



April 2026

Bible Reading and Daily Devotional  
From “The Upper Room Disciplines 2026”

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1 ~ *Read Hebrews 12:1-3*

I have run the Oklahoma City Half Marathon many years. This marathon was established to honor the victims of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, a terrorist attack that claimed 168 lives.

I train a lot for the 13-mile race. It takes much time and energy to stick with the plan in order to be healthy and able to complete the race each year. I know I can finish the race, but I always have in mind a time frame within which I want to finish. Running the race itself is an exhilarating experience for me as thousands cheer for runners throughout the route. At times I have started the race only to want to quit part of the way through. When that happens, I think about the hours and hours of practice I have put in, and I push on. I fight through the pain, discomfort, elements of weather, and other challenges to get to the finish line. I keep my focus on finishing the race.

This passage from Hebrews is a great parallel to my running. Much of running is mental, and it takes a lot of focus to get across that line. The author of Hebrews writes of that which slows us down on our spiritual journey, the sin that just won't let go. We cannot handle it by ourselves, but we can keep our eyes focused on Jesus as we stay determined and focused on the presence of Christ all around us. What wonderful imagery for us when we face challenges in our lives.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus endured the Cross and ignored the shame for the sake of joy. We share that joy on Easter Sunday as we think about Jesus staying focused on his journey to the Cross for all of humanity.

*Creator God, help me to keep focused on you this week as I experience joy all around me. Amen.*

THURSDAY, APRIL 2 ~ *Read John 13:1-17*

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Many of us will participate in special services throughout Holy Week. One of the most humbling and uncomfortable services for many is the washing of one another's feet. I recall a meeting that I attended years ago of people from all over the country. One attending pastor had been assigned to do the devotion. He

surprised all of us by incorporating a foot washing. We had no notice and were not prepared for the humbling experience.

As I participated in the service, I thought about the disciples who were gathered with Jesus that day. They probably had a long day of travel, and, unlike my group, they had walked wherever they went. Their feet were dusty and dirty, and they were not prepared either. Peter was the one who had the nerve to stand up and say, "You are not washing my feet!" Peter's opposition was because Jesus was their leader, and in the eyes of Peter, this task was not something for a person in authority to do.

But Jesus illustrated what it means to be a servant leader. Leaders are not greater than those who follow them, Jesus was saying. Jesus set an example to all who were there of what he expected of them as they continued their work as a disciples.

Jesus is our example too. This act is a command from Jesus to love one another, just as he loves us. The rituals of Holy Week help to bring home the love that Christ has for the world. We can't just talk about love; we must illustrate that love through our daily acts. We are called to do no less.

***Giving God, may my rituals of serving you and others be fitting for you and your kingdom. Amen.***

FRIDAY, APRIL 3 ~ ***Read John 18:1-19***

#### GOOD FRIDAY

Betrayal is one of the most difficult emotions to experience. Betrayal comes in many forms, some of which come from those closest to us. Betrayal is hard to overcome. It takes time, prayer, and patience to forgive those who betray us. Often the closer we are to a person who has betrayed us, the more difficult the recovery.

Reading of Judas' betrayal of Jesus has always been a challenge for me. What catches my attention is that Jesus knew it was coming. He had already called it. It is part of a necessary plan, as Jesus knows his fate is the Cross.

However, Judas' betrayal isn't the only one Jesus faces. Peter denies knowing Jesus, a betrayal in itself. Peter was one of the most faithful disciples; many believe he was Jesus' favorite. Yet after Jesus is taken away, Peter denies knowing Jesus not just once, but three times. By this time, Peter has chosen violence in attempting to prevent Jesus' arrest by cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant, and, as we saw yesterday, Peter didn't want Jesus to wash his feet. Throughout the last days of Jesus' earthly life, Peter fails him in so many ways.

Peter and Judas both regret their betrayal of Jesus. But Peter goes on to continue as a faithful follower, introducing Christ to many throughout the rest of his life. His words of love and service to Christ continue to this day. The role of Peter shows us that the love of Christ overcomes any of our faults and failures. At times we will get it right, and at other times we will fail. In every moment, we rely only on the grace of God.

***Loving God, assist me always as I work to get it right as I serve you and your kingdom. Amen.***

SATURDAY, APRIL 4 ~ ***Read Matthew 27:57-66***

#### HOLY SATURDAY

I think of the types of loss that we face in our lives. Some losses are expected after long illnesses, and some losses are sudden. In whatever way death comes, we are never fully prepared for it. We face the various forms of grief that are natural to all of us.

As a pastor, I have helped many with this grieving process. Right after a loss, we quickly go through the motions of preparing for the service and burial, often without being able to fully take in what has happened.

Joseph, Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary are doing just that. Joseph is very generous to offer his own tomb for the burial. The two Marys are there to mourn the loss of Jesus, doing all that was expected and staying with the body until the end. Many Native American services do not conclude until the relatives and friends have made sure the casket is completely covered with dirt. I think of this ritual as I read of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary sitting in front of the tomb. They loved Jesus so much that they did not have the capacity to worry about the authorities, who would know they were followers of Christ by their presence at the tomb and could have arrested them as well. The same was true for Joseph who risked his own arrest and death when he asked for the body of Jesus.

This story is like a scene in a good movie that points to the rest of the story that is to come. The sorrow of those at the tomb combined with the authorities' suspicion that followers of Jesus will come and take his body give hints of how this story will end. We as followers of Christ know the rest of this story and look forward with hope and joy.

***Creator God, give me words of hope to speak to those who are grieving this day. Amen.***

SUNDAY, APRIL 5 ~ ***Read Matthew 28:1-10***

### EASTER

Several Muscogee-Creek tribal churches in the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference have a special ritual for their services of Holy Communion. The women bake the leavened bread and prepare the elements for the service. Whenever they are ready, they stand at the door of the church and process in with the elements. It doesn't matter at what point of the service they are ready, if the pastor is preaching or others are singing. They come in when they are moved to bring in the elements.

Only the women prepare the elements, the table, and more. They sing a Muscogee hymn as they process in. This tradition honors the women who first saw the risen Christ. The women are called to care for the elements as a way of remembering the role of the women in the Easter story. Through this act, they continue to tell the story.

The women who encountered the risen Christ were frightened yet full of joy. Jesus empowered them to go and tell the others, which they did. Now we are to do the same. We are called to tell the story of the love of Christ for the world. May we see the magnificence of God as the psalmist shared through our reading this week. May we serve one another through servant leadership. May we work through grief in our lives, knowing the One who brings comfort to all. And may we be about the work of justice for the sake of the world.

***O Risen Lord, I begin this day with the joy that I serve a risen savior! Amen.***

MONDAY, APRIL 6 ~ ***Read Acts 2:14a, 22-32***

I loved listening to my grandmother's stories. I marveled at how she and my grandfather crossed the Cordillera Mountain Range in the Philippines to move from the western side to the eastern side of Luzon Island before the building of wide and paved highways. I've only read about World War II, but she told me how her family experienced and endured the Japanese occupation in the 1940s and how the American armed forces eventually helped the Philippines win the war.

My grandmother's experiences took place several decades before I was born, and it was fascinating to connect her stories to my own journey and to the history and developing story of the Philippines.

In today's reading, Peter stands up and preaches to the crowd. That was not an easy thing to do given his humble background. But he encountered something special and life-changing when Jesus called him to follow. He experienced, first hand, the life and ministry of Jesus. He saw Jesus preach, heal the sick, confront hypocrisy, and show compassion to so many. Peter even walked on water with Jesus. He also connected the story of Jesus to the bigger story of God's people, and he saw God's promise fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus.

As an eyewitness to the life of Jesus, the words of Peter carried weight. The Holy Spirit was working in him, giving him strength and courage to proclaim what he had seen and heard. The Holy Spirit was also at work in the hearts of the people listening to him. In the same way, when we tell our story as Christians who follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit works in us, as well as in the hearts of those who listen.

***Dear God, thank you for the courage and strength of your followers who testify and live out their faith publicly. Help me to do the same. Amen.***

## TUESDAY, APRIL 7 ~ *Read Psalm 16*

I grew up in the northeastern part of the Philippines, which is visited by about twenty typhoons annually. When we heard the forecast on the radio, we would hunker down for a day or two and wait for the typhoon to arrive. The sky would go dark as heavy clouds rolled into our town. Strong winds would buffet the trees and batter the roofs of houses. Then the heavy rains would fall, marching incessantly along roofs, roads, fields, and rivers. While strong typhoons were passing through, I remember my father and mother—both United Methodist pastors—praying for God's protection over us, our church, and the community we lived in.

When the sky cleared and the typhoon left, we would discover a trail of destruction. One time, a tree in our yard was uprooted. At another house we lived in, one edge of a piece of galvanized iron roof was rolled up. Still at another time, flood waters came into a room in our house. Elsewhere in the community, it was often worse: Rice fields ready for harvest were flooded; livestock was washed away; and in some cases, lives were lost.

Every year, stronger storms bring devastation to thousands of people around the world. We cannot avoid the destruction brought about by these natural disasters, and often all we can do is pray and flee to a safer place. We can cry out to God for refuge just like the psalmist. While dealing with the aftermath of such disasters, God can show us the way of life through the support of friends, family, and even strangers. I'm always amazed at how people work together cleaning up debris, making repairs, and encouraging one another. After all, God often answers prayers through the people around us.

***Lord, provide succor and protection for those who suffer from the effects of natural and human-made disasters. Amen.***

## WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8 ~ *Read John 20:24-31*

Do you remember the early days of social media? If you had a baby or got a pet, went to Disney, a beach in Thailand, or climbed the Eiffel Tower in Paris, you *had* to post it on social media. I posted about the food I ate, the places I visited, and any new experience I had. My friends and I often joked that if we had an experience—good or bad—and we didn't post about it on social media, had it even happened?

In the first century, Thomas was not present when the other disciples encountered the resurrected Christ. In the absence of smartphones, cameras, and social media, people relied on good, old fashioned stories passed by word of mouth. But Thomas wanted more than that: He wanted to see and feel the wounds of Jesus. Thankfully,

Jesus met him where he was and showed him his wounds. Thomas believed and exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!”

Just like Thomas, we often want proof before believing, before committing. I sometimes wish to have a supernatural experience like seeing a burning bush, hearing an audible word from God, or experiencing some kind of miracle. Those experiences are few and far between, though. I am reminded of Jesus’ words to Thomas: “Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.”

The people around us may not see the actual, physical Jesus. But they can see him through stories from the Bible, through our words of encouragement, through the stories of how God has been working in our lives, and through our acts of kindness. We can follow the example of Jesus when he healed the sick, fed the hungry, set the captives free, and showed compassion to all kinds of people. The world may not see the physical form of Jesus, but they can see the resurrected Christ in each of us who follow him.

***Pray for those who struggle with doubt and with deep spiritual questions.***

THURSDAY, APRIL 9 ~ ***Read 1 Peter 1:3-9***

When I was a child, my parents would often encourage me to study well because education, they said, was the only inheritance they could give my siblings and me. While public school is almost free in the Philippines until high school, it can be expensive to support a child through college. Even then, the support of the parents might not be enough.

I have had my fair share of challenges and difficulties in pursuing this inheritance. My monthly allowance from my parents would sometimes be delayed. In my third year of college, I wanted to shift to another degree program, but I could not. It would have meant staying in college an extra year, and we could not afford that. Some of my peers sometimes skipped meals to make ends meet while others unenrolled for a year or longer to earn funds for their education.

It took me four years of hard work to graduate from college, fighting off distractions and persevering through challenges. I knew that once I graduated, I could build a career that would support me and my sense of mission in this world. Thankfully, with support from my parents, extended family and friends, and working part-time as a freelancer, I was able to afford and finish college. My parents were proud, and I knew that I had done my part in working for this inheritance of education.

Today’s passage speaks of a priceless inheritance, one that we can not yet see but that God has in store for us. This inheritance does not mean an easy, carefree life here on earth. We must endure trials, trials that will challenge our faith but will lead to wonderful joy. We may not be able to see the fruit of this inheritance right away, but we can trust Jesus who is faithful and who walks with us.

***Lord, help me keep my eyes on you and on the inheritance you have for me when the trials come. Amen.***

FRIDAY, APRIL 10 ~ ***Read Acts 2:32***

In 2006, I was elected as the national president of the United Methodist Youth Fellowship in the Philippines (UMYFP). I headed a small team of young people who were in charge of producing resources for youth work in the Philippines, running meetings and leadership conferences, and implementing projects. It required a lot of hours. I also had a full-time corporate job, which I felt was a good career track for me. However, the workload became more and more challenging and I came to the point where I needed to choose between these two commitments.

I weighed my options. I prayed. Then I talked to friends and other youth leaders who had held the position before me. Many of them shared stories of God’s faithfulness and provision as they served as full-time volunteers in the UMYFP.

We are surrounded by stories. We accept some stories more readily than others because of our relationship with those who tell the stories. The more we trust the storyteller, the more we accept the truth of the stories we hear. In Acts 2, Peter preached to his fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem, sharing the story of Jesus: his life, suffering, death, and resurrection. He bolstered his testimony by saying that he and the other disciples were “all witnesses to this.” Some people doubted and claimed they were drunk. But also about 3,000 people were added to their number that day. I imagine that these 3,000 trusted and accepted the story and testimony of Peter and the disciples.

I ended up resigning from my corporate job. I trusted the stories of other youth leaders and friends that I talked to. But more than that, I trusted God and ended up experiencing firsthand the goodness and provision of God after saying “yes” to serving.

***What stories from others have supported you in your journey of faith?***

**SATURDAY, APRIL 11 ~ *Read 1 Peter 1:6-7***

One afternoon in my second year of college, I had a deep conversation with a friend about college, life, and faith. Before we parted, he asked me a difficult question: “If you lost everything, would you still follow God?” It was a pretty serious question for my 19-year-old self. I wasn’t ready to delve into it.

On my way back to my dorm room, my phone kept buzzing with text messages. A fire was raging near where I lived. I was getting worried. And when I arrived, I saw the charred remains of my home: only the facade remained. My jaw dropped and my knees buckled. Everything I owned at that time was burned— my books, a small TV, all my clothes, cassette tapes, my old journals, term papers I was working on—all of it had been lost to the fire. The only thing I had left was the guitar I had borrowed from a friend and the clothes I wore that day.

Today’s reading talks about our faith being tested “as fire tests and purifies gold.” Let me tell you, it’s not easy to go through the testing of fire. But when we endure trials, our faith remains strong, and when we cling to the grace and promise of God, we emerge victorious, joyful, and wiser.

After the fire, friends from my campus ministry helped me get back on my feet. My father came from the province to Manila and treated me to a shopping spree. I got new clothes and everything else I needed. I was thankful for this cloud of witnesses who served as God’s hands and feet to me when I was going through the fire. But more importantly, I knew and felt that God was there walking with me as well.

***What fires have you gone through in your life? How did God walk with you through those fires?***

**SUNDAY, APRIL 12 ~ *Read John 20:19-29***

Have you ever had an experience so incredible that when you shared it with friends, they did not believe you? Imagine being one of the disciples who discovered the empty tomb on Easter morning. Imagine seeing Jesus appear several times in different places. But when you share with the other disciples— particularly Thomas— that Jesus is risen, they don’t believe it. I can almost see the reaction of Peter with his usual impulsiveness and brashness. I can imagine the reaction of brothers James and John who, at one time, fought about who would get to sit beside Jesus. When your sharing is met with skepticism rather than excitement, it can dampen the excitement you feel.

When we share stories and testimonies about our faith and experiences with God, not everyone will believe. Some will echo Thomas and say, “unless I see it or experience it, I will not believe!” Anticipating this reaction could sometimes be enough to keep us silent about wonderful things God has done in our lives.

The disciples were sure of what they saw and experienced: They were witnesses to the wonderful things that Jesus did during his life and ministry, as well as the things that happened after his suffering, death, and resurrection. They talked about it and shared it with their family, friends, and even with strangers.

Sometimes sharing our story and experience of faith is enough. We can trust that Jesus works in the hearts and minds of people around us. This is what John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, called prevenient grace: the kind of grace that draws people to God even before they commit to following God. Some people will doubt, some people will question, but we share our stories of faith anyway with confidence, love, and compassion.

***Lord Jesus, help me share my story and journey of faith with the people around me. May they see and feel your love through me. Amen.***

MONDAY, APRIL 13 ~ ***Read Acts 2:38-39***

I was raised in a family active in The United Methodist Church. Though infant baptism is common in the denomination, my family decided not to have me baptized until I was older. When my friends from eighth grade youth group began confirmation classes in the fall season, I did too. I learned about the history and traditions of our denomination within Christianity. I wrote a faith statement, which helped me discern and claim my own beliefs within the church.

That spring my friends decided to confirm for themselves the vows taken for them at their baptisms. I chose to be baptized in the church at the confirmation service. My baptism was more than thirty-five years ago, and I still remember the sacred moment when my pastor made the sign of the cross on my forehead with the baptismal waters.

In today’s scripture, Peter tells the people, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Baptism for Christians is a sacrament of initiation into new life with membership into the community of faith in Jesus. Peter’s call to repentance also speaks to a radical change of mind and spirit for those who choose to follow this call. When we repent and choose to come back to God from the sins that separate us from God and others, we are restored to right relationship in the family of God. Our repentance means that God’s promised blessings may be realized in our lives. This promise is for all who believe.

***Gracious God, we give you thanks for your promise to always be with us, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, given to us through baptism. Amen.***

TUESDAY, APRIL 14 ~ ***Read Acts 2:14a, 36-41***

Peter’s sermon in today’s scripture passage occurs on Pentecost, and he appeals to the crowd with passion and conviction by saying, “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” The scriptural narrator tells us those present are “cut to the heart,” and they ask, “What should we do?”

When we separate ourselves from God and others, we want to know how we can make things right. On a recent rainy Monday morning, I was feeling cranky and entirely out of sorts. Our family had accidentally overslept that day, and in our rush to get out of the house on time, I had spoken harsh words to my spouse and

teenage daughters. I had also missed my quiet devotional time with God because of our shortened morning routine. I felt very disconnected.

At the retirement community where I serve as a chaplain, we have a beautiful ecumenical chapel. Between services that day I found the chapel empty, and I decided to go and sit for a few moments. While I sat there, breathing deeply, I listened. It took a few moments to quiet my thoughts, but once I did, I heard the lovely “shush” of the raindrops falling on the chapel roof. The sounds of the rainwater reminded me of God’s promises through the baptismal waters. I asked God to forgive me for my distance from God and my impatience with my family. Immediately I could breathe more deeply and felt at peace. I later texted my loved ones and apologized for my bad mood. The rest of the day I felt more connected to God and to my community.

***Forgiving God, thank you for calling us to repentance and offering us your forgiveness through Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.***

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15 ~ ***Read Psalm 116:1-4***

The subtitle of Psalm 116 is “Thanksgiving for Recovery from Illness.” The psalmist begins with words of devotion for God, “I love the LORD because he has heard my voice and my supplications.” I am struck by the power of this proclamation, because only in three other places do the psalms specifically speak of love for God: Psalm 5:11, 31:23, and 40:16. As Psalm 116 continues, we understand that love for God grows out of God’s fulfilled promise to save the psalmist’s life.

I once suffered with a bad case of stomach flu. Neither food nor fluids would stay down for four days. I felt terrible: weak, nauseous, dizzy, sharp stomach pains, and a pounding headache. I cried out to God in prayer multiple times, asking to be delivered from my suffering. I prayed as the psalmist did, “O LORD, I pray, save my life!”

On the fifth day of my illness, I awoke and felt better. I tried a tiny sip of water, and amazingly it stayed down. As the day continued, I regained my strength and was able to feel well. Knowing that God had been with me throughout that difficult time and had heard my prayers gave me hope that when I call on God, I will be heard.

In verse 2 of Psalm 116, the psalmist affirms that because God has listened, a life-long commitment has been established. We pray to God always, in good times and in bad. That is true in our human relationships, as well. When we love someone, we are in constant conversation with them. We speak and are listened to, and they speak, and we listen to them. So it is with God.

***Healing God, thank you for the promise that you always hear us when we pray. We love you, God, and trust in your promise to turn our suffering into abundant life. Amen.***

THURSDAY, APRIL 16 ~ ***Read Psalm 116:12-19***

Psalm 116 focuses on thanksgiving to God for the blessings God has given us. The psalmist wonders how to fully express the deep gratitude felt when God’s promises to us are fulfilled. In verse 13 lifting the “cup of salvation” references the Jewish tradition of blessing four cups during the Passover meal in celebration of the Exodus. In the Christian sacrament of Communion, we too lift the cup of salvation as we remember Jesus’ sacrifice for us to fulfill God’s promise of forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

In both verse 14 and verse 18 of Psalm 116 the word “vow” is used, in which the psalmist vows, or promises, to give thanks and praise to God for all that God has done for us. Verse 17 of the psalm says, “I will offer you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the LORD.” At the time I am writing this meditation

we are preparing to celebrate the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States. Thanksgiving is a time in which many people set time apart from the everyday to gather with loved ones and intentionally give thanks to God for life itself and for all of God's blessings. As a result of this gratitude for God's blessings, we may also feel called to respond by sharing our time and gifts through acts of service to others.

This psalm is traditionally read on Holy Thursday, because of its connections to Jewish Passover and Christian Communion. Psalm 116 reminds us of God's promise to give us life and life abundant. Because of God's gracious promise to us, people of faith vow to give thanks and praise to God in return, and we vow to serve others as visible signs of our faith.

***God of promise, we are grateful for all that you have done and continue to do for us. Help us to respond with gratitude to you by serving others in Jesus' name. Amen.***

#### FRIDAY, APRIL 17 ~ ***Read 1 Peter 1:17-23***

It is easy for us to focus on the material things of this world. Every day we go to work, drive the kids to school, cook meals, prepare for the next day, and try to get enough sleep. Then we get up the next day and do it all over again. These things are important, and we need to pay attention to them. But when our focus on the physical is so narrow that we fail to see the wider spiritual realm, we separate ourselves from God.

Today's scripture from 1 Peter is a reminder that our holy God calls us to be holy people. This letter of encouragement to faith communities claims our call: From the foundation of the world God has destined us to be God's people. As members of God's family, God has destined Jesus to redeem us. God's amazing work in Jesus as Savior of the world is mirrored through God's works in us as those who live out faith and hope in our lives. We are called not to be consumed by the "perishable" things of this world (silver or gold, in verse 18) but to live new lives which are "imperishable," embodying the "living and enduring word of God."

First Peter calls us to respond to God's promise of faithfulness by being faithful to others. We are to live with "genuine mutual affection" and to "love one another deeply from the heart." Loving others deeply, genuinely, and with mutual affection is not easy to do. We live in a polarizing time, politically and religiously. And yet our call as people of faith is not to focus on that which is perishable but to broaden our perspectives to the imperishable.

***God of hope, help us to focus our whole being on your living and enduring word. We seek to live out our faith by loving one another as you love us. Amen.***

#### SATURDAY, APRIL 18 ~ ***Read Luke 24:13-29***

Luke's Gospel account of the walk to Emmaus in chapter 24 is a powerful example of God's promise to be with us always. Nothing in this life, including death, can separate us from God's love. Yet at times we struggle to recognize God's presence in our midst.

In today's scripture two of the disciples are walking along the road and talking about the recent events of Jesus' trial, crucifixion, and his body's disappearance from the tomb. As they go along someone comes to join them. The Gospel narrator tells us this third person is Jesus himself, "but their eyes were kept from recognizing him."

The colloquial thinking is that seeing is believing. But sometimes we see God and still do not believe. God is in the beauty of the sunrise, in the smile of a loved one, in the laughter of children, and in the kindness of strangers. Yet how often do we bear witness to such occurrences? How often do we fail to see God's presence with us through these events?

As the disciples and their traveling companion come to the end of their journey, it is close to evening. The man with them walks ahead as if to continue on alone. This action reminds us that Jesus does not force himself upon others. It connotes that faith is a voluntary response to God's grace. The disciples invite him to remain with them—"Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over"—and he accepts their hospitality. God is with us, always, even when we fail to recognize God's presence.

***Immanuel, God with us, thank you for the reminder that nothing can separate us from your love. Help us to recognize you in all the people and events we encounter each day. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.***

SUNDAY, APRIL 19 ~ ***Read Luke 24:30-35***

At the beginning of today's scripture passage, Jesus reveals himself to the disciples through Communion. "When [Jesus] was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him."

When we gather with our faith community around the Communion Table, our invitation is the same as that given to the Emmaus disciples: to recognize God's promises to us. As we take the bread and cup, remembering that Jesus gave himself for all of us, we may see God in a new way. We see not only with our eyes but also with the eyes of our hearts. When God opens the eyes of our hearts, we may accept the promise of forgiveness of sins and life eternal with God, through Jesus.

The disciples present at the meal excitedly ask one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was opening the scriptures to us?" With renewed insight into God's promise of redemption through scripture and Jesus' actions through celebrating Communion, the disciples spread the good news of Jesus' resurrection: "The Lord has risen indeed."

Our call as modern-day disciples of Jesus is the same now. We gather and feast on God's good gifts of salvation with the sacrament of Communion. Then we take that good news out into the world and share it through our words and actions. "Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

***Saving God, we are grateful for your promises of forgiveness of sins and life eternal with you. Help us to see and accept these promises anew each time we gather for Communion. May we share this good news of your promises in all that we say and do, always. Amen.***

MONDAY, APRIL 20 ~ ***Read Acts 2:42-47***

In the wake of Pentecost, we find the early Christians conducting activities familiar to faith communities today: fellowshiping, breaking bread, singing songs, learning and growing, serving others. But before they undertook any of these programmatic aspects of Christian community, they experienced awe and wonder.

Unlike the corporate actions of fellowship, discipleship, and service, which they could initiate and create together, the sense of awe and wonder had to "come upon them" from God. It came from a source external to them. They could not manufacture it; they had to be open to receiving and experiencing it.

This invites a question for individuals and churches: When is the last time you have felt awe and wonder in regard to God and your faith? In fact, how often do you sense awe and wonder in any aspect of your life?

When we began to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, we longed for wonder and became more attuned to it. We traveled to national parks like never before. We relished the joy of being together like never before. We learned to appreciate the simplest things in life with greater attentiveness than ever.

This scripture passage invites us to be more intentional about sensing the awe and wonder that is all around us, in every moment. We can make it a goal every day to pay attention to the wondrous moments—from the breathtaking to the subtle—which we attribute to God, offering these blessings upon us. It may require disengagement from the stressors of life, temporarily unplugging your conscious attention to these challenges and inviting moments of exercise, rest, or creativity. This will allow the genius and imagination of our subconscious to awaken us to the surprises and serendipities that are all around us. Pay attention to the awe and wonder of God all around you.

***God, open our eyes to your awe-inspiring presence and power all around us. Amen.***

## TUESDAY, APRIL 21 ~ *Read Acts 2:42-47*

The first time Christians gathered in community—before there were impressive sanctuaries, paid professional staff, and denominational structures—they focused on four essential communal practices. They worshiped together. They grew in their faith by learning together. They cared for one another in fellowship. They engaged in service to others. These comprise the four core practices of Christian community: worship, grow, care, and serve. They are rooted in four of the most important Greek words in the New Testament that describe the activities of the early Christians: *Kerygma*, meaning “proclamation.” Christians gather to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, often in the context of worship. *Didache*, meaning “teaching.” Christians gather to deepen their discipleship through study, learning, and training. *Koinonia*, meaning “fellowship.” Christians gather to care for one another and strengthen bonds of love and prayer. *Diakonia*, meaning “service.” Christians extend the reach of God’s love to those in need in their communities and around the world.

For any church to be healthy and balanced, all four of these activities should be conducted with equal vitality. A church without inspiring and God-honoring worship becomes too much like an exclusive social club. A church without effective disciple-making processes becomes too shallow in its commitments and convictions. A church without fellowship becomes too prone to divisive infighting. And a church without effective missions and outreach becomes too focused on its own needs. If any one of these four pillars is missing or out of balance, it is like a table with a short leg or a car with a flat tire.

How would you characterize your church’s effectiveness in each of these areas? And how can you help improve them?

***God, thank you for the gift of community. Guide us in becoming the church you have called us to be. Amen.***

## WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22 ~ *Read Psalm 23*

Tucked amid the tranquil images of Psalm 23, between green pastures, still waters, and an eternal dwelling place, there is this inescapable reality of life: the valley of the shadow of death. We cannot skip past it, because it is in the middle of the psalm. Literally and literarily, it is right in the middle.

My friend and terrific preacher James Howell notes a very important shift in this psalm in the way the psalmist refers to God. In the beginning of Psalm 23, the psalmist refers to God in the third person, as if talking about God. “The LORD is my shepherd.” “He makes me lie down.” “He leads me.” “He restores my soul.”

But somewhere along these six verses, the psalmist shifts the reference to God from the third person “he” to the more intimate, more direct second person “you.” It is as if the psalmist has made a conscious decision at some point to not just talk *about* God but to talk directly *to* God, in a deeper, more personal connection with God. “Your rod and staff . . . comfort me.” “You prepare a table.” “You anoint my head.”

That is a remarkable shift. And where does that happen in this psalm? Yes, right in the middle, right in the valley. This points to one of the central truths in this psalm. It is in the valley that we can experience God most closely and most personally. As painful and as inescapable as the valleys of our lives are, they can be and often are the most transformative moments in our lives, for that is where we discover a relationship with God who is with us. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me” (KJV).

***God, thank you for journeying with me through life’s highs and lows. Even when I am in my darkest valleys, thank you for being with me. Amen.***

#### THURSDAY, APRIL 23 ~ *Read Psalm 23*

In modern day Israel/Palestine, just east of Jerusalem, there is a wilderness called the Wadi Qelt. It is a deep valley, surrounded by steep, imposing cliffs dotted with caves and crevices. One can easily imagine how threatening the Wadi Qelt was thousands of years ago. It was a dangerous place to walk, especially alone, with the constant threat of wild animals and thieves lurking behind every corner.

According to Jewish tradition, this is the place where the psalmist was inspired to write the Twenty-Third Psalm. Not overlooking some green pasture or tranquil water. Not in a place of serenity, but of danger and fear. This was the place where the psalmist realized that his entire view of God shifted. God was not distant or absent, largely disconnected from his suffering, but was close by, whose rod was there to ward off bandits and wolves, whose staff was there to rescue him when he was in danger.

Biblical scholar James Limburg offers a fascinating bit of insight into Psalm 23. In the King James Version of this passage, the phrase “Thou art with me” is exactly in the center point of this psalm. Twenty-six words precede this phrase, and twenty-six words follow it.

This psalm is, in itself, a literary valley in which all the tranquil moments of our past (pastures and waters at the beginning of the psalm) and all the hopeful dreams of our future (“the house of the LORD” at the end of the psalm) converge in the center of the psalm, in the crucible of our darkest valleys. The psalmist would remind us that only when we go through those painful moments can we experience the one truth that will enable us to experience both tranquility and hope: “Thou art with me.”

***God, thank you for being with me amid the hardest moments of my life. Thank you for your rod and staff, which comfort me. Amen.***

#### FRIDAY, APRIL 24 ~ *Read 1 Peter 2:19-25*

Go to any local bookstore and you will likely find a section titled “Self-Help,” entirely devoted to ways to improve a person’s life. Book after book guides us toward maximizing our mental, physical, emotional, and relational strength. Publishers crave the opportunity to sell the next bestseller teaching the masses how to help themselves. It works in selling books, and there is something to be said for wanting to improve yourself. But in matters of sin and salvation, here’s the bottom line: Self-help does not save.

Passages like today’s remind us that Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves.

In one of Rembrandt’s most famous works titled *The Three Crosses*, we see a glorious depiction of Jesus on the cross with the two thieves at his side. It is rendered in stark grays and blacks, except for the inbreaking light from the heavens, signifying God’s holiness cast into a world of sin.

Off in the shadows of the image is a figure. You can barely see the person, except for his hands, burying his face. He appears grieving, overcome with emotion.

Many art critics have concluded that this person is none other than Rembrandt himself. He included himself in this scene as a way of acknowledging that he deserved the fate of the cross; he was responsible for sins that put Jesus there. The figure is therefore not just expressing grief or guilt but also gratitude to God. Rembrandt recognized that Jesus took his place and did for him what he could not do for himself.

In matters of sin and salvation, self-help does not save. God has given to us an amazing gift: salvation through Jesus Christ.

***Gracious God, thank you for Jesus, and for what he did for us on the cross. May we live our lives in grateful response and commitment to you. Amen.***

#### SATURDAY, APRIL 25 ~ *Read John 10:1-10*

In Jesus' day, shepherds lived on the fringes of society. So, for Jesus to name himself as the Good Shepherd in this text may have been a shock to the original hearers of John's Gospel. He was, in effect, saying that he would become the object of ridicule and scorn in much the same way that common shepherds were. These words would have upended the expectations of John's audience.

But here is the more surprising reversal by Jesus. The conventional wisdom was that the shepherd would often surrender his sheep for the slaughter, both for food and to be sacrificed in the Temple, so that people could restore their relationship with God. But in John's Gospel, Jesus flipped that conventional understanding upside down. He declared himself as the one who would "lay down my life for the sheep . . . I lay it down of my own accord" (10:15; 18)

This Good Shepherd was not going to lead his sheep to slaughter but would allow himself to be the sacrifice, to die in their place.

No wonder his critics did not understand him. How could the sacrificer become the sacrificed? It just seemed so hard to believe. But in the grand scope of the gospel message, it makes perfect sense. For Jesus not only gave himself up for us; he then empowers and calls us to give of ourselves for others. Through Jesus' act of self-giving, he shows us how to take up our cross daily and follow him. For "No one has greater love than this," Jesus said, "to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

So, what things in your life need to die in order for others to really live? What call to sacrifice is Christ giving to you?

***God, thank you for sending Jesus, who gave himself up for us. Strengthen me to do likewise, offering myself in service to you and those around me. Amen.***

#### SUNDAY, APRIL 26 ~ *Read John 10:1-10*

Jesus set up a dichotomy between two different kinds of influences on our lives. One leads to life and the other to destruction. Which influence will we allow into our lives? Which "door" will we choose?

I remember the game show *Let's Make a Deal*. The host, Monty Hall, would offer contestants a chance at taking home whatever was behind the doors they chose. Depending on their selection, they received either a fabulous prize or a comical dud. Wouldn't that show have been a whole lot easier if contestants could have received a sneak-peak behind those doors? That's not the way the game worked, and that's not how life generally works. But Jesus gives us an advantage. He said, "I am the door" (NKJV). Behind this door is life—abundant, hopeful, and healthy life, the kind that God intends for us. That's the kind of life Jesus came to give us.

Behind Door #2, though, is the thief. In broad terms, the “thief” is anything that would distract us from receiving the abundant life that Jesus can give us. It is anything that prevents us from experiencing the forgiveness, freedom, and joy of God’s image alive within us. What are the thieves in your life that threaten to “sneak in, steal, and destroy” you? Maybe it is a brokenness in your relationship with others, or a failure both to forgive and to be forgiven. Maybe it is a constant worry about your future, or a nagging addiction that is damaging you or others. Or maybe it is a confrontation with your own mortality.

Here’s the good news. You don’t have to choose those doors sight unseen. You know what’s behind them already. So, choose Door #1. Choose Jesus, who is the door that leads to abundant life.

***God, enable me to choose the abundant life you have for me. And strengthen me to turn away from all that prohibits me from choosing you. Amen.***

MONDAY, APRIL 27 ~ ***Read Acts 7:55-60***

Stephen was a faithful follower of Christ and a church leader who performed great miracles and wonders through the Holy Spirit. These great acts and miracles posed a threat to the order of the day, and he was accused of blasphemy. He was brought before the Sanhedrin, the council of the nation, to plead his case or face death. Even with this threat hanging over him, he continued to preach what was deemed to be offensive to the Jewish interpretation of scripture.

The anger of the Sanhedrin reached its climax when he claimed to see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. This was enough to infuriate the Sanhedrin to the point of wanting him killed. Believing that their interpretation of scripture was supreme, the accusers turned to Leviticus 24:13-16, which prescribed stoning as the appropriate form of punishment for blasphemers. Stephen was dragged out of the city and stoned to death.

Stephen suffered through one of the most painful methods of punishment, but he did not fight back or seek to escape. Instead, he submitted his spirit to the faithful hands of God. He believed the glory that awaited him after death far surpassed his present suffering.

Mob violence is real and continues to happen in our world today. An increasingly common form of mob violence is found in digital spaces where people are bullied and shamed. While digital spaces preclude the physical results of violence, the emotional trauma can be as damaging. When violence—emotional or physical—is inflicted on us, we are invited to find shelter in God. It is from God that we gain the strength to press on. Stephen prays and petitions for his offenders. He dies the death of a faithful servant who trusts in the faithful God who is our refuge.

***Lord, help me to face suffering and pain in the confidence that in you I have a refuge and helper. Amen.***

TUESDAY, APRIL 28 ~ ***Read Psalm 31:1-5***

From the outset the psalmist declares their full trust and dependence in God. The psalmist further pleads with God for deliverance from being put to shame.

I recall the fear that I experienced as a young girl when approaching an adult for help. I was taught that children must be seen and not heard. To me this meant that I should hold back any requests for help. One day during the cold months of the year, I lost my school jersey. For days I suffered and went to school without a jersey because I was too afraid to approach my parents and own up to having lost it. I thought that I needed to suffer in silence rather than risk making my needs known. Eventually, I plucked up enough courage to speak to

my parents and state my case. To my surprise, they were already aware of my need and had a new jersey for me in the cupboard. All that I had needed to do was speak to my parents and confess. I could not believe that I had suffered so much when my parents had already provided for my needs!

God is a good parent who provides for our every need. It is not always easy to approach God with our needs, but we are encouraged to come before God and to make our needs known through prayer. We become more confident in approaching God when we regularly spend time with God and develop faith and trust in God's supremacy. God provides for our every need. God comes to our rescue. Approach God with confidence knowing that God is your provider and refuge.

***Lord, "great is thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see, and all I have needed thy hand has provided. Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me" (UMH 140). Amen.***

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 29 ~ ***Read 1 Peter 2:2-3***

The author of First Peter draws parallels between children of God and newborn babies. Similar to babies who need milk for their sustenance and well-being, Christians need the spiritual milk that will nurture us and help us grow in our salvation.

Christians understand Christ's salvation as deliverance from sin and its consequences. Such deliverance is brought about by faith in Christ. When we experience salvation, we become like newborn babies in the gospel, alive in Christ and yet needing to grow day by day into his likeness. Without spiritual milk, we will never mature into Christians who can resist temptation and sin and live out our calling in the church and the world.

The writer encourages believers to hunger after the things of God and not the things of the world, which are fleeting and offer no contribution to spiritual growth. What is our spiritual milk? These are the things that facilitate our spiritual growth, also known as spiritual disciplines: prayer, meditation, solitude, fasting, Bible study, journaling, service. The more we practice these disciplines, the more they nourish our souls and strengthen our walk with Christ. God our refuge has provided all that we need in order to grow in discipleship. As a mother holds and feeds her newborn, God holds us and wants to see us mature in our faith. All that God asks of us is that we latch onto those edifying things that help us grow in faith.

***Thank you, Lord, for your salvation plan. I commit myself to feeding on your word and to the practice of spiritual disciplines so that I may grow in my walk with you. Amen.***

THURSDAY, APRIL 30 ~ ***Read 1 Peter 2:4-10***

The imagery of a building being erected calls to mind the process by which stones are chosen. Stone workers choose from the available stones, finding those that fit together well and provide strong support from the foundation up. Not all stones fit the builders' needs. A cornerstone is particularly integral to the strength of a building. These special stones are chosen carefully to ensure the success of the project. Here the writer of First Peter gives specific attention to a stone that has been rejected by the builders, and yet this stone becomes the cornerstone for the building. In the same way, Christ is the cornerstone for our salvation.

The writer says that we too are being built into a spiritual house so that we may become a holy priesthood. Through this text we are reminded that we are a spiritual lighthouse, a beacon of hope to our broken world so that people may find refuge in us. It does not end there: Resounding throughout the text is our call to be a royal priesthood; a people consecrated into the service of God; a people called to sing praises to God in thought, word, and action; a people called to holy living. The privilege of this calling does not happen through our own

strength and knowledge but through Christ who has reconciled us to God so that we may be called children of the light.

Christ the chief cornerstone is still rejected by many today as people live their lives without a personal relationship with him. It becomes our duty to call people out of darkness into his wonderful light so that their lives too may be built upon the solid rock.

***God, my Refuge and Strength, help me in my living and dying to reflect your grace and call all into the joy that I have found in you. Amen.***