

## Resurrection of the Lord, Easter Day

**Isaiah 65:17-25** - Isaiah called the future age of messianic blessings “the new heavens and the new earth.” This new spiritual era – that would be created by God – begins with Christ (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15) and culminates following the final judgment (2 Pet 3:3-13; Rev 20:11-15). The fruit of these messianic blessings will be: a radical newness, unspeakable joy, longevity, an abundant and totally satisfying life, answers to prayers, and peaceful coexistence.

**1 Corinthians 15:19-26** - Paul claims that those who deny the Resurrection of Christ are “the most miserable of men.” In other words, they suffer here and now for a faith that is only a fiction. He stresses the “fact” of Christ’s resurrection and that Jesus is the “first fruits” of those who have died... the One who will reverse the wrong that the first Adam brought into this world.

**John 20:1-18** - The preciseness of John’s description of the empty tomb is to be noted. Those who looked in the tomb observed the burial wrappings lying in the shape of the body, but the body was gone! The napkin (used to cover the face) had been carefully folded, lying by itself. This detail challenges those who would think somebody stole the body of Jesus.

Yet this story not only reveals evidence, it gives us a wonderful picture of how the Resurrected Christ meets us in our sorrow. Jesus spoke Mary’s name. In that moment, she recognized Him.

## The Promise of Easter

Consider for a moment the power of Christ’s words to Mary. “Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” In the midst of celebrating an empty tomb, we sometimes miss these words and the promise – the hope – they hold for us.

Easter is more than a celebration of Christ’s resurrection. Easter is a celebration of the life promised to us through Jesus. In Him, we are reconciled to God. His words affirm that Jesus’ Father is our Father – His God, our God. His resurrection is the “first fruits” of the faith to which we hold fast. One day, the bodies of Christians who have died will follow the example of Jesus and emerge from the grave. Like Christ, we will “ascend to our Father,” worshipping Him for eternity with transformed bodies. The promise of Easter allows us to proclaim with joy: Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia!

## Prayer

***Almighty God, in the death and resurrection of Your Son, my life is redeemed. Help me die daily to sin that I may also share in the joy of His resurrection; through Jesus Christ, Amen***

*\*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

## Second Sunday of Easter

**Acts 5:27-32** - Honoring man and God often places us in a precarious position. The injunction imposed upon the apostles by the Sanhedrin council required a hard decision. Peter regards himself as a Jew, indicating that the early church existed as a fellowship within Judaism. The apostles' proclamation is grounded upon what they had witnessed (the resurrection of Jesus), and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, who spoke through them.

**Revelation 1:4-8** - John describes the Christ he knows. The phrase: "... who is and who was and who is to come" portrays Jesus as past, present, and future. In the past, Christ was the faithful witness (a Prophet) and the firstborn from among the dead, a Priest, loving us and freeing us from our sins. In the future, his return will be public; when all will recognize Him as King.

**John 20:19-31** - Jesus comes through locked doors in his glorified body and brings peace to these fearful men. Two times, Jesus speaks "peace" to them. The first "peace" is based on His sacrifice on the cross that cancelled the barrier of sin that distanced humankind from God. The second "peace" is received because of His presence with them.

## Finding Faith

What do we do with seasons of grief, doubt, and uncertainty? When those around us are celebrating an empty tomb but all we can see is the cross, how do we once again find faith?

Notice Jesus' response to Thomas' doubt. He appears. The One who defeated death, hell, and the grave doesn't reveal Himself in a showy splash of splendor. Instead, He comes speaking peace. To his disciple wounded by grief and disbelief, He reveals His own wounds, offering a point of connection and healing.

Jesus, the wounded Healer, gives Himself to us in the same way. This is my body, broken for you. At the Lord's Table, we too experience a Savior who meets our doubts and hurt, not with condemnation, but with compassion and an encouragement to come closer. In His presence, we find arms stretched out to receive us, enveloping our hurts in His own wounds, absolving and dissolving our doubts and fears. In Him, we are found; faith is resurrected, and Easter is experienced.

## Prayer

*Loving God, as I am reconciled to you through the death and resurrection of Your Son, help me also to be strengthened to show in my life what I profess in my faith; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

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## Third Sunday of Easter

**Acts 9:1-6, (7-20)** - Man cannot thwart God's purpose. Paul's venomous hatred toward followers of the "Way" (those men and women who purported Jesus as Lord), is suddenly interrupted by God's gracious act.

Paul was an excellent choice to reveal God's plan to those beyond Jerusalem. Born a Jew he was trained in Old Testament Scripture. As a Gentile citizen he understood Greek philosophies... reminding us: God has the right person – at the right time.

**Revelation 5:11-14** - This passage reminds us that the elders sing, but angels "shout (or say) with a loud voice." Singing is a privilege reserved for the saints of God who have experienced the joy of salvation. Although angels can do many things that we cannot do... they cannot experience salvation, nor can they sing with the saints the praises of the Lamb.

**John 21:1-19** - This story of the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples is filled with wonderful lessons. It was dark, indicating the disciples were not walking in the light. They had reacted (choosing to return to their trade), rather than receiving a direct word from the Lord. Their best efforts met with failure. Initially, they failed to recognize Christ, showing that their spiritual vision was dim.

When Christ appears, light is revealed, instructions given, and failure is replaced by a boatload of fish. A few minutes with Christ always produces more than hours of our own efforts!

## What Will You Choose?

Obedience is a lot easier when we know the outcome from the beginning. But knowing the outcome from the start is more about bribery than obedience. Any child who has received a cookie in exchange for sitting quietly through church will attest to this!

Today's readings give us a different perspective on obedience. Ananias clearly heard God's voice – just as clearly as he had heard about the dangers a Jew named Saul posed. The disciples had worked hard all night and caught nothing. Now they were being asked to put out their nets again. Each situation involved uncertainty, risk, and speculation. At the root of obedience lies choice. Ananias could choose to listen to his well-justified fears – or he could listen to God. The disciples could listen to their weariness and experience – or they could cast their nets into a sea of hope and possibility.

We have the same choice. We can believe the voices of experience, knowledge, or convention that shout in our own heads, or we can listen to that still, small voice in our heart that calls us to trust... hope... obey. What will you choose?

## Prayer

***Gracious God, as I walk in obedience to Your Son, open the eyes of my faith so I can see You at work in my life; through Jesus Christ, Amen***

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## Fourth Sunday of Easter

**Acts 9:36-43** - Joppa was where Jonah went in order to flee from his responsibility to bring God's message to Gentiles. God is about to call Peter to do the same thing. The mere fact that Peter stays with a "tanner" indicates that some of his Jewish prejudices are being set aside, for tanning was "unclean" as far as the Jews were concerned.

**Revelation 7:9-17** - In John's vision, the Jews are numbered (vs. 5-8). However, the fruit of the labors of the 144,000 is so great, they cannot be counted. They come from every nation under heaven. These Gentiles are those saved by faith in Christ (vs. 14).

We are admonished to run with patient endurance in light of these examples. Yet, the premier example is Jesus... who endured the cross, shame, and hostility. He never lost sight of the joy that was beyond the cross.

**John 10:22-30** - Jesus gives a wonderful picture of who true Christians are. They are like sheep who "hear His voice," those who hear His Word and respond to it. They "know Christ and are known by Christ" preventing them from following a false shepherd. Finally, a true Christian follows Jesus. In other words, they obey Christ.

## The Good Shepherd

If you've ever spent time watching sheep, you understand why Scripture is filled with references to shepherds and sheep. The truth is we're a lot like sheep! Unlike goats, which are adept at searching out food, sheep are helpless. Without a shepherd to lead them to green pastures and sources of water, sheep will die. Sheep are prone to wander, getting lost and becoming prey to wild animals. Young sheep tire easily. When the journey becomes too much, the shepherd must pick up the tired lamb and carry it on his shoulders. Sound familiar?

In Biblical times, a good shepherd was easy to spot. Herds of sheep would often graze together, becoming intermingled. A good shepherd could call to his flock and the sheep would separate, following the sound of the trusted shepherd's voice. At night, a shepherd would construct a makeshift pen to keep his flock from wandering into the darkness and protect them from predators. He would lie across the threshold of the pen, using his own body as the door into and out of the sheepfold. His comfort was secondary in his care and protection of his flock. It is said that a good shepherd knew his flock so intimately, that even in the dark he could match a nursing lamb to its mother by simply feeling the shape of its head.

And so it is with us. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, makes us lie down in green pastures. He leads us beside still waters. He restores our souls. And when the journey is too hard and we are tired, He carries us. Seeing Jesus in this light, it is our joy to follow the sound of our trusted Shepherd's voice as He calls us to follow Him.

## Prayer

***Almighty God who sent your Son as the good shepherd, help me to know His voice and to follow where He leads; through Jesus Christ, Amen.***

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## Fifth Sunday of Easter

**Acts 11:1-18** - Peter is criticized by faithful Jews for eating with Gentiles. The contention was not because of prejudice, rather their understanding that God's program would bless Gentiles through the reign of Israel's promised Messiah. But the nation had rejected Christ and His kingdom. Peter did not go to Cornelius' house because he understood God's new program, but because the Holy Spirit commanded him to go. His experience revealed that both Jew and Gentile stand condemned before God and can only be saved through faith in Jesus Christ.

**Revelation 21:1-6** - John is given a glimpse into the future and sees a "new heaven and earth." This will be a time when God will dwell personally with His people. There will be no more tears, death, or sorrow. The same Lord who started creation will also finish it, for He is Alpha and Omega (the first and last).

**John 13:31-35** - Christ's command to "love one another" is new in that the love was to be exercised toward others, not because they belonged to the same nation, but because they belonged to Christ. And, it was new because it was to be the expression of the unequalled love of Christ, which the disciples had witnessed in his life, and would observe in his pending death. "As I have loved you" would become the motivation by which followers of Christ would demonstrate to the world His love.

## All You Need Is Love ♥

The Beatles tapped into the fundamental cry of the human heart when they penned their hit song, "All You Need is Love." In our world, which is often divided and divisive, the concept of love is a magnet, drawing us out of our defensive posture and into a place of hope. But love, real love, is more than an ideal.

In today's readings, the love Christ calls us to live demands that we step out of our comfort zone. It requires us to walk and worship with "those" people. Notice Peter's reaction to God's invitation to walk in this kind of love. "By no means, Lord..."

Yet Peter stretched to embrace a concept of love and acceptance he did not understand. He did it because it's what Christ asked of Him. And those who had often been ignored or marginalized in the Jewish culture were given the dignity and privilege of belonging and believing. To those on the outside, love became an instrument of salvation. To Peter, love became a source of transformation.

Jesus asks the same of us. Like Peter, we have to stretch. It's uncomfortable. But the process changes our hearts and the world around us. And in these moments of divine love, we catch glimpses of the new heaven and new earth that comprises the Kingdom of God. "All you need is love, love, love, love is all you need."

## Prayer

*Gracious God, just as you love me when I am unlovable, help me to love others and find my own life transformed in the process; through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

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## Sixth Sunday of Easter

**Acts 16:9-15** - Macedonia lies north of modern day Greece. In the first century, it was part of where Northern Greece exists. Despite its Greek connection, it was a Roman occupied land, much the same as other areas around the Mediterranean. The region was home to many cities Paul visited on his missionary journeys not the least of which is Philippi.

After the Roman Civil war, troops were left there to maintain the peace. Further, the Via Egnatia went through the city, which helped connect the Byzantine regions to the Adriatic Sea.

Philippi was geographically important, but even more importantly, it was where Paul traveled to respond to a vision. His obedience led him to a small group of women meeting near a river. These God-fearers, Gentiles sympathetic to and likely worshipping in the Jewish way had no synagogue which only required ten men to create.

Luke makes Lydia the centerpiece of this section as she, through her faith, provides a place to base the ministry. She is the first recorded convert to Christianity in Europe. She was a dealer in purple goods which means she likely had money and influence. Her family converts to Christianity and represents the gate through which the mercy of Christ impacts all of Europe.

Luke demonstrates to us how simple obedience to Christ by his people has an impact we can never imagine.

**Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5** - The Holy City Jerusalem has a parallel in the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem. If you can think of creation as the Temple, this new City represents the Holiest place. It's cube-like dimensions even mirror the dimensions of the center of the Temple.

From the Lord and his throne flow life and light, the very things necessary to sustain the "temple."

The reference to the tree of life, healing from the leaves and producing 12 types of fruit are clear references to the 12 tribes of Israel. They are fulfilling their purpose, to bring healing to the nations. God's people were and are, meant to represent him in such a way that anyone within their circle of influence would experience peace, healing, and life.

His merciful presence in the new Temple/Holy of Holies fulfills the promise made good the words in the Prophets and Psalms, "The whole earth is filled with His glory."

Our job as we await this happening is to clear the path through our lives, the way the 12 tribes were supposed to. When we love, serve, act, preach, teach, or share in Jesus name, we point the way to the new heaven and earth and help usher in his Kingdom "... on earth as it is in heaven."

**John 14:23-29** - When we do as Jesus says, we are loved and kept by the Father. We become the place where He resides. He does this by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit teaches and reminds us of Christ's words. It's circular. Obedience = The Father's Presence by the Holy Spirit = Teaching and reminding what Jesus said = Obedience.

When we don't follow Jesus' teaching, we lack peace, and our foundation isn't solid (think house made on the sand). A lack of peace is a great indication we may not be practicing Christ's teaching. Jesus leaves his peace with the disciples because he knows they are going to need it, especially in the coming days of the crucifixion but also in the days of persecution.

The genius of God is that he resides with us in such a way to remind and teach us so that we may obey and have peace. His words are meant to be an encouragement to his disciples and by extension you and me. Our lives can be full of the same stuff Jesus' life was full of. We can have love and peace in the midst of all we experience by simply following what Jesus taught. It may not be easy, but it is straightforward and brilliant.

## Sixth Sunday of Easter (continued)

### A Living Gospel

It's easy to think about heaven as the place we will go when we die. Sometimes, we will talk about things we experience like a "little slice of heaven" or "heaven on earth." Usually, this is during a sweet moment with someone, a great experience or when we've eaten something delicious. Those comments are closer to the truth than we know.

The Bible tells a story of the redemption of heaven and earth. They come together in Revelation, a joining of heaven and earth. This only makes sense because Jesus taught his disciples to pray that way.

When the rubber meets the road, what does that look like? Who is responsible for doing it?

We participate in the redemption of heaven and earth when we are obedient to Jesus. God works in and through his people to reveal himself and his kingdom. As we practice obeying Jesus, we have peace, the kind the world longs for. We have no idea how God will use our efforts to walk with him but we can be assured we are doing his will and his plan is not just for us, but for the world around us. It is God at work in the church by the Spirit in the world. As Christians, we are the primary place of heaven on earth. It is our job to re-present Jesus to the world, to enjoy and demonstrate his kingdom and give them a taste of something we all long for. A slice of heaven.

### Prayer

***Glorious God, pour into my heart a love for You that overflows to those around me; through Jesus Christ, Amen.***

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## Ascension of the Lord

**Acts 1:1-11** - Luke has written his first book (What we know as the Gospel of Luke) to Theophilus. He did it so “that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.”

He writes Acts with an aim toward the same thing. Acts is “Book 2”. This book will tell the story of what happens after Jesus has ascended. The story of God’s people learning a new way to live. This life is based on Jesus, the Spirit and the community of God. The new people will live a life empowered by the Spirit of God. The same Spirit that was at work in Jesus.

Yes, he has left them, but he is now somehow still with them by the Spirit. Jesus is a new creation. The disciples are going to learn what it means to live — as they are new creations in Christ themselves.

**Ephesians 1:15-23** - If anyone questions whether Paul has a passionate heart for his people, they only need to look as far as this prayer.

Paul asks for people to receive wisdom, revelation and that they may know the hope they have in Christ. He also prays they would know the immeasurable power that is at work within them.

This power, the power to forgive, love, repent and walk in faith, is the same power that was at work when God raised Jesus from the dead. Resurrection Power.

Paul wants his readers to know that they have someone who is cheering for them, pleading on their behalf, for them to know all that is at work as they live their lives for Christ. This message from 2000 years ago is not a bad one for people to hear today. You are not alone; you’re not powerless, you are not forsaken, you are not disconnected.

**Luke 24:44-53** - Jesus helps his followers understand not only what is true about him, but what is true about them. Because they are witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, they are now caught up in his purposes. That purpose is to proclaim in their lives repentance and forgiveness in Jesus. They have the power to do that very thing. This power is the Spirit. In the same way, Jesus’ physical presence with them encouraged them; now the Spirit will do the same, and more. Now they will not need Jesus’ physical presence, they have the Spirit, and He will lead them in ways they can never imagine as they begin the work of establishing His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

## But Wait, There’s More!

Jesus’ return to heaven might make us feel abandoned.

*Thanks for the ride Jesus, that was cool. Now, what do we do?*

Jesus answers that question in the Gospels and helps us to understand that without him leaving, we don’t receive the Spirit at Pentecost. Without Pentecost, there is no Church. God is always doing something we can’t quite see. On the surface, it looks like Jesus is taking off when things are getting rough (*Christian persecution in the coming years was no joke*). But God is doing so much more. He is providing for his people and commissioning them in ways that will change the world.

Maybe you can’t see what God is doing. Maybe on the surface, things look pretty rough. There is a bigger picture to see, and if we are patient, we will see it. God isn’t leaving. He is with you and me, and if we can persevere, our world will change and maybe even the world around us.

**Prayer** – *Loving Father, your ascended Son promised the gift of holy power. Send your Spirit of revelation and wisdom, that in the blessed freedom of hope, we may witness to the grace of forgiveness and sing songs of joy with the peoples of earth to the One who makes us one body. Amen.*

## Seventh Sunday of Easter

**Acts 16:16-34** - Paul and Silas have been accused of teaching an illicit faith (a message not supported by the law), one that was corrupting society. Rather than investigate, the magistrates flog and jail Paul and Silas for “disturbing the peace.”

An earthquake opens the way for escape, but Paul responds to a jailer who is about to take his life, resulting in an important question: “What must I do to be saved?” Paul’s reply remains one of the simplest, clearest answers to this vital question: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

**Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21** - Heaven is more than a destination; it is a motivation. Knowing that we will dwell in the heavenly city ought to make a difference in our lives here and now. John hears Jesus promise: “I am coming soon” and urges us to holiness (vv. 12-16) by keeping God’s Word.

**John 17:20-26** - Christ’s prayer is a petition for unity of the church (v21), not uniformity. Oneness of heart and spirit does not mean that everybody will be exactly alike. Unity comes from life within, not from pressure without. Spiritual unity in love convinces the world of the truth of the Gospel.

## A Longing For Love

What caused Paul and Silas to not only endure a beating, but also remain in jail when they could have escaped? What prompted Jesus’ heartfelt petition to His Father in heaven, not only on behalf of the disciples present but also us? The answer is love.

Love is what enabled Paul and Silas to share faith in Jesus Christ. Their concern for the well being of their guard spoke louder than any preaching. Their willingness to remain in prison opened the eyes and the heart of their guard to the message of Christ. Love made them and their message different from anything this man had ever heard or witnessed.

Jesus knew the power of this kind of love. He knew that love would overcome hate, would withstand persecution, and would outshine the darkness of evil. Only love would give His followers the ability to transform the world.

How are we doing in shining this love into a darkened and desperate world? Our world has never seen Jesus. All they see is us. The world longs for love – for Jesus. In grace and humility, we can serve as the hands and feet of Jesus, bringing His love into our world.

## Prayer

***Almighty God, you showed your love for me through Jesus. In love, help me show Him to the world; through Jesus Christ, Amen.***

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## Day of Pentecost

**Acts 2:1-21** - There is a tendency to try to discount the miraculous. How was it possible for these disciples to speak in languages foreign to them? Some charged that they must have been drunk. Peter explains what has happened by reminding them it was the third hour of the day (9:00 am). No Jew would eat or drink anything before 9:00 in the morning, or on a Sabbath or feast day.

He also quotes from Scripture (Joel 2:28-32), emphasizing the pouring out of the Spirit, which takes place “before” the Day of the Lord comes, during which “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (v. 21).

**Romans 8:14-17** - “Adoption” in the New Testament does not mean what it typically means today (i.e., taking a child into a family to be a legal member of the family). The literal meaning is “son-placing” – the taking of a minor (whether in the family or outside) and making him or her the rightful heir. Every believer is a child of God by birth and an heir of God through adoption. This process is not dependent upon the flesh (our doing). It is a result of the Holy Spirit ... “the Spirit of Adoption.”

**John 14:8-17** - Jesus was so intimately connected to the Father that his words and acts are in fact the Father’s words and acts (vv. 9-11). It is not surprising God expressed Himself through the sinless Jesus. But for the Spirit to take sinful human beings and use us as agents of God in this world, is a greater wonder (v. 12).

A “name” in the biblical world represented the character and quality of the person or thing named. When we pray in Jesus’ name, it means: 1) to identify the content and motivations of prayers with all that Jesus is, and... 2) to pray with full confidence in Him as He has revealed Himself.

## Happy Birthday!

Pentecost is often referred to as the Church’s “birthday.” It was on the Day of Pentecost that the Holy Spirit was given to the disciples, empowering them to share the message of Jesus in many languages, taking to all peoples of the earth the Good News.

Pentecost is celebrated 50 days after Easter. It mirrors the Jewish harvest festival of Shavuot, which commemorates God giving the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai fifty days after the exodus from Egypt.

Notice the symbolism. On this day commemorating the giving of the law, God pours out His Spirit. The law is fulfilled in Jesus. His Spirit working in us empowers us to live out the new commandment that we love each other as Christ loves us. The gift of the Spirit is love that transforms our hearts and the lives of those who encounter the Gospel through us.

## Prayer:

***Almighty God, you showed your love for me through Jesus. In love, help me show Him to the world; through Jesus Christ, Amen.***

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