

HOLY WEEK DEVOTIONS



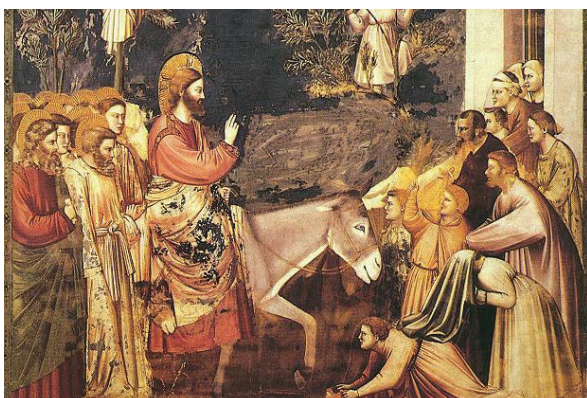
*He comes in the
Name of the Lord!*

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a gift from the Martin Luther College
campus family. We pray that our Lord
would strengthen your faith through
his Word.*



Palm Sunday



Entry into Jerusalem, Giotto di Bondone, 1304-06

The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the King of Israel!” Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, “Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt.” At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. John 12:12–16 (NIV)

There is a reason why “Ride On, Ride On in Majesty” has been included in almost 600 hymnals. The author, Henry Milman, was a nineteenth-century English clergyman and poet who wrote it specifically for Palm Sunday; it conveys the truths of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem that began the triumph and tragedy of Holy Week. Two of the verses of this hymn contain the striking phrase “lowly pomp”:

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die.
O Christ, your triumphs now begin
O’er captive death and conquered sin.

Ride on! Ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain,
Then take, O God, Thy power and reign.

Lowly pomp? A humble display of magnificence? Yes! Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, not on a war horse. *Lowly*. But in the ancient Middle East, kings would ride donkeys if they came in peace. *Pomp*.

Zechariah foretold that the Messiah would come to Zion, to Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. In the verse after the one quoted by John in our text, the prophet declares, “He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zechariah 9:10). The Son of David rode on to the cheers of the crowd; the Prince of Peace rode into the holy city to establish the peace that the angels had announced to shepherds.

That excited crowd had come from near and far for the festival of Passover. They were in Jerusalem to commemorate God’s liberation of the Children of Israel from bondage in Egypt, and in a few days they would sit down to a meal that would feature a lamb without blemish. They didn’t know that they were cheering the Lamb of God who was riding to his death; they could not have imagined that the tragedy of that death would be the triumph of God’s life-giving plan: the wages of sin paid in full, the sin of the world taken away, humanity freed from the bondage of sin.

Not even Christ’s disciples understood yet what lay at the end of the road to Jerusalem. Thank God that, through the eyes of faith opened by the Word, we do.

Prayer: Gracious Father, your Son came to us humbly on a donkey’s back, and now he sits exalted at your right hand. As we journey with him through Holy Week, help us always to hear his Word, follow his teachings, and live in his Spirit. Prepare our hearts for that day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord and King, to your eternal glory. Amen.

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Monday



Expulsion of the Money-changers from the Temple,
Giotto di Bondone, 1304

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. When evening came, they went out of the city. Mark 11:15-19 (NIV)

The Temple in Jerusalem was designed by the LORD to serve as a giant, vivid, sensory picture. More to the point, it was a detailed picture of Jesus. The temple showed all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, that Jesus was their Savior, mankind's one and only way to God.

In the Temple's massive walls, sinners saw their stark separation from God. But upon entering the Temple, they immediately found the altar of sacrifice and the basin of water, and saw Messiah as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Redeemer who washes away the uncleanness of sin.

A seven-branched lamp stands in the Holy Place, showing God's Messiah as the light of the world who brings the wisdom of God's love to all. Across from the lamp, a table holds 12 loaves of bread to present God's Promised One as the Good Shepherd who cares for his people, providing for every physical or spiritual need. The altar of incense is placed at the far end of the Holy Place, its fragrant smoke

circling upward, depicting the Messiah as the advocate speaking, pleading, and praying to God on mankind's behalf.

Finally, in the Most Holy Place, the Ark of the Covenant, adorned with golden cherubim resting on the atonement cover, shines as the very throne of God. Messiah is seen here as the Living One, the King of Kings, the Victorious Redeemer who enables his people to live with God, stay close to God, rule at God's side, and enjoy God's holy life forever and ever. What an amazing and gracious picture of the Savior God had promised to send!

Is it so hard to understand Jesus' fierce anger with the Jews and their leaders? They were drawing mustaches on his picture. They were obscuring the Savior's picture with their politics, hiding it behind commercial aims, horribly defacing it by erasing the Savior's smile of grace. And how could people rest in God's grace and how could they be saved if they couldn't see Jesus? Should we be surprised that Jesus became physically and actively angry?

If the church today makes social activism its highest priority . . . if the church joins with the world in declaring right what is wrong . . . if the church lays aside the means of grace and takes up the tools of politics . . . if the church sets up an altar to human reason within its walls . . . if the church encourages people to find strength in human determination and meaning in human achievement and righteousness in human goodness . . . then how will any see Jesus as their Savior?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, this Lenten season we rejoice that we have more than pictures of you. We have the reality of your salvation as our very great treasure. Amen.

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Tuesday



Jesus Curses the Fig Tree, Ilyas Basim Khuri Bazzi Rahib, c. 1684

Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered. When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. “How did the fig tree wither so quickly?” they asked. Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”
 Matthew 21:19-22 (NIV)

Matthew highlights quite a contrast here. Condemnation one moment; encouragement the next. What’s the connection? Jesus was teaching a lesson about the nature of faith.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7:17-20). The point was not so much about the fruit—it doesn’t make the tree. Fruit is merely the evidence of what the tree is like.

Cursing the fruitless fig tree was a picture of Jesus’ righteous judgment. In a spiritual sense, fruitless means faithless. And faithlessness is subject to condemnation. John the Baptist preached: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. . . . every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:8-10).

Believers live rather in repentance and faith. Jesus is the very focal point of life. The spiritual truth is this: Just as nourishment and soil make all the difference for a fruit tree, so a faith cultivated in Christ will produce Christ-like fruit. That is its nature. People nurtured in Christ's forgiving love are forgiving people. People nourished by the Word of God promote kindness and peace. People revived by resurrection truth want others to share in that truth. People blessed by the gifts of God's grace are generous with the gifts God has given them.

Fruitful faith reflects confidence. Believers see the situations of life from the perspective of trust in God's all-powerful and all-knowing will. They can and will judge between right and wrong—not in a judgmental way, but for the sake of the truth. Believers pray with the conviction that God hears and will answer according to his good and gracious will. "You will receive whatever you ask." For what will we ask? For forgiveness. For strength to bear the cross. For God's will to be done.

Jesus explained that believers could "move mountains." Have you ever tried? Did the mountain move? No? Why? Because that's not what faith is for. Jesus was using an expression to make a spiritual point. God always hears and responds to the prayers of believers—weak or halting though they may be. Faith trusts in Jesus, not self. And with Jesus "all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). So trust . . . and ask.

Prayer: Lord God, forgive our doubt and grant us strength of faith to be bold and confident. Bless your church with wisdom, patience, and peace. Amen.

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Wednesday



Christ in the House of Simon, Dieric Bouts, 1440s

While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly. “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.” Mark 14:3-6 (NIV)

During this Holy Week, we ought never stop marveling at the greatest display of God’s lavish grace: his own dear Son—whom God has loved from eternity with a love that I cannot even begin to understand—that Son is sitting at a table in a house in Bethany. He is on earth, wrapped in flesh, humbling himself to become obedient unto death on a cross. The Father’s gift of his Son for the sins of the world is more than lavish; it is indescribable.

And such indescribable grace begets lavish love in the hearts of Jesus’ followers. It was Sunday of Passover week in Bethany. A meal with friends, spring in the air—calm before the storm. In this happy setting, Mary poured out lavish love on the Savior with nard that was worth more than a common laborer could gross in a year. Here was deep love, honest love—the kind that God delights in.

But Satan had a seat at the Bethany banquet too, and the rising fragrance of Mary’s perfume was suddenly tainted with the stench of self-righteous, pious-sounding words: “The poor!”—as if true religion is doing great things for our fellowman that wins the praise of God and men and leaves us self-satisfied that we have done good and made

some difference in the world. But this type of love always limits itself and is coldly calculating. It always sets boundaries beyond which, “that’s too much.” Sometimes, our twisted hearts even invoke God to validate our coldness; in essence the critics at the table in Bethany said, “This isn’t good stewardship!”

But Jesus came to Mary’s defense by telling them plainly that love for God always comes before love for man. It was God’s lavish love for her that prompted Mary to be lavish toward God in return, and the Savior rejoiced in that love pouring from her heart. Two days later another woman would pour out lavish love for God, giving even more than Mary gave as she quietly dropped her last two small coins into the Temple treasury; it was an offering equally fragrant to God. Such is the wondrous love that God can produce in our hearts through his gospel. Such love for God—one’s heart, soul, and mind freely and lavishly given—this is true religion.

It is a good week to ponder how for our sakes Jesus became poor, so that through his poverty we might be eternally rich. And it is a good week to pray, “Take all that I am, dear Savior! Help me strive to love you as deeply as you have—and still do—love me.”

Prayer: Increase our faith, dear Lord Jesus, and with it our love, so that by this all people may know that we are truly your disciples. Amen.

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Maundy Thursday



Last Supper, Simon Ushakov, 1685

After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”
Luke 22:17-20 (NIV)

After 11 years together, they were family. At least the pastor thought of them that way as he slowly walked in a semi-circle, speaking and giving, speaking and giving.

He placed the wafer into a grizzled hand, bent with 70 years of hard work. *Take and eat, this is the true body of our Lord and Savior Jesus, given for you.* How that elderly brother needed his Savior. The pastor knew what others never would: the man grieved deeply for his spouse, now in heaven seven years. He struggled to focus on the empty tomb rather than emptying a bottle to drown his grief. The pastor silently interceded—*Hosanna! Save now, O Lord*—for that Christian pilgrim. *Given for you*, the very body hung on the tree to cover all sin. *Let there be no doubt, dear Jesus, that you forgive him.*

Take and drink, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you. The teen’s hand trembled when reaching for the cup. The pastor sighed another prayer, for he knew her hurts as well. Her earnest questions in confirmation class reflected a home marked by shouting and sneers, not love and encouragement. *Hosanna! Save now, O Lord.* How she needed her Savior’s unrelenting love while her family loved so little. *Poured out for you*, the very blood she now received in, with,

and under the wine. *Let there be no doubt, dear Jesus, how much you love her.*

The meal, the miracle, continued. For 20 minutes believers came forward to receive their Savior. What a meal, the pastor thought. May the Spirit show his people what is truly here!

It is a meal with a past, going back to the night the Savior himself ate the Passover. The ancient feast, where believers consumed that which saved them, was fulfilled in that upper room. The Lamb was slain to rescue the world, his blood the only barrier against eternal death!

It is a meal with a present—and giving powerful presents: strength for our pilgrimage, strength only the Savior can provide as he gives us himself, truly present.

It is a meal with a forever future. *In this sacrament, we receive forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.*

Help us pray, the pastor thought, with sincere hearts the prayer of the Church:

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, through the blood of your covenant, you have made us worthy to receive your Holy Supper. You join us with believers throughout the world and throughout the ages by your body given for us. In this sacrament time and eternity meet as we celebrate a foretaste of the feast of heaven. As we receive your true body and blood, we rejoice in our salvation through you, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit are one God, now and forever. Amen.

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Good Friday



The Crucifixion, Theophanes the Cretan, Mid 16th Century

And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"
 Matthew 27:50-54 (NIV)

How do you get someone's attention? Students raise their hands. Coaches signal their players. Friends send each other text messages.

How does God get your attention? Consider Good Friday. Could God have been any clearer? He wanted his people, then and now, to know that the death of his Son, our Savior Jesus, means life and salvation. So he got our attention with signs. On that first Good Friday, unearthly darkness covered Jesus as he hung on the cross. From noon until 3:00 pm, the time of Jesus' death, God sent darkness to express creation's sorrow at the impending death of its creator.

Jesus' voice pierced that darkness. As he gave up his life for the sins of the world, Jesus cried out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Suddenly the curtain in the Temple, the one that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, was torn in two. Imagine, a curtain as thick as your hand being ripped in two like a piece of paper. With this mighty act, the Father explained the death of Jesus. "Since we

have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus . . . let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Another sign, an earthquake, ripped through the Jerusalem landscape. Matthew tells us that some believers, those who had died trusting in the Savior who would come, awakened to new life. The message was clear. By the death of Jesus, the earth can no longer keep its dead. Jesus’ death (and resurrection) means new and eternal life for all who believe.

None of these signs were lost on the centurion standing near the cross. The unearthly darkness, the violent earthquake, and the manner of Jesus’ suffering and death shook him. In terror he cried out, “Surely he was the Son of God.” Whether he spoke those words in faith or without faith, he was right. Jesus was, and is, the Son of God. And his death won salvation for all.

When you struggle with your guilt, when you wonder about your future, when you contemplate your own death, God wants you to know that his Son died for you. He wants you to know your sins are forgiven, and your access to God as a loving Father is open. He wants you to know that death has been defeated, now and eternally. He wants you to know how much he loves you. Such good news, such great love, gets our attention.

Prayer: God most holy, for the sake of your Son Jesus have mercy on us. Help us to live in the certainty of salvation won for us by Jesus’ death. In his name we pray. Amen.

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Saturday



Lamentation (The Mourning of Christ),
Giotto di Bondone, 1304-06

The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. “Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.” “Take a guard,” Pilate answered. “Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.” So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard. Matthew 27:62-66 (NIV)

There is a pause between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. For Jesus’ disciples the Saturday of Holy Week was a quiet, uncomfortable moment between history and heaven. In between sorrow and joy, between darkness and dawn—this is where we too live and worship. We know what has happened, the payment made for all sins. And we know what will happen, the glory of eternal life.

In between Good Friday and Easter, Jesus’ enemies were busy. They heard Jesus’ clear promise, but they didn’t believe. They were frantic to discredit and disprove Jesus’ resurrection. Death is the end, they say. Anything beyond that is deception or the conniving of ignorant disciples. We hear the same today. Rising from the dead? It will never happen, really. It is only the rising of hope and good will in our hearts and nature. So they bury Jesus deep in arrogant rationalism or popular spiritual feelings. The enemies want to make the tomb and death secure, the final word both for them and for us.

This is why the moment between Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection is sad and frustrating. Between fact and the final validation, lions prowl and prey on faith. But all the efforts to deny Jesus only make his resurrection more certain and glorious. The guards made sure there were no tricks or stealing or deception going on. And there wasn't, on Jesus' part. He rose from the dead. The only explanation: Jesus did exactly as he promised! On one side are the bribed, trembling guards, and on the other are the witnesses arrayed in white.

In between are the disciples. For this moment between Good Friday and Easter, Peter, James, John, and the rest were in the gray dawn. We are in much the same place, between fear and hope. Between denying the Savior and walking next to Jesus with hearts burning at his amazing answers. Between running away from the threats and running toward the tomb to see if what we were told is wonderfully true. Between the horror of what sin costs and the thrill of sin eradicated forever.

Yes, this Holy Saturday is where we too live and worship, between the darkness and the sunrise. In the moment between our crosses and our empty tombs. Between doubting and touching the glorified wounds that paid for the sins of the world. But tomorrow, only heaven.

Prayer: Dear crucified and risen Lord, today we praise you for your redeeming sacrifice. And we ask you to help us wait well for what we know will happen—our resurrection to eternal life with you. Because you live, we also will live. With hearts resting in you, we pray. Amen.

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Easter Sunday



*The Resurrection of Christ (Kinnaird Resurrection),
Raphael, 1499-1502*

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.” So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”
Matthew 28:1-10 (NIV)

Originally the word simply meant “above a tomb.” Today we know them as “epitaphs.” They are messages, in words or symbols, that have been inscribed on a grave marker. Some epitaphs tell us only the name and life dates of a grave’s occupant. Others provide additional information about the deceased and may even contain messages for the living.

We are not told about any epitaphs inscribed over Jesus’ tomb. But its emptiness offered a number of messages for those who visited it. On the first Easter Sunday, the angel who sat on the stone door of Jesus’

tomb served as a living epitaph. He had this to say about the one who had been in the grave: *“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.”* Although Jesus had died on the previous Friday, he now lived forever. On Easter Sunday Jesus’ empty tomb served as an epitaph that proclaimed the fact that the grave had no power over him.

Since Jesus had predicted his resurrection, there was another powerful epitaph behind the emptiness of his tomb. It proclaimed the fact that Jesus keeps his word. When he makes a promise, it will be done! What Jesus predicts always comes true!

Just as modern epitaphs frequently carry more than just a message about the person who occupies the grave beneath them, so too the epitaph at Jesus’ tomb was meant for the living. Jesus’ resurrection declared that his sacrifice for the sins of the world had been accepted by his Father. Anyone peering into Jesus’ empty grave was witnessing the proof that their sins were forgiven. The fact that Jesus’ tomb was unoccupied also told the living that death had been defeated and that those who die will rise again.

Today as we read Matthew’s account of the early hours of Easter Sunday, he again gives us the opportunity to read and hear the “epitaphs” at Jesus’ grave. The word “empty” over Jesus’ tomb changes our perspective when we stand at the grave of another, or reflect on our own mortality. It tells us to set aside our fears and to believe the good news we have heard today.

Now like the women who first visited Jesus’ empty tomb, we are also led to worship our living Lord Jesus. And today we too listen to him as he sends us on our way with a mission to go and share with others the good news of Easter.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, as I reflect on this day of joy and celebration, fill me with confidence that through your suffering, death, and resurrection my sins are forgiven and eternal life is mine. Amen.

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*It is our prayer that the devotions in this booklet will assist
you in focusing on the work of our Savior in the week
of his suffering, death, and resurrection.*



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