

Today

March/April 2020

refresh, refocus, renew

FOUR TAKES
ON JESUS'
FINAL WEEK



ALSO: THEY MET JESUS

Friends:

Sometimes roads take us to new places, including where and how we serve God.

Since 2006, Steven Koster, who usually wrote the letter on this page, has been committed to increasing the faith formational impact of *Today*. He has led in a way that encourages others to follow Jesus, and he strives to do the same in his own life. Recently Steven saw that the time has come to focus on some new challenges, including research work and his family's bed-and-breakfast venture in Grand Rapids, Michigan. "I'd like to develop our bed and breakfast as a greater ministry opportunity," he says. "We've hosted some marriage retreats there, and I want to expand that with more retreats and other events for parents and pastors."



As I step into this role of executive editor of *Today*, I cannot thank Steven enough for his commitment to expanding God's kingdom through media.

In the next two months, we have the opportunity to focus especially on Jesus, the Savior, who walked the roads of Palestine two thousand years ago, bringing the good news of God's kingdom. In March, we focus on people who met Jesus during his three-year ministry, and we'll see their reactions and his words and love for them. Then in April, with the coming of Easter, we trace from the four gospel accounts a portrait of Jesus that can inspire and deepen our love for the one who gave his life for us and conquered death for our sake.

With these meditations, may you grow in knowledge and grace as you seek to follow Jesus and share him with others today. And may you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

—Kurt Selles

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“They Met Jesus”
Rebecca Jordan Heys



**“Four Takes on
Jesus’ Final Week”**
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ReFrame
Media

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They Met Jesus

Rebecca Jordan Heys

The Bible books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us about Jesus' three-year teaching and healing ministry. He taught with all kinds of illustrations and parables, healed the sick, cast out demons, gathered a group of followers, and much, much more. In those few years, many people encountered Jesus and were transformed by meeting him. Eventually they also grew to realize that he is the Son of God and the Savior of the world!

What can those people's stories teach us about our own encounter with Jesus today? We'll meet many of those people this month and consider what it meant for them to meet Jesus face to face.

Rebecca Jordan Heys serves as a pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She and her husband, Kyle, are the parents of two children.

POINTING TO THE LAMB

John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" —John 1:29

John the Baptist met Jesus. Most of the people in Judea back then knew about John before they knew about Jesus. John spoke to large crowds of people, calling them to turn away from sin and to seek forgiveness from God. People were curious about John. Who was he? And how could he speak with such authority? John responded by pointing people away from himself and toward Jesus.

A work of art called the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, painted by Matthias Grünewald, shows John the Baptist pointing to Jesus as he suffers on the cross for our sin. This painting aims to show how John told people ahead of time that Jesus, the Lamb of God, would take away the sin of the world.

The Jewish people who heard John say this would have thought of the lamb that each

family had to sacrifice for their sin (see Leviticus 4-5). They would also be reminded of the yearly Passover festival, when they sacrificed a lamb to observe God's deliverance from slavery (see Exodus 12). John was saying that Jesus would deliver them from sin, providing forgiveness once and for all, for the whole world.

When you talk about Jesus today, you can follow John's example by pointing to Jesus as our Savior and deliverer. You can trust that God forgives your sin because of Jesus' sacrifice, and you can invite others to know the peace of this forgiveness.

Lamb of God, thank you for taking away the sin of the world. Help us to point others to you and to your love for all people. Amen.

NOT TODAY, SATAN

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
—Matthew 4:1

The devil met Jesus. It may seem strange to consider this story in our reflections about people who met Jesus, because the devil is not a human being. But we can learn some things from this encounter between Jesus and the devil.

Three times the devil tried to disguise a temptation as something good. Turning stones to bread would have sounded good to someone who had just fasted for 40 days. Satan also used Scripture, trying to twist its meaning to tempt Jesus. But Jesus stood firm, drawing strength from God's Word to resist the devil.

Then Satan tried to dazzle Jesus with an offer to give him all the power and authority he deserved. But Jesus turned to the Scriptures again, showing that he and God's Word are far stronger than Satan and any temptations he can throw at us.

Because the devil tempted Jesus, we know that Jesus is truly human. He truly understands what it is like to struggle as we do. But Jesus did not sin. Because Jesus did not sin, we know that he is truly God and that he is powerful enough to save us. As Hebrews 4:15 says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one [Jesus] who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin."

Dear Jesus, thank you for giving us in your Word what we need to resist temptation. And when we fall, thank you for providing the power that is forever strong enough to save us. Amen.

GONE FISHING

“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

—Mark 1:17-18

Simon, Andrew, James, and John met Jesus. When Jesus saw these two sets of brothers working, he told them to come and follow him. The words in Mark 1 show the sense of urgency in this call: verse 18 says that Simon and Andrew left their nets “at once,” and verse 20 says that Jesus called James and John “without delay.” Following Jesus is a very important calling!

Following Jesus is so important that it means leaving other things behind. Simon and Andrew left their nets to follow Jesus, and James and John left their father and other workers in the fishing boat to follow Jesus.

To show these first disciples what it meant to follow him, Jesus used a fishing image that they would understand. He

said to them, “I will send you out to fish for people.”

Does this mean that all people who follow Jesus should leave their jobs and become professional missionaries? Does it mean that people who follow Jesus should not go fishing for fish? No, this means that in whatever we do, followers of Jesus focus on loving people first because that’s what Jesus does. So in whatever situation we are in, let’s join Jesus in showing his love and sharing his good news of salvation, bringing people to full life in the family of God.

Dear Jesus, you draw people in with your deep love for us all. Give us faith to follow you, serving you first in whatever we do, sharing your love always. Amen.

COME AND SEE

"We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth. . . . Come and see," said Philip.

—John 1:45-46

Philip and Nathanael met Jesus.

Do you know the expression "the wrong side of the tracks"? If a town was divided by railroad tracks, people living on one side often showed their prejudice for people on the other side by saying they were from "the wrong side of the tracks."

Nathanael thought Jesus was from the wrong side of the tracks when he first heard about him. Philip was trying to tell Nathanael that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promises. But when Nathanael heard that Jesus was from Nazareth, he said, "Can anything good come from there?"

Philip's response was simple: "Come and see." He didn't try to argue Nathanael into believing in Jesus. He just encouraged Nathanael to see for himself who Jesus was and what

he was doing, regardless of the town Jesus came from.

What a perfect invitation to us and to each person we encounter! The best thing we can do and the best thing we can offer others is to see Jesus. We can see God's offer of salvation through his Son. We can see the Lord's grace, power, and forgiveness of sin. Jesus came to break down all the barriers between people and groups and nations, showing that God offers his love to all people everywhere. Come and see!

God, when we come to see your Son, Jesus, open our eyes to recognize him as our Savior and Lord. Open our hearts to receive him into our lives today. Amen.

AN EXAMPLE OF FAITH

“Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed.” —Matthew 8:8

A centurion met Jesus. Our prayers to God can be modeled after the way this man approached Jesus. First, he asked for help simply by stating a fact: “Lord, my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.” This Roman-army commander didn’t make an official request or ask politely for anything from Jesus. He just cried out to Jesus in his need. When our prayers are no more than a cry of pain, Jesus hears those prayers too.

Second, the centurion trusted in Jesus’ power to respond. Even though Jesus offered to come in person and heal the servant, the centurion replied, “Just say the word, and my servant will be healed.” The centurion knew that Jesus was so powerful that he could heal people even if he was not physically present. We too can trust that Jesus will answer *our*

prayers. Sometimes Jesus heals us physically, and other times Jesus heals us emotionally or spiritually. Sometimes Jesus promises us future healing and asks us to wait until the right time. No matter what, Jesus’ words are powerful enough to heal.

Jesus healed the centurion’s servant and praised the faith of the centurion. We are invited to trust in Jesus, just as this man did. Jesus will listen to our prayers with love and answer our prayers with power.

God of healing power, help us to trust in the power of Jesus’ words. And when we have no words to pray, hear our cries for your healing touch. Amen.

BORN AGAIN

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."
—John 3:3

Nicodemus met Jesus. As a Pharisee (a religious leader), Nicodemus was very good at following rules. He knew what it meant to be a faithful Jew, and he probably acted like a faithful Jew most of the time. When Nicodemus approached Jesus to learn more about him, he might have been expecting Jesus to tell him about some rules or requirements. He might have been wondering, "What do I have to *do* to be your follower?"

Jesus responded to Nicodemus in an unexpected way. Jesus told him that he must be *born again*. If we are familiar with these verses in John 3, we might not realize how shocking this idea must have been for Nicodemus. But Nicodemus reminds us how shocking it was when he said, "Surely they cannot enter a second time

into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus explained that he was talking about a spiritual rebirth, not a physical one. The new spiritual beginning that Jesus offers is so complete, so all-encompassing, that he called it being born again. It's not enough to follow a few new rules. Jesus offers us something better: a fresh start.

As he did for Nicodemus, Jesus offers you the joy of being born again, the joy of a fresh start at life because of God's amazing forgiveness and love.

Jesus Christ, I praise you for coming to save me and to give me new life. By your Holy Spirit, give me new birth that results in a life of faith, hope, and love. In your name, Amen.

ARE YOU THIRSTY?

Jesus answered, “. . . Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” —John 4:13-14

The woman at the well met Jesus. Do you have things in your past that you would rather forget? Do you have things that other people have held against you, assumed about you, or used to keep you on the outside?

This Samaritan woman did. Jesus could have come up with some excuses to avoid her. For example, a Jewish man like him was not supposed to associate with a Samaritan woman. Also, as Jesus himself knew, she had been married five times (John 4:18)—and because the divorce law gave only husbands the right to divorce, that meant she had been left and rejected five times. As a result, she was an outsider in her community, a woman with a checkered past.

But Jesus asked her to give him a drink of water. He allowed

her to serve him water, and then he also offered her a much greater gift: the living water of eternal life. Afterward, many other people in her community believed her story about Jesus and started to follow him too (see John 4:39-41).

As he did for this woman at the well, Jesus still approaches people who feel like outsiders, and he shows compassion and love. To you who are thirsty for acceptance: Jesus is the one who can quench your thirst.

Jesus, help us to drink the living water of eternal life that you offer, that we may thirst no more. Satisfy us always with your caring love. Amen.

RAISE THE ROOF

They made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on.

—Mark 2:4

A paralyzed man and his friends met Jesus. The friends believed that Jesus could heal the paralyzed man, so they wanted to bring him to Jesus. But the crowds were so big that there was no way to reach him in the house where he was teaching. Then the four friends had an idea—and they tore through the house roof so that they could lower their friend down to Jesus!

Because the roof was probably made of thatch or some other common material, it may well have been easy to repair afterward. But these friends had a strong faith in Jesus' healing power. They were so focused on getting their friend to Jesus that they were willing to dig through a roof. They believed that the healing power of Jesus for their friend was more important than anything else.

Jesus saw the depth of their faith, and, even before healing the man physically, he declared, "Son, your sins are forgiven." In this incident and in many others, Jesus is more concerned with forgiveness and healing than with following the letter of the law or doing only what society thought was appropriate.

We can be glad that Jesus is so devoted to loving and healing people. Nothing will stop Jesus from loving and healing us too. We can have faith—like the faith of these friends—in Jesus' power to love us and heal us today.

God of healing power, give me faith that focuses on Jesus alone. Assure me of his love for me and for all the world. Heal me in body, mind, and spirit. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

CHECK IN TO THE HOSPITAL

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." —Mark 2:17

Levi met Jesus.

Maybe you've heard the saying "The church is not a museum of saints but a hospital for sinners." Whoever said that might well have based it on Jesus' words in this passage.

Levi was a tax collector, and when Jesus had dinner at Levi's house, they were joined by other tax collectors and sinners.

Tax collectors helped the Roman Empire by collecting money from the local people, so they were not very popular in the community. To help pay themselves, they were also known for collecting extra money for their own pockets, which made them even more disliked. In Mark 2, we hear that the religious leaders criticized Jesus for spending time with tax collectors and sinners.

But Jesus reminded the religious leaders that sinners were exactly

the kind of people he had come to save. Jesus offered his love to everyone, even sinners. In fact, since every person sins, it may be easier for those who *know* they are sinners to admit that they need Jesus. They do not have so much of their own pride getting in the way.

It is wonderfully honest to admit that we are sinners in need of God's grace. We can have the courage to make that confession because Jesus is ready to receive us. If sin is the sickness, Jesus is the cure.

Healing God, I confess that I am a sinner in need of your grace. Thank you for sending Jesus; he forgives my sin, heals me, and makes me whole. Amen.

ENOUGH FOR ALL

Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished.

—Mark 5:42

Jairus's daughter met Jesus.

Jairus had found himself in a very scary situation. His daughter was so sick that she was about to die. So he came to Jesus, trusting in faith that this amazing teacher could heal his little girl.

On the way there, Jesus was interrupted by another person who needed to be healed. (We will learn more about that tomorrow.) Then, while Jesus was delayed and helping that person, Jairus received word that his daughter had died.

People began murmuring that Jesus shouldn't even bother going to Jairus's house anymore. But Jesus said to Jairus, "Don't be afraid; just believe."

Jairus already had faith that Jesus could *heal*. Now Jesus told him to believe even more; Jesus wanted the father to

believe that he could raise the girl from death.

In the world as we know it, we might expect that Jesus' healing power was limited in some ways. But, with Jesus, we are not in "the world as we know it" anymore. We are in the kingdom of God! There is enough for everyone in the kingdom of God, and Jesus' healing power and love are at the center of it all. Even death is not enough to stop Jesus. And Jesus raised the girl from death, giving her new life, just like he gives *us* new life.

God, I thank you for your abundant power to give us new life. I praise you that Jesus is stronger than death, and I praise you for his gifts of new life for all people, including me. Amen.

NOT JUST AN INTERRUPTION

She came up behind [Jesus] in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed."

—Mark 5:27-28

A woman who suffered from bleeding met Jesus. This woman interrupted Jesus on his way to heal a young girl (as we noted yesterday). Because of this woman's bleeding condition, she would have been considered unclean by her community. No one wanted to touch her, because then *they* would be considered unclean too. The bleeding had been going on for twelve years, so this woman was desperate to be healed.

Either because of her desperation or because of her faith, she dared to reach out and touch Jesus' cloak, believing that she would be healed. Jesus' power to heal was indeed so strong that she *was* healed!

This woman had interrupted Jesus from going to heal the beloved daughter of Jairus. But Jesus called this woman

"daughter" too, when he found that she was the one who had touched his garment. By his healing power, he restored her to her community. And by his loving address, he showed that she was worthy of love.

This is what Jesus offers to us today too. Because of his power, Jesus can heal us from physical disease, and he can heal the divisions that keep us from community with one another. And because of Jesus' love, we can each know the gift of being called a beloved daughter or son.

God, by the power of Jesus, heal the diseases of our bodies and the divisions of our communities. Embrace us as your children, we pray, because of your grace. Amen.

STRONGER THAN DEATH

“Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

—Luke 7:14-15

The widow at Nain met Jesus. Jesus performed an amazing miracle when he raised her son who had died. But the Bible makes clear that Jesus didn't do this miracle to put on a show or to impress anyone; he did it because he had compassion on this grieving mother. As Luke puts it, “When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her, and he said, ‘Don't cry.’” Jesus spoke words of comfort to her, and then he restored her son to her.

This amazing story about a miracle gives us a little hint of an even greater miracle that will happen soon. The fact that Jesus could raise the son of this widow from the dead shows that Jesus is stronger than death. And after Jesus himself died on the cross, bearing all the punishment for our sins, he rose from the dead on the third day. His own resurrec-

tion means not only that Jesus is stronger than death but also that he has *defeated the power of death* once and for all.

When we grieve the loss of people we love, we can be assured that Jesus feels compassion for us in our grief, just as he did for the widow in Nain. We can also be assured that death does not have the last word because of the power of Jesus' resurrection.

God of hope, we are saddened and frightened by death. Show us a way forward and give us comfort, courage, and hope, we pray, because of the power of Jesus' resurrection. Amen.

SO THANKFUL!

She began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

—Luke 7:38

A sinful woman met Jesus. She gave Jesus an extravagant gift of gratitude by washing his feet and pouring perfume on them. Simon the Pharisee knew that this woman was sinful, and he didn't think it was right for Jesus to accept a gift like that from such a woman.

But Jesus said that the woman's sinfulness was all the more reason for him to accept her gift. Because she had been forgiven such great sin, her gratitude and love for Jesus was also great.

We might read this story and imagine ourselves as the Pharisee. We might sense Jesus calling us to be more accepting of sinners. But what is even more important is to imagine ourselves as the woman. Every one of us has sinned greatly and needs to be forgiven by Jesus. Because every one of us

is offered forgiveness by Jesus, we all have reason to show abundant love and gratitude to him, as this woman did.

Jesus has shown us all so much forgiveness—more than we even know. So let us give thanks to him and pour out our life as a fragrant offering to the Lord. “Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2).

God, we confess that we have sinned much, and you have forgiven us much. We can never repay you, yet we offer our whole lives to you in gratitude and joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SURPRISING GRACE

She said . . . "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."
—Matthew 15:27

A Canaanite woman met Jesus. In many of the encounters we have been reflecting on this month, Jesus was the one who brought a word of expansive love and grace. Jesus was the one who challenged boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Jesus was the one who encouraged religious authorities to show grace to sinners.

But in this encounter with a Canaanite woman, Jesus seemed to affirm some boundaries. He implied that because she was not an Israelite, it wasn't in his job description to heal her daughter. He said, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." But the woman bravely and cleverly challenged these words, saying, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

What Jesus had said about his main mission to Israel was

true; he was the Messiah who would fulfill God's promises to the people of Israel (see Matthew 1). And yet, as the woman stated by faith, his mission was to save not only Israel but also the whole world. Jesus, of course, knew his whole mission and also that this woman had great faith—and he was delighted to hear her express it. He even said, "You have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed in the same moment.

Jesus always offers expansive grace. Let us give thanks that we can all receive this amazing grace from him!

God of grace, we are thankful for your grace so abundant and surprising. Help us to receive this grace and to offer it to others. Amen.

A DANCE WITH TWO STEPS

Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.
—Mark 8:25

A blind man at Bethsaida met Jesus. Jesus restored the man's sight, but the curious thing about this story is that Jesus did not restore the man's sight all at once. After Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes for the first time, the man said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." So it sounds like he could see, but things looked blurry. Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes a second time, and then the man "saw everything clearly."

A lot of people who read this story puzzle over why Jesus would heal the man in two stages and not just all at once. Some people guess that Jesus gave the man his vision the first time, and it just took the man's eyes a while to get adjusted. Some people guess that by restoring the man's sight in two stages, Jesus was illustrating how his disciples would

first figure out that he was the Messiah, and then later they would see clearly that the Messiah must suffer by dying on the cross. (Those topics follow this passage in Mark 8.)

At its core, though, this story tells of another miracle that shows Jesus' power to heal—no matter how Jesus chooses to do it! Jesus can heal in one step or two steps, and sometimes in our lives Jesus even gives us hundreds of little steps toward healing.

God, we trust in your power to heal in the name of Jesus. Whether that happens all at once or through a process that may not be complete in our lifetime, give us grace and the assurance of life forever with you. Amen.

JESUS CHOSE YOU

Jesus said . . . "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. —John 5:8-9

A lame man at Bethesda met Jesus. When Jesus asked him, "Do you want to get well?" the man had an opportunity to say, "Yes!" and to be healed by Jesus. But instead the man put his faith in the so-called healing waters of the pool there, and he complained that other people always cut in front of him when the waters stirred.

We may smirk at this man's response, but there may be times when we don't receive the offer of healing from Jesus very well either. Do we take up the opportunities that are presented to us, or do we tend to complain and blame other people for our problems?

Thankfully, the story of the lame man in John 5 shows us that healing is not about us—it's about Jesus! Even though the man didn't respond to Jesus in faith, Jesus *still* healed him. Even though the man com-

plained, Jesus *still* gave him the ability to walk.

And even when we do not approach Jesus in complete faith or obedience, Jesus *still* offers us salvation. The source of our salvation is never based on our own actions or works; it is always by the grace of God in Jesus. This reminds me of what Jesus says later to his disciples in John 15:16: "You did not choose me, but I chose you." Thanks be to God!

God of grace, you love us more than we deserve. Thank you for choosing us even when we are not wise enough to choose you. Thank you for your grace to us in Jesus. Amen.

CAUTION: SLOW DOWN

Mary . . . sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.
—Luke 10:39-40

Mary and Martha met Jesus. If you describe yourself as a “doer” or an organizer, you can understand where Martha was coming from. She welcomed Jesus and his disciples into her home—a wonderful thing to do. But she made herself so busy with the preparations and the work of hospitality that she didn't slow down and pay attention to Jesus. In fact, she got upset with her sister, Mary, for doing just that.

Do you ever make yourself so busy (even with good things) that you miss out on hearing the voice of Jesus in your life? Jesus told Martha not to be worried and upset but to focus on the main thing that is important.

Does this mean we shouldn't do any work for the kingdom of God? Should we only sit still and reflect on the Bible

and pray? No, we are certainly called to be active doing the Lord's work. In fact, the story of Mary and Martha comes right after the parable of the good Samaritan, a story in which Jesus praises someone who works hard to be a neighbor, showing compassion and hospitality.

Instead of going to either extreme (trying to do everything or doing nothing at all), we can focus on the most important thing, which is Jesus himself. Inspired by his love, we can show hospitality to the people around us.

Lord, help me to focus on the one thing that is important: you. Help me to welcome you into my home, my heart, and my life. Amen.

STAND UP STRAIGHT

“Should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”
—Luke 13:16

A woman who was bent over met Jesus. He gave her the ability to stand up straight—and he did this on the Sabbath day. The religious leaders became angry because a faithful Jew like Jesus was not supposed to “work” on the Sabbath by healing someone.

We could say the religious leaders had a point. This woman had been bent over for 18 years. Would waiting one more day make much of a difference?

But to Jesus, this was about setting a person free from a burdensome disease and giving her the dignity of a child of Abraham. What’s more, this was about giving glory to God and rest to this woman on the very Sabbath day of rest and worship that God wanted for his people. Ultimately this healing pointed to the salvation

that only Jesus can offer. And salvation is so important that Jesus wanted the authorities to know it should certainly take place on the Sabbath day.

The healing of this woman can teach us also that we should not wait to receive salvation from Jesus. Salvation is a gift for eternal life, and it makes our lives better *right now*. With such a great gift being offered to us, why would we wait any longer to receive it? Receive Jesus’ salvation for you today.

God, I praise you for offering me salvation in Jesus. Thank you for such an amazing gift that allows me not only to live with you forever but also to know your grace and peace already today. Amen.

GUEST OF HONOR

“When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.” —Luke 14:13-14

The guests and host of a banquet met Jesus. At the banquet, the guests tried to sit in seats of honor, near the place where the host would sit. This was common in that society, which cared about honor for people who were respectable and had status in the community. It was also common to invite people over who would invite you back, because you could benefit socially from attending another dinner party hosted by someone else.

But Jesus introduced a different kind of world by what he said to the guests and the host. He told them to sit in the least honorable seats, and to invite guests who were too poor to return the invitation.

In this way Jesus revealed a way of life in which status doesn't matter, and in which shame and honor are erased.

Jesus revealed this way of life in his teachings, and he made this way of life possible by becoming the most despised outsider of all. He died on a cross and bore the worst of all rejections in order to make God's kingdom a reality in our world.

God's kingdom is the place where the only status that matters is that we are “loved by God.” God's kingdom is a gift that Jesus Christ gives to us.

Lord God, we are shocked by the kind of kingdom Jesus introduced—it seems upside down to us. And yet we thank you for the great love that your kingdom reveals when we allow it to shape our lives. Amen.

SAYING THANK-YOU

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.
—Luke 17:15-16

Ten men with leprosy met Jesus. They had a skin disease, and they were not allowed to live with healthy-skinned people unless they were cured. Jesus healed all ten of the men, and they were able to return to the company of other people. Once again, this is a story of Jesus' great healing power.

This particular story, though, includes an unusual detail. After finding that he was healed, one of the ten men came back to Jesus. He was so grateful to be healed that he shouted praise to God and threw himself at Jesus' feet. Jesus welcomed and praised this man as someone who truly knew how to praise God, even though the man was a Samaritan, an outsider who wasn't supposed to know much about God and faith. Jesus also asked, "Where are the other nine?" and we

are left wondering how thankful they were.

By praising the man who said thank-you, Jesus shows us that receiving healing is best when it flows into a life of thanking and praising God. It's one thing to receive salvation from Jesus, and it's an even better thing to live out our appreciation for that salvation by sharing Jesus' love with the world.

Let gratitude take root in your heart and life as you praise Jesus for all he has done for you!

God, stir us to see how much you have done for us—and to be truly thankful. Thank you especially for the salvation and new life you give us in Jesus. Amen.

THREADING THE NEEDLE

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."
—Matthew 19:21

A rich young man met Jesus. When Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give to the poor, the man could not do it. He just went away sad. Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Many people would like to be able to serve both God and money, even though Jesus makes clear that our allegiance must be to God alone (see Matthew 6:24). So people have come up with ways to try to soften this hard calling in Matthew 19. For example, some have said that "the eye of the needle" refers to a small gate in Jerusalem that camels couldn't pass through.

But Jesus meant to describe something impossible. That's why he adds later, "With man this is impossible, but with God

all things are possible." It is impossible for us to seek and live for God with a pure heart if we are always desiring other things, like money.

When Jesus says, "With God all things are possible," he means that his grace will welcome even people like the rich young man to follow him. His grace will welcome *us* to follow him, to be generous with whatever we have, and to give our allegiance to God alone.

Lord, we confess that we love money and we usually seek after earthly possessions and comforts more than we seek after you. Show us your grace and help us to turn to you. Amen.

CHILDLIKE

“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” —Mark 10:14

Little children met Jesus. If you had to find someone to put in charge of a kingdom, someone to govern and make wise decisions, would you choose a little child? Not likely. Little children contribute many wonderful things to the world. But when it comes to leading and governing, we usually look to people who are wise and experienced.

Jesus, however, welcomed little children when his disciples tried to shoo them away. He even said that the kingdom of God belongs to people who are like them.

Jesus does not give his kingdom to people who think they are self-sufficient, people who act as if they are in control of their lives. The kingdom of God—the kingdom that Jesus came to bring—is not for people who think they have all the answers. The kingdom of God is for people who know

that they depend on God for *everything*—like little children, who are totally dependent on their parents and others.

So many of us like the idea of being independent, taking care of ourselves, and making decisions for ourselves. But Jesus encourages the opposite: instead of striving to be independent, strive to be dependent on God. Ask God for everything you need, and seek to follow God’s will for your life, and you will enjoy full life in his kingdom.

Lord our God, help us to understand that we truly depend on you for everything, and please guide us into full, abundant life with you in your kingdom forever. In Jesus, Amen.

UPSIDE DOWN

“Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” —Matthew 20:21

The mother of Zebedee’s sons met Jesus. She wanted Jesus to give special honor to her sons, James and John. Jesus responded with love to all three of them, but he made clear that they had missed the point of what he was doing.

When it comes to Jesus and the people who follow him, the main goal is not honor but *humility*. A little later Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.”

To many people, this makes no sense. It seems upside down. Usually the rulers and the servants are opposites. But Jesus changed things by what he himself did. Jesus is God, and Jesus had all the power and authority in the universe. But in order to become human, like us, Jesus gave up that power. Jesus even willingly suffered and died on a cross to pay for

our sin. And because of God’s great justice and mercy, Jesus’ humility and service resulted in something amazing and great: the salvation of the world and the defeat of death.

Because Jesus reigns, humble service leads to great success. It seems like an upside-down way of understanding things, but it makes sense because of what Jesus has done and how Jesus has loved the world. Let’s receive the love of God, and let’s show that amazing love to the world.

God of humble greatness, thank you for showing us the power of service in the way that Jesus loves us. Help us to love one another the same way. Amen.

NOW I SEE

"Whether [Jesus] is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"
—John 9:25

A man blind from birth met Jesus. This story shows us that there is a difference between seeing physically with your eyes and seeing the truth—knowing the truth—clearly with your mind. The man blind from birth could only see after Jesus gave him the ability to see. But the Pharisees, who could see physically all their lives, still couldn't see the truth. They still couldn't understand who Jesus was or what he was doing.

It's not that the man blind from birth understood everything about Jesus. He answered many of the Pharisees' questions about Jesus by saying, "I don't know." For people who follow Jesus today, that's often true as well. There are some things about Jesus that we know for certain, and there are other things about Jesus that remain a mystery to us.

But just like this man in John 9, we can know with certainty what Jesus does in our lives. We can know the truth about how Jesus forgives our sins. We can know the truth about how Jesus gives us hope for the future. Because of the promises in the Bible and because of the change Jesus makes in our lives, we can know the truth about our Savior, Jesus. This is something we can see clearly, no matter what our physical sight is like!

God of salvation, there are so many things we do not understand. Help us to see clearly what you can do in our lives through Jesus Christ. Amen.

PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

"You must be careful to do everything [the Pharisees] tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."
—Matthew 23:3

The Pharisees met Jesus. The Pharisees were religious leaders who wanted people to keep the law of Moses. So they built up all kinds of rules around the basic law, and they burdened the people with them. In the process, many of the leaders got so distracted by the rules that they forgot the heart of the law (love God; love your neighbor), and they did not practice what they preached.

In Matthew 23:1-12, Jesus let the Pharisees know what he didn't like about them. Jesus agreed with a lot of what the Pharisees taught. Jesus was a faithful Jew, so he thought the Pharisees had good things to say about what it meant to love God and to serve God. But Jesus showed that the Pharisees cared more about the *appearance* of loving God than about actually loving God.

Following Jesus does not mean throwing out all religious traditions. Jesus knew that faith is meant to be practiced in community. We cannot be Christians by ourselves; we live within the guidelines of a community of other Christians.

But following Jesus also does not mean following the law just for the sake of the law. Jesus always called his disciples to put people first and traditions second. Jesus challenged the Pharisees for making the rules of the law too important. He called them to show love to people, as the law was intended to help them do. Jesus calls us to love people today too, following his excellent example.

God, thank you for giving us your law of love. By your Spirit, help us to love you and others. Amen.

A FAITH LIKE THAT

As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus . . . was sitting by the roadside begging.
—Mark 10:46

Bartimaeus met Jesus. In the book of Mark, there are many stories about Jesus healing people, and Bartimaeus's story is remarkable in several ways.

Mark takes the trouble to tell us his name, Bartimaeus, while many other people who met Jesus are just called "a man in the crowd" or "a woman subject to bleeding." We are also told that Bartimaeus followed Jesus after being healed, and this event happens only a short time before Jesus goes to Jerusalem to die on the cross.

Jesus told Bartimaeus that his faith had healed him. Bartimaeus believed not in himself but in Jesus' power to heal. When he saw Jesus, he called him "Jesus, Son of David," a royal title. And when Bartimaeus went to Jesus, he threw his cloak aside. Bartimaeus was willing to toss

aside perhaps the only thing he owned in order to seek Jesus. And when Jesus asked what he wanted, he simply said, "Rabbi, I want to see."

No matter who we are, we can approach Jesus with the same kind of simple faith. We can trust that Jesus will heal us and save us by his power alone, and we can follow him.

Jesus, help us trust in your power to heal. Give us faith like Bartimaeus. Help us to believe, and guide us to give up everything every day to follow you. Amen.

UP A TREE

He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree. . . .
—Luke 19:3-4

Zacchaeus met Jesus. He was so eager to see Jesus that he climbed up into a tree in order to watch as Jesus passed by.

We aren't told what Zacchaeus was feeling that made him so eager to meet Jesus. We do know that he was a tax collector who had gotten rich by cheating people out of their money. Perhaps he realized that was not the best life he could be living, and he was looking for someone to show him a better way. Or perhaps he was just curious about Jesus because he had heard about all the miracles Jesus had done.

No matter what reason Zacchaeus had for wanting to see Jesus, Jesus took their interaction a step further when he told Zacchaeus that he would come and stay at his house. Even if Zacchaeus didn't know what he needed, *Jesus* knew

what Zacchaeus needed. And during their time together, Zacchaeus's life changed. He became a generous person, giving half of his possessions to the poor and paying back the people he had cheated.

No matter what your reasons are for being curious about Jesus, Jesus gladly seeks out a relationship with you too. He invites himself into your life. And when you open your heart to him, *your* life will change too.

Lord, open my heart to receive your love. Open my life to receive your power to change me. Make me a person who wants to live God's way in gratitude for all you have done. Amen.

ROCK

"I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

—Matthew 16:18

Simon Peter met Jesus. I know several friends and church members who say that besides Jesus, Simon Peter is their favorite person in the Bible because they can easily relate to him.

As he tried to follow Jesus, Simon often made mistakes or blurted out something that he regretted later. Simon was the one who tried to walk on water. Simon was the one who insisted that he would never deny Jesus—and then although Simon did that, he was later restored and called to follow Jesus again.

But sometimes Simon got it right. In our reading for today he made a bold and true confession to Jesus, saying, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And that is when Jesus gave him a nickname: *Peter*. The Greek word for *Peter*

means "rock," so Jesus was letting him know that Peter's bold confession was the foundation on which he would build his church. The most faithful thing a person can do is to trust in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

When we act like Simon Peter, making mistakes or blurting out things we'll regret later, we can be assured that we are not too clumsy or shameful to be of service to God. We too can make the bold and true confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and by God's grace we can stand on this firm, rocky foundation.

Lord and God, though we stumble, we thank you that we can trust in you and in your power to save. Amen.

PREVIEW: NEW LIFE

“Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

—John 11:43-44

Lazarus met Jesus—many times. The two of them were friends. Jesus and his disciples had often stayed at the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. So when Lazarus died, Jesus joined the family in grieving deeply.

Lazarus had now been dead for four days, long enough for everyone to know that he was certainly dead. But Jesus told them to open the tomb anyway—and when he commanded Lazarus to come out, the dead man came back to life and walked out of the tomb.

This is an astonishing miracle, but it shows us even more than Jesus’ miraculous power. It shows us that Jesus is stronger than death. This story acts like a kind of preview for the even more important story of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus points forward to that event when

he says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”

This reality of Jesus’ power over death gives my husband and I such great hope that we have named our son Lazarus. We want his name to point to the hope that he can have—every day of his life—because Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Lazarus and each one of us can have hope because Jesus is stronger than death.

Lord and Savior, we praise you that you are stronger than death. We praise you that because you live, we can live forever with you. Amen.

PASS IT ON

The Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.
—Luke 10:1

The seventy-two met Jesus. There were twelve disciples who followed Jesus closely for most of his ministry. And in Luke 10 we read about seventy-two more people who were appointed by Jesus to spread the word about him. The good news of Jesus is not just for one group or for the people in one place. It's for everyone everywhere.

Seventy-two is more than twelve, but even this group of people could not go everywhere and tell everyone about Jesus. They went to various towns where Jesus himself was planning to go. But these people who Jesus sent out represent the start of a mission to tell the world how God has shown his love through Jesus. The mission continued after Jesus died and rose again, and it continues today.

The good news about Jesus is that he offers forgiveness of sin and new life. Anyone who has heard this good news has the privilege to be a part of sharing the news with others. This is the wonderful mission of the Lord's church, and it will continue until everyone has heard the good news. Like those seventy-two messengers, we are invited to share Jesus' love by what we say and do. Something so amazing can't be kept a secret. Let's pass along the good news of Jesus' love to everyone!

God of all nations and peoples, thank you for entrusting us with the task of sharing the good news of Jesus. Strengthen us for this task, and give us joy in sharing your message everywhere. Amen.

HE LOVES YOU

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. . . . For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

—Matthew 11:28-30

You can meet Jesus. This month we have read about many people who met Jesus face-to-face during his teaching and healing ministry, before his death and resurrection. And people are still meeting Jesus today. Jesus is reigning in heaven, watching over the whole world, and he is present in our hearts and lives by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus wants *you* to know him. He loves you, and he wants you to have peace, wholeness, and a sense of purpose and belonging. Jesus speaks directly to each one of us when he invites people who are weary and burdened to come to him to find rest. The early church leader Augustine prayed, “O Lord . . . our hearts are restless until they rest in you”—and that is true for us today too. Jesus longs for us to come to him and find rest. Jesus knows

that we are tired of the sin in the world and that we are tired of our own guilt, and he offers us rest and freedom from those things.

There are some things that are hard about following Jesus. He calls us to love one another, and that can be difficult at times. But because Jesus is Lord of the universe and because he loves us all tenderly, he equips us with his love so that we can share this amazing gift. Follow Jesus, grow in his love and care, and the peace of God will be with you.

Jesus, I want to have the peace that comes from knowing you. Come into my heart and into my life. Guide me in your ways, embrace me in your love, and help me to share it with others. Amen.



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