

Preaching Helps

April, May, and June 2026:

From Holy Week to Ordinary Time

Ice and ICE Have Shaped This Issue

As editor of “Preaching Helps” I usually write an introduction to the seasonal commentaries. But this has been a season of challenges and disruptions. I broke my left arm in January when I should have been finishing “Preaching Helps.” On January 26, I slipped on the ice near the sidewalk memorial for Alex Pretti, an ICU nurse at the VA hospital in Minneapolis. Alex had been killed two days before by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents. They were part of the larger Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) “surge” in Minnesota.

This issue of “Preaching Helps” was shaped by ice and ICE. I selected lectionary commentaries from those written for this journal over the past ten years, without updating or changing them. (As usual, every preacher will engage whatever is happening in their own setting.) And I invited Pastor Ingrid Rasmussen, pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, to write the introduction. She has joined other clergy and lay people in a holy “surge” to protect our immigrant neighbors and stand for justice in our streets. I wanted readers to hear testimony from the heart of the resistance and resilience here in our city.

Making Good Trouble in Jesus’ Name

[Pastor Rasmussen preached this sermon on January 25, 2026, Third Sunday after Epiphany. The gospel text for this Sunday was Matthew 4:12–23, Jesus calling his first disciples.]

When I first began at Holy Trinity—now, thirteen years ago—I got a call from a pastor who had served this congregation many decades before me. Pastor Wayne began the call by asking me how many times I had been arrested. I said zero; I inferred by the momentary silence that he was unimpressed.

Honestly, given everything these past thirteen years have held, the staff is surprised it’s taken me this long. But the answer to Wayne’s question is now “one.” Before you hear it from your pew mate, I’d like you to hear it from me: your pastors were arrested on Friday while participating in an act of civil disobedience at the airport. We were putting our bodies in a roadway with about ninety-six of our friends to say, “ICE out of Minnesota,” and to invite corporations such as Delta and Signature Aviation—both of whom have been flying fed-

eral detainees across state lines—to say something, anything, really, about what we are experiencing in this city and across this state.

Today’s gospel text begins with John the Baptist’s arrest. It’s a detail I haven’t thought much about in previous reads. But it matters. It’s a small detail, but it changes the whole scene. The gospel begins with the truth that the regime was jailing those who stood in its way. John, with all his strangeness, all his wilderness grit and inconvenient truth-telling, was perceived as a threat. He was not arrested because he was harmless; he was arrested because he was naming a different way. Because he was telling the truth out loud.

And this week, it is strange, and devastating, how familiar that feels.

On Tuesday, federal authorities used a five-year-old boy in a bunny hat as bait before sending him and his dad to a detention facility in Texas. On Wednesday, across from our neighborhood coffee shop—two blocks from here—federal authorities surrounded the car of an observer, smashed his window in, pulled him from the vehicle, and detained him. On Thursday, an asylee that we are accompanying, who was considered a “collateral pickup,” was given a deportation order by the federal government—he’s being sent back to the country he fled three years ago out of credible fear. And yesterday an ICU nurse named Alex Pretti—likely someone known to the veterans in this congregation because of his work at the VA—was beaten and then executed by federal agents in broad daylight. Less than two hours later, federal authorities were indiscriminately lobbing chemical irritants at mourners, clergy, City Council people, and reporters, and chasing us down Nicollet Avenue with flashbangs.

I don’t know how to say any of those things without feeling like my body is breaking open.

It is almost unbearable to witness the relentless brutality of this administration. Usually, when reporters call and ask for comments, I attempt to be measured. I try to speak carefully, because I know how quickly narrative can be weaponized. But by last night, I simply told *The Atlantic* the truth: in Minneapolis and beyond, the system of ICE has shown itself to be morally bankrupt. I said that the freedom people of faith dream of looks nothing like what I see playing out on our streets.

In the midst of all of that, there is another truth arising.

A photographer who came to the church this week reflected that he had never witnessed a city whose citizenry was so singularly focused. One author who writes about social change, wrote about Minneapolis, saying that “[she’s] never seen a population more united.” It struck me because it describes what I have been seeing, too. A kind of collective clarity. A shared refusal. A community that understands that we are not going to be saved by waiting quietly for things to

improve. We are going to be saved by finding our way to one another. By becoming accountable to one another. By saying, with our bodies: enough.

And all of this makes me think differently about the call of the first disciples.

Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee and sees Simon Peter and Andrew casting a net into the sea. And he says, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” Immediately they leave their nets and follow him. Then he sees James and John, mending their nets with their father, and he calls them, too. Immediately they leave the boat and their father and follow him.

For years, I preached this as a strange detail. Why fishermen? Why not scribes? Why not other religious leaders? Why call the ones whose work is so practical, so physical, so rooted in the demands of daily survival? But I don’t wonder about that anymore. Not now. Because every time I open my eyes:

I see grandmas on street corners. I see twenty-somethings in observer cars. I see coffee shop workers bringing hot cups to the traumatized. I see aunts delivering groceries. I see notaries traveling around witnessing DOPAs. I see teachers doing circle time with our kids, trying to name feelings that adults can’t even metabolize. I see strangers with whistles. I see neighbors who have never met forming protective circles around one another. I see communities redistributing resources and wealth to ensure the safety of the whole. I see nurses and lawyers and restaurant workers and tech folks and parents standing outside, keeping watch over their communities by day and by night.

One writer said that “[in Minneapolis,] it’s genuinely a leaderless (or leaderful) movement, decentralized in a way that the state is absolutely unequipped to handle. There are a few basic skills involved, and so people teach each other those skills, and people are collectively refining them.”

This is discipleship. This is what happens when the kingdom comes near. The work is not reserved for experts. [Because the truth is that there are few experts for times such as these.] Jesus doesn’t call only the people with religious credentials. Jesus calls the ones with nets in their hands. The ones mid-task. The ones who are already doing the work of survival and care. And in a moment of crisis, those same people become the ones who help a whole community to keep breathing.

Make no mistake: this kind of collective care is a threat to a worldview of domination. Because domination depends on separateness. Domination depends on convincing you that you are alone, that your neighbor is a problem, that your safety depends on someone else’s suffering. Domination depends on turning us into isolated individuals instead of a communion of saints.

On Friday, there was a moment on the protest line at the airport when I felt alone, even though I was shoulder to

shoulder with people I trusted. And I looked up at the group in front of me, chanting, and caught the eyes of two pastor colleagues who couldn’t risk arrest for personal reasons, but who were there on the other side of the line, standing in solidarity with those of us who were. They looked at me, gently smiled and nodded, as if to say: Keep going. Follow the way.

And then yesterday, after the murder of Alex, I felt the overwhelm that many of you were feeling. Friday’s joyful protest had been so powerful, and we couldn’t even take a moment to rest in that before ICE was staging for immigration raids in nearby parking lots and killing another of our neighbors. Then last night, I was driving home on Lake Street at 7 p.m. and saw all of you out with your candles. Flickering against evil. Summoning us to something more. A corridor of tender, stubborn, resilient, radiant light in the face of militarized violence. Light saying: Keep going. Follow the way.

Part of our vocation as a community of faith is to keep telling the truth about that radiance. To keep insisting: This community is beautiful. This community is holy. These lives are precious. This is a place of belonging for all people. We will not allow brutality to redefine who we are. Because, as civil rights activist Audre Lourde, said: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” And it takes every ounce of restraint and *chutzpah* we have to renounce hatred and the ways that defy God and, instead, to take up the cross of mercy and follow Christ.

Dear ones, the truth is that Jesus goes ahead of us to show us the way. Jesus stands beside us to make good trouble. And Jesus follows close behind us, too—not to shame us for our fear, but to steady us when our courage falters. Matthew ends today’s text with this: “*Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*” This is what the kingdom looks like when it comes near: a movement of truth-telling and healing, of solidarity and mercy, of bodies and voices refusing to abandon one another. It is built on the warmth of our hearts, on the power of our dreams, on the strength of our connection. Jesus Christ is calling us—not to despair, not to isolation, not to surrender—but to keep following the light that has already dawned.

For this we say: Thanks be to God. Amen.

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I am grateful to these writers for their reflections on the texts from Holy Week through the first Sundays of Ordinary Time. As noted earlier, no changes or updates have been made to these original pieces.

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in the ELCA. She is author of: *Parenting Beyond Boundaries in Mark's Gospel* (with Sung Uk Lim, forthcoming 2026); *The Gifts They Bring: How Children in the Gospels Can Shape Inclusive Ministry* (2023); and *For Theirs is the Kingdom: Inclusion and Participation of Children in the Gospel According to Luke* (2019). **Phyllis Anderson** is President Emerita of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, currently living in Sonoma, California. A graduate of Wartburg Theological Seminary, she was ordained in 1978, and has served as a parish pastor, as synodical and churchwide staff, and as faculty and administrator at LSTC, PLTS, and the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University.

Christa M. Compton was elected Bishop of the New Jersey Synod, ELCA, in 2025. She was formerly pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Chatham, New Jersey. She brings seventeen years of experience as an educator to the work of ministry. As a high school English teacher, Christa was named the 2001 South Carolina Teacher of the Year and one of four finalists for National Teacher of the Year. She holds a PhD from Stanford University and an MDiv from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. She loves to accompany people of all ages in learning about scripture and in exploring their faith with all its doubts, delights, and dilemmas. **Brad Froslee** serves as a pastor at St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota. Brad grew up on a farm near Vining, Minnesota, and studied at St. Olaf College and Harvard Divinity School. He is passionate about preaching, worship, and prophetic witness. He enjoys spending time with his husband and son, traveling, and working on genealogy and poetry projects.

Sarah Trone Garriott has served as coordinator of Interfaith Engagement for the Des Moines Area Religious Council Food Pantry Network. She regularly preaches and presides at Christian congregations throughout Iowa. Each summer she coordinates a camp for high school youth and incoming students at Drake University to explore the diversity of religious communities in Des Moines. She serves as Iowa State Senator for District 14 (Waukee, Adel, Van Meter and the Dallas County portions of Clive and West Des Moines). She is currently a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives for Iowa District 03. **Mary Halvorson** retired in 2021 after thirty-five years of ministry. She lives in Roseville with her spouse and two dogs. She plants and tends trees, gardens, quilts, plays with color, and consults with congregations in times of transition. Her grandchildren bring her great delight.

Elaine Hewes is a retired Lutheran pastor who serves St. Brendan Episcopal Church in Deer Isle, Maine. She has lived in the small coastal town of Sedgwick for more than forty years, where she and her husband Michael raised their three children. A former homiletics teacher at Bangor Theological Seminary and a lover of the arts, Elaine is passionate about

finding ways of breaking open (kaleidoscoping) the biblical text using the language of music, poetry, and the "ordinary things" of our beautiful, fragile, suffering world. **Laurie Jungling** served as Bishop of the Montana Synod from 2019 to 2025. She has a doctorate in Christian Ethics and Social Theory with an allied field in Systematic Theology. Originally from Montana, she has served in various contexts including a rural three-point parish in South Dakota, a professor of religion and ethics at Augustana University (Sioux Falls), and an intentional interim pastor in several congregations in the Montana Synod.

Liv Brodwyn Larson is the Director for Evangelical Mission in the Northwest Intermountain Synod of the ELCA. She lives in Spokane, Washington, with her two sons and regularly jumps in the Spokane river. **Justin Lind-Ayres** is copastor at Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. His recent book, *Eye on the Magi*, is an Advent devotional for families illustrated by his sister, Krista Schrock.

Wilbert "Wilk" Miller is a retired ELCA pastor living in Essex, Connecticut, with his wife, Dagmar. He has been blessed (or as Eugene Peterson would have it in *The Message* translation of the beatitudes, "lucky") to have lived and served congregations in wildly diverse settings: inner-city Philadelphia; downtown Washington, D.C.; San Diego; New York City; Main Line Philadelphia; and Old Saybrook, Connecticut. **Jen Nagel** is Bishop of the Minneapolis Area Synod, ELCA. Prior to being elected bishop, she served as Lead Pastor of University Lutheran Church of Hope in Minneapolis. She was ordained extra-ordinarily through Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (ELM), prior to ELCA policy change. Jen and her spouse, the Rev. Jane McBride, share love, parenting (a teen and a tween, both bright and creative), pastoring, and plenty of summer time adventures.

Janet S. Peterman, an ELCA pastor, has spent the last half of her ministry as an intentional interim pastor. After long work in inner city ministry, her Bishop's staff sent her where they needed her. She seeks to nurture new life and to help leaders create new patterns of vitality that will be sustainable in the next pastoral tenure. She lives with her family in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. **Jan Rippen-trop Schnell** is a liturgical theologian and religious ethicist. Trained as a Lutheran pastor, she is the assistant professor of liturgics at Wartburg Theological Seminary. Their 2025 book *Agapic Anger*, an exploration in ethnography and virtue ethics, describes how Christians can do well with their anger in order to bring about positive social transformation. In teaching and research, Schnell is committed to interdisciplinarity, anti-racism, Queer celebration, liberation, and pedagogies or methodologies that recognize the inherent value and wisdom that each participant brings. They delight in God's spirited movement in the fabric of our daily lives and on the streets

of our public spaces. Schnell and their family live on an acreage that depends on solar energy, where they restore a natural Iowa prairie. They share interest in music, reading, theater, and playing outdoors.

Matthew L. Skinner is Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, where he has taught since 2002. His publications include *Matthew: The Gospel of Promised Blessings* (2024), *Acts: An Interpretation Bible Commentary* (2025), and *Voices of Advent: The Bible's Insights for a Season of Hope* (2025). He is one of the co-hosts of the popular weekly podcast Sermon Brainwave. **Benjamin M. Stewart** serves as Distinguished Affiliate Faculty at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and as Pastor to Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Two Harbors, Minnesota. Ben is a member of the North American Academy of Liturgy and contributes to its Ecology and Liturgy Seminar. He is author of *A Watered Garden: Christian Worship and Earth's Ecology* (2011).

My arm is healing and I began physical therapy the first week of March. I pray that God will surprise us once again with the good news of Easter and sustain us with the wild, unexplainable fire of the Pentecost Spirit.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, "Preaching Helps"

Maundy Thursday April 2, 2026

Exodus 12:1–4, [5–10], 11–14

Psalms 116:1–2, 12–19

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Engaging the Gospel

The Triduum, the sacred three days of Holy Week, is one liturgy that begins with Maundy Thursday, continues on Good Friday, and concludes at the Easter Vigil. Those who attend this three-day liturgy will be deeply moved by the highs and lows of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Maundy Thursday receives its name from the Latin word *mandatum* meaning command. Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." Unlike the synoptics, John's gospel makes no mention of the Last Supper's institution narrative. Instead, John uniquely weaves in the foot washing: Jesus rises from supper, takes off his outer robe, ties a towel around himself, and washes his disciples' feet. John's account gives witness to a community of love where

rigid boundaries and possible looming resentments are broken down and all are welcome to the meal.

What becomes clear is Jesus' openness to those who fall short of his love. Judas, as the text reveals, will soon betray Jesus. Peter, who says, "You will never wash my feet," overestimates himself, incapable of realizing how he will soon shrink from his high ideals and repeatedly deny ever having known his dearest friend. In spite of the horrid betrayal, denials, and cowardice about to occur—not by Jesus' detractors but by those who adore him—Jesus is glorified through his sacrificial love. As his friends one by one fall by the wayside, nevertheless, Jesus demonstrates his profound affection for them.

Jesus articulates this new command "to love one another" not only in the words he speaks at the meal but also by his washing of the disciples' feet.

Pastoral Reflections

Most of the congregations I have served observed foot washing on Maundy Thursday. Much to my disappointment, however, no matter how clear the bulletin rubrics and verbal invitations have been and even if I have remembered in advance to warn women not to wear hose and men not to wear holey socks, very few have availed themselves of this liturgical action. We can feel terribly exposed as we wash and dry one another's feet with tender love. Many people prefer to sit out the foot washing. Some choose to steer clear of Maundy Thursday worship altogether.

In those moments when we are so mindful of our human vulnerability, the Christian community gives witness to the gentleness of Christ's glory: he loves Judas the betrayer, Peter the liar, and the other ten cowards who slink away as he breathes his last. Jesus loves us, too, even if we prefer not to come to the bowl and towel. While this action may strike some as too embarrassing or reek of "touchy-feeliness," there are Christian traditions, notably the Amish, Mennonite, Adventists, and Pentecostals, that incorporate foot washing as part of their regular Communion liturgies.

Pope Francis demonstrated how Christ's glory is beautifully revealed in foot washing. Breaking with the long-standing papal tradition of washing only priests' feet, he washed the feet of women, Muslims, AIDS patients, and homeless people. His gesture of kneeling and washing "outcasts'" feet touched millions and gave profound witness to what the church can be when it dares to break down all manner of rigid boundaries, as Jesus did.

Could some of the awkwardness of foot washing be caused by the difficulty many of us have in receiving gifts? When giving gifts, we feel in control; when receiving gifts, we suddenly feel subservient to the gift giver. Peter's words, "You will never wash my feet," are easy to comprehend. There is something deep inside many of us that prefers not to take

from another. Yet, when we allow this gift of washing, somehow the community is made stronger through mutual giving and receiving in Christ's name. I have often noticed my inclination to refuse the gifts of those who have much less materially than I. I catch myself saying, "Oh no, I wouldn't dare take that from you." Aren't the materially poor capable of deciding for themselves what they can and cannot give? Shouldn't they know the joy of giving as well as receiving?

I experienced this receiving a number of years ago, not in a church sanctuary, but in a hospital room. I had been in intensive care for quite a while and was feeling miserable. Finally, a hospital aide came to bathe me. I was dreadfully dirty and felt wretched. I will remember that sponge bath as long as I live. It was a sacramental occasion: through this woman's vocation of bathing my feet, I was treated with rare graciousness and love. At one of the lowest points in my life, I was lifted up through her compassionate ministry. I think of that dear woman every Maundy Thursday, of that holy moment when I was so deathly ill and she washed me clean.

While Lutherans do not call the rite of foot washing a sacrament, I would dare say it is quite sacramental. It is an occasion when we catch sight of what it is to love one another in Christ's name; it is a moment when Christ stoops low to us through the loving actions of our brothers and sisters.

Wilk Miller

Good Friday April 3, 2026

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 10:16–25

John 18:1–19:42

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Except for a few verses appointed for Reign of Christ Sunday in Year B, today is the only occasion appointed in the Revised Common Lectionary to hear the Johannine Passion narrative. Given the unique theological perspective of the fourth gospel—especially including its distinct portrayal of the crucifixion—this is an especially crucial preaching opportunity.

With characteristic overstatement, the preacher Martin Luther wrote, "John's Gospel is the one, fine, true, and chief gospel, and is far, far to be preferred over the other three and placed high above them."¹ We can set Luther's exaggeration mostly aside. However, we can agree that since this is the only

opportunity appointed in the lectionary to help our assemblies think theologically with John's unique account of the passion, preachers will want to make this one count!

The first words of Jesus in John's passion narrative echo two other profound moments in the gospel: the first call Jesus extends to disciples, and the first words spoken by the risen Christ.

When Jesus first speaks in John 1, he turns to face two disciples of John the Baptist who are following him and asks them, "What are you looking for?" (*ti zēteite*, John 1:38). These are in fact the very first words of Jesus in the fourth gospel. In the opening verses of today's Good Friday text, Jesus steps forward to address the armed soldiers and police and asks them also, "Whom are you looking for?" (*tina zēteite* John 18:4). The final time the phrase is used in John's Gospel is Jesus' address to Mary at the tomb on the day of resurrection, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" (*tina zēteis* John 20:15).

Perhaps this is a Johannine hint that despite people's repeated confusions and failures to recognize Jesus' true identity, everyone, even the soldiers, are in the end seekers who are looking for Jesus. The question Jesus asks the soldiers who will execute him points to a mysterious way in which they are also seekers, and, as Jesus has promised, in the end "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). Even this verse needs to be expanded beyond the NRSV's translation. The Greek text is not "all people" but is the wider category of *pantas*, "all things, everything, the whole."

Each time Jesus asks, "Whom are you looking for?" he follows up with a theologically significant response. To the first disciples he called, Jesus continued to beckon them with the theologically pregnant phrase, "come and see." To the soldiers who said they were seeking Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus responded not with the NRSV's lowercase "I am he," but with what would be more accurately rendered "I AM," the name of God (there is no "he" in the Greek text here, but rather the direct *egō eimi*). After he asked Mary for whom she was looking, Jesus brings her fully to her senses by calling her name: "Mary!"

When Jesus speaks "I AM" to the soldiers and they fall to the ground having heard Jesus speak the name of God in reference to himself, we see foreshadowed that the powers of the world are being overcome in Jesus being lifted up on the cross.

John's theological portrayal of Jesus' crucifixion offers theological resonance with the second reading. The text from Hebrews portrays Jesus as both lamb and priest and has images of the efficacy of both blood and water, which John 19:34 portrays as flowing from Jesus' pierced side.

The motif of the suffering servant in the first reading from Isaiah is in some tension with the Johannine passion

1. Martin Luther, "Preface to the New Testament," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 111.

account. The closest the fourth gospel comes to depicting Jesus as suffering in his crucifixion is his expression of thirst—“I am thirsty”—though even this, Jesus says, is “in order to fulfill the scripture,” and because he knows that “all has now been accomplished” (John 19:28).

Luther was correct that the Johannine passion is a theological wonder. There are powerful motifs throughout this passion account that are unique to John. (Another example is the charcoal fire where Peter warms himself and beside which he denies Jesus three times (John 18:18). The only other appearance of a charcoal fire in John’s gospel is the post-resurrection account in which Jesus graciously feeds the hapless fisherfolk and gives Peter—three times—the chance to reverse his denial and speak his love for Jesus (John 21:9). The charcoal fire is a true literary easter egg!

But John’s passion narrative is not without significant problems. The Passion narrative in the fourth gospel is infamous for its role in contributing to anti-Jewish bias and violence. Regardless of how it functioned in its original contexts, the repeated antagonistic use of the phrase “the Jews” (*hoi Ioudaioi*) in translations like the NRSV is irresponsible on this side of the holocaust. Some form of the phrase appears in over 25% of the verses of this passion reading from John.

While a new translation cannot prevent every potential abuse, the updated version of Gordon Lathrop’s and Gail Ramshaw’s *Readings for the Assembly* (Augsburg Fortress 2022) is a profound improvement. Because the fourth gospel itself uses the same blunt phrase to refer to clearly distinct groups of Jewish people, *Readings for the Assembly* helpfully uses more accurate phrases such as “Judeans,” and “Judean authorities,” and “chief priests of the temple,” while continuing to use phrases from the NRSV such as “King of the Jews” and “Jewish day of preparation.”

Preaching begins with the scripture text. Before we begin to preach our sermon on Good Friday, we preachers need to ensure that the scripture translation itself can faithfully speak a life-giving word in today’s context.

Benjamin M. Stewart

Vigil of Easter April 4, 2026

**A rich smorgasbord of 12 Hebrew scripture passages
to choose from**

Romans 6:3–11

John 20:1–18

Reflections on Vigil Texts

“**T**his is the night...” This ancient refrain punctuates the Vigil of Easter liturgy as God’s salvation story for the

world stretches out before God’s people. In the holy dark, the divine, deliberative work of resurrection mysteriously and miraculously happens. Thus, the church gathers to remember, anticipate, and proclaim that *this is the night* Love has risen so that “we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

The smorgasbord of scripture readings—and in particular the appointed twelve Hebrew texts—provide an accounting of the wondrous narratives that shape our imagination about God’s power and presence. *This is the night* to retell the creation story or Jonah’s journey into the belly of the fish, the flood story or the exodus through the Red Sea, Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones or Daniel’s fiery furnace. There are countless creative ways to read and enact these stories together as a community of faith. With movement and props and a bit of flair, the stories come to life in the telling, resulting in a liturgy often beloved by children and adults alike. And the darkness of evening hours holds it all.

For many worshiping communities, the gospel acclamation is the time to turn up the lights in the worshiping space and sing out the Easter alleluias. This preparatory moment makes way for the gathered to hear John’s telling of the resurrection. It becomes the crescendo of the word section that points, finally, to God’s salvific work in the resurrected Christ. The sacraments of baptism and holy communion will sustain the crescendo in the light of Easter joy. But I wonder: if *this is the night* of mystery and miracle, perhaps the Vigil of Easter liturgy asks those assembled to hold the darkness longer, closer? And if not the liturgy, then the gospel itself and Mary Magdalene’s journey to the tomb?

John 20:1 is clear on the details: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.” These simple yet significant specifics tell us that resurrection did indeed happen under the blanket of night, for the tomb was empty upon Mary’s startled approach. What might it mean to preach this gospel with the lights kept dimmed enabling the “still dark” to linger in the hearts of the hearers? Could the setting of Mary Magdalene’s solo venture say more about the salvation of our God at work in the darkness? The appointed Vigil readings already offered up some of the biblical stories of God’s fondness of the dark: the darkness of the deep at creation (Genesis 1), the stormy cloud-cover during the forty days of the flood (Genesis 7–9), the divine cloud of darkness that enabled the Israelites’ water-crossing (Exodus 14), and Jonah’s God-moment while three-days in the inky gut of a fish. Perhaps *this is the night* the church experiences the truth of God’s holy darkness most clearly? And a sermon that speaks into the “still dark” of Mary Magdalene’s journey may help us to know more fully the beautiful mystery of resurrection promise.

I offer a few ideas for your consideration that may assist

in this sermon angle.

First, the gospel acclamation, though anticipatory of the Easter proclamation, may provide a more subdued moment with its celebratory song. Namely, with lights kept low, the moment may call for less organ and brass and more antiphon and acapella. For *this is the night* to savor the “still dark” of God’s working out our salvation. Some musical ideas include simple chants from the resource *Singing our Prayer*, including “In Silence We Wait” (17), “In the Lord I’ll Be Ever Thankful” (18), “Laudate Omnes Gentes” (22), or “Light and Darkness” (24). These sorts of pieces or others like them of your choosing will provide an acclamation of quiet praise that honors the quiet dark.

Another idea involves candles. With a preaching focus on the resurrection of Jesus that is discovered in the darkness, one may seek to kindle the light of Christ while extending the shadows of night. Traditionally, the Vigil of Easter liturgy begins with the lighting of the new fire and the blessing of a new pascal candle amid the declaration that Jesus is the one who gives the light of life to all the world. In the midst of the sermon, the light from the pascal candle could be passed among worshipers as Jesus is revealed to Mary Magdalene and, through her testimony, to us. Once the candles are lit, the assembly sings together then moves (carefully) to the baptismal font for a baptism or an affirmation of baptism. There the light of Christ burns bright, and Romans 6 is experienced in real time for *this is the night* the waters of promise shimmer in shadow and light.

And finally, the hymn of the day following the sermon can provide an emphasis on God’s work in the darkness experienced in the stories of faith. Brian Wren’s text in “Joyful is the Dark” (*All Creation Sings*, 1096) is an exemplary iteration on the theme. Imagine the flickering of the handheld candles as the assembly sings, “Joyful is the dark, coolness of the tomb, waiting for the wonder of the morning; never was that midnight touched by dread and gloom: darkness was the cradle of the dawning” (stanza 4). These words together with whole liturgy of the Vigil of Easter preach God’s salvation for us, for indeed *this is the night*.

Justin Lind-Ayres

Editor’s note: Another approach to the Gospel reading from John 20. It seems particularly good for the Vigil since Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb while it is still dark. Some preachers may choose to preach on John 20 on Easter Sunday.

Easter Vigil April 4, 2026

Selected Old Testament Readings

Romans 6:3–11

John 20:1–18

Engaging the Gospel for Preaching

Early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark—not after the sun had risen as in three of the gospels. In John, Mary Magdalene comes alone “while it was still dark.” Before the first fire of Easter was lit. Before the vigil candles circled the sanctuary with light. Even in the dark she could see that the stone had been removed.

But she didn’t shout, “Christ is risen! Alleluia!” She didn’t go into the tomb. Perhaps she didn’t dare to go in alone. It was a bit like finding your apartment door open when you return late at night and you were sure you had locked it. Who wants to go in alone? Mary ran to get Simon Peter and the other disciple (“the one whom Jesus loved.”) I’m grateful that John never names that beloved disciple. He left room for us to put our names there. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,” Mary said, still out of breath, “and we do not know where they have laid him.” Why did she say “we”? Who was with her? That would be another sermon entirely. What we do know is this: she assumes robbery, not resurrection. Someone has stolen Jesus’ body. Simon Peter and the other disciple run to the tomb and find it exactly as she told them. Simon Peter goes in, sees the grave clothes neatly folded and says nothing. The other disciple who reached the tomb first also went in: “he saw and believed.”

But it is not that simple for everyone. Mary stood weeping. Weeping to be robbed of even this final goodbye. Weeping because Jesus was dead and she was still alive. When she does go into the tomb, she sees two angels sitting where Jesus’ body had been. Why didn’t the two disciples see them? Had the grave clothes been transformed into angels? The angels don’t faze her. She treats them like orderlies stripping a hospital bed where you expected to find a friend. “They’ve taken away my Lord and I don’t know where they have laid him.” She was certain that Jesus was dead.

When she turned to leave, she saw someone standing there. She heard his voice—the same question the angels had asked, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She supposed that he was the gardener. “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Why would the gardener have taken Jesus’ body? Why didn’t he help her? Why did he just stand there? Strange, that voice so familiar.

But, no, it couldn't be. She had been there when he died, standing near the cross with his mother. She heard him cry out "It is finished." Finished. Her faith finished—our faith, too, at times. Perhaps we have gone to the garden in the early morning while it's still dark or at night when all the shades are pulled and everyone else is asleep. We have gone to bury Bible stories that once seemed so certain. But no more. We've grown up!

"Mary"

"Rabbouni!" (that is Rabbi, Teacher)

Whatever we may have heard about Mary Magdalene before, what we need to remember now is that she was one of Jesus' first rabbinical students.

Just when she thought everything was over, she heard Jesus call her name. "Do not hold onto me," he said. Of course she wanted to hold onto him. To be sure that this was Jesus and not the gardener. **But Jesus was the gardener. The gardener was Jesus.** Do you remember? Just after Jesus came into Jerusalem, he gave a lesson on gardening. "Very truly I tell you," he said, "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." If Jesus had been revived like Lazarus, he would have come walking out of the tomb, a dead man resuscitated. That didn't happen—not in John, not in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Jesus was already gone when the stone was rolled away. If Jesus had been revived, he would be bound to the past, to the geography of Palestine, to those who could hold onto him.

"Do not hold me," Jesus said. That is not how you will know me from now on. I will be with you in some other way. I will be with you and with those not yet born. I will be with the ones who know they are dying and with those who wonder what it means to be alive. I will be with you in a word spoken, a story told and retold. A piece of bread broken and shared. From an empty tomb, a cleft in the rock from which you may see a glimpse of God. "Do not hold me but go tell the others: I have seen the Lord."

This day, April 4, marks the anniversary of Martin Luther King's death fifty-eight years ago. Perhaps because of Dr. King and the tragic deaths of young, black people, I've also heard Maya Angelou's voice in those moments just after waking. She, too, had Jesus on her mind and in her heart and soul. Sometimes we hear the power of resurrection most clearly in the voices of those who have been kept down—listen to a few lines from one of her poems:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise...

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise...

Maya Angelou was not Jesus. She didn't claim to be, but she knew resurrection was more than history. Once you hear the rhyming, it's hard to stop! I hear Jesus picking up the rhyme.

You may bind me with your doctrines,
And decide who can be saved.
You may see me as a martyr
And bring flowers to my grave.
You can say it's all a myth
You don't want to seem unwise—
But then I'll call your name
I will arise. Yes, I will rise.

Barbara Lundblad

Easter Sunday April 5, 2026

Jeremiah 31:1–6 or Acts 10:34–43

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24

Colossians 3:1–4 or Acts 10:34–43

Matthew 28:1–10 or John 20:1–18

Engaging the Texts

First things first: look at that list of texts! There are lots of options with which to engage! Decisions are before us. Some congregations have a pattern that is "always" followed, a few don't even realize there are options, most leave it up to the preacher or worship leaders. At my best, I read through all the texts some weeks in advance, listen for the pulls of the Spirit, and then settle into what feels like the best combination for *this* season in *this* faithful community, mindful that on a day like Easter less can certainly be more. **Acts 10** is a synopsis of sorts, Peter's sermon for Cornelius and his household when the Spirit widened the circle. It captures Jesus' activity (doing good and healing all who were oppressed), death and resurrection, then claims Peter and the community's role as witnesses, and invites the listeners (let's include us in that cadre) to be witnesses. That witness thread can go a long way any day, especially on Easter. **Jeremiah 31** and **Psalm 118** share themes of steadfast love, survival, endurance, faithfulness, and whole-bodied praise. I enjoy the rhetoric of Jeremiah (again I will build and you shall be built... again tambourines and dancing... again you shall plant and enjoy the fruits). Psalm 118 similarly includes building images and the classic "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." **Colossians 3** is small but mighty: seek the things above.

For the Gospel this year we have the option of engaging Matthew 28, or the perennial John 20. Since **John 20** is suggested in these pages for the Vigil, I'll lean toward **Matthew 28**.

Unique to Matthew's telling are the pairing of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary—and an earthquake! If an earthquake isn't enough, the angel's appearance was like lightning and the angel's clothes as white as snow. Seeing the angel, the guards posted at the grave became like dead men. Fear/afraid gets four mentions while joy gets one. There's clear practicality in the ordering of this story with its acknowledgement of emotion and the women's search for Jesus, the wisdom to come and see, then the direction to go and tell. Before the two women get far, Jesus greets them with similar practicality and understanding: "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Pastoral Reflections

Going to tombs. Matthew's telling of this ancient story doesn't include carrying spices or enacting burial rituals. In Matthew the Marys simply go to the grave to be there. I imagine this was a brave and risky act, for this expedition meant potentially facing the male guards. But they needed to go, they needed to be there. This makes me curious about the cemeteries, the places of death, where we and our congregations must go. Maybe it's the bereaved who finds themselves at the gravestone of a loved one at lunch time, hot coffee in a thermos and sandwiches wrapped in cellophane, pulling up a lawn chair, simply needing to be close. Where are the tombs that we must visit? What does it feel like in these spaces? How do we respond? I'd certainly include cemeteries and gravesites, but also other places where we experience death or fear of death: the uncertain diagnosis, the injustice, the site of violence in the church's neighborhood, the place of war. Grounding ourselves in grief and at the tomb reminds us that Easter new life doesn't simply happen; rather, it begins with Good Friday, it begins at the tomb.

Fear and joy. "So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples." This combination of emotions holds so much and can provide an entry for many. Fear and joy. Nervous and excited. Terrified and hopeful. On the cusp of resurrection, the emotions that Mary and Mary express are key: pushing and pulling, drawing them (and us) into Easter life. Where do we experience both fear and joy? How do we let these emotions draw us where we need to go? Too much fear and we may never dare take the step. Too much joy and maybe it doesn't have the same impact. Living with aging and changing bodies, holding onto hope for our children, addressing an addiction. Fear and joy are a potent duo. I'm drawn to a simple song by John Bell (Iona Community, widely found on the web) called Don't Be Afraid. "*Don't be afraid, my love is stronger, my love is stronger*

than your fear. Don't be afraid, my love is stronger and I have promised, promised to be always near." I've used this in varied ways, but often with the most impact by briefly teaching it, and then interspersing it through the Easter sermon.

Go and tell. In Matthew's resurrection story twice we hear: "Go and tell". While this gospel begins at the tomb, it doesn't end there. Go and tell, and they are off and running, emotions and all. In Acts Peter speaks of himself and his community as witnesses chosen by God. The Marys certainly become these witnesses. With a bit of curiosity and a keen trust in the Spirit, we too can be witnesses of new life in Jesus. Where is God doing a new thing in our community? Our neighborhood? Our life? How can grounding ourselves at the tomb (impossible as it may feel) and being honest about our fear and joy carry us into resurrection new life? With a few prompting questions (perhaps in the weeks prior to Easter if you hope to integrate them into an Easter sermon, or in a series during the Easter season), how could we gather, curate, and share this new life in our midst? Witnesses, all of us!

Jen Nagel

Second Sunday of Easter April 12, 2026

Acts 2:14a, 22–32

Psalm 16

1 Peter 1:3–9

John 20:19–31

Engaging the Texts

Doubt is a common thread that runs through the lessons appointed for the Second Sunday of Easter. All three turn on dynamics between doubting and believing, between wavering faith and great faith. In very different ways, they each present the resurrection as an antidote to doubt.

The opening verses of 1 Peter proclaim the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ in terms that are full-throated and straight-forward. We hear the good news that by the great mercy of God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, we too have received new birth, salvation, and an imperishable inheritance in heaven. This affirmation was originally intended to reassure and comfort Christian communities in Asia Minor who were experiencing trials of one kind or another. They were suffering. They were too far removed in time to have known Jesus themselves, and yet they believed—mostly. The writer invokes the resurrection to strengthen their wavering faith, to renew their sense of community and to inspire their missionary zeal. Resurrection is encouragement in time of doubt.

In the lesson from Acts, we hear Peter preaching to the great crowd in Jerusalem on Pentecost. Newly filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter convincingly proclaimed Jesus, whom God had raised from the dead, as the Messiah. He appealed to his fellow Jews, who did not yet believe, by comparing the resurrected Jesus to their great king and prophet David, who “both died and was buried, and his tomb is here with us to this day.” Long ago David had foreseen the resurrection of a Messiah who would succeed him one day. For this crowd of seekers and doubters, the resurrection was confirmation that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

In the story of Thomas from John’s Gospel, the doubt is more prominent and more personal. The writer lets us glimpse the struggle between doubt and belief going on inside of Thomas. The resurrection, or rather the reports of the resurrection, raised Thomas’ suspicions and doubts. Thomas knew Jesus. He had experienced his wisdom, compassion, and power. He had been among his closest followers. Jesus had called him friend. And now Jesus was dead. Thomas’ grief was complicated by the joy of the other disciples, who claimed to have seen Jesus, who said he was alive. Thomas refused to believe until he saw the resurrected Jesus for himself, until he could put his own finger in those horrible wounds and know this resurrected being was really his Jesus. And when he did, the doubt disappeared. Thomas believed. He proclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” Resurrection became an experience of recognition.

Pastoral Reflections

This theme of “resurrection as recognition” is where I would go if I were preaching on the Second Sunday of Easter. I would take as my guide Robert Smith’s remarkable commentary on the Gospel of John, *Wounded Lord: Reading John through the Eyes of Thomas*,² written in the last year of his life. Robert Smith was a beloved professor of New Testament and the editor of this “Preaching Helps” feature in *Currents* for many, many years.

In this book, Smith challenges the traditional characterization of Thomas as the man of little faith, the doubter who demanded extraordinary tactile proof before he would believe that Jesus was alive. Instead, Smith sees Thomas as the one who finally understood who Jesus was, crucified and risen Lord. Of all the disciples, Thomas was the one who grasped that the identity of Jesus was most profoundly revealed on the cross, in his death, in his wounds. Thomas had to see that the wounds were still there. Jesus’ core identity had not changed. This was the same Jesus, known by his wounds in life, in

2. Robert H. Smith, Donna Duensing, editor. *Wounded Lord: Reading John Through the Eyes of Thomas; A Pastoral and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel*. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009).

death, and in his glorious resurrection.

Thomas’ focus on the wounds of Christ opens fruitful avenues for preaching. Through Thomas’ eyes we see that Jesus’ self-giving love and willing vulnerability are the perfect incarnation of God. God’s way of being is revealed in Jesus’ care for the poor, his blessing of children, his kindness to outcasts, in his death. The enduring wounds are proof that God’s way is the way of the cross, not the way of power and domination. The wounds do not go away. Jesus carries them with him when he returns to glory. The wounds are part of the core identity of God for all eternity.

The wounds on the body of the glorified Jesus also show us the pattern of the Christian life. Jesus calls us to live in solidarity with all the wounded ones as he did. Because the one we worship as Lord and God has holes in his hands, we do not need to hide our wounds or pretend to be invulnerable. There is no shame in our scars when we share them with our Lord and God. We can even embrace the mystery of death confident that we are accepted with all our wounds. Jesus, who bore the marks of death in his glorified body, empowers us to accept our limits and live boldly with our wounds. Robert Smith lived such a life and worshipped such a God. I was privileged to preach on this text at his memorial service in the Chapel of the Cross at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in 2006.

Phyllis Anderson

Third Sunday of Easter April 19, 2026

Acts 2:14a, 36–41

Psalm 116:1–4, 12–19

1 Peter 1:17–23

Luke 24:13–35

Engaging the Texts

The Acts text introduces Peter’s Pentecost sermon, then jumps immediately to its conclusion to show its result—the people’s reaction to his preaching. After telling the story of Jesus, including his unjust persecution and death at the hands of the crowds (represented by those listening!—that’s the sermon we don’t hear, but to which they respond), they take full responsibility: “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’ [They] said..., Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven...” (vv 37–38). We are to model ourselves on their eager responsiveness! Oh, that we had such energy in our preaching, or the people’s responses! We might schedule a baptism on this day to feel the enthusiasm of parents and

sponsors responding eagerly to the promise of new life.

Psalms 113-116 are called the *hallelujah* psalms because they all include “Praise the Lord” (Hebrew: *hallelujah*). In the Jewish liturgical tradition, they were used in connection with the great festivals.³

Christians may not recognize the English translation of “Praise the Lord” as “Hallelujah,” but we should grasp the connection! Using this psalm in the Easter season, we are reminded that even with resurrection, Jesus carried the marks of crucifixion with him. Just so, we bear the marks of our turmoil and losses with us. I hear the harmonies of Richard Smallwood’s version of *I Love the Lord, who heard my cry, and pitied ev’ry groan....*, slow and plaintive: *Long as I live, and troubles rise, I’ll hasten to his throne*: a much beloved version of this psalm in the African American communities where I have long served and still live.⁴

Notice in the well-known resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus in Luke that the disciples are at first disappointed. Resurrection doesn’t look like what they had hoped for. They wanted something more, something bigger: “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (v. 21). Commentators often seek details that can’t be found in the text: more information about Cleopas (he’s only here in scripture) or the town Emmaus (it’s out and away, but where, that’s not so clear). Some details of scripture are hard to pin down. But there’s a shape in this Lukan text that’s vibrant and alive, surely as much for us today as it was for those who encountered that stranger on the road the first Easter evening. That is what engages us, as much as the disciples on the road, that we meet someONE, who changes us and our hopes.

Pastoral Reflections

Perhaps you have experienced this yourself: congregations can go through years, yes, even decades of slow, steady decline. Of losing ground for so many years that nobody remembers when it started... Then it is time to get a new pastor, and suddenly there is so much fear and anxiety. Will they even survive?

Rarely are the questions as bold, as self-reflective and as faith-filled as the one the listeners to Peter’s sermon ask! Ah, that we might so inspire each other to such boldness and faithfulness! Given where we stand right now and given that we have this gift of the gospel, what then should WE do? Alas, it can be hard to know where to start. But it can help to name the grief of the losses we are experiencing, if we can bear to speak them. We who have placed the seed of the Word into our children, as faithfully as we have known how to do it, have watched many of them walk away from the church to fill their lives with other things.

Jesus, stay with us! We have no imagination left, so little faithfulness, and we are afraid.

Early in my ministry I knew an elder, Betty, who was the last in her family line. Her mother died in childbirth with her younger sibling. As each of my three children turned 20 months, she reminded me that that was the age she was when her mother died in childbirth, when her only sibling was still-born. That grief shaped her life, but with a depth we only knew after she died.

The church inherited Betty’s few personal effects, mostly some historical documents. We discovered that all the people who were dear to her died in a cluster of weeks echoing the date of her mother’s tragic death: her father and the two aunts who raised her. It was startling when we discovered that Betty died 80 years to the day of her mother’s death in childbirth.

But I know another story about Betty, as well. When she was dying, the church choir she had sung in for fifty years came to her nursing home and surrounded her with song. She who could no longer even speak, raised her head and mouthed the words with them of her favorite hymn: *My faith looks up to thee, thou lamb of Calvary, Savior divine...*

There’s a report from the early 1920s about an expedition to Antarctica. In the account, it was related that the party of explorers, at the extremity of their strength, had the constant delusion that there was *one more member* of their group than could actually be counted. The poet T. S. Eliot heard their story and saw again in his mind the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus. He writes:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you...
-- But who is that on the other side of you?⁵

Wherever we are on the road, Jesus meets us and we encounter the Living God. In the meeting we become people with a life, a hope, and a future.

Janet S. Peterman

3. <http://comments.montrealcathedral.ca/aeas3m.shtml>

4. *Hymns, Songs & Spiritual Songs* #362

5. T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” Lines 360ff, in *Complete Poems and Plays*, 48.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 26, 2026

Acts 2:42–47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19–25

John 10:1–10

Engaging the Texts

As a social activist, I am humbled by today's reading from Acts 2. The early Christians didn't just stand in solidarity with the marginalized, "they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:45). Scholars have called into question the existence of such an ideal commune on both historical and textual grounds. But even if Acts 2 represents an ideal that was never truly reached, the bar has been set. And it has been set *high*.

If the contrition I feel at falling short of this self-less Acts community were not enough, we also have 1 Peter. This text tells us, "For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly" (2:19).

So, for those keeping track: Sell all you have and give to those in need, suffer for the sake of righteousness, and don't complain. Do these things and, the author of 1 Peter suggests, "you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls" (2:25).

Before going any further, a word of caution: 1 Peter addresses slaves and ought to be reproached for this. Although the social context was one in which the Christian movement would have suffered reproach for preaching the release of slaves, popular opinion ought never be a rationale for human suffering. Christians need to be reminded that our God who frees people from suffering and bondage never asks us to remain in abusive relationships by free choice or otherwise.

Our God certainly never suggests that we should seek suffering or abuse. However, when we do experience pain or reproach for seeking after righteousness, this is not to be spurned. Likewise, Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Luke 10:27). This means giving what we do not need (and honestly discerning what we truly need) but not giving to the point of our own deprivation. Even the idyllic Acts 2 Christians shared their possessions and continued to break bread together.

Nevertheless, the examples of these early Christians in Acts and 1 Peter are all *good* things to do within the right context. But they are good things *because* they give us a picture of the way in which we can live a Christ-centered life. They are not intended to be battering rods with which to make one another feel bad that we are not fully living this life in the present.

For this reason, the image of Christ as Shepherd takes central place in my reading of this text. For, while the sheep know the Shepherd's voice and follow the Shepherd, it is the *Shepherd* who leads the sheep. When a sheep is lost, it is the *Shepherd* who seeks that sheep out (Luke 15:3-7).

Therefore, in the face of insurmountable odds, in a world always in need of more mercy, we can take comfort in the words of the psalmist: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).

Pastoral Reflections

When someone walks into my office, one of the first things they see is a small wooden sheepfold. The gates are made with Lincoln Logs. Inside the fold, painted wooden sheep gather around their shepherd. This isn't really a toy so much as devotional material and its origin is a children's faith formation program titled "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd." The sheepfold helps children three to six years old unfold the promise of the Gospel.

It works like this: In the first lesson, the catechist tells the story of the Good Shepherd from John 10, emphasizing that the sheep know their shepherd's voice and the shepherd calls his own sheep by name. Together, the catechist and the children re-enact the story using the materials, while the catechist imagines with the children how wonderful it must be to be one of these sheep the shepherd cares for so much. Over time, as the children continue to return to the sheepfold, the catechist reaffirms the story and encourages deeper wondering in the children. Wondering together about the names that the shepherd calls the sheep, the catechist is able to watch the children's comprehension of the parable deepen over time.

Having experienced this method with groups of children, it is a joy to watch them move from playfully calling their flock names like "Fluffy" and "Baa Baa" to beckoning the sheep with their own names and the names of their friends and family members. In this transition, the children internalize the promise that Jesus, our Good Shepherd, cares for *us* and calls *us each* individually by *name*.

Indeed, our Acts reading picks up immediately from last week when "those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized" (Acts 2:41)—a baptism which, just as it does today, calls each believer *by name*, a child of God, marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit forever.

It is from this personal relationship with God who knows us, cares for us, and leads us beside still waters (Psalm 23:2) that the mutuality and fellowship of the Acts community flows.

The model of the Acts community is thus not intended to be a model of works-based righteousness, but an example (among many included in the New Testament) of how people

called and inspired to a vocation of discipleship by Christ might live together and in service to our Shepherd.

Amy Lindeman Allen

Fifth Sunday of Easter May 3, 2026

Acts 7:55–60

Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16

1 Peter 2:2–10

John 14:1–14

Engaging the Texts

The gospel text for this week is one that is commonly read in the context of funerals and memorial services. This is a reading of comfort and strength for many. It holds the promise of God's dwelling place with many rooms along with the promise that Jesus goes to prepare a place for the followers. Standing in the tradition of Israel (evoking images of intimacy with God and the House of the Lord), this text from the Gospel of John lifts up a safe haven for the faithful into the ages of ages.

Dr. Allen Callahan, a scholar who focuses on Johannine writings, emphasizes the significance of community, home, and safety in the context of desert and nomadic communities in the Ancient Middle East. Yet, within the lectionary reading even the disciples struggle with what Jesus is telling them. Thomas doesn't seem to think the disciples know the way to this holy dwelling and Philip asks Jesus again to show them the way. The disciples long for assurance, and likely this is the message we long to hear at funerals and in the sermon this Sunday within our own contexts. Especially when the text is coupled with the martyrdom of the deacon Stephen and a psalmist seeking help from God, people long to be reminded of something greater in the face of danger and death.

Preachers have the opportunity to acknowledge the challenges in our lives and to turn our attention with the psalmist and gospel to the promise of refuge and dwelling place. Depending on context and events in the congregation, this day offers the opportunity to challenge people with the witness of Stephen, to offer comfort to those who need to hear a word of hope or strength, or to create a space in which to accomplish both. In all things, though, God is lifted up as the place of sanctuary and everlasting hope.

Pastoral Reflections

Many years ago, I came to know a man named Moses in Uganda. Moses was building a house outside of his village. Over the years this house has become a haven for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender in need of safety in

the midst of a harsh church and political realities in his country. The house has also been a place of employment and safety for an albino man who is threatened by the dominant culture. It seems that whoever is struggling, is unsafe, or is being marginalized, Moses welcomes them into his home and offers care and strength for the journey. He creates a space, a safe haven. Today's texts of refuge and holy dwelling place make me think of Moses as one who provides a place of welcome when life and the world seem stacked against people.

In much the same way the work of sanctuary congregations across the United States speaks to the belief that we create a holy dwelling place for migrants and those on the margins. These congregations do not wait for heaven but set aside a place where immigrants can feel safe this side of heaven. The work of Moses in Uganda and the work of sanctuary congregations is not easy. This is faithful and risky business. Faithful people have put themselves on the line much like Stephen. The image of people engaging in the creation of God's home is powerful when set alongside 1 Peter 2:2-10 with its image of people becoming living stones built into a priesthood. What a gift to imagine people building the holy dwelling place "here on earth, as it is in heaven."

If one goes with the 1 Peter text, the story of the Jewish people building the booths of Sukkot, becomes a wonderful image, as people construct a holy place to remember God's dwelling among them on earth. Throughout the lectionary today, the images of refuge and holy habitation for God's people become a refrain and promise for all. The texts offer comfort to those longing to know promise, perhaps in the face of a diagnosis, addiction, broken relationships, or the loss of a loved one. At the same time these texts offer challenge and call for faith-filled people to engage the promise of God's refuge and dwelling place here and now and into life everlasting.

Brad Froslee

Sixth Sunday of Easter May 10, 2026

Acts 17:22–31

Psalm 66:8–20

1 Peter 3:13–22

John 14:15–21

Reflections on the Texts

Today we listen in as Paul preaches to an intellectual, secular crowd. He is savvy in using language that will draw outsiders to the faith. John's gospel addresses and reassures the church in Jesus' farewell discourse. Every time we preach, we speak to this tension: the secular world and the life of faith.

These texts provide a way to address this tension. Both texts describe the interrelatedness between God and creation. There is no fracture between the Holy and creation, between the secular and sacred, between the church and the world: “the spirit abides with you and will be in you” (John 14: 17). These texts bring to mind a complex and beautiful Celtic knot. Our identity is inherently intertwined with others and with God, with church and society, in a spiritual journey that tends the interior life and the exterior life of the neighbor.

George MacLeod, the Scottish pastor and founder of the Iona community, told this story in a sermon:

Years ago there was a terrible drought in Canada. If rain didn't come at once, thousands would be ruined. So the word passed around that the next afternoon there would be a service in church to pray for rain to come at once.

From long distances God's faithful people came. But there was one strange part to this story—only one person brought an umbrella. Why? Because she expected it to rain. There was really only one faithful person there and she was a little child. Her faith was declared in an act.

In his farewell address, Jesus reassures his disciples, “I will not leave you alone.” Did the disciples believe Jesus would really accompany them in his absence? Did this ease their troubled hearts enough to carry their umbrellas of faith into the world, trusting God's immediate presence and the Spirit's guidance?

The Greek word for advocate, *paraclete*, means, “one called to your side,” a word used to describe a person who stood up with another who was on trial. With no court appointed lawyers in Jesus' day, defendants had to try their own cases. A *paraclete*, an expert in Roman law, sat with the accused. Their role was not to address the judge, but to encourage, guide, and help throughout the trial.

How can the preacher help listeners imagine this same *Paraclete* guiding and encouraging them in whatever “courtroom” struggles and challenges they face—to help them realize God's desire of shalom: peace, wholeness, and healing for them and all God's creation?

The Spirit draws us into the very presence of the life of the trinity. She comes to us through the death and resurrection of Christ. Like a relay race, Jesus' breath is passed on to the Spirit who continues to breathe life, courage, and inspiration in us—to enliven and restore community, to release us from fear and timidity.

In Sallie McFague's book *Life Abundant*, she reminds us that God, in Jesus, breathes the spirit into our very beings, transcendent and radically close. God is the one who is more awesome than all the galaxies in the universe and nearer to us

than our own breath. This God is the one who invites us into community to live and flourish together as God's beloved.

McFague writes that Jesus presents an entirely different kind of economy, an abundance that demands a cruciform life. This means a give and take among all the creatures and entities on our planet, involving sacrifices by some so others may survive. A cruciform kind of generosity is the way back to God; it means to live differently, with frugality, making sacrifices so all members of the global family may thrive.

But we have done a grave disservice to our Creator and our interdependence as we neglect, hurt, and destroy the earth and her creatures. Consider planning your worship and preaching for this Sunday around “Care for Creation.” Our climate crisis is a spiritual crisis, requiring us to reconsider what it means to be human. These ancient texts call us back to our interdependence and the gift of humility.

The language in John's gospel is totally relational. I in you, you in me, the father in me, I in him, we in each other. Interdependence. Like the earth's processes, we are all wrapped up in each other. We can only thrive *together*, in this magnificent web of life.

Once, as part of a sermon, I threw a huge ball of yarn from the pulpit into the congregation. Whoever catches it throws it to another worshipper, with each person holding onto the yarn they caught. As the yarn is thrown around the sanctuary, a web is created in this art installation flash mob. Scissors were on hand for people to cut the yarn and make bracelets for each other.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples had to live a new way. Jesus assures them they had what they needed—the Spirit at their side. They were called to be Church—to live differently. We are being called to live differently, faithfully, subversively, as we care for the earth and our siblings who share the same air, water, and light. This ecological crisis is an opportunity to check our trust—do we believe the advocate will be at our side whispering encouragement, empowering us, bringing us toward life and meaning in ways we never expected? God makes a covenant with us, promises to be with us and with this world. We are in it together, related, inter-related, and dependent upon each other. And into the world we go with our umbrellas of faith.

Mary Halvorson

Ascension of Our Lord

May 14, 2026

Acts 1:1–11

Psalm 47

Ephesians 1:15–23

Luke 24:44–53

Engaging the Texts

With such a brief introduction to the Book of Acts, it may be tempting to rush on in our eagerness to get to the action. It may also be tempting to give priority to today's appointed gospel. Instead, let us slow down and appreciate the details that paved the way in Acts. Even if Acts is not your preferred text, it may help to inform preaching on Luke's ascension.

Immediately we are reminded of the “first book.” The listeners need to know that this is a continuation of the story that began in Luke. For the author it is very important to frame all that will take place as an extension of Luke's gospel. Most congregations could use that simple reminder—especially since the assembly has heard a lot from John in recent weeks, with just a bit of Luke on Easter 3 and today. Jesus' followers may now look to “all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning” to find guidance when the guide is no longer with them.

In this first sentence we are not only directed to the past but encouraged to look toward the future with the promise of “instructions through the Holy Spirit.” The author speaks as if the audience already knows what is coming. Perhaps they do. They and we hear this account of the ascension while anticipating “the sound like the rush of a violent wind” that will soon follow. There will be very little time for the disciples to catch their breath before the Spirit rushes in and exhales them into the world as apostles.

Only two sentences in, the author feels a need to present “proof” that the resurrection did in fact take place. According to the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary on Acts, this specific word *Tekmerion* appears in ancient rhetoric to describe “the hard evidence that convinces the skeptic or confirms the authority of the apologist (40).” There are still people in the community who doubt, as well as believers who are on the defensive, otherwise the author would have no need to make mention. This is really not so surprising. Don't forget that the disciples were the first to refuse the women's proclamation as an “idle tale” — they took some repeated convincing. In the Emmaus story we were reminded that they didn't recognize Jesus, even when he was standing right in front of them. In our communities as well, there is a struggle to trust even though we have once again lived through Good Friday and Easter

morning. The word “proof” may direct us back to the gospel of Luke again. The witness of scripture provides an important resource to reassure the believer and strengthen faith.

In the next sentence there is a reference to Jesus' activity during the forty days since the day of resurrection. We're told that he spoke about the kingdom of God. Looking back at Luke, it's clear that the kingdom of God has very little similarity to an earthly kingdom. Therefore, it is a little disappointing that the disciples kick off the ascension scene by asking “Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus' teaching did not seem to sink in. For his part Jesus doesn't bother to correct them or even answer their question. Instead, he gives the answer to the question he would have them ask instead, “How can we take part in bringing the kingdom of God?” The disciples ask Jesus to act. Jesus responds by informing them what will happen to them and how they will act. Jesus is already shifting agency from himself to his followers. As always, Jesus is a step or two ahead of them.

Now we get to the exciting part—lift off! The scene echoes imagery we have encountered in the distant past. The moment brings to mind the last glimpses of Elijah in 2 Kings 2:11 as he ascended in a whirlwind. In that account, Elisha is left to move forward on his own. In Acts, Jesus is taken out of sight by a cloud, evoking the pillar of cloud that led the Hebrew people in the wilderness. The cloud also made an appearance in the Gospel of Luke at the transfiguration. Jesus has barely disappeared and the disciples are jolted out of their reverie by two men in white robes. This brings to mind the two men in white at the tomb in Luke. These characters also move the action forward—in both cases interrupting what could have been a very long time of dumbfounded staring. These two figures might also get us thinking again about the transfiguration, with Elijah and Moses on the mountain top. On the mountain there was also a desire to linger, but that moment was short-lived.

Pastoral Reflection

Ascension is not just a moment of looking back, but it is also a time to anticipate the future. The past is a resource, but the Spirit is on her way with the something new that will be necessary for this next phase of ministry. This moment is just a brief pause. The disciples cannot stand there indefinitely, gazing up at the sky in awe. The two men in white give them very little time before nudging them onward.

Ascension is a brief pause on the way for today's disciples. This festival is an opportunity to celebrate the resources of the past and to begin dreaming about the gifts the Spirit will soon bring. Is there a way to encourage both reminiscing and imagining? Consider a time of sharing about the congregation's past year or reach back even further into history. Take

time also to lift up hopes for the future of this ministry. This is an opportunity to involve many voices in the worship or preaching—empowering individuals across the generations to prepare and offer a brief reflection. Where is the push to move on coming from? Is there a need in the wider community that is calling these disciples to get moving? While pastors may often fancy themselves to be the ones who nudge the community forward, is there some other messenger showing up and calling these followers to keep going? Perhaps the festival itself calls for a movement away from the expected. Ascension does not have to be marked with a traditional worship service. Consider marking the ascension with something more informal, such as a meal with scripture and conversation.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Seventh Sunday of Easter May 17, 2026

Acts 1:6–14

Psalms 68:1–10, 32–35

1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11

John 17:1–11

Engaging the Texts

John 17 is not an ascension text. These words come shortly before Jesus is lifted up on the cross. Even if your congregation did not observe Ascension Day, the Acts story appears here in an abbreviated version. Consult the Ascension Day commentary for some insight into what is omitted from this Sunday's lesson from Acts. If you don't want to miss out on Ascension, the preacher may find it useful to expand the Acts text and make it the focus of this Sunday's worship. If not, some similar themes are heard in the gospel this week. We've been spending a lot of time with the gospel of John during Lent and Easter—and that is by no means an argument against sticking with it. The preacher and the assembly should by now be familiar with John's voice and story, which can be very useful for engaging with another one of Jesus' complex monologues.

Echoing the Ascension scene in Acts, this is also a transitional scene in the story of the church. As we pause for a moment here, Jesus reminds us of everything that came before. As the disciples listen in, maybe they remember the glorious signs they have seen Jesus perform. Each of these signs pointed to some aspect of the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Eavesdropping on the prayer we sense some of the intimacy of this relationship in action. Once again the disciples find themselves confused by Jesus' words, bringing to mind many other times they did not get what he was saying. Intrigued, but confused, those within earshot tend to draw in

closer to Jesus, lingering a little longer. As we see again and again in John, the result may not be greater understanding, but rather, a deeper relationship with Jesus.

This is not the first time we have seen Jesus pray like this. Recall the moment before raising Lazarus where Jesus prays very publicly for the benefit of all who hear. Perhaps we are to think back to that moment when Jesus approached the tomb, then astonished all with new life. That resurrection was just the dress rehearsal for what would come next. Don't forget that the raising of Lazarus is also the occasion for Jesus' opponents to begin plotting against him. Both of these prayers anticipate threat as well as promise. The word "glorify" in Jesus' prayer may sparkle and shine, but it is also tarnished with grim foreboding.

This prayer does not simply direct the listener to look back, but it makes a turn toward the future in the final verse of the pericope. In the verses that follow Jesus shifts his focus to the future of the ministry and his hopes for the disciples. While we may stop short of hearing the rest, we do get a hint of what may be coming by including verse 11. Jesus begins the prayer by drawing our attention to the past, but leaves us facing the unknown future. However, the disciples do not go forward unequipped. Jesus prays for the resources they will need in the days ahead—protection, grace, unity, relationship.

Pastoral Reflection

I'll never forget what it was like to proclaim portions of Jesus' last supper monologue when I was preparing to leave my first parish. I had not yet resigned. As I spoke those words of goodbye I was painfully aware of everything that was already taking place—and all that they did not know or could not understand. Caught up in my own intense emotions, Jesus' rambling and repetition made so much more sense. Of course! How does one say goodbye—honoring the time together, communicating the love that is felt, expressing hope for those they are leaving behind? It is impossible to put a relationship into words. Jesus has tried throughout John, but ultimately all words and signs point back to the truth that a relationship cannot be explained, it can only be experienced.

To this end, consider how you can help your assembly experience Jesus in this moment. This passage is a little complicated, but it is not long. Could this be an opportunity for the preacher or someone else to commit these words to memory, try to embody them? The experience of this passage should be of one listening to another praying from the bottom of their heart, not of another reading from a page. There is intense emotion here. Imagine watching someone you love deeply pray out loud on your behalf. Imagine that this prayer comes moments before the parting of death. Words will fail to express what body language can convey. If preaching is an event, so should be the proclamation of the gospel. It will not

be possible to explain it later if it isn't captured somehow in the telling.

The church is on the verge of Pentecost, but isn't that always the case? We are always poised, waiting to receive the next inspiration, the next equipping, the next sending out. Both scriptures from Acts and John remind us that the present moment is only to be a brief respite. The two men in white will not let the disciples keep staring up into heaven. Jesus will call an end to this dinner party and lead them out into the night. The church is to keep moving. We need these moments to gather, to look back to the past, and also to hear the promises of the future. But it won't be too long before some messenger shows up and reminds us that it is time to get going again.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Day of Pentecost May 24, 2026

Acts 2:1–21

Psalms 104:24–34, 35b

1 Corinthians 12:3b–13

John 20:19–23

The Letters and the Words Fall Away

It was as if winter had come to stay forever. After seven weeks without any sign of Jesus' promised return, the disciples, a disheveled and mournful band indeed, met to share their despair, to pray, and to practice listening for the sound of something other than loss and inconsolable grief. (Faith is the practice of such listening, said Martin Luther, which is why, when asked once to draw a picture of a Christian, he drew a picture of an ear).

After that day, no one could say exactly what had happened, but one of the on-lookers (a young girl, gathered along with thousands of others from every tribe and tongue for the annual Jewish Harvest Festival of Shavuot), wrote a poem in response, which she titled "Winterberries":

The bright red berries,
as signs of summer's end
and autumn's transition
into winter,
point not only to
the changes about to come,
but also to the way
in which we might
be signs
in the endings
of our own days.

That is,
by flaming out
in colors so vibrant
they say, "Look here!
We have something
to tell you we heard
from the earthworms,
who heard it
from the underground rivers
who heard it
from the stars
who heard it from the wind (the ruach)
Listen!
Even when the songs
have been silenced,
the music
still finds
a way."

And after writing her poem, what the young girl would tell you by way of explanation, is that somehow those closest to Jesus who had gathered to grieve his absence and to wonder together about how to proceed, suddenly (by wind/spirit/breath untamed), flamed out like the winterberries in the ending of their own day (at the ending of their own hope), and spoke a message so real and authentic and deep and true, it was as if the letters fell away and the words fell away, leaving only what lives and moves and has its being **inside** the letters and **inside** the words... (Rather like what you discover when you break open an apple to find what's **inside**; going deeper than the skin, deeper than the flesh, deeper than the core, all the way to the seed of the apple, where what you find inside is... an orchard)...

What the girl would say is, "It was like that," trying her best to describe what happened when the letters and the words fell away, and those who flamed out like winterberries uttered something that spoke to the deepest heart of everyone present, no matter what letters and words they normally used for talking about the weather and the stock market and what to buy for supper... Something more akin to music than to language... Something that had been received and conceived in earthworms and underground rivers and stars alike from the very beginning, finding its way to prophets and poets, dancers and dreamers, and finally to one who would carry (in his very body) the sound of that music in such an unsettling, expansive and excruciatingly open way, the authorities did everything possible to put it to an end.... The one who could not be confined by cross or grave or a single place or people, and in whose absence the disciples had now languished and despaired for fifty days, thinking the music had been silenced forever...

The sound of that “something,” so rung-sung with love and life, it brought 3,000 people that day all the way to the end of letters, to the end of words, and all the way into orchards, into winterberries... all the way into music... all the way to where the music always leads; that is, all the way to... *(What letters can we use, dear reader, or what words, to speak of... God... to speak of a Love that will go all the way to death, to absence, to make itself known?)*

Which is why the young girl who wrote the poem about winterberries has, since that day, suggested that anyone intending to preach on the story from Acts 2 might watch the film “Shawshank Redemption.” Specifically the scene in which a multitude of prisoners serving time in the notoriously unjust and cruel Shawshank Prison (prisoners of many different backgrounds and languages), are gathered outside in the prison yard, when, suddenly, from the loudspeaker (thanks to the ingenuity and “winterberry-daring” of one of the inmates), there comes the sound of two sopranos singing an aria from Mozart’s “Marriage of Figaro” (in Italian of course, a language few of the prisoners knew)... “Watch what happens,” the girl would say, “as those voices rise higher and higher... watch what happens, and you will have a sense of what happened on Pentecost.”

“Watch what happens. And then, if you can find the letters and the words with which to preach a Pentecost sermon, do so. But if not, do not fear, for even when the letters and the words fall away, and even when the songs have been silenced, the music will find a way. This is the promise breathed into creation from the beginning of time... the promise made real and tangible and visceral and audible in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus... So... listen... listen... Even in the endings of our own day, it sings of the orchard stirring inside the seed and the music, dear Winterberry preacher, stirring in you...”

Elaine Hewes

Holy Trinity May 31, 2026

Genesis 1:1–2:4a

Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13:11–13

Matthew 28:16–20

Engaging the Texts

The question addressed to God in Psalm 8 is one point of departure for this day: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” This question captures

our longing to be in relationship to God, and the Trinity provides some answers about how God responds to that longing.

The creation story from Genesis 1:1–2:4a establishes not just God’s creating power, but also that the Spirit has been there from the very beginning, as the wind swept over the face of the waters. The creation of humankind in God’s image shows how much God desires a connection with humanity.

The familiar Great Commission of Matthew 28 gives us the most explicit language of Trinity. We are instructed to baptize in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But we are also told to *teach* people about Jesus—which suggests a longer, more complex relationship. Jesus promises to be with us always, and his presence empowers us to walk with others.

Together these texts remind us that God wants our relationships with each other to reflect the mutual interdependence and love of the Trinity. In 2 Corinthians, we hear: “Agree with one another, live in peace.” We struggle to follow that instruction, which may be why we need the Trinity even when it perplexes us.

Pastoral Reflections

A few years ago I hoped to catch a glimpse of the much-hyped “honey moon” — the full moon that gets its name from the warm color provided by the haze and humidity of the mid-summer air. Much to my disappointment, the east coast sky was so cloudy that I could see almost nothing - just a faint glow somewhere behind the clouds. I awoke the next morning to pictures of a gorgeous full moon shared by friends on the west coast. They raved about how beautiful it was.

But I didn’t want to hear about other people’s experiences. I didn’t want to see *their* pictures or read about *their* awe and wonder. Nor did I want to read the scientific explanations about the times in the lunar cycle when the moon is at its shortest distance from the earth. Neither the testimony of friends nor the expertise of scientists could satisfy me. I wanted to experience it for myself.

On Trinity Sunday our listeners want more than someone else’s experiences or explanations of the Trinity. They want to encounter it in a more personal way. The Trinity is, after all, about relationship.

The creation story from Genesis offers one entry into what the Trinity has to do with relationship. Here we have God the creator—the One who speaks into existence the wonders of this world—the light and dark, the sky and earth, the waters and the dry land, the seeds and fruit and vegetation, the stars and seasons, the sun and moon. And the creatures: the swarms, the herds, the pods, the flocks, the litters, and the broods. This staggering variety comes from the One who was present from the beginning—the One who created us in God’s image and is there at the beginning of our lives too. The One who looks at creation and calls it *good*.

All of that *is* good, but it isn't the whole story. That same God sought another kind of relationship with us in the person of Jesus, the Word made flesh, who lived among us so that we would know that blind people can see again and outcasts can be welcomed home and everyone can be fed. Jesus, to whom all authority on heaven and earth has been given, shares some of that authority with us. He entrusts us with the sacred responsibilities of baptizing and teaching.

All of that is good too, but it still isn't the whole story. There is yet another way that the divine love is with us—in the Holy Spirit. Genesis tells us that the Spirit was there from the beginning too, sweeping over the face of the waters and stirring the new creation to life. That Spirit is with us still, shaking us up and sending us out.

All of that is good, but it still isn't the whole story. Our triune God continues to create and connect us. Frederick Buechner writes in his book *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith*:

Using the same old materials of earth, air, fire, and water, every twenty-four hours God creates something new out of them. If you think you're seeing the same show all over again seven times a week, you're crazy. Every morning you wake up to something that in all eternity never was before and never will be again. And the you that wakes up was never the same before and never will be the same again, either.⁶

Creation is ongoing. Father, Son, and Spirit are with us still. Each of us will experience that creation in our own way. Some of us encounter the Trinity as ocean waves pull the sand from beneath our feet. Some of us experience the Trinity as we feed the hungry or care for the dying. Others find that connection in the satisfaction of daily work or the opportunity to worship and pray with others. Even in the smallest things—the soft breath of sleeping children, the pinch of a mosquito bite on an ankle, the vibration of the symphony's final chord—God is still creating.

All of these moments are details added to the story of a God who never tires of dreaming up ways to be in relationship with us.

It turns out that God was right. Creation *is* good – and it is still unfolding, day after day.

Christa M. Compton

6. Frederick Buechner. *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith*, (HarperOne, 2004), 69.

Second Sunday after Pentecost June 7, 2026

Hosea 5:15–6:6

Psalm 50:7–15

Romans 4:13–25

Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Matthew 9: I envision a large banner draping the word “MERCY” over the remainder of year A in the lectionary. “I desire mercy” Jesus proclaims in Matthew 9. What a helpful lens through which to view the unfolding story of Jesus in this gospel, in our lives, and in our congregations. For the tax collector Matthew, mercy shows up in a bold moment of calling. For the child and woman who are sick, mercy is healing that flows freely. At the beginning and to the end, this is a story about God's mercy.

We relish a delectable story sandwich here in Matthew: a healing within a healing. The layered narrative illustrates how Jesus describes his merciful purpose in verse 12, “I have come for those who are sick.” Healing the sick is not only a metaphor about sin and righteousness but a major part of Jesus' tangible ministry on earth. Mercy is given flesh and blood.

Comparing these healing stories in Matthew and Mark offers insight about what each gospel desires to share in the telling. Though Mark's gospel is often spare with narration, in this case Mark's telling takes up twice as many verses as Matthew's. It is in Mark that the synagogue leader is named, and the age of the young girl is given which equals the length of time the woman has suffered hemorrhages.

Why is Matthew so spare on this story in comparison to Mark? This could be a fruitful question to consider as a preacher, especially if exploring the uniqueness of Matthew's narrative is a priority for you in preaching in the remainder of year A. We hear this story paired with the calling of Matthew and the affirmation that Jesus is about mercy. Does this story serve to instruct potential Jesus followers about what the baptized will be up to? Is it painting a picture for us to remember what our baptismal call is about? Mark features the sending of the twelve soon after this healing story and accompanies it with Jesus being rejected by his hometown. In Matthew, there are several more stories of healing that follow this one in chapter 9. The whole section begins with Jesus' followers getting questioned in the home of the tax collector, “Why does your teacher eat with sinners?” The story seems to offer an answer. Jesus keeps table fellowship with sinners because God's mercy needs to come in flesh and blood to heal the sick. Jesus—the teacher, the healer—is God's mercy in flesh and blood. Jesus is mercy; Jesus is Messiah.

Hosea 5 and 6: For the prophet Hosea, God’s mercy is like a faithful spouse. In a prophetic book that gives many verses to illustrating God’s judgments, this pericope gives voice to the people as they are deciding to return to God. God has waited faithfully for them. Then, we hear the voice of the Lord again, lamenting the fleeting nature of the people’s worship and devotion, fading like morning dew. Echoing forward to the voice of Jesus, we hear the Lord declare, “I desire steadfast love.” Steadfast love that tirelessly waits. Mercy that pulls up a chair to the dinner table and touches the sick with healing power. These images kindle hope for all of us who have been counted “as good as dead.” Why does our teacher eat with us? Because we need his mercy and fellowship. Because this is the way of Jesus in the world.

Romans 4: Paul never got to keep flesh and blood fellowship with the church in Rome. Yet his words bear the powerful echo of Christ’s mercy that we also long to receive. With the Romans, our churches can “hope against hope” in our God who gives life to the dead, mercy to the sinful, healing to the sick.

It might be a scary question to consider: What is “as good as dead” in your midst? Our church structures are undergoing necessary and major change. Our planet continues to be in peril. Many relationships have changed as a result of deep isolation in recent years. In all these changes, and even in death, God’s mercy does not flee or fade. It comes close. It touches us. It permits us to touch.

We know that in cycles of systemic trauma, “hurt people hurt people.” Perhaps this

Sunday is a good day to explore how it is also true that “healing people heal people.”⁷ Our bodies contain the capacity for metabolizing pain through communal practices and ritual caregiving. Together, we can end cycles of hurt through embodied healing. We need each other for this work. There is generous grace in that truth. God’s mercy continues to come close for those who are hurting, sick, and suffering. This means that God’s mercy, in flesh and blood, is sitting right beside us in the pews and walking with us around the neighborhood.

“Call on God in a day of trouble,” urges the psalmist in Psalm 50, appointed for today. The hemorrhaging woman and the leader of the synagogue did so when they came to Jesus. Take heart, preacher. God also uses you and your words to bring mercy in flesh and blood to all who need it. Thanks be to God that the banner of mercy covers us, too.

Liv Brodwyn Larson

7. As explored in *My Grandmothers Hands*, by Resmaa Menakem.

Third Sunday after Pentecost June 14, 2026

Exodus 19:2–8a

Psalm 100

Romans 5:1–8

Matthew 9:35–10:8

Tough Reflections on Tough Texts

Preachers, we’ve got a problem. Texts for the Second Sunday after Pentecost (A) have been called exclusionary, triumphalist, and conquest narratives. There is so much in these texts that one could easily avoid these wince-inducing interpretations. But I find it is only faithful to wrestle with them as they have been wrestling with me. So, what I provide in the next paragraphs is a wrestling, a journey of faithful encounter with a living word in the presence of a loving God and dislocated people.

Reading **Exodus 19**, we are literally in the middle of the book, a place of heightened chiasmic significance where the next chapter will yield the Ten Commandments. The Israelites are also in the middle of a journey having struggled through phase one of their escape from Egypt, often named the “Wilderness of Sin.” They now pause for a month or two (the rest of the book of Exodus, Leviticus, all the way through Numbers 10:10) at the base of a mountain before they continue into the second phase of their wandering called the “Wilderness of Sinai.” They camp at Rephidim—a spot in the middle of a harrowing journey, the place where the commandments are given, the site where Moses will respond to mounting criticism and complaint by striking a rock for water—an action that will cost him entry into the Promised Land. Moses at age 80 will hike up and down this mountain seven times in the next several chapters. A lot is happening here between God, Moses, and the Israelites.

In the text, the voice of God reminds Moses of “what I did to the Egyptians,” which scholars figure refers to folding the sea back over the Egyptians as they pursued the Israelites. The treatment of the Egyptians is put into contrast with the treatment of the Israelites, who were borne on eagles’ wings and brought to God. The voice of God continues, saying that of all the peoples of the world, the Israelites will be the “treasured possession,” the “priestly kingdom,” the “holy nation.”

Robert Warrior, distinguished professor of American Literature and Culture and citizen of the Osage Nation, penned an oft quoted article that helps us see layers of complexity in this text. He begins by acknowledging that the Exodus image of God who takes the side of the oppressed has given hope to many who (have) suffer(ed) under cruel oppressors. Without diminishing that reality, Warrior lifts up another. He writes,

“As a member of the Osage Nation of American Indians who stands in solidarity with other tribal people around the world, I read the Exodus stories with Canaanite eyes. And, it is the Canaanite side of the story that has been overlooked by those seeking to articulate theologies of liberation.”⁸ He points out that already in Genesis when Yahweh covenants with Abram, it is clear that the land to be given is a land inhabited by many peoples: Kenites, Kenizites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaim, Amonites, Canaanites, and Jebusites. A similar promise is made to Moses when he is commissioned in Exodus 3. Warrior says, “The land, Yahweh decided, belonged to these former slaves—from Egypt and Yahweh planned on giving it to them using the same power used against the enslaving Egyptians to defeat the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan. Yahweh the deliverer became Yahweh the conqueror.”⁹ Religious Studies scholar Nathaniel Samuel Murrell builds on Warrior’s scholarship from a Caribbean perspective. He writes, “I seek to present a perspective that challenges interpretations of the Exodus that disregard or do not deal effectively with those aspects of the Scriptures which make us uncomfortable or which we cannot in all honesty name as “liberating”... I therefore hope to question any elitist, privileged and definitive readings of Exodus. In so doing I locate myself in a space that has often been at the receiving end of triumphalist interpretations of the Exodus.”¹⁰ I welcome preachers into the discomfort and questions that come with honestly grappling with privilege and position, travesties and triumphalism.

The New Testament is not immune to texts that alarm those who hear scripture with an awareness of the Osage, Canaanite, and Caribbean perspectives reverberating above. In the appointed **gospel text**, which begins Matthew’s “mission discourse,” Jesus sends the disciples out to share the Good News: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Now Jesus and the first disciples were focused on Israelites, so scholars suspect this phrase was not needed in Jesus’ day. They think instead that it was added because the early church was struggling with how to define boundaries regarding who got to hear the Good News.

Gentrifying neighborhoods that price out people who have lived there for years, slashing affordable housing plans from grants, and settlements dotting Palestinian lands are cur-

rent examples showing that reading with what Warrior calls “Canaanite eyes” needs to be an ongoing practice. Narratives we find in Exodus, Matthew, and beyond that raise concern need to be recognized as concerning. On a post-colonial view, it is important to acknowledge and resist ways that Canaanites and the land have been repeatedly rendered voiceless.

I certainly do not intend now to tidy this up with a bright bow, but I pledge solidarity in continued wrestling with some ideas as we move forward. First, take up a perspective in which it is holy to find problems disquieting—this is an honest way to engage with scripture believing in a living God, living word, and living world. Then, wrestle with ambiguity. Take plurality seriously. Pay attention to multiple social locations. Remember that your liberation is tied up with everyone’s liberation; you are truly free only when all your neighbors, including the living earth, are truly free. I will end with Warrior’s own suggestion that people try to take up a Canaanite lens in both their theological reflection and their political action.¹¹ How would a Canaanite family hear this news, and, knowing the loving God you know, what Good News do you have to proclaim to this family?

Jan Rippentrop Schnell

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost June 21, 2026

Jeremiah 20:7–13

Psalm 69:7–10, 16–18

Romans 6:1b–11

Matthew 10:24–39

Engaging the Texts

Every Gospel has its share of hard sayings and depictions of discipleship that are either unattractive or intimidating. Some of Matthew’s fall here, near the end of the so-called Missionary Discourse that began last Sunday. As Jesus commissions his followers to extend and perpetuate his ministry, he reminds them that the world will be as unsafe for them as it was for him. He offers no guarantee of comfort and success, as conventional wisdom understands what comfort and success are.

The trials and threats Jesus describes are not a hazing ritual to weed out the faint of heart or an attempt to reveal a life of contentment hidden in suffering. The horrors he mentions are much more matter of fact. The Gospels are, in part, stories about the world’s resistance to the in-breaking of God’s kingdom. What Jesus experienced in his own rejection and suffering was hardly an aberration. His followers should

8. Robert Allen Warrior. “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today” in *Christianity and Crisis* 49(12), 261-265.

9. Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” 262.

10. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell. “Dangerous Memories, Underdevelopment, and the Bible in Colonial Caribbean Experience” in *Religion, Culture, and Tradition in the Caribbean*, edited by Hemchand Gossai and Nathaniel Samuel Murrell. (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000) 12.

11. Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” 264.

expect more of the same. After all, “a disciple is not above the teacher.” The good news continues to threaten the world’s powerful people and systems. It continues to expose the status quo as idolatrous, oppressive, and deceptive. The status quo will not stand idly by.

At the same time, this Gospel text is not all gloom and doom. There are promises lurking in these verses. Jesus’ followers have great value in the sight of God. Jesus will acknowledge those who acknowledge him. In the way of the cross—a radical identification with Jesus and his boundary-breaking ministry—lies the possibility of finding one’s life.

To understand Paul’s discussion in Romans 6, one must note that Paul’s letters refer to the problem of “sin” (singular). Only rarely does Paul speak of “sins” (plural). Humanity’s core problem, according to Paul, is not that we commit sins in the bad things we do or in our failure to do good things. Rather, human beings are, apart from Christ, enslaved to a power called “sin.” Individual sins are therefore manifestations of that deeper sickness. Furthermore, Paul does not speak about “forgiveness” of our “sins.” Instead, he refers to being delivered or liberated from the power of sin. Through Christ, God defeats sin, as well as death.

Paul explains to the Romans that they experience their freedom precisely because they share a union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Just as baptism symbolizes death followed by being raised out of a watery grave, believers participate in Christ’s own crucifixion and resurrection. Because believers have, in effect, been crucified, they have already suffered the full ferocity of sin and death. Because believers have been raised up, in Christ, they now exist free from sin’s dominion and are able to “walk in newness of life.” Paul’s point is about much more than enjoying a new status in God’s eyes. The change is existential; believers have been transferred into a whole different sort of existence—one in which they are free from servitude to sin. The “newness” that Paul names has already begun.

Pastoral Reflections

The lections from Matthew and Romans require extra effort from preachers to help congregations find their place in the texts’ rhetoric. The persecution and divisions that Jesus describes sound monstrous and almost fanatical to us who dwell in a society that mostly values pluralism and tolerance. It is difficult for many to imagine how Jesus’ words might comfort anyone. But believers in the ancient world who faced social ostracism, economic loss, and even estrangement from their families because of their embrace of Christ might have found these verses much more familiar. (Some modern Christians have that experience, too.) The text would have assured Matthew’s earliest audiences that their struggles were hardly signs of personal failure or divine indifference. The promises

embedded in the text provide reminders that God sees those who suffer rebuke because of their faith.

Jesus’ instructions to his followers, delivered before he sends them out to perform ministry, offer important reminders about the nature of the kingdom of heaven. We fool ourselves when we imagine that the gospel is an unobtrusive or politically compliant message. Remember that near the beginning of Matthew’s narrative a king went on a murderous rampage to prevent the newly arrived “king of the Jews” from surviving (Matt 2:1-18). Of course, near the end of the story Jesus will be unable and unwilling to escape the violence of the empire’s elites. Jesus, his gospel, and those who minister in his name speak out against injustice and hypocrisy by heralding the arrival of a new order, a different “kingdom.” In doing so, they inevitably criticize those who wield power or who have a vested interest in preserving corrupt elements of the status quo. Conflict ensues.

As for the passage from Romans, it requires hearers to see the universe from Paul’s perspective. His language about enslavement and deliverance, and his claims about the union that believers share with Christ almost sound like they could be at home in a fantasy novel or mythology. While some preachers will want to explain to their congregations that Paul was deeply influenced by the symbols, rhetoric, and worldview of Jewish apocalyptic theology, other preachers will prefer to point out, more simply, that Paul always views salvation in light of what God does on behalf of the whole world and indeed all creation. In the gospel, God does more than reach out to individual sinners. God reorders the cosmos. God defeats everything that stands in the way of God’s purposes and sets the world on a new course. Paul thus urges his readers not only to believe certain things but to step into a new reality, one marked by newness and communion with Jesus Christ. His ultimate point is that we belong to God.

Matthew L. Skinner

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

June 28, 2026

Jeremiah 28:5–9

Psalms 89:1–4, 15–18

Romans 6:12–23

Matthew 10:40–42

Engaging the Gospel

The coach gathers the players and gives them the plays before sending them onto the court. The conductor gathers the orchestra and inspires the musicians before sending them onto the stage.

This is what Jesus is doing in Matthew 10. The teacher gathers his disciples, gives them authority to heal and proclaim, then sends them out to the surrounding communities, sharing his final instructions concerning the who, what, where, when, how and why of their mission.

Only in the context of these instructions can we fully understand Jesus' closing words of encouragement in Matthew 10:40–42. For these words are not mere final instructions; they describe the vision guiding the disciples' mission, a community of radical welcome beyond anything we can imagine.

While these verses at the end of Chapter 10 are packed with meaning, three words help us see the community Jesus is describing. First, the word “you,” or rather its plural, “you all.” Jesus proclaims, “whoever welcomes you all, welcomes me...and the one who sent me.” The “you” Jesus is talking to are Jesus' disciples, both then and now. “Whoever welcomes you—my followers, my messengers, my emissaries—welcomes me, and therefore God.” Jesus is offering a promise both to his followers *and* to those who welcome them: you all will be received as I am and those who accept you will receive the reward: me and the new life I bring. For we are all one and the same.

The second word is “whoever” which appears four times. “Whoever” is one of those words that opens doors and breaks down the barriers that humans like to construct between us and them. “Whoever” replaces human identity groups with the character of God's community. In these verses, Jesus reminds us that God's community is not first and foremost about our human constructed identities, but about being Christ's welcome and welcomed no matter who we are. Whoever welcomes the disciple will receive the reward the disciple has already received. “Whoever” welcome is welcomed. That is the community Jesus promises here.

The third word in the text is what the NRSV translates as “welcome” (*dexomai*), which appears six times. We often use the word “welcome” to describe hospitality, inviting into

our lives the presence and identity of another. Certainly, this is part of the welcome Jesus is naming: inviting someone in and treating them with dignity and worth. But in the context of Jesus' instructions, the meaning of this word goes deeper than greeting a guest with warmth. The Greek word *dexomai* means to receive and accept, to take someone into ourselves as one of our own, and therefore Christ's own. In these verses, such welcoming means not just receiving and accepting the message-bearer as they are but also the message they bring and the Christ who stands at the heart of that message. “Whoever receives you and my message, receives me...and the God who sent me.”

Pastoral Reflections

In these three verses, Jesus is describing the character of God's community (kingdom): radical welcome, acceptance and transformation through the receiving of another who is Christ for us and for whom we are Christ. This community is a network of interwoven relationships, not constructed by the followers, but by the Spirit as we plant the seeds in our proclamation of and faithful receiving of Christ's message and messengers of healing, hope and new life in God's community.

What does God's community of radical welcome look like? To see the fullness of this community, we first need to leave behind the command and demand that often distort Jesus' meaning. These words are not a command: “you must welcome others to receive your reward.” Nor is it a demand I use against others: “you must welcome me to receive your reward.”

When we use Jesus' words as command, welcome often becomes little more than friendliness.¹² This friendliness invites newcomers into what already exists and then expects them to change to fit into the current system. The welcomed are told: “We're glad you joined our family. But it's OUR family and we hope you like the way we do things. If not, there's the door.”

On the other hand, when we use Jesus' words as a demand, welcome easily turns into colonization where the welcome is expected to change into what the newcomer demands while the welcomed get to stay the same. The welcome is told, “We're glad you welcomed us into this family. But none of this is working for us so we're going to fix you. If you don't like it, there's the door.”

But Jesus' words in this passage aren't demand or command. They are a vision, a description of a community of mutual transformation that happens when together we proclaim and receive God's reward of: 1) right relationship with God and whole-y relationship with one another (righteous-

12. Ruth Fletcher, *Thrive: Spiritual Habits of Transforming Congregations* (Energion Publications, 2015), 75ff.

ness); 2) death and new life in Christ (the prophet's reward); 3) acceptance into God's abundant life through Christ; 4) the mutual healing and transformation received in Jesus' living water.

In God's community, both the welcomed and the welcomer are transformed into Christ's identity. In God's community, all "whoever's" are received as equal partners with gifts, ideas, and experiences to share. In God's community, every member of the community says to every other: "We want you to share your Spirit-transformed self with us so that we too can be transformed into whoever Jesus is calling us to be as his followers."

To paraphrase Episcopal priest, Stephanie Spellers, God's community is finally about everyone finding themselves so utterly accepted and embraced by God that we can't help but run into the community to share God's welcome with others.¹³

Laurie Jungling

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13. Stephanie Sellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other and the Spirit of Transformation*, (Church Publishing, 2006), 18.