



# Back to Life

Experience  
Your Own  
Resurrection

A Personal Spiritual Practice Guide for Easter  
by [Sacredise.com](https://sacredise.com)

# Back to Life

A Personal Spiritual Practice Guide  
for Easter

*John van de Laar*

Design and layout by *Jenine Pretorius*  
of Quirky Sloth Designs

Sacredise  
Johannesburg



© Copyright by John van de Laar, 2022

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to make copies of all prayers and liturgies and of all small group and daily devotional resources for congregational use only.

No part of this publication may be copied or transmitted by any means or in any form, outside of fair congregational use, unless prior written permission is received in writing from the publisher.

The ministry of Sacredise is supported through sale of these resources. If you genuinely cannot afford the purchase price, then please contact the publisher at [john@sacredise.com](mailto:john@sacredise.com) for a complimentary copy. If, however, you can afford to buy a copy, please refrain from passing on or making use of unpaid copies of this resource outside of a single congregation. Thank you.

This publication may not be resold, in whole or in part, by any means electronic or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher.

SACREDISE PUBLISHING

16 Geelvink Street

Atlasville

Boksburg

1459

South Africa

[www.sacredise.com](http://www.sacredise.com)

Cover image by [brahan milla](#) on [Unsplash](#)



# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
What's In A Name? .....	6
<i>Easter Sunday</i>	
Own Your Truth.....	12
<i>Easter Two</i>	
Rise Again .....	18
<i>Easter Three</i>	
Become What You Seek.....	24
<i>Easter Four</i>	
It Really Is All About Love .....	30
<i>Easter Five</i>	
Do You Want To Be Whole?.....	37
<i>Easter Six</i>	
Stay In The Game .....	43
<i>Ascension Day</i>	
Better Together.....	49
<i>Easter Seven</i>	
Conclusion .....	56

# Introduction

Easter Sunday 2022 marks the start of our third Easter season of the pandemic. This is a strange observation to make on the day when we celebrate resurrection, perhaps. But there is wisdom to be found in the dissonance between this celebration of life and the crisis of a life-threatening virus plaguing our world.

Many of us were already expressing a deep longing to return to normal two years ago when Easter seemed almost meaningless in the locked-down world. Now vaccines and less deadly variants offer us the first glimpses of hope that normal may not be that far away. This means that the time has come to ask what normal will look like in the pandemic-altered world.

Of course, there are global issues that can be addressed in our search for answers. But for most of us, the question of what our future normal will look like is far more personal. We want to know how to experience our own resurrection now. Many of us have lost much of the life we knew before COVID entered our world. In some ways, that has been a liberation. In others, the grief still weighs us down. So, if we are to talk about resurrection and life, it has to be practical, experiential, and real. It has to lead us into a renewed energy, creativity, and vibrancy. And it has to show us the way back to Life (with a capital 'L') not just for now, but for the future.

And that is why I am proud and excited to offer you this Easter guide: **BACK TO LIFE—Experience Your Own Resurrection.**

The fifty-day Easter Season is more than a long remembrance of a strange event. It is not a time to focus on the ancient past. It is an invitation to dive into the deep, vibrant and meaningful life we long for. It is an opportunity—too often missed in our observances of this season—to experience resurrection again now.

After these years of pandemic in which we have felt entombed by lockdowns and restrictions, the world is finally showing the first signs of opening up. Our stones are finally being rolled away, and we are catching our first glimpse of the Life that awaits us beyond the grave. And **BACK TO LIFE** is the guide that will lead us into a new normal, a renewed life in a post-COVID, pandemic-altered world.

## A Repeating Practice

To get the most out of this guide, you will need to set aside at least ten to fifteen minutes every day. I recommend that you have a journal, or a dedicated document on your phone, tablet, or computer to record your thoughts, questions, and insights. You can also make notes of any specific practical things you want to do to experience resurrection in your life.

If your church is using this journey in your Sunday worship, the content in each week is the same as that which is used to guide the sermon in church. The practices you find in this guide are based on this content and you are invited to return to it throughout the week. The practices themselves are tailored to help you to engage more deeply with the message of the week, and are repeated



throughout the week. Some of the practices remain the same or similar throughout the entire Easter journey for the same reason.

Repetition often moves us past an initial, shallow engagement and removes any resistances we may have to more difficult or challenging insights. As we repeat a practice, so our defences begin to relax and the Spirit is able to speak to us in ways that are not possible without the repeated practice. I encourage you not to skip over the repeating parts, but to engage in them with intention throughout the journey.

It is my hope and prayer that **BACK TO LIFE** will not only be meaningful for you but that it will be transforming. I believe that a mindful and intentional spiritual practice through the Easter Season, both personally and in community, can empower us to enter the post-pandemic world with confidence, hope, and a deep sense of renewed life. Easter truly can be a personal resurrection for us all!

May God guide and bless you as you come **BACK TO LIFE** in this Easter Season.

John

# What's In A Name?

Easter Sunday

## Reflecting on Scripture

### SCRIPTURE READING

John 20:1-18

I lived in eleven different homes, in three different continents in the first seven years of my life. My father's work meant that my family moved often. For my tiny, sensitive, introverted soul, this was a lot to cope with. But what made it possible for me was my security pillow with its dog picture on the front and shaped to match. Everywhere I went my pillow was firmly tucked under my arm. My mother tells me that, as we moved through the various airports, she would put me on the trolley with our luggage and I would put my head on my pillow and go to sleep. I don't remember when I stopped clinging to my dog pillow, but I do remember the pillow itself clearly and very fondly.

It was appropriate and very helpful for me to carry my dog pillow around with me as a small child traveling the world. But if I had tried to take it with me to my first day of school that would have been less appropriate. If I had kept it beside me through high school, or laid it on my desk as I attended university lectures, or had it on my lap in my first job interview, that would have been dysfunctional. What was normal for me as a child is abnormal for me now as an adult. I still have important objects that hold meaning for me. And some of them may even seem juvenile or strange to others. But I engage with them as an adult in an adult way, not as an attempt to cling to my childhood.

What makes this Easter different from the last two years is that the first signs of an end to the pandemic are beginning to appear. We're not out of the woods yet, but we can begin to imagine a life that is no longer restricted by COVID protocols. And that can make the temptation to cling to what we've known seductive. When we think of a return to normal, it is tempting to look back. We naturally long to return to what we've known, even if it is now beyond our reach. But we can't get back to life by going back. The life, the resurrection we seek is ahead of us, in the new world that is, as yet, unknown.

In the resurrection narrative of John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene tried to cling to the Risen Jesus who had just made himself known. But he discouraged her and helped her to see that he, her relationship with him, and their world, were all changed. She could not cling to what she knew. That reality was gone. The life she now sought was not behind her but ahead.

Jesus had already prepared her to cope with the new reality. Although at first she mistook him for the gardener, he opened her eyes by speaking her name. This was not just saying a label. It was an act of recognising her for who she was, of celebrating her and all that her name meant and embodied. Her relationship with Jesus had always been based on his capacity to make her feel truly seen—perhaps as no one else ever had.

I often wonder how Jesus spoke her name. Did he simply say it as an affirmation of her presence? Or did he voice it with a smile as a gentle question, "Seriously, Mary? You don't recognise me the way I recognise you?" Perhaps he looked her in the eye and spoke it as a reminder of her strength and uniqueness. Whatever the case, when he named her he empowered her to rise up, embrace her new reality, and share her experience with the other disciples. He led her back to life not by clinging to the past, but by stepping confidently and hopefully into the unknown future.

We cannot know fullness of life, we cannot be resurrected into our most abundant, meaningful life unless we know what it is to be fully seen, truly named, and completely loved. And that's why the Scriptures are so consistent in speaking about the importance of our names. The psalmist, without specifically mentioning names, celebrates being fully and lovingly known by God in every way (Ps.139). When the people of Israel cry that God has forgotten them, Isaiah brings a divine word that says, "See, I have written (some other versions say engraved or inscribed) your name on the palms of my hands." (Isaiah 49:15). In Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, it is the poor beggar who is named in contrast to the wealthy man who ignores him (Luke 16:19-31). When Jesus calls Simon he gives him a new name to express both the giftedness and strength that Jesus sees in him and his new calling among the disciples (John 3:42). Nathaniel's scepticism is overcome when Jesus describes seeing him under the fig tree before Philip called him and affirms him as a "genuine son of Israel—a man of complete integrity" (John 3:47). And here, Jesus names Mary and sends her as the first apostle to share the news of resurrection.

If we long to get back to life again, to experience our own resurrection, we can begin by remembering that we are named, seen, and loved by God—just as we are, regardless of what life and the world have taken from us or how others have mis-seen us. All we need to do is learn to believe it and live into it—which is, I confess, easier said than done. And that's why we need each other. As we intentionally and lovingly see and name one another, so we remind each other of God's love and God's seeing of us all. And as our souls learn to trust that we are truly and fully named, seen, and loved, so we can find the courage and strength to move forward into the life, the resurrection, that awaits us beyond the pandemic—or any other tragedy or trauma that we may have had to deal with.

We don't know what the post-pandemic world will look like. But we do know that we cannot avoid it. We cannot go 'back to Egypt'. We cannot return to normal in the sense of having again the life we once knew. Like Mary, we have to let go of our temptation to cling to the past, the familiar, the safe, and we have to step into the new reality that awaits us—whatever it may be.

And the thing that empowers us is to know that we are known; to experience, daily, that we are fully and truly seen, that we are enthusiastically celebrated, and that we are unconditionally loved. This is what Christ gives us as he speaks our names and engraves them on the palms of his hands. And this is what he asks us to give to one another as we embody for each other, the seeing, knowing, and loving of Christ.

Who needs you to name them today? Who needs to know that you see them? Who needs to feel God's love expressed through you? And how will you make sure that you speak that person's name warmly, respectfully, and with deep celebration and gratitude for who they are?

# Daily Spiritual Practice

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.

The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.

## PREPARING

Take a few minutes to prepare yourself for your practice. Allow a minute or two of silence, and focus on your breath as you slow and deepen your breathing. You may want to close your eyes and/or open your hands.

When you're ready, clench your fists and think about something you are clinging to, some element of your pre-pandemic life that you are trying to bring back and don't want to let go. Consider whether this thing is still meaningful and appropriate for your post-pandemic life or if it is holding you back from entering the new pandemic-altered world. Then, after a few moments of reflection, open your hands as a sign of releasing that thing, or of your willingness to become willing to release it, or of your willingness to hold it lightly and be open to new possibilities.

Finally, you may want to offer this prayer:

*When I am tempted to cling to what I know  
what feels familiar and secure,  
You invite me into a deeper relationship with you, Jesus,  
and into the wonder of resurrection life.  
And so I celebrate that you are the Risen One,  
And I ask that you would help me  
to release what is dying  
and embrace the new life into which you call me.*

Amen.

## LISTENING

Insert the **Listening Exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

## RESPONDING

Take a few moments now to begin working with what you have received through today's practice. Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and focus on your breath.

After a few moments, inhale deeply and breathe in the presence of Christ. And as you exhale, breathe out any sense of disconnection with Christ.

Then, breathe in the resurrection life of Christ and breathe out stuckness.

Finally, breathe in hope and breathe out fear.

End this response reflection with a few more moments of silence.

## INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice, think of one thing you can do today to release anything unhelpful to which you may be clinging. And at any time when you need to refocus or centre yourself, come back to the breathing exercise you have just done.

Now as you end your practice, affirm that you are going into your day immersed in the presence and filled with the power of Christ. And go to embrace and share resurrection life.

## *Listening Exercises*

### DAY ONE (EASTER SUNDAY)

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- What objects, people, places, or things do you cling to for security?
- Are any of these 'security blankets' to which you cling inappropriate in any way? Is there any way they may be holding you back? How would you be able to identify if they were or not?
- What motivates you to cling to these things? What are you afraid might happen if you were to release them?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- When you imagine a world beyond the COVID pandemic, what do you imagine? What do you hope that world will look like for you?
- In what ways might a 'return to normal' mean looking back for you? How does your vision of the post-pandemic world reflect a desire to go back to the pre-pandemic world? How might this vision be blinding you to the possibility of resurrection in your life and world?
- If you were to release backward-looking ideas of your post-pandemic life, and open yourself to the unknown, unpredictable future ahead, what thoughts and feelings emerge for you? How easily do you feel hopeful, excited, and energised by the idea of a new, unfamiliar future?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?



### DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Take a moment to read the Scripture for this week again. Read it slowly and thoughtfully. What stands out for you? What do you notice that you haven't seen in this passage before?
- As you reflect on this passage, take note of any feelings that rise up in you. Stop and ask what specific words, images, or elements of the story generated these responses in you. And be sure to name the feelings as accurately as possible.
- What do these feelings tell you about what this passage may be saying to you? How is this passage speaking to you? What message from this reading do you need to remember as you navigate the future?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Return to the Scripture passage for this week. You may want to read it again slowly and thoughtfully. This time, as you read it, try to place yourself in the story. With which character do you most identify? Or do you rather see yourself as an observer watching the story play out?
- What do you imagine doing differently if you were in this story? What feels exactly like how you would respond?
- How does the story relate to, or resonate with, what is happening in your life? What points of connection can you find between this passage and your own experience and reality now?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY FIVE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- When have you felt truly seen, named, and loved? Take some time to remember and relive that experience.
- When you think about the passages in the Bible that refer to God seeing us, naming us, and loving us, how does that connect with your experiences of feeling seen, named, and loved?

- What can you do to believe more strongly in God seeing, naming, and loving you? And how can you open yourself to receive these gifts more intentionally?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY SIX

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How does your experience of being seen, named, and loved, and your awareness of God seeing, naming, and loving you, help you to understand the power and importance of us learning to see, name, and love one another?
- When you consider how God sees, names, and loves you, how does that change how you see others who are equally seen, named, and loved by God?
- How does your awareness of God seeing, naming, and loving you change how you perceive the world, especially as we navigate this dark and difficult season?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY SEVEN

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How does knowing that you are seen, named, and loved by God empower you to face the future with greater hope and confidence? What can you do today to express that hope and confidence a little more intentionally?
- What can you do in the future to remind yourself that you are seen, named, and loved by God? How can holding on to this knowledge enable you to release the things you cling to that are holding you back from entering the unknown, unpredictable future?
- Who needs to know and experience that you see, name, and love them? What will you do today to make sure they know?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

# Own Your Truth

Easter Two

## Reflecting on Scripture

### SCRIPTURE READING

John 20:19-31

In Ricky Gervais' excellent (if rather 'in-your-face') television show *After Life*, the character Kath, played by Diane Morgan, has a chance encounter with a rather attractive man. She is thrilled when they arrange a date, but gets extremely anxious when she concludes that a lawyer like him won't be interested in a woman with an unglamorous job in a small, local newspaper. Going against Tony's (Ricky Gervais) advice, she tries to pose as a doctor but fails hopelessly.

How easily we lose ourselves. How strong the temptation to conform and accept a life and faith that is given to us, rather than ones that are authentic. In times of trauma, struggle, uncertainty, and chaos our need to feel accepted and that we belong to a community becomes particularly acute. And it can tempt us to shape-shift and hide our authentic selves to preserve a sense of acceptance and safety.

There are lots of things we do need to do for the greater good. It is kind and necessary to restrict our personal freedom for the sake of others, and that can add to our confusion about how best to respond when times are tough. But compassion and generosity do not—or should not—require us to lose ourselves and live a life that isn't ours, that isn't authentic and full. Rather, in times of struggle is when we most need to remember ourselves and express our unique gifts, values, perspectives, and ways of being.

As we begin to imagine living in a post-pandemic world, now is when we most need to break free of conformity for conformity's sake and reject a second-hand life and a second-hand faith. Now is when we need most to ensure that what we believe and how we live is truly ours. Only then can we be most fully present and alive—and that's the only way we can get through this struggle to the resurrection that awaits.

Rather unkindly, in my opinion, Thomas has been cursed by history to be forever known as the Doubter. Such negative labels are often applied to those who refuse to conform—and that is essentially what Thomas did.

Imagine the social pressure when Thomas arrived back to find all his friends excited and celebrating the Risen Christ. Imagine how easy it would have been to accept what he was told, go along with it, laugh and celebrate with the others. But he refused. Not because he doubted, but because he knew that he needed more. He needed a first-hand experience, not a second-hand one. A first-hand faith, not one passed to him from someone else. He needed to own and experience resurrection for himself. He needed to do this his own way and he needed not to



conform, but to stay true to himself. The alternative would have been for the resurrection to have meant nothing to him and to have had no real impact on his life.

It is easier to live a life that is given. It is easier to conform and go along with the dominant voices. It is easier to silence our questions, to ignore our unique needs and ways of being, learning, and experiencing. But we don't find life by following the pack and choosing the easiest path, the path of least resistance. We find life when we are determined to stay true to ourselves—the selves that we know is seen and loved by God, and whom we are learning to see and love in ourselves. We find life when we are courageous enough to ask our questions and to do the work to have our own experience, to live a first-hand life that is ours. And then, because we have done the courageous and difficult work of showing up authentically and fully in our lives, we are more able to receive the vibrant, abundant, resurrection life that empowers and guides us through our toughest times.

Jesus' words to Thomas are often seen as a reprimand: "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me." But the other disciples also saw before they believed. My sense is that John added those words into his Gospel to emphasise his theme of putting faith in Christ rather in miracles, signs, or experiences. It was a statement that, while some may receive the gift of seeing and then believing, this does not make them better (or worse) than those who believe without seeing. The point is not *how* we come to faith but *that* we come to faith and that our faith leads us more deeply into the resurrection life that Jesus offers.

We often miss how Jesus responded to Thomas' need for an authentic experience. Jesus took his questions seriously and gave him exactly what he asked for. One of the most empowering gifts we can give each other is to welcome one another's uniqueness, to take one another's questions seriously, and to celebrate one another's quest to experience faith and life in our own unique and authentic way. Instead of judging, we can accommodate one another. Instead of trying to fit us all into a one-size-fits-all faith and life, we can celebrate our differences and make space for our diverse ways of being. And when we do this, we all find abundant, empowered life—the life that can carry us through the uncertainty and chaos.

In times like this the temptation is to retreat into what is safe and known, into what will get us the approval and protection of others. But this is a bit like burying our heads in the sand. It's a fight, flight, freeze, and fawn response that may make us feel safer in the moment, but that doesn't empower us for whatever the world may throw at us.

Now is not the time to hide. If we are to come back to life after the pandemic, we need to express ourselves fully, courageously, and authentically. The world needs us to express ourselves fully, courageously, and authentically. The new world is up for grabs and now is the time when we can make our space in it—our unique authentic space. Now is the time to ask our awkward questions, have the uncomfortable conversations, embrace our particular foibles and eccentricities. And 'as we let our own light shine'—as Thomas did and as Marianne Williamson so beautifully taught—'we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.'

# Daily Spiritual Practice

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.

The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.

## PREPARING

Take a few minutes to prepare yourself for your practice. Allow a minute or two of silence, and focus on your breath as you slow and deepen your breathing. You may want to close your eyes and/or open your hands.

When you're ready, open your hands, or focus on your hands if they are already open. As you do this, think about some aspect of yourself that you feel is most authentic but that you are tempted to hide or ignore to fit in with others. Then close your hands as a sign of owning and embracing that element of who you are. Think about how you can be more intentional about expressing and celebrating that part of yourself.

Finally, you may want to offer this prayer:

*When I am tempted to lose myself in conformity  
to the expectations of others,  
and to accept a second-hand faith,  
where I am told what to think, and believe, and be,  
You remind me that you take my questions seriously,  
and you invite me into an authentic relationship with you.  
And so I celebrate that you are the Risen One,  
And I ask that you would help me  
to release anything that is not true  
to who you have made me to be  
and to embrace the authentic faith and life  
to which you call me.*

Amen.

## LISTENING

Insert the **Listening Exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

## RESPONDING

Take a few moments now to begin working with what you have received through today's practice. Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and focus on your breath.

After a few moments, inhale deeply and breathe in the sense of being seen by Christ. And as you exhale, breathe out shame.

Then, breathe in the courage and breathe out fearful conformity.

Finally, breathe in curiosity and breathe out blind faith.



End this response reflection with a few more moments of silence.

## INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice, think of one thing you can do today to own your truth and express your authentic self a little more. And at any time when you need to refocus or centre yourself, come back to the breathing exercise you have just done.

Now as you end your practice, affirm that you are going into your day in the love and acceptance of Christ. And commit to living your most authentic faith and life.

## *Listening Exercises*

### DAY ONE (EASTER TWO)

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How comfortable are you with being fully and authentically yourself around other people? What are the things that support or undermine your comfort with revealing your true self?
- When have you experienced losing yourself in conformity to the needs and expectations of others? Why did you allow that to happen and how has it affected you?
- What makes you feel that you have to shape-shift or change yourself to be accepted, welcomed, and loved by those around you? What kind of belonging can you really experience when you do this?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- What are the things that most tempt you to conform and accept a life and faith that is given to you, rather than ones that are authentic?
- As you reflect on your life, in what necessary and legitimate ways do you restrict your personal freedom for the sake of a greater good?
- In what ways have you lost yourself in your desire to be compassionate and generous? And how can you be more intentional about remembering yourself?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?



### DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Take a moment to read the Scripture for this week again. Read it slowly and thoughtfully. What stands out for you? What do you notice that you haven't seen in this passage before?
- As you reflect on this passage, take note of any feelings that rise up in you. Stop and ask what specific words, images, or elements of the story generated these responses in you. And be sure to name the feelings as accurately as possible.
- What do these feelings tell you about what this passage may be saying to you? How is this passage speaking to you? What message from this reading do you need to remember as you navigate the future?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Return to the Scripture passage for this week. You may want to read it again slowly and thoughtfully. This time, as you read it, try to place yourself in the story. With which character do you most identify? Or do you rather see yourself as an observer watching the story play out?
- What do you imagine doing differently if you were in this story? What feels exactly like how you would respond?
- How does the story relate to, or resonate with, what is happening in your life? What points of connection can you find between this passage and your own experience and reality now?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY FIVE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- What social pressure has made you feel that you cannot be fully and truly yourself? What has made you feel incapable or unwilling to resist that social pressure?
- In what ways do you feel that it is easier to conform and go along with the dominant voices in your life? What makes conformity and hiding yourself easier?

- Who in your life has made you feel completely comfortable being yourself? Who has honoured and supported your expression of your authentic self? How has that experience impacted you?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY SIX

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- What questions do you need to ask—yourself, God, others—that you aren't? What keeps you from voicing those questions?
- If you were to imagine living a completely authentic life, what would that look like for you? What needs to shift in your thinking, believing, or decision-making to allow you to move toward that authentic life?
- How possible do you believe it is to live an authentic life? What has shaped that perception? What evidence is there to support or question your perspective? Is there anything in your thinking that you would want to change in order to support your most authentic life a little more?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY SEVEN

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How can you resist the urge to hide your authentic self in the quest to feel safer and more secure in this difficult time in history? What can you do to make expressing your true self safer?
- Who needs you to support their quest to live more authentically? How can you do this for them? What questions of theirs do you need to take more seriously?
- How can you let your light shine a little more and, in so doing, give others permission to shine too? What can you do to liberate yourself a little more from your fear and liberate others at the same time?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

# Rise Again

## Easter Three

### Reflecting on Scripture

#### SCRIPTURE READING

John 21:1-19

Take a moment to check in with yourself. How whole and well-balanced is your life right now? How has the pandemic disrupted your mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health? What do you most need to restore a sense of wholeness and balance to your life and to get back to a full and vibrant sense of aliveness?

The pandemic has been brutal to many of us. Businesses across the world have closed their doors. Churches have shut down. Whole industries have downscaled. People have lost jobs. In the last two years, the global human community has experienced a collective sense of failure beyond anything we've known before in our lifetimes, and possibly ever. Add to this the loss of loved ones, of our identity, and of our belief in ourselves and we find ourselves in a second pandemic of low self-worth, self-trust, and self-belief.

Unfortunately, religion is too often part of the problem. The damage done by religious judgement and condemnation of people who follow other religious and spiritual paths, of black people, of LGBTQIA+ people, and of women has left almost an entire generation with their confidence and self-belief in tatters.

I will never forget sitting in my dorm room at university chatting with a friend who had graduated the year before and come back for a visit. During a lull in our conversation, an expression of deep sadness crossed his face as he gazed at the cigarette in his hand. He informed me that he had been trying, unsuccessfully, to stop smoking. But, explained, he knew wouldn't be able to quit until he changed his life. And then he came out to me, telling me that he was gay, but that he hated himself for it. I often look back on that moment and wish I had been in a place where I could have comforted him and assured him that he was loved and valuable just as he was. I wonder how many people feel a similar self-hatred—for more reasons than can be listed—due to the failures, traumas, and grief they have experienced in the last two years?

At the beginning of John 21, Peter decided to go fishing. This was a return to the life he had known before Jesus called him. After his denial of Christ, the guilt of which had clearly not been erased by his previous encounter with the Risen Jesus, he seems to have felt that his days as a disciple were over. He had failed dismally and so he went back to the one thing he still knew he could do.

Imagine Peter's frustration when his fishing achieved nothing—he couldn't even do his old job successfully. And when he saw Jesus on the beach his shame and the urge to hide must have been overwhelming. But perhaps his need to be forgiven was stronger, causing him to jump out



of the boat and swim to Jesus. Then, when the boat finally got back to shore and the catch was hauled in, Peter and the others shared the simple breakfast that Jesus had prepared on the beach. The first step to Peter's healing was this simple, but profound, restoration of relationship with Christ.

But then Jesus invited Peter to take a walk. As they talked, Jesus questioned Peter about his love and asked him to return to the work they had begun together. Peter affirmed his love for Jesus, but his self-doubt kept him from accepting this renewed call. In the verses following the set reading for this chapter, Peter noticed the disciple whom Jesus loved following them. And, obviously remembering that this disciple had not abandoned Jesus, Peter asked why Jesus didn't rather choose them. Jesus brushed the thought away and repeated his call to Peter. In so doing Jesus reaffirmed his trust and displayed his confidence in Peter, even though the Big Fisherman may have had none left in himself.

When we feel that we have failed, when we feel unacceptable and judged by others, when our confidence and self-belief have been undermined by bullies, critics, and circumstances, we need a voice that interrupts our self-recrimination and self-doubt. Jesus was that voice for Simon. And now, as we seek to follow Christ, the Gospel promise of forgiveness and the call to participate in Christ's life-giving mission is that voice of confidence and trust for us, even though it may be difficult to believe and accept. This is where our faith in resurrection is so important. Beneath all of the doubts, fear, and shame, it reminds us that life is not quenched and that second—or third, or fourth, or fiftieth—chances, are an integral and restorative part of life's journey. We will all fail, be broken, and lose people and things that enrich our lives. And we will all need to be given another chance. We will all need to be restored and brought back to life.

As we journey through this life together, we need one another. We need the encouragement, trust, and reminders of our goodness and competence that others offer us. We need to speak life and confidence and affirmation to one another, especially in these broken times. And we need to resist the urge to try and make ourselves feel better by criticising and judging others. Jesus speaks to us the same words of affirmation, forgiveness, and resurrection that he spoke to Peter. The only difference is that now, he often speaks those words through us.

When the world is in chaos, and we have been plunged into struggle and despair, it can feel safer to nurse our wounds, hide from the world, and lose ourselves in negativity, self-doubt, and paralysis. It can feel impossible to find strength and courage and creativity when we've lost so much.

But if we will begin by allowing ourselves just to listen to the voices of comfort and encouragement around us, we can begin to see light again. And then, if we can find a way to take one small step at a time toward that light, we can slowly rebuild our lives and once again bring our unique gift into the world. It's not easy, but the alternative is much worse. And with the Spirit's presence and the help of loving, trusted friends and family, we will discover that we really can rise again.

# Daily Spiritual Practice

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.

The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.

## PREPARING

Take a few minutes to prepare yourself for your practice. Allow a minute or two of silence, and focus on your breath as you slow and deepen your breathing. You may want to close your eyes and/or open your hands.

When you're ready, clench your fists and think about some area in your life where you feel that you have failed, where you feel judged or misunderstood, or where your confidence and self-belief have been undermined. Consider how you may be clinging to these negative and debilitating feelings. Then open your hands as a sign of releasing those thoughts and feelings and opening to new ways of seeing yourself. Consider how you can accept and celebrate yourself and allow the Spirit to help you rebuild your confidence.

Finally, you may want to offer this prayer:

*When life has undermined my confidence  
and my faith in myself and in you, God,  
When I am tempted to remain stuck  
in my inadequacy, failure, and regret,  
You remind me of how you see me,  
and you invite me to trust your love and belief in me.  
And so I celebrate that you are the Risen One,  
And I ask that you would open my eyes  
to your image within me  
and to your Spirit who empowers the gifts  
you have given me.*

Amen.

## LISTENING

Insert the **Listening Exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

## RESPONDING

Take a few moments now to begin working with what you have received through today's practice. Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and focus on your breath.

After a few moments, inhale deeply and breathe in the affirmation of Christ. And as you exhale, breathe out any sense of unworthiness.

Then, breathe in the grace of Christ and breathe out guilt.

Finally, breathe in possibilities and breathe out regret.

End this response reflection with a few more moments of silence.

## INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice, think of one thing you can do today to release any guilt, shame, or sense of inadequacy, and one thing you can do to affirm your belief in your own worth and giftedness. And at any time when you need to refocus or centre yourself, come back to the breathing exercise you have just done.

Now as you end your practice, go into your day in the affirmation and strength of Christ to live with confidence in your God-given gifts.

# *Listening Exercises*

## DAY ONE (EASTER THREE)

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How whole and well-balanced is your life right now? How has the pandemic disrupted your mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health?
- What has been the most difficult aspect of the pandemic for you? What have you lost? What has left you with feelings of shame, guilt, or unworthiness?
- What do you most need to restore a sense of wholeness and balance to your life and to get back to a full and vibrant sense of aliveness?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- In what ways, if any, have religious people or organisations contributed to your feelings of failure or unworthiness?
- In what ways has your faith or connection with a religious community been a source of strength and healing in this time?
- What can you do to challenge any feelings of failure, guilt, regret, or unworthiness that may have emerged in you through this pandemic?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?



### DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Take a moment to read the Scripture for this week again. Read it slowly and thoughtfully. What stands out for you? What do you notice that you haven't seen in this passage before?
- As you reflect on this passage, take note of any feelings that rise up in you. Stop and ask what specific words, images, or elements of the story generated these responses in you. And be sure to name the feelings as accurately as possible.
- What do these feelings tell you about what this passage may be saying to you? How is this passage speaking to you? What message from this reading do you need to remember as you navigate the future?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Return to the Scripture passage for this week. You may want to read it again slowly and thoughtfully. This time, as you read it, try to place yourself in the story. With which character do you most identify? Or do you rather see yourself as an observer watching the story play out?
- What do you imagine doing differently if you were in this story? What feels exactly like how you would respond?
- How does the story relate to, or resonate with, what is happening in your life? What points of connection can you find between this passage and your own experience and reality now?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY FIVE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Who is a voice for you that challenges your feelings of failure, judgement from others, or lack of confidence and self-belief?
- How does your faith help you to feel affirmed, trusted, and valued by God? How can you be more intentional about remembering and nurturing your sense of being accepted and trusted by God?

- How does your faith in resurrection help you to feel more confident and hopeful in your future? And how can it help you to feel more secure in your capacity to navigate whatever life throws at you now and in the years ahead?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY SIX

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- What do you think about when you think about yourself? What thoughts undermine your belief in yourself and what thoughts affirm your sense of worth? Which thoughts are louder for you?
- What can you do to be more intentional about turning up the volume on the positive thoughts and turning down the volume on the negative?
- Where are you tempted to view the world through a lens of negativity and pessimism? What do you gain from seeing the world this way? What do you want to do to shift your perspective so that you are more aware of the positives that exist even in the tough times? What might you gain by doing this?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY SEVEN

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How tempted are you to ignore or deflect words of affirmation, praise, and appreciation from others? Why do you do this? What can you do to be more open to receive kind and supportive words and actions from others?
- What can you do to be more supportive, affirming, and appreciative of those around you? How might that help them to regain their confidence and sense of value in themselves?
- What will you do today to draw on the Spirit's power and resources to help you rise again with greater strength, creativity, confidence, and resilience?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

# Become What You Seek

Easter Four

## Reflecting on Scripture

### SCRIPTURE READING

John 10:22-30

We live in a data-driven world where proofs, evidence, results, and numbers are required for almost everything we do. In response, there tend to be two ways we navigate the world: We may get overwhelmed and reject the numbers altogether. We find an authority figure to follow, or we make going against the mainstream our default, and we become cynics who prefer to stand on the side-lines and criticise everything rather than risk getting in the game. Or we may become so bogged down in the quest for data and proof that we do nothing unless the numbers add up. We end up in what has become known as 'analysis paralysis' and we give up our creativity, our intuitive leaps of faith, and our capacity for reasonable risk-taking to find life and goodness.

The alternative to these two responses is not to reject all data. We can rather balance what we learn from the numbers with a self-confidence and trust in our own God-given capacity, intuition, and openness to new ideas and insights. And then we can navigate this chaotic and unpredictable world with confidence, changing as we go and as we need to, and believing that we have what it takes to thrive even in the toughest of times.

In the movie, *Finding Nemo*, Dory and Marlin find themselves in the belly of a whale. What they don't realise is that the whale has been carrying them to Sydney harbour, where they believe they will finally find the missing Nemo. When the whale stops swimming and instructs the two fish to move to the back of his throat to allow him to blow them out of his blowhole, Marlin is convinced that they're about to be digested. Dory, on the other hand, happily complies. As they move backwards the whale prepares to blow, leaving Marlin and Dory hanging on to tastebuds on his tongue. When the whale tells them to let go, Marlin asks Dory how she knows that nothing bad will happen. She replies, 'I don't' and promptly lets go. Closing his eyes, Marlin follows suit and they are blown out of the whale's belly and into the water of the harbour. Dory reminds us that not everything in life can be decided on the basis of evidence, proof, and certainty. That's why it's called faith, after all.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is confronted by a crowd of people who wanted Jesus to tell them clearly what they should believe. They wanted proof that he was the Messiah and they wanted him to win them over. But Jesus knew that if they didn't believe the things he had already done, there was nothing he could do that would satisfy their need for proof. Theirs was not a rational request. It was rooted in their own deep seated insecurity, scepticism, and fear. Believing in the Messiah would be committing treason against Rome which carried the death penalty. If they were going to take that risk they wanted to be sure. And they needed Jesus to give them the certainty they sought. In this insecurity, fear, and quest for external proof, the people revealed that they were



not among Jesus' 'sheep'—followers who had learned to trust not just Jesus, but themselves because of his encouragement and teaching.

If we read a little further, we see that when Jesus responded to the crowd's challenge by describing himself as the Son of God, the people wanted to stone him. But he pointed out that even the Scriptures refer to human beings as 'gods' and 'children of the Most High'. In this sense the problem of the people, and the reason for their constant demand for proof, was less about their lack of faith in Christ and more about their lack of faith in themselves. Those who, like the disciples, had begun to experience God's presence and Spirit within them, and who had been taught by Jesus what a remarkable contribution they could make to the world, needed less external proof because the proof was in themselves, in the divine nature that they discovered was part of their own being. And so they found the faith and confidence to release the need for proof, and to trust their own instincts, their own intuition, their own wisdom, and the divine image and Spirit within them.

It can often still be seen as blasphemy in the Church today to refer to ourselves as gods. We work very hard to keep our humanness separate from God's presence and nature, and we tend to focus more on Jesus' divinity than his humanity. But as Athanasius declared, "He became what we are so that he might make us what he is"—gods, little incarnations, and those who can act in the world as participants in God's purpose and mission because we trust in our capacity as God-imagined and God-beloved ones.

One of the most profound things we can do for ourselves is to receive, acknowledge and remind ourselves of our own divine nature—which makes navigating life's struggles, and embracing resurrection a real possibility for us. And one of the most profound things we can do for one another is to keep reminding each other of the divine beauty, wisdom, grace, light, and life that we see in each other. The Hindu greeting 'Namaste' offers an example of how we can do this for each other. But also simply praising one another, expressing our awe, admiration, and gratitude can remind us all that we are indeed children of the Most High. And as divine children, we can trust our intuition, strength, and God-given wisdom as we seek to find life and resurrection in the midst of our pain.

We cannot find our best lives, we cannot become our best selves, and we cannot make a positive difference in our world if we distrust ourselves and if we're constantly looking for proof and assurances from outside of ourselves. It's wonderful to be affirmed and it's wonderful when our instincts and actions are confirmed to be right for our circumstances. But sometimes we need to act when we don't know for sure what the best way forward is—like in this pandemic-altered world. And that means we have to believe that we have what it takes, we are made in God's image, and we are beloved children of God filled with God's Spirit. We need to trust that, even if we make mistakes, they are part of finding our way forward. And when we do, we can break free of paralysis and the constant quest for proof, signs, and assurances before we are willing to commit to our best lives.

## *Daily Spiritual Practice*

*Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.*



*The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.*

## PREPARING

Take a few minutes to prepare yourself for your practice. Allow a minute or two of silence, and focus on your breath as you slow and deepen your breathing. You may want to close your eyes and/or open your hands.

When you're ready, clench your fists and think about any areas in your life and in the world where you feel unable to move forward without proof. Take a few moments to consider how you may be clinging to your need for proof in unhelpful and debilitating ways. Then, when you're ready, open your hands as a sign of opening to your intuition and to your own divine nature.

Finally, you may want to offer this prayer:

*When I am tempted to get lost in distrust  
to become deaf to my divinely-inspired intuition,  
and to become obsessed with seeking proof,  
You remind me that your Spirit guides me into truth,  
and you invite me to remember and trust  
my own God-begotten nature.  
And so I celebrate that you are the Risen One,  
And I ask that you would help me  
to release my need to cling to proof  
before I can act  
and to trust that in you and in myself  
I have what I need to navigate  
an unpredictable world.*

Amen.

## LISTENING

Insert the **Listening Exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

## RESPONDING

Take a few moments now to begin working with what you have received through the today's practice. Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and focus on your breath.

After a few moments, inhale deeply and breathe in Christ's Spirit. And as you exhale, breathe out any sense of disconnection with anxiety.

Then, breathe in intuition and breathe out any addiction to certainty.

Finally, breathe in awareness of your divine nature and breathe out inadequacy.

End this response reflection with a few more moments of silence.

## INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice, think of one thing you can do today to release any compulsive need for proof and any anxiety to which you may be clinging. And think of one thing you can do

to remember the divine nature that God has placed within you. And at any time when you need to refocus or centre yourself, come back to the breathing exercise you have just done.

Now as you end your practice, go into your day in the power of the Spirit of Christ to live from your intuitive, God-begotten self.

## *Listening Exercises*

### **DAY ONE (EASTER FOUR)**

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- What is your relationship with evidence, proof, and data? Are you a sceptic or a cynic by default? Or are you more trusting and open to follow the lead of experts and authorities?
- Have you ever become so overwhelmed by numbers and data that you have chosen rather to ignore them than try to make sense of them? What was that experience like for you? Where have you turned for proof or evidence when this has happened to you?
- Have you ever become so obsessed with numbers and data that you have fallen prey to 'analysis paralysis'? What was that experience like for you? Where have you turned for proof or evidence when this has happened to you?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### **DAY TWO**

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How good are you at balancing news, information, and data with your own intuition and instincts? How do you go about doing that on a daily basis?
- How open are you to believe that you have a God-given capacity that is enough to navigate the challenges you face? How can you be more intentional about accessing that power?
- What habits can you nurture to be more mindful and intentional about bringing data, evidence and information together with your intuition, instincts, and personal perspectives?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?



### DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Take a moment to read the Scripture for this week again. Read it slowly and thoughtfully. You may want to include a paragraph or two before and after the set reading for this week. What stands out for you? What do you notice that you haven't seen in this passage before?
- As you reflect on this passage, take note of any feelings that rise up in you. Stop and ask what specific words, images, or elements of the story generated these responses in you. And be sure to name the feelings as accurately as possible.
- What do these feelings tell you about what this passage may be saying to you? How is this passage speaking to you? What message from this reading do you need to remember as you navigate the future?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Return to the Scripture passage for this week. You may want to read it again slowly and thoughtfully, including some verses before and after for context. This time, as you read it, try to place yourself in the story. With which character do you most identify? Or do you rather see yourself as an observer watching the story play out?
- What do you imagine doing differently if you were in this story? What feels exactly like how you would respond?
- How does the story relate to, or resonate with, what is happening in your life? What points of connection can you find between this passage and your own experience and reality now?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY FIVE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- What does faith mean to you? What role does faith play in your life and to what extent do you rely on faith to help you navigate the world and feel secure and confident?

- To what extent do you include faith in yourself as part of your life of faith? How do you feel when you think of yourself as a 'child of the Most High'?
- How does your faith empower you to trust in your ability to make a positive contribution to the world, and to trust your instincts, intuition, and gifts?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY SIX

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- What is your response to the idea that we are 'gods'? What does this idea mean to you and how would you interpret the way Jesus spoke about it?
- How do you understand Athanasius' statement that "He became what we are so that he might make us what he is"? What does this statement mean to you personally and how might believing it impact your life?
- How does understanding your own God-given divine nature help you to trust yourself and believe in yourself a little more?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY SEVEN

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How can you recognise when you are trying to overcome your sense of distrust in yourself by looking for affirmation or proof outside of yourself? And when you do recognise this tendency in yourself, how can you help yourself to trust yourself more?
- If you really believed completely that you have what it takes to navigate your world and its challenges, what would you do differently?
- How can you help yourself to be more comfortable with mistakes and to embrace them as part of learning and finding your way forward in difficult times? How might this help you to trust yourself a little more as you navigate the unpredictable world?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

# *It Really Is All About Love*

Easter Five

## *Reflecting on Scripture*

### SCRIPTURE READING

John 13:31-35

"I long for the day when everyone can love whomever they want, however they want." These words were spoken by a ministerial colleague on a retreat where we were exploring questions around sexuality. And the response was strong, negative, and immediate. Most of the comments opposing his vision of love were concerned about the danger it posed to society, to the Church, to human beings in general. It was like love was some kind of radioactive material that could destroy the known universe if it wasn't controlled and handled with great care. And of course the idea that love could, in some cases, be expressed sexually in ways not sanctioned by the Church was tantamount to threatening anarchy. I still struggle to understand why these ministers reacted with such disgust to the thought of setting love free.

What does this say about how we see love? Why are we so afraid of love, and why do we either reduce it to sentimentality and rob it of its power, or make it so complex and difficult that we lose our capacity to give and receive love well?

In 1965, Jackie DeShannon proclaimed, in the words of the famous song by Hal David and Burt Bacharach that "What the world needs now is love, sweet love." Two years later the Beatles declared that "All you need is love." Yet most of us remain unconvinced, even as we sing along to these songs with great passion. We doubt that love on its own really is enough and we add all sorts of conditions and requirements to make up for what we think love lacks.

But what if they were right? What if love—set free from Hollywood romanticism, cynical self-protection, and moralistic legalism—really is what we need to address our greatest personal and global crises?

The writer of John's Gospel set aside what we now know as chapters thirteen to seventeen to record Jesus' teaching on the night before his crucifixion. This long discourse can be viewed as Jesus' final words, and contains some of the most popular and challenging passages in the New Testament. The section begins with Jesus washing his disciples' feet and then proceeds to the new commandment to love one another, which is John's parallel to the Great Commandment of the synoptic Gospels. From this starting point, the theme of love continues throughout the rest of the discourse.

It only takes a cursory reading of the Gospels to know that everything Jesus taught and did was founded in love. For Christ, the call to love is at the heart of the Gospel, of his way of being, and of his understanding of abundant life. And in the last moments before his trial and execution, Jesus chose to reiterate his message of love. Last words are always significant, and the fact that



Jesus centred his last teaching around love shows how concerned he was to make sure his followers got the message.

It's important to remember that Jesus issued this commandment after showing his disciples that he loved them 'to the very end' (John 13:1) by washing their feet. He included both Peter and Judas in this ritual and gave his new commandment immediately after Judas—his 'enemy'—had left to betray him. He still preached love even when he knew that Peter's fear would lead him to deny his relationship with Christ. And he stated that this love would be the identifying mark of his followers. The importance Christ placed on love, especially in the lives of his disciples, cannot be over stated.

When faced with the challenge to love we often struggle. We may not intend to resist it, but we do. We want to add complexities and conditions to our love. We want to free ourselves from the need to love everyone and we want to define love in terms that give us a way out of the sacrifice and discomfort that always accompanies love.

We view love as soft, weak, and powerless in the face of evil. As I write Russian President Vladimir Putin is invading the Ukraine. We may be tempted to think that to speak of love in such a reality is inappropriate. We may believe that love would let Putin off the hook. We may feel that a call to love is an insult to all the innocent people who have died. After all, love will not protect us from nuclear war.

But perhaps we respond this way because we continue to sentimentalise and individualise love. When we consider loving dictators, oppressors, and aggressors, we tend to think it means feeling warm toward them. We view the act of loving like an indulgent parent who never holds their child accountable or punishes wrong doing. But that isn't love. Love is willing to be rejected, even by the ones we love, for doing the right thing. Love is willing to resist dictators out of love for those who are abused and harmed by their violence. And love will always need to navigate the evil of violence (recognising that violence is always an evil and always results from the failure of love in some way) and its place in protecting both perpetrator and victim from the destruction of hatred, self-interest, and greed.

German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was both a pacifist and actively engaged in resisting Hitler and the Nazi regime. The extent to which he was directly involved in the attempts to assassinate Hitler is up for debate, but he almost certainly passed on important information to help the Allies in the war. His love was not passive and it was not sentimental. It was strong and courageous in its commitment to resist evil and uplift the vulnerable, marginalised, and threatened. Our world needs more of the kind of Christ-following love that Bonhoeffer embodied.

In a world of chaos, violence, uncertainty, and fear love is our best protection. It doesn't mean we won't be harmed. But it does mean that we can provide some comfort and healing to one another when harm comes. It does mean that we will do whatever it takes, even if it hurts, to minimise the harm we cause to others and to resist the great harm that can be done by those who wield great power. And it does mean that we refuse to allow our pain to destroy our hearts and turn us into cold, unloving creatures that see violence as the only solution to our personal and societal problems.

Most of us will not be faced with the kind of choices and risks that Bonhoeffer had to navigate. Few of us will have to worry about being put to death for our commitment to all inclusive, justice-

making love. For most of us, the call to love will be worked out in our homes and families, in our neighbourhoods and offices, and in our relationships with both friends and strangers. In our ordinary lives the call of love will challenge us to listen more deeply and attentively to our loved ones. It will invite us to be generous with our time, attention, and resources for the sake of our friends and family members. It will inspire us to forgive quickly, judge slowly, and do the hard work of learning to know, understand and celebrate one another's perspectives, values, and unique weirdness.

The best thing we can do for ourselves to preserve and nurture our capacity to live fully is to ensure that we give and receive love whenever, however, and with whomever we may. And the best thing we can do for one another is to share love in whatever small ways we can at every opportunity. Regardless of what may be happening in our world, such small but significant commitments to love enable us to live fully within our anxiety and struggle. And even if we don't see it, every small act of love raises the world's love quotient a little.

We long to feel that our lives have meaning and that our lives are fulfilling and vibrant. But we cannot experience our best lives or be our best selves if we leave love out of the equation or if we make a habit of creating conditions and adding unnecessary complexities to our love. We and our world need more of us to embrace love as our primary value and goal. And then, even if we achieve nothing else, our lives will have mattered and we will get to the end knowing that we have lived well and made a positive difference.

## *Daily Spiritual Practice*

*Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.*

*The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.*

### **PREPARING**

Take a few minutes to prepare yourself for your practice. Allow a minute or two of silence, and focus on your breath as you slow and deepen your breathing. You may want to close your eyes and/or open your hands.

When you're ready, open your hands, or focus on your hands if they are already open. As you do this, open yourself to receive more of God's love into any area of your life where you need it. Then, close your hands as a sign of receiving, embracing, and integrating love into your life more intentionally.

Finally, you may want to offer this prayer:

*When I am tempted to add all kinds of complexities to my love  
to bypass the simple command to love,  
and to settle for love that is conditional,  
limited, and exclusive.*

You remind me that love is all you ask of me,  
and you invite me to gamble on the possibility  
that love really is all I need.

And so I celebrate that you are the Risen One,  
And I ask that you would help me  
to release my fear, distrust, and anxiety  
around love,  
and to give myself to love fully and recklessly  
even as you do.

Amen.

## LISTENING

Insert the **Listening Exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

## RESPONDING

Take a few moments now to begin working with what you have received through the today's practice. Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and focus on your breath.

After a few moments, inhale deeply and breathe in Christ's love. And as you exhale, breathe out distrust.

Then, breathe in the simplicity and breathe out unnecessary complexity.

Finally, breathe in a renewed commitment to love and breathe out avoidance.

End this response reflection with a few more moments of silence.

## INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice, think of one thing you can do today to be more openly and radically loving. And at any time when you need to refocus or centre yourself, come back to the breathing exercise you have just done.

Now as you end your practice, go into your life in the love of Christ to love and be loved recklessly and unconditionally.

# Listening Exercises

## DAY ONE (EASTER FIVE)

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- To what extent would you say that you are afraid or distrustful of love? Do you have any concerns that love may be sentimental, weak, or untrustworthy? Where do these concerns originate?
- What does love mean to you? What role does love play in your life? What role do you feel love does—or should—play in our world?
- What is your response to the idea expressed in the Beatles song, *All You Need Is Love*? Is love all you need?



- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- When are you tempted to add conditions and complexities to your love? Why do you think you feel the need to add requirements or restrictions to love?
- When do you feel tempted to hold back when it comes to love? How do you navigate your need to love and protect yourself with your need to love and give yourself to others?
- What would it take for you to resist the temptation to put limits and conditions on love? What would you need to feel safe and free to love wholeheartedly and radically?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Take a moment to read the Scripture for this week again. Read it slowly and thoughtfully. You may want to include a paragraph or two before and after the set reading for this week. What stands out for you? What do you notice that you haven't seen in this passage before?
- As you reflect on this passage, take note of any feelings that rise up in you. Stop and ask what specific words, images, or elements of the story generated these responses in you. And be sure to name the feelings as accurately as possible.
- What do these feelings tell you about what this passage may be saying to you? How is this passage speaking to you? What message from this reading do you need to remember as you navigate the future?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you

want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Return to the Scripture passage for this week. You may want to read it again slowly and thoughtfully, including some verses before and after for context. This time, as you read it, try to place yourself into the passage in some way. Imagine that you were hearing Jesus speak these words for the first time. What do you think your response would be?
- What does it mean to you that, for Jesus, love is at the heart of the Gospel? How would you have responded to having your feet washed by Jesus? And how would this experience have impacted your understanding of love?
- How does the message in this passage relate to, or resonate with, what is happening in your life? What points of connection can you find between this passage and your own experience and reality now?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

#### **DAY FIVE**

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- When you think of loving everyone, regardless of who they are or what they have done, how do you feel? What limits or conditions are you immediately tempted to put on love? How would it feel to release them?
- Are there any ways in which you are tempted to sentimentalise and individualise love? What would it feel like to expand your understanding and expression of love?
- How comfortable are you with loving those who bring harm to others? What would such love look like for you?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

#### **DAY SIX**

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- When you think of resisting evil, or even being involved in a plot to assassinate an evil person as Dietrich Bonhoeffer was, how do you connect that with love? What thoughts do you have about how love can actively work against injustice and evil?
- Do agree that violence is always a failure of love in some way? Do you think it's ever possible to be loving and still do an act of violence? If so, when? If not, why not?

- Is it possible for loving one person to be in conflict with loving another? How do you navigate those situations? How important is it to you always to try to love everyone in a given situation?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY SEVEN

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- In what sense do you feel that love is our best protection in times of chaos and uncertainty? What do you do practically to embrace love as a protective force in your life?
- How can you express your love more clearly and practically in your own life and relationships? What would that mean for you?
- How easily do you give love? How easily do you receive love? What can you do to become better at both?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

# Do You Want To Be Whole?

Easter Six

## Reflecting on Scripture

### SCRIPTURE READING

John 5:1-9

We live in a world where millions of dollars are spent daily to avoid pain and death. We long for lives of wholeness, peace, and connection and yet somehow we never seem to get there. We give our time, energy and resources to chasing all sorts things that promise us a good life, and yet that life seems strangely elusive. We remain broken people in a broken world.

But it's not like we don't know what we need to find the wholeness we seek. We know that we need mutually loving and serving relationships. We know that we need to be connected with others, compassionate toward those in pain, and contributing to the common good. We know that we need to be mindful, to live simply and humbly, and to care for our planet and its creatures. We know that our dependence on fossil fuels, our constant quest to own more and consume more, our individualistic self-centredness, and our thoughtlessness about how we live, relate, and consume is destroying us and our world. And yet we continue to do the very things that undermine our desire for a life that is truly good and whole. As Thomas à Kempis said, "All [people] desire peace, but very few desire those things that make for peace."

In the early days of the pandemic so many people were posting about the difference lockdown made to the world—the reduction in pollution, the recovery in natural environments, the greater calm and mindfulness in people, the sense of connection with the animals who were moving about freely in our cities. And yet as the crisis has dragged on, there has been a growing desperation for the world to 'return to normal'—the very normal that robbed us of that deeply connected, mindful, and beautiful life. This all means that the question Jesus asked the man at the pool of Bethesda is just as important for us now: 'Would you like to get well?'

The pool of Bethesda was a kind of spiritual hospital, a place known for miracle healings that resulted from the angelic disturbance of the waters. And yet simultaneously, there was a culture of scarcity and competition that undermined people's capacity to get whole. Only one person could be healed when the waters were stirred—the first in the pool. And so we are told that crowds of sick people filled the porches, some of whom had been sick for decades.

The Gospel writer seems to say that Jesus spoke to just this one man and gives us no reason why he ignored all the others. Perhaps he was enacting a kind of street theatre. Perhaps his conversation happened in a way that others around the scene would be able to witness it and receive the message for themselves too. Whatever the case, this one man is the symbol for a human disease that has plagued us since our origins: our struggle to do what really brings the wholeness we seek. Our temptation to become so familiar and comfortable in our pain and



brokenness that we cannot find the strength or motivation to do what would bring us the lives we claim to want.

It is a strange thing about our world that we don't easily know what we want. And sometimes our spirituality is part of the problem. We have come to think of our desires and God's desires as mutually exclusive. How often haven't you heard someone asking another person, "is this what God wants or is it what you want?" The assumption is that what we want can't possibly be what God wants for us. And what God wants is, by definition, not what we would choose for ourselves. And so as we seek to be faithful in our spirituality, we lose touch with our own wants, desires, and needs. Sometimes our faith has placed our locus of control so far outside of ourselves that we become unable to even consider what we might want for ourselves. And so, though we may want to be whole, we don't know how to want the things that could lead us to the wholeness we seek.

When I was in my early twenties I wanted to be a Gospel music 'star'—another Steven Curtis Chapman, was what I had in mind. Leaving aside, for the moment, that my musical skill was nowhere near good enough to have been signed by a record company and catapulted to stardom, I also had no idea of what I really wanted. I was right that I wanted my life to be filled with music. I wanted writing, recording, and performing music to be a significant feature of my work. But I assumed that meant being signed by a record company and going on tour around the world. I'm grateful that I never fulfilled that dream.

Years later, as I learned more about how the music industry worked, I realised that I would have hated every minute of being a full time, touring musician. I thought I wanted it, but I didn't realise how much I needed a quiet life with lots of privacy. Fortunately, I discovered that it is possible to make music a significant part of my working life without all the media, touring, and fame.

What I thought I wanted wouldn't have made me whole. It would have broken me. But when I found what I really wanted, it healed me and set me free. It took a long time to create the life I truly longed for—and I'm still working on it. But I finally know not just that I really do want to be whole, but what that wholeness means for me.

What does wholeness mean for you? And do you want it enough to do the work to get there even if it's uncomfortable? The man at the pool didn't know what wholeness looked like. And he didn't know what he needed to do to get there. He thought it was about getting into the water first and coming out with all his problems solved, like winning some kind of lottery. He was looking in the wrong place, and adopting the wrong strategy—which was really a non-strategy that allowed him to be stuck in the familiar pain he supposedly didn't want. Jesus showed the man what he needed to do to start his journey to wholeness, which according to verse 14, was to be a long and ongoing process.

Jesus' question to this man, "Would you like to get well" or "Do you [really] want to be well?" is one we need to answer for ourselves. But it can be more difficult than we realise to respond honestly. Brian McLaren explains that our brains welcome data that allow us to relax and be happy and reject data that require us to work and inconvenience ourselves. This remains true even when the inconvenient or uncomfortable work is what gives us a more relaxed, happy, and comfortable life in the long term. The reason for this could well be because, as Brian McLaren states, "our brains are wired to set a baseline of normalcy and assume that what feels normal has always been and will always remain. That means that we minimise threats, and we're vulnerable to disasters, especially disasters that develop slowly."

Finding wholeness is a messy and complex thing. We need to begin by working out what wholeness looks like for us and we need to learn how to find wholeness. It's not about being free of struggle, pain, foibles, scars, and imperfections. Rather, it's about finding life and wholeness *in* our struggles and celebrations and all the seasons in between. This means that we will need to be mindful about noticing when we feel most alive, when we experience renewed energy, joy, strength, and courage, and when we struggle the most. As we identify what enlivens us and what robs us of life, we can journal our discoveries and reflect on how to reduce what drains us and maximise what energises.

Doing the work to become whole can be uncomfortable. It forces us to confront ourselves. And it can be intensely uncomfortable to let go of our familiar, comforting pain and learn to do different things to become more whole. But we cannot find our best life unless we embrace this work. The best thing we can do for one another is to support one another, challenge one another, and encourage each other in this liberating, albeit difficult, journey.

We often think that our best life is a life free of pain, suffering, and grief. We think that if we have the perfect body, the well-resourced bank account, and the unconditional affirmation of everyone around us that then we will be 'happy' or whole. Then our lives will be good. But such a life does not exist. Our wholeness and fullness of life must be found within our human condition—our health and our sickness, our wealth and our poverty, our friends and our antagonists. Being whole or well means finding a depth of connection with ourselves, others, God, and the world in *all* the seasons of our lives. And it means being willing to journey together to create the fullest, most authentic, and most courageous lives for us all.

## *Daily Spiritual Practice*

*Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.*

*The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.*

### **PREPARING**

Take a few minutes to prepare yourself for your practice. Allow a minute or two of silence, and focus on your breath as you slow and deepen your breathing. You may want to close your eyes and/or open your hands.

When you're ready, clench your fists and think about anything in your life which is getting in the way of your wholeness. Consider how you may be clinging to things that feel good or necessary, but that are actually breaking you and robbing you of life. Then, after a few moments, open your hands as a sign of releasing these things and opening to what will bring true wholeness to your body, mind, heart, and spirit.

Finally, you may want to offer this prayer:

*When my pain, brokenness, and suffering  
become familiar companions  
and I am tempted to become stuck  
in what keeps me from wholeness,  
You force me to face whether I truly want to be whole,  
and you invite me to receive your gifts  
of healing and life.  
And so I celebrate that you are the Risen One,  
And I ask that you would help me  
to release all that keeps me  
imprisoned in my pain,  
and to do the uncomfortable work  
that leads me into true wholeness  
Amen.*

## LISTENING

Insert the **Listening Exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

## RESPONDING

Take a few moments now to begin working with what you have received through the today's practice. Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and focus on your breath.

After a few moments, inhale deeply and breathe in Christ's compassion. And as you exhale, breathe out judgement.

Then, breathe in wholeness and breathe out brokenness.

Finally, breathe in fullness of life and breathe out self-pity.

End this response reflection with a few more moments of silence.

## INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice, think of one thing you can do today to embrace wholeness and fullness of life in the midst of whatever season you're currently experiencing. And at any time when you need to refocus or centre yourself, come back to the breathing exercise you have just done.

Now as you end your practice, go into your life in the compassion and healing of Christ to grow in wholeness and share healing wherever and with whomever you can.

# *Listening Exercises*

## DAY ONE (EASTER SIX)

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.



- What wholeness do you seek in your life? What wholeness do you long for in your world? What would it take for you to move a little closer to that wholeness?
- What is your response to Thomas à Kempis' observation that "All [people] desire peace, but very few desire those things that make for peace."? How have you experienced that in your life?
- Are there any areas of your life where you are tempted to become comfortable with your pain or brokenness? What keeps you stuck in those areas and what would it take for you to take the first step to breaking free?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Take a moment to read the Scripture for this week again. Read it slowly and thoughtfully. What stands out for you? What do you notice that you haven't seen in this passage before?
- As you reflect on this passage, take note of any feelings that rise up in you. Stop and ask what specific words, images, or elements of the story generated these responses in you. And be sure to name the feelings as accurately as possible.
- What do these feelings tell you about what this passage may be saying to you? How is this passage speaking to you? What message from this reading do you need to remember as you navigate the future?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Have you ever felt that your desires and God's desires for you are at odds? Has your spirituality ever left you feeling that you have lost touch with your legitimate desires and needs?
- To what extent do you feel that you really know what you want or need? And how capable do you feel that you could get your needs met even if you did know what they are?
- What does wholeness look like for you? What would this wholeness bring into your life and relationships? How much work are you willing to do to attain some measure of the wholeness you seek?

- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

#### DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How do you respond to the idea that it is possible to be whole in the midst of struggles, pain, foibles, scars, and imperfections? Are you comfortable to embrace and experience wholeness on that basis?
- To what extent do you find wholeness in your connections with God, yourself, others, and the world? What can you do to deepen those connections?
- How does your personal wholeness contribute to the wholeness of others and to the wholeness of the world in general? What can you do to be more intentional about cooperating with others to bring greater wholeness to you all?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

***PLEASE NOTE: The rest of this week continues in the next chapter, because Day Five of this week is Ascension Day, which is the focus of Chapter Seven.***

# Stay In The Game

Ascension Day

## Reflecting on Scripture

### SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 24:44-53

The Ascension is one of those strange biblical events that leave me wishing there was more detail. Matthew and John have no account of the Ascension at all. Our only record of the Ascension is three single sentences:

Mark 16:19: "After the Lord Jesus spoke to them, he was lifted up into heaven and sat down on the right side of God."

Acts 1:9: "After Jesus said these things, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight."

And Luke 24:51: "As he blessed them, he left them and was taken up to heaven."

None of these accounts give us any insight into what the disciples actually experienced. While it is common to read these verses literally and to think of Jesus physically levitating into the sky, we now know that the universe is not built in three-tiers as the people of the first century believed. Heaven is not somewhere 'up there' above the earth and hell is not beneath our feet. So whatever actually happened at the Ascension, its value and purpose was always meant to be metaphorical, symbolic, and about what it means rather than a literal event.

But even so, there is very little in these passages to give us a clear sense of what that meaning was for the first believers or what it should be for us. And so we are forced to explore other ideas that can give us clues about the Ascension's meaning.

In all of the Synoptic Gospels, when Jesus gives his apocalyptic prediction of the destruction of the temple and the turmoil that will come to Israel, he includes a reference to Daniel's prophecy: "...they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." (Matthew 24:30 with parallels in Mark 13:26, Luke 21:27). The actual prophecy in Daniel refers not to the return of the Messiah to earth, but to a victorious 'someone like a son of man' being led into the throne room of the Ancient of Days where he receives authority, honour, power, and sovereignty over the earth (See Daniel 7:13-14). Matthew picks up this theme in the closing verse of his Gospel when Jesus says, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth..." This would indicate that in the Ascension narrative the first believers saw Jesus as the one like a son of man who is given authority over creation by God. This account was a mythological way to affirm their belief in the divinity and sovereignty of Christ.

When we think of the Ascension in this light, it raises two interesting questions about the account in Luke's Gospel. Firstly, why is there no grief at the loss of Christ's presence? The writer mentions only joy and worship. And secondly, in the period between the resurrection and the ascension,



where were all the miracles and works of ministry that Jesus and his disciples had shared in the years before his crucifixion? We will return to these questions later.

When life is hard and painful, when we're struggling and we feel exhausted, then the great temptation we face is to check out of life, to numb out, and to seek an escape. It doesn't have to be through destructive abuses of substances, social media or television. It can be through over-exercise or neglecting exercise altogether, over-eating or eating unhealthily, sleeping too much or not enough. It can even be by using our spirituality as a way to detach from living in the real world.

When we focus more on what happens after we die than on what is happening in our lives now, that could be a sign that we're using our spirituality as an escape. When we make our spirituality about 'worship'—attending church services, conferences, and 'worship concerts', singing, praying, and listening to rousing sermons—then we may have started using our spirituality as an escape. When our standard response to difficulties is to pray rather than do anything practical to address the problem, we may have turned our spirituality into an escape.

A few years ago, I was part of a church leadership team where we were seeking a new vision for our church. The senior minister, who had become frustrated with our conversations and debates as we talked about what we felt we were being called to, told us all to stop talking and spend the next couple of weeks in prayer. I asked what we would do when that time was up. Would we come together again and share what we felt God was saying? Would we bring our prayers into the conversation and seek a unified vision for the future? His response was a strong 'No'. When I asked what we would do then, he simply said, "We will pray." Still confused about how we would come to a decision about what our actual vision was to be, I asked again and received the same answer: "We will pray." At that point I realised that there was to be no further conversation or wrestling. Prayer had become a convenient way to bypass the difficult work of debate and finding consensus and hide in a spirituality that would allow the senior leaders to announce what God had told them without being questioned.

Luke's Gospel indicates that the resurrection was a disturbing event for the disciples, as much as it was also a joyous one. They were often terrified by Jesus' resurrection appearances. And they desperately wanted to believe that Jesus would now lead them to overthrow the Romans and establish a new Israel as an independent, theocratic nation—with Jesus on the throne and them as his cabinet. We can't know for sure what the nature of Jesus' resurrected form was, but it does seem that the disciples expected the resurrected Christ as they were experiencing him to remain with them and lead them. Whatever the actual nature of the Ascension to come, they clearly did not expect it. It seems that for a while they were lost in the joy of having their leader back and enjoying his presence and teaching. As we noted before, none of the resurrection accounts in the Gospels say anything about Jesus or the disciples doing any of the healing, liberating, uplifting ministry that had characterised their three years together before his death. Is it too much to assume that, after the grief and trauma of the crucifixion, the disciples were now ready to escape into the euphoria of the resurrection, at least for a short while, and forget about their calling to bring love and justice to the world?

At the Ascension, Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit would come. And the Gospel closes with the note that 'they were continuously in the temple praising God.' It seems as if the disciples retreated into spirituality, into worship as an escape. If they experienced any grief at Christ's absence, it is ignored. And if there was any sense of call to continue the work

of ministry they had learned from Jesus, it too is unmentioned. Rather, they celebrated the power and authority of Christ which was revealed in the Ascension through prayers, songs, and worship—which clearly caused no opposition or questions from the religious authorities.

It was only after the Pentecost experience (in the Luke/Acts narrative) that they found themselves drawn to care for the poor, protect widows and orphans, and preach Jesus' message of God's reign. Is it possible that they were tempted to hide in their spirituality and get lost in their worship? This would be an understandable response—they needed to heal and rest. But I wonder if they would have changed at all if they hadn't had their dramatic experience on the Day of Pentecost.

It is a sad reality that Christians are often known to be people who sing and pray one thing on Sundays and live something different from Monday to Saturday. In many cases it is more than simply neglect of our call to carry love and justice into the world. It is an active resistance which leaves us preaching against 'social justice,' excluding the marginalised, and intentionally retreating into figurative (or sometimes literal) spiritual compounds where we are disconnected from the world.

In times of grief and pain like the last two years, it is understandable that we would seek refuge in a faith of certainty, comfort, and self-indulgence. But that is not where we will find life and wholeness. Such spiritual escapism only serves to break us further and isolate us from the friendships and partnerships that can give our lives and spirituality meaning. It does nothing to solve or contribute to solving the issues that hurt us and those around us.

Jesus invited his disciples, as he invites us, to embrace a different kind of spirituality. He offers a promise of a divine power which we can access to overcome our grief and exhaustion. And he calls us to find that power within. To recognise that we are more than flesh and blood. We are more than 'only human'. We are God-imaged, God-beloved ones. We are little incarnations, little Christs filled with the divine life and Spirit. And this divine energy is a renewable resource that we can access at any time—even in the midst of our difficulties. Which means that, in dark times, we can find our way back to life not through escape, but through staying in the game, reaching out to others, and allowing ourselves in some small way to be channels of the Spirit's power.

When we look around us and find ways to love, serve, and uplift others, we find ourselves being loved, served and uplifted. And when we encourage and support one another in whatever small acts of love and generosity we can manage, we build one another up and we all experience a deeper, richer life.

In this time of grief we need to become more intentional about connecting with the divine Spirit within us. As many researchers have shown, we do not find healing by nursing our wounds. We most often find healing when we reach out to others who are struggling and help them to find strength and life. And as we allow God's Spirit to lead us to share life and love and justice with one another, so we are renewed, healed, and empowered to live lives of goodness, beauty, truth, meaning, and fulfilment.

# Daily Spiritual Practice

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.

The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.

## PREPARING

Take a few minutes to prepare yourself for your practice. Allow a minute or two of silence, and focus on your breath as you slow and deepen your breathing. You may want to close your eyes and/or open your hands.

When you're ready, clench your fists and think about all the ways you are tempted to use your spirituality as an escape from the world and its struggles. Consider how you may be retreating into prayer, worship, and religion as a way to avoid dealing with the tough realities of our human existence. Then, after a few moments, open your hands as a sign of releasing your need to escape, or of your willingness to become willing to release it, or of your willingness to hold it lightly and be open to engaging more directly and intentionally with life's struggles and chaos.

Finally, you may want to offer this prayer:

*When the chaos and unpredictability of my world  
becomes unbearable,  
and I am tempted to retreat into spirituality  
as an escape from the pain,  
You invite me to remember your presence and power,  
and to receive again your Spirit  
who empowers me to face my struggles  
and live fully in the midst of them.*

*And so I celebrate that you are the Risen One,  
And I ask that you would help me  
to face whatever challenges life throws at me,  
and to keep living fully and authentically  
in your Spirit's power.*

Amen.

## LISTENING

Insert the **Listening Exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

## RESPONDING

Take a few moments now to begin working with what you have received through the today's practice. Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and focus on your breath.

After a few moments, inhale deeply and breathe in Christ's power. And as you exhale, breathe out any sense of being overwhelmed by the world.

Then, breathe in self-giving and breathe out self-protection.

Finally, breathe in the Spirit of God and breathe out escapism.

End this response reflection with a few more moments of silence.

## INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice, think of one thing you can do today to release anything unhelpful to which you may be clinging. And at any time when you need to refocus or centre yourself, come back to the breathing exercise you have just done.

Now as you end your practice, go into your life in the power of the Spirit of Christ to show up fully, authentically, and generously in your world and relationships.

## *Listening Exercises*

### DAY ONE (ASCENSION DAY)

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- In what ways have you been tempted to find ways to escape dealing with any pain, struggle, confusion, or chaos in your life? What is your preferred method of numbing out when you feel the need to escape? How effective is this for you?
- Have you ever used your spirituality, your faith, or your worship and prayer as a way to escape and not deal with your difficulties? What does that look like for you?
- What signs are there in your life that you may be seeking to numb out? And what signs are there that you could be using your spirituality as a way to escape?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Take a moment to read the Scripture for this week again. Read it slowly and thoughtfully. What stands out for you? What do you notice that you haven't seen in this passage before?
- As you reflect on this passage, take note of any feelings that rise up in you. Stop and ask what specific words, images, or elements of the story generated these responses in you. And be sure to name the feelings as accurately as possible.
- What do these feelings tell you about what this passage may be saying to you? How is this passage speaking to you? What message from this reading do you need to remember as you navigate the future?



- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### **DAY THREE**

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How much do you make your faith about finding comfort, security, certainty, and a defence against the struggles of this world? How would you feel if your faith didn't give you those things? What other gifts could faith give that might be more valuable than these?
- How do you respond to the idea that faith is about accessing a divine power to endure and overcome suffering? And how does it help to recognise that this divine power—the divine Spirit—lives within you?
- How can you be more intentional about accessing the Spirit's power in your life? What does it mean for you to live as a 'little incarnation' of God? And how can you be more intentional about using the Spirit's power to serve others and find your own strength in the process?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

# Better Together

Easter Seven

## Reflecting on Scripture

### SCRIPTURE READING

John 17:20-26

It's an ancient and effective tactic that in order to control people or destroy opposition to the powers-that-be, all you have to do is divide. The old adage, 'united we stand, divided we fall' may seem like a cliché but its truth remains evident in our world.

In times of struggle and pain, in the difficulty of living in this broken world, it is tempting to cry 'everyone for themselves'. We tend to want to withdraw and create barriers between us and others. We focus on our differences and view others as threats. It feels like dividing ourselves from those who are unlike us makes us safer, but the opposite is true. Our dividedness harms us and makes us more vulnerable.

Lines and walls, defining who is in and who is out, feel like they give us more control and security. But we lose the strength that comes when numbers of people are united in heart and purpose. Of course that unity can be used for destructive purpose by unscrupulous leaders. But it can also bring about great good and the overthrow of unjust dictators, as history has shown.

Right now, as Vladimir Putin's invasion of the Ukraine continues, the world has become united behind a country that has stood together in unexpectedly effective defiance. From their President, to celebrities, to ordinary people, the sense of standing together against this unjust invasion has not only united the Ukrainians, but has been a catalyst in bringing most of the world together in resistance to this unwarranted aggression. Ukraine may still fall, but I can't shake the feeling that the unity that we are tasting will have an impact long after this war is over.

As Jesus faced his death, he could have spent his last moments pleading for his life and begging for God to save him miraculously from his coming suffering. In one sense, the Gethsemane prayers of the synoptic Gospels could perhaps be interpreted as exactly this kind of plea. But that interpretation would be simplistic and inaccurate. Beneath it all was the courageous commitment of Christ to the divine purpose of love and justice. In John's Gospel there is no Gethsemane prayer. The closest John comes to it is in 12:27 where Jesus says, "Now my soul is deeply troubled. Should I pray, 'Father, save me from this hour'? But this is the very reason I came! Father, bring glory to your name." In these few words, John reveals the truth about Jesus' prayer, courage, and conviction in Gethsemane.

In John 17, which precedes the account of Judas' betrayal of Jesus, we see Jesus praying for unity among his followers. Rather than pleading for his own safety and deliverance, Jesus prays for his followers to be one. He knows that if his message is to survive, then it will need a united



community of believers who don't just preach it, but live it and reveal it to the world through mutual love and commitment.

Even a quick reflection on this prayer can leave us wondering whether Jesus' message really has survived. Or has what is now preached as the Gospel buried the message of God's Reign of Love under factionalism, competitiveness, and hate-filled distortions of Jesus' mission? There is no question that our unity has too often failed, and what we have revealed to the world is not the character, values, and priorities of Christ, but a religious version of the same individualism, dividedness, and self-interest that hurts our society.

The unity for which Jesus prayed was not a doctrinal unity where his disciples would all agree about every detail of their interpretation of the Scriptures or of Christ's life. It was not a unity born out of conformity. It was to be a hard-won unity found through their commitment to love one another above all and to place the saving mission of Christ above their own agendas and power-struggles. The Book of Acts and the Epistles all reveal how hard it was for the first century church to sustain their unity. But they worked hard, they forgave much, apologised much, debated much, and even fought for it. In the end, their unity was brought down not by their inability to resolve their conflicts, but by the way they were seduced by the values and priorities of Imperial power and wealth.

It has been heart-breaking to see how followers of Christ have been so divided—politically—by the pandemic and the medical and scientific responses to it. It is tragic that the message of Christ has been cast aside to support political expediency, lying leaders, and personal 'freedom' more than the common good. And it is tragic to see how much the Church has been infiltrated by the forces of Empire in our day—capitalism, consumerism, populism, and nationalism. But it does not have to be this way.

One of the best things we can do for ourselves is to build small communities of dialogue. We can learn together, as friends and family, to have tough conversations, and to make space for our differences of opinion while committing to unity in love and mutual care. We can create safe and vibrant relationships in which we can find safe and vibrant life together in spite of living in a divided and unsafe world.

We may be tempted to seek unity with everyone—and that's a noble ideal. But we also know that, at this point in our evolution that's not going to happen. When we are faced with those who refuse to compromise, who make unity achievable only by everyone capitulating to their power and their version of truth, then we do well to break unity. But in our resistance to dictators—political, religious, or otherwise—we can find unity with others who seek justice for all. And that means, primarily, choosing to be one with the same people Jesus connected with—the poor, the marginalised, the oppressed, the rejected. We don't have to act on a large social or global scale—although organisations like *Avaaz* and *Global Citizen* make it easy to share in global movements for justice and peace. It is equally valuable when our actions are small and simple, like befriending those in our church, neighbourhood, or family who are seen as strange, questionable, and outsiders. We can confront and work to eradicate the racism, sexism, homophobia, and self-centredness in our own hearts. And we can learn to listen more, talk more carefully, and engage in debate and dialogue more respectfully and compassionately with those around us.

The greatest evidence of Christ's life, and the most certain way that we can experience the vibrancy, abundance, and meaning of Christ's life, is when we do it together. That doesn't have to

be in a formal church or organisation. It can be in our own homes, neighbourhoods, and circles of friends and acquaintances. But we will never find our best life and our best selves in isolation. We need each other. And if we believe at all in the resurrection life that Christ offers, if we believe at all in his message of love and justice, then we will need to learn to embody the values, priorities, and purposes of Christ in some small way. And we will need to join with others—even if we disagree with them on some matters—to put our shared interests above our own personal good. It's not easy. But it is possible. And when we are able to do it, the life we experience is far deeper and more vibrant than anything we can know alone.

## Daily Spiritual Practice

*Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.*

*The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.*

### PREPARING

Take a few minutes to prepare yourself for your practice. Allow a minute or two of silence, and focus on your breath as you slow and deepen your breathing. You may want to close your eyes and/or open your hands.

When you're ready, clench your fists and think about any ways you may be idolising your individuality and clinging to divisions and separation in your home, neighbourhood, and world. Then, after a few moments, open your hands as a sign of releasing any self-centredness and division in your life and opening to community, connection, and unity.

Finally, you may want to offer this prayer:

*When my world is divided and in conflict,  
and I am tempted to live by  
    'every-person-for-themselves'  
You invite me to remember that we are all connected  
    we need each other if we are to find fullness of life for all,  
    and if I am to find fullness of life for myself.  
And so I celebrate that you are the Risen One,  
And I ask that you would help me  
    to become better at balancing my own needs  
    with those of others,  
and to connect more deeply with others,  
    to build true, life-giving  
    unity and community together.*

Amen.

### LISTENING

Insert the **Listening Exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.



## RESPONDING

Take a few moments now to begin working with what you have received through the today's practice. Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and focus on your breath.

After a few moments, inhale deeply and breathe in awareness of your interconnectedness with others. And as you exhale, breathe out any idolising of your individuality.

Then, breathe in community and breathe out rigid self-sufficiency.

Finally, breathe in unity and breathe out divisions.

End this response reflection with a few more moments of silence.

## INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice, think of one thing you can do today to release anything unhelpful to which you may be clinging. And at any time when you need to refocus or centre yourself, come back to the breathing exercise you have just done.

Now as you end your practice, go in the unity of Christ to connect more deeply with others and to help build a united world.

# *Listening Exercises*

## DAY ONE (EASTER SEVEN)

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How much have you been tempted to adopt an 'everyone-for-themselves' attitude in the last few years? What has brought that temptation on? Or if you haven't felt that temptation, to what do you attribute that?
- How are you tempted to create barriers and divisions to try and keep yourself safe in these unsafe times? What is it about focussing on differences and keeping others at bay that makes you feel safer?
- How do divisions between us and others hurt us all? When have you experienced this pain and how has it affected your life?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- When have you experienced the power of numbers of people working together with one heart and mind? What was that experience like for you?
- What experiences of unity and mutual care have you experienced during the pandemic? Why do you think those experiences happened? What impact have they had on your life?
- In what ways can you resist the temptation to idolise your individuality and personal safety at the expense of unity with others?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Take a moment to read the Scripture for this week again. Read it slowly and thoughtfully. You may want to include Jesus' whole prayer to give some context. What stands out for you? What do you notice that you haven't seen in this passage before?
- As you reflect on this passage, take note of any feelings that rise up in you. Stop and ask what specific words, images, or elements of the story generated these responses in you. And be sure to name the feelings as accurately as possible.
- What do these feelings tell you about what this passage may be saying to you? How is this passage speaking to you? What message from this reading do you need to remember as you navigate the future?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

### DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- Return to the Scripture passage for this week. You may want to read it again slowly and thoughtfully. This time, as you read it, try to place yourself in the passage in some way. Perhaps you can imagine what it was like for Jesus as he prayed this prayer. Or what it sounded like to the disciples as they listened to Jesus as he prayed (the setting is the Upper Room where Jesus and his friends shared their meal). Or you can imagine yourself as an outside observer observing the scene but not involved in it.
- If you were facing death, as Jesus was, how do you think you would have prayed? Why do you think Jesus chose to pray this prayer?
- How does the prayer relate to, or resonate with, what is happening in your life? What points of connection can you find between this passage and your own experience and reality now?

- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY FIVE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- If you compare Jesus' prayer with the reality of the world and the Church, do you feel that Jesus' prayer has been 'answered'? If so, what makes you feel that? If not, how does it feel to consider that Jesus prayed a prayer for unity that wasn't fulfilled?
- If you have experienced any failures of unity, what have you learned from them? How did those experiences feel? What would you change if you could go back?
- In what ways do you feel the same divisions, suspicions, individualism, and self-interest in the Church that you see in the world around it? What is your response to that? What feelings in you make it more difficult to find unity with some other people?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY SIX

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How much do you believe that agreeing on doctrine, ethics, and morality is essential to unity with others? Would you ever feel comfortable working or living closely with someone who did not share your views in these areas?
- How do you respond to the suggestion that Jesus was not concerned about doctrinal unity or conformity? On what basis were the disciples to find unity according to Jesus' teaching and his prayer in John 17? How do you understand Jesus' call to unity?
- How do you think we can overcome the divisions within our families, communities, and churches that have resulted from the pandemic? What divisions within yourself have come about as a result of this pandemic? What can you do to begin to overcome these internal divisions?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

## DAY SEVEN

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you shared in a worship service this Sunday. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- How comfortable are you with deep dialogue? What can you do to become more comfortable with debate, disagreement, and wrestling to find a way forward?
- What can you do to find connection points for unity with those with whom you disagree?
- To what extent do you experience your best life in relationship with others? What can you do, in collaboration with people in your family, circle of friends, and faith community, to contribute to making your world a little more united?
- As you think about these questions, what makes you curious? What challenges you? What disturbs or distresses you? How will you engage with these thoughts and feelings so that you can learn what they're trying to tell you?
- What other thoughts, insights, or new feelings are emerging in you as you engage in this spiritual practice?

# Conclusion

You have now reached the end of your journey **BACK TO LIFE**. I hope it has been a meaningful, empowering, and enlivening experience for you.

If you have managed to work intentionally and mindfully with the practices in this guide, you will have experienced a sense of resurrection and renewed life. I pray that your life is now a little richer and more vibrant because you are able to enter into resurrection more intentionally.

I encourage you to continue the journey you have begun. The quest to experience resurrection is never-ending. And so now is a good time to create your own customised practice to connect with resurrection on a daily basis.

If you're looking for resources to take you further on your journey into resurrection, you may want to explore one of our guides for Pentecost and beyond. Alternatively, you can sign up for the free Daily Worship devotional emails at [Sacredise.com](https://Sacredise.com).

Thank you for sharing in this journey! I hope we will have the chance to journey together again soon!

John