



The
Shadow Jesus

**Not Just
the Jesus
You Want**

**But the
Jesus
You Need**

2018 LENTEN STUDY

By Rev. Richard Dake, Rev. Amy Mayo-Moyle, and Rev. Jeremy Peters

THE SHADOW JESUS:
NOT JUST THE JESUS YOU WANT, BUT THE JESUS YOU NEED

An Introduction

I never considered myself good at math. In high school, it was nothing more than a class I had to take in order to graduate. I took a math class in college to fill a requirement, and I took the class pass/fail. I was much more interested in language arts and social studies.

I enjoyed the writing and reflecting. I liked considering how our country is shaped by its history. I liked learning about why people are the way they are. And I loved getting lost in a book.

But from time to time, algebra captured me. When I approached equations as a puzzle to figure out, I had more fun. When I was successful in my work, I felt good, accomplished. My eleventh grade teacher and I however, did not always speak the same language. She would write an equation on the board and tell us what to do. Occasionally, I wanted more than directions. I wanted an explanation. If I was going to understand this puzzle, I needed to know more than what to do. I needed to know why I was doing it. I remember one day in class I know I came off as disrespectful because I just kept asking, “But, why? Why do we do that?” and she just kept responding, “It doesn’t matter, just multiply the numbers.” I wanted more. I needed more.

As children, we are often braver than we are as adults. We are willing to ask questions. We are uninhibited by fear of what the answer might be. Unfortunately, as children, many of us asked questions that were dismissed. We were told things like, “Because that’s what the Bible says.” Or “It doesn’t matter, just memorize the scripture.” And so, asking questions of our faith, and of its scriptures, doesn’t feel natural. And can even feel unfaithful.

This Lent we are looking at the shadow side of Jesus. We are confronting questions and feelings that are hard for any of us, even the teachers. We are exploring the ways that Jesus confuses, angers, scares, frustrates, knows, and surprises you. And if we have the courage to look into the shadows, inevitably, we discover that the confusing, surprising and scary Jesus is more real and more compelling than the Jesus of easy answers could ever be.

This Lenten Study was written by myself, along with two of my colleagues for whom I have great admiration, Rev. Richard Dake and Rev. Jeremy Peters. I am excited for you to get to know them through their writing.

I pray your Lenten Journey will be a powerful walk with Christ as you get to know the shadow side of Jesus.

Faithfully


Rev. Amy Mayo-Moyle

Table of Contents

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Chapter 1	February 18: When Jesus Confuses You	1
	by Rev. Richard Dake	
Chapter 2	February 25: When Jesus Angers You.....	5
	by Rev. Richard Dake	
Chapter 3	March 4: When Jesus Disappoints You.....	9
	by Rev. Jeremy Peters	
Chapter 4	March 11: When Jesus Scares You.....	13
	by Rev. Jeremy Peters	
Chapter 5	March 18: When Jesus Knows You	17
	by Rev. Amy Mayo-Moyle	
Chapter 6	March 25: When Jesus Surprises You.....	21
	by Rev. Amy Mayo-Moyle	
Easter	April 1: When Jesus Saves You.....	25
	by Rev. Amy Mayo-Moyle	
	About the Authors	27

CHAPTER 1
FEBRUARY 18—WHEN JESUS CONFUSES YOU
Rev. Richard Dake

Matthew 22:15-22

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21 They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

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The sanctuary that birthed my faith is in the United Methodist Church in Montrose, Michigan. The front of that sanctuary is dominated by a large beautiful stained-glass window of Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd by Bernhard Plockhorst.

I always loved that picture. I sang in the children's choir standing under that picture. I daydreamed through countless sermons looking at it. I goofed off in youth group running under that picture. Recently, I celebrated my mom's life at her funeral under that picture. As I stood there before her funeral, looking at the iconic figure of Jesus in my life, I realized for the first time its full impact on me.

In ways beyond my understanding, I had accepted from my childhood a core belief about Jesus as a gentle, protective Good Shepherd. In some ways, that was and is the Jesus I have tried to emulate in my own life and ministry.

There is much good in that understanding. Like most of our Vacation Bible School understandings of Jesus, we are taught that he is gentle and kind. Jesus protects us. Jesus is always watching over us with overwhelming love and grace. When we are lost he will come find us and gently bring us home. He is a heavenly Mister Rogers, and we all want to live and get along in his neighborhood called the Kingdom of God.

Yet there is a danger in this Christology. It does bring comfort but may also leave us ill-equipped to deal with a more complex world of challenges and pain. A child-like faith in gentle Grandpa Jesus may leave many disillusioned and lost when life takes us to places of sin, loss, brokenness, and despair where Jesus seems so far removed.

In my adult life, I discovered pain that seemed beyond the reach of the Jesus of my childhood. The world is filled with situations where a one-dimensional Jesus is not enough. This reality is painful when people find themselves in life situations where the Jesus they

know seems lacking. Those are the places where Jesus may be left behind, and faith gets rejected.

This is why we find in Scripture moments when those around Jesus were so confused. The Pharisees and Herodians were two very separate entities. The Pharisees were committed to following the Jewish Torah as the authority for the community and rejected outside influences like the Romans and King Herod. The Herodians were Jews who believed it was best to try to get along with King Herod to protect what they could of their Judaism. These two factions disagreed about everything and had little in common. Little, that is, except their confusion about Jesus.

At times in Scripture, Jesus seems to adhere to the laws and practices of his people. In other moments Jesus seems to reject the status quo. His popularity and his clearly unique ministry could not be ignored. Both groups wanted to know if he was a champion they could get behind or a troublemaker to eliminate.

So, they posed the question, *“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”* They assumed his answer would tell them everything they needed to know about Jesus. Either he was one who adhered to tradition, or one willing to compromise in a less-than-perfect world. Then they could choose to accept or reject him.

This passage is an all-too-familiar example of how we operate today. We have questions intended to reveal what we really need to know about each other. What kind of worship do you like? Are you pro-life or pro-choice? Do you take God’s word as the literal and revealed work of God, or do you find ultimate Truth in Scripture beyond the literal words? Are you for full inclusion in the church, or do you believe there are some lifestyles that should be singled out from others as being incompatible with the Christian faith? Are you Republican or Democrat or Independent or politically checked out? Where do you stand on immigration? Are you Green and White, or Maize and Blue? Is pizza a finger food, or do you use a fork?

These and a thousand other questions get asked out loud every day, and the answers determine how people are accepted or left out. Networks of friends, virtual communities of “friends,” and entire congregations have formed around the answers to these questions. Perhaps even more powerful is when questions remain unspoken, but the answers still create gated communities of all kinds.

The question asked in this scripture is not the problem. Questions can be very helpful in opening our mind and relationships to each other and God. There are no stupid questions when asked with sincerity and a desire to learn. When genuine curiosity is at the core of any question, there is possibility for our world, life, faith and community to grow. Questions are a gift when someone really cares to hear and understand the answer.

A problem in this scripture is that no one asking the question wanted to learn any new perspective or gain deeper appreciation. No one thought Jesus could reveal any new truth

or help them find a new way to live. They wanted to see how Jesus would answer so they would know which box they could put him in.

In the face of their question, Jesus did not run away from them. He turned to them. But he did not answer their question. He would not fall into their trap, nor would he allow them to remain trapped in their own preconceptions. *But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"*

So, he asked for a coin. When one was produced he asked them to take a close look at the image on it. *"Whose head is this, and whose title? The emperor's."* Then he said to them, *"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."*

Scripture tells us they were amazed at his answer. Why? Were they amazed because he had announced an option they had not considered? Were they amazed because he missed the opportunity to side with one or the other of these strong factions to advance his cause? Were they amazed because they were not sure how to take what he said and spin it? Were they confused because they gave Jesus a chance to be the answer man for their faith, and his answer did not neatly tie everything up for them?

They were amazed for these reasons and more. The same is true for us. We have come to Jesus with so many questions needing answers. We have faced so many moments of life when we needed clear direction, and none came. We have read Scripture looking for specifics it refused to give. We have been amazed when the Jesus we thought we knew suddenly showed us a new and unexpected face.

They were confused about Jesus. So are we in many moments. We seek a black-and-white Jesus and find he is not always easy to pin down. There are times we discover that the Jesus we thought we knew does not match the one we find in Scripture. Jesus is not always as simple or clear as I desire in the moment.

Perhaps part of our confusion comes from the goal of our questions. Are we looking for a relationship with Jesus or a life-line answer to the game of life we are playing?

Jesus did not come to be a spiritual Google. He didn't come to answer every question. He came to reveal the fullness of God. He came to teach us in word and action what a faithful life looks like. He came to invite us to follow him. He came to be the Savior. If the Pharisees and Herodians had been willing to follow him even with their questions, they could have moved beyond the desire to find out if they were right. They could have found more than an ally.

The church is called to be faithful. The church is called to be a place where questions create holy conversations. The church is a place where our primary focus is to draw close to Jesus. At times he will confuse us. At times we will not agree with each other about Jesus or our mission. That is the moment that occurs at the end of this passage. They were amazed. But did they follow him? Were they willing to put being right aside to pursue together (even

with their differences) the one who would lead them beyond the questions to a new Kingdom on earth and in heaven?

Sometimes this passage has been used to suggest Christians should focus more on being faithful instead of social justice. The totality of Scripture renders such an understanding as misguided. We are called to take stances and act in the most faithful manner we can to represent Jesus in the world. That does not mean we will always agree on how to do that, nor will it mean that those we disagree with are less faithful in their faith journey. I have a vision of the church being a place where people come together with a primary focus of following Christ. We then work hard to take our faith out into the world and give witness. During the week, we will find different ways that work for us. We may even find ourselves protesting or voting on opposite sides of issues. So be it. Then we come back into the presence of Christ, ask more questions and continue to follow. I wonder if Jesus has the same vision. Maybe I should ask him!

This Lent, instead of assuming what you know about Jesus, be curious about him. Ask without knowing or presuming. Dare to put your faith in him, even in the middle of the unanswerable moments of life. Follow him and join with others in a community of faith that dares to value relationship over being right, questions more than answers, and faith more than certainty. Together we will share in this Holy Lenten walk, and I pray find that Jesus is the one who draws us together.

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In a few words, who is Jesus to you? What adjectives, titles, and images do you use most often when you think or talk about Jesus?
2. What question(s) do you wish you could ask Jesus?
3. What about Jesus confuses you?
4. How have you witnessed Jesus being a source of division?
5. *“This Lent, instead of assuming what you know about Jesus, be curious about him. Ask without knowing or presuming. Dare to put your faith in him even in the middle of the unanswerable moments of life.”*

What about this invitation attracts you and what about it gives you pause?

CHAPTER 2
FEBRUARY 25—WHEN JESUS ANGERS YOU

Rev. Richard Dake

Matthew 21:12-17

12 Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. 13 He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers."

14 The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. 15 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry 16 and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?'" 17 He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

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Coming up in a few weeks will be the celebration of Palm Sunday. In our church, we will have the procession of the palms by children who will walk around the sanctuary during the singing of the first song. This is our homage to when Jesus entered the holy city in the final week of his life. It begins a Holy Week where we supposedly walk with Jesus in his final days. We read about the drama headed to victory on Easter. In an attempt to remind us you can't get to Easter directly from Palm Sunday, we now call it Palm/Passion Sunday. We have special worship on Holy Thursday and Good Friday because they are so important.

So why don't we have a worship service where we all get to throw a hissy fit? Why can't we have a service where we holler at God in anger for all the pain in the world? We could have a service where primal gut screams would be the liturgy and smashing things with a baseball bat could be our offering. Why not have a worship service where we remember the anger of Jesus and the anger others had at Jesus during Holy Week?

I wish I could hear your answers to those questions. My guess is that there are some who would love the idea and others who would be repulsed by it. I think there are several reasons we do not worship that way. One, we rarely have a service focused on an emotion. More significantly, anger is an emotion that makes so many uncomfortable. We see Jesus get angry and it makes us uncomfortable. We excuse it as being the human side of Jesus being revealed. We don't want to think about God getting angry. The Jesus we want helps take our anger away. Do we really want a Jesus that gets angry and learn to be okay with him? Do we really want a Jesus that makes us angry and makes others angry as well?

In this passage, Jesus expresses his anger in a way that makes us uncomfortable. If he had said a solid, "Darn it!", we would be more accepting. But he went off in the temple. He overthrew tables. He upset others. He acted out in a place where we are working so hard to teach people the proper way to behave. But before we start judging his behavior, let's first

explore the context of this passage.

In the middle of the Palm Sunday celebration, we often point out the fickle nature of the crowd shouting, “Hosanna”! Many of them, in less than a week, would be shouting, “Crucify Him”! In the midst of the celebration, Jesus knew after all his efforts, so much was still left undone. He knew his own disciples did not understand him. Soon they would not only let him down, they would betray him. He knew what was coming, so he was angry. Why can't we accept that without rationalizing it?

Jesus clearly was also angry at what he saw as the desecration of the temple. The place where he had run to as a child, so he could be in his Father's house was now a flea market. Or at least it was a place where the focus on God was lessened by sellers and buyers. It hurt his heart. It angered him.

If fact, Jesus was still so angry the next day, that he cursed out a fig tree. (Matthew 21: 18-22). Matthew does not give us much wiggle room in avoiding this truth; Jesus got angry and we have to deal with it. Those who had their tables overturned, those who had their quiet Sabbath disrupted and those who were hoping Jesus would not upset political apple carts certainly must have been angry with Jesus. Their story is our story.

So now, let's deal with it.

First, there are times we get angry with Jesus. I have gone into the sanctuary when no one else is in the church and raged at God for moments when I have walked through valleys of injustice, brokenness, betrayal and deaths I deem to be cruel. Not everyone gets to do that, but have you ever let out your anger with God at home, on a walk in the woods or in a moment when you are alone? I am aware of times when anger at Jesus is expressed by people just quietly walking away from their commitment of faith.

What makes us angry with Jesus? There is no way a complete list of answers to that question can be produced. Some of those issues will be addressed in future chapters in this study. Usually for me, my anger gets expressed at Jesus when he does not do what I want/ need him to do. I am talking about critical moments like healing dying children, moments when inhumanity is expressed in acts of horror and the self-proclaimed holy ones act in unholy ways. What has made you angry at Jesus?

I have also seen Jesus make people mad when he leads them into places of high risk. Like the first disciples, we may be shocked when Jesus leads us to places of risk and danger. We can get angry with Jesus in those moments. It has been my experience that those places are where the most powerful moments of grace and resurrection can occur. Churches that play it safe and try to do only what they can accomplish without trusting in God are dying all around us. The same can be said for our personal faith walk as well. We may be able to follow Jesus and never risk much. Such a path will not likely lead to the kind of abundant life Jesus promises.

When Jesus got angry, it was real. It was also permission for us to claim the truth about our own anger. We even gain permission to have holy anger in the name of Jesus against evil and injustice. Holy anger can become the fire that burns off apathy and gives voice and action to bring about a new world order called the Kingdom of God. Anger can be a way we let the victimized know they are heard and not alone. Anger can be a power that moves seats of power. Anger can be where God is revealed when that anger also restrains us from vengeance, hate or disrespect of others. Anger can be an acceptable part of our walk.

It is interesting to consider that Jesus expresses his anger in exactly the place most of us would be least likely to share it. I wonder if it may be because he felt safe there. When our daughters were young, I remember literally praying to God that if they had to lash out in anger to address their issues, they would do so in the safety of our home. Little did I know how Jesus would answer that prayer! During the years of teenage discovery, there were days when holy hell happened at home. Then I would go out into the community and hear people tell me about my sweet and polite children. I wondered who they were talking about!

The fact is we do have great children. They are wonderful strong women today with compassionate hearts and sharp minds. They also reflect the benefit of learning about their anger in the safety of their home, so now as adults, anger is a healthy part of their life.

When I think about it, I express my anger best with the people I love the most. With them I feel safe. I know that my anger will not destroy them or be held against me. At least not forever! If my anger is real and expressed in the most intimate of my human relationships, doesn't it make sense that I would share the same with the Lord of my life? Perhaps we should teach more of that in church.

What if we could learn in the safety of the church to deal with anger in a holy way? Then we could send into the world disciples of Jesus who are unafraid to confront anger. We could be a force in the world accepting anger as a way of life; just like we do every other emotion. Such a witness could change the world. I wonder if Jesus had that in mind as he threw over another table.

Much of our comfort with anger is cultural. As a white, middle class child of the Midwest, I learned to be polite, even with my anger. I marvel at cultures who express their anger without leaving scars or building lasting barriers. We may not be able to change our cultural instincts, but Jesus does invite us all into a new Kingdom where apparently, we can have and deal with anger in a holy way.

In the passage today, Jesus is angry about things that matter. He will not tolerate worship being reduced to a matter of economy. Jesus is angry at the blindness of those in the community of faith as to what God is doing in the moment.

When will we get to a place where we can be angry enough about lifeless faith, irrelevant priorities and apathy about holiness? When will our walk with Christ take us to places

where people are being crushed, families being broken, and hope stripped from the vulnerable? When we find ourselves there, we may discover an anger welling up inside of us. It will be more than okay. It will be the gift of God to move us to act as the hands and feet of Christ. We may even get mad. Jesus will understand.

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What was the greatest influence on your comfort level with anger?
2. How would you describe your personal comfort level with your anger and the anger of others?
3. Are you more comfortable with the idea of God getting angry or you getting angry with God? Why?
4. What would holy anger look like?
5. Have you ever been angry with Jesus? Why?
6. How has our inability to deal with anger in an honest and holy way diminished our faith walk and weakened our churches?

CHAPTER 3
MARCH 4—WHEN JESUS DISAPPOINTS YOU
Rev. Jeremy Peters

Matthew 26:14-16

14Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. 16And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

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A church member recently asked me an interesting question. "If you could have lunch with anyone, past or present, who would it be?" What a great conversation starter! I have a sneaking suspicion she was expecting me to say, "Jesus, of course!" My actual answer took her by surprise.

"I would love to have lunch with Judas," I said. "I've got a few questions I'd like answered."

Judas Iscariot is one of the most confusing and fascinating figures in the Gospel story. He was a follower of Jesus, one of the Twelve who were personally selected and called by Jesus. He saw something in Jesus so compelling that he walked away from his home, his family, his career. He came to be trusted by the other disciples. They made him the treasurer. He carried the purse, wrote the checks, balanced the budget.

And then, somehow, Judas turned against Jesus. He betrayed Jesus to his enemies. I'd love to talk to Judas about that. I'd love to ask him how he could do such a thing. I'd love to ask him why.

The Gospels give us a few clues about what Judas might have been thinking. In the Gospel of John (12:1-8) there is a story in which a woman pours a bottle of expensive perfume all over Jesus' feet. The other houseguests and family members are shocked speechless, but Judas has something to say. "Why would you do such a thing?" he snarls. "This perfume could have been sold for a small fortune! Think of all the money we could have given to the poor!" To all appearances, Judas has made an excellent point. Appearances, however, can be deceiving. After Judas' speech the Gospel writer lets us know that Judas doesn't really care for the poor at all. For some time now, Judas has been embezzling funds from Jesus' ministry. He isn't thinking about the poor; he is thinking about the cut he could have taken from the proceeds.

Maybe that explains Judas. Maybe he was just another small-minded man who only thought about putting coins in his own pockets. Maybe it really was just about a bag of silver.

Then again, maybe not. There is another possible explanation for Judas' betrayal, one that might explain how someone who truly believed in Jesus could end up turning against him. This other possibility has to do with the secret of Judas' name.

In the Gospels, Judas is referred to as "Judas Iscariot." That word "Iscariot" is a mystery—no one knows exactly what it means. Some Bible scholars believe it may be a reference to the town where Judas grew up, or perhaps a family name. Other scholars have offered a darker, more intriguing interpretation: the name Iscariot might be an indication that Judas was a member of a group known as the *Sicarii*.

The *Sicarii* were assassins, Jews who reacted violently against the Roman occupation of their land. Their name comes from the curved dagger, called a *sica*, that they would carry in their robes. The *Sicarii* resented the emperor, his taxes, his religion, and his legions of soldiers. Whenever they got the chance they would slip out their daggers and slide them into the backs of their enemies; then, just as quickly, they would disappear into the crowd.

If Judas was a dagger man, then he may have thought that Jesus was too. Many people expected that the Messiah would organize a rebellion when he came. We are used to the idea of a Messiah who suffers and dies for the forgiveness of sins, but that is not what people in the time of Jesus expected a Messiah to do. In Jesus' day there were people who believed that the Messiah would gather a great army, march on Jerusalem, overthrow the religious leaders who had corrupted the Temple, drive out the Romans, and proclaim himself king. Judas may have seen how people were drawn to Jesus and concluded that Jesus was just the man for the job.

You can imagine that Judas may have been frustrated with Jesus as he spent years wandering from backwater town to backwater town. "Why are we messing around in Galilee," Judas wondered, "when the real action is in Jerusalem?" And then, finally, Jesus said what Judas had been waiting to hear. "The time has come to go to Jerusalem," Jesus said. Judas must have been thrilled when the people of Jerusalem poured out of the city to greet Jesus. As they waved palm branches in the air and shouted their welcome, he must have thought that victory was close at hand.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem he headed straight for the Temple. He entered the outer court, where the money changers had set up their stalls. In a fit of anger, Jesus started flipping tables. "My Father's house is meant to be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves!" he shouted. "Finally!" thought Judas. "This is the Jesus I've been waiting for!"

Judas knew what was supposed to happen next. Jesus would whip the crowds into a frenzy. He would have them toss the chief priests out of the Temple. He would call on the faithful to take to the streets. He would declare himself king. Judas knew what was supposed to happen next, and he waited for Jesus to act.

And he waited.

And he waited.

But instead of mobilizing the crowds, Jesus suddenly became strangely...passive. Just when the city was ripe for revolution, Jesus seemed content to sit in the Temple and tell parables. In the evenings, when Jesus should have been forming alliances and drawing up battle plans, he went off by himself and prayed. To Judas, all of this inaction was maddening. His dagger hand was twitching. His patience with Jesus was at an end.

Maybe there was no one moment that caused Judas to turn away. Maybe Judas just got tired of being disappointed. Maybe he broke down under the weight of a long series of letdowns and missed opportunities. Maybe Judas rejected Jesus when he finally realized that Jesus' agenda didn't involve anger, vengeance, and violence.

The truth is, we don't really need to have lunch with Judas in order to understand Judas. We may not carry daggers in our pockets, but we all carry a little bit of Judas in our hearts. Don't believe it? Look around. See how eager people are to recruit Jesus for their cause. See how many people say, "Jesus is on my side! He hates the same people I hate. He likes my church the best. He would vote for my political party if he were eligible to vote." See how many people look at Jesus and see only their own motives and agendas, and then ask the uncomfortable question: do I do it, too? Am I really seeking to align myself with Jesus' agenda, or have I created my own Jesus, one whose agenda seems eerily similar to my own?

If we expect Jesus to condemn our enemies, justify our politics, and like our angry Facebook posts, we are in for a strong dose of disappointment. Jesus has never been interested in baptizing our agendas; he has his own plan for this world, and his plan doesn't involve destroying our enemies, by sword or by tweet. Jesus knows that pride, hatred, and anger will never be able to heal this world, because Jesus knows that pride, hatred, and anger are what broke this world in the first place.

Jesus has come to teach the world a different way. He came to show us the only power that is truly capable of healing this world: a power that would rather die than kill, a power that would rather serve than command, a power that would rather inspire than dictate. There will always be people who find that sort of power small and disappointing. But if we are willing to give the gentle way of Jesus a chance - if we are willing to follow him all the way to the cross - we will discover that the simple way of Jesus is more powerful than all of the revolutionaries, politicians, and priests of this world. If we can push past our own disappointment, we will discover a power that can give life, even to those who are dead.

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever felt disappointed by God? Have you ever felt so disappointed that you thought about walking away? If you held on to your faith, what made you stay?
2. Where do we see the peoples of the world putting their trust in the kinds of power that Judas was attracted to? Where do we see people looking for military, political, or religious solutions to human, spiritual, interpersonal problems?
3. Where have we seen examples of people practicing the simple, gentle way of Jesus? Where could the simple way of the cross be practiced today, and how might it lead to healing and new life?

CHAPTER 4
MARCH 11—WHEN JESUS SCARES YOU
Rev. Jeremy Peters

Matthew 27:46-49

46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."

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Many years ago, when I was a brand new pastor, a man made an appointment to speak with me. When he came into my office I could see that he was agitated. His hands were shaking, and he couldn't look me in the eye. "Take your time," I said. "When you're ready, we can talk."

Eventually he did talk. The man told me his story, and it was quite a story. He told me about his substance abuse, and his (so far fruitless) efforts to recover from alcoholism. He told me about his months of unemployment, and he told me that his wife had recently left him, taking their children. He shared a long list of hurts and pains, some of which he had brought on himself (by his own admission), many of which he had not.

Finally he said, "These last few weeks, I've been praying like I've never prayed before. At first I was hoping that God would straighten out my life, but after a while I found that I was praying just so I wouldn't feel alone. And the thing that hurts the most, the thing that brought me to your office today, is this: even when I pray, I feel alone. I don't feel close to God. I don't feel anything. And I want you to tell me why that is. Why has God allowed all of these terrible things to happen to me? Why has God abandoned me?"

Those are big questions for a brand new pastor. This was the first time anyone had asked me those questions (though it wouldn't be the last). As the man was sitting there, waiting to see if I had anything helpful to say, I did the only thing I could think to do. I got out a Bible. I opened to Matthew 27. I handed the Bible to the man, and I asked him to read.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he read, and then he looked up from the Bible. "I don't understand. What is this?"

So I explained. I explained about the word "forsaken." It means abandoned, I said. It means left behind, like a shoe by the side of the road. It means deserted, unwanted, like an empty, boarded-up house. Forsaken is the word we use for the way you're feeling now.

And then I explained that in this part of the gospel story, the person who feels forsaken is Jesus. As he is hanging on the cross, his flesh in tatters, struggling to breathe, the thing that hurts Jesus most is not the nails in his hands. The thing that hurts Jesus most is that he cannot feel the presence of God. He feels forsaken.

“I can’t explain why all of these things have happened to you,” I said. “I can’t explain why you don’t feel the presence of God when you pray. What I can tell you is that you’re not the only one who has ever felt this way. Even Jesus felt this way. And if Jesus felt this way - if Jesus suffered and sometimes felt far away from God - why should we expect anything different?”

Something in what I said seemed to make sense to the man. He slumped in his chair as if a great tension had suddenly been released. And then he asked me a question. “I’ve been to church a bit,” he said. “I’m not there every Sunday, but I grew up in the church, and I’ve sat through my share of sermons. Why haven’t I ever heard these words? Why didn’t anybody tell me that there were days when Jesus felt this way?”

I don’t remember how I answered his question all those years ago, but I can tell you what I’ve come to believe since. I suspect that this man had never heard a sermon on those words of Jesus because most of us, including preachers, find those words to be terrifying. When we hear the anguish in Jesus’ voice, we have to grapple with a scary truth: the only way to the empty tomb is through the rugged cross. If we want to follow Jesus all the way to resurrection, then we can expect to suffer. If Jesus suffered and sometimes felt far away from God, why should we expect anything different?

Be honest. Isn’t there a part of you that hopes somebody can figure out a way to have the flowers and celebration of Easter Sunday without all of the pain and anguish of Good Friday? Of course there is. Nobody wants to suffer. In fact, it may be that many people who sit in a pew on Sunday morning are there because they hope that God will save them from suffering. “If only I can stay awake during the sermon and put a few dollars in the plate,” we think, “then God will surely keep me far away from cancer and car crashes.”

A pastor I know tells the story of a couple who wanted to get married in the church. They met with the pastor, and everything was going well until the couple asked to see the sanctuary. The pastor showed them around, and the couple ooh-ed and ah-ed over the antique furniture and the stained glass windows. “This will be such a beautiful place for our wedding!” the bride said. “I just have one request: on the day of the wedding, would it be possible to cover up that great big cross on the wall? Crosses are just so depressing! When I’m walking down the aisle, I don’t want people to be thinking about suffering and death.”

The world is filled with people who hope they can have Christianity without the cross, and there are plenty of preachers who are willing to accommodate them. Turn on your

television any Sunday morning and you will find seven different evangelists on seven different channels, each of them promising that if only you believe hard enough and pray the right way, Jesus will straighten your teeth, make your hair grow back, get you a job, and send you the perfect spouse.

Of course, you don't have to turn on the TV to hear that message. In many churches, on many Sundays, you could easily get the impression that Jesus came into this world to fix all of our problems and make us happy. Most preachers love to proclaim the good news of Easter, but it's much harder to ask people to carry a cross. And just to be clear, when I say "most preachers," I mean me.

This is why that man in my office had never heard a preacher talk about the suffering of Jesus. This is why many people lose their faith when they get a terminal diagnosis or when they lose a loved one. This is why we want to turn away from Jesus when he says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Suffering is scary. We want to believe that suffering is something that only happens to wicked people. We want to believe that suffering is something that only happens to other people. We don't want to hear that suffering is something that will happen to each and every one of us.

Today, then, let me say clearly what on too many Sundays I only mumble. If you try to live as Jesus lived, then you will experience suffering. If you love people without reservation, then they will hurt you, just as they hurt Jesus. If you stand with the poor and downtrodden people of this world, then the powers of this world will conspire against you, just as they conspired against Jesus. If you are made of flesh and blood, then eventually you will bleed, just as Jesus bled, and you will die, just as Jesus died. If Jesus, the Son of God, the Lord of all creation, the Savior of this world was made to suffer, then why should we expect anything different for ourselves?

When he walked out of my office that day, that man still had a lot of pain in his life, and many difficult days ahead. But at least he knew that what he was feeling was normal. At least he knew that God hadn't singled him out for special suffering and punishment. And he knew one thing more.

Before he left, I also told him how the story ends. After Jesus' moment of physical pain, after his moment of spiritual anguish, after all hope was gone and his body was lying in the grave, that's when the resurrection happened. God turned the suffering of Jesus into celebration. God turned the death of Jesus into glorious, new life. That's how this works. First the cross, then the empty tomb. That's how it was for Jesus. That's how it will be for us.

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever experienced spiritual dry seasons, when you felt far away from God? How long did that season last? Did you tell anybody what you were experiencing? When did that season come to an end (if it did)?
2. Do you think it is possible to be faithful to God, even if you don't feel the presence of God? Why do you think that we sometimes feel like God has abandoned us?
3. Have you ever suffered because of your faith? What sorts of crosses do you believe Jesus calls us to carry today?

CHAPTER 5
MARCH 18—WHEN JESUS KNOWS YOU
Rev. Amy Mayo-Moyle

Matthew 26:31-35

31 Then Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' 32 But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." 33 Peter said to him, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you." 34 Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." 35 Peter said to him, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples.

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I love personality inventories. They fascinate me. I'm an ENFJ on the Myers Briggs. This means I am an extrovert - I love being around people, which is why I always feel exhausted at the end of a long day cooped up in my office. I'm Blue on True Colors. I'm an ID on the DISC. I'm a 2 on the Enneagram. My Love Languages are Gifts and Acts of Service. I've also taken a whole lot of Facebook quizzes, but I won't bore you with the results of all those surveys, except to tell you that according to the Harry Potter quiz I am definitely a Gryffindor. OK - I *may* have skewed my answers to get that particular result.

I also love finding out other people's results to personality inventories. It has certainly helped my marriage. My husband is an off-the-charts introvert. Early in our marriage, when we lived an hour away from family and friends, we had a long car ride before any gathering. As we rode in the car, Mike was always especially quiet. I assumed he was angry. I figured he'd rather stay home than go out with friends. Turns out, as I came to understand his introversion better, I realized it was because he was storing up his energy, preparing himself to be "on" with a group of people.

As I've served with staffs at different churches throughout my ministry, I've appreciated the times we've taken these inventories and learned about each other. The results have helped me to understand the people I work with, and they have given me insight into how my co-workers work, react, and relate. I get excited when I see their various personality types play out, and I'm able to identify what dynamics are occurring within a situation or conversation.

But here's the thing. I really don't like it when people do the same to me. "Ahh, you're responding this way because you're an F." "Of course you feel that way - you're Blue." I don't like to think of myself as predictable. I don't like to think that someone might have me all figured out. I especially don't like to think that someone could know me better than I know myself.

That is exactly what occurs in this week's scripture. This week we see Jesus at the end of his ministry. He's gathered his friends for a meal. The story is told a little differently in the

various Gospels. In one Gospel, Jesus washes his disciples' feet. In other Gospels, Jesus uses bread and wine to represent his body and blood. There is, however, one moment from that evening that is told consistently in all four Gospels.

That night at supper, Jesus tells Peter, "I know you. I know you better than you know yourself. I know things about you that you aren't even ready to face." Jesus doesn't say this in so many words, of course. What Jesus actually says to Peter is, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times" (Matthew 26:34). Peter reacts the way I do when people say they have me figured out: he pushes back. "I'd die before I would deny you!" he protests, but Jesus is right. Peter will deny Jesus after all.

Peter's denial of Jesus shouldn't come as a shock. There are enough stories about Peter that by this point in the Gospels, we can assess his personality and predict his behavior. In story after story Peter struts, trying to impress Jesus, only to stumble at the critical moment. In one story Peter calls out to Jesus from a fishing boat, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water" (Matthew 14:28-29). Peter defies gravity and walks on water - until he looks down and begins to sink. When Jesus takes some disciples up a mountain and Moses and Elijah appear, Peter can't help but declare, "Let me build you all some shelters, so we can stay up here on the mountain!" Just after Peter makes his offer, God's voice booms from the heavens, and Peter is so startled he falls to the ground. These stories often end with Peter falling.

Peter is always trying. He wants desperately to understand Jesus' message. He wants to serve Jesus. He wants to be a leader, but he also wants to be liked. He wants the approval of those in power. He wants others to think well of him. The idea that Jesus would suggest that Peter will deny even knowing him is unimaginable to Peter. But Jesus knows Peter. He *knows* him - he knows that Peter doesn't want to be left out. He knows that at this point, Peter isn't strong enough to stand up for Jesus, or to stand up to the crowd. The idea of being in trouble with the authorities, of being singled out by those in power, of being disapproved of and condemned is too much for Peter to bear. And so, just like Jesus says, when Peter is asked if he was with Jesus, he says, "No."

It's not that Peter was ashamed of Jesus. It's not that Peter wanted nothing to do with Jesus. It's that Peter was scared. And we can be sure that Jesus knew that too.

That might be the hardest part of having someone know us better than we know ourselves—they know deep down our greatest fears. Of all the secrets we try to keep, we guard our fears most closely. In friendships and relationships, our fears are the last thing we reveal about ourselves. When people know our fears, they have power over us. If someone discovers that I am afraid of abandonment, they can get their way by threatening to leave. If someone knows I am afraid of conflict, they can push me around, knowing I'll back down. If my boss knows that I am afraid of disapproval, then my boss knows just how to motivate me - and how to hurt me.

In our scripture, we are not really talking about just anyone knowing Peter. We are talking about Jesus knowing Peter. And thus, Jesus knowing us.

There's something wonderful about the idea of God knowing us. Matthew 10:31 says that God knows how many hairs are on our head. It's wonderful to have a God who sees us as individuals and knows us so well. It reminds us that we are loved and precious in God's sight. How I love these words from Psalm 139:

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

*Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.*

*My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

God created each one of us with care. God knows each one of us by name. We belong to God. We are precious in God's sight. That feels good.

There's also something scary about the idea of Jesus knowing us that intimately. If Jesus who created each one of us and loves each one of us also knows us, it means that Jesus knows our fears. It is certainly comforting to remember that Jesus knows that I am afraid of losing someone I love or that I might be afraid of rejection. It is not as comforting to think about Jesus knowing that there are people I am afraid of, that there are rules I don't want to follow, that I sometimes come home from work and want to yell at my spouse for nothing he or she did. It is not comforting to think of Jesus anticipating that I would look the other way when I passed someone different from me, that I would ignore the person on the road seeking help, that I would pretend to be busy so as not to have to go to lunch with my self-absorbed friend. Really, I would rather Jesus not know that about me. And if he ever suggested that I would do one of those things, I might even flat out deny it and say, "No Jesus, I would sooner die than do that." But the risk of spending time with Jesus is that he might tell me the truth about myself. And like Peter, I am not sure I want to accept some of the truths about myself.

The thing is, God loves us - all of us. That can give us courage to face the parts of ourselves that are hard to face. God knows the truths we struggle to accept and wants a relationship with us anyway. We are afraid of people knowing our fears, we are afraid of their rejection. Peter's life story reminds us that Jesus will never reject us.

The Gospel of John tells us that after the Resurrection, Jesus came to Peter on a beach. Peter must have felt terribly vulnerable. He probably had a hard time looking Jesus in the eye. The two men sat together, and Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” Peter gave the only answer he could. “Of course, Lord. You know I love you.” Jesus asked again. And again. Three times Jesus asked the question. Peter had denied Jesus three times, so Jesus gave Peter three chances to affirm his love. Jesus gave Peter three opportunities to start over.

In truth, the story of Peter is the story of falling, followed by forgiveness. Jesus knew who Peter was from the very beginning, and still he called Peter to be his disciple. Jesus knew Peter’s deepest fears and frailties, and still he said, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18a). Think about that. Jesus knew all the ins and outs of Peter, had inventoried his personality from top to bottom, and still Jesus put his faith and trust in him to build the church. Jesus never stopped loving Peter.

Jesus does that with us too. We too are called to build the church and spread the good news of this loving and all-knowing Savior. Jesus sees us, messy and complicated, arrogant and afraid, and God calls us and empowers us anyway. We will fall and fail, but Jesus will be there to pick us up. No matter how many times we fall or fail, Jesus will never stop loving us.

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are some biblical examples of people who experienced failure and still were part of God’s work in this world? Do you think that God knew that they would fail? What did God see in them despite their failures?
2. Peter argued with Jesus and declared that he would never deny Jesus. Put yourself in Peter’s shoes. Why do you think he made his confident declaration? Why do you think he failed? How do you think he felt, in the moment of failure and after?
3. From time to time each of us has a thought or a feeling of which we are ashamed. In that moment, have you ever stopped to consider that Jesus knows you are thinking or feeling that way? How does it make you feel? Is it possible that knowing Jesus knows you so well can help you to overcome shame or fear?
4. Read the whole of Psalm 139. Which parts speak loudest to you? Are there lines that are difficult to imagine? Is it a psalm of comfort? How can these words help you to remember that not only does God know us, but God loves us?

CHAPTER 6
MARCH 25—WHEN JESUS SURPRISES YOU
Rev. Amy Mayo-Moyle

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” 4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 5 “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd²¹ spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

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

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Patrick McDonald was a legend. I heard of him long before I met him. He was a retired United Methodist pastor, though I had not heard of him through my conference relationships. I first learned of him at my introduction to the church’s Staff Parish Relations Committee. They hoped I would be like Patrick. Would I stand and speak up when something was wrong? Would I be at the bedside when someone was dying? Would my sermons be biblically based and give them something to think about? Would people come to their church because I was dynamic and strong? Even though he never served that local congregation, Patrick was their pastor.

Just after that meeting, I got a call from the congregation’s lay leader. “One of our members is in the hospital, and she’d love a visit,” she said. “Her name is Shirley - she’s Patrick’s wife.” I went up to the hospital and found Shirley just as she was getting settled into her room. Patrick had run home to pick up some personal items. As I visited, Shirley told me all about her husband. “He has a big personality,” she said, “but such a gentle nature! He is a force to be reckoned with, but he was always such a loving pastor! He is the love of my life, and I have so enjoyed being his wife and his partner in ministry!” In my mind, I began to create a picture of Patrick. I imagined a tall man with thick, gray hair. I could imagine a deep, booming, stained-glass voice and a huge smile that made you feel important because he smiled at you.

A few days later, when Shirley was released from the hospital, I was invited over to Shirley and Patrick’s home for lunch. They had missed my first Sunday, and Patrick wanted to meet me. I was a bit thrown off when Patrick met me at the door. He was not at all as I had imagined. He was not tall—I might even say he was short. His hair was indeed gray—

but he didn't have much of it. His clothes were humble. His smile was sweet, not overpowering. When he spoke, his voice was soft, not booming. I found it to be an inviting, cheerful sort of voice. He told stories that were engaging, direct from his heart. As we talked, I felt the presence of Christ. I saw why people loved him so. In the time I knew him, this diminutive, gentle, surprising man taught me much about what it means to be a pastor.

Like Patrick, Jesus wasn't at all what people expected. They had a picture of the Messiah in their minds. The Messiah was supposed to be a conqueror, a king. They imagined a Messiah in sparkling armor, towering over the crowds on a mighty battle horse. What kind of a conquering king rides in a parade on a donkey? How in the world could Jesus save them, riding on a donkey? To suggest that they would be surprised is an understatement.

Jesus the Messiah wasn't going to put on a dog and pony show. Jesus resisted putting on any kind of a show. Jesus was humble. He was unassuming. He didn't conquer the Roman Empire and take his place on the throne. He was a very different kind of king.

From his very beginnings, Jesus surprises us. What kind of a savior is born homeless to a simple carpenter and an unwed, teenage mother? Would the Messiah really be associating with prostitutes and tax collectors? How can the King of the Jews touch people who are unclean and even eat with them? Jesus came to turn the Kingdom upside down. He came to usher in the path of servanthood.

That might not be what the people wanted, but God knew it was what they needed. For many it is comfortable to think of Jesus as above us. He is perfect. He is divine. Jesus is God. In many ways we put him on the throne, which can make him inaccessible. As such, it's hard to imagine that Jesus really did have the full human experience and range of emotions. We want a flashy, enormous Jesus who throws down all that is evil and painful. That's not who Jesus is. It turns out that the humble, small Jesus is exactly what we need. By entering town on a donkey, Jesus declares that he chooses to be among his people. By humbling himself in such a way, Jesus is declaring, "I am here with you and for you."

Sometimes we are uncomfortable with the idea of taking Jesus off the throne. It can almost feel heretical to think of him as a friend or a brother, as if somehow that makes him less divine. In his humility Jesus shows us that he is accessible, approachable, among us. We are surprised to learn that he wants to be with us, not above us.

Riding in on a donkey was a surprising move, but it was in keeping with God's character. God's actions throughout history so often have shown themselves in the small, quiet moments. Jesus is revealed at the bedside of a loved one as she takes her last breath and peace takes over the room. Jesus shows himself in the face of a child who has planted his first garden, as he fingers the seeds and dreams of what will come. We experience Christ in the words of encouragement offered by a stranger. We feel the love of God when we see how all the little moments and happenstances have worked together to bring grace. It's so

often in the humble moments that God surprises us most.

In our world today we celebrate the mighty. Perhaps that's why I assumed Patrick was very different from how he actually was. I was looking for charisma and power. That's what we do - we elevate the strong and formidable. We strive for the glamorous life, and to be admired by all. We live in a world that teaches us to compete. The purpose of human interaction is to win.

Humility is counter to all that our culture teaches. But it is the way of Jesus. The story of Palm Sunday teaches us that the way of Christ is humility. All that Christ is to do is accomplished by his humbling of himself. We who walk in his footsteps are called to a life of humility. Christ compels us to humble ourselves to be among the people, to put our trust in him and not in the lure of might. Christ fought the powers of his day by humbling himself and modeling a way of peace, love and resistance. As his followers, we are called to understand that the way he brought victory was by humbling himself. We are not going to fight the way the world fights. We are going to overcome with love. Love always wins.

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. I am often amazed to find that the most humble of people I know are also the some of the strongest. Has this been your experience? If so, what is your story?
2. What do you think it would have been like to be part of the crowd on Palm Sunday?
3. Is it more comforting to think of Jesus on the throne or right next to you? Why?
4. Consider humility as a virtue. What examples do you see in today's culture? How is our culture lacking humility?
5. How is the choice to be humble a choice to walk in Christ's footsteps?
6. How might the kingdom be turned upside down by humility today?

EASTER
APRIL 1—WHEN JESUS SAVES YOU
Rev. Amy Mayo-Moyle

Matthew 28:1-10

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

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All of the shadows are overcome by glorious sunlight on Easter Sunday. The struggle is over. The message is clear. Jesus has been raised from the dead. While our anger and confusion and fear might still be with us, we can face it because the bottom line is God loves us. God has declared that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. By raising Jesus from the dead, God has declared that nothing—not our questions, not our fears, not our anger, or frustration—is more powerful than God. God loves us even when we have these feelings.

Jesus' death on the cross was an act that demonstrated his love for us. He was sentenced to a gruesome death by people who were afraid of him and his message. Jesus was willing to die that death to show us that his love was more powerful than fear. He rose from the death to show us that his love is more powerful than death. In the midst of all the pain and struggle and questions and doubts, Jesus meets us with a promise to be with us and love us anyway. He will bring us to resurrection and new life. Keep struggling. Continue to look at the various sides of Jesus. Know that he will stay with you, love you and bring you hope. That is a resurrection promise.

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