

Lent Study 2020

Introduction to Lent

Lent is the period beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending at Easter, during which Christians have traditionally fasted and devoted themselves to prayer in anticipation of Christ's death and resurrection. Just as Jesus fasted and prayed in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights (Matthew 4:1-11), so too do Christians also fast and pray for forty days and nights.¹ In the same way that Jesus' time of fasting prepared him for his ministry - a ministry which led him to the cross - so we use it as a time to prepare ourselves, to be tested, and to walk with Jesus to the cross.

Although Christians are never explicitly commanded to fast, the practice is mentioned repeatedly in the New Testament, and Jesus gave instructions about "when you fast" (Matthew 6:16-17), which is a good indication that he thought we ought to fast! We can fast anytime, but Lent presents an especially good opportunity because it is a season in which we are particularly called to deny ourselves and take up our crosses.

Traditionally fasting literally meant abstaining from food for some period (or skipping a meal or certain foods). Among other things, this kind of fasting makes us aware that we are creatures who need our daily bread to survive, and it presents an opportunity to pray. Our hunger can be redirected to God.

Fasting from food is not the only possibility and today many decide to give up something (like alcohol, television, Facebook, etc.) which also creates both the space and the reminder to pray and to remember our need for God. In this spirit, many also decide to *add* something during Lent, like a spiritual discipline (i.e., praying every morning) or an act of service.

Whatever we decide to give up or add it should be a real sacrifice, even if a small one. It is ok for us to "suffer" a little, not least because it focuses our thoughts on Christ's own suffering. But just as Christ's own suffering on Good Friday makes Easter possible, so too do we trust that, during Lent, our own sacrifices, through Christ, will lead to new life. And if these Lenten practices bear fruit, they can certainly be continued after Easter! So I encourage you to consider what you might do for Lent this year.

¹ There are, however, forty-six days during Lent because the Sundays do not count as its considered improper to fast on the Lord's Day. This means that, if you fast during Lent, you're allowed - even encouraged - to break your fast during the six Sundays because these are all like "little Easters".

A word about this study

This year during the seven weeks of Lent we will focus on the following seven passages and themes both in Sunday worship and in our small groups. You can choose whether you prefer to study the passage in your small group before or after the Sunday in which the passage is preached.

1 March	Matthew 4:1-11	Temptation
8 March	John 3:1-17	Pride
15 March	Rom. 4:1-5 & 13-17	Prejudice
22 March	Luke 12:13-34	Possessed & preoccupied
29 March	John 11:17-45	Unbelief
5 April	Matthew 21:1-11	Earthly restoration
12 April	Matthew 28:1-10	He is Risen from the dead

The first five weeks explore various sins that separate us from God. In the sixth week, we look at the way in which Jesus restores us (and all things) to God. And in the last week, accompanying Easter, we see what difference this makes.

Week 1 - Matthew 4:1-11 - Temptation

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. **2** He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. **3** The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." **4** But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, **6** saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; **9** and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." **10** Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

It is startling to read that the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness so that he might be tempted by the devil. We assume that temptation is always something to avoid, but here the Spirit sends Jesus out for exactly that purpose.² Immediately following this passage, Jesus will begin his ministry and calling disciples. This time of prayer, fasting, and - yes, temptation/testing - seems to be preparation for all that is to come.

Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights, a period which - whatever spiritual strength Jesus gained - rendered him hungry and tired, just like it would any human. And this is when the tempter appears. The devil's first temptation is to turn stones into bread - something which must've been quite appealing in Jesus's condition. And wouldn't this be rather harmless? No one would even need to know? But, as he will three times, Jesus responds with Scripture. With the words of Deuteronomy, Jesus replies that his source of life is not bread alone, but God's word (Deut 8:3).

The devil then "takes" Jesus to Jerusalem and sets him on the pinnacle of the temple, then commanded Jesus to throw himself down to be saved by the angels - and this time the devil quotes Scripture! (Psalm 91:11-12). If Jesus did what the devil suggests, it would create a dramatic spectacle proving to everyone that he was the Son of God. Wouldn't that be a good thing!? But Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (Deut 6:16).

Finally the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. He tells Jesus that these can all be his if he would only bow down and worship the devil. But these kingdoms are not really the devil's to give, and Jesus responds "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Deut 6:13)

Turning stones into bread seems to be a harmless use of Jesus' power. The "end" of Jesus being revealed to the crowds would seem to justify the "means" of throwing himself down from the temple. And Jesus really does deserve all the kingdoms of the world, no? In all three cases you can imagine a possible rationalization for doing what the devil suggests. And this is the nature of temptation; to convince us, even if only for a crucial moment, that what is bad is actually good.

It's worth noting that Jesus responds to these temptations by quoting Scripture - Deuteronomy in particular. If we want to faithfully follow God like Jesus did, it is essential to know the Scriptures. When we are tempted by a lie the best defense is always to recall the truth. However, clearly it is not enough to simply know the Scriptures, because the devil can quote them as well. We must truly *know* the Scriptures - not just be able to recite the words.

In all three instances, the devil tempts Jesus to use his power and authority in a self-serving way. He is essentially tempting Jesus to be a different Christ, to place before Jesus the possibility that he can have all the glory with none of the pain. Instead of being faithful to the

² Why does the Spirit do this? Does Jesus *need* to be tempted? These aren't easy questions, but at least part of the answer is found in Hebrews 4:14-15: "Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested[or tempted] as we are, yet without sin."

Father - faithful unto death on a cross - the devil tempts Jesus to seek his own satisfaction and comfort, to take the easy road instead of the demanding one. And that Jesus prayed in the Garden the night before his crucifixion that the cup would pass from him shows us that Jesus - like any person - would rather not suffer the cross. Perhaps Jesus was then wrestling with this same old temptation, to show his power, to give the people what they want, to rule the world. But, of course, he continues, "Yet not my will, but yours be done." This is the defining principle of Jesus's life, revealed from first to last.

- 1. Why did the Spirit send Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted/tested? Is there something he needs to learn or prove? Can temptation be good for us?**
- 2. Are you always aware/conscious when you're being tempted? Does the word temptation apply only when we actually know what is right but convince ourselves otherwise?**
- 3. When we've succumbed to temptation, what kind of stories did we tell ourselves? How does the truth get exchanged for a lie?**
- 4. Why would the devil - among all possible temptations - choose these three? Do you think Jesus was really tempted to do any of them? Was there ever any doubt how he'd respond?**
- 5. It's fairly obvious why Jesus couldn't give in to the third temptation, but the first two are less clear; why did he have to refuse to do these things?**
- 6. How does knowing the Scripture help us respond to temptation?**
- 7. What does it mean that the devil can quote Scripture? How is knowing the Scripture not enough?**
- 8. What do these temptations - and Jesus's response - teach us about who he is and his mission?**

Week 2 - John 3:1-17 - Pride

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2** He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." **3** Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" **5** Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. **6** What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' **8** The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" **10** Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? **11** "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. **12** If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? **13** No one has ascended into heaven except the one

who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. **14** And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. **17** "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

It is not immediately obvious what this passage has to do with pride. In fact, Nicodemus stands out as one of the few in the Gospel of John who seek out Jesus; it seems that, if anything, Nicodemus is model of humility, not pride, for he comes to Jesus in search of understanding.

Even so, Nicodemus has trouble understanding and receiving what Jesus has to say. It's hard for him to make sense of Jesus' words in relation to what he already thinks. Jesus is saying one thing, but Nicodemus' mind cannot comprehend, his imagination is inadequate to the task.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that a person needs to be born from above (or born again) in order to see the kingdom of God. Part of the issue is that the verb can mean both again or above, and Nicodemus apparently interprets Jesus' words to mean that a person need to literally be "born again" and reenter the womb! He assumes that Jesus' teaching is too outlandish to possibly be true; he does not realize in the moment that the error lies with him.

After Jesus explains that a person must be born of the Spirit - and after he illustrates the nature of the Spirit by comparison with the wind - Nicodemus exclaims, "How can these things be?" He is incredulous; he can't imagine that Jesus is telling him the truth. It's clear from Jesus' response - "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" - that Jesus thinks Nicodemus really ought to understand. Jesus suggests that, as a teacher of the Law, Nicodemus already knows everything he needs to know; he's got all the pieces to the puzzle and he ought to be able to assemble it. And yet he doesn't know and he can't yet put it together. Why not?

This is where a kind of pride gets in the way, a pride that is so much a part of our experience that we don't even notice it - and which we, if do notice, we don't think of as pride. And this pride is the assumption that our view of things is the correct one, that we see the world accurately, that the story we tell ourselves is the true one, that we walk in the light and not the darkness, etc.

The famous Proverb tells us, "Lean not on your own understanding" - but this is much more difficult than we imagine, and if we think we've succeeded it might be an indication that we have not. Even when it comes to God (perhaps especially when it comes to God!) - trying to understand who God is, what God says, what God wants, what we're supposed to do, etc. - we want to figure things out, we want to reach an "understanding" that seems right to us. Nicodemus thought he wasn't leaning on his own understanding, but Jesus showed him that he was mistaken.

The wisest people, I think, are those who realize what they do not know - and what cannot be known. Conversely, the foolish are those who have no concept of what they don't know, who assume they know everything worth knowing. This is a form of pride, and one which afflicts all of us. Nicodemus reminds us that we need to seek further understanding from Jesus, and when we do might just discover that our understanding wasn't quite right. It's an uncomfortable position to realize that you were wrong, that you've been operating with false

assumptions. But it's only when confront our own misunderstanding that we gain true understanding.

- 1. Does Nicodemus strike you as more humble or prideful?**
- 2. Is it hard to admit that you don't understand? Do you ever convince yourself that you understand when you don't? Do you typically think you're right and others are wrong?**
- 3. Have you ever had an experience in which you discover that your understanding was incorrect? What led to that realization? How did it feel?**
- 4. Are there ways that your understanding of God has changed?**
- 5. Can we ever really, fully "lean not on our own understanding"?**
- 6. Do you imagine that, even right now, your understanding could or, like Nicodemus', should be better?**

Week 3 - Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 - Prejudice

4:1 What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? **2** For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. **3** For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." **4** Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. **5** But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. **14** If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. **15** For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, **17** as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

One of the major issues addressed repeatedly in Paul's letters, including here in Romans, is the inclusion of Gentiles (non-Jews) into God's family. The Jews were (and are) descendants of Abraham, the one with whom God made the initial covenant, and it was to them that God gave the law. It was by keeping this law that they were set apart as God's chosen people. They were the ones with whom God had a special relationship, the ones to whom God's promises were made and kept.

Although Jesus was a Jew who came to save the Jews, he came for the Gentiles as well. The book of Acts (chapters 10-11 especially) tells the story of how the Gentiles came to be included in the God News of the Gospel through the work of the Holy Spirit. This was a surprising development, but the Spirit does tend to surprise.

But this led to an important question: do the Gentiles need also need to keep the Law in order to be part of God's people? There were many Jewish Christians at the time who believed that the Gentiles did indeed need to keep the Law. Paul passionately argued against this in many of his letters (Galatians especially). In Paul's mind, to make the Gentiles take the Law upon themselves would essentially invalidate Gospel. After all, the Gentile Christians had received the Holy Spirit apart from the Law; it was by grace they had been saved; through faith, not by works. If they had been saved apart from the Law, why then add the Law as a requirement?

Paul's side eventually won the argument, for which we should be grateful: we are all Gentiles who need not take on the burden of the Law. But some Jews couldn't help but resent the fact that the Gentiles were given the same standing before God as they. After all, the Jews had been keeping God's commands for centuries; they had been God's people for generations; they had a history with God. But now these Gentiles just show up and are made the same! It didn't seem fair.³

Through Paul's letters we gather that some Jewish Christians thought they were superior because they still kept the Law, because they were descended from Abraham, etc. They had always thought of the Gentiles as inferior, and old prejudices are hard to shake. As always, some people have the desire to exalt themselves over others. But Paul insisted that this made a mockery of the Gospel. And Paul made his point, as he often did, through an unconventional reading of the Old Testament.

In the passage from Romans above Paul invokes Abraham, but he observes that, in fact, if you pay attention to the story, Abraham was justified in God's sight on account of his faith *before* he was circumcised.⁴ From this observation Paul makes a startling claim: the true children of Abraham are those who, like Abraham himself, have faith in God. Paul argues that justification before God has always been by faith apart from the Law; nothing has changed. The Gentiles, have been included on essentially the same basis as the Jews. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations, and now that promise has been fulfilled.

- 1. *Can you sympathize with those Jews who thought it was unfair that the Gentiles were included into God's family so easily?***
- 2. *Was the Jewish Christians prejudice against the Gentile Christians in any way justified? Did they have reason to think they were superior?***
- 3. *Was it "fair" for God to include the Gentiles? Does God need to be fair?***
- 4. *Have you ever had an experience in which you discovered that your prejudice placed you in opposition to God's purposes? In what ways have you/we resisted the Spirit in the past? And how might we be resisting the Spirit even now?***
- 5. *What does Paul's reading of the Abraham story teach us about how to interpret Scripture? Are there things that have been there all along that we haven't yet seen? How do we open our eyes?***

³ Jesus's parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) addresses this resentment. The workers who were hired first and worked all day protest receiving the same wage as those who were hired just before sundown and who did little work.

⁴ Genesis 15:6: And [Abram/Abraham] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." It not until Genesis 17:24 that Abraham was circumcised.

Week 4 - Luke 12:13-34 - Possessed and Preoccupied

12:13 Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” **14** But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” **15** And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” **16** Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. **17** And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ **18** Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. **19** And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ **20** But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ **21** So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

22 He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. **23** For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. **24** Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! **25** And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? **26** If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? **27** Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. **28** But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! **29** And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. **30** For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. **31** Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

32 “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. **33** Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. **34** For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

A man in the crowd called out to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” This man wanted his share of the inheritance and - like the prodigal son - he wanted it now. Jesus is indeed a judge, but not the kind who settles petty disputes on behalf of greedy brothers. Jesus understood that this man wanted to exploit Jesus’ authority to his material benefit, and he warns the crowds against the dangers of greed. This man, it seems, would gladly damage his relationship with his brother for the sake of financial gain. His priorities are out of order; he’s thinking only about the short term and not about eternal things. So Jesus tells a parable comparing him to a wealthy man who decided to demolish his old barns in order to build new, larger ones to store his many possessions. But that very night he died - and what will become of his riches? They will be worthless.

Instead Jesus provides a different vision. He tells us not to worry about our life, our food, our clothing. His point is that all of our worrying, all of our attempts to gain an advantage, to

accumulate wealth, to secure our futures is ultimately in vain. We attempt to take control of our lives when, in fact, we cannot even add an hour to our lives.

Jesus calls our attention to the lilies of the field and the ravens in the sky. They don't worry about tomorrow and yet they have everything they need, because God provides for them. Just like the Israelites who received their daily manna, so does God provide daily for the lilies and the ravens, so will God provide the daily bread (for which Jesus has already taught us to pray).

Jesus says that the nations of the world - that is, those who don't know the one true God - who worry, whereas God's children should be confident that, like the good Father he is, God will provide. Because we have the promise that God will give us the kingdom, we don't need to struggle to secure our own little kingdoms. Instead we can even freely sell our possessions and give to others in need, confident that God will take care of us.

1. ***Do we imagine Jesus as someone who takes our side, who settles disputes in our favor?***
2. ***How is this man guilty of storing up treasures for himself but being stingy toward God? What is the relationship between offending against his brother and offending against God?***
3. ***In what ways do we seek an apparent short term advantage (receiving the inheritance) over what's truly important in the long term (preserving the relationship with the brother)?***
4. ***What makes us anxious? Is it possible for us to never be anxious? Are there times when anxiety can be good - even necessary?***
5. ***In what ways are we like the lilies of the field? And in what ways are we different? Do we need to work to provide for our needs?***
6. ***What about people who really do lack what they need? Some people are not taken care of as well as the birds and the lilies - who is to blame? And what does that tell us about God's provision?***
7. ***Do we seek to secure our futures by making sure we have enough? What does it mean to trust that God will provide? What would Jesus say about retirement plans?***
8. ***What does it look like to seek first the kingdom and God's righteousness? Can we seek the kingdom and also be anxious?***
9. ***Do our lives become more or less secure if we give our possessions away?***
10. ***How did Jesus enact this passage in his life?***

Week 5 - John 11:17-45 - Unbelief

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. **18** Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, **19** and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. **20** When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. **21** Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22** But even now I know that God will give

you whatever you ask of him.” **23** Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” **24** Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” **25** Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, **26** and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” **27** She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” **29** And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. **30** Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. **31** The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. **32** When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” **33** When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. **34** He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” **35** Jesus began to weep. **36** So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” **37** But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. **39** Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” **40** Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” **41** So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. **42** I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” **43** When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” **44** The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

45 Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

The first four weeks of Lent we’ve looked at various ways that our sin prevents us from trusting in God, the ways that we fail to have faith and to be faithful. We simply don’t believe as we ought to believe.

Even Martha didn’t fully believe. She was follower and friend of Jesus, as was her sister Mary and her brother Lazarus, who had just died. Jesus arrived in Bethany after Lazarus had been in the grave for four days. She tells Jesus that if he had been present Lazarus wouldn’t have died and she expresses confidence in what God will do. Martha has expressed greater understanding and greater faith than anyone else, and yet her faith and understanding are not perfect.

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again”, to which Martha replied, “I know that he will rise again on the last day.” But Jesus, of course, meant that Lazarus will rise again right now. Martha is thinking of the resurrection only as a future event, as something that will happen at the end of time. But Jesus replies that the resurrection is not something that we must only wait for: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will

live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” This is stunning claim: Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life. And even more stunning: those who believe in him will *never* die!

Jesus redirects Martha’s hope from a seemingly distant promise to God’s promise in the immediate present, from what God will hopefully one day do to what God is doing here and now. Jesus teaches Mary that, in him, all of God’s promises are fulfilled, and all those who are in him, even though they die yet shall they live. And this leads to a new understanding: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

But even then Martha still has reservations when Jesus commands the stone to be rolled away from the tomb. She points out that, because Lazarus has been dead for four days, there will by now be strong odor. She’s concerned that unsealing the tomb will lead to the display of death - not a display of resurrection. Despite what Jesus said, and what she seemed to understand, she does not grasp what is about to happen, nor does she fully appreciate who Jesus is and what he capable of. “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” And then Jesus demonstrates that he is indeed the resurrection by raising Lazarus from the dead.

- 1. Does Martha seem more an example of belief or of unbelief?**
- 2. What does Jesus mean when he said, “everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”?**
- 3. Do you focus on what God will do some day rather than on what God is doing right now? Is it easier to hope in the future than in the present.**
- 4. Why does Jesus weep? Why was he “greatly disturbed” when he arrived at Lazarus’ tomb?**
- 5. Why does it is so hard for Martha to understand what she is telling her?**
- 6. Have you ever thought that you understood something (especially something about God) only later to realize that you hadn’t understood?**
- 7. Can we be totally sure that we believe fully? Would Martha have thought that she believed?**

Week 6 - Matthew 21:1-11 - Earthly Restoration

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” 4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

*5
“Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks

on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. **9** The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" **11** The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

This passage is often referred to as the "triumphal entry" because, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, he is hailed as king. But calling Jesus' entry "triumphant" is somewhat ironic, as indeed is the scene itself. For the people proclaim Jesus a king - which is true! - but they mistake what kind of king he is. They assume that he will conform to their own preconceptions, that he will meet their own expectations. And this means that they assume Jesus will be king like David, his ancestor. They want him to be a mighty warrior who leads them into battle, who conquers their foes, who delivers them from their oppressors, who re-establishes Israel's political and religious independence and exalts them over the nations. But that was not the kind of king Jesus was.

As Jesus rides in on a donkey (a humble animal, not the typical choice of kings) he knew what the crowds did not: rather than being the victor over the earthy powers, he would soon become their victim. The crowd thinks this is the moment that they've been waiting for, but within a few days all of these hopes are dashed. They're disappointed and disillusioned: they were wrong, it seemed: Jesus wasn't really a king at all.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said something which anticipated his own death, and how that death would be beneficial. He said, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Just as the earth is restored by the grain that falls to the ground and brings forth abundant life, so too will Jesus in his death restore the Earth and, indeed, all things.

The crowds had their sights set too low, so they couldn't see or even imagine how the victim would become the victor, how the last shall be first, how the humble shall be exalted, how death leads to life. They wanted their political situation to improve; but Jesus came to bring new creation. Just as Adam and Eve had walked with God without shame, so too would Jesus restore the relationship between people and God, between creation and creator.

Some in the crowd wondered aloud, "Who is this?" Others answered, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." And that is true, but not the whole truth. Jesus is the one who makes all things new.

- 1. What do you think of the common title of this story - the Triumphal Entry? Does that seem appropriate? Or misleading? In what sense, if any, is Jesus triumphant?**
- 2. What is the significance of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey? Did the crowds miss the message?**
- 3. How is Jesus a victor? Is he the kind of victory that we really want - or are we more like the crowds?**
- 4. Is Jesus actually a victim - or does he only appear to be? Can he both be a victim and a victor?**
- 5. How does death lead to new life in nature? And in the Gospel? What Truth does this teach us?**

- 6. What kind of Messiah do you long for? What is it that you most want Jesus to do? Do you ever want Jesus to be a different kind of Messiah? Do you perhaps hope for less than what he actually offers?**

Week 7 - Matthew 28:1-10 - He is risen from the dead!

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." 8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

On Sunday, after Jesus have been in the tomb some 36 hours, the two Marys went to the tomb. It's unclear why they went or what they hoped to find. As soon as they arrived an angel of the Lord rolled away the stone to reveal that the tomb was empty. The angel does not roll away the stone to let Jesus out but to show that's he not inside, for Jesus has already been raised. It seems that the grave couldn't hold him - not only in the sense that he's conquered death but also even that he's no longer bound by the limitations of human existence. Jesus has not just been resuscitated, he's been resurrected. He is risen to new life, not just a resumption of his previous life. He is the same, but he's also been transformed.

We see the power of the resurrection already at work in Mary and Mary, whose sorrow is immediately transformed into joy. The world they inhabit has been changed forever, for Jesus is not dead but alive. The angle commands them to go tell the other disciples what they have seen, and on the way they encounter the risen Christ. They respond in the only sensible way, to fall down and worship him in humble adoration. They take his feet. Jesus is not a ghost or a spirit. He has a physical body, but he doesn't need to roll away the stone.

Jesus is the first fruits of the new creation, and through him we will experience his new creation as well.

- 1. Why do you imagine that Mary and Mary went to the tomb? What did they hope to find? What were they feeling and thinking as they went?**
- 2. Why do you think only these two went to the tomb? Where were the others? Is it significant that the only one to go to the tomb, the first to whom Jesus appeared, and the the first to proclaim the good News of the resurrection were women?**

3. ***Was it important that they see the empty tomb? Would it have been easier if they just encountered Jesus directly?***
4. ***How does the news of the resurrection transform Mary and Mary? How do “fear and great joy” go together?***
5. ***What is the difference resuscitation and resurrection? What difference does it make?***
6. ***What does it reveal that Jesus can pass through a sealed tomb but that Mary and Mary can still grab his feet? What does this teach us about the new creation? What does it teach us to hope for in our own resurrection?***
7. ***And if you haven't already answered it, here's the most crucial question: What difference does Jesus' resurrection make, both in the world? And in our lives?***