



SPRING 2025 ISSUE OF THE WRITER SHOWCASE

ENGAGING *with the* GOSPELS

WORDonFIRE
INSTITUTE

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Introduction

DR. HOLLY ORDWAY

*Word on Fire Institute
Editor, Institute Writer Showcase*

The theme of this issue is “Engaging with the Gospels.”

As Catholics, we hear the words of Scripture read at every Mass, reminding us that the Bible is part of our formation as members of the Church, the Body of Christ. The Scriptures also provide both an opportunity and a challenge for evangelization. Engaging with the Scriptures can be an opening to a profound encounter with God and an invitation to enter into deeper relationship with him and his Church, but for many people this is hindered by misunderstandings about the Bible, previous bad experiences with it, or lack of knowledge in how to approach it.

These pieces are aimed at helping readers to grow in their knowledge and love of God, inviting those who are outside the Church to take a step closer in a nonthreatening way, and encouraging those who are already Christians to deepen their life of faith by a fresh look at the Scriptures.

For this issue, I invited writers to approach their Gospel selection either in the form of a devotional (drawing the reader to reflect on the meaning of the Scriptural passage and to make personal connections and applications) or as a fiction piece that imaginatively engaged in some way with the Gospel passage.

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FICTION



Traffic That Friday

(John 19:17–20:10)

DAVID PICKERING

St. John Henry Newman Writing Group

We haven't had a good execution in a while. Used to have some proper ones, though, back in the day. I could tell you stories. That Passover Friday trio, that was an execution, that was. Stopped the traffic all along the road outside the wall, on the west side. Get me some more of that wine, I'll tell you about it.

My first job, taking stone out of that quarry. Should never have been used for executions. Me and my brothers used to help our cousins move the stone, when we weren't working the family stall. Then, when it was quarried out, my uncle had a garden there. Only they had to start doing executions right there, didn't they? Ruined the neighbourhood. Took half Uncle Shimi's garden for it. And when they have a big one, crowd blocks the road. That Friday, worst jam I've ever seen, they did three together and I couldn't get my melon deliveries through. Stuck for hours. Hardly had space to breathe, the crowds were so bad, and the donkeys got all scared and wouldn't move. Stayed scared, too, younger one's never been the same. Can't blame him, after that day.

Strangest thing was the one in the middle, middle of the three. He wasn't normal, he wasn't. Didn't cry and wail like they do, didn't curse the Romans, talked strange. I seen a lot of them nailed up on those crosses, never seen one like that. Couldn't understand him. The middle one, he was something else. No cursing no screaming no shouting. Told God to forgive them as they hammered in the nails. Never seen anything like it.

He'd done okay up north, of course. They made a right fuss of him, Galilee way. That's how they get airs and graces, those northerners. Make it at home, think they can make it anywhere. Oh no, not in Jerusalem. You can't try all that on in Jerusalem. The Romans, the priests, the scribes, Herod Junior, all of them together, it's too much for some northern hick. He found out, he did.

The other two, one was normal enough, good bit of screaming and shouting. The other, started that way, went all quiet, then he just starts talking to the one in the middle. Not arguing, not shouting, just talking. Couldn't believe it. Everything was going mad, that day. To top it all, the sky went funny. Went all dark. Shook everyone up something proper. The crowd so big, they trampled over Uncle Shimi's garden. No consideration for the small producer. Romans should have had their executions somewhere else, and I told them so. Got a crack on the head for saying it, but I told them.

End of it, this centurion, he got a spear and jabbed the middle one, just to prove he was dead. I could have told him. Bleedin' obvious, he was battered almost dead before they stuck the nails in. He was never going to last, that one. Looked like they'd whipped him good and proper before they marched him to Uncle's garden. Surprised he even got there. They were lucky they got to crucifying him.

That centurion, he looked pretty pleased with himself when he got the blood and water running separate where he poked him with the spear, but anyone could see that's what it would be. Centurions ain't what they used to be, or maybe we just get the dregs out here.

Maybe they save the good ones for Egypt, Syria, places that matter. We used to matter, once. This dead one in the middle, he seemed to think we mattered, and look where it got him. That's what you get for trying to change things round here. Keep your head down, that's my advice.

And the people they had watching there. Some very grand types from the Temple, right next to the rabble from the bottom end of town. And a load of Galilean accents I kept hearing. Come down for Passover, I suppose. We get too many northerners in Jerusalem for festivals. They're worse than the foreigners. At least those Gentiles spend money. It's the big sales for our stall, and the foreigners hardly haggle, some of them. But the northerners! Beat you down for two figs, the aggro they give you, hardly worth selling to them.

And what was going on with the sky that day? I'll never understand it. Never forgot him, neither, the one in the middle. They say he started this new religion. I said it won't go anywhere, not if they keep stopping the traffic like that. You got to respect business, that's how the world goes round. But he was something else, I'll give him that.

Maybe that's what sent those followers of his mad. Couple of days later, there he was, dead and buried, and we had nutjobs running round the city saying he'd escaped the grave. Body not there, and here's the thing. It wasn't. I had a mate in the temple guards and he checked it himself. No body, just gravecloths. So the idiots thought something magic had happened. Hadn't they heard of grave robbers? Unusual, I'll grant you, no valuables to nick, leaving the gravecloths all neat, but these religious types, you never can tell what they'll do. And his new religion, keeps on going. My own son's got into it now. Wants me to go to their meetings with him. I told him, over my dead body. He said, Dad, it started with a dead body, didn't end with one. I told him not to try getting clever with his old man, sent him back to the stall to do some extra cleaning.

Thinks he's too good for a fruit stall? I let him have it. Still won't shut up, though.

Not the others, neither. That Friday should have been an end of it, but those followers of his, they won't stay down and they won't keep quiet. Something got into them. Made quite the commotion, and when you think it's over it keeps coming back. Can't last, though, you got to have your head screwed on in this world, mate, got to look after number one. All this dying noble business, stories of getting out of graves, it's not practical, won't last. You can't stop business. All those dreamers, they'll work it out in the end.

He was a strange one, though, the one in the middle, never saw anyone die like him. And those followers, when he died. I seen unhappy, seen that before. Never seen unhappy like that. They acted like the world was over, like everything was ended, not just one geezer. Two days later, Sunday morning, saw them again, gone crazy mad with stupid joy. I seen happy before, never seen happy like that. They were like the whole world began again, kept shouting about their Messiah alive. Should have been locked up, of course, but I never seen anything like that. Maybe I will go to one of those meetings, one day. Get that son of mine to take me. Make him happy, at least. Maybe I will.



To Share a Pew

(John 19:25–27)

KATE TALIAFERRO

St. Thomas More Writing Group

Marie kept her eyes averted from the pews as she walked to the restrooms. It's just something in my eye, she told herself, I just need a minute. I'm fine.

"I'm fine" had been the mantra of the past weeks. I'm fine, my daughter's suffering is over. I'm fine, I have other kids and grandkids. I'm fine, it's a relief not to see her in pain. I'm fine.

Marie caught the last few words of the Gospel, which pierced her sorrowful heart: "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."

Through her tears, she noticed a young mother with three little children in tow behind her. Marie opened the door for them, and gestured to allow them to pass. As they walked, the mother was explaining that they all had to go for the baby's diaper change because their dad was on his deployment. They were too young to be left alone in the pew.

The trip to the restrooms to deal with the diaper was thankfully quick, and Jenna was surprised she managed to hear a few words of the homily over her children's chatter. Something about Mary being our mother and advocate. Rather than inspiring her, it only reminded Jenna of how far away her own family lived.

In a blur of Cheerios and stickers, Mass ended. By the time the family got to the donut line, it was rather long. Jenna's girls anxiously checked each person's donut as they walked past, wondering if the precious sprinkle donuts would still be there. Their hopeful faces fell when it was finally their turn, no sprinkles left.

At that moment, the woman who had held the door for them earlier came out of the kitchen holding a donut box. She saw Jenna and smiled, saying, "Someone forgot to put out this last box. I wonder what kind of donuts are inside?"

Marie put the box on the table and opened it for the girls. Jenna wasn't sure who was happier, the girls or herself. She did not have the energy for a meltdown.

Marie graciously offered to help carry the plates to the table. As they walked, she introduced herself to Jenna. "My name is Marie Stewart."

"Jenna Johnson," replied Jenna.

"I'm Nora! This is Grace and baby Caleb," chimed in Jenna's oldest daughter.

Jenna was surprised when Marie sat down with them. Marie easily placed Grace, a two-year-old, in a seat and passed Nora a napkin. The two girls smiled up at her and then set their sights on their donuts.

"How long have you been at the parish?" Marie asked Jenna.

"Only a few months. My husband, Mark, is deployed right now, so we aren't very consistent." Jenna ducked her head. She wondered why Marie was hanging around.

Marie nodded. “Your children are beautiful. They remind me of my own kids when they were little.” Marie smiled, though it seemed rather hollow.

“How many children do you have?” Jenna asked.

“Five, all grown now except . . .” Marie began, but paused and looked away. She took a deep breath and continued. “I have five children. Four are grown and married, my youngest recently passed away.” Her eyes began to shimmer with tears as she sat stiffly in the chair. Again, she looked at the girls licking the frosting from their donuts. Her face softened somewhat. “My daughter, Violet, had curly blonde hair, just like Grace.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Jenna stammered, unsure what to say.

Marie looked over and, seeing Jenna’s discomfort, deftly shifted the conversation to lighter topics as the girls finished their donuts. While Jenna wiped the last remnants of frosting off Grace’s face, Marie said, “Have a good week. I know it’s hard, but hopefully I’ll see you next week.”

Jenna was surprised at the genuine comment. She was also a little worried. She had been seriously considering not coming to Mass next week. Now, was Marie going to be looking for her?

The week passed as usual. Meals, laundry, late nights, early mornings. Marie’s comment had been playing in the back of Jenna’s mind. She couldn’t let it go. She decided to give Mass one more week. She had survived last week after all. She would sit in the back again—easy access to the exits—and, hopefully, disturb the least number of people.

Walking into the church, Nora spotted Marie lighting a candle in one of the alcoves. This one had a large crucifix, with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the apostle John at its base.

“Look, Mommy! Look! It’s the donut lady!” she shouted.

Jenna quickly tried to shush her, but Marie had heard Nora.

“Good morning, Jenna! How good to see you this morning. I was hoping to catch you.” Marie smiled at each of the children as she came over.

“I’m so sorry we interrupted you,” Jenna apologized.

“You’ve been on my mind. I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but it seems like you could use some help in the pew. I remember when my two oldest were little. It’s not easy to get to Mass when the children are young, even when both parents are home. Would you mind if I sat with you today?”

Jenna didn’t quite know what to say. She had never had anyone offer this kind of generosity before. “I’m not sure you really want to. I mean, I barely hear what’s going on, much less have time to pray with everyone talking and moving around. Is that really the way you want to spend Mass? It’s so kind of you, but really, we are okay.”

Marie paused, considering. “You know,” she said thoughtfully, “when people ask how I’m doing, I usually say I’m fine. Last week, maybe you didn’t notice, but it was a difficult day for me. That’s why I was leaving Mass when you were walking out. But sitting with you all after Mass was a delight and reminded me that even when life is hard, there are still things to be joyful about. I’ve realized this week that it’s okay to not be fine. And it’s good to share that with others. You were the first person I told about Violet who didn’t already know what happened. I don’t know why, but it made a difference for me.”

Jenna took in Marie’s words. She was touched by this woman’s openness. There was wisdom here, and courage. Jenna looked at her. “You’re right,” Jenna admitted. “I’m not okay either. Wow, that’s hard to say, but it’s true. It is so hard to get here, it is so hard to sit through this hour and feel like I’m getting nothing out of it.”

“Well, I can’t promise any miracles,” Marie chuckled, “but if you are open to it, let’s try sitting together today and see how it goes. Maybe we can help each other.”

“Okay, sure,” Jenna smiled. Marie took Nora’s hand. Together, they all walked into Mass.



Geology Theology

(Matthew 16:18)

BETTY GLAZ

St. Clare of Assisi Writing Group (co-leader),

St. John Henry Newman Writing Group

The rooster's crowing wakes Ambrose, who quickly checks the weather through the window. The rising sun shines dimly through the fog after three days of rain. He turns on the coffee pot and begins to dress, careful not to disturb his sleeping wife. He decides he should wear boots for the muddy ground. Grabbing a mug of coffee and his John Deere ball cap, he walks toward the fields.

Breathing a sigh of relief, he thanks God that all the area farmers got their crops in the ground before the rain began. The corn is only about five inches high, but it looks healthy.

An unusual rock at the cornfield's edge near the creek bank catches his eye. Water on the rock glistens like a halo from the rising red sun asserting itself through the fog. Ambrose picks it up, surprised by its heaviness. The rock is shaped like a boomerang, about four inches thick and the size of a dinner plate. Layers of brown ranging from the hue of mud to sand and even rust stripe the rock. Fossils on each side intrigue him. He rinses off most of the mud and dirt in the creek before returning to the farmhouse.

Irene sits at the kitchen table drinking coffee. “Oh, my goodness, what do you have? Let me put some newspapers on the table. I don’t want dirt with our supper tonight.”

“It’s a rock, Irene, and I’ve already rinsed it off. Can you hurry? It’s very heavy!”

Irene hurries to cover the table with newspapers, and Ambrose sets the rock down. He removes his boots and goes to the bedroom for another pair.

“I’m going to call Keith to come up and look at this,” Ambrose says while picking up the phone receiver.

Keith is one of Ambrose’s nephews, who, in his youth, had walked through the fields of all his relatives searching for arrowheads. He has a vast collection from the Shawnee, Wyandot, and Kickapoo tribes that once resided in southern Indiana. Throughout high school, Keith longed to be a priest and had studied for two years at the seminary in St. Meinrad before dropping out. His grandfather cried for three days when he was told about it. Undeterred, Keith went off to an upstate university and became a geologist.

Keith arrives that afternoon and parks at the weathered barn with the double doors open wide. His Uncle Ambrose and the rock await. He sees his uncle working on his tractor and yells out, “I’m here, Uncle Ambrose. Let’s look at that magical rock.”

The rock is on a work table near the open barn doors where the sun is shining on it. The glint of the sun makes the rock look like a dazzling fire.

“Oh, wow,” Keith says. “This is so cool. See all these different colored bands? I believe this is a metamorphic rock that came from the center of the earth. Pressure, heat, earthquakes, erosion, and soil pushed it up. It made a long journey.”

“How old do you think it is?”

“Oh, I have no idea. I’ll be happy to take it to my geologist friends at Marengo Cave. They have all kinds of fancy equipment. But I warn you! They may want to cut this rock in half to test it.”

“No, absolutely not! I don’t want half a rock.”

“Let me take it up there and see what they say. I promise not to cut the rock in half.”

Keith returns three hours later with the rock intact.

“No luck, eh?”

“Naw, like I told you, they wanted to cut the rock in half, so I guess it can be any age you want it to be.”

“Okay,” Ambrose laughs. “I’ll say it’s older than me.”

“I knew you would say that. As I was driving back, I did some thinking. This rock reminds me of life changes in a way. Babies are born and grow into adults, shaped by family, culture, and spiritual influences. Some resist peer pressure, while others pick up uncompromising excess baggage to carry for the remainder of their days. They are like pebbles in the creek that are swept away with every storm. This is a gift from God, Uncle Ambrose.”

“What do you mean, a gift from God?”

“Well, in all my years of walking these fields, I’ve never seen a rock like this. It’s called nice, spelled g-n-e-i-s-s. So, while it represents life changes, it’s also solid, like bedrock, never changing. It’s a paradox. The foundation of the Church is built upon the solid bedrock of God’s Truth and Saint Peter, the strongest materials in the universe.”

“Well, it seems to me that a rock like the Church, built upon Peter, can withstand time and the elements.”

“That’s right, Uncle Ambrose. Jesus said the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church. She retains memory and traditions just as these fossils are reminders of an earlier age.”

“How did you get to be so smart?”

“Well, I graduated from college, and I read a lot. I study a lot too. Don’t watch much television except for the news, just so I know what’s happening in this crazy world.”

“Like you, I don’t watch much television except for *Judge Judy*. I don’t read much except for newspapers. Oh, I read a bit of the Bible each night.”

“Good for you, Uncle Ambrose. Hang on to that rock; it might be worth something. What do you intend to do with it?”

“Oh, I haven’t thought about it. I might give it to one of my daughters.”

“Make it a family heirloom. I like that idea. Promise me that I can be in the room when they read your will so I can find out who inherits the rock,” he laughed. “I better get home before they send a posse out for me.”

“Thanks, Keith, for your help today. And for the good conversation.”

They shake hands, and Keith drives away.

The proud rooster welcomes the morning by crowing three times. Ambrose slowly moves out of bed and makes coffee. He realizes his elderly body is tired from walking the cornfield the previous day. Yet, thirty minutes later, he is slowly walking the soybean field. He thanks God that he’ll likely have a plentiful harvest in the fall. With his eyes upward, he sees a white-tailed hawk flying overhead.

“Gee whiz,” he thinks, “I’m awake, and I see the light of sunrise on this cloudless morning, watching the crops glisten with the morning dew. It’s wonderful to be alive, surrounded by these rolling hills. Thank you, God,” he prays, “for your creation and for allowing me to live this long life to see something new each day. I never thought a rock would bring me closer to You.”

Deeply touched, he makes the sign of the cross, as a tear escapes his eye.



Enemy in Grey

(Luke 6:27)

ELIZABETH DUSOLD

*St. Faustina Writing Group,
St. Venantius Fortunatus Writing Group (co-leader)*

Sunday, September 29, 1918
Meuse-Argonne Sector, near Montfaucon, France

“Hold up, Shorty. Do you even know where you’re going?” Bill Hoffman asked his pal Harold “Shorty” Campbell. Bill swiped at the unrelenting rain on his face as his boots squelched to a halt.

“It’s not my fault you got the wagon stuck and we have to hoof it,” Shorty retorted.

In April 1917, Bill and Shorty had been among the first to enlist when America had declared war on Germany. Despite their differences, the two had quickly become buddies in training camp. Shorty sported a tall, sinewy frame gained from years of farm chores. Bill, barely five feet five inches tall, made up for his small stature with grit honed in Cincinnati’s crowded German tenements.

Bill's squad had set out the day before to deliver water to the guys at the front, part of the frantic push to end the war. Trucks, carts, wagons, and foot-soldiers had jammed supply lines on muddy farm roads. Wounded men had straggled back from the front, and German prisoners had been pressed into service carrying wounded soldiers to field hospitals. Bill had tried to maneuver the mule team around the traffic jam, but the wagon had quickly mired in the mud. So, their squad had set out on foot to carry water. Now their muscles ached from the overnight hike back to camp with the empty water cans.

"Let's take five," Shorty said. "I'll check our bearings. Maybe the rest of the guys will catch up." The heavily forested, hilly terrain had made keeping the squad together nearly impossible.

Bill scanned the Sunday morning sky for signs of daybreak. A city dweller, Bill felt uneasy in the dense Argonne Forest. Every scorched tree limb reached out as if to snatch him. He recalled the Brothers Grimm fairy tales Mama had read to him in German, of shadowy forests where witches lured unsuspecting children to their death. But fairy tales paled in comparison to the horrors of the artillery battle over the last three days. Massive craters pock-marked the forest, and dead soldiers, both German and American, lay where they had fallen.

Bill, chilled to the bone from the constant rain, squatted down on the spongy ground next to Shorty. He gazed up and noticed one remaining buttress of an ancient church silhouetted against the sky. An arch gaped where a stained-glass window had been obliterated. Stone upon stone of rubble reached the base of the window.

Bill instinctively felt under his uniform for his crucifix, a parting gift from his sweetheart, Claudie. So far, he thought wryly, her prayers for his safety had been answered.

"I'm going to check out that bombed-out church up there," Bill said, rising to his feet.

“Aww man, haven’t you seen enough ruins to last a lifetime?” groaned Shorty. But curious, he stretched and followed Bill.

Bill skirted the base of the massive pile of stone. Centuries-old craftsmanship had crumbled in minutes. Thick dust floated from the ruins like incense rising to the heavens.

“Over there,” Shorty whispered in Bill’s ear, pointing, “I hear something.”

Through the dim light and the choking haze, Bill spied the sodden lump of a man trapped among the stones. A heavy layer of dust and debris coated his uniform in white, so that it was neither German grey nor Doughboy olive.

“The guy’s a Kraut, not one of our boys,” said Shorty, gesturing at the distinctive German helmet. “Just leave him to rot.”

Bill continued to pick his way among the shifting stones. The soldier moaned softly. Bill saw only the man’s torso. A huge stone block crushed his legs.

“What’s he saying?” Shorty asked. “That’s German, isn’t it?”

Bill heard the words Mama had drilled into him, “Pater noster, qui es in caelis...” The wounded man continued to murmur the first words of the Lord’s Prayer, lacking the strength to continue.

“That’s Latin, you dunce. The guy must be Catholic,” Bill replied, recalling the many times he had served at Mass as a kid.

“He’s reaching for his pocket. He’s going for a grenade!” Shorty exclaimed.

Bill waved his hand dismissively in reply. Under the pall of dust, blood seeped down the German soldier’s face from a gash on his forehead. He strained to draw each breath.

“He doesn’t have the strength to unbutton his pocket, much less pull the pin on a grenade,” Bill observed.

As Bill crept forward, the German soldier recognized the American uniform. Terror flashed through the wounded man’s eyes as he struggled to rise.

Bill quietly echoed the Lord's Prayer, "Pater noster . . ." The wounded man, comforted by the unexpected brotherhood of faith, fell back and groped weakly at his pocket.

"Do you want something from your pocket?" Bill asked softly in German.

"Ja, ja," the soldier sighed, surprised to hear his native language spoken by an American.

Bill removed a small Bible from the soldier's breast pocket and placed it in his hand. The soldier clasped the book and clumsily drew it towards his lips, as if to kiss it. A photograph fell out as he handled the small book. Bill picked up the photo, holding it before the soldier's face.

The soldier's eyes glistened with tears as he muttered, "Meine liebe Frau . . . Unser Hochzeitstag."

"What'd he say?" Shorty demanded.

"It's his wife on their wedding day," Bill explained.

The soldier clutched Bill's hand and pleaded in German, "I need to confess my sins."

Bill patted the soldier's hand and said in German, "I'm not a priest, just a grunt like you. But I'm sure the Lord forgives you."

The Lamb of God prayer sprang to Bill's mind and he recited gently, "Agnus Dei qui tolis peccata mundi, miserere nobis." Bill saw recognition flit through the soldier's eyes as his lips joined silently in prayer. "Agnus Dei . . . dona nobis pacem," Bill concluded, as the young man's eyelids fell. Moments later, the soldier's grip slackened and his breath fell silent.

"What was that mumbo-jumbo?" Shorty questioned.

"It's a prayer. 'Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us, Lamb of God, grant us peace,'" Bill translated.

"Yeah, right. There's no peace in this place," Shorty scoffed, surveying the wasteland around them.

As Bill drew his hand away, the photograph stuck to his damp palm: a young soldier stood proudly behind his bride, seated primly on a high-backed wooden chair. Bill turned the photo over and read the sprawling handwriting: “Ernest and Estella Siebelmeier, St. Dionysius, Recke, June, 1914.”

Bill’s eyes swam and the blood drained from his face. Hadn’t Mama been baptized at St. Dionysius before she emigrated to America thirty-five years ago? Weren’t Mama’s neighbors named Siebelmeier?

Shorty’s sharp voice cut off Bill’s thoughts, “We gotta get back to camp. Quit mourning over a dead Kraut.”

Bill reverently placed the wedding photo and the Bible in the dead man’s pocket and turned to follow Shorty down the mountain of rubble. As Bill trudged down the hill to return to his duties, a ray of sunlight pierced the clouds.

“Rest in peace, Ernest,” Bill whispered, glancing up at the radiant sunbeam, “Maybe we’ll meet again in a better place.”



I Want to See: The Story of Blind Bartimaeus

(Mark 10:46–52)

JOHN FAIRBANKS

St. Gregory the Great Writing Group

“Wake up Bartimaeus, it’s time to move.” The spindly figure lying on a straw mat over a dirt floor rolled onto its side.

“You’re hilarious, son,” Timaus wryly observed. “You know I meant it’s time for you to rise. The sun will be up soon and you need to get to the side of the road before people start passing by.”

Bartimaeus gave a slight groan as he extended an arm and began patting around with his hand in search of his walking stick, which, after his roll over, was now out of reach. Timaus knelt down, picked up the stick, and put it in Bartimaeus’s outstretched hand.

Leah, Bartimaeus’s mother, entered the room carrying branches. Walking over to the fire pit, she added the wood to the glowing coals and placed the cooking stone with some cakes on it over the fire.

“Come on, honey,” she practically sung in a lilted voice. “Come to the table. The cakes will be ready soon.”

Bartimaeus walked to the table without a misstep. He was born eighteen years ago in this one-room hut. It was the only place in

the world where he wasn't blind. He could feel the presence of the stools and the table and everything else inside even before he touched them. He could smell the tunics his parents wore. The sounds of their voices painted images in his mind of their countenances and where they stood.

Sitting down on his stool, Bartimaeus turned to his mother and said, "I didn't tell you yesterday, but the man who took pity on me and gave me a whole shekel said he was going into town to hear Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth. He said I should go with him and that Jesus could heal my eyes. I almost went with him. I have a feeling Jesus is someone great."

Leah was preparing her reply, but before she could speak, Timaeus interjected. "Put your faith in what you know, son. I've said this a million times. Hope leads to disappointment. Count on yourself and protect your spot by the road. That's all you need."

"Yes, father, but I've heard Jesus is the Messiah. The one who will heal all wounds and gather the tribes of Israel."

"Nonsense," Timaeus sniffed. "I must go. It's been a moon and six days since the last rain. I'll be carrying water all day to put on Sendor's wheat field. Leah, my dear, I'll be exhausted when I get home. If you can trade for just a cup of wine, I'd be very grateful."

"Anything for you, my love," she said in her lilted tone.

"And make sure our dreamer gets to the road on time," Timaeus gently growled, adding a wink in Leah's direction before passing through the door.

The sun was nearly at its highest point when someone walking strangely approached Bartimaeus on the side of the road. The footfalls went skiff, thuudd, skiff, thuudd.

"Who's there?" Bartimaeus inquired, mustering authority.

"You didn't know it was me?" responded Amos. "I'm disappointed."

Bartimaeus relaxed. "You're walking funny," he said. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be with my father in Sendor's field?"

“I was until I tripped walking up the bank from the stream and hurt my leg. I heard Jesus of Nazareth is leaving Jericho today on his way to Jerusalem. He’ll have to pass by here, and I hope he can heal my leg.”

“I’ve heard people talk about him being the Messiah. What do you think?” Bartimaeus asked, hoping for assurance.

“A cousin said he knew someone whom Jesus healed. So I can hope.”

Just then, Bartimaeus heard an approaching crowd, but something was different. He distinctly heard everyone in it. Each foot that went crunch on the dusty road. Each flap of a rustling cloak. He could even distinctly hear voices. “He’s going to outlaw divorce,” said one. “He placed his hands on my child,” said someone else. “He said wealth is not a sign of favor with God,” said another.

Then a fragrance emanating from the crowd came upon him. It was reminiscent of when he was young and followed his mother on errands. They’d walk through an olive orchard near home. After the first spring rain when the trees were full of pollen, the orchard gave off a scent that was like the smell of moist, rich soil, freshly turned over, but there was also a sweetness to it, like the essence released from peeling an orange. He focused all his attention on the scent.

The fragrance filled his nose. Then it filled him. It was in his mind. It was in his mouth. A taste sweeter than honey was on his tongue. Suddenly, he was somewhere else, but not anywhere on earth. Everything was quiet and it was like he was being infused with a sense of complete comfort and calm and there was a gentle hint of that rich, earthy, and sweet fragrance. He could have stayed there forever.

The crowd was passing by when he regained his senses. The same way he could hear the voices before, now he could smell each individual. That rich, earthy, and sweet scent was coming from one man in the center of the crowd. Somehow he knew that man was Jesus of Nazareth. He didn’t know how he knew this total stranger

was the man whom people thought might be the Messiah. He just knew.

Bartimaeus cried out, "Jesus, son of David, have pity on me!"

"Keep quiet, blind man," someone snarled.

Undaunted, Bartimaeus cried out all the louder, "Son of David, have pity on me."

Jesus stopped and said, "Call him."

"Take courage," said the snarly voice. "He is calling you."

The crowd parted. Bartimaeus sprang to his feet and followed his nose to the man emanating the wonderful fragrance.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked.

"Master, I want to see," Bartimaeus implored.

"Go your way," Jesus said. "Your faith has saved you."

Immediately, Bartimaeus was looking into a gentle set of eyes on a face that was even more gentle and assuring. Jesus smiled at Bartimaeus, then turned and went on his way.

Awestruck, Bartimaeus stood still, soaking in what had just occurred and the sights he'd only imagined before. The sun, the clouds, the trees, the people. Oh, the people! He'd heard about black hair and brown hair before—now he could see the difference. He could see the difference between tall and short, lean and stocky. He could see people smiling! Overwhelmed with joy, he slowly turned around in a circle taking in all that surrounded him.

Amos was still by the side of the road when Bartimaeus ran up and grasped him by the shoulders.

"I can see!" he raved. "I must go! Jesus is the Messiah! I must follow him. Tell my parents. Tell them I've found the Messiah. Tell them I can see!"

Bartimaeus ran down the road toward Jesus.

Amos stood with his mouth agape for a moment, then began walking back to their village, turning over in his head what had just happened. He walked for a while before realizing his leg didn't hurt anymore.



“Jesus Wept”

(John 11:35)

KIM JACOBSON
St. Francis de Sales Writing Group

Millie finished trying on graphic T-shirts at Hot Topic. Too old for these now. She buttoned up her flannel and grabbed her purse. She noticed a Cheerio on the dressing room floor. A kid. How old? Boy or girl? Her child would’ve been four. She’d always imagined the baby was a boy. She’d named him. When she saw other kids, she’d guess their age and think, Enrico would’ve been four too.

The strangest things reminded her of him. Yesterday—a pinecone. As she walked to the gym, she heard it fall through the branches. She cringed at how violently it hit the sidewalk after leaving the mother tree. Last night in a dream, she saw Enrico behind thick, rain-kissed glass and just knew it was her son. They had each raised their hands to touch without actually touching. Enrico blinked his brown eyes, but didn’t smile. His cheeks and nose were speckled with faint freckles like hers at the same age. She couldn’t distinguish between rain and tears on her dream face.

Millie met her bestie at Starbucks. When cookie crumbs on their table distracted her, left by a kid, she confided in Carla about the dream. She asked Carla if she could meet her parish priest. Carla

had mentioned numerous times how nice he was. Maybe someone spiritual could help. Counseling was too expensive.

Carla arranged the meeting, and Millie went on Thursday.

As Father Segreto ushered Millie into his office, they talked about the lingering South Bend winter. She sat on a comfortable chair in front of his desk and then blurted out her desire to confess something big. She stared at a portrait of the Virgin Mary hanging behind him until she found the courage to meet the priest's eyes, brown like Enrico's.

The priest was younger than her with smooth, olive skin. He leaned in. "I can hear your confession, Millie, but can't absolve sins for non-Catholics." He bit the inside of his bottom lip, then continued. "What's important is that you're here."

She nodded and focused on the second hand of her watch.

Father Segreto leaned back. His chair creaked. "Just letting you know, so there's no false expectations. No rush. Start when you're ready."

Her eyes darted from a hanging fern in the corner, to frost framing the window, to a bobblehead in the priest's likeness. She avoided looking at the crucifix, but her peripheral vision was aware of it. "What do I say, though?"

"Whatever's on your mind. There's no wrong way to go about this."

Millie swallowed, and silently sat for longer than intended. She looked at the door and then back at the priest. He lifted his right hand and placed it over his heart.

Her words gushed out. "Well . . . I . . . I thought I was doing a good and right thing by not keeping the baby. I couldn't afford him. It wasn't easy, Father. I refused pain medication. I didn't want it to be easy. The first time didn't work and the doctor . . . she tried again. When she did, my heartbeat slowed so much I went into shock and shook uncontrollably, and they thought they were losing me. I

wanted to be lost, d'ya see? And . . . and—then it was done. And I can't stop thinking about him—the baby, Enrico.”

Father Segreto didn't flinch like she had assumed. He made her feel loved with his very gaze. He reached into his drawer and pulled out a handkerchief. He handed it to her. “For your tears. My mom stitched this. She'd want you to have it.”

Millie took it, but before raising the cloth to her face she noticed a brown embroidered cross next to the initials IHS in red.

“Keep it, Millie. Call on the holy name of Jesus.”

She nodded and glanced at the crucifix. “Thank you.”

“I'm glad you came. You did because you acknowledge your sin, right?”

“Yes.”

“Did you consider adoption?”

“No. I . . . am . . . well . . . was alone then, too, and going to community college, and working mall security. I wanna be a cop, but it's taking forever. And I panicked and just did it fast.”

“And the father?”

“Left me a month later.”

“I see.” He moved his hand up to his neck and struggled to pluck a medal out from under his collar. After pulling the chain over his head, he cupped it in his hand and held it over the desk. “Keep this too. St. Anthony of Padua.”

She reached out and unfolded her fingers. The chain slid into her palm. The priest's body heat warmed her cold hand through the metal.

“I'll be praying for Enrico and you.”

“You'll—pray for us?” She squeezed the medal.

“I sure will, Millie.”

He asked about her family. She usually avoided this topic—too toxic. However, Father Segreto seemed legitimately interested, so she opened up.

When the clock in the bell tower struck two, she stopped the priest mid-sentence to explain that she had to work. She'd been there for nearly an hour and a half.

He said, "If you want to talk about this further, or anything else, don't hesitate to contact me."

Before she left, he blessed her.

The next day, Millie and Carla sat on her couch. Millie told her about the meeting. "He was very fatherly, but I don't feel healed or anything."

"Because your sins weren't erased." Carla's bangles jangled as she sipped a margarita.

"He gave me this." Millie pulled the medal out from under her shirt. "St. Anthony." She retrieved the handkerchief from inside her bra. "And this." She handed it to Carla.

Carla ran her fingertips over the embroidery. "These initials . . . they're . . . ?"

"Greek. The first three letters of 'Jesus.' I looked it up. It makes me cry in a . . . a cleansing way." She took it back and focused on flames flaring in the fireplace. "Do you think Jesus hates me?"

Carla flicked a thick strand of auburn hair over her shoulder. "No, Mill. I think he weeps for you. He feels your pain. He died so our souls can be forgiven."

"That sounds crazy."

"I know. For now, let's think of a way for you to remember Enrico." She nodded at a potted fern. "Like getting you a new plant or something."

They volleyed other ideas back and forth, but nothing felt right. Carla invited her to Mass for the umpteenth time, and she declined.

After work the next day, Millie sat in her car waiting for it to warm up. A snowflake landed on her windshield and melted. A group of kids walked in front of her. They held onto a rope led by a nun. Another sister followed behind. Childless mothers mothering. She pictured Enrico in the same blue coat worn by the last little boy

who sang to himself. The child reached into his pocket and turned around. He handed a Cheerio to the nun behind him. She smiled and popped it into her mouth.

As the group turned a corner, Millie imagined their souls hovering above them. She picked up her cell and dialed the priest. When he answered, she said, “Hi Father, this is Millie. I have a question . . .”



It Happened in Bethany

(John 12:1–8)

NANCY SOMERVILLE

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Slashes of sunlight from the small, high windows contrasted sharply with the unlit corners of the room as Mary swept the floor. The day was unseasonably warm, the late afternoon air still, the aroma of cooking slowly gaining strength. Her sister Martha wanted everything to look perfect because they were expecting company. Their teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, and his closest companions were coming to their house for the Sabbath meal.

She swept diligently, the repetitive movements a balm for her jangling nerves. Looking up as her brother Lazarus returned with wine for their meal, Mary shook her head as if the motion might settle her thoughts into order. Lazarus. Just a few days ago, her brother had been dead! Carried off swiftly by a fever. She and Martha had lost all hope as their message to Jesus to come to their brother's sickbed remained unanswered. Numb with grief over his unexpected death, she and her sister had anointed Lazarus's body. Entombed him.

Four days later, Jesus arrived at their village with tears on his face and asked to be taken to Lazarus's tomb.

Then it was as if the earth shuddered, like the way she'd once felt a rockslide moments before it toppled houses into unrecognizable heaps. Jesus brought her brother back to life. Jesus raised her four-days-dead brother to life as if death had never slackened his countenance or stilled his blood. She'd witnessed all of it yet still struggled to make sense of what had happened.

Mary had heard the stories of his other miracles, but none were as bold as this one, which Jesus declared was wrought for all to see and believe in the glory of God. In no time, the story fanned outwards past the borders of their small village of Bethany onto the well-traveled streets leading to Jerusalem.

The story of Jesus bringing her brother Lazarus back from the dead broke loose the safe mooring of everyone's understanding of life and death. The Jewish leaders were appalled. This was a force of untold power, and they had no weapons to fight it. There were no scrolls of wisdom to unroll and proclaim, no laws to refute or contain it. Instead, there were terse whispers of the need to destroy Jesus, arrest him . . . eliminate him.

The dark murmurs formed an insistent rhythm, and the noise, hushed and scattered at first, was increasing. It was a chorus of unrest, the din like a grim drumbeat echoing in her heart. Mary and her family were trying to keep to themselves, fearing their brother might be stolen away to destroy evidence of the miracle.

Their guests began to arrive, rousing Mary from her anxious musings, and she set the broom aside. Her gaze immediately went to Jesus, and she noticed the dusky pink tinge to his eyelids and the slump of his usually straight posture. Her heart crowded her chest as he met her eyes, but the soft smile she sought was absent as he nodded a greeting. She had hoped that seeing him again would calm her nerves and reassure her somehow, but the sight of him laden with worry only heightened her anxiety.

He had given her so much. Jesus had given her back her brother! What could she give him in return? How could she thank him for these years of friendship and loving guidance, for how his teaching had infused her world with all-new meaning?

Extremes of gratitude, compassion, fear, and sorrow merged into a new unnameable feeling, and she suddenly felt as if she were floating in something like the margin between sleep and wakefulness. Those threatening whispers she'd overheard, the clamor of feelings, and the dramatic events of the past few days billowed up inside her, forming an image of her beloved teacher . . . lifeless and shrouded. In her premonition, she was back in the tomb she had so recently attended, but this time, it was not her brother's body—it was Jesus lying there.

What if he were to be killed, taken away in shame and dishonor? What if this was the last time she ever saw him? The need to take action eclipsed every other concern as an urge coursed through her. As soon as the idea formed, it became all-consuming. How Martha would chide her for her impulsiveness!

Unnoticed as the guests continued to greet each other, Mary slipped away to the back room and located a bottle of precious nard, the same kind of oil they had used mere days ago to prepare her brother's body for burial. Darting back with the bottle, she knelt in front of Jesus.

"Mary, my little thinker, always content to sit at my feet," he said softly.

Flushing slightly, pleased by his gentle teasing, she focused on her task. Carefully breaking the wax on the recently replaced seal, Mary poured the oil, chilled from the jar's cool alabaster, into the palm of one hand to warm it before touching him gently, smoothing the pale gold liquid over his feet.

The oil's earthy fragrance reminded her of the grasses that grew on the river bank. The pungent scent began to float through the room, and several eyes turned to them in a curiosity that almost

immediately boiled over into concern as all conversation stopped. It was strange how a particular fragrance could be seared into memory. All present knew that this was the scent of burial, of death.

“Is that nard?” Simon Peter asked, confused. “Why are you doing that?” There was a challenge in his voice. Lazarus hurriedly got up and headed toward them, and Martha abandoned her meal preparations to see what was happening.

“That stuff costs a fortune!” Judas Iscariot came around the table, looming over her with indignation. “You could have sold that and given the money to the poor. Foolish girl—why are you wasting it?”

But their voices seemed to be coming from a great distance, so focused was she on her task. Mary was used to being scolded. Judas had never paid much attention to the poor before now, she thought ruefully.

As Jesus raised a hand to quiet the men, she bent even lower, shielding her face behind the curtain of her hair. The veil of hair seemed to give permission for shy tears to escape, tears she hadn’t known she’d been holding back. They dotted Jesus’s feet like tiny stars, and Mary thought of how he had brought them a whole firmament of new light with his teachings. She bent lower still, taking hold of the long strands of her hair and reverently drying his feet.

Laying a protective hand on her head, Jesus said, “Leave her be. She alone among you knows what she is doing. You can help the poor at any time. They will always be with you, but you will not always have me.”

She met his gaze as he said, “Let her save the rest for my burial.” The sadness underscoring his words seemed to curl around her, making her a partner in his thoughts. Her next breath didn’t come. Nor the one after that. She had to force herself to breathe, as she would need to force herself to live by faith after he had gone.

And then it all happened so fast. Before the week was out, as he had foretold and as she had feared, Jesus was laid to rest in a tomb.



The Mercy of Dawn

(John 8:1–11)

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The scars were her downfall. It was hard to convince the man who caught her that she wasn't a habitual Flame Thief when her hands and arms were covered in burn marks.

He marched her through the tunnels to the village hall where the Ember Guards sat in judgement for crimes against the Flame Law. The green glow of the Flames lit their faces as they heard the man's evidence and saw the woman's scars; those shining streaks of skin spelled out her doom.

"Her kind are best left to the Dark," the youngest Guard declared.

The woman glared at him. She was sure this scrawny youth had never lived a minute without Flames.

"Better yet, leave her to the Sun," a Guard with a grizzled beard chimed in.

The hall filled with harsh laughter and the woman's heart beat faster. To many in the village, the Sun was even more mysterious and terrible than the Dark.

The Captain of the Ember Guards raised his hand for silence.

“Why don’t we perform a little test of the Sun?” he asked.

A confused murmur rose up among the Guards.

“We’ve lost a dozen Woodcutters this month alone,” the Captain continued, gesturing to the woodpile. “They stayed out past Darkset and we haven’t seen them since. At that rate, how long will it be until we run out of fuel?”

Anxious whispers rippled through the assembly. They had all been raised on stories of the dangers that awaited them if the Flames were allowed to go out. For generations, parents had passed on the words of the old sorceress who first brought the green-glowing Flames to the village. She showed them how brightly the Flames lit up their homes, assuring them that they would now be safe when the Sun abandoned them to their nightly Darkness.

As the villagers’ eyes filled with the sight of the Flames, their heads filled with questions. Why did the Sun leave them at night? How could they trust that it would rise again every day? Why not use the Flames to order their days in their own way? So the villagers shuttered their windows, dug tunnels under their roads, and spent their hours avoiding the Sun and feeding the Flames.

“The Sun probably burned the deserters,” the bearded Guard now said, “And rightly so. But what does that have to do with this Flame Thief?”

“Yes, they probably burned, but no one knows for certain,” the Captain explained. “I say we bring her out just before Darkset and come back with proof of what the Sun can do.”

As the hall rumbled with dark laughter and plotting, the woman wrapped her arms around herself, burning away her fear with a fierce resentment.

A few hours later, by the green glow of their Ember Lamps, the Guards and their captive crept through the dark forest towards the sea. They brought the woman to the edge of the cliffs and drew back to the forest, awaiting the judgement of the Sun.

The woman gazed across the inky sea to where the sky was beginning to grow lighter. She looked back over her shoulder and saw the Guards' Ember Lamps glinting through the trees where they waited. She was trapped. She faced the cliff's edge again and saw a sliver of light beginning to rise above the water. Her heart pounded and tears rolled down her cheeks as fear finally overtook her. If the Sun burned her to ashes, who would miss her? No one. In fact, she was no one, just a convenient pawn in someone else's game. She closed her eyes, bracing herself for that familiar, searing pain of burning flesh.

Among the trees, the Guards watched the woman's lengthening shadow creep towards them as the sky grew brighter. Suddenly, the Sun burst above the horizon, dazzling them with a pure, white light. It seemed at first that the woman had been consumed by the Sun's rays. Yet, as their eyes adjusted, the men saw that she was still there, glowing as if made entirely of light, without a mark upon her.

The woman felt a gentle warmth envelop her and a light breeze blow across her tear-streaked face. She opened her eyes and beheld the Sun-drenched world: the waves below her reflected thousands of tiny, glittering Suns and, high in the sky, wisps of clouds glowed pink and gold. Then she turned to face her accusers and gasped.

Scars, blemishes, and imperfections of every kind now shone forth from the bodies of the Ember Guards as they were caught by the Sun's light. The Guards stood with mouths gaping and eyes wide with disbelief until the Captain whipped around and darted back into the forest. One by one, the others followed.

The woman didn't feel triumph at this retreat. She had seen their hidden wounds, and how well they matched her own, and could only feel a deep sorrow. She regretted every scar—those she held and those she gave—but her remorse seemed such a small thing in the face of so much pain. Weeping, she fell to her knees in the dust.

The woman's tears made a pattern of sorrow on the ground beneath her. She reached up to wipe her eyes and stopped in

astonishment: her hand was clear and bright without a trace of imperfection. She stretched out her arms, turning them in the golden light of the Sun, and couldn't find a single scar. She was clean.

She stood and saw a path she hadn't noticed in the Dark, winding along the cliffside. It led down to a small village with fishing boats along the shore. She took a shaky step along the path, then another. When she was halfway down the cliffs she paused. A man stood before a fire on the beach, cooking something. How did she know these people would even want her? What if it was the same as the old village?

The man spotted her, waved, and called out, "Come, have breakfast with us!"

He gestured to a table nearby where other men and women were gathered, laughing and talking in the Sun. The woman looked to the fire again and saw that the flames were a beautiful orange color. She hurried down to join them, knowing in her heart that she would never steal another Ember.

Back among the shadows of the trees, the Ember Guards marched silently towards their village. As the Captain looked ahead, he was startled to see how dim his Ember Lamp appeared. A pool of Sunlight spilled across the path in front of him and his eyes followed the beam of light up to the treetops. His companions watched in silent terror as the Captain set his Lamp on the ground, threw back his cloak, and stepped into the Sunlight. A few moments later, he let out a shout of joy and turned back towards the others. His face shone, his eyes glistened with tears, and there wasn't a single scar upon him. The other Guards stood frozen, clutching their dim Lamps, as he strode past them, back down the path, towards the morning Sun.



Can You Hear Me Now?

(Matthew 13:1–9)

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Hubert surveyed the group gathered beneath the statue of King Alfred the Great. During the Middle Ages, Alfred promoted the city of Winchester as a center for learning. Hubert prided himself as a man of knowledge, and despite the king's passionate religious leanings, Hubert was confident he and the king would have been good friends. He wondered if he would learn something new on this walking tour.

Perusing the group again, he speculated whether anyone knew that Winchester had once been the capital of England. He doubted it. He was disappointed in the caliber of those assembled. A group of women, British, he surmised from their accents, chirped amongst themselves. A few older couples, perhaps continentals, stood quietly with their tour books, like schoolchildren awaiting instruction. Hubert was confident enough in his knowledge of British history to travel sans aide. There appeared to be no other Americans. Slightly to his right, a tad too close he thought as he moved away to the left, was a slight man of perhaps Middle Eastern origin.

“Welcome to Winchester, the original capital of England,” announced the tour guide.

Hubert looked to see if anyone seemed surprised by this bit of information. There was no reaction. Hmm, well that’s encouraging, he decided.

The first stop on the tour was the City Mill, where wheat was still ground to flour as it had been for over a thousand years.

“Listen!” The Middle Eastern man spoke suddenly in a commanding voice with an accent born of that region of the world. “A sower went out to sow.” He was at Hubert’s side again.

Hubert glanced at him. What a strange little fellow. Once more, Hubert moved slightly to his left.

The guide continued. “The earliest document shows this to have been a working mill in the early to mid-900s. We know that Queen Aelfthryth gifted the mill to Benedictine nuns in 989.”

Nuns producing flour for bread. How quaint, thought Hubert.

“Over the centuries, the mill changed hands many times and eventually fell into disrepair before being rescued by the National Trust,” said the guide.

Hubert stood on the stone bridge in front of the mill. He looked at the turbulent water of the River Itchen below and imagined the nuns and their religion flowing with the ducks down the waterway, around the bend, and out of sight. If asked about religion, he liked to quip there was a trace of Catholicism in him. “I wasn’t so much raised Catholic as I was exposed to the faith. Nothing really stuck.”

The group moved to the next point of interest and, as Hubert turned, he again heard the Middle Eastern voice.

“And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.”

Hubert was startled to see the strange man at his right side once more. He spoke as one with authority. Hubert found it amazing yet unsettling. He tried again to put distance between them as the group continued toward the cathedral.

“Winchester Cathedral, completed in 1093, was originally of the Catholic faith but is now under the auspices of the Church of England,” the tour guide continued as the group entered the massive edifice.

Much like myself, mused Hubert, considering his Catholicism. He once had allowed a small flame to grow within him. It had felt necessary, like food being necessary when hungry. He’d been surprised at the warmth of the flame and the sudden need to keep it alive. But it slowly died. He had thought perhaps he was in the “wrong pew,” so to speak, and he meandered into different faiths and practices, but never felt that initial fervency again.

Hubert’s musings ended as he was once more aware of the Middle Eastern man speaking at his side.

“Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where there was not much soil, and they sprang up quickly. But they had no root, and they withered away.”

Hubert, unnerved, turned to the man and asked, “What are you going on about?”

The man looked at Hubert and smiled.

The smile both comforted Hubert and frightened him. This man knew things that Hubert did not. Once more, Hubert moved away from him.

The group walked from the Cathedral to the Buttercross on the High Street.

The tour guide continued. “During Medieval times, a commerce town would erect a Buttercross. It was a marker for the center of commerce and also served as a reminder of a moral duty to conduct affairs in a Christian manner. As you may notice, the Cross bears an image of the Mother of God as well as twelve saints.”

Hubert watched as people walked past the Cross, absorbed in their daily cares.

I guess it has been allowed to stay in a public setting, thought Hubert, because no one even notices it anymore.

He knew immediately that the strange man was beside him again.

“Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them with the cares of this world.”

“Now see here,” Hubert began as he turned towards the now-familiar voice. Hubert was interrupted as the tour guide commenced.

“This Buttercross took on new significance when in the twelfth century, King Henry II came to resent Thomas Becket for his strong stance on church rights. Knights, in support of their king, murdered the saint while he was at prayer inside Canterbury Cathedral. Shortly after, people began to meet at this Buttercross to walk ‘The Pilgrim’s Way’ to Canterbury to pray at Saint Thomas’s grave. Today, pilgrims still meet here to begin the long trek to Canterbury.”

Hubert, distracted by knowledge he did not previously possess, pondered. People still go on pilgrimage all that way? Why?

Once more, from his right, Hubert heard the voice.

“Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

Hubert refused now to look at the strange man, though he felt his presence very close. It was as if the man were reading his thoughts. Hubert turned left and walked around the Buttercross until, safe at the other side, he hid amongst the others in the tour.

The walking portion of the tour ended at the Cross. The group entered a nearby restaurant to share a meal and a final lesson on local cuisine. Hubert stayed close to the left side as the group merged into the restaurant, but when they were all seated, he was startled to discover the strange man sitting, once again, to his right.

The man passed the bread basket to Hubert, and as Hubert tore a piece from the loaf, the man moved closer and whispered to him, “Let anyone with ears listen!”

Perplexed and frustrated, Hubert turned to ask the man what he was about, but the man was gone. He had simply disappeared.

Such a strange man, Hubert thought. Such a very strange man.
And he began to eat the bread, marveling at his sudden hunger.

DEVOTIONAL



Come and See

(John 1:35–39)

MATT RITZERT

St. Jane de Chantal Writing Group

“Come and see.” With three simple words, Jesus Christ invites us to enter into a personal relationship of discovery and transformation.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, we read about Jesus’s encounter with John the Baptist and two of the Baptist’s followers:

“The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God.’ The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come, and you will see.’ So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. It was about four in the afternoon.” (John 1:35–39, NABRE)

These verses contain the first words spoken by Jesus in John’s Gospel. “What are you looking for?” “Come, and you will see.”

John has already been preaching in a mysterious and hopeful way about “a man [who] is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me” (John 1:30). Twice, John has

proclaimed Jesus to be the “Lamb of God.” Now, two of his disciples encounter the “Lamb of God.”

John’s proclamations piqued the interest of his two disciples. They call him “Rabbi,” but Jesus is like no rabbi they’ve ever met before. Hoping to learn more, the men ask Jesus, “Where are you staying?” They want to get to know this man called Jesus and try to figure out what John’s been talking about. Jesus understands. He could have said, “I’m staying over there, by the river.” Jesus could have responded like a typical rabbi and launched into a long explanation about the coming of the Messiah. No, Jesus invited the men to “come and see.” The invitation “to come and see” called the men into action. It was like he was inviting the men into his home, to have dinner, to talk and get to know one another. It was an invitation to come and enter into a friendship.

They came and they saw. To see is more than to simply look. To see is to experience, explore, to understand. Jesus was not inviting the men to come and look at his campsite. Jesus desired that the men spend time with him so that they would see and understand. And what did they see and understand that transformed their lives? Maybe they looked into Jesus’s eyes, which communicated a love as pure as the waters of a mountain stream. Maybe he reached out and touched them with the warmth of a mother’s hand consoling her child. Maybe the Rabbi quoted Isaiah: “Pay attention and come to me; listen, that you may have life. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, the steadfast loyalty promised to David.” (Isaiah 55:3). Maybe Jesus drew his new friends close by the light of the campfire embers and closed the evening by praying the Shema, which begins with these words from Deuteronomy: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4–5, NIV).

He was a complete stranger just a couple hours ago, but now they developed a mystical bond that would transform their lives. The

journey that would lead the men to truly see the “Lamb of God” had just begun, but their hearts were now ready for the invitation to come and see. The burning flame dances and moves and cannot be grasped, but the men knew that flame would be the light to lead them to what they were looking for. And in the morning with hearts burning with a new love, they invited their family and friends to “come and see.”



A Recipe for Daily Living

(Mark 12:28–30)

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In response to a question from a scribe, Jesus says that the first of all commandments is “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:29–30, NABRE).

One might be compelled to ask why we should love God. It’s a fair question, as we can only follow the first commandment if we understand why we ought to do so. Why should we love God? The famous quote from St. Augustine’s *Confessions* best answers this question: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” To love and to be loved is an intrinsic human desire. And only God can fulfill this desire because He is the source of love—Love itself! “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8, RSVCE).

Once we understand the why, we can proceed to the how, and that’s when we usually stray. The greatest commandment can be daunting to someone new to Christianity. Even faithful believers are sometimes disheartened by it. What does it mean to love with

all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength? As broken creatures, are we capable of anything other than broken love?

Love is a choice, not a feeling. We choose whether we want (or not) to put our attention to love, to act with love. And because God is Love itself, the first commandment impels us to choose God in every moment of our lives by applying all our human faculties: intuition (heart), imagination (soul), reason (mind), and will (strength). Rather than an unattainable ideal, the first commandment is a practical recipe for daily living. Like ingredients in a recipe, all these parts of ourselves come together to create a beautiful loaf of love, nourishing our souls and drawing us closer to God.

To love God with all one's heart is to choose love despite one's initial negative emotion. When being wronged, instead of clenching our fist and losing our temper, we invite God into our heart and offer the other cheek (Matthew 5:39). Regardless of our feelings toward someone or something, we direct our heart to God, who is Goodness and Truth itself, and can transform any circumstances through love.

To love God with all one's soul is to glorify God through one's imagination by cultivating the daily habits of reading the Scriptures and praying. Seeing God in the ordinary, contemplating His infinite majesty and higher plans, and being open to hearing His voice are also ways to love God with our imagination.

To love God with one's mind is to use one's intellect to recognize and contemplate God as the eternal, transcendent creator of the universe and everything in it. We can't love what we don't know, so to truly love God we must learn about Him, His words and works. From the books we read and films we watch to the intellectual work we produce, our minds must be directed to God.

To love God with all one's strength is to align one's will to God's will and use one's physical abilities for the glory of God and the service of others. This last piece of God's greatest commandment invites us to go further, as "agape love" is the final ingredient in the

recipe, the yeast that makes the loaf of love rise above our human nature.

The Greek word *agape* refers to the highest form of love that transcends mere feelings, emphasizing choice, action, and commitment. Agape love embodies selflessness, sacrifice, and unconditional care for others. It's the kind of love that arises in the midst of suffering and is concerned with the greatest good of another, rather than the self.

To choose love when things are well is commendable and honorable, but to love when things don't go our way, when others turn their backs, and when God seems silent—that is sacrificial love! That is the meaning of the cross. Jesus loved us even when we turned away and crucified Him. He loved us and the Father with all His strength, unto death. “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends” (John 15:13, NIV).

Agape love does not come naturally to us in our sinful state. However, such love is an integral part of God. By drawing closer to Him, we can love Him back and radiate His love to others. Only through Him can we begin to understand and experience real love. Only in Him can our restless hearts finally rest.



The Unbidden Gift

(John 5:2–9)

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Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep Gate a pool. . . . In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there . . . he said to him, “Do you want to be well?” (John 5:2–6, NABRE)

In this Gospel passage, Jesus meets a man lying by a pool believed to have healing powers. While we don’t know the exact nature of his ailment, it’s likely this man has been ill for most of his life, given the average lifespan at that time. Jesus’s question to him is interesting: “Do you want to be well?” Isn’t the answer obvious?

The man responds, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me” (John 5:7). He doesn’t answer Jesus with an eager “Yes!” anticipating the fulfillment of that desire. He only shares a brief summary of his story: he is alone; he is helpless; on top of that, he has been left behind while others presumably receive the healing he seeks.

We don’t have the benefit of hearing the man’s tone of voice or seeing his facial expression, but we can surmise that he’s discouraged.

Perhaps he's given up hope, and his only consolation is to indulge in self-pity. Or maybe he's stuck in a fixed mindset, unable to imagine another possibility of healing.

How many of us would keep our hope intact in this man's circumstances? Whether it's from an illness, a broken relationship, or another form of suffering, most of us long for healing. We strive for it and even pray for it. Yet when months turn into years and years turn into decades and nothing changes, it's easy to lose hope.

Sometimes, giving up hope is less painful than continuing to be disappointed.

The man by the pool doesn't express faith in Jesus to heal him. Maybe he genuinely lacks faith, or maybe he isn't aware of Jesus's reputation as a miracle-worker. Yet regardless of his faith or lack thereof, his response to Jesus's question illustrates an often-overlooked truth: the best way to approach God is with total honesty.

Instead of rebuking the man for not having greater faith, Jesus tells him to get up and walk (John 5:8). The man obeys. Whether or not he had faith prior to meeting Jesus, he has enough faith now to do the impossible. In the process, he steps into a miracle.

Unlike others in the Gospels who are cured and commended for their faith, this man's discouraged outlook doesn't hinder Jesus from healing him. His story shows that perfect faith isn't a prerequisite for a miracle. Healing cannot be earned—it's a gift.

Whenever we're tempted to lose hope, the story of the man by the pool can give us courage. In our hopeless places, we can find ourselves face-to-face with Jesus, and our honesty with him gives him room to work miracles.

We may receive the healing we desire, or we may receive the one we didn't know we needed. Perhaps we'll receive the seed of a healing that will mature into a beautiful fruit with time. Whatever God gives us, we don't need to worry about meriting the miracle; we only need to receive the gift and act on it.

When we do this, one thing is certain: we will walk away a new person.



Becoming the Apostle to the Apostles: Mary Magdalene, a Luminary of Hope

(John 20:11–18)

C.K. YOO

St. Jane de Chantal Writing Group

In this Gospel, Mary Magdalene is the first to arrive at Jesus's tomb on Sunday morning, only to find it empty. In her distress, she fails to recognize the man standing before her who asks, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" (John 20:15, NABRE). Mistaking him for the gardener, she inquires where he has laid Jesus so that she can take him away. Then the man calls to her, "Mary!" Immediately recognizing the voice of the Good Shepherd who calls his sheep by name, she exclaims, "Rabbouni!" (meaning Teacher) (John 20:16).

Remarkably, Mary became the first witness to the Resurrection. By announcing to the disciples "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18), she became the first apostle to bring the Good News. Jesus challenged social norms, and this instance was no exception. Mary would not have been considered a credible witness by first-century

Jewish society. A woman could not testify as a witness, much less a woman with a past. Why did he choose her?

To understand its significance, let us reflect on Mark 16:9, which tells us that Jesus had cast seven demons out of her. One can only imagine her torment from demonic possession and the healing she received, which enabled her to become a devoted disciple. He did not disqualify or merely fix her; instead, he poured his grace into the depths of her brokenness. His extravagant love utterly transformed her, reaching deeper than sin.

His love ignited her own. Mary became fearless. In John 19, she was one of the few disciples who remained close to Jesus during the Crucifixion, while most had fled. Later, he gave her the glory and joy of hearing his Shepherd's call at the tomb. There, she recognized the victory over sin and death. As someone who had died to her old self and risen to new life through the redemptive power of Christ, she understood that death is not the end.

By choosing Mary, Jesus stands in solidarity with all repentant sinners, affirming that even our worst sins cannot truly separate us from him. He sees us differently than the world does. He sees into our hearts. He sees who we are meant to become. Mary discovered her true dignity by confronting the harsh realities of her weaknesses and sins. Her witness offers hope to all sinners—a hope that continues to heal the world today.

In our secular age, amidst the darkness of addiction, pride, fear, anxiety, confusion, and despair, let us keep coming back to this Gospel. May it speak hope into the places where our culture desperately needs it. May it illumine our hearts during this Jubilee Year as we meditate on its theme: *Spes non confundit* (“Hope does not disappoint”). Like Saint Mary Magdalene, may we navigate our sorrows to rise with Christ toward the ineffable joy that transcends all expectations.



Neither Too Early Nor Too Late to Be First

(Matthew 20:1–16)

JENNIFER TAN

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When we're prompted to believe in or deepen our faith in Jesus Christ, we're also invited to build God's kingdom on earth. What is it like being on this mission? Jesus uses the parable of the laborers in the vineyard to enlighten us.

In the parable, a landowner hired laborers for his vineyard at different times of the day. At the end of the day, he paid them all the usual daily wage, as promised to the first laborers, starting with the last group and ending with the first. On receiving their pay, the first laborers grumbled, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Matt. 20:12).

The landowner was displeased. They had agreed on the pay, and he had the right to pay everyone the usual daily wage, which he considered fair. Jesus seems to affirm his stance by concluding the parable thus: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matt. 20:16).

Isn't it unfair that those who worked the least become first and vice versa?

God also calls us at different times throughout our lives, through various ways—stirrings in our hearts, someone's invitation, or life circumstances, among others. At the end of time, God's promise to us is eternal life. Does Jesus's statement mean that deathbed converts, who would've worked the least, will become first in God's kingdom?

We recall that the landowner didn't vet the laborers' qualifications. He hired everyone he saw who was jobless. Weren't they lucky! Wasn't he worried whether they could deliver? As owner of a vineyard, he knew how to run one. He would have set up everything necessary, including tools and supervisors for his laborers and provisions for their well-being—for example, food and water, shelter for respite, and first aid for emergencies. Similarly, companies in our time offer employee benefits, such as training, free onsite meals, and medical benefits.

Just as the landowner had asked one of the grumblers, "Are you envious because I am generous?" (Matt. 20:15), he might have said to another, "Didn't you notice the provisions at the vineyard? Did you not use them?" Or to others, "You've been in the vineyard all day, and could've used everything I've provided. But these last ones endured the scorching heat almost the whole day by themselves, and would've worried about feeding their families. Don't you see that you'd been better off?"

What could've been the last laborers' responses on receiving their wages? Most would've exclaimed, "What a generous and merciful master! We're blessed to be his workers!" Some might have said, "Thank goodness he paid us first so we can leave immediately; I'm so hungry." Or others: "The day would've been more bearable with the provisions here. I wish I'd been hired earlier."

Which group of laborers would do their best in working for the landowner?

God, too, calls us unconditionally. Answering his call gives us the privilege of building his kingdom on earth. However, we still have to bear “the burden of the day and the scorching heat”—the challenges and temptations of the world. We can take heart, though, that God will give us the necessary abilities and his Church to help us weather them. He who calls us desires us to be first in his kingdom.

Should God call, would we rather answer him earlier or later?



Hope in the Hour of Suffering

MATTHEW EARLE

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What treasures we can witness in nature. Even moments we miss can be captured and played again on command. Technology allows us to condense days of footage into less than a minute. During a time-lapse video of an Easter lily, it will effortlessly bloom and then wither and fade.

Watch a time-lapse video of a dandelion. It simply responds to the rays of the sun. The outer layer of petals open up first to stretch. Then, a second layer explodes to gather up every ounce of light. The days it took for this phenomenon to happen seem to be spent in pure bliss. Something so small and meek as a flower can strike such awe in us.

These are troubling times. Troubles that can swallow someone up, that seem too big to face. As if storm clouds have rolled over the light. Our faith wavers like a small flower in a strong wind. A desperate call slips from our lips for deliverance from our predicament, from the suffering received at the hands of our perceived enemies.

Jesus called out in similar fashion in the Gospel of John: “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’?” (John 12:27, RSVCE).

His humanity is on full display as he names his misery. So often we find ourselves either despairing or heaping hot coals upon our heads. As we question our value and worth, our purpose in life is sucked up in an isolating storm. We condemn ourselves, which leaves us questioning our own existence.

Why are we here?

When faced with suffering, we can easily slip into despair. What's the remedy? When Jesus was troubled, he answered by saying: "No, for this purpose I have come to this hour" (John 12:27).

He does not command the suffering to cease. He is not asking for a simple life, void of pain. He trusts the Father as completely as we trust the sun to rise each day. Jesus desires the Father's will to be done.

We do not know the limitless ways of the Father, so we trust in him. And when we surrender our attempts to control our situation, we can let the light in. The warmth can expand our hearts as we detach from our anxious needs.

Our pain is real. The loss of a close friend or job, facing pressure at work, politics. Pain from strained relationships, families and nations being torn apart.

How can we hold onto hope?

By accepting that the Father's radiance is real. As the dandelion opens from the warmth of the sun, so can our hearts open. And as our hearts explode, amid suffering, there is Jesus. Jesus, the one who dwells in the secret chamber of our hearts—the second layer of petals. The one who questioned his Father when troubled. He is there to embrace us in our own suffering as we trust and surrender to the Father who loved us first.

We can choose to receive the light each hour so that when we look back on our life, we do not see a gift wasted, but God glorified. We can hope in the face of suffering. How? By turning and opening up to the Father and accepting that our current hour is of God.



Living Water

(John 7:37–39)

PATRICK JOHNSON

St. Jane de Chantal Writing Group

Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture says: “Rivers of living water will flow from within him.” [Jesus] said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive. (John 7:37–39, NAB)

Thirst. Such a basic human need, and yet so sublime. Does any word define the human heart more? Is not the human being constitutively thirst and desire? Not for mere water, mind you, but for truth, love, goodness, beauty, happiness, justice—and the list goes on. Moreover, no matter how much we have of something good that is limited, we always want more, or for it to last. We crave, we thirst for, we need the infinite, the eternal!

God knows this motor in our hearts. He put that thirst in us. He deliberately engineered our hearts such that they would propel us in the general direction of Himself, precisely through desire for the infinite and eternal. The result is that before we are even looking for God, God has already found us! He has found us at the foundation of our hearts. And what happens if we follow that blueprint of desire to its true end? We arrive at Jesus, the infinite incarnate, perhaps after

a long and tiring and painful search. Yes, Jesus finally gives us what we need to live spiritually: the Living Water, the Holy Spirit. God has led us to God who gives us God, and we taste God's true life.

However, even in the presence of Jesus, the process of satiation is not automatic. An additional perquisite is required to drink and, as Jesus said, to let the Living Water flow from within oneself. That necessity is faith. Faith must recognize that God is good and Christ present, offering that exceptional drink for which we have been looking, and indeed that its givers have been looking for us! Faith is the door by which the Living Water can present and enter and start to bring life to our decaying sinful selves, and in turn begin to make us spreading conduits of Living Water to recreate the world.

Such a project requires proper working order. One cannot simply choose to take a little bit here, believe a little bit there. No. Jesus has his sights set on something much greater. He desires the whole person, and the whole world; and to irrigate them correctly, he demands the centermost place in each one's heart. One meaning of the context of Christ's cry being on the last day of a Jewish feast reliving the anticipation for the Promised Land (Jn 7:37a, see Ex 16), is that exactly at the height of our religious expectation, Jesus proposes himself as a new Center, soliciting a yes or no. Recall how Jesus Christ redeemed the Samaritan woman at the well, whose heart was divided between five previous husbands (John 4:16–19). He said to her, "Whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst" (John 4:14). Her life said, I am unsatisfied. His gaze said, You are mine.

The Lord is not just talk. "He loved his own in the world and he loved them unto the end" (John 13:1). Jesus died and rose for us sinners. He left us the Sacraments; his blood and water poured out such Mercy from his side on the Cross. He did that for you, for me. What is more, He does it every day in the re-presentation of his sacrifice in the Mass and its heavenly counterpart beyond the veil. He has been raised and ascended to heaven, and from his Risen

depths he continues to dispense the Living Water of the Holy Spirit on his faithful People who continue their yes. Come Holy Spirit, fall afresh on me!

Thirst. It is the insatiable ingredient of the human 'I.' It is the beginning of the renewal of ourselves and of the world. Thirst is God's finger within us begging us to seek Him out soon for a fulfilling drink only he can provide, no one else.



The Cup of Life

(John 7:37–39)

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On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood up and exclaimed, “Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: ‘Rivers of living water will flow from within him.’” He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive. There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified. (John 7:37–39, NABRE)

Jesus is always waiting for us at the well of life, with his cup of salvation. He invites us to give him our sins and take the cup. Jesus gave us life through his Crucifixion and Resurrection from the dead. In the Passion of Christ, we participate in the sharing of God’s spirit—the rivers of living water flow through us as believers in Christ. Anyone who thirsts is invited to believe in Christ and drink from his cup. We are glorified in and through Christ’s Passion. The struggle to be real is difficult. We want to just be, but our attachments to the world require us to stay busy. The world wants us to be busy doing and not being. Yet we yearn to be about love, as God is love. Every day in our ego’s forgetfulness, we try to reach God through our merit. We forget that it is God’s grace that saves

us. Each day, each hour, each minute, each moment, we can start again and just love. It is only through prayer that we find the straight path, as we are tempted to move through the mazes of worldly attachments. We find that focusing our attention and disciplining ourselves to prayer is the soothing balm that we need to start the process of turning away from sin and looking to God more steadily.

In prayer, we find ourselves falling deeper and deeper in love with our Creator. We seek prayer as we seek to spend time with our beloved Savior. The more we pray, the easier it gets to remember in the moments of difficult times that prayer is where we will find the answers to our problems and the relief to what ails us. We remember that Jesus is with us, ready for us to hand him our attachments to sin.

Open up to the rivers of living water, let it wash over you as it nourishes you and everyone around you with the love of God.



Help My Unbelief

(Mark 9:14–27)

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A man and his son are waiting at the foot of a mountain, desperate for Jesus's return from the summit where he has been with three of his Apostles. An evil spirit has kept the boy from speaking or hearing since he was a child. It continually threatens his life. Waiting with the two are the other nine Apostles, a large crowd, and some religious leaders. They are arguing.

Imagine the scene from the boy's perspective. It might look something like this:

Unable to hear or to speak for as long as he can remember, the boy tugs on his father's robe and points toward the mountain, its summit bathed in a cloud of white light. Jesus and three of his Apostles cut a striking silhouette as they approach from a distance. The boy turns to see his father wave his arms, trying to get the crowd's attention to tell them the rabbi draws near. Locked in rancor, no one notices.

Amidst the silent clamor, the boy knows they are shouting. He can see it in the contortion of their faces, the spray of saliva accompanying angry words. He knows it's about him. It's always

about him. Holy men like the scribes will not tolerate demons, and everyone says that's what he is.

As Jesus advances toward this unruly knot of humanity, Scripture tells us, the awestruck crowd runs to greet him. Perhaps they had heard that this itinerant rabbi is a miracle-worker who changed water into wine at a wedding, that he provided food to thousands with only a young boy's picnic of five loaves and two fish. Did they know that Jesus touched a leper? That he heals the sick? Is it true that demons flee from him? Some say he raises the dead.

When Jesus asks about the argument, the father answers from the crowd that it's about his son. An evil spirit has been trying to kill the boy since he was a child. The Apostles, the man explains, could not cast it out. When Jesus hears of the demon-possessed child, he is overcome. "You faithless generation," Jesus laments, "how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me" (Mark 9:19).

Scripture doesn't tell us how the father reacted to Jesus's outburst. Perhaps he stepped back, startled, possibly even afraid. Even so, the passage affirms that the father persists in seeking Jesus's help. When the boy is brought to Jesus, the demon throws the child around like a rag. The boy's father begs Jesus for help, even as he qualifies his entreaty: "But if you are able to do anything," he begins, "have pity on us and help us" (Mark 9:22).

"If you are able!" Jesus replies. "All things can be done for the one who believes" (Mark 9:23).

Believes? Believes what? Believes how? In whom? How much faith is required?

With Jesus's earlier lament, "You faithless generation," still hanging in the air, the father immediately blurts out what Jesus said is necessary.

"I believe" (Mark 9:24).

In the face of uncertainty and a desperate need to hope, the man continues without pause:

“Help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

With those words—“I believe; help my unbelief!”—the boy’s father seems to fling his meager faith toward the healer, hoping, trusting, that, in Jesus’s loving hands, it is enough.

And it is.

Scripture tells us that Jesus rebukes the evil spirit, commands it to come out of the child and never enter him again. It convulses the boy violently and leaves him as dead. Jesus takes the boy by the hand and raises him up, whole, healed.

Imagine the boy clear-eyed, clear-headed, ears unstopped, tongue unstuck, brand-new, returning Jesus’s gaze of love. Do they speak? Is Jesus’s voice the first thing the boy hears? Scripture doesn’t say, but we can imagine the father weeping for joy. He, too, is new.

How much faith is enough?

Faith is a slippery thing. It can be elusive. Questions and doubt may bring us to our knees in anguish, searching for answers. Or it may bring us to gaze on the face of Jesus, listening for his voice, trusting in his love.

I believe; help my unbelief! It is enough. Let Jesus do the rest.



Taking Up Our Cross

(Luke 9:23)

DONNA M. LANE

St. Gertrude the Great Writing Group

Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23)

We take up many things casually every day, most without thinking: our mail, a neighbor’s wave, dinner from the oven, a child from its crib. Taking/receiving becomes synonymous by the time we are adults. If somebody gives us a gift when it’s not a birthday or holiday, we usually receive (not take) it with joyful surprise and, perhaps, a bit of self-consciousness. Jesus’s saying that we must take up our cross is confusing. Take up? When? How? Why? That he endured so much for us is beyond our ability to fully comprehend, but do we need to follow his example in order to enter his kingdom? Both Luke and Mark present this teaching by Jesus as a conditional invitation: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23–24; cf. Mark 8:34–35).

The terms are few, hard, and start with an if. “Take up” involves a clear two-step direction for claiming our own cross: (1) a deliberate

action (2) enabled by a painful how: denying ourselves. Why? Jesus says we must lose our life if we want to save it. That paradoxical condition moves the casual act of taking to a difficult choice. Luke alone among the Gospel writers adds the word daily, determining the when and underscoring its difficulty.

As his life on earth drew to a close, the tone of Jesus's teaching may have had to become more emphatic, perhaps because he was trying to jog the Apostles out of familiar doubt and uncertainty into understanding his purpose. Jesus knew the Apostles before he chose them. He had seen them jump over, around, and through faith, sifting, shifting between the evidence of his parables and teachings, needing his forgiveness, his ready acceptance, and great love. Jesus had been patiently revealing "his way" as they got to know him, but time was short.

The Apostles had just returned from their initiation into proclaiming Jesus's kingdom, to tell him with great enthusiasm the details of their success; they had witnessed Lazarus being raised from death by Jesus and, most recently, had assisted him in the feeding of the five thousand. But when Jesus asked them, "Who do you say I am?" (Luke 9:18–21), only Peter could identify him as the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus knew that his leaving was near and that most of his closest companions would not be with him when he showed on his cross how much he loved them.

Recoiling from pain and suffering might be a normal, human reaction, but if the first impressions from Luke's passage cause us to recoil and turn away, we might never see that this pronouncement by Jesus could make sense. As good as earthly life can be, it is always shadowed by the cloud of sin, the threat of death, and drastic change, making it hard to consider that his suffering and death were an act of divine love meant to repair man's relationship with the source of all life. Perhaps anyone who has not experienced failure, heartache, and the agony of death in their life might not. Even confirmed

followers of Jesus talk constantly in their songs and novels about how difficult it is.

The ordinary men at that Last Supper the night before Jesus was crucified must have had intentions to further enjoy his friendship, know him better, understand more clearly his peaceful way of living, remain near his profound goodness. The Crucifixion of Jesus interrupted their plans, just as seeing injustice and poverty pit modern man's enjoyment of material abundance against our intentions to love and serve others. Like Peter, who denied Jesus, we may stand close to the fire of life, but fail to see its light, feel its warmth, or comprehend our power to give and receive love. We see suffering everywhere and deny it by wishing it would go away. Perhaps, as for Peter, a loving look from Jesus's eyes can steady us into accepting the challenge of following him and his way of living.

Can we humans admit that denying ourselves is not impossible? Don't we do so every time we stop what we are doing to respond to another's need? Jesus says to take up our cross if we are to enter His kingdom. Don't we do that when we allow traffic to merge ahead, mow our aging neighbor's lawn, spend Saturdays off helping groups fund charities, honor our parents through trying end-of-life issues, and go about our day-to-day following the most peaceful path? Could taking up our cross be easier if we let go of the useless things that exhaust our hearts? Could we begin a better life by losing ourselves as Jesus did, thinking about others? What would we learn by trying to pray as Jesus did: "Not my will, Father, but yours"?

Luke 9:28 states that eight days after Jesus's sayings about following him, Peter, James and John were with him at his glorious Transfiguration. In 2 Peter 1:16–19, a much older, wiser, and more saintly Peter gives detailed testimony that at the Transfiguration they heard a voice from heaven proclaiming, "This is my Son, my beloved with whom I am well pleased, listen to him."

If we pause for a moment to take a second look at the teachings of Jesus, we may discover that our first impression gives way to a

deeper, yet straightforward, simplicity that draws us beyond our usual thinking. Can we listen to Jesus's appeal long enough to hear the difference in his voice and ours? Instead of debating what to take up, if we try following Jesus by taking up the cross, we could, like his Apostles, grow in understanding and come to experience a new, more fulfilling way of being.

