

Holy Week and Easter 2026 Messages From Pastor Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Russell, Kentucky

Palm Sunday – March 29 – “The Thunder Of Silence”

*Maundy Thursday – April 2 – “A Night Of Love
And Betrayal”*

Good Friday – April 3 – “Rescued From A Nightmare of Sin”

*Easter Sunday – April 5 – “It’s Easter Today And
Next Sunday”*

*Second Sunday of Easter – April 12 – “Rehabilitating A
Reputation”*

*Third Sunday of Easter – April 19 – “Sonrise In Morning
Brings End To Grave Problem”*

Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 26 – “Lost And Found”
Message from Sylvia Gardner

Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 3 – “Home Sweet Home”

Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 10 – “Mother Knows Best”

*Seventh Sunday of Easter – May 17 – “Time To Glorify
The Son”*

“THE THUNDER OF SILENCE”

Message for *Palm Sunday*
From Pastor Norman Staker

March 29, 2026

MATTHEW 21: 1-11 * ISAIAH 50: 4-9A
PHILIPPIANS 2: 5-11 * MATTHEW 27: 1-54

**GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND
FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN**

**Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name
of the Lord. Hosanna! HE IS RISEN;
HE IS RISEN INDEED!!**



A little boy was sick on Palm Sunday and stayed home from church with his mother. His father returned from church holding a palm branch.

The little boy was curious and asked, "Why do you have that palm branch, dad?"

"You see, when Jesus came into town, everyone waved Palm Branches to honor him, so we got Palm Branches today."

The little boy replied, "Aw Shucks! The one Sunday I miss is the Sunday that Jesus shows up!"

The place was buzzing with activity; everyone was full of excitement. That's exactly how it felt on Palm Sunday when

Jesus got on a donkey and rode into the city. The people were looking for a leader who was going to lead them to victory over their oppressors.

Finally God was doing something new and different. This Jesus had been doing miracle after miracle. The healings, the feedings, the teachings, the casting out of demons, and the raising people from the dead were all incredible events. Jesus and his disciples were the best team to come riding into Jerusalem in a very long time.

The whole city had turned out to see Jesus riding into Jerusalem. They were laying palms on the ground to give him the red carpet treatment as he entered the city. Some were taking off their coats and robes, laying them on the road hoping Jesus' donkey would step on theirs as he came down the road. What a souvenir that would make!

People were shouting "Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord". People would have been eager to get up on the donkey with Jesus. They would have gladly swapped places with him. Everybody knew this was a winning team. Who wouldn't want to be identified with a winner? Who wouldn't want to say they were with Jesus?

Imagine the bustling streets of Jerusalem alive with excitement as Jesus made His triumphant entry on that fateful Palm Sunday, riding humbly on a donkey while throngs of people waved palm branches and laid their cloaks before Him, their voices echoing with jubilant cries of "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" Yet, in a stunning turn of human fickleness, by Friday those same voices had twisted into a venomous chorus demanding, "Crucify Him!"—a stark reminder of betrayal's swift and painful sting.

He was the most popular person in the city. People would have gladly traded places with him on Palm Sunday. But everything seemed to have gone wrong for Jesus that week, just like it went wrong for the team on the field.

Jesus was betrayed by one of his closest disciples. Judas, the treasurer of the group, sold out Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. He added insult to injury by trying to betray Jesus with a kiss. You see it was dark, and the soldiers didn't know which one was Jesus so Judas said, "Just watch me, the one I give a kiss to is the one you are to arrest."

Before the arrest, Jesus took the other disciples into the Garden of Gethsemane where he asked them to pray with him. But instead of praying, they all fell asleep. Jesus knew the pain and agony of the cross was ahead with the rising of the morning sun, so his soul was overwhelmed and sorrowful to the point of death. Recognizing that he would be forced to be separated from the Father in order to pay for our sins, great drops of blood fell from Jesus' forehead as he prayed.

When he was arrested, he watched all the disciples flee into the darkness so that they wouldn't also be captured. He was led before the religious authorities in a sham of a trial. The witnesses they called to testify against him contradicted each other but their testimony was allowed to stand. Something about that swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God; no I can't say that word "God." Then you can't handle the truth!

He stood there silently at the trial. But at the same moment his most trustworthy disciple, Peter, was trying to distance himself from Jesus. As Peter angrily declared for the 3rd time, he did not know Jesus, Jesus turned and looked at Peter in the face. All Peter could do was go away in tears, because he had

promised Jesus, “no matter what, you can depend on me.” Jesus was alone.

He had three trials in one night. People spit on him, slapped him in the face, insulted him and pulled at his beard but he said nothing. He was flogged with a whip, had a crown of thorns placed on his head, and mocked as being a king, with soldiers laughing at him.

He was forced to carry his cross until he could carry it no longer to the place where he was crucified. Virtually nobody was willing to swap places with Jesus at this point. All this has happened and it's just the end of the third quarter.

They put the spikes in his hands and the nails in his feet and they hoist him up on the cross. He's crucified with two other criminals. The physical pain is terrible. The insults continue. He's challenged to prove Himself to the world by doing another miracle. The mental anguish intensifies, but Jesus knows the worst is still to come.

You may ask, what could be worse than having the skin torn off your back by 39 lashes from a Roman whip that had hooks and bones in it. What could be worse than having that followed up with a crown of thorns shoved onto your head, and then having to carry a heavy cross up a hill.

What could be worse than knowing that when you reach your destination, you will be rewarded with nails driven into your hands and feet! Knowing that the weight of your body would cause you more pain as you were hoisted up with ropes. Then knowing you would be hanging from 9 in the morning until way after 3 in the afternoon while at the same time enduring a loss of blood and trying to keep from suffocating.

Suppose for a moment that you were a judge over a trial of a person charged of horribly brutalizing and killing a father, a mother, and their 3 kids. The jury comes back with a verdict of guilty. You sentence the person to the death penalty. You go to watch the person to be executed.

At the time of the execution, you notice the person you sentenced is not the person that is about to be executed for the crime. Somehow there has been a change in people, what if anything should you do?

One of the most difficult things for us to accept is God's pronouncement against the human race. God says, not a single one of you is good in my sight. All of you have rebelled against me. All of you have done wrong. All of you have evil and wicked hearts that think of ways to do evil. The punishment for your wrongdoing, your sin is death and eternal separation from me.

That leads us with one of four options. 1) We can say, I don't believe God is right. I believe I am a good person. 2) We can say, "God is right, but the good I do out weighs the bad I do so I am okay. 3) We can say, God is right but God is love so I don't have to worry about my sin. 4) We can say, God is right and there is nothing I can do to save myself from my sin. Which of the 4 do you honestly believe about yourself?

The Scriptures teach us, the penalty for our sin is death. Not just physical death, but a spiritual separation from God in eternity. The Scriptures also teach, that the only way sin is removed is by the shedding of blood that is pure and not tainted by sin. The only blood that was not tainted by sin was the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus was not just a good person, Jesus was the Son of God. He's the only one with sinless blood.

Each one of us deserves to die upon the cross. I know we don't think we're really that bad. God says we are. We deserve the

whippings, the beatings, the guilty verdict, and the nailing. We could all have the title, "King Of My World," hanging above us on the cross.

Here's the good news of the gospel: after we were found guilty, Jesus snuck in and took our place. He took the beatings and the nailings so that we would not have to. He hung on the cross in our place so that our lives could be different.

When the Father looked at Jesus on the cross where we should have been, the Father recognized that it was Jesus and not us. The Father as a righteous Judge, could have said, "stop this, the wrong person is being crucified. Let him go."

But Jesus in his infinite love and wisdom for us yelled out to the Father, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus is saying go ahead and let the process continue. Let me pay the penalty for their sin. I voluntarily change places with them to pay the debt they owe.

Folks, our sins were so dark and so dirty, that when Jesus began the process of taking his sins upon us, the world began to turn dark. From noon until 3pm darkness came all over the land as Jesus hung on the cross in our place.

It was at the end of the period of darkness, that Jesus suffered the greatest pain and suffering of all hanging on the cross. Sin demands that we be separated from God's presence or we will be consumed by God's fire and judgment.

When our sin was fully upon Jesus, God the Father could no longer be in fellowship with his Son. Jesus felt the separation immediately and he cried out, "My God, My God, Why have you Forsaken Me."

This folks is why we cannot save ourselves. Our sin eliminates us from being able to call God back to the judgment hall once we have been found guilty. But with Jesus it was very different.

Taking our sin upon Himself did not change the fact that Jesus was still the Son of God. As the Son of God He was able to remove our sins as far as the east is from the west.

There on the cross, Jesus did what was necessary to fulfill God's promise found Psalms 103:10-13 which says he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;

This is why Jesus was able to boldly declare upon the cross on behalf of all who put their trust in him, all who fear the Lord. "It is finished, Into Your Hands I commit my spirit." Jesus didn't die with his head in shame. Jesus died with a triumphant declaration that he had done what God had sent him to do.

His death paid the price for our sins. We are declared righteous because when God looks at us, he sees us covered in his Son Jesus. I don't know what your sins are and how great they might be, but I do know it doesn't make sense for you to try and pay for a debt that has already been paid.

Jesus did more than die for you on the cross; he died instead of you on the cross. If you don't understand that truth, you will not see the need for Jesus in your life.

Jesus died to start preparing us all to begin to live in the kingdom that he began setting up marching into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The people were right when they proclaimed

“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” To live in Jesus’ kingdom, means doing things the way Jesus wants them done so that the Holy Spirit can live inside of you.

Jesus is not interested in us simply cheering him on as we would a team coming onto the field. Jesus requires us to be involved as his players, running out the plays that He’s calling for our lives. The call to be a follower of Christ, is a call to leave the fans in the stadium behind and to do the work involved in being on the team.

AMEN!!



“A NIGHT OF LOVE AND BETRAYAL”

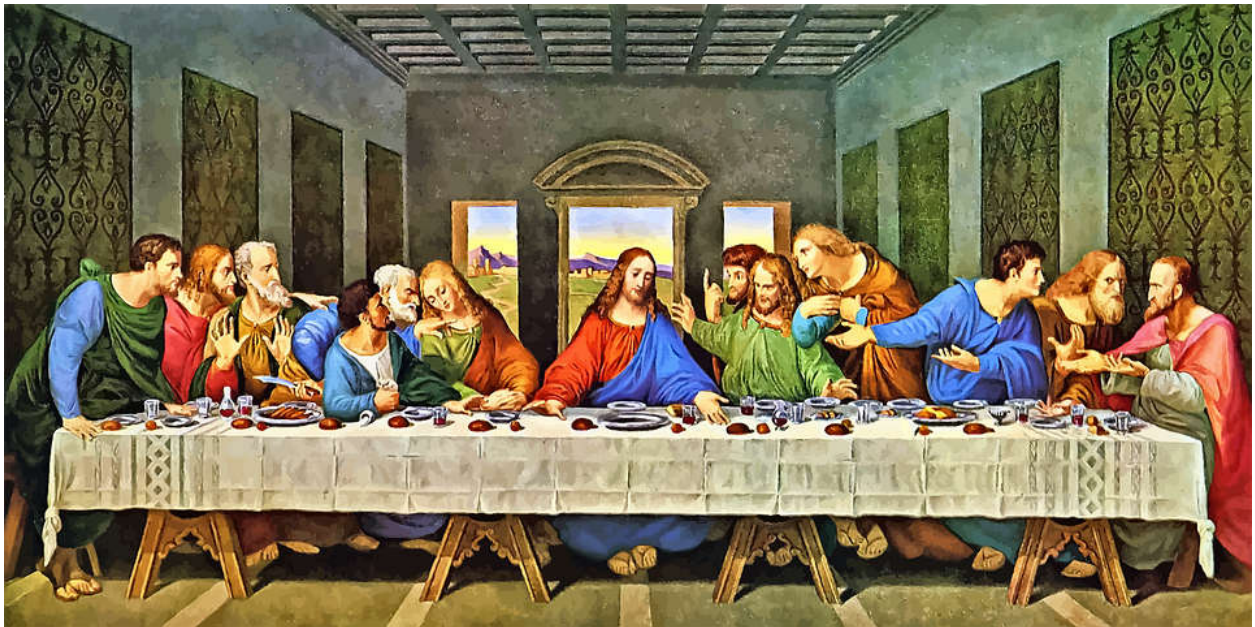
Message for *Maundy Thursday*

From Pastor Norman Staker

April 2, 2026

EXODUS 12: 1-4(5-10) 11-14 1 CORINTHIANS 11: 23-26

JOHN 13: 1-17, 31B-35



**GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND
FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.
HE IS RISEN: HE HAS RISEN INDEED!!**

Do you like to say goodbye to anyone, for any reason? All of us have been in a situation where it is hard to say goodbye. We have all been in those situations where we have had to say goodbye to parents as we have moved away, goodbye to children as they have grown up, goodbye to a much

loved pastor, or goodbye to a dying loved one. We have all been in those situations.

All of us handle these last goodbyes, these final farewells, in different ways. Some of us are rather unemotional. We shake hands and say goodbye. "Son, be good and take care of yourself." Some of us are more unemotional, controlling our feelings. Others of us are criers; we cry; we weep. We can't talk because we get all choked up. Still others of us are "happy go lucky" people, and we try to make our final farewell a good time and we laugh it off. And still others of us avoid these situations all together. That is, we never get caught in the situation of having to say the last goodbye. We avoid that situation at all costs. We can't say the last goodbyes and so we avoid the situation. Each of us handles these delicate situations differently.

Personally, being the emotional type, saying the last goodbyes has always been difficult for me. I am not very good at that. I feel that this is a character weakness that I have. I am not proud of it but I have learned to accept that this is the way I am.

I am simply saying to you that I am not very good at saying goodbye. I would rather avoid those situations, at almost all costs. Those events are not easy for me.

Such was the mood of the Last Supper of Jesus, the last night that Jesus shared a meal and conversation and friendship with his disciples. During that meal, they were so overwhelmed by the pain of the moment, they could not see the possibilities of the future. For three full years, these twelve men had learned to live and love each other. They had been together night and day for three full years: three years of meals, three years of miracles, three years of teaching. They had shared so much life and so much death together. Jesus had trained them for three years to be his disciples. And there they were in Jerusalem

together on the last night, the last meal, the last words, the last parting comments to each other, their last goodbyes. The disciples knew that Jesus was going to die and soon. This was their last moment together.

Such was the mood of the last supper. These men had grown to love each other and knew that this was the end of their relationship. This was an end of an era, an end of their earthly relationship of love as they had known it. This was the end of their three years together and they were very tight as a group with Jesus.

So... during that last supper, the disciples listened intently to the words of Jesus, hanging on to his every word. They knew that this was their final lesson, his final words, his last and final words. Words of wisdom, pearls of great price, gems for future generations. They listened carefully and wanted to understand and remember as much as they could.

They listened to every word of the wisest teacher they had ever heard, "I will not leave you an orphan. I will come to you again. I will send my spirit to come and live in you.

A woman who is about to deliver a child experiences great pain, but when the child is born, she forgets her pain. And so you will experience great pain at my leaving you, but when I come to you again, you will experience great joy as at the birth of a child." The disciples thought to themselves: What does that mean that he is going to come again, that we will forget the pain of his leaving us, that when he comes we will experience great joy like the birth of a child? What does this all mean?"

He continued with more words of wisdom, "In my house are many mansions. If this were not so, I would not have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you and when the time is right, I will come again and take you to myself." ... "Those words

make sense,” thought the first disciples,” but what do they mean. Many mansions? Go to prepare a place for you? Come again and get you to take you to these mansions? That’s good that Jesus has built living spaces for us, but where will these living mansions be and how will we get there?

The disciples again hung on to these priceless pearls. His words were so profound that they were beyond their grasp. Jesus said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father. He who knows me knows the Father. He who loves me, loves the Father.” The disciples thought to themselves, “OK fellows, this teaching is kind of heavy. Whoever sees, knows and loves Jesus, then sees, knows and loves the Father. Is Jesus saying he is like the Father? He can’t be saying he is the Father. He must be like the Father. Whoever sees, knows and loves me loves God. OK. I think that is what he is saying.”

Again Jesus spoke and the disciples were totally quiet as they concentrated intensely on these last words, on these last teachings, the last gems, the last pearls. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. If you love me, you will keep my words. A new commandment I give to you: love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. I command you: love one another.” The disciples thought to themselves. “A new commandment? To love one another as he has loved us? Those words seem to be clear. It is what he was saying all these past three years, to love one another. These words seem to be at the heart of his message. Are these his final words to us? His last words?”

Then it suddenly changed. No more words. All silence. A silence so deafening. The disciples thought to themselves, “What is he doing now? He is taking a towel. It is so quiet. No one is speaking. No one is stirring. No one is moving. Totally silent. Now he takes a bowl of water. We hear the splashing of the

water. The creak of the floor as he quietly moves. The rustle of his garments as he kneels before each disciple. Now he is washing the feet of one disciple. Now he is washing the feet of all the disciples, one at a time. No. Weird. Strange. A breathless silence. He, the master, washing each of our feet? What does this mean?" Jesus finally breaks the prolonged silence and he says, "Do to one another as I have done to you. Be loving servants of one another?"

All the while that Jesus talked, the disciples did not comprehend that Jesus was going to come again. I can understand that. We can understand that. We can understand not comprehending the meaning of the last words.

And so it is with all of us. Each of us takes our turns. We are too absorbed in the pain of the moment that we cannot see the possibilities of the future, the future that God has prepared for all of us.

And so it was with the disciples. They thought they were having their last goodbyes and they didn't comprehend his teachings. They couldn't comprehend his words because they were so absorbed in their pain of loss.

So often in life, we think it is all over, that we have said our last goodbyes. After almost 39 years of marriage, I kissed Joyce goodbye with full intentions of seeing her again later that evening. I told you I have a hard time saying goodbye but that night when we left, I didn't think would be our last one together, our last goodbye. But ... it wasn't goodbye. Yes, she was gone but we'd see each other again.

See, the last goodbye is not the final goodbye. The future continues. God's future continues. Jesus does not leave us orphans but God comes to us with his spirit who lives within us,

heals us, and prepares us for the future. God's future always overwhelms the sadness of today and yesterday.

The last supper was not the last supper but the beginning of the feast for all eternity.

When Jesus was crucified, we have called Good Friday. On Good Friday we remember that Jesus offered himself as the final, complete sacrifice for our sins, freeing us from a slavery we could never have freed ourselves from.

The day before Good Friday, today, is called Maundy Thursday. That Thursday, Jesus had a meal with his disciples in an upper room, somewhere in Jerusalem. Before the meal, he washed his disciples' feet. Jesus had a lot to say to his disciples over that meal. It occupies about five chapters in John's gospel. But in all that he said, there was just one thing which he actually commanded. He said, 'A NEW COMMANDMENT I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.'

Jesus' commandment to love one another is really important! We would assume that it's important. We would imagine that the day before he died, Jesus would remind his disciples of his most important instructions.

Jesus had already made it clear that the greatest commandment is to love: to love God, first, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. But Jesus isn't REMINDING his disciples of his most important instruction. He's giving them a new one! He says, 'A NEW COMMANDMENT I give to you'! Isn't it a bit late for Jesus to be giving them a new commandment?! And isn't this commandment just the same as the old commandment, to love our neighbors as ourselves? What's different?

Listen carefully! Jesus said: 'A new commandment I give to you, **THAT YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER: JUST AS I HAVE LOVED YOU, YOU ALSO ARE TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER.**' It's the same thing; or is it?

What's new? The quality of love which Jesus is asking us to show is new.

Jesus commanded his disciples, not simply to love one another, **BUT TO LOVE EACH OTHER AS HE HAD LOVED THEM.** It's hard to imagine anything more challenging!

Before Jesus gave this instruction, he washed his disciples' feet. Then he said, 'Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you ... Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.'

As far as we know this is the only occasion when Jesus washed his disciples' feet. If the ultimate expression of love was **LITERALLY** washing people's feet, Jesus would have been doing it the whole time. The primary meaning can't be **LITERALLY** washing feet. And it's clear that this was **NOT** what Jesus had in mind. Jesus tells Peter, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me'. That has nothing to do with Peter's feet being literally clean or dirty. The way that Jesus really showed his love for Peter was by going to the cross for him and taking his sin.

Holy Communion is also real. It is Jesus' action to serve and save us. We do not trust our subjective sensations of sight and touch to believe this. We have an even more-sure Word from the Son of God: "This is my body given for you. This is My blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Yes, here, God gives us

a most precious and holy bloodbath. For where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

So draw near and take the body of the Lord, and drink the holy blood for you outpoured; offered was He for greatest and for least, Himself the victim and Himself the priest. Come forward then with faithful hearts sincere, and take the safeguard of salvation here: Christ's own body and blood, offered into death and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

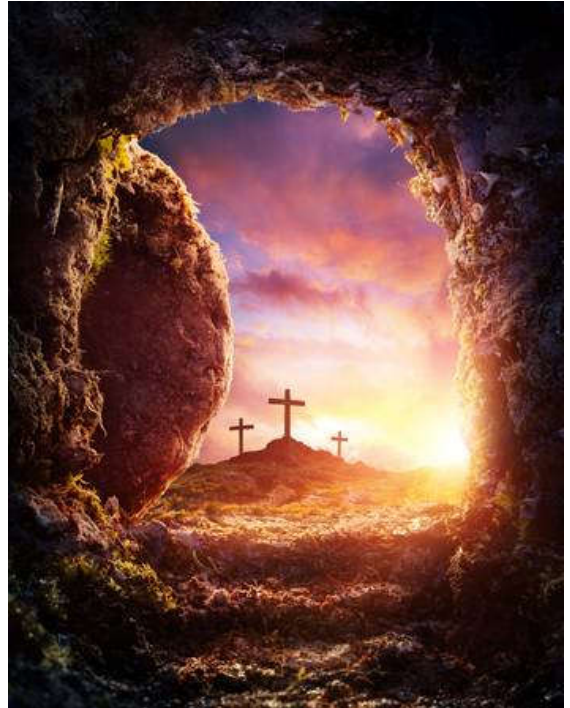
Amen.

“RESCUED FROM A NIGHTMARE OF SIN”

**Message for Good Friday
From Pastor Norman Staker
April 3, 2026**

ISAIAH 52:13-53:12 — HEBREWS 10: 16-25 — JOHN 18:1-19:42

**GRACE. MERCY, AND PEACE FROM
GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR
LORD AND SAVIOR THE CRUCIFIED
JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.
HE IS RISEN: HE IS Risen INDEED!!**



Pastor James Merritt said;

"Normally people are remembered for what they accomplished during their lives, the things they did to make a difference, good or bad, in the lives of others. We know George Washington was the first president of the United States and was a famous general in the Revolutionary War. We know about Benjamin Franklin and his connection to electricity, Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War and the freeing of the slaves, even Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement."

There are thousands of names we could mention from history or even today who are known for their accomplishments, their talents, their gifts and what they did in this life. As we have today to Good Friday, I want us to be reminded that the most significant thing Jesus accomplished was accomplished with His death. This night in the life of Christ was the darkest period in the history of the entire world.

It has been 2,000 years since Jesus left this earth physically and the centerpiece of our faith, and what has become a symbol of our faith, is not a cradle or a crown but a cross, an instrument of the cruelest form of execution known to man. It was so brutal and barbaric that it was abandoned over 1500 years ago.

Today we remember that Jesus came to die.

Another great preacher, Dr. R. G. Lee, put it like this: "His death prearranged, prophesied, and provided by God, was no afterthought. Jesus was born with the shadow of the cross upon him. With the shadow of the cross upon his heart, he learned to walk, he learned to talk, and he learned to work. From his earliest moment upon this earth, it was his burden by day, his bed by night."

Billy Graham said many people write to me and say, "We do not understand the Gospel. We do not understand what you mean by receiving Christ or being born again, remember that was Nicodemus' question. But Graham goes on to say that more people write to him because they do not understand why Christ had to die on the cross in order for us to be saved. They do not understand the dark hours of Gethsemane. They do not understand why Christ voluntarily laid down his life. They do not understand why he endured the shame of the cross. They do not understand all the phrases in the Bible that talk about the blood. In Hebrews, it's the blood of Christ. In John, the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin. They wonder why that is in the Bible. They wonder why so much stress is placed on the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. Before the triumph, before the crown, before the kingdom, before the victory, there had to come the suffering. He's had the last supper with the disciples in the upper room, and they have gone now to the Mount of Olives. Now they are in the garden that is called

Gethsemane. Jesus leaves eight of his disciples on the outskirts of the garden and He takes three with him, Peter, James, and John. He tells them to watch and pray. Then he goes a little farther into the garden and falls prostrate on the ground and begins the agonizing prayer. Before he was finished, the Bible says he sweat, as I said last Sunday, great drops of blood. Talk about agony. Talk about praying hard. Many times in scripture we find Jesus praying all night and if he had to pray all night, what about you and me in 2026? We Americans are not praying; we are not calling upon God; we give lip service to God but our hearts are far from him. You and I have to stand at the foot of the cross and receive the Savior who was willing to go to the cross.

Yes, the last 24 hours in the life of Jesus were the darkest in history, but the good news, it was the darkness before the dawn.

Jesus came to die but I want us to ask the question, "Why did Jesus die? Why would we say that His death was His greatest accomplishment?" To answer that question I want us to turn our attention to one verse, 1 Peter 3.18: "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit."

There are three days in the New Testament that are the most important days in all Christianity and they are the birth of Jesus, the crucifixion of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus. Each of these days are equally as important to the other and each deserve their own day of remembrance and celebration.

If any one of these three days were eliminated from Christianity, then Christianity would cease to exist altogether;

that's how crucial each part is to the total.

Today as we approach Easter, I wanted to put my focus on the day Jesus was crucified for our sins. Many Christian churches today do not even celebrate this day or give it its just time and focus and I struggle to understand why.

Could it be the guilt associated with the day causes Christians to pass it by? The guilt of their own personal sins and the pain and suffering Jesus had to endure because of it? It is a valid question that needs to be asked of both the church and the individual.

As we look throughout scripture about this day, we need to start near the beginning and the fall of mankind into sin.

Genesis 3: 1-7- "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths."

This is the point in which everything had changed for mankind and from this moment on, every person born would inherit the sin of that day. When God had confronted Adam and Eve about

their disobedience, God also rebuked the serpent and gave revelation about Christ to come.

Verses 14/15: "The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

The woman God talks about in verse fifteen is Mary and the offspring being Jesus, the only one who could now pay the penalty for mankind's sin by living His perfect life in our place and dying on the cross for each of our sins.

Later in scripture we see another revelation about the pain and suffering that Jesus would have to pay for the sins of all who would believe.

In Isaiah 53 vv 3-6: 'He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.'

The penalty we deserved for our sins was laid upon Jesus at the cross for all who believe in Him as their Lord and Savior, and the life given for us we know was to give our life to Him as servants in the hope of bringing more people to Him and salvation.

As we move forward to that day, in the book of John chapter nineteen we read this: John 19: 1-6: Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands. Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!"

And then, we move forward to the crucifixion of Jesus. Men had died terrible deaths before. Men had been thrown into boiling water; men had been burned at the stake. Other men had died and suffered physical pain. But the death of the cross was something even worse than that. It was said that the death of the cross was said to be the worst possible torture that a man can endure. First, they would strip a man to his waist. Then they would tie his hands together and bend him over and take long leather thongs with lead pellets or steel pellets and shards of glass and nails embedded in leather thongs and beat him across the back until his back was in ribbons. It was such a violent form of torture that many times the lash of those thongs would come around his face and take his eyes out by the sockets, even tear his teeth out. Often death followed just the scourging and the floggings were given by great muscular men. Jesus endured that kind of flogging for you and me.

Then they would take that crown of thorns and place it on his brow, not gently mind you but forcefully to get the point across if you'll pardon the pun, and his face bled as they jerked His beard off. Then they spat in his face until he was covered from head to foot with the spit of the people. Hatred, prejudice, intolerance, and bigotry all that the human heart could devise against this one man, Jesus Christ. No, he was not killed by

Rome or Israel. We did it; you and I did it. My sins and your sins crucified Christ.

In light of that, have you helped Jesus to carry the cross or were you one of those putting nails, spikes, 9 inch spikes, into his hands and feet?

You say, 'But Pastor, I would never put a nail in Jesus' hands. I would never flog him. Wouldn't you? You did it today. The sin that you committed today helped crucify Christ because those people were all representative. We were expressing ourselves in them. You and I helped crucify Jesus. He was dying for our sins.

At Golgotha, those spikes tore his hands, they tore his feet. Jesus never uttered a sound. He hung on that cross hour after hour; the pain, the thirst. A lot of times when a person is dying on a cross, the ravenous birds, the vultures, would come with their iron-like beaks and peck at him while he was still alive. That was the cross! Gruesome is not a strong enough word for it!

Jesus died alone. You say, But Pastor, what about the two criminals who were hung on crosses on each side of Jesus? He wasn't alone. Let me ask you; what did they do to deserve their sentence? Murder, rape, robbery, child molestation, the list goes on. And Jesus, start listing the sins he committed. You can't; he was a sinless son of the Almighty God and even Jesus cried out to him, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Forsaken indeed.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the

sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

So you see without that day on the cross, all the rest of Christianity fails. The significance of it is as vital as His birth and His resurrection.

So I say that we should reflect heavily on that day and what our contribution was in it. If there was only one sinner who lived, in order for that sinner to receive salvation, the pain and suffering of Jesus would have looked much the same. That is how destructive God sees our sin.

How do you live like he's risen when you feel dead yourself?

How do you dance for Joy when you're knocked down to the floor?

How do you celebrate Easter when you're living Good Friday?

Good Friday will never be as harsh for us as it was the disciples. We know he was resurrected – they did not. But without Good Friday, we don't have an Easter.

One of the mainline denominations in the USA is in an uproar this Easter because one of its chief bishops gave an Easter message in which he said that Jesus was a sinner. He said that we need to repent of our sins in the same way that Jesus did when He was baptized by John the Baptist in his baptism of repentance.

Here is the only message I will proclaim on Good Friday. Because what happened on this day some 2000 years ago was a murder, a cruel, painful, and utterly shameful execution. Paul the apostle says it best when he holds up the horror of the actual cross, "We preach Christ crucified."

Yes, we get to hand over the penalty of our evil deeds to the One who, through His death on the cross, dealt with it completely and forever. His death for our death, His life for our life!

AMEN!!

“IT’S EASTER TODAY AND NEXT SUNDAY”

Message for *Easter Sunday*

From Pastor Norman Staker

April 5, 2026

ACTS 10: 34-43 — COLOSSIANS 3: 1-4 — JOHN 20: 1-18



**GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD
OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR RISEN,
YES RISEN, LORD AND SAVIOR, JESUS
CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!! AGAIN, HE IS RISEN;
HE IS RISEN INDEED!!**

When we left here this past Friday, I asked you, ‘How do you celebrate Easter when you’re living Good Friday?’ Then I made the statements that ‘Good Friday will never be as harsh for us as it was the disciples. We know he was resurrected – they did not. Knowing the ending of the story changes the way we receive it. On Good Friday we read scriptures that told of Jesus’ horrible death, and of the efforts on the part of a couple of his friends, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, to secure his body and a proper place of burial. But then again, without Good Friday, we don’t have an Easter.’

So that made me think. Yes, I do that sometimes when I don’t have anything else to do!

You all know how we start the Easter Service “He is Risen! He is Risen indeed!” I struggled with myself just not to say it at the beginning of my message today, to be different but also to be like those disciples who saw him die. But, like I always do and

have done just about every Sunday that we have been together. I decided to do it. But I thought, 'Well we're not going to do that today.' It's my message so if we don't say it, no problem. Of course, we've already done it so it's a moot point.

He was dead! He was dead indeed! They had seen him beaten. They had seen him crucified. They had seen him buried. He was dead! And with him died all of their dreams, all of their hopes, everything they believed in.

They had given everything to this man Jesus, their past, their present even their future, and up until three days ago it seemed like a pretty good bargain. All he had asked was that they have faith in a mystery. And for the most part they did. After all they had seen the impossible. They had seen blind men receive their sight and see again. They had seen lame men walk. The deaf had been made to hear again. They believed with all their hearts in the things they could actually see and they saw a lot of things.

But not any more. Now their beliefs were as dead as their master. There was nothing to do but go home. To leave their hopes, to leave their dreams, and just go home. He was dead!

Our passage today from John begins with an even darker possibility. In the predawn darkness, Mary of Magdala comes sorrowfully to the tomb in order to complete the proper burial duties for Jesus, and discovers the body is gone. Was it true what Mary had seen? She had seen an empty tomb. She had seen unoccupied grave clothes. She had seen two men in dazzling robes asking her "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."

If that were the case, then he wasn't dead; he would be alive. If he was alive, then everything was going to be all right! Their hopes and dreams would be restored.

So here's the dilemma we face on this Easter Morning—He is dead! Therefore our beliefs are dead. Our hopes and dreams are shattered and we might as well just go home right now.

Or what Mary reports in today's gospel reading is true. He is risen! He is risen indeed. And everything is going to be all right! Our hopes and dreams can be restored, or resurrected if you may. But Mary Magdalene had been possessed by demons years ago and one of them was alcoholism, maybe she's fallen off the wagon and been drinking again. But Jesus healed her and that was usually good for a person's lifetime.

But you know that the way the whole world is? I read somewhere that 99% of all human beings believe in God or a Higher Power—the other 1% are lying. But when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus, the numbers go down dramatically, and most have their doubts.

What if I told you that today, right here, right now I am going to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. You are going to leave the confines of this building and you will know once and for all, no questions, no doubts. He is risen!!

Welcome to Easter! He is risen! He is risen indeed! But there many distractions. The first distraction happened 2000 years ago when the Pharisees paid the soldiers to deny what they saw with their eyes; they paid them to spread the story that the disciples stole the body.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus was distracted by the betrayal of a friend, In the garden Satan tempted him to avoid the coming pain of the cup of God's wrath. Jesus prayed; "Father for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me." His request received no response. In this clash between his human will and the will of God, Jesus said "not my will but

Yours be done. Jesus resolved to drink the cup of God's wrath and judgment which we deserved. In the first garden he was betrayed with a kiss. In the 2nd garden the stone was rolled away. Easter is about Jesus and His resurrection from death and the grave. "Easter is about Jesus. Easter is about hope. Easter is knowing that death on this earth is not the end of life. Your soul, your spirit, was created by God to live forever. You know it in your soul, in your heart. The Easter event shatters all fear, because the resurrection of Jesus strips Satan of his power to hold people in the fear of death.

The great dividing line in history is not BC/AD but BR/AR-- Before resurrection, After resurrection. If, on this Easter morning you are one who feels unsure about your eternal destiny, and your heart is locked in fear, then hear the truth your soul longs to hear. Jesus is alive! He has risen from the dead! He is the "hope" your heart longs to know.

We all have friends who are grieving over the recent loss of a husband or wife, a child, a parent, a friend. Death came like a ruthless thief, snatching away a treasured presence, leaving only hollow memories in its' wake. This sadness of grief casts a spell of loneliness too powerful for spoken words or shallow songs to break. For those who do not know Jesus..... "hope" is missing.

On a Sunday morning 2000 years ago, the disciples of Jesus were hiding in a locked room. They were distracted, worried about their own arrest, without hope. They were afraid to go out into the streets. Afraid to show their faces There is nothing like the truth of resurrection of Jesus to bring hope back to life.

This is the truth of Easter. This is the truth, this is the message of Easter for those locked behind closed doors, fearful to step into the light of each new day.

Easter has its own proclamation: "He is not here, He has risen from the dead."

Billy Graham wrote: "Without the resurrection, the cross is meaningless."

"Without Jesus' death, we have no hope of God's forgiveness; and without Jesus' resurrection, we have no hope of eternal life. Like the two wings of an airplane, both are essential!"

Both the cross on which our broken commandments were nailed, and the empty tomb of Jesus have shattered the fear of death. The cross and empty grave remove the wrath of a Holy God from the human heart. Easter celebrates God's dramatic rescue operation giving you and me a righteousness which we could not ourselves earn.

Charles Colson, of Watergate fame, in his devotion for Easter reminded us that there will always be those who seek to deny the resurrection: ".....The easiest way to get attention during Easter is to claim the resurrection of Christ was a hoax."

Charles Colson said: "Don't hold your breath, Some, like the Pharisees created a distraction by paying soldiers to say the disciples came at night and stole the body of Jesus. Through the centuries others have written books: "The Da Vinci Code"; proposing that the beaten body of Jesus swooned in the cool tomb of stone only to awaken, then marry his sweetheart, Mary Magdalene, and move to France and start a family.

The men and women who witnessed the death of Jesus; The Roman soldier who put a spear into the side of Jesus testified that Jesus was dead; those who wrapped his breathless body with a linen shroud; those who rolled the stone to close the

entrance to the tomb, knew it was watched and sealed by Roman guards. Everyone knew that Jesus was dead and buried.

Listen to the words the angel spoke to the same women who wrapped the broken and dead body of Jesus in a linen shroud. "I know you are seeking Jesus, who was crucified, He is not here, He has risen". "Go and tell his disciples." He is risen! He is risen indeed.

To accept the words of the angel, spoken to these women in the shallows of early morning, or deny the words of the angel is always a choice. To deny the words of the disciples who with their own eyes saw and touched the visible resurrected body of Jesus in the shuttered "Upper Room" is always a choice.

Twelve men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true.

Only the resurrected glorified body of Jesus, risen from the chains of death can provide eternal peace for your soul. Jesus is the truth, the whole truth, the only truth.

The Roman guards knew what their eyes saw. Money was to cause a distraction.

Intuitively you know human death can not destroy your soul. The real you, the soul God gave you at your conception never dies. Only faith in the resurrection of Jesus opens the door to eternal life.

If, on this morning, you chose to deny the resurrection, then I understand the never ending tears, that fall like rain, when you stand at the foot of an open casket.

On this Easter I know the words of the angel to be true. 'Because Jesus lives I can face tomorrow, no matter the fear of cancer, nor the virus that stalks the streets where I live. Because Jesus rose from the grave with a glorified resurrected body, I know that one day when Jesus returns, I too shall possess a resurrected glorified body, fashioned like His. Do not let the distraction cause you to miss the gretest good news. He is risen! He is risen indeed. Amen.

But my friends, we come here today with the Pharisees long dead and gone, with the ancient Greek culture buried in the sands of time, and still proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And we do that, not "according to one person" or "according to opinion" or "according to logic," but we celebrate with joy and proclaim EASTER ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE, that Christ Died For Our Sins.

In our world, especially America, we like to highlight differences and celebrate diversity, but this difference between a holy God and sinful man is far from something to appreciate. For the holy God demands that we live up to his holy standards in our every thought, word, and action. And his standard is this: YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I THE LORD YOUR GOD AM HOLY.

There was no one. So God sent his own, holy Son into the world to DIE FOR OUR SINS. The Old Testament prophets spelled it out in detail: HE WAS LED LIKE A SHEEP TO THE SLAUGHTER; HE WAS CRUSHED FOR OUR INIQUITIES. ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES, God offered his own Son into death as a perfect sacrifice FOR OUR SINS. His own Son, whom he has loved from eternity far more intensely, far more perfectly than I am able to love my children. And the Son agreed willingly to sacrifice himself because he loved his Father, and because he loved us.

Who on Good Friday believed it? How loving, how powerful, how victorious did the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth look as it

hung there, bloodied and beaten, nailed to a tree?

It didn't. And so two of his followers took down his cold, lifeless body and wrapped it for permanent burial in the tomb. The rest of his followers were hiding, thinking they were next.

And ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES, Christ rose because he is the God of the Living, not the dead. Confucious is dead. Mohammed is dead. Buddha is dead. Aristotle is dead. Mary Baker Eddy is dead. Ralph Waldo Emerson is dead. Charles Taze Russell is dead. Joseph Smith and Brigham Young are dead. Shirley McClaine isn't dead yet, but eventually she will be.

Every leader of human religion is dead. But Jesus Christ is alive forever and ever.

For how easily Christian churches can be distracted, and burdened down by the cares of the world and the work that has to be done. How easy a thing it is for a church to spend all its time feeding the poor, housing the homeless, debating "abortion", denouncing "racism" etc. etc. And those are good things. They need to be done and the church needs to do them.

But of FIRST IMPORTANCE we must continue to declare forgiveness of sins through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That alone can change peoples lives, and give them the greatest help and hope. That alone can change hearts, and when it does, it will change behavior.

It is Easter today and next Sunday and the next and the next!

Jesus Christ is risen, He is risen indeed!!.

Hallelujah and Amen!!

“REHABILITATING A REPUTATION”

Message for the Second Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

April 12, 2026

ACTS 2: 14A, 22-32 ** 1 PETER 1: 3-9 ** JOHN 20: 19-31

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

A lady went into an ice cream shop in Beverly Hills, Ca. to buy an ice cream cone. She was shocked when Paul Newman walked in and stood right behind her. Although rattled, she was determined to maintain her composure. She paid for her ice cream cone, then confidently walked out. Outside, she realized she didn't have her cone. Not wanting to look foolish, she waited a few minutes before re-entering the store. When she didn't find her ice cream cone at the counter, she paused to contemplate where it could be. A soft tap on the shoulder interrupted her thoughts. She turned to find herself face to face with Paul Newman. He politely suggested that if she was looking for her ice cream cone, she might look in her purse. When Paul Newman showed up, he had an amazing impact on that lady. Famous people tend to have an impact on us.

As I was preparing this message for today, I came across an interesting article and the central idea behind it was this: that God can use anyone to start something incredible. And God can use ordinary people like us to do extraordinary ministry.

Does anybody here have a nickname that was given to them either back in grade school or high school or even since then, a nickname that has stuck? Nicknames have a way of focusing on one aspect of a person's appearance or character or on one incident in a person's life. Remember in history, we learned about Eric the Red, Richard the Lion-hearted, Mad King Ludwig; in church we sing about Good King Wenceslas.

That same kind of naming applies in our own life experience. A child fumbles the ball in a schoolyard football game and for a long time is known as 'Butterfingers.' The smallest kid in the neighborhood is tagged "Pee-Wee" and the name sticks.

The roughest kid in town is known as 'Bruiser,' at least to those afraid of him. Few people get to choose their nicknames and it's likely that few people are happy with how they are named and known in this way. I knew a guy who got the nickname 'Turkey' later shortened to "Turk" because he got the starring role in a Thanksgiving play in the fifth grade. A lot of his cousins would mimic a turkey gobbling whenever they saw him. But he survived and actually became a pastor in the Southern Ohio Synod at a church named Bethel; yes, that was me and some cousins still call me Turk some 60 years later!

Many people doubted the existence of God; they still do today. Many people doubt the resurrection. On that first Easter, many years ago, one of the disciples refused to believe in the resurrection. He had doubts. Today we are going to take a look at that man, and see how his doubts are our doubts. We're also going to see how Jesus healed this man of the disease of doubt, and how he heals us today.

Thomas would very likely be upset at the way he has been remembered. Thomas is a disciple who showed great loyalty and bravery. When Jesus announced that he was going back to Judea, even though people there had previously tried to stone him, Thomas is the first to say, "Let us go with him." He was ready to stand by Jesus in the face of danger. Thomas is said to have brought Christianity eastward as far even as India. And yet, mention this disciple and most people will name him as 'doubting Thomas.'

The perception is so well entrenched that we may not hear or see anything else in this exciting and important story about the risen Christ appearing to his disciples. Thomas as we know wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared. The Gospel tells us they were hiding behind locked doors. Their teacher had been arrested, tried, and executed. Their world had been shaken, and they were afraid for their own lives.

Have you ever wondered where Thomas was? Maybe he wasn't as scared as the others. He does join them later and hears their report that they have seen the Lord. The conversation immediately flows to Thomas saying that he needs to see the mark of the nails in Jesus' hands and the wound in his side. Nothing else is said about why in the voices, but we can consider that in asking to see the nail marks and the wound, Thomas was no more disbelieving than the rest of the disciples after hearing the women tell of their experience at the empty tomb. The others had heard Mary Magdalene's account of meeting the risen Christ, but her story hadn't convinced them. They were still hiding.

There's something quite wonderful in the interaction between Jesus and Thomas. It is a great reassurance to us with our own questions and hesitations that Jesus does not rebuke Thomas when he asks to see the nail marks and the wound. Thomas is expressing a heartfelt need. Jesus' first words spoken in this second appearance to his disciples are the same words spoken earlier to this group of shaken and fearful men: "Peace be with you." Not words of accusation or condemnation, but words of blessing and benediction.

You and I might hear the words of Jesus spoken gently and lovingly, encouraging Thomas to move forward in his quest for reassurance. Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." In that same tone and manner, without rebuke or condemnation, Jesus offers invitation and encouragement, "Do not doubt, but believe."

Consider the impact of Jesus on history. Someone has pointed out: "Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, Aristotle for 40, and Jesus for only 3, yet the influence of Christ's 3 year ministry is greater than the impact left by the combined 130 years of teaching from these men who were among the greatest philosophers of all time. Jesus painted no pictures; yet, some of the finest paintings of Raphael, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci received their inspiration from Him. Jesus wrote no poetry; but Dante, Milton, and scores of the world's greatest poets were inspired by Him. Jesus composed no music; still Haydn, Handel, Beethoven, Bach, and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the music they composed in His praise. Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by Jesus Christ."

Jesus has influenced our world and He wants to influence our lives. What happens when Jesus shows up in your life? Again, listen to the words from our text this morning: "Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

When Jesus showed up everything was different.

We are all familiar with the term “doubting Thomas,” because Thomas doubted Jesus rose from the dead. Would you have believed such a story? The Bible never describes Thomas this way. It describes his moment of doubt. But it is one moment, only one, and he moves quickly beyond it. His identity, despite our perception and description of him, is not rooted in that moment. Thomas has been over branded through the years, similar to this Texas rancher:

There is a story that a Texas rancher bought 10 ranches and put them together to form one giant spread. His friend asked him the name of his new mega-ranch. He replied, "It's called The Circle Q, Rambling Brook, Double Bar, Broken Circle, Crooked Creek, Golden Horseshoe, Lazy B, Bent Arrow, Sleepy T, Triple O Ranch."

"Wow," said his friend, "I bet you have a lot of cattle."

"Not really," explained the rancher. "Not many survive the branding."

The story of Thomas is very similar to many of our emotional lives. When the Lord changes something in our lives, we become very determined in following that call. However, if we were left to our determination, we would all soon become prideful and arrogant, believing our determination caused the fulfillment of that calling. God will allow circumstances to come “interrupt” our calling so we grow more dependent upon Him. He will allow us to realize we are not capable of fully understanding our calling, as well as showing us we don't have all the qualifications for that calling.

Remember, as a friend once told me, “God doesn't call the qualified, he qualifies the called.” We will immediately realize there will be times we don't know which way to go, or what road to go down. This is usually the turning point in many peoples spiritual lives. When they get to the point of “I don't know,” many times they will reverse course and follow the road they do know. Following the “I know the way” route will always end up in the truck stop of brokenness. If we will work through and wait upon the Lord during those times of unknowing it will help get us through the next stage.

On Easter night, the disciples were together in a house, hiding behind locked doors. A number of them had seen Jesus alive, and now they were scared. What were the Jewish leaders going to do? Would they be arrested now? Would they be accused of stealing the body? Would anyone believe them if they told people that

Jesus had risen from the dead? They were hiding from the Pharisees and Sadducees – hoping to avoid confrontation.

Suddenly, Jesus was standing in the middle of them, and said to them, “Peace be with you.” Jesus always says just the right thing at the right time, doesn’t he. He tells them that they can feel peace in their hearts. He was there, and they had nothing to worry about. He showed them his hands and side to prove to them that he wasn’t a ghost, but that he was the same Jesus they had known, the same Jesus they had seen crucified just three days earlier.

The Apostle Thomas wasn’t there. When he returned, the disciples told him that Jesus had appeared to them. But Thomas didn’t believe: “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.” You can’t get much more skeptical than that, can you. I will not believe, unless I see visible proof.

Why does Thomas refuse to believe? Because Thomas was a practical person, and he lived in a practical world. He was shattered on Good Friday when Jesus died. But he wasn’t about to succumb to fantasy. Dead was dead, and that was it. No one in their right minds would doubt it when the Romans said a prisoner was dead. They were experts at killing! It’s not that Thomas didn’t want to believe that Jesus was still alive. But Thomas knew how the world worked. Dead was dead, and that was it.

That’s how our world sees Jesus’ resurrection today. Nice idea, but it didn’t really happen. Many people are set on proving that the resurrection of Jesus was a spiritual resurrection. Jesus arose only in the sense that his spirit goes marching on, sort of life the way the spirit of Abraham Lincoln continues to influence America.

It is always so. The Easter victory is the victory of the Resurrection. Out of despair comes hope. Up from weakness comes strength. In the midst of pain, there is peace. Sorrow is turned into joy. In place of death, there is life.

With all of us in our times of deepest need is the risen Christ. In Him is the Easter victory that overcomes the world.

Only Jesus could pull this off. If somebody popped up in the middle of my bedroom at night and said, “peace be with you!”, I’d probably jump through the ceiling. But it wasn’t Jesus’ purpose to startle them. It was His purpose to assure them that he had everything under control. Once they saw who it was that was with

them, they could rest easy. Jesus, their master, their leader, and as Thomas later on said, their “God”, was still with them, stronger than ever. They could rest easy knowing that Jesus was protecting them. They didn’t need to fear anything anymore. They could be at peace.

The main thing to remember is this- Jesus is alive and well. He’s living in your living room. He’s living at your school. Jesus is living with you at work. He’s in charge of Iran, the USA, and every other country in the world. You may not be able to hear Him, but He’s saying, “Peace be with you! Relax, I’m here. I haven’t gone anywhere. Even if there is a nuclear war going on around you, there’s no reason to be afraid. I’m protecting you.” This is not a cliché. This is not a nice saying that never comes true. This is not a politician telling you, “I’m protecting you.” This is your Almighty God who rose from the dead saying to you, “peace be with you.” The Almighty God is telling you to relax; it’s all ok. He’s got it all under control.

I encourage you to celebrate the resurrection presence of Christ today and every day for: Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

Amen.

“SONRISE IN MOURNING BRINGS END TO GRAVE PROBLEM”

Message for the Third Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

April 19, 2026

ACTS 2: 14A, 36-41 ✱ 1 PETER 1: 17-23 ✱ LUKE 24: 13-35

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

Read me the story again,” is frequently heard in many households as kids are growing up. Garrett had a favorite book about trucks, naturally it was called “All Aboard Trucks” and he wanted me to read to him every night before he would settle down and go to sleep. I’d get so frustrated; Garrett, I read this the past few nights; you know the story. I don’t care; I want to hear it again. So every night, those same trucks would be on the go, in the city, in the country, in the neighborhood doing the work they did the night before that and the night before that and so on. It was a cute book and I could understand why he wanted it read and it was always me he wanted to read it, not his mother. I guess she was blessed more than I was. Everywhere you turn, trucks are on the go!!

Maybe some of you did the same thing. Many parents read daily to children, often each night before they go to bed as was the case with Garrett. Kids, like many of us, and Garrett, have favorite stories, and so you might find yourself sitting on the couch or in a favorite chair, night after night, turning the pages of stories you can recite by heart because of its familiarity. Sure, sometimes kids will intentionally delay going to bed, one cannot deny the power of story to engage the heart and awaken the imagination.

Storytelling has long been at the center of the Judeo-Christian experience. In fact, that’s just what the two disciples were doing as they walked the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus following the death and resurrection of Jesus. As they walked, they talked about all the things that had recently happened, and

unbeknownst to them, Jesus was walking beside them. His question about their discussion launches into a story, a story ironically that they expected he'd already heard, and not realizing that the story they told was Jesus' own. At Jesus' insistence, they begin again, relating the hopes and heartaches that had been played out over the past few days.

Telling the story, of our lives and of our congregations, is important work as we journey through life. Our story and our perspective on it, is unique. The story of our congregation is the story of our faith. It is the story of how we have, over the years, striven to be good stewards of the resources of people, gifts, energies, time, and opportunity to tell the good news of Jesus Christ.

How effectively we tell our story influences how people will receive it. With words, pictures, video, in person, online, in printed materials, we tell the story of God's interaction with us and our call to be in service to the world. So as Jesus joins these disciples, it is no wonder this is where he begins, by asking them to tell their story. And he falls into step with them as they begin. Jesus listens as they tell their story and when they are finished, he says, "how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" It's like he's saying "Oh come on folks! Get with the program! Is this really all you believe? Jesus listens to their story and then he starts back near the beginning, with Moses and the prophets, and 'he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. Jesus hears their words and he puts them in a different context, sheds new light on them. They tell their story and he brings fresh perspective! He re-interprets for them the things they thought they already knew.

Athletes in training speak of feeling the burn. And you're thinking, why are we talking about feeling the burn after talking about stories and books? I hope I can explain. Folks who are not athletic and maybe had a past life of alcohol consumption might think of the warmth that spreads over your body after that shot of whiskey as feeling the burn or the sensation of a burn as it passes down your throat. True Disciples of Christ that get their faith exercised and are filled with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, instead of spirits also get to feel a different kind of burn and it is a more like a flame than a feeling or warmth. Our Gospel today tells us about two of the disciples who felt the burn after the resurrection of Christ.

Now on that same day two disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near

and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?”

Many times the burn comes when you least expect it and not in the place you would imagine. All the action had been happening in Jerusalem and these folks were walking away from it. They actually felt like the action was all over and may have been traveling back to their home in defeat and despair. Emmaus was about seven miles from Jerusalem. We are not told so it may have been their hometown or only where they were going to spend the night before they continued their journey. They would truly experience the happenings in Jerusalem seven miles away from where they thought they had experienced them.

It is great that the name Emmaus means warm springs for the wellspring of their hearts were about to be warmed. They discussed the things that had happened, but we will see that they only thought that they knew what happened. Sometimes, we feel the burn when we think there is nothing to feel or nothing burning.

They were wrapped up in their conversation and reasoning and did not even notice Jesus drawing near to them. He did not sneak up on them. They were just too self-absorbed. How often has Jesus drawn near to you and me, but we were too self-absorbed in our ministry or troubles to even notice Him there? He said that He would always be with us, but so often we do not feel His presence because we have our life and problems all worked out or at least we are in the planning stages of working them out.

Jesus did not let them recognize Him at first. I believe He wanted them to open up their hearts to Him as a stranger first because they would have been too overjoyed to see Him and would have dropped all their questionings. He did not want them to just ignore their doubts and questions. He wanted them to have a chance to learn how to handle them. He listened to them.

So often we will open ourselves to a stranger more than we will do so with the Lord who loves us. It is like we think He does not know our doubts and fears and we do not want to risk His displeasure by voicing them to Him. Is that not silly? He who made the universe and us knows everything. We might as well voice our hearts to Him and let Him answer the questions and relieve the doubts. Hiding them only causes us pain.

Don't you love this? He asked them what was wrong though He knew exactly what they said and why they were sad. We often wonder why we bother to pray

because He already knows what we are going to say before we say it and what we need before we even know what we need. The answer is because He wants His children to interact with Him. He is a listening God.

Think about it, we often think a friend is the greatest person on earth and very wise when in reality the only thing they did was listen. They may not have said a word, but when we get done talking to them we feel great and thank them profusely for all they have done while they scratch their head wondering what was the great wisdom they bestowed. They listened! And if we can get so much from another frail human who is not omniscient or omnipotent just imagine what we would get if we let God who is both of those listen to us and then act in perfection to provide what we need!!!!

Cleopas means renowned father which makes me think he was a mature and godly man to whom people went to for wisdom. His reaction to Jesus' question in our terms may have been, "Man, where in the world have you been?" or "What planet are you from or what boat did you just get off of?" After all, all this had only taken place a few days ago and the guy had to be a foreigner who just got into the area to not know what had transpired. Crucifixions were common in those days, but a man like Jesus was not common and now with the talk of Jesus rising from the dead, there was no place in the area that was not abuzz with talk about these things.

This is so good! Jesus wants to hear their view of the happenings and their view of who He was or rather is. Cleopas starts out calling Jesus a mighty prophet and for sure He was. He says that His deeds and words were obviously of God and they were done in the open and not in some dark corner with only a few witnesses. He did them in front of God and everybody. In fact, at His baptism, He had the vocal approval of God the Father and the symbolic seal of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove that lit on Him. Man, we think the Good Housekeeping seal of approval is something! When the Father and the Spirit endorses and seals, it gets no better than that!!!! So far, Cleopas has a pretty good picture of Christ!

His account of what happened is accurate, but after that we see the doubt and confusion sinking in! Note they trusted in the past tense that Jesus should have redeemed Israel. Hey, we thought this guy was the redeemer, but all bets are off now and that is why we are sad. Jesus is dead and all hope is lost and Israel is not saved. The harvest is past. He's been gone three days by the way and we are figuring out how to get on with our lives after this great disappointment.

Not only that but we are at our wits ends because some of our ladies went early to the tomb and the body was gone. Stinking Romans or the Pharisees must have stolen the body. The poor gals were so distraught that they said they saw angels and even Jesus alive. Anyway, two others went and did find the tomb empty but they did not see Jesus, of course.

They heard the testimony of the empty tomb, but they knew there had to be a logical explanation for this. Yes, they may have seen Jesus raise others from the dead, but hey, no one can raise himself from the dead. Right? Wrong, wrong, wrong, praise Jesus, they were wrong!!!!!!

We do not know how close they were to Emmaus when Jesus joined them, but He got through the whole study from Genesis to Malachi by the time they arrived. WOW!!! We have been discussing these things for centuries and the Lord only knows how many hours of homilies and seminars we have spent on them not counting the megatons of paper and now megabytes of data we have composed. Maybe if we spent more time with the Master on the road, we could come to a final conclusion of the matter. God managed to tell His story from beginning to end in 66 books and had His Son on earth only three years to complete His mission. We have spent two thousand years like political reporters telling people, "What He really meant to say was...." Personally, I think He said what He meant and the simpler we keep our homilies and theologies the better off we will be when we stand before Him and get His review of our review of His Word.

All the time that Jesus was talking these lads still did not know it was Him. They must have been in awe of His knowledge of the Law and Prophets. They thought surely this is a great Rabbi or teacher and we cannot be so crass as to not offer him a room and meal after such fine teaching. Nowadays instead of the preacher getting invited for fried chicken on Sunday, the folks sit down to roast the preacher. These lads knew good teaching when they heard it and had a bit more respect of it than we do. The teaching ain't sweet if it steps on our feet.

If you were like me, and you read the same story over and over to your child or children, rarely do you find something new. The more familiar we are with the story the less able we are to step back from it, to hear it as if for the first time. The more conditioned we are to hear the same story told in the same voice, at the same pace, with the same language, the more harmless it becomes! The surer we are that we know the outcome, that we've memorized the script, the less engaging, the less transformative its power! After reading the same story night after night, you can, and many do, close your eyes and say the words while they flip the pages! But

what happens if you skip a word or drop a line? Yeah, they will notice; you don't dare change the words or the rhyme or the rhythm. Interestingly enough, Jesus meets the disciples on the road and tells them their own story in a new way. And sure enough, they heard something that they had not heard before.

Those disciples invited Jesus to stay with them to bless and break the bread. The connection was made. What was familiar, this table ritual, became new again. What was hidden, revealed. What was lacking, complete. The story became clear and the truth it held evident. In that moment, their eyes were opened and they see Jesus, and likely themselves, in a whole new light.

The two disciples couldn't wait to get back to Jerusalem. Even though it was late in the evening. They had to go back and tell the others what they had seen and heard. If Jesus is alive, there's no time to waste.

May this living Christ stay with us in this Easter season, that our eyes might be opened, that we might experience true communion, that our hearts might burn with story of our own vision for the story that gives us life.

Amen.

“Lost and Found”

Message for the Fourth Sunday of Easter
from Sylvia Gardner
April 26, 2026

The lost sheep, a lost coin and the Prodigal son are well known Gospel stories that focus on God’s love and joy in rescuing those who are lost. These parables about “Lost and Found” teach us of God’s relentless pursuit and divine joy when something precious is recovered, symbolizing God’s care for each individual ... YOU.

A shepherd leaves his flock of 99 to find one that is lost. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'

A woman has 10 silver coins, loses one and engages in major housework to find the one she has lost. And when she has found it she calls together her friends and celebrates.

The prodigal son is a parable about a son who became lost and was found. He leaves home, wastes his inheritance, returns home and his father welcomes him with open arms and celebration.

The effort to find the lost comes entirely from the one searching, not from the lost person or item.

The three parables about the lost being found illustrate the kindness and mercy of God. When those who are lost are found, there is much rejoicing in the household of God. God relentlessly pursues us when we are lost and rejoices when we are found.

I want to invite you to reflect on a time in your life when you were lost, really lost. How did you feel? Where did you turn? What resources did you lean into to get your bearings again?

When I was a child on a large dairy farm, we were often sent out to find a missing cow, hiding with a new born calf. Mt. Greylock, with its perfect bell curve,

peaked at 3,500 feet on the west side of town. Our farm was on the East side with the town in the valley below. My dad told us that if we ever got lost, to climb a tree, and when we saw Mt. Greylock we would know where we were and could find our way home.

I never had to climb a tree to see the highest mountain in MA, but the thought of having a solid, immovable GPS like bearing was very reassuring. As adults we realize that the true GPS for our life is God, the source of life and light and love.

God, is not going to move away. He's always right there, inviting you to draw near to him.

The parables of the Lost and Found are powerful images of zeal in searching and joy in finding. The heart of God is to search out those who are outside, and the mission of Jesus is to seek out and to save the lost. When the lost are found there is abundant joy.

The lost and found parables guide us to places where people who are broken and who feel lost are summoned back to wholeness and restoration. They remind us that God is our true resource, our refuge and strength in troubled times.

Through the grace and mercy and compassion and the love of our Lord, we recognize that each and every person — every life— is precious — precious to God.

God shows his unconditional love and forgiveness for repentant sinners. God seeks out people who have wandered from Him. He doesn't give up on anyone. Luke 15:10 says "I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." God may be beyond our full comprehension, but God relentlessly pursues us when we are lost and desires nothing more than a personal, intimate relationship.

God loved us enough to take on flesh and dwell among us so that our lives would never be the same, so that we could see and understand that we are precious and beloved in God's sight. Each and every one of us. God is our life's GPS.

There is one word I want you to hang your hat on today, and it's the word REJOICE. When you turn to God, when you start fresh with him and come clean with him, he rejoices. He is not looking at you and shaking his finger at you. He is looking at you with his arms wide open.

Jesus says, in the gospel of Matthew, come to me, you who are weary and I will give you rest. When you come to him, he is going to rejoice.

Sometimes we humans get stuck in the lost and found box. We get lost and we just kind of drift to the bottom under all the old things, the old thoughts and emotions and coats, and then a hand comes, a nail scarred hand, and pulls us out and says, I have found you. You are mine. I love you.

Feel God's hand, the hand of Jesus reaching out for you. YOU are loved.

The Lost and Found Parables inspire awe and remind us of the vastness of God's mercy and love. And the focus of his love is YOU. You were created to be loved by God.

We have the wonderful promise found in Hebrews 13:5: "I will never leave you nor forsake you.."

In 1772, John Newton penned the Hymn, "Amazing Grace", as a testament to God's redeeming mercy;

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind but now I see.*

Amen!

“HOME SWEET HOME”

Message for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

May 3, 2026

ACTS 7: 55-60 ✱ 1 PETER 2: 2-10 ✱ JOHN 14: 1-14

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

Jesus begins his farewell address to his disciples and to the world and he starts out by saying: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Anyone here have a car equipped with Onstar or a similar form of GPS? Maybe you have a program downloaded on your cell phone that does the same thing. No don’t raise your hand. Depending on what you have, you tell it you want directions to a certain destination and it downloads it for you so that you don’t need to use one of those old fashioned paper maps! I had a friend who is worse with directions than I am and that’s bad. Myself, I miss Joyce who had a triple A rating in map reading. Anyway my friend bought a car with a GPS system and he was determined to try it out. He was on one of those back country roads where some construction had been going on but it was now done. So he turned on this newly constructed road and his GPS began to ‘speak’ loudly, repeatedly shouting, ‘Stop! You are off the road! You are off the road! The further he drove on that road, the louder and more insistent the automated voice became. ‘You are off the road!’ Knowing he wasn’t, off the road, he turned his GPS off, not convinced that he had found anything that could actually show him the way.

How can we, you and I, find the way? It’s a fitting and rather unsettling question for the times we live in. In the past few years, with no outline, no road map, no blueprint before us, we have found ourselves propelled onto the landscape of an economic meltdown, at war with Iran, political standoffs, I have the right platform

to take this country forward; No I have the right platform to take this country forward and yet no one does take us forward. We are off the road! Which direction is correct? How can we know the way?

That is the question the disciples ask Jesus. They've been with Jesus his entire ministry, they don't understand what he means when he speaks of his departure; he told them that where he is going they cannot follow now. But then he speaks of places prepared for them. They fail to understand what dwelling places with God have to do with their lives in the present. Jesus' assumption that they know where he is going prompts Thomas, remember doubting Thomas, to express their ignorance and uncertainty. "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? Jesus' answer to them is about as helpful to the disciples as my friend's GPS was to him. He tells them that if they know God, then they know him. But even that is as clear as mud to the disciples.

Chapter fourteen, begins Jesus' long "farewell" discourse found only in John, spanning chapters fourteen to seventeen. Jesus begins by assuring his disciples that his physical absence, caused by his death, will not be a permanent condition. He will return to them in two ways. He will return at the unspecified end- the end of the world and the end of their own time in the world, their own death- and he will return to them soon; also unspecified, but soon to be experienced on the evening of the resurrection, in the form of his Spirit. If he does not cease to be present with and to and in them, neither do his works, the works he was originally sent to do by his Father, cease. They will continue through his disciples because he will continue through them. The key to this "continuing," what John coins or terms "remaining," or "abiding," or "indwelling," is faith, insight, not physical vision.

In verse one, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." In the Old Testament and in the Synoptics, "heart," is the place where decisions are made. In other words, "heart," means "the will." In John it also is seen as the seat of the emotions. On level one, this physical world, the disciples are emotionally "troubled," because Jesus is speaking of his death and departure. The verb for "troubled," Greek *tarassein*, was used to describe Jesus' emotional state when confronted with Lazarus' death in chapter eleven and with his own betrayal, unto death, by Judas in chapter thirteen. Jesus means here, "Do not continue to be troubled," not to have such emotions in the first place. Emotions are not within our control, and Jesus knew that firsthand. However, when submitted to our attitudes, the will, their intensity does abate, allowing us to see more clearly. The disciples are understandably troubled by the thought of serving an absent Master, of what will happen to them when Jesus is no longer there with them, physically present.

In verse two, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”

Jesus is referring, of course, to heaven, but using an earthly metaphor. Heaven was imagined as if it were a palace or place as the earthly Jerusalem Temple is like God’s palace. Jesus is telling his disciples that he is going back to his Father, to the realm and reality of God. He has been there before and knows that there is room aplenty for all. As Christ he came to earth to prepare humans as “dwelling places,” for the divine indwelling, now he goes to heaven to prepare “dwelling places,” for those very same humans.

If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?: The disciples are to “have faith also in me,” verse one, because Jesus has been there, in eternity, and knows what he is talking about. He says so; they take him at or believe in, his word.

In verse three, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” Jesus is speaking of the final state of affairs when humans will live only on level two, along with him. He will later explain to his disciples that he will send his Spirit upon his resurrection, the Spirit who will abide with and within them here and now. For the present he is speaking of the future and final state of reality, his final “return,” to bring them “up,” with him and his Father.

In verse four, “And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Jesus is going to the Father. That is his goal. Now, he shifts focus and begins to include his followers. Their goal is the same as his and their means to it, the way, is Jesus and through Jesus.

In verse five, “Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” All this talk of departure has upset Thomas to the point of exasperation. No one would know of the goal of life, if it were not for Jesus, he who dies with the most toys wins. And no one would conclude that the way, the means, the access to that goal was a person rather than a method or a program or a discipline of personal effort.

In verse six, “Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus is the earthly way to the heavenly realities of truth and life. Jesus is the channel through which the Father’s life and

truth come to humans, the sacrament of God, much as he is the “gate” in chapter ten, the means of access and progress into God. Jesus is not only a moral guide, the way to truth, but also the only avenue to salvation, the way to life. The disciples follow Jesus by repeating his example of obedience, obedience even to death, which leads beyond death to true life, eternal life.

In verse seven, “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” This parallel runs throughout the Last Supper discourse. It shows up in “As the Father loves me, so I love you,” chapter fifteen and “As the Father sent me, so I send you” in chapter twenty. Jesus parallels his union with his Father with his union with his followers. Thus, to “know,” Jesus, know him personally as opposed to merely knowing about him, is to also know God. Jesus did not study Greek metaphysics, nor did his disciples. He is being neither philosophical nor mystical in describing his union with his Father, valid as those approaches may be. He relates the union to his mission. Jesus is as Jesus does. He does his Father’s works. He is God’s agent, representative of the one who sent him. He is also God’s Son, and that deepens the legal relationship of agent or representative to a relationship of likeness of nature. That is as far as Jesus will go in explaining his union with the Father. He will leave it to later philosophers and theologians to spell out the metaphysical and mystical implications of that union.

In verse eight, “Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Philip, speaking on level one or the earthly level and with earthly vision, expresses an understandable wish- to physically see God. When Jesus’ opponents asked for this, “Show us a sign,” Jesus got angry with them. Such physical seeing does not produce faith. It only produces the need for more miracles, more proof. Here Jesus is not angry, but somewhat frustrated that he has been with his disciples so long and they do not yet, and the time is getting short, understand. The disciples have not failed completely to know Jesus, yet their questions indicate that they have a “way,” to go. Jesus knows that physical vision of God will not be “enough” for them.

In verse nine, Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Not all who “see,” the physical Jesus “see,” into him and “see,” the Father. Only faith provides that vision. Those who do, who see Jesus, see God. The whole life of Jesus- his words and his works- have been the revelation of the Father, the expression of the Father’s presence, power, activity and will for the world and the humans in it.

In verse ten, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.” Jesus expresses this union from both perspectives because he will use it to express his personal and moral union with his disciples in the same way. He, then, is the vital link between a human and a divine uniting and indwelling and abiding and remaining. The Father on his side “does his works,” in and through Jesus. Jesus on his side reveals the Father by those works and words.

In verse eleven, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.” If the disciples “look into” the works Jesus has done they will conclude God could only have done them. This is not a lower level of belief, only an easier route to the same belief. Jesus recognized that the works themselves, the signs, the miracles, do not produce faith on their own. But they can strengthen weak faith.

In verse twelve, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. First, this refers to Jesus continuing to work through his disciples as the Father worked through Jesus. Jesus is primarily referring to works done by himself during his physical absence from earth through his Spirit living in his disciples, driving their works. The disciples will carry out and carry on the work of Jesus, which is also the Father’s work, and their words, those of the Father and Son, over the expanse of the entire planet and through the ages. It is, of course, still Jesus who is at work when they do these things. As Jesus acted on behalf of, in the name of, in the character of, his Father, so they act on Jesus’ behalf, now that he has gone to his Father.

In verses thirteen and fourteen, “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” Jesus assures his disciples he will be with them in his name, if one would think of the word nature when one sees the word name in the Bible it would convey a better understanding. “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. By asking in Jesus name we are doing those things Jesus commanded us to do.

Jesus is it. He is the way, the means, the channel, the conduit, the everything, to the goal and the goal is not a physical place or an emotional state. The goal is no less than God himself. Now, Jesus, our friend, brother, Lord and Savior, God himself in human form and flesh, wants so badly that we “fare well,” in this life

that he gives us this “farewell,” message to contemplate. It is always revelatory and encouraging, but especially so when we must face death- ours and others’, face departures and leave-takings of all sorts. There are so many things as well as people which we emotionally cherish, some rightly, others wrongly, so many people and things we are attached to, even addicted to, which we must take leave of, that these words of Jesus will help us with. We, too, must say “good-bye” to level one- one “leave,” at a time.

Jesus saw his death as a permanent detachment from earthly ties, but only as a temporary departure from earthly friends and disciples.

Jesus would soon return after his death and departure and be present not only among his friends and disciples but within them through his Spirit.

As Christ came to earth to prepare humans as “dwelling places,” so he goes to heaven to prepare “dwelling places,” for those same humans and friends and disciples.

No wonder Jesus was so brave, so calm amidst storms, physical and emotional! The whole goal and point of life, a gift from God, is simply to “be with,” and to “be in.” We are not or need never be alone. Not only alone in the universe, but alone within ourselves. No wonder Jesus was so happy and brought such joy to others merely by his being there in their midst! We can be and do the same! When we realize that God created us to have a relationship with him everything changes its perspective for us, because it is an eternal relationship that our Heavenly Father claims for us. “Let not your heart be troubled!”

Amen!!

“MOTHER KNOWS BEST”

Message for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

May 10, 2026

ACTS 17: 22-31 ** 1 PETER 3: 13-22 ** JOHN 14: 15-21

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HAPPY MOTHERS' DAY MOMS! HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

Moms, I pray you have a blessed day in which you're pampered and honored by those you brought into the world and those you can take out if they don't.

Today is Mother's Day, a time to get away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life to thank our moms for raising us, for loving us, for putting up with us. The "mother" of Mother's Day is a woman named Anna Jarvis. Two years after the death of her mother, she convinced her church to have a special celebration remembering all mothers on the anniversary of her mother's death, the second Sunday of May. Her drive to create a national observance reached fulfillment in 1914 with a presidential proclamation by Woodrow Wilson.

Anna Jarvis never became a mother. Over the years, she slowly became disgusted and embittered with Mother's Day because of the commercialization of the holiday. Kind of sad isn't it?

Let me ask; what do you think of when you hear the word - mom? This question and more were posed to a group of 2nd graders, and here were their responses.

Why did God make moms? God made moms to help us out of there when we were getting born.

How did God make moms? A little dirt, some magic, a dash of superpowers..and a lot of stirring.

Why did God give you your mom and not another mom? God knew she would like me a lot more than other people's moms would like me.

What kind of little girl was your mom? I don't know, because I wasn't there, but my guess would be pretty bossy, even though they say she used to be nice.

Why did your mom marry your dad? It's because she got too old to do anything else with him.

What would it take to make your mom perfect? She's already perfect on the inside, but on the outside, some type of plastic surgery.

Who is the boss at your house? Mom is. She doesn't want to be, but she has to because Dad is such a goofball.

If you could change one thing about your mom, what would it be? I'd like her to get rid of those invisible eyes she has in the back of her head.

Being a mom is a challenging job. Not only do they have to deal with their kids, but they also have to deal with their husbands who are usually just big kids.

Today, being Mother's Day, I'd like to spend a few minutes in Proverbs 31 to gain some wisdom pertaining to Biblical womanhood. Whether you're a woman in pursuit of virtue, or a man looking for a virtuous wife, this wisdom is for all of us.

To appreciate this passage, we have to first look at Proverbs 31:1, the words of King Lemuel, an oracle that his mother taught him. These cover the first 9 verses.

While most of Proverbs was written by Solomon, this portion was penned by King Lemuel. But notice; he's only reciting the pearls of wisdom given to him by his mother as it pertained to the kind of woman he should be seeking for his bride. Thus, as any mom would do, she sets a pretty high, hypothetical standard.

Then we come to the rest of Proverbs 31, a total of 22 verses all of which present the ideal wife, no, not the perfect wife necessarily but the ideal wife. A mother has the unique opportunity of performing two invaluable services for her family: keeping true faith in the family and passing on that same faith to succeeding generations. A mother's knee is a good place for children to hear the word of God and find Jesus Christ as their Savior.

“A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing

hands. She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away. She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant girls. Proverbs 31 continues: She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too and he praises her. Many women have done excellently but you surpass them all. Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.”

Jewish parents used the Book of Proverbs to teach their children valuable life lessons. One of the most essential lessons every boy needed to learn was how to select the right wife. In fact, earlier in Proverbs, young men are warned against the wrong kind of woman, the adulteress whose lips drip honey but who brings about death/destruction. It warns against the noisy woman, quarrelsome woman, rebellious woman, and foolish woman -to avoid such women at all cost. And if we don't keep the correct focus, something even as good as Mother's Day can become sad and abused.

First of all, to the mothers who are here today: Do you ever feel like people should call you “Mara” for all the difficulties and struggles in your life? Are you ever bitter or at least saddened by the “sacrifices” that you have made to be a mother? Do you ever wonder if it's all worth it? If you would have been happier following your career instead of starting a family?

As mothers, God has given you two amazing blessings (well, really more than that, but today we are going to focus on two). The first of these blessings is the fact that you are forgiven. Yeah, I know, we hear that all the time. But think about it. Are you the perfect mom? Do you always act as God would have you? Do you always discipline in love, or sometimes is it because you are angry? Do you ever look at your life in discontent? Do you think that your life would have been better if you had followed your career instead of raising your children? And men this all isn't just directed at women/mothers; it affects you too.

You need that forgiveness which God offers through Jesus Christ. The good thing is that such forgiveness is yours. Jesus won it for us on the cross. It's a blessing, the best Mother's Day gift you'll ever receive. God forgives you for not being the perfect mom. In fact in his eyes you are now the perfect mom because of what Jesus did. What a blessing!

The second blessing that God has given you is your children. The book of Proverbs is filled with verses telling us what a great blessing children are. And I

think all the moms here would agree. It is a privilege to have children, and not an obstacle to your career or a cramp in your style. But children are also an opportunity to thank God for the salvation that he has given us. They are our responsibility to raise in God's Word. That's right, God works through mothers and fathers to create children of God.

God commands parents to raise their children up in the instruction of the Lord; see men, this applies to you too.

You know today we see both parents working long hours almost every day to provide for their children what they never had, to give their children a better life. But what's the result? Families aren't stronger but weaker. Children are spoiled and rebellious. The main responsibility of a parent is to give their children the foundation that they need in God's Word so that they go to heaven. What good does it do if we give them a better life here, but are too busy to give them what they need to go to heaven?

Mothers you are God's instruments through whom he creates saving faith in your children. Don't ever take that responsibility lightly. As mothers you have been given many great blessings, but with those blessings come responsibilities. So thank God for the blessings by fulfilling your responsibilities.

But now let's talk a little bit about us as children.

You know, God has given us incredible blessings as children. He has given us the same blessing of salvation that he gave our mothers. Even though we think we know everything, even though we don't show respect and appreciation as we should...we have forgiveness through Jesus and are perfect children of God in his eyes.

God also has given us the blessing of mothers who have dedicated a large portion of their lives to us. They gave birth to us. They changed our stinky diapers. They stayed up with us when we had a fever. They worried about us and guided us as we took steps into adulthood. They helped us overcome the errors of our youth. They showered us with love.

So how do we respond to these blessings? You know it's so easy to say thanks and make breakfast in bed or send a card once a year.

I read about a man who never showed his affection or appreciation for his wife. After 20 years of marriage, it finally hit him and he felt terrible. So he went out and bought some flowers and candy and showed up at the door of his home. When his wife came to the door he gave her the flowers and candy and told her that he loved her and appreciated all the things that she had done for him and for their family. She began to cry. She told him, “The car broke down today. The bank called to say that some of our checks have bounced. The children’s teacher called to say that they have been acting up. And then you show up here on the doorstep...drunk.”

How sincere does our thanks and appreciation seem when it’s just a card once a year? Let’s show our love, respect and appreciation to our mother’s every day. Let’s thank God often for the blessings that he gives us through our mothers. Because they truly are a blessing from him.

So this week, I encourage you to read Proverbs 31 in its entirety but go one further, read the book of Ruth (and don’t worry, it’s actually very short). In that story I want you to see how God works all things for our good. Also think about what you as mothers can learn from Naomi about the blessings and responsibilities of being a mom. For they truly are a blessing from God. Happy Mother’s Day.

And lest we think that none of what you just said, Pastor, applies to me, listen to the words of our Gospel, and yes, they apply to all of us: Jesus said, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

Jesus says: If you love me, you will obey what I command. He doesn’t say you should do it, or you could do it, but you will do it. I think this is an important point. If you have the Holy Spirit you will listen to Jesus and want to do what Jesus says. Will you do it perfectly? No. Will you do it all the time? No. You are still a sinner - who has a part of you that doesn’t like to do things that God says. But nonetheless, with the Holy Spirit in you - you WILL do it. Why? Not because you should. Not because you have to. But because the Holy Spirit has converted your will so that for the most part you WANT to. Even though you’ll still struggle at it, it’s what a Christian does - because that’s what a Christian is. It’s in your blood.

At baptism, the Holy Spirit whispered, “You are mine. You are cleansed in the blood of Christ.” In Holy Communion our Lord says, “Take and eat; take and drink. Receive what I have given to you.” The Holy Spirit leads us to know that the gifts of hope, forgiveness, life and salvation are ours. Our Lord promises it. When you come to worship, go to Bible study, or have a family devotion the Holy Spirit continues to whisper the mystery of God’s love into your ears. He reminds you that the Bible was written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and by believing you may have life in his name. Each day he reminds us of the simpler things of faith: forgiveness, salvation, and the hope of heaven. We don’t have to listen to a charismatic, world-renown speaker to inspire us. It’s all right here in the Bible. So listen to God himself. And we don’t have to spend a small fortune to hear about the secrets of salvation. God’s love is a gift of his grace – it’s free of charge. So, don’t doubt. Simply believe. After all, your God promises it.

Amen.

“TIME TO GLORIFY THE SON”

Message for the Seventh Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

May 17, 2024

ACTS 1: 6-14 ** 1 PETER 4: 12-14; 5:6-11 ** JOHN 17: 1-11

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

One Sunday the minister was giving a children’s sermon to all the kids in church. A bright-eyed three-year-old girl was listening intently as he explained that God wanted them all to get along and to love one another. She was tracking with her pastor until he said, “God wants us all to be one.” To which the little girl replied, “But I don’t want to be one. I want to be four.”

This little girl was on to something. Many of us don’t want to be one either. It’s much easier for us to splinter into four groups, or forty groups, or even four hundred different groups. While it’s difficult to get an exact count because the number keeps going up, there are thousands of denominations and religious groups in the United States alone. This morning I want to focus on how we can be united with one another.

In his book called, “Gentle Thunder,” I don’t have it, but the author, Max Lucado, tells the following story with wit and style, as only he can: Some time ago I came upon a fellow on a trip who was carrying a Bible. “Are you a believer?” I asked him. “Yes,” he said excitedly. I’ve learned you can’t be too careful. That’s when the questions started! Do you believe in the “Virgin birth?” I asked. “I accept it,” he replied.

“What about the Deity of Jesus?” “No doubt.”

“Death of Christ on the cross?” “He died for all people.”

Could it be that I was face to face with a Christian? Maybe. Nonetheless, I continued my checklist. “Status of man?” “Sinner in need of grace.”

“Definition of grace?” “God doing for man what man can’t do.”

“Return of Christ?” “Imminent.”

“Bible?” “Inspired.”

“The Church?” “The Body of Christ.”

I started getting excited. “Conservative or liberal?” He was getting interested too. “Conservative.” My heart began to beat faster. “Heritage?” “Southern Congregationalist Holy Son of God Dispensationalist Triune Convention.” That was mine! “Branch?” “Pre-millennial, post-tribulation, noncharismatic, King James, one-cup communion.”

My eyes misted. I had only one other question. “Is your pulpit wooden or fiberglass?” “Fiberglass,” he responded. I withdrew my hand and stiffened my neck. “Heretic!” I said, and walked away.

Though humorous and extreme, Lucado identifies a common problem. Many of us are quick to divide over just about anything. As someone has said, “to live above with those we love, oh, how that will be glory. To live below with those we know, now that’s another story.” The Bible is filled with a focus on family togetherness. God’s people are designed to fit as pieces of a puzzle in order to form a united picture of divine love. When we are unified, we display the personality, purposes, and power of God.

Here’s a brief survey of some Scripture passages that lift up the spiritual standard of a cohesive community of faith.

2 Chronicles 30:12: “The hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the LORD.”

Psalms 133:1: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!”

Jeremiah 32:38-39: “They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them.”

Acts 4:32: “All the believers were one in heart and mind...”

Romans 15:5-6: “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

1 Corinthians 1:10-11: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.”

How are we doing in our quest for unity within the community of faith? Are we united as one person? Are we living together with singleness of heart this morning? Are we one in mind so that we're in agreement with fellow Christ followers? These are tough questions to answer, aren't they? Left to ourselves, we don't automatically drift toward unity. In fact, our default setting is disunity. History is littered with a lack of harmony among humans.

The good news is that we're not the first group of believers to display dissension. Even the disciples, who spent three years with Jesus, demonstrated more discord than accord. James and John caused envy and jealousy when they wanted to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in His coming kingdom. Matthew was a tax collector who had sold out to Rome and Simon the Zealot hated IRS agents. On the night before Jesus selflessly gave His life, an argument arose among those who should have known better.

In the final moments before His arrest, Jesus could have prayed for His own strength. He could have requested that the eleven would support Him. His intercession to the Father could have been filled with a desire to make the disciples better teachers or servants or givers or leaders or administrators. Instead, His prayer was dominated by a single thought- the unity of his followers.

As we set the stage for our Gospel today, let's review: In chapter 13, Jesus washed the disciples' feet as a demonstration of servanthood and then challenged them with a new command in verse 34: “...Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” In chapter 14, He comforts the disciples by telling them that even though He's about to leave, they can join Him in heaven if they put their faith in Him. In the meantime, Jesus is going to send the Holy Spirit so that they will not be orphaned. As He's walking through a vineyard in chapter 15, He reminds them that apart from Him they can do nothing. In chapter 16, He teaches them more about the Holy Spirit and the peace that He will bring to their lives.

Then, on the eve of His excruciating death, He utters an appeal for unity John 17:1 begins, “After Jesus had spoken these words to his disciples, he looked up to heaven and said...”

Folks, this is the true “Lord’s Prayer.” The other prayer that we commonly refer to as the “Lord’s Prayer” is actually a model for us to follow, or we could call it the disciple’s prayer.

This is the longest prayer of Jesus. This prayer is long in two ways it’s Jesus’ most protracted prayer recorded in Scripture and it’s the longest in the scope of time it covers because it extends all the way to today. Look at verse 20: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.” That’s you and me.

This prayer is saturated with urgency. You can almost hear the agonized intensity as Jesus pleads with His Father to make His followers one. In fact, He asks for our unity four different times! This chapter has been called the “Holy of Holies” of the New Testament because we’re allowed a glimpse into what motivated the Master.

This prayer was prayed aloud for the disciples’ benefit. His followers couldn’t help but be moved and convicted about their disregard for unity as they heard Jesus pour out His heart to the Father. Because it was prayed out loud, the Apostle John was able to record it so that we can read it today.

We need supernatural strength to be united with fellow followers. If the early Christians struggled to maintain unity, and we do as well, it’s obvious that we need God’s help in this area. The very fact that Jesus prayed for unity indicates that we can’t accomplish this on our own. The last hours that Jesus had with his disciples ended in a prayer meeting.

We could summarize this prayer by saying that Jesus is committed to His church presenting a witness of oneness to the world. Jesus prays essentially about three matters:

Verses 1-5 For Himself...that He may be glorified.

Verses 6-19 For the disciples...to be protected and sanctified.

Verses 20-26 For the church...to be unified.

Let's look first at verse 11 as Jesus prays for His disciples: "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." Jesus knows He is about to leave His believers behind in a very tough world. He can foresee the upcoming persecution and every temptation they are going to face. He knows how the Deceiver, the devil, will work to divide His disciples and so He prays for their protection by appealing to the power of God's name.

Notice that He refers to God as "Holy Father," indicating that the Father is far above the wickedness of the world. His "name" stands for all of God's resources, power and abilities. We should pray the same way, as we make requests for the glory of God's name, not necessarily for the comforts of His children. Because of who the Father is, Jesus is asking Him to stand guard over those who have put their faith in Him by unleashing His arsenal of protective oversight. Jesus is praying for our protection.

Satan works and he works hard to sever relationships among Christians. His number one mission is to divide us because he knows that a "house divided cannot stand." The devil has destroyed disciples and attacked assemblies. I've prayed for protection and I've attempted to get Christians to reconcile with each other. I've come to the conclusion that I must do whatever it takes to maintain unity within the church, and must make sure that I'm not the cause of unnecessary clashes between fellow Christ followers.

This protection that Jesus prays has a purpose in mind: "so that they may be one as we are one." In the original this is even more forceful. The meaning is this: "so that they may constantly be one..." Notice that He ties this request for oneness to the type of relationship that He has with the Father. Just as Jesus and His father are one in essence and purpose, so too, his disciples share the same fundamental nature as brothers and sisters of the same Father. And we share a similar purpose with Jesus to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Using the relationship between the Father and the Son as an example, our union with one another is to be close, holy, and complete.

The relationship that Christ wants us to have is so intimate, so personal, and so vital that it is patterned after, and based on, the relations that exist in the Godhead. It is a oneness not only of faith, hope and love but of life itself.

When we are united, the world will stand up and take notice of God because they will see Him glorified in us. Matthew 5:16: “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

After listening to what I’ve said so far you might think that I question whether Jesus’ prayer has ever been answered. Actually, his request was fulfilled immediately after His return to heaven. The church in Jerusalem exhibited a profound unity. After seeing Jesus hang from the Cross and be resurrected from the dead, they experienced extravagant oneness. Acts 4:32: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.” And this unity had an eternal impact on the lives of the lost.

This prayer for unity has been answered throughout church history. Let’s bring it closer to home.

Are you willing to be an answer to Jesus’ prayer today?

We are His church. It’s time to stand up and be one with each other.

Remember that Jesus is praying for you. Jesus wants us to live as children of God and promises to give us the strength to face whatever comes. Remember to pray for those around you, and those far away. Pray that we will be protected in our faith and that we will “sanctified” even if that means that we will need the courage to appear weird. Remember that we are to be salt and light to a bland and dark world. Remember that Jesus is praying for us and that all the power of God is with us. Remember that there is nothing that has power beyond the power of God. Remember that God is truth. Then we will be like the tree of Psalm 1, “their delight is in the law of the Lord; They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in due season.” Are you going to yield your fruit in due season?

AMEN!!