

40 **FOR** **YOU**
mind | body | spirit
CUC LENTEN WELLNESS

The In-Person Passion
Daily Lenten Devotions
2021

Introduction

As part of Concordia's annual Lenten wellness campaign, "40 For You", we are again providing short, daily devotions for the entire Concordia community. This year we've partnered with area churches, schools and institutions of the LCMS Northern Illinois District. Together we are in ministry, in the word, and in fellowship as we journey to the cross and anticipate the celebration of the Resurrection. You'll find devotions written by Concordia students, faculty and staff; area pastors and educators; and lay leaders who share in the common work the Lord has entrusted to us.

We're all tired of Zoom. We long for physical interaction, crowded ball parks, a night out, and the open-throated singing of the great hymns of Christmas or Easter. Our theme for this year's devotion, "The In-Person Passion", highlights the full, physical reality of Christ's suffering for us. This was not a virtual event. We've asked our contributors to reflect for us on a single object, item, or place Christ physically encountered in the Passion narrative: the spit which struck his face, the seals which secured his tomb, the scourge which ripped his body, etc. Our prayer is that this theme draws us into the physical reality of Christ's work while reminding us of his "love unknown" (Lutheran Service Book 430). He endured live and in-person all this for us and our salvation.

The devotions will be sent via email; they can be found on the website (CUChicago.edu/40-for-you); the LCMS Northern Illinois District will distribute them through social media; and printed copies will be available throughout campus. If you'd like a PDF copy of the full booklet, reach out to us: jeff.leininger@CUChicago.edu.

The 40 reflections are meant to be used daily, Monday through Saturday, from Ash Wednesday (February 17) through Holy Saturday (April 3).^{*} If one of your Lenten disciplines is to read a daily devotion, these will be perfect for you! However, if you miss a day or two along the way, don't worry. You'll find much benefit for your spiritual health, regardless of how you use this book.

May God richly bless our Lenten journey together!

Pastor Leininger

^{*} Sundays are considered "in" but not "of" Lent, making the total number of days 46. Use the six Sundays as a time for corporate worship online or at Church, while reading a devotion for each of the other forty days. Unless otherwise noted, scriptural references are from the Christian Standard Bible.

Wednesday, February 17

Ash Wednesday

The Darkness

After receiving the piece of bread, he [Judas] immediately left. And it was night.

John 13:30

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land.

Matthew 27:45

The central events of Passion Week take place under cover of darkness, beginning with Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Judas leaves Jesus and the disciples in the Upper Room, and he steps out into the night. He will soon bring a group of torch-bearing soldiers to the Garden, where he will betray the Son of Man with a kiss. The torch-lights may help them find Jesus, but they do not mitigate the spiritual darkness of the scene. Night only underscores the dark heart of the betrayer. Powers of cosmic darkness are at work, attempting to extinguish the Light of the World.

These dark forces put Jesus on trial, convict Him, subject Him to mockery and torture, and finally nail Him to a cross. As Jesus endures this anguish for our salvation, the natural world underscores the moment. Darkness covers the earth for three hours. The eternal Son of God, the Light of Light, is about to breathe His last breath. For a moment, the power of darkness appears to hold sway, and Jesus calls to His Father, asking why He has been forsaken. The world has seen no darker moment, but the darkness does not have the final say. After three dark days in the tomb, Jesus emerges as victor over death, a living, eternal Light that shines into every dark moment we experience.

The Advent Service of Lessons and Carols concludes with a collect that declares, "O God . . . you once broke into the darkness of this world to shine with the brightness of the true Light." On Good Friday, the opposite appeared to be the case: darkness "broke into" that afternoon on Calvary. The night, however, was only temporary. In a similar way, darkness sometimes appears to break into *our* lives. Dark powers encourage us to despair, but the message is false. The "true Light" came into the world, lived, died, and rose again for our salvation. His grace and truth illuminate every aspect of our lives. His victory assures us of ultimate victory over our darkness, in whatever form it takes.

David Rogner, CUC Faculty

Thursday, February 18

The Bread

*As they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, gave it to the disciples,
and said, "Take and eat it; this is my body."*

Matthew 26:26

It was when our children were young. "I'm hungee," the child said. I knew what the little one meant.

"Yes, you're our honey," I teased.

"No, I'm hungee." Yes, hungry!

What are you hungry for these days? What are you desiring? Have you hungered lately for what is wrong before our holy God and spiritually dangerous? Yes, we all have. We have selfishly desired revenge, gossip, power, lust, lazy leisure, self-security and much more. No excuses or blame needed, but confession and repentance are!

Jesus knew what those early disciples needed and what His people have needed through the ages. Himself! He knows best what you and I need right now! As He reclines with them at the Passover table, He takes the unleavened bread, and gives them the better meal. In this meal He is present in the bread... and the wine, "This is my body and this is my blood." As we partake we remember His past work of redemption and receive its blessings, celebrate His real presence in the meal now and as a "foretaste of the feast to come." Simple bread and wine become so much more with His Word spoken in the Sacramental Action.

I remember one of my seminary professors commenting on the bread in the Lord's Supper, that it "speaks to the harshness of life." It's followed by the "sweetness of the wine" which brings joy. Together, this Sacrament renews us and brings us life that is truly life and salvation that connects us to a glorious eternity.

The Lord still feeds us in the wilderness of life lest we become bitter and hunger for the wrong things. Jesus desires that you do not live death, but live life! Jesus says, "I am the Bread of Life" (John 6:35). And yes, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6).

What we need, the Lord generously gives! Himself, given and shed for you! It never stops with you but flows through you to a hungry world. How is the world in which you live noticing that you have tasted the Lord is good?

Lord Jesus, create in us a hunger for your righteousness, generously given. Help us feed others with what we have received from you and in you with joy and generosity. Amen

Allan Buss, LCMS Northern Illinois District

Friday, February 19

The Cross: The Throne of Reconciliation

For in him [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1:20

In a world so polarized and broken, the concept of reconciliation seems to be misplaced, illogical, and impossible even. We see this throughout Scripture, for from the eating of the forbidden fruit, God and man were separated from one another, with little hope of reconciliation. Anytime God reached out to His chosen people, He was rejected and abandoned. And yet, while man may have been faithless, God remained faithful, and the fullness of that faithfulness became incarnate, dwelling in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose mission was to eternally “reconcile to himself all things.” And, as St. Paul tells us, the means of that reconciliation is the cross.

The cross is the bridge between God and man, the fullest expression of God’s grace and mercy in Christ, the site of true reconciliation between sinners and the sinless One. It is upon this cursed tree that the Son of God carries every last sin of man, nailing that debt to the cross and erasing it once and for all (Colossians 2:14). It is upon this instrument of torture that the Lamb of God is sacrificed, shedding His body and blood so that we might be atoned for, set free, and reunited with Him. This is the Prince of Peace upon his throne, killing the hostility once and for all (Ephesians 2:16) so that our old selves, who were estranged in our sin and shame, might be drowned and reborn in Christ’s saving bath, a new creation.

The most profound truth of the Christian faith is that we have a God who comes to us, a God whose love is so deep that He walks the way of the cross, so that by His suffering and death, by “the blood of his cross,” we might be renewed, restored, and reconciled to the Father. And it is this message of the cross, this ministry of reconciliation that God charges His church to proclaim and to hold fast to (2 Corinthians 5:18), especially in times of suffering and separation.

Lord God, during this Lenten season, may Your cross remind us that through Christ, we have been reconciled to You. Amen.

Joshua Teggatz, CUC '21

Saturday, February 20

The Great Stone

*And placed it in his new tomb, which he had cut into the rock.
He left after rolling a great stone against the entrance of the tomb.*

Matthew 27:60

A massive stone closed Christ to the world with even more finality than a nail driven into a coffin. This rock, fitted to the tomb's entrance and sealed with wax, seems to be the end of hope for the disciples of Jesus. It likely took many strong men and animals to roll it into place; there is no way that a dead man could break the seal and move the rock from within the tomb.

Without God, every human being is in the same state as Christ was right then. We are dead in our sin and sealed from goodness, trapped inside a pitch-black tomb; however, unlike Jesus, ours is a tomb that we deserve, even a tomb of our own creation. Alone, we have no hope of escape; for we have no light to see our grave's exit, we lack the strength to move the stone, and, of course, we are simply dead.

When Joseph of Arimathea walked away from the tomb which he had donated to Jesus, he almost certainly had no hope of seeing his Master again. All lost hope, and all lost faith in Jesus' promise that he would rise. However, Christ defied the despair of his disciples. He rose from the grave, defeated death, and escaped from his tomb – a feat impossible for man, but quite possible for God. And in this act, Christ not only proved that he could take up his own life again, he also made clear that he could and would raise his disciples, too. He proved that, though we are weak, he is strong enough to roll away the stone from our tomb, bright enough to show us the way out of sin, and so alive that his new and restored life is contagious. He restores our hope when we have none and gives us the faith that we lack so that we can live forever with him, not in the dim caves and tombs, but in his light, which illuminates Heaven.

Christ, thank you for freeing us from our dark tombs to spend eternity in Heaven with you. Please give us hope and faith when we lack it and grant us life forevermore. In Your Name, Amen.

Nathaniel Bauman, CUC '23

Monday, February 22

The Pieces of Silver: Clinking Coins and Cocks Crowing

Then one of the Twelve, the man called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they weighed out thirty pieces of silver for him. And from that time he started looking for a good opportunity to betray him.

Matthew 26:14-16

Good Friday. In the six hours between Jesus arrest and the nails piercing his hands, there are two dramatic accounts of remorse for betrayal. Both events involved men who had followed him, heard his words, and seen his miracles for 3 years. The events happened less than 800 meters from one another. Yet, they were an eternity apart.

Peter, in the courtyard of Caiaphas the High Priest, denies he knows Jesus. The moment he realized he fulfilled the words of Jesus, "Before the cock crows, you will have betrayed me three times," "He went outside and wept bitterly."

Judas, at the temple and full of remorse, seeks to return the money his coconspirators gave him to betray Jesus, he cries out, "I have sinned, for I have shed innocent blood."

Here is where these similar stories diverge. What happens next has been both an example and a warning to those who seek after Jesus for the last two thousand years. Remorse is as inevitable as sin. We all sin, and we all carry around remorse, and shame, and regret. The question is, what do we do with it? Where do we go with it?

Judas turned inward. He looked at his sin and thought, "I must make up for this, and I have to make this right." He had taken 30 silver pieces to betray Jesus. If he could give it back, then all would be restored. Of course, he found out what everyone finds out: this never works. Those who had so willingly patted him on the back, giving him the money, now shun him and its return. "What is that to us, that's your responsibility," they sneered at Judas as he tried to atone for his sin. He left hopeless.

Peter, on the other hand, was willing to trust the strength of God's grace to withstand the weight of his sin. We don't see it until Easter morning. When Peter heard rumors of Jesus resurrection, he runs TOWARD the tomb. He runs TOWARD Jesus. If he thought he had to be worthy in himself, he would have run the other way.

Thus we come to the well-worn pathway of Lent. It is a time of remorse, repentance, reflection. But the question still remains, where do we take our sin and shame and regret? We can try to "give enough" or even "give up enough" to make up for our failings. Like Judas we will find our efforts are never enough, simply bouncing back at us like coins on a stone floor. Or we can run to Jesus. We can run to his forgiveness, his grace, his inexplicable mercy, and find ourselves standing upon the rock of grace. Follow the path of grace.

Matt Hoffmann, St. Andrews Lutheran Church & School, Park Ridge, IL

Tuesday, February 23

The Spear

But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.

John 19:34 (ESV)

Roman soldiers were known to carry a couple of different types of spears. Slender like a javelin they would typically be thrust or thrown. Made out of metal, with a point or barb at the end, a soldier's spear was more than capable of producing deadly bodily harm.

Whether it was a thin variety or a wider variety of spear that was thrust into Jesus's side is not important. Scripture tells us that a soldier's spear pierced the side of Jesus. The spear did not kill him, but the spear did serve to demonstrate proof of His death. The pierce of the spear immediately produced blood and water from the body of Jesus. Oftentimes legs of the crucified were broken to prove or hasten death--not so with Jesus. Scripture was fulfilled and not a bone was broken (John 19:36). Jesus had already willingly given his life.

He was pierced for our transgressions....with his wounds we are healed (Isaiah 53:5). It is the holy precious blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). In the living water of our baptism we have forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.

Our resurrected Lord instructed Thomas to put out his hand, and place it in His side. "Do not disbelieve, but believe" (John 20:27). Thanks be to God who gives us the victory.

Jesus, It is with your wounds I am healed. Only your sacrificial love provides the forgiveness I need. Keep me faithful unto you. Amen

Stephen P. Zielke, St. Peter Lutheran Church and School, Schaumburg, IL

Wednesday, February 24

The Torn Curtain

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

Luke 23:44-45 (ESV)

As if the Passion of Christ was not a real enough moment of suffering and pain, at our Lord's last breath the world became dark and the sanctuary's curtain was torn asunder. This great destruction seems to highlight even more the fracturing of humanity from each other and from our Light; however, the tearing of the curtain serves only to brighten our futures. Separating the people from the temple's holy sanctuary, the curtain had served as a divider itself. It had separated God's people from His holy place. Now, this boundary, which the Fall necessitated, has been stripped away and our lives can be reunited with him.

Before Christ died for us, God's people had to go to the temple to receive forgiveness for their sins during specified times and specific occasions. Now, instead of having access only to God's grace at the temple, through Christ's word and sacraments, we can be in communion with him and benefit from all of his great gifts at any time and from anywhere.

In times such as this, we must remember that regardless of what physical boundaries might exist right now for us, and no matter the distance and space between, God's grace is everywhere and never can be separated from us.

Thank you, God, for sending Your only Son, Our Lord, to show us your grace and to help us know and remember Your love and caring for each of us at all times. Thank You for Your support and we give You thanks for being there for us in all ways, in all places. Please let us live our lives in thanksgiving for Your grace. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Abigail Merkler, CUC '21

Thursday, February 25

The Scourge/Whip for Flogging

*So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas,
and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.*

Mark 15:15

Scourging was a particularly insidious punishment that the Romans inflicted on prisoners. Scourging was done primarily before crucifixion. The Roman whip (flagellum) was made of leather thongs knotted with metal, bone and sometimes contained a hook at the end. This construction allowed for maximum penetration of the flesh, excruciating pain, and often resulted in death.

The Prophet Isaiah provides insight into the scourging of Jesus. “But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and ***with his stripes we are healed.***” *Isaiah 53:5*

You and I are humbled that our sins led our Savior to suffer this punishment – ***with his stripes we are healed!*** You and I are humbled at the love Jesus shows to the Heavenly Father that he would willingly endure this punishment, our punishment – ***with his stripes we are healed!*** You and I are humbled that our Lord Jesus loves us so much that he takes upon himself our transgressions and iniquities – ***with his stripes we are healed!***

You and I can be confident that the price for sin has been paid in full. Jesus sheds his blood at the end of a whip and through the nails on the cross, thus becoming the Sin Offering for all mankind. Our relationship to God has been restored. “*Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and ***with his stripes we are healed.****”

Heavenly Father we are humbled by the love you have shown us. You have redeemed us through the suffering, death and resurrection of your beloved son. May your Holy Spirit be with us as we live at peace knowing that our sins are forgiven. Amen.

Dan Green, St. John Lutheran Church and School, Chicago, IL

Friday, February 26

The Towel in the Upper Room

“[Jesus] rose from supper and laid aside His [outer] garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.”

John 13:4-5 (NKJV)

The NKJV is used specifically because of the word ‘girded.’ It’s a word that speaks of action, of readying for battle, of preparing oneself for something difficult or challenging. Jesus was certainly girding himself for what was ahead.

The towel was part of a lesson for the disciples about humility. Just before his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus told the disciples, “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Matthew 20:26-28

The task that was reserved for the lowliest slave was lovingly performed by the King of Kings. The towel that girded Jesus was used to clean and dry the feet of his disciples. There was no soap to go along with the water. The dirt and animal waste that wasn’t cleaned off by Jesus’ hands was cleaned by that towel. That towel must have been filthy after removing dirt from 12 pairs of feet. The dirty towel reminds us that all of our righteousness is as a filthy rag.

So Jesus cleaned the disciples’ feet as he prepared, as he girded Himself, for the war about to take place. In his victory over the devil, Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection would cleanse all people from the filth of sin and bring us to eternal life with him in heaven.

The towel – a hint of the epic battle to come. The towel – a sign of true humility through serving others. The towel – a reminder of how the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin.

Gracious Lord, we are humbled that You sent Your son, Jesus, to endure the suffering and death that is rightfully ours. Keep us mindful of that tremendous sacrifice every day. Help us to live as Your redeemed children. In Jesus’ most precious name we pray.

Sue Green, LCMS Northern Illinois District

Saturday, February 27

The High Priest's Robes: Clothes [Do Not] Make the Man

*Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has blasphemed!
Why do we still need witnesses? See, now you've heard the blasphemy.*

Matthew 26:65

Ever since Adam and Eve made leafy garments humans have worn clothing to cover our nakedness. Sometimes garments are merely functional (who else wore their pj's every day in the midst of the pandemic?) but more often they are a matter of fashion. Shakespeare, Homer, and even modern-day poet ZZ Top know the value of a "sharp dressed man." Clothing is part of who we are as people. "Clothes make the man," Mark Twain said, "Naked people have little or no influence on society." While we understand Twain's comical sentiment to be true in most cases, it is NOT true in one very important one.

The "clothes made the man" for the high priest, Caiaphas, who met secretly late one night, with other well-dressed councilmen, to hear testimony against a man claiming to be the Son of God. After asking Jesus point-blank "are you the Christ, the Son of the Living God?" – and after Jesus answers in the affirmative – Caiaphas, enraged at this 'blasphemous' reply, tares his fine robes while the rest of the council speaks a sentence of death.

This robe - a sign of either his priestly authority, but more probably his affluence - covered his sinful heart. Sins of pride and arrogance and unbelief were covered by the finest threads. Yet his poor, sinful heart was exposed the instant he tore them in two.

If only he had recalled the prophet who writes, "Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity" (Joel 2:13).

Yet the sentence remained death. And so this well-dressed HUMAN, who tore his clothing, condemns GOD to death. Men dressed Jesus in purple robes to mock him. Stripped him bare to be beaten and scourged. They hung him on a tree, naked and exposed, for the world to look upon his shame. Yet it was the nakedness of Christ that revealed his true heart. A heart that beats not in anger, but in love and compassion. A heart that lived to serve. A heart that stopped beating – so that your sins might be forgiven. A heart that beats once again for eternity – so we too might live forever. A heart that belongs to a naked man who changed the world for good.

God of grace – you clothe us, not only with garments from the earth, but with Christ's robes of righteousness. His beating heart lived for us. His broken heart pleaded for mercy on our behalf. His dead heart won our forgiveness. As his heart beats again, forever, so make ours to pulse with your life-giving Spirit. Fill our hearts with love and compassion, so that regardless of what our outer clothing may be – others might see your heart in us, and come to be clothed with Christ as well. Amen.

Nathan Erb, Immanuel Lutheran Church and School, Crystal Lake, IL

Monday, March 1

The Staff/The Reed

*And twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand.
And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"
And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head.*

Matthew 27:29-30 (ESV)

Jesus was bullied. The King of all kings was belittled by bullies. A large battalion of Roman soldiers stripped him of his whip-tattered clothes. They put a scarlet robe on him, impaled his flesh with a crown of thorns, and "put a reed in his right hand." That reed was the kind of stick used in beating his flesh; and the same kind of stick that held up a sponge of wine-vinegar to his blood-soaked lips.

This was a royal sham. The soldiers were mocking the Lord of lords, inserting a flimsy staff into the place where a king would hold his scepter. In the ancient world, kings carried scepters of ivory or gold as a sign of their office. Ivory and gold are strong, but this staff was not. It was a flimsy reed, a weak and pathetic scepter, chosen for a Man who looked incredibly pathetic and weak. The bloody ears of Jesus then heard the soldiers crying out sarcastically, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

Why did the King of kings endure such mockery? So that bullies could be part of his Kingdom; so that you could be part of his Kingdom. Now before you say, "But I am no bully!"; consider the times when you have belittled others with your sinful thoughts and hurtful words.

We all fall short of the glory of God, which is why Christ followed the Father's plan. It was the only way for you to be part of his royal reign for now and forever!

How much does Jesus love you? He loves you so much that he allowed himself to be bullied for you. He paid the price for all of your sins so you could live in the joy of a kingdom where no unkind words will ever be spoken.

*Lord Jesus, my crucified King, thank You for everything You endured out of love for me. In Your holy name.
Amen.*

Mike Gudgel, St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lemont, IL

Tuesday, March 2

The Seamless Undergarment

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, a part for each soldier. They also took the tunic, which was seamless, woven in one piece from the top.

John 19:23

There are certain moments in life that remind us we are *not* in control. Things happen to us that we could never predict, never plan, never see coming, and are helpless to do anything about. These are moments when we feel powerless, hopeless, and lost. It happens when we get the diagnosis we thought we'd never hear. When our job is taken from us out of the blue. When a loved one dies much too young.

As Jesus was led to the cross, it looked like one of those times. In fact, Jesus looked rather powerless and weak. As He was mocked, ridiculed, and stripped naked, it seemed like Jesus was losing to the forces of sin and evil. It felt like there was nothing He could do. It looked like things were spinning wildly out of control.

But, the seamless undergarment that was stripped from Jesus and gambled over tells another story. It tells us that this was all a part of God's plan. None of this was an accident. In fact, this moment was planned and prepared for long ago. After all, Psalm 22:18 spoke about this very moment centuries before. God had seen this coming, even if no one else did.

The seamless undergarment, the one taken from Jesus and spoken of in Psalm 22, reminds us that Jesus was in control as He laid down His life. Nothing was taken from Him, not His clothes and definitely not His life. It was all given away out of love. The seamless undergarment reminds us that the cross was a choice, and one that God made joyfully. It reminds us that Calvary was not a place of loss or defeat, but of victory and life.

Jesus willingly sacrificed His life as one who was firmly in control. He took control of His death, in order to bring you life. That's how much He loves you.

Peter Berauer, Living Christ Lutheran Church, Arlington Heights, IL

Wednesday, March 3

The Sword in the Garden

*Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's servant, and cut off his right ear.
(The servant's name was Malchus.)*

John 18:10

The sword. It is often thought of as a symbol of valor—think of the US Marines dress sword; or even justice (The Sword in the Stone and the legend of King Arthur). Although those connotations do exist, the sword reference in this gospel passage has always disturbed me, as it reminds me of how quick we are as humans to resort to violence to express our negative feelings and frustrations.

When I was a freshman in college, my grandfather sent his one and only letter he ever wrote me. The closing of the letter has stuck with me ever since; it was a simple yet powerful reminder to “be nice to people.” Not the most eloquently written thought, but those four words certainly pack a punch and, to me, sum up a tall but absolutely necessary order for living a life guided by Christ. Kindness, or the Golden Rule that is summed up in Matthew 7:12 — “so in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” — is a teaching so simple to understand, but so hard to live out on a daily basis. I often wonder what the world would be like if everyone just got along or thought twice before speaking or acting in a negative or violent way. Again, not easy, as Simon Peter demonstrated with one quick flash of his sword.

By dying for us, Jesus rejected the sword as the final arbiter of truth, justice and power. His kingdom was not of this world, and his reign was one of self-sacrifice on the cross. He chose the way of love and forgiveness, taking upon himself our sins of violence, hatred and enmity. By Christ saying “no” to the sword, and “yes” to the cross, he won forgiveness for all of those moments when we too quickly turn to violence or so slowly love as he commanded. His death won our salvation through grace, but it also graced us with an example on how to live. As Christ comes to us through his spirit-breathed word we are drawn closer to him and given an inner peace. Through baptism, the Holy Spirit dwells within us, equipping us for those moments when we’ll be asked to choose between the way of the sword, or the way of the cross.

I leave you with a concluding prayer, written by a favorite Jesuit priest and professor I had the good fortune of knowing. Father Naus loved people — he was a prime example of the Golden Rule and a life of living by the cross and not the sword:

*Live, Jesus, live
So live in me
That all I do*

*Be done by thee
And grant that all
I think and say*

*May be thy thought
And word today.
Amen*

Tracy Vasquez, CUC Staff

Thursday, March 4

The Spit

And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head.

Matthew 27:30

All of us, at one time or another, have wondered about our ancestral past. We know some of the story, but not all, about our families. Recently, my cousin has convinced me to send a saliva sample to a genealogy testing company to help determine our family tree. Obviously, the key to finding out about our origins lie in the saliva or spit. Ironically, it is “the spit” that represents the key to Jesus’ suffering and the story of our opposition to God.

Jesus has already appeared before the Jewish rulers, and now He is once again, back to Pilate. Pilate condemns Him and has Him scourged by the Roman soldiers. The soldiers have already adorned Jesus with a scarlet robe and a crown of thorns. They have placed a reed in His hand to be His scepter. The soldiers do not spit on the ground in front of Jesus; no, they scornfully spit right into His face, using the reed to strike Him repeatedly on the head.

We all know that to spit in someone’s face is the highest form of contempt. In this case, the spit represents our rebellion against God and a desire to go our own way. Yet, the spit is more than a representation of our rebellion. It is the only way in which we can be free of the condemnation of God. The spit, along with the scourging, beatings, mocking and crucifixion, was the only way we could ever be reconciled to God. It was part of God’s plan from the beginning. It was the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Jesus had to encounter the spit, so we could have an intimate encounter with the living God. Our Savior bore all the spite, spitting, mocking and abuse in order to deliver us from perishing. I look forward to the discovery of my ancestral tree, but I rejoice in the fact that He endured “the spit” that I might enjoy the blessing of being part of the family tree of God.

Elstner Lewis, St. Philip Lutheran Church, Chicago, IL

Friday, March 5

The Bowl of Water

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.

Matthew 27:24

Pilate wanted to release Jesus, which of course would have been the right and just thing to do. The easier path, however, was to appease the crowd. All Pilate had to do was release a guilty man and deliver Jesus to be executed. He couldn't pass up such an easy choice, and it worked! He appeased the crowd and avoided a riot. The problem was that he apparently understood the injustice of his actions, so he sought to eat his cake while still having it: receiving the benefits of his lawlessness while deflecting the blame onto others.

Pilate attempted this by declaring his own innocence while demonstrating it symbolically by washing his hands with water. It seems he hoped, or maybe even believed, that he would accomplish his innocence by adding his own declaration – his own word – to the water. "I am innocent," he declared as he washed.

Pilate's vain and wicked attempt points us to divine reality, to the power of God in baptism. For it is by the washing of water that we are made innocent. What Pilate got wrong was that he added his own word – a prideful declaration of his own innocence – to the water. In baptism, it's God's word that makes the water to be of eternal benefit. By adding God's merciful declaration of our innocence to the baptismal water, we are made innocent, indeed! We are buried with Christ and raised with Him to new life, and thereby made one with Him in perfect righteousness.

Pilate illustrates for us why baptism isn't our own work, it's God's work in us and for us. Were we to wash and declare our own innocence, pride would only corrupt the water. God's Word, on the other hand, transforms the water into a means of eternal cleansing.

Russel Dawn, President, CUC

Saturday, March 6

The Blindfold

They blindfolded him and demanded, "Prophesy! Who hit you?"

Luke 22:64 (NIV)

The Roman guards blindfolded Christ to insult and mock Him, thinking that this Nazarene can't be a god of any kind. They were probably bored too. The blindfold, beating, and mocking made their shift interesting and entertaining. One can only imagine the crude, sarcastic voices they used as they cried out, "Prophesy! Who hit you?" Little did they know that Christ indeed knew who hit Him. He could have easily called out the name of the Roman soldier, but He didn't. He submitted fully to the suffering asked of Him by his Father.

Christ being fully God, is omniscient. He knows all, especially who hit Him. It follows that, quite literally, Christ was hit by the sins of the world that night. We slapped and punched Christ with no mercy. We threw sin after sin at Him with no relief. You and I were the ones who hit Christ. Our names would have been as valid as the Roman soldiers.

However, we as Christians are a lot like Christ that night, tortured and betrayed by the world. We as Christians are one with Christ in His death and resurrection, we too must suffer with Christ. It often feels like we are blindfolded, walking through life with no purpose—empty shells of who we are supposed to be. A blindfolded Christ could have easily saved himself, but He didn't because He could see the bigger picture. He knew what was to come.

We can't save ourselves, and we cannot see the bigger picture. We know of God's grace and salvation, but I think we have all had moments when it's difficult to see it. We can't see God's plan for our lives. The world blindfolds us with the many idols and distractions fed by seemingly innocent evil. The world throws punch after punch calling out to us "Who hurt you?" We sit here helpless and blind, but in due time God reaches down his mighty hand and removes our blindfold to show us the glorious light of a plan He has had for us all along. Even in times of doubt, God has trained us to walk by faith and not by sight, that we may overcome the darkness of the world and receive his light. By faith, we see everything from the blessings of this earth as well as the salvation of heaven. Until that day, we patiently wait for the risen Christ to come and remove our blindfolds that we may see the empty Easter tomb.

Brinn Miller, CUC '23

Monday, March 8

The Sour Wine

*And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine,
and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink.*

Matthew 27:48

Poignant suffering. Strong praise and severe imprecations. All of these supplications are wrapped up in David's psalm (Psalm 69) crying out in anticipation of Christ, "Save me, O God!" Imagery of a deep, drowning flood surrounds him, and yet wearied by his crying, his throat is parched. "They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink" (Psalm 69:21). Thus, in the face of the scorn of his enemies, he looks around for pity and despairs that he is alone and friendless. Where he expected some comfort or sympathy, he finds none. Even the prophet Elijah, running for his life from Jezebel as he sat down under a broom tree asks that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life" (1 Kings 19:7).

Our days have wearied us. Isolation and loneliness have darkened our thoughts. When will it end? As darkness covered the land, Jesus hangs alone--silently suffering God's wrath at the sins of the world. Your sins. Finally after three hours, He cries out in agonizing vocals, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). A dying, suffering man on the cross--thirsts. The sponge offered to him is soaked with a cheap, common, vinegary, sour wine. It shall do nothing to quench his thirst, but at most ease his throat so that He might cry out his final words from the cross, "It is finished." The Savior thirsted for your salvation. Jesus died in the flesh for you and for your sins.

The Lord hears the needy and does not despise his own people. He knows the journey is too great for you. You are not alone. He meets you at the altar where you eat and drink not only bread and wine, but the gifts of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and receiving that, you receive forgiveness, new life, and salvation. Trust in Him and you will not thirst.

Heavenly Father, being parched is something we can relate to with thirsting souls. Thank you for your love in sending Your Son, Jesus Christ, to the cross as He paid the price for our sins in full.

Cory Estby, Zion Lutheran Church, Grant Park, IL

Tuesday, March 9

The Angel from Heaven

Then an angel from heaven appeared to him, strengthening him.

Luke 22:43

Struggle, anxiety, and fear are always with us as human beings. Struggle over our inability to complete God's tasks for us. Anxiety over the unknowns of the future and the trials that we may have to face. Fear over the inevitable suffering we will experience in the future and the inescapable reality of death.

To cope with these struggles, anxieties, and fears, we rely on the brothers and sisters in Christ around us. They strengthen us amid the trials and temptations which beset us and which seek to deter us from following the will of our Father.

St. Luke gives us a small window into the turmoil our Lord underwent in the garden. As fully human, Jesus felt and experienced real emotions, yet without sin. He was sorrowful; felt distress; hoped there could be a different path forward; anxiously grieved over that which lay before him; and finally accepted the Father's plan. Only Luke's account shows the Father then graciously sending an angelic minister to attend to him. We can only imagine with what blessed balm this minister of grace strengthened Jesus for what would unfold the next few hours.

Now angels do a lot of powerful things throughout the Bible. An angel guides Abraham's servant to Rebekah while he is searching for a wife for Isaac in Genesis 24. Moses acknowledges that God "sent an angel and brought [the Israelites] out of Egypt" to escape slavery in Numbers 20. 2 Chronicles 32 and Isaiah 63 both account for the destructive power of angels when they tell how angels single-handedly slay hundreds of thousands of Assyrian soldiers. An angel saves Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from dying a fiery death in a furnace in Daniel 3 only to be followed by angels keeping Daniel safe while defenseless in a lions' den in the sixth chapter. Angels are powerful beings that answer directly to God. Yet these same angels visit Mary saying, "do not be afraid"; and appear to Jesus personally to give strength to him at his most difficult hour.

And now, because we have been marked with the face of Jesus, these same powerful and loving angels attend to us. Hebrews 1:14 says that angels are "ministering spirits sent out to serve those who are going to inherit salvation." As the angels were to strengthen Jesus, so they are also to strengthen his followers. Psalm 34:7 states, "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and rescues them." So acknowledge your struggles, anxieties, and fears. Just as with Jesus, His angels are physically with you and rescuing you.

Heavenly Father, we often find ourselves in fights that we cannot win and with fears that we cannot overcome. Just as Jesus was strengthened in the garden, give us the courage to conquer this world and live for you. Your angels are with us, Lord. Thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Micah Brown, CUC '21

Wednesday, March 10

The Prepared Spices

Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

John 19:39-40 (ESV)

When trying to write this devotion, I hadn't the slightest idea where to start. This passage from John immediately follows the death of Christ. The death of the Word made flesh. The disciples watched Christ die. He was their teacher and their hope, and they watched Him take His final breath. If I didn't know where to start with writing a 300-400 word devotion, I can only imagine that they had even less of a clue.

When faced with the unexpected, they turned to what they knew. They followed the burial customs of the Jews, using spices to prepare the body of Christ Himself. Following the traditions of generations upon generations before them, they did something that seemed ordinary in the midst of the extraordinary. While they prepared the body as their ancestors had done countless times before, they were at the same time doing something which would be recorded in history for all the world to read about.

When they were dressing the body with the prepared spices, they weren't keeping a body from decaying. For a body to decay, it needs time, and death's ticking countdown had officially run out. Satan's grip on humanity was lost. Binding Christ's body in spices and linen cloth, they were not handling a sin-sick body that would soon return to dust. Rather, they were holding salvation itself. God in the flesh, bearing the full weight of our sins in His death, yet only a matter of days from the unleashing of life itself.

It's no secret that God works the extraordinary through the ordinary. The baby in a manger. Forgiveness through the water and the Word. His body and blood in, with, and under bread and wine. The lifeless body that would soon mean life for all. In a moment of confusion and uncertainty, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea's prepared spices were meant for one captured fully by death. Instead, they were given to the firstfruit of new life. And because He is the firstfruit, we rest in the assurance of new life in Him. Thanks be to God.

Heavenly Father, guide us in our doubt and uncertainty. Remind us that when we feel lost and without a starting point, You call us to look to You and You alone. When the world seems to toss and turn us, hold us steadfast in your promises of forgiveness and eternal life, won by Christ's death and resurrection. In His name we pray, Amen.

Jesse Muehler, CUC '22

Thursday, March 11

The Courtyard Fire

And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire.

Mark 14:54

When reading this biblical text, my first reaction was one of indignation and criticism towards Peter for following Jesus at a distance and staying in the courtyard warming himself around the fire. But after examining my conscience and heart, I realized how much I resemble Peter. How many times have I had the same attitude? How many times have I come in contact with His Word? How many times have I seen His miracles? How many times has He comforted me with His forgiveness and His love? And how many times like Peter, have I followed Him at a distance, especially when I don't give my time and have not dedicated my life to the one who suffers for me, when I remain silent in the face of injustice, when I criticize my neighbor, when I am intolerant and my patience is quickly exhausted, when I reject someone who is not like me, when I believe that my opinion is always the best, when I justify my actions to calm my conscience. But it comforts me to know that Jesus, on His way to the cross, thought of me, that He gave Himself for me, to remove the weight of the guilt of sin and offered me His love so that now together, I and others can live our journey of dedication and service here on earth.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your forgiveness and your love manifest in Christ. Help us to live united to you in thought, word and deed. We ask this in your Son Jesus' name. Amen.

Jorge Mazariegos, Vida y Fe Church, Aurora, IL

Friday, March 12

The Linen Undergarment

*Now a certain young man, wearing nothing but a linen cloth, was following him.
They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth behind and ran away naked.*

Mark 14:51-52

It was the night our Savior was betrayed and arrested. By the next afternoon, Jesus would be nailed to a cross, labeled a sinner, cursed by God, and die for the salvation of the world. But between Judas' kiss and Peter's denial in the courtyard of the high priest the Evangelist Mark gives us the unusual encounter with an unnamed disciple. With two short verses, Mark gives us the brief account of a young man following Jesus as He's being led out of the Garden of Gethsemane by the armed band that had come to arrest Him. The young man is clothed only in a linen cloth and, when the band attempts to grab him too, he runs away naked, leaving the cloth behind.

Many have written about this encounter. Some theologians say the young man was Mark himself. It is possible that Jesus and His disciples celebrated the Passover, and the institution of Communion that night, at Mark's parents' home and that Mark, having already gone to bed when Jesus and the disciples leave, follows them in his night clothes. Others note that the young man may represent the reality that all of Jesus' followers abandon Him. This one was so desperate to save his own life that he leaves behind his wrap and flees naked. Others have even suggested that Mark alludes to Jesus own cloth at His crucifixion, His burial wrap, or a foreshadowing of Holy Baptism. This encounter, only mentioned in Mark, has given much food for thought, to say the least.

Realizing all that is unfolding on that first Maundy Thursday night, my meditation is drawn to the almost impressionistic imagery that Mark seems to paint for us as Jesus' followers. A linen garment, clothing...coverings... Adam and Eve sewed the first coverings for themselves when they sinned and realized they were naked. Our Lord makes skins to clothe His fallen creatures, right before banishing them from the garden. Now, the Son of God is being pulled out of a Garden, and will take the label of sinner for all humanity as He will hang naked on the cross, and hours before what image does Mark give us? – A young man escaping naked near a garden. The linen garment discarded. The covering for Jesus' followers will now be His blood.

Kris Whitby, LCMS Northern Illinois District

Saturday, March 13

The Wine Mixed with Gall

They gave him wine mixed with gall to drink. But when he tasted it, he refused to drink it.

Matthew 27:34

O wine laced with gall! O anodyne prescribed by those who mock! OxyContin of sadists! You would have the Savior dumbed, dazed to deaden the pain, prolong the sport, the spectacle of those who jest while striking the cheek and pulling the beard. But He will die neither drunk nor drugged. Delusion, go; make your sordid bed elsewhere! He has already given His back to the smiters; not hidden His face from shame and spitting. Already He has accepted a different cup, a chalice Abba Dear willed before the founding of the world; before any law had been shattered, any statute breached. Thine be done. He refuses the one to take the other; drain it to the dregs; and He does so for me.

So what is left, Lord, for me to drink? I want peace, I want rest, I want restitution. I want wrong turned into right. I want freedom back. I want things tidy again; tied down again, like they were before. I want to live unmasked. A disciple, though, is not greater than his teacher, You said; nor a slave than his lord. Yet you did also call me friend, and held nothing back, kept no secrets from me; left nothing under wraps. Everything Father told You, You told me. Tell me again, for I forget. Remind me: what is left for me to drink? Should I now embrace what You refused? You Yourself “learned obedience through what You suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). Your undiluted, un-numbed suffering drew You deeper into Father’s heart, the same heart that was so loving the world, and every sinner like me. If Your suffering was so Your teacher, how much more mine? Let me go with You to Father; learn with You, love with You. Your Lent is over—precious thought—but mine has only begun. Complete in me what remains of Your cross, Your afflictions, Your brand scars, for the sake of Your sisters, Your brothers in the world. Make me see my sins, face them fully sober, un-drugged by the rationalizing-laced wisdom of the world. Make me acknowledge what I deserve.

*For cleansing, though it be through pain,
Christ crucified, I come.
Then let Your pardon set me free.*

Patrick Bayens, CUC Faculty

Monday, March 15

The Inscription

Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

Matthew 27:37 (NRSV)

The inscription above Jesus’ head on the cross where he was executed was meant as a mockery by Pontius Pilate. The chief priests objected to the inscription and wanted to wordsmith out the sarcasm—to write, “He said, ‘I am King of the Jews;’” Pilate responds, “What I have written, I have written” (John 19:21-22). The chief priests want the inscription to document the alleged blasphemy. Pilate not only wants to ridicule Jesus but make the whole nation out to be a joke.

This is humor that comes at the expense of others—mocks others—celebrates someone else’s demise or destruction. This kind of laughter is a poison inside spilling out for others to see and hear our callousness and cruelty.

What Pontius Pilate, the chief priests, the mob, and all humanity do not know is that God has a better sense of humor. God’s humor does not tear down but builds up. It does not disparage but encourage.

In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, he says, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). In Luke’s account, Jesus says, “you will laugh” (Luke 16:21). God gets the last laugh. And then he enriches our joy by inviting us into his grace-filled wit.

Three days later, God adds his own punchline when Jesus rises victoriously from the dead. He is not just King of the Jews. He is Lord of lords and King of kings. His reign extends over heaven and earth. The tomb where they lay Jesus is now empty. In the resurrection, we now laugh, dance, and give shouts of praise. We can laugh in the face of death and even mock death itself, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55; Hosea 13:14). In Christ, all our tears will be wiped away. When we’ve been there 10,000 years our laughter will scarcely have begun because of Jesus, our King of Heaven and Earth.

Tom Johnson, First Saint Paul’s Lutheran Church, Chicago, IL

Tuesday, March 16

The Linen Burial Clothes

So Joseph took the body, wrapped it in clean, fine linen.

Matthew 27:59

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Romans 6:3-5

At a baptism of a small infant, the parents, godparents, pastor, and other congregational members, are rarely thinking about death. After all, the infant death rate has decreased, modern medicine has made leaps and bounds, and ultrasound technology is so good that it can often identify medical concerns in utero, with plenty of time to develop a treatment plan or even do surgery before the baby is born. And yet, our baptism and funeral rites are so intricately entwined that it is almost impossible to examine one without finding evidence of the other. For example, at most Christian baptisms, the baby, or adult, is given a white garment. In some churches the garment is plain white, others embroider the cloth with a cross. At a funeral, the casket is covered with a white pall, similarly embroidered with a cross. Some churches even have a much smaller pall for cremated remains.

St. Paul tells us in Romans chapter 6 why this connection exists. We are baptized into Christ's death. Paul explains that if we are united with Christ in His death, then we are also united with Him in His resurrection. In our baptism, and eventually at our funeral, we are clothed with the same linen burial clothes as Christ when He was laid into a tomb on Good Friday. At our baptism, the cloth draped on the tiny body serves as a reminder to the congregation of our salvation through Christ's death and resurrection. It's also a reminder of our mortality. One day, you and I will most certainly die, unless Christ comes first. Death is the wages of sin. But we have the beautiful assurance through baptism that Christ, who was once laid in a tomb in similar burial clothes, has risen. Death, our old sinful nature, has been swallowed up by Christ's death on the cross. At a funeral, another white cloth reminds us of this same promise of resurrection. The pall on the casket or cremated remains calls back to baptism, a comforting reminder that we can die unfearing. Through our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, we know we will be awakened from death at His second coming, and look on Christ with joy. Christ took on the sin of the world and the clothes of death for us, and yet has cast them off and won the glorious battle through His death on the cross, that we might be clothed in His death and resurrection at our baptism. Amen!

Rachel Mueller, CUC '22

Wednesday, March 17

The Cast Lots

After crucifying him, they divided his clothes by casting lots.

Matthew 27:35

Human chance or Divine Choice? The ancient practice of the casting of lots appears 77 times in the Bible. There is speculation as to even what a lot was – perhaps a pebble or small piece of wood - to our modern equivalent, the roll of a die or flip of a coin. Surely “chance” means to take human decision out of any equation; the practice was also used by pagans – but for gambling and fortune-telling.

The Lord was the one who directed and used the action of casting lots, so surely the outcome was His good and gracious will for rescuing humanity broken by sin. Prophecy would be fulfilled in that foretold in Psalm 22:18 written before the birth of Christ and found preserved for all in the Dead Sea Scrolls, “they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” “They” were the pagan Roman soldiers assigned as executioners for the Son of God - God is and remains in control of the outcome of all things!

Only John’s Gospel reveals that there were four soldiers present at Jesus execution. Each soldier was an eyewitness to the extraordinary events that would occur before and after the death of the Son of God at what they thought was just another routine day of executing the most shameful and cursed of criminals.

Scripture does not reveal which of the soldiers “won” the tunic - that valuable, priestly, woven one-piece undergarment that was the only piece of clothing for which lots were cast. Tradition tells us that one of the soldiers converted to Christianity. We can ponder the mystery of whether that soldier might have been the one to whom the lot fell and the fruit of his conversion in witnessing Christ crucified!

Jesus – thank you that you willingly endured the shame and suffering, separation and death that belonged to us, so that we might undeservedly partake of your righteousness and thus receive the free gifts of redemption and eternal life. Lord Christ, let us boldly speak of your personal, present love and saving grace – you remain our ultimate High Priest, the only perfect sacrifice and the one who spoke words of forgiveness even as you were dying – that you might conquer death for all who would believe. Amen.

Lori Trinché, LCMS Northern Illinois District

Thursday, March 18

The Hyssop Branch: A Way to Minty-Fresh Clean

*A jar full of sour wine was sitting there; so they fixed a sponge full of
sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it up to his mouth.*

John 19:29

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Psalms 51:7

Early in childhood parents teach their children to brush their teeth, and for us adults there is nothing like that minty-fresh clean feeling after we've had our teeth cleaned. All of the bad breath or disease-causing bacteria is scrubbed away, leaving everything bright, shiny, and renewed. In David's cry and prayer for forgiveness, the psalmist sought such a cleansing, not of his teeth but of his soul. But with hyssop? How could a small, bush-like plant from the mint family with purple flowers on long stems factor into the equation?

Hyssop grew prolifically throughout the Middle East during biblical times. It is an herb that has long been used in cooking, as a flavoring, and for its medicinal and cleansing properties. The Bible mentions hyssop several times. Israel's fathers, following God's instruction, used hyssop to paint their doorposts with lamb's blood in order for the angel of death to pass over them (Exodus 12:22). In Leviticus, God commanded His people to use hyssop in the ceremonial cleansing of people and houses (14:1-7; 48-53). And it was this same plant, involved in the first Passover and in Israel's cleansing rituals, which David begged God to use in cleansing him from the sins (adultery with Bathsheba and conspiring to murder her husband Uriah) that were breaking his heart. Hyssop was a go to tool when a devout Jewish believer needed to do some spiritual housecleaning.

Hyssop is also identified as being used in the account of our Lord Jesus' crucifixion in the Gospel of St. John. After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.

Parallel passages in the gospels of Matthew and Mark do not mention hyssop but say that the sponge was put upon a reed (the hyssop plant is capable of producing stalky stems three to four feet in length). However, what's really important is that this was Jesus' last act before He declared His work on earth finished and gave up His spirit. While the hyssop stalk may have been used out of practicality because it was long enough to reach to Jesus' mouth as He hung on the cross, it is interesting that hyssop was the plant chosen.

As a plant used in Israel's worship practices for cleansing, could God have been using it to finish His salvific masterpiece of purification, forgiveness, and salvation, which was painted in the blood of His Son, Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world?

Gracious and forgiving God, just as blood and hyssop were the image in David's mind when he cried out to you for forgiveness of his sin, place and keep in my thoughts a similar blood and hyssop combination as I journey to the cross of Your Son, my Lord and Savior Jesus. Amen.

Kevin Borchers, CUC Faculty

Friday, March 19

The Temple Curtain

And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

Mark 15:38

Nothing in life hurts like the pain of grief. Even for those who trust in Jesus, the loss of a loved one is the loss of life as it used to be. It hurts to lose our parents but it is expected if they have lived a long life. Perhaps we are mentally prepared for the day of their passing. This could be said of older siblings as well. Similarly, it is difficult to witness someone who has lost their spouse and is coming to terms with life alone for the first time in many years. Taking it to the next level, when someone younger who you love dies, grief is escalated, especially if that younger person happens to be your child. What does this grief look like? It is as if one's heart has been torn out of their soul.

As Jesus hung on the cross of Calvary there was no way he would escape death. Everyone knew it. As his last moments of life were passing, they were likely already grieving the loss that they knew would happen soon. Then Jesus breathed his last. It was time for the next level of grief to step in. But first our Heavenly Father needed to express His grief. What does His grief look like? The temple curtain was split from top to bottom expressing something that scholars debate to this day. We can imagine God's heart torn as well. But there is more. The top of the curtain would have had ornately embroidered heavenly images. With the tearing from top to bottom we see the doorway to heaven opened leading down to earth. We see in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus that he descended to earth and opened the doorway of heaven to all who call upon his name. The tearing open of heaven will happen again on the last day when Jesus descends again and calls us home for eternity. This is what God's grief looks like. It gives us hope.

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence-- (Isaiah 64:1)

Jerry Hayes, St. Peter Lutheran Church and School, Schaumburg, IL

Saturday, March 20

The Purple/Scarlet Robe

And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him.

Matthew 27:28

A scarlet robe. This object denoted royalty, majesty, even luxury. One imagines it being soft, brightly colored, and regal. What a contrast to the bruised and bloodied body of Christ over which it was placed! It was used here symbolically (and ironically) by the soldiers in order to make a show of calling Jesus a “king” only to further abuse and beat him. It was an additional flourish, adding insult to injury. One can imagine the soldiers trying to figure out how they could further humiliate Jesus. He had already been beaten, abused and insulted. But wait: what if we dress this poor sap in royal garb—he calls himself a king!—and then give him a crown...of thorns, and then beat him some more. They were using this luxury item to further humiliate Jesus. It was not enough to physically harm him, or even, eventually, to crucify him. They felt the need to mock him and humiliate him as well.

As we contemplate the Passion of Christ, we are, of course, reminded of the great sacrifice he made for us and for our salvation. His death on the cross redeemed us. He suffered a painful execution so that we need not fear death. So what does it mean that he also suffered humiliation, that he was laughed at and scorned? That a scarlet robe, woven to adorn a king, was instead used to mock the Son of God?

Though he was beaten, he wore the robe. Even in that moment, he **was** our king and salvation, our Christ. Through both physical and mental anguish, the depths of which most of us will never have to experience, he was suffering so that we could be free. Free to live a Godly life, free to follow His teachings, free to love our neighbors, knowing that through His death and resurrection, our death has lost its sting.

Tim Bouman, Walther Christian Academy

Monday, March 22

The Crown of Thorns

They twisted together a crown of thorns, put it on his head, and placed a staff in his right hand. And they knelt down before him and mocked him: "Hail, king of the Jews!"

Matthew 27:29

My mother is a skilled gardener which has remained a constant source of peace in her life. I can recall many spring days spent outside helping my mother in the gardens around our home. Those days usually involved trips to the local home and garden store, afternoons of mulching, and the tedious process of creating garden beds. After much hard work, our home exterior looked wonderfully decorated with many colorful flowers and plants. One perennial that still always appears, and to me is the most pleasing among the garden, is the red rose. I am always enamored by the beautiful complex color and texture of the flower which sits juxtaposed to the ugly and dangerous bush on which it grows. The flower itself appears pretty but the prickly bush of thorns can at times distract me from its beauty; this reminds me of the role sin plays in my life.

Matthew 27 takes place at the ending of Jesus' trial, a time when He was sentenced by a ravenous crowd to be crucified in the place of a murderer. Roman soldiers who were assigned to humiliate the death row inmates took the horrible trimmings from a thorny bush and applied them to the head of the incarnate Son of God, pressing hard into his skull. These thorns of sin had grown long and sharp through generations building upon their first planting in the sinful nature of Adam and Eve. Jesus who, throughout his entire life, did not contain even an ounce of sin was now crowned with the thorns of sin of all human wickedness to fulfill the prophecies spoken by Isaiah 53:12. Each one of us weaves his own thorny crown by living a life of sin and wears it upon his head wherever he goes. Thankfully, Jesus takes our crowns and adorns them upon himself accepting our sinful punishment, taking them to the cross, and freeing us from the weight of our heavy crown. Not only does Jesus take this punishment to the grave, where the thorns wither away, but on top of them He grows a beautifully complex crown of life reserved for all of humanity (James 1:12). Whenever I stare at those red roses in the beds of the garden my mother and I created, I am reminded of the crown of thorns Christ bore and the crown of life which is laid aside for me.

Ben Simmons, CUC '22

Tuesday, March 23

The Seals on the Tomb

They went and secured the tomb by setting a seal on the stone and placing the guards.

Matthew 27:66

We seal many things in our lives. We seal envelopes closed by licking them, we seal doors closed by locking them, and we seal a multitude of things I don't understand what to do with in home improvement projects. In any case, sealing has one of two purposes: to either keep something in, or to keep other things out. In the case of Jesus and the Roman guards, it's most likely that the guards sealed the tomb with the intent of keeping body snatchers or disciples out rather than keeping Jesus in. After all, there's not many places a dead body can go...or so they thought. As we know, the guard's efforts to contain Jesus were ultimately fruitless, as the seal was broken and Jesus left the tomb.

We may want to seal Jesus and the church away, like the guards did, so that our sinful world is kept out and they may continue comfortably by themselves, helping us whenever we need them. But when we seal Jesus away to keep things out, we also work against his gospel getting out. Rather than sealing himself away to remain safe, Christ has sealed us all to Him in His death and wraps us in His loving arms on the cross. This way, we are the ones kept safe from the sin of the world, sealed to Christ through the waters of our baptism. Jesus makes us secure by wrapping around us, ensuring that there is nowhere that we can go that He is not. Psalm 139 exclaims:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.

Jesus seals us to him and sets the guard of the Holy Spirit before us, so that we can venture nowhere that he is not also. Christ is in us, with us, and before us, and there is no time that this is clearer than the time of his death on the cross and resurrection. We do not need to worry about protecting Christ, as it is he who is our protector, seal, and guard. Thanks be to God!

Michelle Frerking, CUC '22

Wednesday, March 24

The Judgement Seat/The Stone Pavement: “Is This Seat Taken?”

When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside. He sat down on the judge’s seat in a place called the Stone Pavement (but in Aramaic, Gabbatha).

John 19:13

Pilate was not having a good day. Stuck in a dusty Roman backwater - far (so far) from the center of real power, of real action, of real importance – he was tasked with controlling and cajoling an unruly native population given to frequent resistance toward the Roman way of life.

True, he was in charge, but in charge of what? He was a man of some little consequence in a place of none. He knew it and the people under him knew it. The less he had to engage with them the better. But today, this day, was the day he had to get involved. Worse, he had to make a judgment in a matter that he was not only incapable of understanding, but seemed to go against every ounce of common sense he possessed. This man, this Jesus, didn’t seem to have committed any crime.

Whatever doubts Pilate nursed, vanished when he heard the name of Caesar uttered in verse 12. If he let Jesus off, he was no friend to Caesar, or so said the Jewish leaders who could sense their case against Christ taking on water. And so Pilate did what any insignificant, virtually unknown Roman governor would do when faced with the prospect of siding against the leader of the known world or a small time prophet claiming to be the Son of God. He chose the world. At least Pilate could console himself that even if this was a wrong choice no one was likely to remember his name let alone this particular case. Thank God for small mercies.

Of course it was not Christ who was being judged, but Pilate. The judgment seat was not a place of authority as Pilate thought but a scale that found him wanting. What’s easy to gloss over for comfort’s sake is that it was not really Pilate who put Jesus on the cross, but you and me. It was Pilate’s misfortune to physically act out what we too often daily do – choose the world over Christ. The result is the same for the judgments of ourselves and Pilate: Christ on the cross. The weight of that choice is almost too much to bear if it were not for the wondrous power of the forgiveness and salvation that came from the Crucifixion. Jesus forgave Pilate, Jesus forgives us in that incredible sacrificial love that shatters the judgment seat and replaces it with open arms and bring us closer to Him.

Andy Pederson, CUC Faculty

Thursday, March 25

The Hammer and Nails

*By canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.
This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*

Colossians 2:14 (ESV)

The tools of an artist are extremely important to their craft. The paints, the brushes, and the canvases of a painter all matter before they even get started on a painting. A musician will almost never choose to create music on an instrument that is out of tune. A singer takes care of their voice even when they are not singing. A carpenter will never complete his work without tools.

As the son of a carpenter, and a worker himself in that artistry, our Lord Jesus Christ knew that the tools with which he worked would be important. Christ would have worked carefully with saws, lathes, hammers, and nails. The tools with which he completed his work were important.

Even in His death, Christ worked in tandem with these carpentry tools. The boards of the cross were tied or nailed together, fastened into the instrument of salvation for all. Christ, the final piece of this woodwork, was taken by Roman soldiers and nailed onto the wood, each painful strike working unknowingly to complete the final and greatest masterpiece, the magnum opus, of the artist of all of creation. The blood dripping from his wounds on his head, his hands, and side bring God's masterpiece brilliant color. The tools of an artist are important, and Christ, a willing sacrificial artistic medium for the saving work of God's people, acted exactly as the "artist" intended. The masterpiece hung that Good Friday on Golgotha brilliant, bruised, beaten, and beautiful. Like those visiting art museums today, many of the passersby, Jew and Roman alike, missed the point of what was on display. But unlike your average exhibition, Christ welcomes you to come close and touch and even taste his masterpiece, without any barriers between you and the work he finished to save you, once and for all.

Lord God, heavenly Father, allow us open eyes and ears to receive your almighty and saving work. All of Your creation has been redeemed through the painful suffering of Your Son. Remind us that the hammering of the nails was done for our gain, and to pay for our debts. Forgive us of our sins and deliver us through our lives so that we may spend eternity in the beauty of your great masterpiece of love. This we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Ben Heinz, CUC '20

Friday, March 26

The Cloaks of Palm Sunday

A very large crowd spread their clothes on the road; others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them on the road.

Matthew 21:8

Just last month, I looked at my coat and wondered, “How long have I had this thing?” The earliest recollection that I have of wearing it was on May 3, 2013 when a freak snowstorm hit rural Missouri. It was also my daughter’s senior year in high school. (It’s funny how parenting changes the way we remember things.) After remembering how long I had had that coat, the numerous times that I had washed it, and the numerous times that I had hand-sewn the lining and pockets back together, I decided it was time for a new one.

The Bible talks about coats or cloaks. You know them—Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together, Joseph and the coat of many colors, and the Palm Sunday account of people laying their cloaks on the road to welcome King Jesus. All of these coats were memorable for these people. You can imagine them looking at the coat and saying, “Oh, that was the coat that we made...”, “This is the coat that Dad made me...”, and “This is the coat I laid down in the road for King Jesus.”

So now back to my coats. I have two now. The old one and the new one. Would I lay the old one down in the road? Sure. Would I lay the new one down in the road? Probably not. Here’s the challenge for you: what is your *metaphorical* new coat? What means so much to you that you would cleave to it rather than lay it down for a donkey to walk on, even a donkey that was carrying Jesus? Is it your money, time, talent? It is your phone or your athletic prowess? You get the idea.

Think about your confirmation vows. We promised to “suffer all, even death” for the sake of our Lord Jesus. He did that for us and rose from the grave on Easter to save us! Think about it and choose this day for whom and to what you will serve and lay down your coat for Jesus.

Dear Lord, open our eyes to see you coming. Open our hearts to give and lay down our coat for you. Thank you for suffering, dying and rising again to save us. We love you. Amen

Chrissy Heiss, Immanuel Lutheran Church and School, Crystal Lake, IL

Saturday, March 27

The Colt

*Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it,
you will find a colt tied there which no one has ever ridden.*

Mark 11:2

“Which no one has ever ridden...” is a theme carried throughout the biblical narrative in a variety of different forms. At this point in Mark, we read “which no one has ever ridden,” as we move closer to the climactic point of biblical story and of all human history.

In the beginning, our Creator gave humanity a perfect and unblemished Creation. For each piece of this virgin Creation, “God saw that it was good.” Though it was sure to be plenty magnificent after Day 5, God created humanity. After His creation of humans, God said “it was *very* good.”

The pinnacle of His Creation, of His majesty, was given a land beyond the imagination to work and enjoy. Adam and Eve were the first. The paradise was virgin to the touch of humankind. The gift of the Garden had “never been ridden.” Yet humanity, we, tainted it.

We rode it into the darkness of sin. Therefore, God exiled humanity, and then communicated to His chosen people of Israel, the ceremonial laws to atone for the regular darkness in their lives. Part of this atonement was sacrifices of perfect, virgin animals. His chosen people did this. They took the animals that had never been ridden and they made their atoning sacrifices, only to repeat the sacrifices over and over again for generations.

In the Christmas story, we see the entrance of the King, of Jesus. Completely man and completely God; completely Earth and completely Heaven. He entered the world through the womb of a virgin. He experienced around Him, through his humanity, the sinful darkness of this world. He brought, through his godliness, the glorious light of the heavenly kingdom.

As he readies to connect heaven and humanity, he makes his final entrance in the same way he came into the world. He commands his disciples to get him a colt, “which no one has ever ridden.” He prepares to walk to Golgotha and make a journey, which no one has ever made. He does these things so the gates of His heavenly perfection would once again be open to the pinnacle of His Creation. In the sacrificial death of the sinless God-man and through the miracle of his Resurrection, he promises that we will experience the perfect and unblemished joys of Heaven!

John Meulendyke, Immanuel Lutheran Church, Crystal Lake, IL

Monday, March 29

The Palm Branches

*They took palm branches and went out to meet him. They kept shouting:
“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord —the King of Israel!”*

John 12:13

They took palm branches and went out to meet Him shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!” (John 12:13)

In ancient times palm branches were used to welcome the victor back from war especially the king. As the people greeted Jesus on that first Sunday, they welcomed Him as King. The ovations for our Lord were misdirected as they were seeking an earthly King who would lead them out of bondage of their enemies and return Israel once again to its glory. How soon they forgot this adulation. Five days later many of these same people stood in the courtyard of Pontius Pilate and called for crucifixion.

We are often quick to condemn these people for their quick turn, but during this Lenten time we need to examine our own actions and the type of King we are expecting. Are we looking for one who will deliver us from our enemies and lift us to higher status? In our prayer life, are we expecting a quick fix to all of our problems and success, or are we asking that the will of the Lord be done? Do we long for the day when our enemies are subdued, or do we pray for them that they may, through the work of the Holy Spirit, be turned and brought to the saving knowledge of our Lord and Savior?

The Palm Sunday participants had it right when they were celebrating a victory. They only had the wrong victory. The victory was won on that first Good Friday and sealed when our Lord rose from the dead and brought life to all in faith. St. Paul exclaims this clearly when he says, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin and the power of the sin is the law. **BUT THANKS BE TO GOD! HE GIVES US THE VICTORY THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST**” (1 Corinthians 1: 56-57).

The final victory is ours through Christ. In Revelation 7 we see the palm branches reappear once again. “They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.” May that be our cry of victory as well!

James Krupski, St. Paul's Lutheran School, Bourbonnais, IL

Tuesday, March 30

The Overturned Tables

Jesus went into the temple and threw out all those buying and selling. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves.

Matthew 21:12

Let's take moment to imagine the scene described in Matthew 21:12 that happened shortly after Jesus had made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus walks straight into the temple and literally flips over the tables. What a bold move! These weren't just random empty tables around the temple. These tables were being used to take advantage of God's people coming to worship Him through their sacrifices. These money-changers and pigeon sellers were profiting off of the poor and those from foreign lands. The earthly desire to make money was overshadowing the reason people were coming to the temple in the first place. Therefore, Jesus decided to flip those tables and chairs to make a point. A point in which He had already made at the beginning of His three-year earthly ministry (John 2:14-16) and now made sure to make a second time within the week of His crucifixion.

So, what is the point (or points) Jesus is trying to make to the people back then and to us today? Well, I could point out a few: don't take advantage of people, stand up for what is right, and places of worship should be given more respect than the money-changers and pigeon sellers were showing. But, the point I want to focus on is to not let earthly desires overshadow what is truly important: God's Word and Sacraments. For me, Jesus used the COVID-19 pandemic to overturn the tables in my life and focus me back to what is most important. I realized and learned that it is easy to let earthly desires, like wanting to have the coolest Mission Trip location or the most extravagant Vacation Bible School plans, overshadow what is truly important— sharing God's love with people and teaching children about the Word of God. What about you? Take a moment to think about what tables need to be overturned in your life. What are you allowing to take priority over God's Word and Sacraments? Repent of these things and know that you are forgiven through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Most merciful God, Forgive us when we let things of this earth overshadow the things that are from You. Thank you for sending Jesus to overturn the tables and to die for each and every one of us. We ask that you overturn the earthly desires that are keeping us from prioritizing You and help us to share Your wonderful gifts with others. In Jesus Name, AMEN.

Hannah Russell, St. John Lutheran Church, Union, IL

Wednesday, March 31

The Split Rocks

“... And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.”

Matthew 27:51b

Christians know from Psalm 31:3 that God is our Rock and our fortress. He is the ultimate foundation.

What is lesser known is that He is also the breaker of rocks. In 1 Kings 19:11b God sent a great wind that shattered the rocks about Him. At Jesus’ death the very foundations of the world are shaken. When we’re dead in sin we cannot rely on anything in the world to be our foundation, even boulders. Jesus’ death makes us aware of how we can’t rely on the certainties of this world to last but instead know that He is the only thing that lasts—our sole foundation. The unchanging certainties we stand upon and the quaking shoulders we lean upon are weak compared to God’s mighty hand; they cannot bear the full weight of sin and death.

The rocks splitting upon Jesus’ death proves he is the Son of God and a stronger rock than anything we have on earth. It is as if Jesus shouts at His death with a deep tremor, “Look! I am the Son of God!” Who else dies and shatters stones in the process? The Messiah’s death shook the world with a double-digit magnitude earthquake strong enough to split rocks. No ordinary man died, and no ordinary man rose from the dead. This is the Lord of lords, whose death and resurrection now are our unshatterable, unshakeable, unbreakable eternal foundations. Thanks be to God.

Dear God, our rock and our redeemer, thank you for the signs you gave us upon Jesus’ death and showing us the futility of our world that we may stand firm upon your power alone. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Claire Walker, CUC `2025

Thursday, April 1

Maundy Thursday

The Garden of Gethsemane

*Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he told the disciples,
“Sit here while I go over there and pray.”*

Matthew 26:36

During the story of the Passion, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. We can see time and time again in the accounts of the gospels when he would turn to be by himself and pray to God the Father. It would make sense that he would again do this when he is about to have the sins of the world on his shoulders as he dies a death he did not deserve. There is something though that I have overlooked until now. At Jesus's most sorrowful moment, he does not go off to pray alone as we so often see in the scriptures, but rather he brings his disciples to accompany him.

Jesus knew what was to come. He knew the suffering he would endure for me, for you, and for those disciples he brought to pray with him. He had to die for us. I think that normally, when we face hardship because of someone else it is so easy for us to push them away, to avoid them, and to suffer alone. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus doesn't do that, though. Instead, he brings his friends with him.

During times of trials and tribulation, it can be so easy for us to fall away into solitude. We don't want to burden those around us with our problems, we don't want to be seen as weak, and we don't want to be pitied. When we read the scripture, we can see just how troubled Jesus was as He outright says to the disciples, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me” (Matthew 26:38). Instead of going away in isolation to pray, He brought His friends with Him.

We have all suffered in one way or another this year. In the interest of keeping one another safe, we have all been isolated to some extent, leaving all of us to feel as though we are alone in our sorrows. While it is true that we may not still be able to physically see one another, we are so far from alone. When Jesus died on that cross for our sins, he made it possible for us to be with him forever in eternity. But we don't have to wait for eternity to be with God. He walks by our side every day, and through his Word he embraces us when we feel alone. He wipes away our tears when we weep. These may be some of the most heartbreaking times we've ever seen, but just as Jesus was not alone during his time of heartbreak, neither are we.

Mackenzie Jean-Marcoux, CUC '23

Friday, April 2

Good Friday

Golgotha

They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of the Skull).

Mark 15:22

Place of a Skull. What an ominous name. Bible encyclopedias suggest that Golgotha was named after the rounded shape of its hill that resembles a skull, and when you read or hear “Place of a Skull,” images of death and mortality certainly come to mind. When passersby saw Jesus being led to Golgotha, another man carrying His cross because Jesus was too weak to do it Himself, they knew that His journey would surely end in death. There seemed to be no hope for Him.

We, too, live in a place of skulls. We are constantly surrounded by reminders of our sinful nature, our weakness, and our mortality. We have especially felt these reminders over the past year, amid this pandemic. If you have not lost a loved one because of COVID-19, you know someone who has. Everyday activities like going to the grocery store or meeting a friend for coffee are enshrouded with concerns about sickness and the frailty of our bodies. Watching the news and scrolling through social media, we see the anger and hatred that permeates our lives. Eventually, we know that our bodies will succumb to all of this and we will die.

The good news is that Jesus left the place of skulls. He died, but three days later He emerged, alive and victorious, having defeated sin and death forever. You received this victory from Him in your baptism when He marked you as His own. As you live in this place of skulls, you can take comfort in knowing that Jesus is walking right beside you. He understands your fears and pains, and He has already delivered you from sin and death. Golgotha is just a temporary stop, a place to wait as we anticipate eternal rest and peace.

Grace Conrad, CUC '22

Saturday, April 3

Holy Saturday

The Garden Tomb

*Taking it down, he wrapped it in fine linen and placed it in a tomb cut into the rock,
where no one had ever been placed.*

Luke 23:53

After Jesus' body was taken down from the cross late on Good Friday, preparations for his burial began in haste. This meant placing it in a tomb until the flesh, organs, and other tissue rotted away, where eventually the bones could be collected and placed in an ossuary. This can take months, sometimes years, and as you can imagine it is not a pleasant process. The smell of a body just a few days after death is enough to turn anyone's stomach.

The stench of a rotting human corpse would not fill the garden tomb of Joseph of Arimathea though. Three days after Jesus' body was placed in it, some of his closest friends came early in the morning to anoint it with aromatic spices. Much to their dismay, however, they discovered the tomb to be empty. When Peter and another disciple inspected it, they found only the linens used to wrap Jesus' body and cover his face. They assumed he had just been moved, and so they went home.

Mary Magdalene, however, stayed behind. She was a weepy mess, but she had to take a second, closer look. What she saw was miraculous. Inside the tomb were two angels. They spoke to her, asking, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Explaining, she backed out of the tomb (probably out of fear) and then turned and ran into what appeared to be a gardener. He asked her the same question. "Why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Answering with blurry, tear-filled eyes, Jesus interrupted her and called out her name, "Mary." She must have dissolved into even more tears, only this time they were tears of joy. This was no gardener. It was her Lord who she had seen crucified and dead just a few nights before.

"I have seen the Lord," she soon told the disciples and for forty days thereafter Jesus "presented himself alive" to the disciples "by many proofs." And the rest is history, for in "complete certainty caused by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ," according to Clement of Rome (c. 30-99), the disciples "went with the Holy Spirit's certainty, preaching the good news that the kingdom of God is about to come." They turned the Greco-Roman world upside down with the message of the forgiveness of sins, and now, nearly 2000 years later, we too are certain of it because of the events of that took place in the garden tomb.

Lord God, Heavenly Father, we thank you for our salvation won by the death and resurrection of your son. We ask that you strengthen our faith and our witness so that we might be as bold as Mary and as certain as the disciples, always speaking the good news the people you have put in our lives. Amen

Adam Francisco, CUC Faculty

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