for our sin. Give us faith to accept this act of love, so that we turn from all human efforts and drink in the atoning righteousness of your death and resurrection.

Lord, in your mercy . . . **hear our prayer.**

Risen Lord, you are the true vine and we are the branches. By your Spirit, produce the fruit of love, joy, peace, and patience in us for others to taste and enjoy. Keep us from hanging on to love for ourselves. Prune all selfishness from us and fill us with your love.

Lord, in your mercy . . . **hear our prayer.**

Risen Lord, have mercy on your earth and supply its needs. Where people are hungry, give food. Where people are in distress, comfort them. Where people are in trouble, bring order and peace. And turn the whole world to you in faith, repentance and praise.

Lord, in your mercy . . . **hear our prayer.**

Lord Jesus Christ, focus our love on people we know with special needs. Heal those who are unwell particularly (*insert names*) and others in need whom we now name silently in our hearts . . . (brief silence)

Lord, in your mercy . . . **hear our prayer.**

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for hearing us and caring for us in all our needs. Constantly intercede for us before our heavenly Father, and open our eyes that we may see him through you. We ask all this in your holy name, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

— from the Lutheran Church of Australia's Worship Planning Page (revised slightly). Reposted:
<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/prayers-of-people-john-15-1-8.html>

Woven

*Words for centering prayer and reflection about the great "I Am."
Suitable for use with this passage about the vine and the branches
Begs for a musical setting.*

I Am, woven.

Woven through the earth.

Woven through your veins.

Woven through the Son.

The one who bore our pains.

Woven through existence.

In minds, in sweet remembrance.
In future and in an instant.
I Am, never distant

I Am, Peace.
When feelings overwhelm you
And disappointments tell you
That you are less in value.

I Am, Hope.
When all you know is sadness
And talking makes you nervous
And your mind does you a disservice.

I Am, Trust.
I never leave you wanting.

I satisfy your longing
I carry you beyond your limits
Onward to a new existence.

I Am, woven.
Woven through the earth.
Woven through your veins.
Woven through the Son.
The one who bore our pains.

Woven through existence.
In minds, in sweet remembrance.
In future and in an instant.
I Am, never distant

Linda Furtado, Easter Liturgical Resources from Africana Writers, edited by Safiya Fosua, 2020.

Lord, We Would Grow with You

Lord, we would grow with you
New shoots reaching out
Hands stretched upward

Like leaves newly formed
Soaking up your light and warmth
Lord, we would grow with you

Lord, we would grow with you
In sunshine and rain
In darkness and light
In cold days and summer days
From Springtime to Winter
Lord, we would grow with you

Lord, we would grow with you
And bring forth fruit
That is pleasing to you
Fed by your living water
Giving sustenance to others
Lord, we would grow with you

~ contemporary Welsh prayer posted on A Place for Prayer. <http://revgalprayerpals.blogspot.ca/>
Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/07/prayer-for-growth.html>

Admitting our Failures and Trusting Forgiveness

(based on John 15:1-8)

Jesus said: "I am the vine, you are the branches." Let us pray.

We thank you, gracious God, for Jesus Christ the true vine, with his roots eternally grounded in you. We rejoice that by grace we have been grafted into him, to be branches on a vine which bears the loveliest of all the fruits of earth. Yet we confess that all is not well with the way we live.

*Please forgive us for the occasions when
we have been the ones to introduce disease into the vine,
preferring its contamination to the vigor of health.*

*Forgive us for neglecting to draw deeply on the sap of Life,
for our tendency to wander instead of growing on the framework you provide,*

*for being content, and sometimes even proud of, a few sparse or undersized fruits,
for the apathy which lets us to go through some seasons without bearing any fruit.*

Have mercy on us. Please do not lose patience or sever us completely from the true vine. Rather heal our diseases, discipline and train our wandering tendrils, prune our unfruitful branches and cut away our diseased ones. May we remain in Christ and he in us, through all the changing seasons of life. Let us delight in bearing the fruits of love which are our true purpose and joy. For your Name's sake. **Amen!**

Forgiveness

Jesus said: "If you reside in me, and my words reside in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you." Friends, we have asked for forgiveness and correction. It has been truly done for us. It is being done for us. And it will be done for us.

Thanks be to God!

— written by Bruce Prewer, and posted on Bruce Prewer's Homepage. Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/prayer-of-confession-john-15-1-8.html>

Commission and Benediction

(based on John 15:1-8, 1 John 4:7-21)

Go now, and love one another,
because love is from God.
Proclaim God's salvation to every generation.
Remain in Jesus Christ,
and like branches of a vine, draw your life from him.

And may God the vine grower tend you and make you fruitful;
May Christ Jesus abide in you and give you life;
And may the Holy Spirit cast out all fear and fill you with God's love.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,
. . . In the name of Christ. Amen.

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To the One Who Abides in Us

(Based on John 15:1-8)

And now to the One who abides in us, as we abide in Him. To the One who loves us with a tender mercy that keeps us. To the One who prunes us so that we may grow exponentially, to this gracious and loving Savior Jesus Christ through whom all things can be accomplished, and through whom the prayers of all people, in all stations of life are answered: to Him we give thanks and praise, always and forevermore. Amen!

*Joseph W. Daniels, **The Africana Worship Book for Year B**, Discipleship Resources, Valerie Bridgeman Davis, and Safiyah Fosua Eds., 2007, p. 216.*

Sixth Sunday of Easter – No Greater Love
Mother's Day – Festival of the Christian Home
May 9, 2021 – [John 15:9-17](#)
Color: White or Gold

INTRODUCTION

For the churches in the US, Mother's Day is always a difficult day – not because there is any reason or reluctance to celebrate the mothers who exemplify the best of the faith, but because there are far too many whose experience of mother is not a positive one. To declare, directly or indirectly, that God is like your mother will bring a smile and joy to many faces, but also a knot in the stomach to others. This is why we need to tread carefully. Avoiding the issue altogether is not very satisfying for many, either. Perhaps providing a low-key recognition is appropriate along with the opportunity to say “thank you” to those mothers among us who do help us find our way into the grace of God, as well as prayers of support for those who struggle with motherhood – either because of their history or their present. Those who struggle with infertility might find this day difficult, for example.

It is not our intention to dampen the spirit of the day, but to remind worship teams of the delicate nature of recognition. By all means, find ways to give thanks and to give honor. That is one of the tasks of the followers of Jesus (Romans 12:10). At the same time, however, offer prayers of healing for those who are struggling on this day.

The emphasis of worship, we should be reminded, is not on any human being, whether a reality or an ideal, but on Jesus the Christ. Therefore, the emphasis of No Greater Love is on the person of Christ and the life he lived and gift he gave. If individuals can see that love reflected in their earthly parents, then they are blessed. Let them make those connections.

We are called this day to celebrate the love that has been poured out on us and then to strive to exemplify this love in our lives. Some of that loving is nurturing and supporting and caring, like the mother we describe at our best. Like the mother many of us had. So, how do we encourage acts of loving? How do we shape a life of loving in a difficult world? What has changed about signs of love in this new pandemic or (hopefully) post-pandemic world?

A real driving force for the worship team this week is to define this sacrificial love in real-world terms. The text tells us that this love of which there is none greater is a love that lays down one's life for one's friends. What does that mean? It is a rare occasion in the world that most of us live in where we are called upon to die in service to another. We can talk about those who willingly lay their lives on the line as a part of their calling: military, police, first responders of various kinds, and so on. But what about the rest of us? Do we need to look for risky opportunities to prove our commitment by throwing ourselves and looking for toddlers wandering into oncoming traffic? While that would be dramatic and certainly an example of self-sacrifice, the call for most of us most of the time is something both more mundane and yet more difficult.

Our sacrifice is daily, or even moment by moment. We set ourselves aside in order to be of service to others. Whether those others be in our household or in our community or in our church or around the world, we learn to give ourselves away, sometimes turning away from something we want in order to give to another. This is the countercultural message of the gospel. It is countercultural because we live in a society that values self above others; values individual rights over communal responsibilities or even duties.

What does a life of sacrificial love look like? That's the image that you are casting this week. For many, it looks like a mother's love. For others, it might need to be more personal, more individual. A part of our worship together might be a time of thankfulness for those who have loved us like that. The more we are able bring the example of this kind of love into the consciousness of the worshiper, the more it becomes possible to live into that kind of loving. The call to sacrificial love should be an encouraging call, rather than an impossible dream. We can do this; we can love like this. We know because we've been loved like this. The community should leave this moment of worship inspired to love, not worn down by failure or afraid of the challenge to reach this height.

The other secret to share is that the more we love, the more we are able to love. The more we surrender to others, the more we want to surrender. That is another dimension of this "greatest love." It is greatest because it grows. It grows within us and it grows between us. Love begets love. This is what living the Resurrection is all about.

PREACHING NOTES

It's Mother's Day this Sunday in the USA. What a joyous occasion. For many. It is a time to say thank you to the one who often holds the family together and who often carries the heartache bound up in hope when no one else sees beyond their own personal pain. Today offers a chance to say thank you to the one who brings order out of chaos, who can find the missing sock and the lost homework, the one who remembers how much laundry detergent you need per load and the reason why some plastics won't work in the microwave and some will. This is a chance to say thank you to the one who rarely gets thanked for all that she does day in and day out. Thank you and I love you. Mother's Day on Sunday, what a joyous occasion.

It's Mother's Day on Sunday. What a delicate and difficult commemoration. How do we ignore the many whose experience of mother was more painful than joyous? How do we pretend that being motherly isn't something that is bestowed with the birth or reception of children under care? What about those who long to be a mother but for some reason are not able to receive that blessing? What about those mothers whose children are no longer around to send them cards or buy them flowers? And what about those who love their mothers but no longer are able to speak in a language she can hear or comprehend? Mother's Day, what a delicate and difficult occasion.

So now what? Yea or nay to Mother's Day? The truth is neither response is completely satisfactory to everyone. Someone will be upset either way. We may not hear about it, but wounds might be inflicted. Are we being overly sensitive? Some think so. It's a cultural event, for heaven's sake; don't make a theological issue out of it.

Except, that's what we do. We followers of Christ. We examine everything we do, everything our culture does, from a theological point of view. We ask how is Christ celebrated, how is Christ honored, how is Christ followed in this event? OK. So, how?

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Can we be commanded to love? Well, apparently. Jesus did it. Does it. That wasn't a one-time thing. Just for the disciples, and not for us. This is an ongoing, new

every morning kind of command. Love. Love one another. This isn't even a love your enemies kind of thing. This is one another. Those around you. Those close to you. Those who need you. Those in your care. This is the kind of thing a mother ought to do. And a father, for that matter. Or a teacher, or pastor, or caregiver. Love one another.

In my experience, no one loved me like my mother did. No one sacrificed, no one laid down her life for me like she did. Not in one big martyr-like gesture, but in the daily setting herself aside in favor of those in her care. She was parceling herself out, piece by piece so that we would have our needs met, our desires catered to. It was never about her, but about those in her care. When she became a victim of Alzheimer's and lost the essence of who she was, there was a corner of my soul that felt she was lost to me now because of all those pieces of herself that she gave away so willingly throughout my life. And I felt that maybe if I had returned that love more directly, more frequently, more obviously, there would be more of her left to us now. I know that made no sense medically, but I felt a sense of guilt, and I mourned the loss all the same. Now that she is gone and no longer suffering in front of our eyes, I have a better perspective. I can accept her daily sacrifice of love as the gift it was, the greater love that no one like her gave. No, my mother isn't Jesus Christ. I do understand that. But she was a disciple, a follower of the one who told her to love like that. And she did her best, and that is all any of us can do. Do our best to love.

Loving is who we are. Loving in a way that lays down our lives for those we love. Loving in a way that honors God and the commandments of God. Loving that is a response to the love we've received. Maybe from mothers and fathers, maybe from spouses and lovers, from brothers and sisters of blood and in Christ. But even if from none of these, we have been loved by God in the definitive sacrificial act of loving, which means that all the loving we are able to do is response. We've already been loved; all we can do is respond.

Why not respond with more loving? With greater love?

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Of course, you should acknowledge the event of Mother's Day during worship this week. The real question is how? What would be an appropriate recognition and yet keep the focus of worship where it properly should be, on the risen Christ who calls us to remember whose we are. Too often, our observance of this day is akin to worshipping our mothers or the institution of motherhood. In so doing, we often alienate those for whom the experience of mother was not a good one. Thanking God for mothers is appropriate, as is a call to those who mother with God's love in mind.

The sacrificial love Jesus talked about in our text for this week is not exclusive to mothers, nor it is an automatic or instinctual response for those in that role. So, it would be good to keep the attention to the high calling of the follower of Christ to live this kind of love regardless of the social roles an individual holds.

Sacrificial love doesn't always mean dying. It means dying to self or setting one's self aside in favor of the other. So, worship could be full of such stories or petitions for each heart to be shaped in such a way that the outward focus becomes predominant. A community of faith that seeks to make the lives of everyone around them better – happier, fed, clothed, welcomed, included, loved – is a community of faith that is following the risen Christ.

Call to Worship

Leader: See what love has been given to us, that we should be called children of God.

People: By this we know love, that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, and lived and died, that God's love might be made plain among us.

Leader: Therefore, beloved, let us not love in word or in speech but in deed and in truth.

People: Because we love one another, we know that we have passed from death into life.

All: This is the victory that overcomes the world, through Jesus our risen Christ. Amen.

Ruth Duck, *Bread for the Journey*, Ruth Duck, ed., Pilgrim Press, 1981, p.44.

Call to Worship

(inspired by Psalm 98, Acts 10:44-48, John 15:9-17)

The Spirit is coming to bless us all with a new song:

Let our joy be complete!

Gifts for the good of all, poured out on all to teach us a new song:

Love one another!

Strangers and neighbors, foreigners and family will join in the new song:

No longer servants but friends!

Come, let our worship make a joyful noise,

Rejoicing in the friendship of God.

Prayer of Invocation

(inspired by Psalm 98, John 15:9-17)

O Beloved One,

All the ends of the earth marvel

at your deeds of power; we feel your presence

as growth returning to the countryside;

we rejoice as we remember your faithfulness and steadfast love
revealed in the risen Christ.

Surround us with that faithfulness and steadfast love

Fill us with generosity and courage

so that we may be called your friends

and go forth to befriend your world. In Jesus' name.

— from *Friends of God: Service Prayers for the Sixth Sunday of Easter*, written by the Rev. Susan A. Blain.

Posted on the United Church of Christ's Worship Ways archive. Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/call-to-worship-prayer-easter-6b.html>.

Father, You Call Us Your Friends

An Opening Prayer Inspired by John 15:9-17

Unison,

Lord, we are gathered here today as one body, because you chose to call us your friends. We come from all walks of life. We have had our share of good days and bad days. In the world's eye, we aren't good enough or worthy enough to have this bond; but in your sight, we are exactly who you need. Despite all the drama, we made it here to worship and praise your name. May the love we experience today in worship restore us, revive us, refresh us. God, use our broken selves as tools of hope and love on this day. Lord, we love you. Thank you for loving us and calling us your friends. It's in your name, we pray. Amen.

Stephon Carlisle Void, Easter Liturgical Resources from Africana Writers, edited by Safiya Fosua, 2020.

Come and Go with Me to My Father's House

(A Litany of Song and Scripture based on John 15:9-15)

People: (Sing) Come and go with me to my Father's house.

Leader: As the Father has loved me, I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as you have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. (John 15:9-10, NRSV).

People: (Sing) Peace and love abide in my Father's house (second verse).

Leader: I have said these things to you so . . . that your joy may be complete. (John 15:11, NRSV).

People: (Sing) Peace and happiness there in my Father's house (third verse).

Leader: This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:12-13, NRSV).

People: (Sing) No more dying up there in my Father's house (fourth verse).

Leader: You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because a servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father (John 15: 14-15, NRSV).

People: (Sing) Come and go with me to my Father's house (first verse).

Leader: You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another (John 15: 16-17, NRSV).

People: (Sing) Sweet communion up there in my Father's house (fifth verse).

*Marilyn E. Thornton, **The Africana Worship Book for Year B**, Discipleship Resources, Valerie Bridgeman Davis, and Safiyah Fosua Eds., 2007, pp. 91-92.*

Prayer of Confession

Loving and merciful One,
we thank you for the community in which you have placed us,
for the brothers and sisters with whom we walk this pilgrim journey.

Yet, we confess that we fail to love as you love.
We push aside those whom we believe are the least in your Kingdom.
We fail to see your Kingdom in parables
because we fail to see your Kingdom in each other.
Form in us a new vision of community
in which there is neither East nor West, neither South nor North.
We pray for the sake of your Kingdom
that both is and is not yet. Amen.

*~ posted in Hearing the Parables with the Early Church on the **Baylor University** website. <http://www.baylor.edu/christianethics/parablesstudyguide2.pdf>. Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/06/prayer-loving-others.html>.*

Prayers of the People: Easter 6

(inspired by John 15:9-17)

Eternal God, in these moments of quiet we thank you for your presence in our lives. We thank you for all of the testimonies of your profound love for your children. We especially thank you this day for the holy one Jesus. We thank you for his humility. We thank you that rather than elevating himself above us he

instead would lift us up and as with his disciples call us “friends.” We thank you for his many reminders that we are to love one another. But we confess that we have great difficulty following his command to love.

We become upset with others and find it easier to reject them than to seek to understand and to love them.

We struggle with the almost impossible command to love our enemies.

We become driven to meet our own needs and become blind to the needs of others.

We are driven to succeed which becomes all-consuming and trumps our command to love.

Forgive us our foolish ways. Help us to keep in our awareness this command to love which Jesus repeated so many times. Help us especially to hear it in those hard times when it is most difficult to love.

Help us to love others when they are power hungry.

Help us to love others when they are inconsiderate.

Help us to love others when they are angry and lash out blindly.

Help us to love others when they are selfish and insensitive.

Help us, O God, to love others so that we may abide in your love and act like the friends of Jesus. Amen.

— written by Richard J. Einerson, from his collection of prayers, **Prayers of the**

People. <http://www.richardeinerson.com/> Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/prayer-of-intercession-easter-6-b.html>.

Commission and Benediction

(based on John 15:9-17)

Go now, and bear fruit for God, fruit that will last.

As Christ has loved you, so love one another,
and abide always in God is love,
that your joy may be complete.

And may God give you all you ask for in Christ's name;
May Christ Jesus reveal to you God's ways and call you his friends;
And may the Holy Spirit confirm the truth within you and make your joy complete.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,
in the name of Christ. Amen.

— Copyright © 2003 Nathan Nettleton LaughingBird.net. Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/benediction-easter-6-b.html>.

Seventh Sunday of Easter – We Are Yours

Ascension Sunday

May 16, 2021 – [John 17:6-19](#)

Color: White or Gold

INTRODUCTION

This prayer that John records is a prayer that Jesus prayed for his disciples. The part that includes us (“but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,” John 15:20) happens just after our text for this week. But we can be included anyway. Jesus is praying for us! What an amazing thing. Set this thought alongside the idea of Ascension. Jesus is leaving, but Jesus is with us. Jesus takes his place at the right hand of God, returns to the circle of the Trinity, but at the same time continues to be present with us.

Worship this final week of Eastertide needs to be a celebration of living the Resurrection with the Resurrected one at our side. It is a reminder that we are not alone, that we continue to journey with the one who calls us and the one who saves us; even as we look forward to the one who will empower us to continue the work of building toward the kin-dom of God.

This experience of worship is about relationship with Christ and with one another. And it is about glory—receiving glory and giving glory. We are called to recognize the glory of Christ in the world today. And the hint we are given is that it is found in moments of sacrificial love. It is experienced in moments of service and support. We give glory when we bind up the broken; we bask in glory when we feed the hungry; we see glory when we reach out to heal hurting hearts. Jesus is inviting his followers to know God’s glory in their own lives as he knew it in his.

So, our prayers are outwardly focused; our challenge is to go into all the world, yet the call is clear to not belong to the world. What does that mean? It doesn’t mean we hate or fear the world. Like the one we follow, we have come into the world because we love the world. What it means is that we do not take our values from the world around us; we do not have the priorities that much of the world has. We don’t look to society for guidance on how we live in community. This is not a rejection of the world, but a rejection of the values of the fallen world.

One of our values is community. We are in this together. So, while we stand, on this Ascension Sunday, looking to the Christ departing from us into heaven, we stand together. We stand side by side. And when my vision of who Christ is begins to waver, you come alongside and shore me up. When you begin to wonder if it was all a dream, I'll be there to remind you of the reality of our experience of Christ. We are here for mutual support. Christ prays that his followers would be united, would stand together as we embark on our mission. Living the Resurrection is to celebrate the community of faith that we have become.

At the same time, we celebrate our mission, we understand that we do not exist for ourselves. We were not called to care only for ourselves. We were not even called to protect ourselves; that's God's job, according to Jesus' prayer. We were called and are called to go into the world. Sent by Jesus, we move out of our comfort zones to engage a hurting and broken world. So, we encourage one another to labor for the kin-dom by serving and loving and working within the world.

Our songs celebrate the Christ who sends and who stand with us. Our prayers turn us toward the world. Our worship enfolds in the joy of community, or even of family, and heals our hurts and shores up our spirit, but not as end in itself. All of that inward movement is so that we can then turn and move outward. Worship, as personally gratifying and inspiring and transforming as it can be, is not ultimately about us. It is about God, and God in Christ, experienced through the Spirit, first. And then about the world, about sending us out to live the Resurrection by making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It is who we are. We belong to Christ.

PREACHING NOTES

There are so many threads in this tapestry that the picture might be a bit obscured. And to spend the time picking them all apart is beyond the realm of these notes. But let's consider a few, shall we?

We could talk about that sanctify ending. Jesus calls on the Spirit of protection so that we could be made fit for God's purposes. Jesus hands us over to God and asks God to let us live and work in this world, but as signs of God's presence,

pointing beyond the world in which we work. We could talk about what this protection means and what it doesn't mean.

Or we could talk about unity, one of my favorite themes. Jesus prays that we (that's you and me and everyone else) would be one as "we are one." We are to be as close as Jesus and God; we are called to function as parts of the Trinity, aspects of the same thing, different, but one in essence and in hope. That is what community really means. It doesn't mean individuality is lost; differences make the whole what it is. But it does mean that we acknowledge our need for the other, acknowledge that we are somehow incomplete without the other. How can we fight amongst ourselves? How can we hate and cast stones at one another when we are part of the same whole? We are hating and casting stones at ourselves. The church is many things, but in this prayer it is clear that the church is called to be one.

Or we could talk about that in the world and out of the world language in the prayer. Yes, on one level it is Jesus' farewell address; he is on his way out of the world. But then we also believe that Jesus is in the world, still today – just as we live in this world but we don't belong to the world. Our eyes are on eternity; our true home is in the kingdom that might have embassies here in this world, which might break through, which might peek around the edges, but it isn't here. At least not yet.

Or we could talk about the hundred other things that I haven't figured out yet. Maybe you saw something or wonder about something or figured something out from this prayer that you didn't know before, or that confirmed something inside of you. Or maybe we could simply talk about what it is like to know that Jesus is praying for us – what a blessing that is, even when we don't always know what is in that prayer. Even when we don't know how to respond to that prayer, or even what we should be looking for. Just knowing about the prayer means something.

(A week away is May 24, Aldersgate Day, the day we remember John Wesley and his heart strangely warmed experience, as he finally understood that Jesus' love and salvation was a gift for him too.)

But instead of all of that, the words that jumped out were those in verse ten: "All mine are yours and yours are mine and I have been glorified in them." I know that really says more about who Jesus is than it does about us. But it also speaks

deeply of relationship and of community. Eugene Peterson (*The Message*) translates the last part of the verse like this: “my life is on display in them.” How we live and love in this world is the presentation of Christ to those who don’t know him yet. How we share and give does not just reflect on us, but it reflects on Jesus. How we treat one another, how we honor one another, how we celebrate one another and the commitments we have made are parts of our faith. And Christ is glorified by the way we live in community.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

At last, we come to the end of the long Eastertide series. But, of course, living the Resurrection will go on. It will be our way of life as long as we remember the risen Christ is among us. That might seem an odd thing to say on this day when we remember the Ascension. Isn’t that the time that Jesus left us to go reside at the right hand of God? That depends on how you define, “left us.”

Even as we celebrate the risen Christ taking full possession of the place to which he is entitled, we also acknowledge the ongoing presence of the Word among us. Next week, we will claim the gift of the Spirit as the manifestation of that presence. But for now, we are pledging our allegiance to the Christ we worship. “We are Yours” defines our stance to the one who claims us. In our Gospel text today, Jesus lays claim to the followers, which is us. And we give thanks for that claiming today.

We celebrate the body today. We rejoice in the fellowship of believers, even as we encourage one another to even more growth in grace. This is a moment of claiming our discipleship path. We are on the way to fulfilling the commission to go and make disciples of all nations, even as we are being made into disciples. So, while the focus, as always, is on Christ, we can also give thanks for the church and the mission we have been given and are living out each and every day.

Meditations for Gathering

Jesus Praying

(Based on John 17:6-9)

Jesus, God Incarnate, the Anointed and uniquely born Son of God believed in the great power of prayer! Throughout the Gospels, we find Jesus journeying to far away places at early hours of the day to pray. In John 17, Jesus prays for himself, for God to do with his life as God wills. Then, he prays for his disciples – for God’s provision, direction, and protection to guide them. Later in this same passage, Jesus prays for us; yes, even before any of us were born, we were inscribed upon the heart of the Holy One. What great love and what an honor it is to be ushered into the room where Jesus is praying. John 17 creates that space for us. Listen to Jesus’ words. And let God speak to our hearts that they may be fertile ground for the power and testimony of God’s Holy Word.

*Stacey Cole Wilson, **The Africana Worship Book for Year B**, Discipleship Resources, Valerie Bridgeman Davis, and Safiyah Fosua Eds., 2007, p. 32.*

God, Help Us!

A Call to Worship, Inspired by John 17:6-19

Leader: Jesus Christ has ascended into the heavens and sits at your right hand while we are down here laboring doing the best that we can to survive.

People: God help us!

Leader: We are keeping our heads above water, but (God forgive us) sometimes drowning seems to be an answer.

People: God help us!

Leader: We keep our faith and trust in you in spite of how we are being treated.

People: God help us!

Leader: We are abused, misused, and accused.
For this reason, we understand more and more
That this world is not our home
And we are just strangers passing through the night.

People: God help us!

**All: God, we are your children and we need you to help us
So that our feet won’t slip**

**And our faith won't waver.
We believe in you and trust in your Holy Word.
Do it God! Do it today!
God help us!**

*Curry F. Butler, **Easter Liturgical Resources from Africana Writers**, edited by Safiya Fosua, 2020.*

Prayer for Assurance of Grace

God of Grace, you call us to be different from the world,
but the world is seductive, and so we come here to be strengthened.
God of Vision, you hold before us an alternate way of life,
different priorities, different loyalties, different values.
But we know that the world is not only seductive but powerful,
**and so we are drawn in to following its priorities,
accepting its values, showing loyalty to its gods.**
God who blesses the meek, the peacemakers, the merciful,
**forgive us when we lose sight of these qualities,
when we misunderstand their role in the world.**

. . . time of silent prayer . . .

Rejoice and be glad!
God is gracious and God offers blessings.
God calls us to life in the world,
God offers us the chance to explore how to live out God's vision.
We are called, we are forgiven, we are blessed.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

*~ posted by Rev Gord on his blog, **Worship Offerings**. <http://worshipofferings.blogspot.ca/>. Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2015/06/prayer-of-confession-and-commitment.html>.*

Prayers of the People: Easter 7

(inspired by John 17:6-19, Acts 1:15-17, 21-26)

Our gracious, eternal God, we thank you for the challenges which life brings. It also brings changes which sometimes throw us into crisis. Be with us in such times

in our Christian community. Like the early disciples help us in our common life to find your guidance in our collective decisions.

Help us to approach our decisions, seeking your guidance through prayer.

Help us to examine our own hearts for any unseemly motives.

Help us to focus on the common good and not be driven by our own selfish interests.

Help us to seek consensus and never be satisfied with power plays and divisiveness.

Help us all to share in our mutual ministry.

Lead us forward and help us to create a community where love, acceptance, and mutuality are expressed, where joy abounds, and where results are achieved because we are all working hand in hand together. May it be said of us as it was said of old: "See how those Christians love one another."

We ask that you would save us from ever being a cloistered cell which seeks escape from our world. Instead, open the windows of our souls to the world and its needs. Send us forth to herald the good news of Jesus, to be your servants to those in need, to visit the sick and the imprisoned, to remember the forgotten in our society, and to work for justice and peace. Use our varied gifts so that as Peter suggested we all might do our fair share in this ministry. Bolster us in moments when we feel inadequate for the task and give us courage. Amen.

— written by Richard J. Einerson, from his collection of prayers, *Prayers of the People*. <http://www.richardeinerson.com/>. Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/prayer-of-intercession-easter-7-b.html>.

Confession: Easter 7 B

Call to Reconciliation

Called to proclaim repentance, we are reluctant to look at our own failings.

Invited to witness to God's loving forgiveness of sins, we would rather not speak aloud of our own. Let us trust in the One who offers us hope and healing, as we pray together, saying,

Unison Prayer of Confession

You call us to proclaim a gospel we find difficult to practice, God Most High. We

watch our clocks to make sure we spend more time with ourselves than with you. We are hesitant to witness to your power from on high, as we are uncertain of your presence in our lives.

Forgive us, God of Light. Fill us with the healing presence of your Spirit, that we may proclaim your good news, as we participate in the life and suffering of our world, as did your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Silence is kept

Assurance of Pardon

Choosing to set aside judgment, God gives us justice; choosing to let go of punishment, God fills us with peace; choosing to release anger, God's steadfast love rests upon us.

Forgiven, redeemed, restored—we will tell everyone, through the lives we lead, what God has done for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

— written by Thom Shuman, and posted on his *Lectionary Liturgies* blog:

<http://lectionaryliturgies.blogspot.ca/>. Reposted: <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/confession-easter-7-b.html>.

Benediction

Leader: Let us go forth into the new seasons of our lives.

People: We go forth into growing and changing and living.

Leader: Let us go with caring awareness for the world and all that is in it.

People: We go to discover the needs and opportunities around us.

Leader: Let us go forth in peace and be led out in joy.

All: We go in God's continuing presence, with the power to love and the strength to serve. Amen.

*Mary Ann Neevil, **Bread for the Journey**, Ruth Duck, ed., Pilgrim Press, 1981, p.49.*