

Jesus, the Messiah

“Tradition says that Matthew preached in Palestine for some years, and then traveled to foreign countries; that he wrote his Gospel originally in Hebrew, and some years later, probably 60 A.D. issued a more complete edition in Greek.”

As we approach Lent, the time for remembering the passion and death of our Lord, we invite you to meditate with us using the Passion as it is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew.

Ash Wednesday -- Matthew 21:1-11

The Triumphal Entry

Jesus here enters the hostile city of Jerusalem with a claim to be a king of peace. And this claim is made by means of a dramatic act – riding into Jerusalem seated upon an ass. Although in our part of the world the ass is an animal that is not much appreciated, in eastern lands this is not the case. A king might ride an ass and by doing so declare that he comes in peace. The commentaries tell us that the donkey or ass was considered to be an animal of peace. In contrast, a horse was perceived to be an animal of war.

Jesus here fulfills the passage in Zachariah 9:9 which says the Messiah will come riding on a donkey.

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Jesus is also proclaiming that he is coming as David’s offspring, as the Messiah had to be.

Jesus comes meekly, not the force, and invites our allegiance. Those who follow are not forced to comply with God’s will but are “captured” by God’s love.

Many people of that time paid no attention to Jesus. Others rejected him. Now we have to make up our minds. Will we reject him? Or will he be king in our hearts and lives?

Bev Jensen

Thursday (day2) -- Matthew 21:12-17

Jesus in the Temple

I think there's something kind of exciting about Jesus' run-in with the moneychangers and merchants doing business in the temple. After seeing Jesus portrayed time and again in the New Testament as meek and accepting of his outrageous fate, this is one of the few times in the biblical record when Jesus displays the very human emotion of anger. And right fully so. The presence of these traders was a distraction and a trivialization of the temple's real purpose.

Most of us feel a similar anger when we see scandals involving those who purport to speak in the name of God or when we see the major events of the church year trivialized by commercialism in the form of little old men with twinkling eyes or cute little bunnies bearing colorful eggs.

The Apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, writes, *"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy and that temple is you."*

Ultimately, most of us lack the wisdom or the authority to judge those who seek to profit in the name of the church. Nevertheless, we need to constantly be on our guard lest these modern-day "moneychangers" gain a foothold in our own temples.

Will Dunwiddie

Friday (day3) -- Matthew 21:33-41

The Householder and Tenants

In connection with this parable the reader may desire to read, in addition, Mark 12:1-9 and Luke 20:9-16, both on the subject, as well as Isaiah 5:1-7.

This parable of Jesus was told in the presence of “the chief priests and elders of the people...as he was teaching” in the temple.

In this parable the householder has been commonly understood to be God and the tenants were the many faithless, untrustworthy rulers, priests and prophets in the long history of the Hebrews down to the time of Jesus. The vineyard was made up of the remaining Hebrew people and the messengers (“slaves” in the New-RSV) were the faithful, trustworthy rulers, priests and prophets sent by the householder.

William Barclay in his commentary on the book of Matthew wrote that this parable tells us much about God, mankind and Jesus. God trusted the tenants and was patient with them; God would also hold the tenants responsible for their actions. The tenants had a fine vineyard and freedom to operate it as they saw fit; however, it appeared that they were not very conscious of a possible day of reckoning for what they had done. Jesus was the son in the parable and so identified himself as the Son of God; he knew that he would die.

On Sunday morning in St. Luke’s we usually confess our faith in the words of the Apostles’ Creed and say in part that Jesus “is coming again to judge the quick and the dead.” In his book “Knowing God” J.I. Packer wrote: “Run from him (Jesus) now, and you will meet him as Judge then – and without hope. Seek him now and you will find him ...to be your present Savior.” Jesus has said: “...him that cometh to me I will in no wise (i.e. no way!) cast out.” (John 6:37b).

Come!

Anker B. Harbo

Saturday (day4) – Matthew 21:42-46

The Chief Cornerstone

The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

It is no surprise when Jesus uses this quote. He was a skilled carpenter and builder. He knew the importance of a cornerstone and the fact that it must rest on solid ground.

Jesus is quoting Psalm 118 that would be familiar to his hearers. I am sure this song was sung by the Israelites as a song of thanksgiving and reassurance. God had chosen the Jewish nation to be his people and through them to be a blessing to the nations. God had prepared a special place for this people.

Jesus uses this same theme to point to their refusal to accept him as the promised one. The leaders are completely aware of this and consider him to be a prophet.

Jesus also uses this imagery when he tells Peter, “*upon this rock I will build my church*”.

Dear Lord, Help us to rest upon you as the cornerstone of our salvation. Amen.

Jane Norman

Monday (day5) – Matthew 22:1-4

The Wedding Banquet

“The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet” (vv 8-9)

Like the previous parable, the two parables in this selection refer in the first place to the circumstances of Jesus’ life. In yesterday’s text the tenants refuse to give the harvest to the owner; here they refuse the king’s invitation to come to his son’s wedding banquet, and then one comes without the proper garment. In different ways each refers to the rejection of Jesus by the inner clique of priests and scribes, which led to his death.

Since everyone was invited to the feast, this story reminds me of the parable of the “Prodigal Son,” actually the Lost Son. At the end of that parable, the Father is begging the older son to join the feast with his brother. The point of the parable for us is that we are invited to join the music, dancing, and feasting which are the metaphor for the kingdom of God; rejecting the invitation is a serious matter.

There is a dissonance between the king in this parable and the father in the other one. I believe that we should not “allegorize” parables, making every element stand for something else. The character of the God of the New Testament is much more like the father who threw the feast than the king who threw out the unworthy.

Give us grace, O God, not to trivialize your invitation, but to enter into your joy.

Brad Holt

Tuesday (day6) – Matthew 22:15-22

Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperors

This passage, where Jesus discusses with the Pharisees whether it is lawful or not to pay taxes to Caesar, is still a very relevant passage to a modern day Christian. You can see this when looking at the context of the discussion. In a period when the Israelites were on the verge of a full-fledged rebellion against the “atheist” Roman state, outraged at the imposition of the emperor/deity cult in the midst of their holy city, the Pharisees, the traditional interpreters of Judaic law, gave Jesus a loaded question. If Jesus had answered yes, it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he would have upset the intensely hostile Israelis, Jesus’ own people. But on the other hand if had answered no, it was not lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, then he would be seen by the Roman authorities as inciting revolt, which the extremely jealous Pharisees would us against their “rival”.

Jesus after revealing the Pharisees themselves as “hypocrites,” middle men who were willing to sell out their own people in order to preserve their own authority, continued his dialogue. After asking for the “denarius,” the coin used for paying the tax, he asked again whose face was on the coin. They answered that, “it was the emperor’s.” Jesus then gave his answer to the original question, that one should “give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s”. Jesus’ message here that the church and state were separate may have been incomprehensible to the Pharisees of his time, but it is one that is very clear to Christians today. It also means that while we as Christians may disagree with the philosophies or policies of the government, our religious beliefs do not necessarily translate into taking up arms against the state, or taking the law within our own hands.

York Norman

Wednesday (day7) – Matthew 22:23-40

The Greatest Commandment

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your Soul, and with all your mind” (v 37)

Each of us is called to answer the same question Jesus was asked, which of the Ten Commandments is the most important. The people who asked thought no matter which one Jesus picked, it would be easy to find somebody who would think he should have chosen a different one. Jesus answer was unexpected. The greatest commandment is to love God above all else. He said, “the second commandment is just as important; Love your neighbor. All the commandments depend on these two.”

Love for God and love for other people go together. If we love God we want to love others because God loves everyone. If we want to do something for others, we want to have God’s help.

What do we really think is important in our lives? The answer Jesus gave is still the best one. Most of the time we answer by what we do. We show whether we love God by the way we act. If we love God we’ll do what he wants.

We pray that we will love you, God, and make you the most important thing in our life. Help us to grow in our love for you and to show that love by loving other people as you do. Amen.

Doris Hanson

Thursday (day8) – Matthew 22:41-23:12

Jesus asked – “What do you Think of the Christ?”

Jesus is all the world to me. He’s a part of all that I experience because He lives in me, as He lives in every believer. Romans 8:9 says, *“but you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”*

It seems to me that we should thank Jesus more than we do that He in union with the Holy Spirit is present in us always. We’re prone to say, “Come, Lord Jesus,” and He has already come. Or, we say in a prayer, “Please be present with us,” and He already is.

Jesus is the best friend we can have, He’s always there for us and shows us the way to go. He always loves us and gives us what we need. He has died for us and has prepared a beautiful place for to live with Him forever. The Scribes and the Pharisees written about in Matthew are much to be pitied because they rejected the blessings Jesus so much wanted them to accept. When Jesus asked them what they thought of the Christ, they didn’t have a good answer. When Jesus asked the disciples, *“But who do you say that I am?”* Peter replied, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,”* and Jesus pronounced His blessing on Peter. (Matthew 16:16-17)

Thank you God for telling us what you think of Jesus. You said, “Thou art my beloved Son; with Thee I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11)

Doris Mikelson

Friday (day9) – Matthew 23:13-36

Called to be Authentic Christians

These verses from Matthew 23 contain seven woes spoken by Jesus to religious leaders of his day, the Scribes and the Pharisees. The word “woe” as used here by Jesus conveys the sense of both anger and sorrow. Jesus feels anger toward them because they were not authentic in the practice of their faith. He feels sorrow because by their example they were leading others astray.

Jesus charges them with hypocrisy. The word “hypocrisy” has an interesting history. It was first used in the Greek language in which language the New Testament was originally written to describe the dialogue between two actors on a stage. Later it came to be used as the normal word for an actor. And finally it came to be used for an actor in the worse sense of the word, as one who only pretends. The Scribes and Pharisees were hypocrites because they only pretended to be religious, only pretended to follow God, only pretended to honor his laws.

In the seven woes of these verses Jesus gives several examples of how they pretended to be devoted to God, but in fact found reasons and ways to not live out their faith. It was their disingenuousness, their insincerity, their lack of authenticity that so disturbed Jesus.

Hypocrisy, insincerity, being non-authentic in matter of faith is a matter that concerns all of us. It is easy to pretend to be what we are not with regard to our love for God and for others. Hypocrisy on the part of those who claim to be people of God does great harm to the cause of God. But being authentic and genuine in matters of faith is a powerful witness for Christ and his church.

Carl Jensen

Saturday (day10) – Matthew 23:37-24:2

Longing

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often would I have gathered your children together...! You will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” (Matthew 23:37, 39)

“O Minneapolis, Minneapolis...,” How often do we, also, long for this city. And we, the body of Christ, sensing the nudge of the Spirit within us, hear our hearts also cry, *“How often would I have gathered your children together...!”* Is it not so? Sometimes we may mistake the ache within us for a symptom of despair. But we have been baptized into Christ, and that baptism provides us not only the joy of his presence, but also the longings of the one who lamented for Jerusalem.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty is to recognize him. It is true that we are the body of Christ. But we also are members of the city. Jesus was present within the city of Jerusalem but was not recognized. He longed for people to understand who he was and to welcome him.

He says. *“You will not see me again until you say, ‘blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”* We live with both the ache and the promise, with the longing and the hope. Jesus longs with us for the day when we and our own city will receive him with joy.

Be near us, Lord Jesus, and open our eyes, so that we may recognize you within our own city, and greet you with joy. Amen.

Linda Holt

Monday (day11) – Matthew 24:3-35

Beware of False Prophets

The Lord says that we shall know false prophets by their message, for they shall claim Jesus Christ is at hand. They shall proclaim He is in the next room, or in our presence now, at this very moment, that we can see and touch Him. Christ tells us directly in the Bible, this is not true. When Christ comes we will know it, because all that is known to us will change. The world that we know will come to an abrupt end. But for the true believer this dramatic period of change, will be short. The true Christian who has kept the faith will be saved.

Jesus saw two dangers that will threaten the church. First, a false leader will seek to propagate his or her version of the truth; rather than the truth as it is in Jesus Christ. The false leader is out to spread their ideas. The result is he or she tries to attach others to oneself, rather than to Jesus Christ.

The second threat is of discouragement, there are those who will lose their love for Christ because of the increasing lawlessness of the world. The true Christian holds to their belief under all circumstances, no matter how discouraging and refuses to believe God's ability to reach us is shortened, or His power grows less.

If we put our trust in Jesus Christ we will live by his example, as it is written in the Bible. He will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability to resist, and when we weaken pray to Jesus to save us from our temptation. We see fine examples of Christian faith around nearly every day if we look for them; reflected in loving hearts who give of themselves unselfishly to bring out the radiance that is sometimes hidden in others.

Jack Norman

Tuesday (day12) – Matthew 24:36-44

That Unexpected Hour

“But about that day and hour no one knows...For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man... Keep awake, therefore for you do not know on that day your Lord is coming... Therefore, you also must be ready, for the son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Mt. 24:36-44)

These verses include two important truths. First, the hour of Christ’s return is known only to God. Therefore, no one ought to speculate on when this will happen. Second, Christ’s return will be sudden. Jesus compares it to the coming of the flood at the time of Noah. The people in his day were wicked, and their sin grieved the very heart of God. While Noah built the ark, God waited patiently for people to turn to him. However they were corrupt and continued in their wickedness. The earth was filled with violence and all manner of evil. When the flood came, they were unprepared, and all died except Noah, his wife, his sons and his sons’ wives.

Christ’s return will be just as sudden, and it will be too late then for unbelievers to turn to God. Scripture warns us never to become so immersed in earthly things that we forget eternity. When he calls—morning, noon, or evening—we must be ready. Jesus came to live, to die, and rise again in order to become our Ark.

Jesus told us about his coming again, not that we might continue in sin or live in fear, but so we might live by faith in Jesus, our Ark. While we wait for his return, we are to spread the Good News and imitate Christ’s ways of loving people. In this way we heed his warning to be ready for that unexpected hour.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that we may live safely in you, our Ark, until that unexpected hour when you shall return for us. Amen.

Vivian E. Thorson

Wednesday (day13) – Matthew 24:45-51

Vigilance is Essential

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. (vv 45,46)

This could be a message to the church of today. Is it still a requirement that we be faithful to our mission?

After asking a friend what the church should do in these very difficult times, I was given a very profound answer. We are only required to do what we have the capacity to do. We are to minister to those we see and know about, that is our mission. But remember God is not limited to our capabilities.

Our ministry and servanthood according to this passage (and my friend) is not measured by results, but vigilance. We need to be loyal to our calling and blessed by the serving.

Lord, thank you for the assurance of your sustaining love. Amen.

Jane Norman

Thursday (day14) – Matthew 25:1-13

The Wise and Foolish Maidens

Be prepared, “for you know neither the day nor the hour”. Jesus will come when we least expect Him and He is telling us through these many parables to remain aware of His return. We may be sleeping but if we have been resourceful and understood the importance of planning ahead, we will be the ones to accompany Him and share in the feast.

There will be others who will not have been an astute, they have not had the forethought to prepare themselves. They believe that there will be enough time at the last minute.

We must remain devoted to our knowledge, not only of how much extra oil it may take while we wait, but that other must make their own preparations.

With God’s help and enlightenment we must work to acquire the ability to develop our resourcefulness. So when the kingdom of heaven is near, we will be part of the group of wise maidens. This could be one of the most difficult actions to take in these days of rushing just to keep up with our daily activities.

We feel as though nothing we do is ever finished, much less done adequately, and yet to take the forethought to be ready at the very moment Jesus comes will be the most rewarding deed we will do for ourselves, God has made us aware of the last judgment and won’t be waiting when we come back from the spiritual 7-11.

Carol Ann Sersland

Friday (day15) – Matthew 25:14-30

Parable of the Talents

“What do talents have to do with lent?” was my first thought when I found this was to be my portion for a Lenten meditation. Ten I noted that the talents were to be given to a master. And who is OUR Master? Our Lord and Savior. Do you and I have talents—gifts—to be used for Him?

Jesus was standing on the threshold of Good Friday, just a few short weeks away. But He was not thinking of His impending crucifixion; His mind was on a band of disciples who must bring His teaching into all the world. Could they grasp it all? Much of His teaching was in the form of parables (short stories) of which the Parable of the Talents is one. What was He trying to teach them and us?

Three men have been given talents to use according to their abilities. And how did these talents fare? The first one in the story doubled his, as did the second; but the third man buried his and did nothing with it. Besides that, he slandered his master as a greedy, cruel man. While the master complimented the other two and gave them higher positions, the third man’s talent was taken from him and given to him who had the most, and he was cast into outer darkness.

What does this say to us this Lenten season? We, too, have been given talents or gifts, and like those men in Jesus’ parable, we are all different. Some of us can speak, sing, lead meetings, visit shut-ins, fix what’s broken, cook, or serve—and the list goes on and on. Are there also those among us who have hidden their talents, been too busy to use them, or by careless words or actions even slandered our Lord and Master?

This is the time to take inventory. What gift or gifts have I been given? Can I truly say, *“Lord, you have given gifts and I have done the very best I could. Continue to use me today and every day.”*

Hazel Willand

Saturday (day16) – Matthew 25:31-46

When the Son of Man Comes

In Matthew 25 Jesus instructs his disciples about his return at the close of the age. The disciples listen intently because they must pass on all that Jesus taught them to future members of his community.

Jesus did not call his followers to vague “good works” but to specific compassionate acts: giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, lodging to the stranger, clothing to the naked, help to the sick, and compassion to the prisoner. He explained that in doing these acts of kindness, they were serving him.

In these verses from Matthew, spoken by Jesus, he does not necessarily call us into a private relationship with himself but into the fellowship of his community. He emphasizes service to others in his name. We are not to harm the faith of another but forgive unendingly. Though both good and bad will be found in the community, the obedient are not to waste time evaluating what they do. They are to sow energetically and leave it to God to reap the harvest.

Dear God, All that I am you have allowed me to be. When I have needed you, you have been with me. You have guided, strengthened, and blessed me far beyond what I could ask or expect. Help me God, to be a blessing to others. Allow me to serve others and in doing so, serve you. Help me to grow in grace and faithfulness.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Marge Moe

Monday (day17) – Matthew 26:1-13

Jesus in Bethany

Verses one and two of this passage mark the beginning of the fulfillment of the three predictions of Jesus' death found earlier in Matthew 16:21, 17:12, and 20:17-19. However, also in this passage is the account of an act of kindness and love which stands out against the tragic account of betrayal and Jesus' death.

The anointing of Jesus by the woman is significant for two reasons. First, it is a symbol of Christ the King. Kings were anointed at their coronation and the woman may have anointed Jesus as King of the Jews. However Jesus tells his disciples that she has done it to prepare him for burial which is symbolic of a higher coronation—the crown of thorns and the throne of the cross.

The second reason the anointment is significant is because it was an opportunity for the woman to give a beautiful gift to Jesus. The disciples criticize her gift as wasteful for purely economic reasons. But Jesus answers them by pointing out that they will always have the poor but that they will not always have him. The woman took the most precious thing she had and gave it to Jesus.

Her gift was given out of love and love can cause us to be extravagant. Love is giving to the uttermost limits without calculating its monetary worth. She had the opportunity to give this gift and she took it. There are some things that can be done at any time and some things that can only be done once. If we are moved by a generous impulse and do not act on it, the person and the circumstance, the specific opportunity to give, may never be present again.

Ann Eichelman

Tuesday (day18) – Matthew 26:14-15

Judas' Betrayal of Jesus

The story of Judas' betrayal of Jesus into the hands of the Jewish authorities for thirty pieces of silver is one of literature's more disturbing stories of betrayal. Why did Judas, a disciple of Jesus, decide to betray him to the religious leaders? What prompted such action on his part? Three possible reasons have been given by those who have reflected on this event.

Judas may have been motivated by nothing more than greed. Thirty pieces of silver was not a large sum of money, but it may have been enough to prompt Judas to carry out this act of betrayal. Judas was the treasurer of the disciples' group. He carried the money bag into which all the disciples contributed their financial resources. And the Bible says that Judas sometimes stole some of the money for his own use. It may have been greed, the love of money, that caused Judas to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

Others have suggested that Judas' betrayal of Jesus was motivated by disillusionment with Jesus. It may be that Judas was fascinated with power and saw in Jesus a Charismatic person whose popularity with the people would lead to great power, a power in which Judas would share as one of Jesus' disciples. But when Jesus declared to his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and die on a cross, Judas became bitterly disappointed in Jesus because he was not going to become the leader he expected him to be and wanted him to be and was by that disappointment motivated to betray Jesus.

Still others have suggested that Judas' betrayal of Jesus was an attempt to force the hand of Jesus, to compel Jesus to act. Things were moving too slowly for Judas. The arrest of Jesus by Jewish authorities would bring matters to a head and Jesus would then act to bring in the kingdom of which he spoke.

It is the third reason that seems to best fit the facts. But the tragedy is Judas tried to make Jesus what he wanted him to be. However, it is not Jesus who is changed by us, but us by him. We can never use Jesus for our own purposes. We are to be used by him for the accomplishment of God's purposes. The tragedy of Judas is the tragedy of anyone who thinks he or she knows better than God.

Carl Jensen

Wednesday (day19) – Matthew 26:17-19

The Fulfillment

In Exodus 12 verse 14, the first day of Passover is given as a day of remembrance. Matthew suggests to me here that Jesus is embarking on a course fulfilling the law.

It should be clear to followers of Jesus as to what this day is a remembrance of. As if we are given a day of remembrance in Exodus, then given what we are to be remembering in Matthew.

Guy Evers

Thursday (day20) – Matthew 26:20-25

Jesus Talk of Betrayal

This story of Jesus' appeal to Judas is one of the saddest stories in the Bible. It is a contrast of Jesus loving appeal and Judas' refusal to respond. The setting is the Passover supper Jesus and his disciples were enjoying together. Normally, this was a very special occasion for family and friends to commemorate a very important event in their history. Indeed the disciples were horrified that one of them would betray this wonderful friend of theirs.

Jesus' answer was so general that it really did not reveal anything to the other disciples. They all had dipped in the dish with Jesus. But when Jesus continued with his warning of the seriousness of the betrayal, they became even more concerned.

In a subtle way Jesus was appealing to Judas. When Jesus tries to stop a person from making a serious mistake he does two things: he confronts the person with himself. Judas rejected both.

This story should also be read in John 13:21-30 where we have a more detailed account of Jesus' conversation with Judas. It seems that when Judas accepted the morsel of food, he allowed Satan to enter his sould. The story ends with Judas leaving and "it was night." For Judas this was literally and figuratively the darkest night of his soul. Betrayal led to deep regret and finally Judas hanged himself. Regret is a terrible burden to bear.

Oletta Wald

Friday (day21) – Matthew 26:26-29

This is my body....This is my blood

The story is familiar to all of us. Jesus was gathered with his disciples in an upper room on the night which has come to be known as Maundy or Holy Thursday. Jesus had told his followers on several occasions that he would be with them for only a short while longer.

As they were eating, Jesus took the bread, and having said a blessing broke it and gave it to the disciples saying: “Take it, this is my body, given for you.” In like manner, he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he said: “Drink of it, all of you: for this is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

What did this mean for the disciples? What does our participation in the Sacrament of Holy Communion mean to us? C.S. Lewis, the noted twentieth century writer/theologian, comments in one of his books that one of the saddest spectacles in the life of Christendom is the Lord’s Supper, which our Lord surely meant to be a meal for his whole family united around his table, has become a striking symbol of our separation, and often a very unhappy point of dissent and argument among the various Christian communities.

A few years ago, at a St. Luke’s congregational meeting, one of the items on the agenda for the day included discussion regarding the giving of Communion to fifth graders. For those who were opposed, the argument, of course, was “they are not old enough to understand”. One of our old saints, now long gone on to glory, stood up slowly, looked at all of us with his kindly eyes, and stated, “If understand is the criteria, then maybe I should not receive the Sacrament either. And I’m, almost eighty years old.” He sat down quietly. We voted to invite fifth graders to the Lord’s table!

Jesus states in his Word, “Take eat...take this cup and drink”. He doesn’t say, “Take, eat, drink, understand”. We are told upon receiving the Sacrament that our sins are forgiven, we are told that we are in fellowship with our Lord. We do not fully understand it – for many of us our understanding is, at best, quite vague. But perhaps most of us could agree with C.S. Lewis that it is enough that Jesus has asked us to come, and that in trust and obedience we do come to him, with thankful, prayerful hearts.

Vonnie Dinter

Saturday (day22) – Matthew 26:30-35

To the Mount of Olives

Peter said to Him, *“Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you”* and so said all the disciples. (Matthew 26:35)

The disciples and Jesus had just sung a hymn which was probably one of the Psalm from 115-118. These were traditionally sung at the Passover meal. Jesus knew beforehand that his disciples would later on scatter and leave him and he tells them so quoting scripture from Zachariah 13:7 *“I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered!”* He also foretells his resurrection. Then Peter, always impulsive Peter, is quick to declare that even if all the others would desert Jesus, he never would. He even goes so far as to say he would die for Jesus, but he would never deny him! The bold statement was made after Jesus had warned that before the cock crowed, Peter would deny him three times! The other disciples declared their loyalty, too. Yet within a few hours we know they all scattered.

Yes, talk is cheap. It’s always easy to claim our love for Jesus when we are surrounded by other Christians, but how about when we are out in the everyday world? Is our faith strong enough then? If put to the test as Peter was, would we put our life on the line and declare our love for Jesus? Jesus tells us in Matthew 16:25;

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Lord, help us to be a bold witness for you. Amen.

Coral Anderson

Monday (day23) –Matthew 26:36-46

Jesus praying at Gethsemane

Following the Last Supper, Jesus goes with his disciples to Gethsemane* to pray. Jesus is afraid; the disciples are weak—two emotions we can all identify with. These emotions remind us to trust in God and to acknowledge our need for God’s help and presence in our lives.

Jesus knows he will be betrayed and given to his enemies to die. He tells his disciples “I am deeply grieved,” verse 38, and asks God in verse 39 “...if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” But Jesus also places his trust in God, saying “...not what I want but what you want.” This is also a phrase from the Lord’s prayer—“...Thy will be done”—in which we give up our own selfish desires to turn our lives over to God.

Jesus asked the disciples to stay awake while He prayed. This wakefulness may be as protection against enemies, or it may be an analogy for religious alertness—a readiness for God’s coming. Jesus returns from his prayer to find the disciples asleep.

The disciples represent our human weakness, our willingness to take the easy way out of situations that require Christian principles. We need to ask God every day to give us power to live our lives with Christian love, strength, and forgiveness.

*Gethsemane means “oil press.” There may be (or have been) a protected area on the Mount of Olives where harvested olives were brought to be pressed into oil.

Sue Filbin

Tuesday (day24) – Matthew 26:47-56

The Betrayal

When we think of the name of Judas we think of the nouns – betrayal, treachery, traitor, scoundrel.

When we think of the name of Jesus we think of love compassion, forgiveness, Prince of Peace.

We do not know Judas' motives for his behavior. We do know that a kiss was a greeting between friends, that here it was a kiss of betrayal. Jesus responded as a friend, showing His love and compassion as He calmly submitted to the insults and implications while being taken by force by the chief priests and temple guards. Jesus, in fact, informs the Jews that their behavior and conduct had been foretold by the prophets. The contrast between Judas and Jesus shows us that God's Son Jesus knew that He was God's gift of love, given to all people, in his birth at Bethlehem, and that in His death God is giving Him to the world as a sacrifice for the sins of all mankind.

As Prince of Peace, Jesus is the gift of love, compassion, forgiveness. We betray and humiliate Him, when we betray and hurt our brothers, sisters, friends, and neighbors. Jesus has shown that in our faith in Him we may receive Him and his gifts anew in our relationship with Him and all the peoples in this world.

Lord God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, we pray that in your forgiveness and love in our times of betrayal, despair and loneliness we may accept your compassion and strength so that we may do unto others as you have done unto us. Amen.

Addell Dahlen

Wednesday (day25) – Matthew 26:57-68

Jesus before Caiaphas

How many of us would have acted any differently had we been sitting in that council room. A man is brought in to be tried, but no charges of guilt can be found that stick. Finally, he is accused of making a statement – *“I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days”* – which sounds like the words of a madman. Even if we had understood its true meaning, it still would have sounded deranged. Finally, he is asked, under oath, to declare *“if you are the Christ, the Son of God.”* In our shock and horror, this rather ordinary man standing in front of us says yes. – *“It is as you said.”* He is now more than a nuisance – he is making himself equal with God! This is blasphemy, and he deserves to die.

Thankfully, none of us had to make that judgment on Jesus. We are blessed with being able to understand, through faith, what really happened that night. Jesus, being sinless, could not be convicted of any sin or wrong. He could be charged with only one thing – saying that He was Christ while under oath – which made Him “guilt”, even though His statement was perfectly true. Because of the imperfect understanding of the high priest and council, God was able to use them to be one of the instruments whereby His Son, who knew no sin, could be put to death for the sin of all of us, and could thus be our redemption. Through Him we can now also share in the righteousness of God.

Thank you, Lord, for the great gift of your son, Jesus Christ.

Larry Anderson

Thursday (day26) – Matthew 26:69-75

Cowardly Denial

The last thing we expect Peter to be a coward. We've seen him throughout the gospel as a strong man, decisively leaving his fishing business to follow Jesus, daring to step out of a boat and follow Jesus across the water, boldly speaking a strong word of witness that made Jesus answer, *"On this rock I will build my church."*

Peter has seemed rash and impulsive, perhaps, but cowardly? Never.

Yet here he is, shamefully revealed in this tacky moment in the courtyard of the high priest. Just hours earlier Peter had vowed his allegiance to Christ, promising that he would never deny him, even if faced with death. And what is he faced with here? Armed men with power? No, just a couple of girls and servant girls at that. Nobody to fear. The girls' questions seem almost casual... *"weren't you with the man they brought in?"* They're followed by a bystander's observation, *"You have a Galilean accent."*

Peter not only denies Jesus thrice, he does so in a bluster of crude bravado, swearing and cursing to underscore his "manliness." He has never seemed such a puling weakling. What kind of a leader is this to lead the disciples? To speak the fiery sermon that will spark the Pentecost birthday of the Christian church? A coward, afraid of servant girls.

And what kind of a weakling am I, when I deny Jesus in so many ways, on so many days? Times when a statement of witness is called for and I soft-pedal it, mush it over, equivocate.

When someone claims all faiths are equal paths to God, and I conveniently forget that Jesus said, *"I am the Way."* When someone asks what I believe and I answer with a theological lecture on the historic creeds of the church without saying that I believe them and live by them. When the name of Jesus is used as casual verbal punctuation and I don't say that it offends me and my Lord. When someone asks "Who was Jesus?" and I tell them what I know about Jesus without adding that he still lives. Without saying "I do know Jesus."

Inez Schwarzkopf

Friday (day27) – Matthew 27:1-2

Transferring Jesus

It was the morning after those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas. All the chief priests and elders of the people knew that politically, Jesus was gaining a great deal of popularity. His open honest manner and unselfish behavior was flawless. They had questioned him the night before and tried to discredit him with false witnesses. Now, they came to the conclusion that the only way to stop this man and thwart the beliefs of his new converts, was to have him killed. In order to do this, they had to turn Jesus over to Pontius Pilate, the governor.

These “elders” and chief priests and the High Priest had earned their status by either honest or dishonest measures, but were respected by the people that put them in those positions. These leaders were not open to Jesus’ drastic preaching that the son of God had come among them. These men were losing popularity, if not respect from their followers as the Hebrew people turned to Jesus for guidance and faith. The elders’ and leaders’ emotions of jealousy and pride turned to hate. Jesus knew of their strong negative feelings and knew of the eventual outcome. He remained steadfast in his stance allowing them to lead him to Pilate.

The leaders knew there was no way Jesus could be the son of God because he would not “prove” it to them in any way. They did not bother to read the scriptures which prophesied his death and resurrection.

Lord, open our hearts to your will and keep us steadfast on the true path despite the pressure and criticism we receive from unbelievers. Amen.

Becky Dunwiddie

Saturday (day28) – Matthew 27:3-10

Judas

In Matthew 27:3-10 the story of Judas' betrayal of Jesus is told. At this point in the story of the passion, Judas has given up Jesus to the Chief Priests and the elders. He was given 30 pieces of silver for this deed and afterward, feeling great guilt tries to return it. The elders say, "*What is that to us? See Thou (referring to Jesus) to that.*" Finally, the elders take the money and decide they cannot put blood money back into the treasure. Instead they use the silver to buy a field to bury strangers in. This field was called the "Field of Blood" or Akeldama. Shortly after this time Judas kills himself.

Judas' remorse is surprising since he so boldly gave up Jesus to the Chief Priests and the elders. It has been suggested that Judas did not know or understand that Jesus would be killed. It has also been implied that Judas was not intending to hurt Jesus but instead wanted to spite Herod and Barrabas, whom he despised. Understandable, Judas learned that bad choices ultimately have their consequences.

We can wonder why Judas turned to his other conspirators when he had found such faith and fellowship within the group of disciples. We as Christians can learn from Judas' mistakes. We share a fellowship within our congregation and our lives given to God. He has shown us that we are his children and if we give our lives to him he will show us the way. Most importantly, and a point that Judas tragically forgot, God will forgive our sins if we ask him to. We are fortunate to have our Christian community and the belief system God has given us. Judas had the same benefits, which he chose to ignore. We can use Judas as an example of a path not to follow.

Karen Swanson

Monday (day29) – Matthew 27:11-14

Being Responsible

As a teenager I was stopped by the police and given a speeding ticket. Because of my young age I had my driver's license revoked for thirty days. Also, the police required me to attend a number of driver training classes. Mr. Hush, a burly kindly man slammed his fist against the table and exclaimed, "*Are you kids taking responsibility for your life.*" What a lasting impression this made on my life.

My four year old daughter was caught stealing a candy bar off the counter of a convenience store. I confronted her, requiring her to return the candy bar to the clerk. I told her to apologize to the clerk for her act of stealing. I wanted her to be responsible for her actions. Today our concern is reflected in the moment Jesus was facing his trial before Pilate. It is evident that Pilate was clearly impressed with Jesus. Pilate knew a revolutionary when he saw one. Jesus was not a revolutionary. The dignified silence of Jesus made Pilate feel that it was not Jesus but he himself who was on trial. Pilate was a man who felt the power of Jesus and who was afraid to submit to it. So many are aware of Christ's presence in the world. However, so few are committed to His message of grace. Pilate knew Jesus, but he did not want to take responsibility for condemning Him. Scripture relates, "he washed his hands" therefore passing the responsibility onto the mob. How can we as members of St. Luke's Church take responsibility for our lives? Initially, we can strengthen our daily devotional life. Pray for someone today having difficulty coping with the demands of life. Be faithful to Christ. Let the image of Christ be reflected in all our daily actions. Take responsibility for our lives.

May we all become responsible followers of Christ today. Amen.

Jon Ellefson

Tuesday (day30) – Matthew 27:15-23

Barabbas

Unlike his cellmate Barabbas, Jesus was innocent of any brutal physical “crime”. However, Jesus stood before Pilate guilty as charged, unable to lie about his identity as King of the Jews, the Son of God. Jesus could have wormed out of the situation to escape death by disowning his own father, just as Peter had disowned Jesus (Mt. 26:69-75). It would have been so simple and yet Jesus knew that He was the chosen one. His loyalty to his father was much greater than we could ever comprehend. The magnitude of his love is far beyond our wildest imagination.

How often in our daily lives are we confronted with opportunities to share our faith in Christ, yet we deny him all too often. It’s easy to be Christ-like and obedient in the presence of other Christians. Yet when faced with our accusers our faith wavers and we fall short of his glory. Why is this so? We are weak in the flesh and do not trust the Lord enough to help us through tough situations. In this passage Christ has taught us, by his actions (in this case—non reaction), that He finds his strength in the Father and that we should follow his example.

Take a minute to reflect on where we might be now had Jesus not relied on the Father. What would our reaction have been in that situation? Would we have gone along with the crowd and demanded the persecution of Jesus or would we have acted otherwise? Even in retrospect this would be difficult to comprehend as Jesus had to go to the cross to wash our sins away, the fulfillment of a promise given to the Jews. A promise we can read about in Isaiah 53.

Jennifer Bolen

Wednesday (day31) – Matthew 27:24-26

The innocent Pilate...

...literally “washes his hands” of the decision of what to do with the condemned Jesus. The People in the crowd answer that he must be crucified.

Pilate seemed to recognize that Jesus was either a harmless innocent who needn't be killed, or if he were the King of the Jews, shouldn't be killed. Pilate didn't want the responsibility of Jesus' demise either way.

In the drama of the moment, at this point of Jesus' life when he has surrendered himself to those who have seized control and spoken, we see the powerlessness of the civil leader Pilate. We see the Son of God at the mercy of neediest and most fearful of all, the rabble crowd, who has decided that he must not be saved. A less frightening prospect, Barabbas, is saved because he is a common criminal. But Jesus was no common criminal, and the crowd acknowledges that power. That they chose his demise reminds me of the destructive power of our fear.

Why does Jesus surrender himself in this seemingly powerless way? What this part of the story shows me is that in order for Jesus to truly be able to save the souls of the people he had to be rejected by the people. “His blood be on us and on our children” the crowd yelled. This reflects the broadened scope of Jesus power—He surrendering himself wholly not only to the leaders of the time but to all the people. The fear and hatred was not confined to those who lead us but lives in all of our souls.\

These verses remind me of the commitment necessary to stand up for the word of God and not “wash our hands” of the responsibility.

Gary Hill

Thursday (day32) – Matthew 27:27-31

The Soldiers Mockery

I will always remember the feelings I had when I first heard the story of Pilate's soldiers mocking Jesus. They stripped Him, beat Him, spat on Him, placed a crown of thorns on His head and made fun of Him, hailing Him,

“King of the Jews”.

This made me troubled, confused, and afraid. How could this happen to such a good man who was innocent? Even Pilate asked what harm has this man done. The chief priests and elders were threatened by the wisdom Jesus held and who He said He was. They convinced the crowds to shout

“Crucify Him!”

Pilate felt the pressure and ordered Jesus to be crucified. Why did God let this happen to His son? Little did they all know that this was God's plan. God loved us so much that He sacrificed His son for our sake. Jesus went through rejection and suffering so that our sins could be forgiven so that we may be accepted into the Kingdom of God. In our busy everyday lives it is important to remember our faith in God and be reminded of what Jesus did for us.

Jean Hansen

Friday (day33) – Matthew 27:32-37

Jesus Led to the Cross

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

Gall is understood to be a narcotic that would reduce the pain of crucifixion. As Jesus waited to be crucified, he denied the wine and gall the soldiers offered him in order to remain fully conscious and with a clear mind. He showed great fortitude when he denied any pain killer.

As I think back to the way I felt after Julie was born, I was in pain from the c-section and all I wanted was to have all the pain erased. In fact, I wanted relief so badly that Guy threatened to rename me “More Morphine”. I can understand why Jesus wanted to be fully aware of what was happening, but I know that I would not have even a fraction of the strength that he had during crucifixion and death. Would you?

I think this passage points out very poignantly the greatness of Jesus’ love for us and our weakness.

Jean Evers

Saturday (day34) -- Matthew 27:38-44

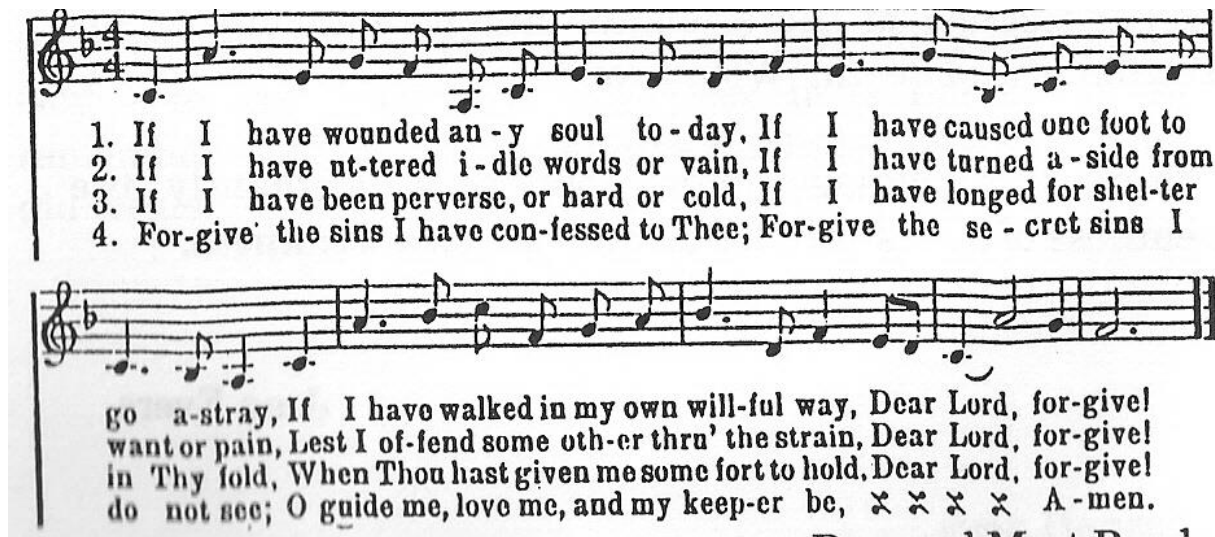
In Paradise TODAY

The thief said, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom". Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise". Luke 23:42-43

Today! Today you will be with me in paradise. What a wonderful answer to a repentant sinner's prayer – REMEMBER ME. The repentant robber admitted his sins. We (the two robbers) have been condemned justly. The one robber knew Jesus was the Christ. That's why he prayed "remember me when you come into your kingdom". And even while Christ was dying on the cross he had the authority to forgive sin. Christ blessed the robber with this reply "Today you will be with me in paradise".

"Remember me" is a prayer we can say in the morning and be in a form of paradise the whole day. Say "remember me" during the day. Replace "Now I lay me down to sleep" with "Remember me". Today you will be with Jesus in paradise.

If "Remember me" is not enough of an evening prayer, let's sing 'An Evening Prayer' by C.M. Bittersby:



1. If I have wounded an - y soul to - day, If I have caused one foot to
2. If I have ut - tered i - dle words or vain, If I have turned a - side from
3. If I have been perverse, or hard or cold, If I have longed for shel - ter
4. For - give' the sins I have con - fessed to Thee; For - give the se - cret sins I
go a - stray, If I have walked in my own will - ful way, Dear Lord, for - give!
want or pain, Lest I of - fend some oth - er thru' the strain, Dear Lord, for - give!
in Thy fold, When Thou hast given me some fort to hold, Dear Lord, for - give!
do not see; O guide me, love me, and my keep - er be, x x x x A - men.

Don and Myrt Brude

Monday (day35) – Matthew 27:45-54

The View of the Cross

I spent two Easters in Guatemala. Holy Week is celebrated in a manner there that I had never experienced before. The events leading up to Christ's crucifixion are reenacted. There is a solemn feeling everywhere during the week. On Friday huge platforms with statues of Jesus carrying the cross are carried through the streets by members of the church. These platforms are preceded by "Roman Soldiers" and followed by the poor of the town, and brass bands playing mournful songs. The whole procession is a very serious for the people involved and the observers cannot help but feel the belief of the crowd. I saw the reenactment that moved me to tears, it strengthened my belief.

This passage in Matthew made me think about believing without having to see. There were those in the passage who wanted to wait before they helped Jesus. They wanted to see if he was really God's son. I live in Turkey. 95% of the population is Muslim. Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet. They believe that the father of Jesus was an angel, but not God. I have explained various aspect of Christianity to my Turkish friends. We have even debated about Islam and Christianity, but I have realized since I have been here, and since I have had to explain myself, that I do just believe. I do not often have the chance to commune with other Christians here as there are not many, but this has not weakened my faith. I think in fact that my beliefs have become clearer for me as I have had to explain them to Muslim friends. I find that I hold on to my beliefs and look for God and Jesus in the world around me.

As humans, I think sometimes we feel the need to see something before we can believe in it. As Christians maybe we should not have to see to believe. I saw the dramatization of one of the most important events in Christianity,. And my belief grew. The time I have spent in Turkey however, has made me realize just how important my religion is to me, and how much I believe without having to see.

Dana Schwarzkopf

Tuesday (day36) – Matthew 27:55-56

The Women at the Tomb

There were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Who were these women following Jesus and ministering to him? They were mothers and caregivers who started out following their sons to care for them and then became followers and believers in Jesus. As a mother gives her child unconditional love, they saw how Jesus' love was also unconditional and they reciprocated.

Their faith grew and they became true believers. They were there at different times during Jesus ministry and they were there when his days on earth ended, to do whatever it was that needed to be done. Their gift to God was to take care of Jesus on earth and nurture him as a mother might do to see that he was taken care of.

Are we not all caregivers of one sort or another? We can all be role models for our faith and help one another. We can renew our faith and model our faith by acting kindly to one another and not judge and show love as Jesus showed his love by dying on the cross for our sins and as these women showed love by taking care of Jesus.

Dear Lord, thank you for dying on the cross for our sins. Thank you for cleansing us and making us feel renewed at this time each year. Help us to look after one another as you always look after all of us and to react with kindness and love and forgiveness as Jesus did when he was on earth. In Jesus name, amen.

Judy Osell

Wednesday (day37) – Matthew 27:57-61

The Burial of Jesus

Death is the cleansing of the soul, the final act of being prepared and ready for the Kingdom of God. The burial is a ritual that is to be witnessed by others and not to be disturbed.

Death is not Death, but is the beginning in the life of the Kingdom of God! In God's kingdom it does not matter whether you are rich or poor, does not matter race, creed or color. What matters is whether you are prepared. Do you believe!

Have you been prepared and are you ready for the final act or journey into the Kingdom of God.

Wayne Hanson

Thursday (day38) – Matthew 27:62-66

Who Is Really in Charge?

After Jesus was crucified, the chief priests and the Pharisees seemed to think they were in charge of the events that were to happen. They went to Pilate to get his help in trying to make sure the dead body of Jesus would remain in their custody. Jesus had said that after three days He would rise again; the chief priests and the Pharisees remembered this and were going to make it seem as though Jesus had in fact risen.

Pilate, who hadn't found any wrong in Jesus, may have been less sure than the priests and the Pharisees that they could control events. He said they should go and make the sepulcher as secure as they could. We know their efforts failed. The stone was rolled away by an angel!

Thinking about the amazing works of God makes me wonder what's going on in heaven now as God our heavenly Father and our Savior Jesus Christ survey that's going on here on earth and move in mysterious ways to shape human events. God is the ruler yet and He is fully in charge.

Come, Lord Jesus!

Doris Mikelson

Friday (day39) – Matthew 28:1-10

HE IS RISEN!

Good Friday, the culmination of the events in which Jesus had willingly obeyed God. The day seemed pretty dismal to the disciples. Their hopes for their leader were gone. What had happened to their Messiah? He was dead. After the crucifixion the disciples fled and assembled together for fear of the Jews.

Then a miracle happened! Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb of Jesus. This occurred after the sabbath toward the dawn of the first day of the week. There was an earthquake and an angel of the Lord descended from heaven to roll away the stone and to announce that Jesus no longer was in the tomb, but that he had arisen as he said. Per command of the angel the women quickly departed and ran to the disciples with fear and great joy to proclaim the good news. At first they did not believe the women. In retrospect, would we have behaved any different?

A man once went to a wise but rather cynical philosopher and made a foolish request. *“I am sick and tired of the claims of our so-called religions in the world today,”* he said, *“and I have decided to start a religion of my own. Would you give me some advice as to how I can begin?”* The wise man paused a moment reflectively, and replied *“Why don’t you get yourself crucified, and then rise again the third day?”* (1) It is true there are many religions in the world today, but Christianity is the only religion that can truly make the claim of a resurrection. The other leaders have been born, lived their lives and then died.

Thank you God for Good Friday because without a Good Friday there would be not Easter.

HE IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

(1) Sermon by the Rev. Erling H Wold

Wally Hanson

Saturday (day40) – Matthew 28:11-15

The Cover Up

The soldiers were paid by the chief priests and elders to say that the disciples came at night and stole the body. They did not want it to spread around that there was an event that they could not explain. It was not important to them that they may have witnessed the single event in history that could and would have really changed their own lives.

They wanted to preserve the status quo. They wanted to preserve their position of power and would not give credibility to this person Jesus and his small group of followers.

It seems to me that they may have added to the mystery by trying to stop information from getting out about Jesus' death and resurrection. They seemed to realize the power of such an event for the people of Israel of their day. But they could not or would not realize its impact on their own lives; the hope of the resurrection, the destruction of the power of death, and the possibility of the life to come.

Lord, thank you for the hope, the life beyond our mortal existence. Amen.

Jane Norman

Easter Sunday – Matthew 28:19-20

“Go therefore....”

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always to the close of the age.