

NEAR 

 THE CROSS
AND TOMB 

AN EASTER DEVOTIONAL

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To the members of Jackson Way Baptist Church, may you
and your families have the courage to draw closer to
Christ this Easter and always.

“Abide with me, fast falls the eventide
The darkness deepens Lord, with me abide
When other helpers fail and comforts flee
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me
Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away
Change and decay in all around I see
O Thou who changest not, abide with me
I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness
Where is death's sting?
Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me
Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows
flee
In life, in death, o Lord, abide with me
Abide with me, abide with me.”

- Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847)

Near the Cross & Tomb

INTRODUCTION:

If you have ever been on a once in a lifetime trip, then you know the value of planning. For some of us, while planning the next week at work, or the next day of duties to accomplish is not the most enjoyable thing to do. However, if we plan and pack for that amazing vacation trip, or begin laying out our clothes for the hobby that we so enjoy the night before, planning becomes part of the joy we experience.

When Easter comes around, it usually comes fast and as Christians, we feel like we have a moment's notice to get prepared, even though the date on the calendar has been visible for a while.

This devotion exists to help us intentionally prepare our hearts and minds ensuring Easter doesn't just pass by. This is for those who want to take in every moment with reverence and awe for the death and resurrection of Christ.

“But for me, it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.”

Psalm 73:28

This devotion is also about drawing close to the Cross & Tomb. What does this mean? It means that we live every day not by chance but with all the effort we can to love God with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strengths. This means that there is a reality of wanting to be close to something or someone. Discipline is essential, but delight will follow.

April 1st

“It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”

Hebrews 2:3-4

April 1st is usually known as “April Fools Day.” For years I would call my mom after work on April 1st and tried to see if I could trick her into thinking I bought a motorcycle or was calling from some far away land. It was always amusing to see what my mom would fall for.

When it comes to seeking Christ in the month leading up to Easter, the first thing we need to remember is the grave reality of what took place. The crucifixion of Christ and His resurrection is not just a story that man invented, but real events in history.

If you have grown up in church like I did, it may take some extra effort to let our minds process (as much as possible) that the death and resurrection demand that we value them as moments in time that did in fact happen.

What should be our proper response to this amazing reality? Awe and wonder.

“It was the will of God that we should have sure footing for our faith and a strong foundation for our hope in receiving the gospel. As at the giving forth of the law there were signs and wonders by which God testified the authority and excellency of it, so he witnessed to the gospel by more and greater miracles, as to a more excellent and abiding dispensation.”

(Matthew Henry, An Exposition of the Old and New Testament)

Questions:

- 1) As a family, or maybe with a friend, ask each other: What is one event you witnessed in your life that was so amazing, that you could hardly believe it happened?
- 2) What evidence do Christians have that help us believe that the Gospel is true?

Response:

After spending a few minutes of silent reflection about the reality of the death and resurrection of Christ, spend some time praying out loud, expressing your gratitude for His sacrifice for our sins.

April 2nd

“So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel.”

John 12:13

There is some debate among scholars about how many people were gathered to wave palm branches for Jesus, and were these the same people who later shouted “crucify Him” just a few days later. Truthfully, we probably can’t be precise about that assumption.

What we can be sure of is that there are some people who will say and sing “Hosanna” and some who will say and sing “Crucify Him.” The real question we should be asking is why. What would really lead a person to not only sing Hosanna, but live that heart cry out in meaningful ways as a vision for their life? Or what would lead a person to cry out “Crucify Him”?

The truth is we as humans don’t just say and scream things, we mean things. We have a heart and a brain, and the things that we say we often have good reasons for saying them. In this situation within the Gospel of John, the perception of Jesus changed very quickly to human emotion, which happens. One week we are living for Jesus and the sky could not be bluer. However, when you give it time, the weather changes, something bad happens to us or those we love, and then we begin to wonder if Christ really is all that great and good.

It is easy to look at culture and see how people can go back and forth about God, the church, or religion in general. However, Christians can get this way too sometimes. We can let emotions become everything to us and view Jesus a certain way just based on how things are going in a given season. The reality is, that Christ is the King, Lord, and Savior of everything and everyone. It is our joy to glorify Him and trust Him regardless of what our emotions are telling us, or how popular He is to the world.

Questions:

- 1) What are you thankful for in your life that God has given you? What are things that you need to praise Him for?
- 2) What are you trusting God for in your life that may seem strange to you, but you know you just need to keep following Him and trusting Him with?
- 3) What are some creative ways that you and your family can praise Christ for this coming week and thank Him for coming to this world and into our lives to save us and to lead us?

April 3rd

“There was darkness over the whole land”

Mark 15:33

As a child, I am not sure that I took Good Friday and Easter as seriously as I could have, but I did recognize they mattered. Even though Mom and Dad hid Easter baskets in our house on Easter morning (often with the latest DC Talk or Switchfoot CD), our family was well aware that something else was going on, something far greater.

There is something different about Good Friday and Easter Sunday morning. Much like Christmas Eve, and how you notice the particular night of Dec. 24th stands out amongst all other nights in December. Good Friday always seems to have a sense of weight to it, so much so that it can cause us to wonder how exactly we should feel on Good Friday. However, on Easter Sunday I do remember waking up and sensing celebration just by the day itself.

There is a difference between merely passing by a special day or event and truly entering into it. Moving by a day is like standing outside a busy New York City Subway station and watching the subway go flying past. It is a different experience to actually stepping on board and letting it take you to where you need to go.

Good Friday and Easter are like that. It is important that we dedicate time to asking the Lord to not let this special celebration simply fly by again but to get on board and enter into the full glory of this season. Inviting us to fully engage, not just observe.

How do you do this? One way is through the exercise of *placement* - immersing ourselves in the events as if we were there. Can you place yourself at the Lord's table as Jesus is talking about what will soon take place? Do you sense the confusion and concern as Jesus speaks of what's to come? Picture yourself in the garden where Jesus is alone and knows that His time of trial, torture, and death is approaching. Do you

feel the injustice as you stand as a part of the crowd as the God who created everything is screamed at by religious people and slapped in the face? Do you feel the darkness of the lonely cross when the Father turned away from our sins laid upon Jesus?

Then step into the sunbeams shining into the empty tomb, the frantic sound of the disciples and Jesus' friends rushing to the tomb to try and find Jesus, to see if it is true. Imagine the shocking amazement that overwhelms people when Jesus suddenly appears in their house.

“To see him who is the wisdom of God and the power of God, always beloved of the Father, to see him, I say, fear, and tremble, and bow, and sweat, and pray, and die, to see him lifted up upon the cross, the earth trembling under him, as if unable to bear his weight, and the heavens darkened over him, as if shut against his cry, and himself hanging between both, as if refused by both, and all this because our sins did meet upon him—this of all things does most abundantly manifest the severity of God’s vindictive justice.”

(John Owen, Communion with God)

Prayer:

Ask God to allow you to sense the loneliness of the garden, the weight of the cross, and the beauty and glory of the resurrection. Ask the Lord to help you to enter into Easter with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. This season isn't meant to pass us by. It's an invitation to step in, to experience the depth of sorrow and the fullness of joy, and to stand in awe of the greatest event in history.

April 4th

What Exactly Did Jesus Die For?

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.”

Ephesians 2:1

Francis Shaeffer is known for asking, “If Jesus is the answer, then what is the question?” In other words, why do we celebrate Good Friday and Easter? Why did Jesus have to die? How does the death of a Jewish man 2,000 years ago affect me today?

Paul tells us in Ephesians 2 that we are all sinners by nature. While that might not surprise you or your family, it might surprise you that the Bible talks about sin as something that offends God. Sin at its core, is when we are trying to find fulfillment apart from Christ. Sin is not valuing and trusting Christ, so we go and look for happiness elsewhere.

Christ came to live and die for sinners. He lived the life we should have lived, and died the death we deserved. We celebrate the death of Christ because He was our substitute, paying the full penalty for our sins. If God is a perfect judge and completely holy, then sin cannot go unpunished, someone must pay the penalty. This is why Christ’s death is worth celebrating. Christ saved us from our sins.

Question:

Was there ever a time when you received something amazing, especially when you did not deserve it? How did it make you feel?

Read:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Ephesians 2:8-9

Think & Pray:

Spend some time reflecting on God’s overwhelming love for you, that He came to die for you and to reconcile you to the Father.

Who needs to hear this truth today? Pray for them, and ask God to give you the courage to share the Gospel with love.

“There is only one way whereby Christ can bring me nigh unto God, and that is by his blood, by his death, by his broken body, by his shed blood, by his life poured out.”
(Martyn Lloyd-Jones, God’s Way of Reconciliation)

April 5th

“One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at take at Jesus’ side”

John 13:23

As we talk about being close to God, especially in preparation for the Easter season, it is hard to overlook this story. The Gospel of John is well known for providing very specific details that helps us see into the heart of Jesus and His ministry. The Gospel of John also does not shy away from the details about the author’s affections for Christ, and Christ’s affections for him.

John wants us to know that he was the one who had the title, “the guy Jesus loved.” John also noted later that he outran Peter to the tomb on Easter Sunday morning. It would be a mistake to say that this kind of ambition and affection is wrong. In fact, there is something that has a child-like love about it that we need to replicate in our own lives.

The simple fact of the matter is that at the table in the upper room, there was no assigned seating. As far as we know, the disciples could sit wherever they wanted to. So it would be fair to say that if the other disciples wanted to sit next to Jesus they could have. If any one of the disciples wanted to lean up against Jesus and lean their head on the creator of everything, they could have.

However, only one person on this particule evening, that we know of, walked into the room and probably thought, and said 4 things:

- 1) I am sitting next to Jesus
- 2) I am not sitting in other spots that are away from Jesus
- 3) I am going to lean up against Jesus
- 4) I am not focused on what others think

Was John leaning up against the side of Jesus something that was normal at dinner? Did others do this as often as they met?

We simply do not know, but we do know that on this particular night, John was going to sit next to Jesus and lean up against Him.

This should automatically bring up the question, where are you currently? In your time, in your mind, in your heart, and in your holiness sitting right next to Jesus? In your preparation for Easter, and in dealing with the trials of this world, are you leaning your head up against Jesus in a childlike / trustworthy manner? Do you refuse to be far away from Jesus, and have no issue with rejecting “other places” so you can sit next to and be near the God who loves you, leads you, and has saved you?

Let us be Christians who do not know any better but to be passionate and bold with our love for God that no other place will do. The truth of the Gospel is, is that even when we did not come near to Him, Christ came near to us, right next to our sin, to die for it and to rescue us. We were the sinners with the disease of sin that nobody wants to get close to, except Jesus came and rescued us, cleansing us with the blood of Christ.

Family Activity

Act of Kindness Cross- hang a paper cross. Add sticky notes with kind acts each family member completes leading up to Easter.

April 6th

“Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself”

John 18:18

As Jesus stood under arrest for the crime of loving sinners and giving people hope, truth, and love where was Peter? He was standing in the crowd, standing next to the comforts of a warm fire in the midst of God haters, a stone's throw away from Jesus.

Though Peter's entire life would bear incredible fruit and love for Christ, we do see a bad example of how Peter in his moment of weakness, missed the opportunity to stand boldly with and for Christ. Peter should have been in the room with Jesus testifying to the greatness and goodness of God. Peter should have demanded his own chains to be fastened right next to Jesus, but he didn't.

What does this have to do with us you ask? There are plenty of times in life, maybe even this weekend when you will face moments where you must choose between standing next to Jesus or warming yourself by the fire of sin and the company of darkness. No matter how scary it may seem, or how dangerous the unknown, it is always better to deny our feelings in order that we may stand next to our Lord and Savior and accept whatever happens next.

Even when the warm fire is not outright sin, but is merely the ease comforts of this world that keeps us fully living radically for Christ. But we will never have any regrets for standing by our King's side.

Jim Elliot, the well-known Missionary / Martyr is well known for saying, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." John Piper in his book, "Risk Is Right", reminds Christians that sacrificing our comfort and even safety for Christ is more smart than it is sacrificial.

In a world where Satan loves to keep the comfortable fires going all around us, to block our passion from following Christ, it is our

mission and joy to go wherever Christ is in order to make His name great.

When Albert Mohler Jr. arrived at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary to turn the school back to conservative theology and away from the liberal situation it was in, Mohler preached a sermon in chapel entitled, "Don't Just Do Something, Stand There."

As Christians, we are called to reject sin and stand for the things that Christ has called us to. It might be easy for some of us to stand up for Jesus when the world is watching. However, what about when no one is present, except God Himself? The real question is: Will we stand up for Christ when nobody else is watching and we find ourselves under the temptation of the world's comfortable fires? When there's no audience, no applause - only the choice between comfort and obedience?

April 7th

“Stay awake, watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation.”

Matthew 26:41

Have you ever tried to stay awake when you were completely exhausted? Maybe as a child you tried to stay awake on Christmas Eve, or you fought off sleep on a big trip. When we are tired and need rest, falling asleep comes easy. Yet, on the night of His arrest, Jesus urged His disciples in the garden to stay awake and remain watchful. Does this apply to us today?

While it is true that Jesus was telling the disciples in the garden to stay awake and pray for what was about to unfold. His words carry lasting significance for us as Christians today. The church is also called to “stay awake,” remaining alert to what is happening in the world and within our hearts.

The sleepiness of our culture lulls the church into spiritual complacency, tempting us to forget about God’s truths and rest in the sins of the world. As followers of Christ, we have the joy of following Him in obedience and being fully awake and alert as we glorify Him.

It is striking that Jesus tells His disciples to not enter into temptation. Jesus does not just say do not enter into sin, but to stay so far away from sin that you even avoid temptation. Because to be truly awake in Christ means we do not want to get anywhere near temptation. Our love for Christ should be so great that we desire to glorify Him, staying far away from the flames of temptation entirely.

As Good Friday and Easter approach, are you staying fully awake and alert in your mind and heart about the cross and tomb? Are you preparing your affections to be renewed as Christians around the world prepare to remember, reflect, and rejoice in the greatest truth told?

Ask the Lord to help you prepare yourself and your church, so that you will experience Easter with fresh eyes and a ready heart. Not sleepwalking through Easter, but that this year would be different. Ask the Lord to help you to enter into the meaning behind Easter so that you and those around you can be blessed by His presence and Gospel, not just another routine, but a time of deep renewal and gratitude for Christ's sacrifice and victory over death.

Family Activity:

As a family, gather at the dinner table to pray for tomorrow's service. Pray for those leading the service and ask God to draw people to worship Christ tomorrow morning. Pray that people would see Christ as He is meant to be seen, that lost people would be saved, and Christians would be encouraged by His love and grace.

April 8th

“For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

Hebrews 2:18

I remember in my grandmother's house in Ohio there was the famous “Footprints” poem on the wall. If you have never heard or read the “Footprints” poem it is very encouraging. The basic idea is that a man was walking on the beach one day and was having a conversation with Jesus and thinking back over his life. The man was thankful that he always saw 2 sets of footprints in the sand. One set was his own and the other set of footprints was Jesus walking right next to Him.

However, when the man saw that in his toughest times in life there was only one set of footprints He asked Jesus why that was the case. Jesus told the man that it was in those difficult times in his life that Jesus was carrying him. This is a great story and I think we can agree, the Bible would say amen to that idea. However, the author of Hebrews may add another thought that might even be more encouraging. The author of Hebrews might add another set of footprints. The footprints that are in front of us.

The author of Hebrews wants to encourage Christians by reminding them that Jesus is not only walking beside you, and in some cases carrying you, but He has also been where you are currently walking before. Jesus now comes back to finish your course alongside you.

Especially in the garden of Gethsemane, we see Jesus going through a lot of the feelings and situations that too go through. Have you ever known loneliness? So has Jesus. Have you ever known grief? Jesus has been there too. Have you ever been misunderstood by others? Jesus definitely knows what that is like. Have you ever had to come to terms with the fear of your own death? Jesus is well aware of that issue. We could go on and on, but you get the point.

So what does this all mean? It means more than just an informative religious point. Jesus has been where you have been, He knows what it is like to go through this life. Even though He did not ever commit any sin, He knows more than we do, the temptations and evil of living in a fallen world.

Therefore, we can trust that Christ is worth going to when we face times that are difficult. Jesus knows He understands, and He sympathizes with our pain. Who else can you go to who is this way? Jesus is the perfect friend, the trusted counselor, the great Savior, and the Lord of our lives.

April 9th

“When Jesus said to them, I am he, they drew back and fell to the ground”

John 18:6

What would cause the world to draw back and fall to the ground in amazement and shock? What happens in our culture, in our politics, and in our news that would cause people to be so caught up in awe that they would literally fall to the ground? Sure, it is not surprising that a Christian might fall to the ground every now and then as they appreciate the glory of Christ, but when it happens to people of the world, something is different.

The first thing to notice in the context of John 18:6 when Jesus is being arrested is who is there. Who is it that falls to the ground? If we look at who is arresting Jesus, we see the Pharisees, soldiers, and officials, the best that the world has to offer of power and pomp. However, none of this power is too big for Jesus, even when He is turning Himself over to their questions.

When Jesus says, I am He, He is not simply saying, “over here...I am the person that you are looking for.” Jesus, when saying to His enemies I am He, they took it as Jesus saying “I AM”, the same saying that God says in Exodus to Moses. However, plenty of people have claimed to be God in human history, why does this situation cause men to fall to the ground?

It is not only what Jesus says that’s impactful to these men, but also the power behind the statement. As Jesus claims that He is God, in a way that only God can do, men have no other option but to fall over in amazement.

While there are some people around us today who do not fall at the feet of Jesus and all of His righteous glory, it is true that they will one day. As we understand from Philippians where Paul says to the Philippians, “Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

While all this is true, do we still fall at the feet of Jesus in amazement? Do we enter this Easter season with the attitude of just another year, or do we enter this season ready to be impacted by the power of God, no matter what that looks like externally? Will we stand in pride as the church celebrates another religious holiday, or bow at the feet of Jesus who is our Lord and Savior? Will you go to the cross and bow down asking the Lord to help you understand and appreciate the cross just a little more this year than last year?

Many people will accept that Jesus is the Christ this Easter season, let us be the church that worships and celebrates it.

April 10th

“Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” (Part 1)

John 18:37

As Jesus was being unfairly questioned by Pilate, He could have responded a different way if He chose to. Jesus could have said, “One day I will be the one asking you questions and putting you on trial.” Jesus could have responded in a way that would put Pilate in his place or caused Pilate to die right on the spot. However, Jesus simply states the truth - everyone who is of the truth hears a lot of voices, but only listens to one.

When we think about it like that, we begin to realize how many voices we hear in a given day. No, I am not saying that we are people who hear all kinds of voices that nobody else hears, however, we can all admit that we live in a culture of a lot of opinions and thoughts.

Not only is there the voice of truth, but there is also our own voice of the world, the voice of culture, the voice of social media, the voice of our parents, the voice of friends, the voice of politics, and the voice of the enemy.

In a world of many voices, we also hear our own sinful voice that we can't always trust. This all begs the question, which voice should we be listening to? We all know the answer to that, but maybe a better question is, what voice are we focusing on listening to today?

If we want to be reminded of truth in the midst of pain, truth in the midst of emotion, truth in the midst of fear, truth in the midst of sickness and darkness, we need to be listening to the voice of Jesus. What does this mean? We need to be listening to the voice of Jesus as we read the Scriptures.

The best way to arrive back to truth each day and hear the voice of God is to pick up His word and let God speak to us. Or as Augustine of Hippo said, “The Holy Scriptures are our letters from home.” The Bible helps us come back to where we know

we need to be, the place where our souls feel truly where they belong.

Questions:

- 1) How can you make sure that your house / family is a place where God's Word is paramount over all other truths? What voice(s) needs to be limited or amplified?
- 2) Is there a way you can improve your affections for God's Word in your own personal life?

April 11th

“Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” (Part 2)

John 18:37

The election night of 2024 was a night that most of us will not forget as most of us were probably waiting for the news of who was going to be the next president of the United States. I remember my wife turning to me the night before and saying, “But how do we know what news source to trust.” What she was referring to was the media’s advice on what poll to trust when it came to the prediction of winners. While some news outlets were telling the American public that one candidate was leading, another new outlet was saying the exact opposite. It was actually really annoying for everyone regardless of who you were voting for.

It is a common question we all ask in this life. When we are facing financial problems, mental problems, relationship issues, or just common concerns that we face living in this broken world. We tend to wonder, where do we go for truth and information? Who can we trust for truth?

At some point in time, the Christian must not only see the Bible as authoritative but also sufficient. This means that the Christian must not only say, “Sure, I believe that the Bible is true, but also that the Bible is meaningful for my everyday life. Christians must come to the place where they believe that the Bible is God’s Word for every second of every day in their lives.

When we as Christians have that kind of faith in the Bible, we no longer see it as a monument kind of book, but a movement of truth that goes with us in our everyday life. This means that we trust it as God’s Word to do it’s job as it helps us and guides us.

It may help to think of the voice of God and the voices of this world and our sinful selves as a giant soundboard. There are certain voices in our lives that need to be turned down so that we can turn up God’s voice. Normally it means that we need to turn down our own voice of panic so that we can hear the voice of God that we are trying to drown out.

Are you allowing the voice of your own confidence and arrogance to be louder than God's Word? Are turning up the voice of others so high that you can't even hear the level of the Scriptures? Are you allowing the track of culture, popularity, money, or career to dominate your thinking and hearing?

It may be hard to turn down the volume of the world, but it is absolutely essential that we as Christians force ourselves to push up the sound of God's truth so that we are letting our minds and hearts hear the right and good things for ourselves.

April 12th

“It is finished.”

John 19:30

It seems like every week, or at least once a month, someone asks me this question. Pastor, how do I know that I am a Christian, is it by my works or by Christ's work? They may not always put it like that, but the question about our salvation that includes the terms law and Gospel, or works and faith is very common.

There are a number of passages that we can turn to for help. The whole context of the epistle of Galatians is helpful, Ephesians chapters 1 and 2 are an incredible encouragement in helping us see that we are saved by faith in Christ alone. Romans is without a doubt the Mount Everest of epistles that explains the Gospel. Jesus preached the same Gospel that Paul preached and we see this in the parable of the tax collector praying in the temple.

However, my favorite verse that helps us understand the Gospel and its implications for us is found here in the Gospel of John where Jesus says, It is finished. Here are 3 important truths about this incredible statement that Jesus made before He died.

1. When Jesus said, “It is finished”, the curtain of the temple was torn in two. This is important because it helps us understand what was finished. In order to be made right with God in the Old Covenant, believers had to continue to come to the temple and offer sacrifices. When Jesus died, he finished the last and final sacrifice. Therefore, there is no need for any veil to be between God and man.

2. When Jesus said, “It is finished”, He was saying that the works of men trying to be made right with God are done. A new covenant is now in effect that Christ purchased by His blood. Thus, if we can be made right with God through something we do, then Christ died for nothing (Galatians 2:21).

3. When Jesus said, "It is finished", He was saying that the Gospel is complete. The mission of Christ was to come to this earth to die for His children, sinners. Jesus is telling us to trust in Him and His sacrifice for us. We must not grieve Him by saying it is not finished, I have to continue to work for God's favor in my life or else I will not be saved. If you have placed your faith in Christ for salvation and not in yourself or your own righteousness then I have great news for you, IT IS FINISHED.

Many people in this world are still trying to earn God's love and God's favor. Many people still think they have to work for God's love because well...that's how everyone and everything else works around us. But that is not how God works. People need to hear that salvation is not cheap, it cost God everything. But the cost was on Christ, we can be free from the slavery of being separated from God by trusting in Christ alone.

April 13th

“When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, Truly this was the son of God.” (Part 1)

Matthew 27:54

In the Roman army, centurions were commanders. These were not just regular infantrymen, but those who were over the average soldier. Although, unless we forget, the Roman army at the time of Christ, was the most powerful empire and military on the planet. So to say that the centurions were the best of the best is an understatement.

While the centurions were amazing soldiers who commanded other incredible and elite soldiers, they were also professionals in executing death by crucifixion, and to do this, they needed to be experts in death itself. Centurions had seen their fair share of crucifixions and probably were not all that impressed by simply another death, it was what they did and what they knew.

Therefore, the question must be asked, how in the world did one centurion come to the radical conclusion that Jesus was in fact the son of God? This is an incredible statement made by the Roman soldier for a number of reasons.

First, any citizen of Rome, and especially a soldier of Rome is impressed by one thing and one thing alone, Rome. Caesar and Rome were the light of the world, and their glory and dominance of the world was what every person alive needed to bow down to in amazement.

The second incredible detail about this story is that it happens rather quickly. At one moment this commander is just putting to death another criminal, and in the next moment, he is declaring that this man is the son of God. What kind of power could change a man so quickly?

The third observation of this incredible story is that it was the death of Christ that shook this soldier to the core. As many of Jesus' sermons, encounters, healings, and compassion changed people's lives, it was the power of Jesus' death, when Jesus had nothing to say or do, but His death that had the power to change this man's life.

Fourthly, it is interesting to note that the centurion noticed the presence of a higher power. Again, to this man, there is no higher power than Cesar and Rome. However, the soldier saw creation respond to Jesus' death. He saw and felt that there was an actual earthquake.

Lastly, it is important to note that the centurion was not alone in his transformation. Matthew notes that those who were with him also testified that Jesus must have been the son of God.

What an incredible piece to the story, that this Roman soldier was so changed by the death of Christ, that he risked his job and life by realizing that Jesus was not just any man, but the son of God, and what convinced him of this? The death of Jesus.

If just the death of Jesus and the power of that moment can change the very centurion that was in command over the execution of Jesus, is there any human on earth that cannot be reached? This means at least 2 things:

- 1) Have high confidence in the power of the Gospel. Paul reminds the Roman church, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." Romans 1:16. Do you believe in the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Do you believe that the Gospel has such a power that it can change the heart of a centurion in a matter of moments? If we believe in that kind of power in the Gospel, it should give us an incredible confidence in personal evangelism.
- 2) How does the death of Christ impact you to this day. I am going to assume for just a moment that you are a Christian. If you are unsure about your salvation in Christ, then there is no better time than the Easter season to talk to someone about that. But if you are a Christian, how

does the power of the death of Christ impact you today?
Have you allowed yourself to meditate and take time to think through the power of the death of Christ and His sacrifice for us?

Action:

With Easter approaching, who can you invite to church this Easter? More than likely, people are expecting an invitation to church. Christians should always be reaching out to lost people to share with them the love of Christ, but they won't be too surprised around Easter. Take advantage of this time and invite someone to church where they can hear about the love of Christ.

Make an invitation to JWBC and put it in a neighbor's mailbox - people are expecting to be invited to church... make blessing bags/baskets- same idea but fill a bag/basket with welcoming items (include the invitation in the bag/basket).

April 14th

***“But He was pierced for our transgressions;
He was crushed for our iniquities;
upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with His wounds, we are healed.”***

Isaiah 53:5

Sometimes we feel like we are not good enough to be Christians, that is because we are not. We continue to try and work for our salvation because much of the time that is the world we live in. We are surrounded by friends, family, bosses, co-workers, and the world in general that says, if you are good to me, I will be good to you. If you help me, I will help you. But you have to work for it.

God says in His word that He is not like us. God loves us, not based on anything we do, but based on what He has done for us. Isaiah 53 is a very encouraging chapter on God's love for us, but it also tells us something true about our condition. We have sins, we have iniquities, have do not have peace because of our sins against God, and we do need healing.

Thankfully, God is not a person who walks down the hallway of the hospital, yelling at us to get better or else. God comes into our hospital rooms, sees our weaknesses, and tells us that sin has caused these issues. Then the Father introduces Jesus to us as the one who is going to operate and make us better. God is going to give us a new heart, one that loves God and will beat for His purposes.

When we turn to God, we are saying that we need healing and that we need to be put back together. Only Jesus can really bring us peace, only He can truly heal us of our sinful disease. As we celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ this season, think through these verses and the fact that what Jesus did on the cross was personal.

When Jesus died, He did not just die for a random group of possible Christians. Christ died for His own, Christ did for those who needed to be saved. Christ died for you. God knew the

people He was dying for and the sins that needed to be forgiven. Christ has healed you by His wounds. Christ has brought you peace through His death.

It is not glorifying to Christ for His children to walk around like they have not received peace and are still under the curse of sickness. It glorifies Christ when we celebrate with the job that God loves us and has healed us from the sin that separates us from Him. We should have the same joy of being discharged from the hospital, free from all illness and ready to live for the first time ever.

As it has been said by many Christians before, “Christians are to live as though Christ died for us yesterday, was raised from the grave today, and is coming back tomorrow.”

“Christ’s deformity is what gives form to you. If he had been unwilling to be deformed, you would never have got back the form you lost. So he hung on the cross, deformed, but his deformity was our beauty.”

(St. Augustine)

Family Activity

“Cross Craft” (create crosses using wood, paper, or string and add bible verses that highlight Jesus’ sacrifice and victory over death).

April 15th

What Can We Learn From The Resurrection?

Why is Easter such a big deal? What does the resurrection of Christ teach us about our past, present, and future? Is our life any different because of the resurrection of Christ? Today we will look at 4 reasons how the resurrection affects us today.

1. The Word of God is true.

Jesus predicted His death and resurrection in many different ways, but He definitely spoke of it very clearly three different times.

The first time we see Jesus predicting His own death and resurrection is in Matthew 16:21–23 (have someone read this passage). The second time we see Jesus predicting His own death was just after the transfiguration in Mark 9:30-32 (someone else read this passage). The third time that Jesus predicted his own death and resurrection was in Luke 18:31-34 (someone else read this passage).

We can trust that when God says He will do something, He will do it. Many people can try and predict their own death, some might even claim their own resurrection. However, Jesus is the only person who predicted the time and details of His own death and resurrection.

2. The resurrection of Christ validates Christianity.

If Christ did not rise from the grave, then the entire Christian faith is no different than any other religious claim. Even the Apostle Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians 15:14 said that everything hinges upon the resurrection of Christ. However, because the resurrection of Christ was a real and physical resurrection, we can trust that everything about the Christian faith is true.

But how do we know that the resurrection really happened? Here are a few quick responses to that:

- No argument against the resurrection of Christ for the past 2,000 years has been successful.

- If the resurrection was a fake, then the disciples would have been involved. That means that they knew the resurrection of Christ was a lie, but they went ahead and died for the lie. Nobody would do that, at least not all of them. Also, the disciples could have made a lot of money by producing the body of Christ and confirming it as a lie.
- Nobody has ever been able to produce the body of Christ. For the Roman Empire, this was a must to put down the rebellion of Christianity.
- More than 500 people saw the resurrected Jesus as one time in His 40 days of being on earth after His resurrection.
- The conversion of the Apostle Paul is incredible evidence for Christianity as one of the worst enemies of the Christian faith went on to die for the faith. There are many others, but the greatest evidence of the resurrection of Christ is your own testimony. Look at how our Lord Jesus has changed your life. How can a dead man who is buried in the Middle East somewhere ever change your life today? Unless...He is alive!

3. The resurrection of Christ proves God's love and plan for us.

When Christ was raised from the dead, He proved His eternal love and sacrifice for our sins was a real and actual sacrifice. The point of Jesus dying on the cross for His children was so that we could be reconciled to the Father. If Jesus did not rise from the grave then our sins would still be against us, and we would have no assurance of God's love.

4. The resurrection of Christ gives us an example of the resurrected life.

In John chapters 20 and 21 we see Jesus modeling the resurrected life for us, we see what it will be like when we have resurrected bodies. In the Gospel of John, we see Jesus speaking with friends, recognizing friends, having a glorified body, but not so different that people cannot recognize him, eating food, and walking on a beach.

Far from a ghostly figure, Jesus shows us that the resurrected body is a real body that is not tainted with sin. The resurrection of Christ is an encouragement of what will be for us when He brings us back to life in His Name.

April 16th

“But they urged him strongly, saying, stay with us.”

Luke 24:29

Many people will celebrate Easter this weekend. Many people will paint and hide eggs, eat some candy, and maybe go to a service at church. It may even be possible that many people will think about the cross and the resurrection of Christ. There will be movies and shows on television that talk about the person called Jesus Christ. The culture will give some notice of Jesus.

Christians know that these things are good, but having an actual relationship with Jesus is better. Christians are encouraged to prepare their hearts and minds for this special season where we remind ourselves of the glorious gospel of Christ, but they will also find their hearts and minds saying, “Stay with us” long after Easter is over.

We find this saying, “Stay with us” in the Gospel of John after the resurrection of Jesus. Even though it took a few moments for the disciple’s eyes to be open to who this man really was, they had been around Him long enough to know that they did not want Him to leave.

Simply put, Christianity is about walking with Christ, talking to Christ, listening to Christ, and in every season asking Him, “Stay with us.” The disciples could have said many different things in that moment, they could have been concerned about their own safety from the Roman Empire, or what the religious leaders might say. However, all they cared about was asking this man to stay with them.

This week and next week, this Easter and next Easter, on Sunday morning at 10:30 a.m. and next Thursday at 4:30 p.m. will your heart and mind still say, “Stay with us?” When every season comes and goes, will you still be seeking the person of Christ above and beyond what circumstances favor you or the ones you love?

My prayer for you this week is that you spend time thinking and praying about your personal relationship with Christ. How could your relationship be better with Christ? What are certain things you can do each week to improve your alone time with Christ? Maybe this Easter is the beginning of something new for you, maybe you spend the next month spending more time with Christ every day in Bible study and in prayer like you have always wanted.

Either way, let us be the people who come boldly to the throne of grace and say to Jesus, "Stay with us."

April 17th

“Did not our hearts burn within us, while he opened to us the Scriptures?”

Luke 24:32

Is that not what we all want as Christians? Would it not be the greatest thing ever, to see a group of people gathered on Easter Sunday morning with their hearts burning? Doesn't a burning heart mean that someone somewhere is passionate and determined?

The church needs passion and determination of course, but what is the root of the passion and what is the outcome of the passion? Passion for passion's sake doesn't mean anything. Emotion comes and goes, it never really lasts or amounts to much. However, a passion for God and His word never ends.

If we look back to the Gospel of John and the testimony of these men encountering the resurrected Jesus Christ we see some amazing things. These men were testifying to the encounter they had with the real resurrected Jesus as He opened up the Scriptures to them. The burning hearts came from Jesus Himself and the Scriptures that He spoke of.

The burning heart is the effect of letting go of other distractions in the world and allowing Christ to be our central focus in everything we do. Not only does Christ get the glory when we make much of Him, but we also are left with a heartbeat that is infectious to others.

Is this what causes our hearts in the church to burn today? Do we burn after Christ Himself as we search for Him in the Scriptures? Do we allow our hearts to be easily kindled by other secondary issues that stir up emotions but do not mean anything eternal?

What a miracle for two separate men to testify to each other, did not our hearts burn when Jesus, God Himself spoke to us through His word. Would it be enough for Christ just to speak to these men, would not their hearts burn at just the sounds of

Jesus' words? Of course they would, but here Jesus chooses to speak to these men by and through the Word of God.

What does this mean? If we want our hearts to burn with the white-hot passion of glory, then let us have a serious joy in hearing the words of God from the Scriptures themselves.

Prayer: Lord we ask you that this week especially, as we read your Word that our hearts would burn for you and you alone.

“Read the Word with affection. Get your hearts quickened with the Word; go to it to fetch fire. Labor that the Word may not only be a lamp to direct but a fire to warm. Read the Scripture not only as a history but as a love letter sent to you from God that may affect your hearts.”

(Thomas Watson, A Body of Divinity)

April 18th

“Come And Have Breakfast”

John 21:12

Of all the things that Jesus could have said to the disciples, He chose to say, “Come and have breakfast”, what a merciful and great high priest! In any other relationship with a human being on earth, this conversation would not be filled with such grace and mercy.

Think about it...Jesus just went through the worst death imaginable, taking on the wrath of the Father for the forgiveness of sins, and if that wasn't enough, was abounded by all of those closest to Him. It would make sense for Jesus to be upset and say something like, “Alright it's time to talk about your lack of faith”, or “I cannot believe none of you trusted me”, or “After all that we have been through together, and all that you heard me say on my own death and resurrection”, or “thanks fellas, after all that I did for you all, this is the thanks I get.”

Jesus never says anything like this, but he does invite them to have breakfast. Why did Jesus do this? Was it because Jesus thought that the disciples had already been through enough? Did Jesus think that the disciples had already felt bad about abandoning Jesus and learned their lesson already? Either way, the disciples deserved a very harsh response from Jesus not that He was back with them.

However, Jesus never showed disappointment or hurt. Jesus wanted them to sit down next to Him and eat. What does this mean for you and your family as you prepare for Easter? Jesus knows fully what you have done. Nothing is hidden from the eyes of God, He is fully aware of your sins, even the ones that nobody else knows about. Jesus knows everything.

Yet still, Jesus invited you to come to Him. Jesus knowing all you have done and have thought invites you to be His child, invites you to receive reconciliation with God, and invites you into an eternal relationship with Him. God invites you to fellowship with Him.

What is so special about this invitation? It is special because it comes from God Himself, but it is also special because it comes after the resurrection of Christ. Jesus not only invited His disciples into mercy and grace but He did so after securing their grace and mercy on the cross. Jesus is inviting His disciples to partake and experience His mercy that was bought for them on the cross.

As Jesus invites you to share in the same mercy and grace, the only question is, will you come too?

.April 19th

“You Follow Me.”

John 21:22

It is amazing that we get to listen in on one of the last conversations that Jesus had while on this earth just before His ascension into heaven. However, it is not just any conversation, it is a conversation with Peter, a disciple who would go on to help build the Church of Jesus Christ.

In this conversation, Peter asks about what the future will be for the other disciple, John. But, Jesus tells Peter to not worry about what happens with John. Jesus pointedly tells Peter, “You follow me.” This was to be Peter’s focus, not what happens with others, not how God would plan out the ministry and life of John, but the focus for Peter to follow Christ.

This is not only true for Peter, but it is also true for all people who claim to be Christians. To put our faith in Christ and to call ourselves Christians, means that we have trusted in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross to secure our salvation. The fruit of that belief in Christ’s sacrifice, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is a life that wants to follow Christ.

Simply put, we can’t be Christians if we refuse to follow and obey Christ. There are many distractions in this world, some good and some bad. Some good things in this world like other Christians can be distractions as we might compare ourselves with other people. However, God always reminds us that our main vision and goal in life is to follow Christ.

Peter knew enough to know that following Christ would never be easy. Peter did not know all the details about his own future and neither do we. Still, one thing does give us confidence in following Christ no matter what, and that is that Jesus is alive. It is one thing for Jesus to give commands to His disciples, but when Peter was looking at the risen Jesus Christ just before His ascension in the eyes...that’s the realization that giving your life to Christ and following Him is worth it!

Is Christ calling you to follow Him in a specific way? In what ways do you think God may be leading you to follow Him in obedience this special Easter week?

April 20th

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet still believed.”

John 20:29

There are many things that we can be grateful for when it comes to the interaction between Jesus and Thomas. First of all, aren't you thankful for the way that Jesus responds to Thomas?

Thomas says, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (John 20:25). If we did not know the rest of the story, we might assume that Jesus would appear in the room right behind Thomas and rebuke him. After all, didn't Jesus do enough already for Thomas to believe?

However, this is not the way Jesus responded to Thomas, is it? While we might have responded in anger and frustration, Jesus responds with grace to Thomas and shows him the actual evidence. Jesus wants Thomas to believe by seeing the scars in His hands and on His side. Jesus wants Thomas to see the actual evidence and logic for believing that Jesus truly is the messiah.

What is Thomas' reaction, “My Lord and my God” John 20:28, which might be one of the greatest verses that shows Jesus is God. Thomas was given grace to see and believe that Jesus and His sacrifice was in fact the Gospel itself.

What about you? Have you believed because someone told you to believe, or have you seen the logical evidence that Jesus really is who He says He is? As we celebrate Easter today, Jesus reminds us that those who did not get to see the actual physical body of the resurrected Jesus are blessed because they still believe.

Today, can you say that you believe in the resurrected Christ, who died on the cross for your sins, and now sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven? As we conclude this devotional and this Easter season, my hope is that you continue to draw

closer to Christ, not because someone told you to, but because you know it's real.

“It is now the power of the resurrection of Christ that Thomas, who was so deep and obdurate in unbelief, even more than any other disciple, is so suddenly changed, becomes an entirely different man, who publicly and freely confesses that he not only believes that Christ is risen but is also enlightened by the power of Christ’s resurrection so that he firmly believes and confesses that he, his Lord, is true God and man, through whom, as he is now resurrected from unbelief, the fountain of all sin, so he will also arise from the dead at the judgment day and live forever with him in indescribable glory and blessedness. And not only he, but all who believe thus, as Christ himself further says to him.”

(Martin Luther, The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther, vol. 11)