

# Into the Wilderness:

## 2018 Lenten Reflection Guide

A JOURNEY HOME WITH HABITAT

---

“Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my fellow servant also will be.”

---

*John 12:26*

---

Through shelter, we empower.



**Habitat**  
for Humanity®  
Catawba Valley



# Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

*Rev Patrick Campbell  
Peace United Church of Christ*

## Reflect:

On Ash Wednesday the congregation of Peace Church gathers for prayer, reflection, Holy Communion, and the imposition of ashes. When the time is right, each person comes forward to lovingly receive the sign of the cross, marked in ash, on their forehead. Every person hears the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Remember. What an incredible word. It conjures up everything from the joyful to the painful, the despairing to hope-filled praise. Remember that you are dust; the same substance that our ancient stories tell us God molded together with God’s hands and breathed life into to form human beings in the likeness of the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

At the beginning of every Lent we are invited to remember that we are dust, the same material where animals walk and trees grow and our fellow human beings go about their lives. In other words, during Lent, we are encouraged to remember that all of creation and humanity are linked together.

With this remembering, we are inspired to recognize the needs of our neighbors and respond in some way. We can respond with our prayers or we can volunteer or we can donate some of our treasure or we can try something new.

Getting started is often the hardest part because there is such great need everywhere and it is overwhelming to imagine how one person might respond. Yet we are not free to ignore the needs around us. That is why I am grateful for organizations like Habitat for Humanity that respond to the need of creating safe places to live for so many people across the United States and the world. And I am grateful for a day like Ash Wednesday, that invites us to remember that we are all linked together, seeking ways that we might respond to the needs of our neighbors. Now, we have forty days to remember and to respond, let us begin.

## Pray:

---

Holy One, by remembering that we are dust and to the dust we shall return, show us all of the ways that we are connected to one another and to your creation. Guide us, this Lent, into ways that we might better care for our neighbors near and far. Amen.

---

## Fast:

Consider giving something up for Lent like going out to eat for lunch or dinner and donate that money you would normally spend to an organization like Habitat for Humanity of Catawba Valley.

## Act:

Go to Habitat for Humanity’s website and learn about all of the ways that Habitat recognizes the needs of their neighbors and responds to that need.



## Pray:

---

God of Love, you are with us at the river and in the wilderness. Set us free from the voices that tempt us to despair and discouragement. Tune our ears instead to your voice that calls us your own. Let your voice of love shape and prepare us each day before we go out and enter a world full of noise. Amen.

---

## Fast:

Jesus' forty days in the wilderness reminds us of Israel's forty years in the wilderness before entering the promised land. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the wilderness is a place of digital disconnection—no cable TV, no WiFi, no cell service. Consider fasting from screens. Maybe you fast from one thing all season—for example, no social media—or maybe you choose one day a week to be entirely screen free. Let this be a season to disconnect in order to reconnect with God.

## Act:

Not every wilderness experience comes to us by choice. At times, we see others who have been thrust into a wilderness of suffering or challenge. Then we are able to become the ones who wait on and serve them. Consider a person you know who is undergoing a season of trial or hardship. How might you go and minister to them? How might you offer a listening ear and an encouraging voice? Sometimes the gift of presence, and simply being with someone so they are not alone, says more than any words ever could.

## Reflect:

The way Mark tells it, the story of Jesus' life always moves at a quick clip. He let's Matthew and Luke tell us about Jesus' birth, while Mark skips straight to this scene at the Jordan River bank. Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit comes on him, and immediately that same Spirit drives him to the wilderness. It's in the wilderness where Jesus prepares for his life and ministry that follows. Only after being tempted in the wilderness does Jesus emerge proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.

The wilderness requires that you travel light. A little over a year ago I went on my first overnight backpacking trip. I knew once we got to the place where we were going to pitch camp, if I forgot something in the car, there was no going back to get it. I also knew I didn't want to carry an excessively heavy backpack. My preparation for the trip included thinking as much about what I needed to take with me as what I needed to leave behind.

In the story, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. It doesn't seem like Jesus had much of an opportunity to calculate what he did and didn't have room for in his pack. Maybe you've had that sort of experience too. No time to think; just go.

Lent is an opportunity to willingly enter "the wilderness" with God. Not necessarily a place on map, but a spiritual space in our hearts where we learn to travel light and listen for God. What are the things you need to leave behind in this season? Maybe there are negative voices that cause discouragement or shame? Maybe that includes your own voice of self-doubt? Un-invite them from the journey. Listen instead for the one voice of God who calls down from heaven and says, "You are my beloved child."

## First Sunday of Lent

Mark 1:9-15

*Rev Wil Posey, First United Methodist Church of Hickory*



## Second Sunday of Lent

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Rev Whit Malone  
First Presbyterian Church  
of Hickory

### Reflect:

It is a simple observation, I know, but an important one. Jesus takes his disciples with him *up* the mountain. Then, after the period of revelation, transformation, and transfiguration, they come back *down* again. Up and down. Jesus *could* have stayed up there; and maybe *should* have stayed there. Yet he comes back down. Down into the mundane experience of everyday life. Down into the midst of squabbling, disbelieving disciples. Down into the religious and political divisions of the day. Down into the poverty and pain that are part and parcel of life for so many in this world. Down. Jesus came down.

Why is this important? At least two reasons: First, because this is the very heart of the gospel. As Paul writes, "though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Phil. 2:6-7). That Jesus came down from his rightful place in glory to embrace the world in love is the very essence of the gospel.

Second, and just as importantly, Jesus came down to us because frankly, we can't go up to him. Preachers tell us that our job is to try our darnedest to become more like him. Yet, no matter how hard we try to be perfect – like Jesus-- we know that we fall dreadfully short. Jesus is just a little too good for us.

The good news is that this isn't a story about *our* going *up*, it's a story about *Jesus* coming *down*, all the way down into our brokenness, fear, disappointment, and loss. And, of course, it only gets more so, as we watch our Lord travel to the cross, embracing there all that is hard, difficult, and even despicable in life so that he might also bring victory from death itself. It is because he came down that we might live in hope knowing that wherever we may go, Christ has already been and that where Christ is now we will one day be.

### Pray:

---

O Christ, give us grace to know at all times and all places that you came down that we might know your steadfast presence. Amen.

---

### Fast:

Friends, as part of your Lenten practice this week perhaps you could contemplate what is dark and fearful in your life and the lives of those you love. And as you do, remember that Jesus came down... that Jesus is not afraid of what is difficult in our lives... that Jesus will not reject us on account of our failings... that Jesus' descent back down the mountain reminds us that we don't have to hide the hard parts of our lives from the God we know in Him. In fact, Jesus is already there. For God the Father came to us in and through the Incarnate Son precisely to be with us and for us through thick and thin... through life and death. Indeed, God came in Jesus to be with us through death into new life. For no other reason was Jesus born, lived, died and was raised again, except that we might know that God is unrelentingly and indefatigably *for us*! Thanks be to God.

### Act:

Memorize Philippians 2: 5-8.



# Third Sunday of Lent

John 2:13-25

Rev Troy Howard

First United Methodist Church of Hickory

## Pray:

---

Gracious God, help me to live each day aware of your presence, aware of your love and ever willing to offer myself to others in the same way that you offer yourself to me. Keep me ever mindful that your grace and mercy are freely given. Amen.

---

## Reflect:

He really made a mess that day, Jesus did. Up until he walked into the synagogue there was an order to things. The religious establishment had allowed the sellers of livestock and the money changers to create quite a business for themselves. They probably made a pretty good living and it is possible that the priests and the other keepers of the temple found a way to profit from the trade. Worshippers, the people traveling to Jerusalem to participate in the sacred rituals of their faith could buy their sacrifice when they got to “church.” What’s more, they could buy the sacrifice that was worthy of their station in life. The order of things allowed people to go to the holiest shrine of their faith and *buy their sacrifice*. Buy their sacrifice!

Nothing was required, or expected, of me to show up to the temple for worship except that I have some number of coins in my pocket. I didn’t need to pray. I didn’t need to look inward and reflect on what the moment could mean or what I the state of my heart was. All I had to do was go take advantage of the merchants who were waiting for me, sleepwalk through the routine observance of the proscribed rituals, pat myself on the back for showing up, and then go on about the rest of my day. How much has changed in the two thousand years since Jesus upended the life in the temple? How much has changed since the temple was raised again?

Worship doesn’t happen because we show up at the right time and at the right place and with all the right stuff. Worship doesn’t happen because the clock strikes 11:00 AM, it’s Sunday morning, and I’m in a pew or behind the pulpit. Worship happens because, and when, I choose to look for God in the people I meet, the things that I do, the stuff that I read or watch on TV. Worship happens when I cultivate a relationship with God and I seek to join my heart with the hearts of others who long to give their thanks and praise for all of the unmerited love and grace that I receive every day. A sacrifice cannot be bought from a merchant in the narthex. A sacrifice can only be returned as a sign of thanks for the love God shows to us through his Son.

## Fast:

I want to fast from the routine order of my life. Patterns of behavior can be helpful and lead to great productivity. Life all but demands that we live according to a schedule. Things can get done. Tasks can be accomplished. Checklists can be completed. And at the end of the day I haven’t made a difference, I haven’t spoken with God at all and the whispers of the Holy Spirit are lost in the wind. Even though the routine of my day includes devotional reading of scripture and time for prayer, sometimes it is like buying the turtledoves in the temple. I want to open myself up to the possibility that I can do what I need to do, be who I’m called to be, and do so in a way that lets God continue to mold and shape the lump of clay that I am.

## Act:

This is going to start on the third Monday of Lent. It will be both pretty easy and fairly difficult. The context of our lives includes all of the people who need and expect things from us and we still have to live into that, but breakfast can be something other than two scrambled eggs every morning. I intend to eat lunch in places I never go and with people I’ve never met. I’m going to hangout with the preschoolers at church. I hope to give them glue and glitter and then stick around to clean up the mess. I’m going to prepare my Sunday school lesson or sermon in a hospital waiting room or the Hickory Soup Kitchen or the Northstone neighborhood being built by Habitat. I’m going to shake off the routine so that I might be more ready for the hymns, prayers, message and offerings that come on Sunday morning.



## Reflect:

“For God so Loved the World”. These are the words the gospel opens with this Sunday. That out of the pure pleasure of God’s love for humanity, God gave us God’s only son. So often, we speak of God in terms of being and power: God as omniscient in knowledge, God as omnipotent in power. God becomes so large and so abstract, that God can almost become unreachable. But here, John invites us to see God in a different way – through the lens of love. John’s God is a God who is all powerful in love, who freely reaches out to the world in connection and compassion.

What’s more, just as God reaches out to us with an offering of love, God desires the same love from us in return. In Exodus 20:5, God declares “for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.” While this notion of a jealous God may seem dissonant from the ways we commonly talk about an impervious all-powerful being, the underlying sentiment is actually a beautiful reflection on our relationship to the sacred. In order to experience jealousy, we must put our guard down and submit ourselves to the feelings of another beyond our control. It is a decentering experience. God created us out of love. But God also created us with free-will, giving us the power to choose an authentic relationship with God. Yet, this also gives us the power to reject the one who loved us into being. What a beautiful commentary about a Creator who, out of pure love for his created, sheds power and makes self vulnerable; a God who desires relationship for the pure joy of giving and receiving love. God sanctifies the power of vulnerability, the strength of love.

It is through God’s free gift of love that we become loveable. There is nothing we can do to make us worthy of the love of God. There is nothing in us valuable enough to elicit God’s love. Rather, God first bestows love upon us, and in doing so, makes us valuable. So for those moments along our Lenten journey in which we feel inadequate or that we have come up short, we can take comfort in the fact that God loves us through our faults, not in spite of them.

The love we get is the very same love which we are called to give. As disciples, we are not called to love those who have earned it. Our comfort and care is not reserved just for those who help themselves, who have everything together. We don’t just minister to the strong, we don’t just tend to the worthy. As Dorothy Day says, “the gospel takes away our right forever to discriminate between the deserving and undeserving poor.” We are called to love first and without condition, not after someone proves themselves trustworthy of compassion. This can be a vulnerable, decentering experience – will they take advantage of our service? Will they make a fool of our kindness? It is a risk to love. But it is also a grace and a gift that we receive in return. We love those in front of us, we serve those we encounter. And we delight in the knowledge that we too are met and measured with a generosity we can never earn.

## Pray:

---

Lord, the call to love can be an overwhelming one. Help me to find the strength to sit in vulnerable spaces and to empty myself of fear in order to make room for love of my neighbors. Remind me that the love I receive is born of generosity and joy. Inspire me so that the love I give may be rooted in justice.

---

## Fast:

This week, invite yourself to fast from judgements of yourself and others. Instead, challenge yourself to look through the eyes of God. Let go of feelings of frustration, thoughts of criticism, and fears of inadequacy. In the space created by their absence, try and cultivate a tolerance of vulnerability, a posture of love, an embrace of generosity.

## Act:

Look for opportunities to say yes to those around you. If someone asks you for assistance, whether a loved one or a stranger, begin from a posture of what is possible. Practice generosity in love and action.

## Fourth Sunday of Lent

John 3:14-21

*Jenna Ross*

*Habitat Catawba Valley*



## Pray:

---

Father, let me die to myself today, so that my life may bear spiritual fruit. Forgive me for my tendencies toward selfishness and pride. Today, I give you the freedom to do your work in my heart. Grow me into the person that you want me to be. May the things that bring you joy, bring me joy. May the things that hurt your heart, hurt mine as well. Help me to bring you joy by loving others well. Thank you for the work that you have started in me. May you grow it into an eternal harvest that brings glory to your name. Amen.

---

## Fast:

The focus of our fast this week is a challenge to put aside something that promotes selfishness in our lives. As we allow our own personal preferences and privileges to be buried under the work of Jesus in our hearts, we turn our focus instead toward those things which demonstrate the fruit of our faith to others. We replace selfishness with selflessness: loving self with loving others.

## Act:

The call to action is simply a call to show the love of Jesus to others. Give something to someone in need. Volunteer in an organization that serves others. Be a friend to someone who needs a listening ear. Love on someone who is hurting. Invest yourself in the well-being of another person. Throw some seeds around and see what God grows!

## Reflect:

I grew up in a farming community in rural Virginia. As a child, I would watch in amazement as fields that had sat empty all winter suddenly exploded with growth. Within weeks, much of our county would be covered with row upon row of corn. Though I was still too young to understand the science behind it all, there was one certainty that even my childish mind could grasp. If you wanted corn, you had to plant the seeds.

Jesus uses this same concept to illustrate a faith principle. Though the immediate context speaks prophetically to his upcoming death on the cross, the greater implication carries truth to each and every Jesus-follower who has come after. You see, Jesus' plan for our lives is that we should bear fruit (c.f. John 15): not the physical stuff you buy at the grocery store, but rather the spiritual product that leads to both internal transformation (i.e. sanctification) and external replication (i.e. disciple-making). The end result of this process is a bountiful harvest of faith: both in my own life and in the lives of others.

Like most processes, however, there is a caveat. Unless a seed falls into the ground and is transformed, there will be no harvest. In the same manner, unless my selfish, sinful, proud nature is transformed by the work of Jesus in my heart, my life will not bear any benefit of eternal consequence. The call to follow Jesus is not simply a call to serve him, it is also an invitation to die to self. It is then, and only then, that my life will begin to bear spiritual fruit to the glory of God.

## Fifth Sunday of Lent

John 12:20-33

*Chris Gruver, Christian Family Academy Principal; Habitat Homeowner*



## Reflect:

Today's reading is a nostalgic one for me. Palm Sunday was a BIG tradition in the little brick church that I grew up in in Small Town, South Carolina. Service started outside, a winding crowd circled a liturgist that would start worship by reading this passage from Mark. This was no ordinary lectionary reading, I cannot recall a stronger "Thanks be to God!" at the end of the lesson. The choir would then kick us off, almost beating themselves to the starting notes with enthusiasm – trumpet, tambourine, drum, and voices. We would wind through our church yard and into the sanctuary, a living labyrinth, waving palms with off-key sing-shouting as we filed in. "Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" I get chills today reflecting, remembering those moments of my childhood. I can't explain why, to me it's just one of those things that defines what I think of as "growing up."

I couldn't tell you why we had such an emphasis on Palm Sunday. I think that we, like many Christian communities, wanted to give Jesus the welcome we know he was worth then and is worth now. So imagine my shock, as I read this passage in preparation for this reflection, that I stopped in my literary tracks when I noticed something I'd never given thought to. How could something have not hit home during one of the many passionate readings of this scripture? So many joy-filled processions, so much hosanna shouting. What could I have overlooked?

The colt. My entire life, I have hyper-focused on the joy and pomp. Time and time again I've run to the grand procession, palms, and shouts of blessing. I've celebrated the spectacle so much that I've forgotten the logistics. Someone had to get the job done for the whole thing to happen. Jesus himself instructs his disciples to tell anyone who stops them in retrieving the colt that "the Lord needs it." Needs it?! The man that is drawing crowds singing his literal praises. The man who is God. Who will die that week to save the world, and RISE again?! Why the detail on the donkey?

Because Jesus knows that in order for us as His church to live as part of the Kingdom, we must recognize the holiness of the every day. Of the struggle, the daily grind. We need to find the donkeys of our faith. Not every act of faith, not every movement of mercy, not every stand for justice in our life will be grand and triumphant. Most, in fact, will be small, every day signs of the coming of the Kingdom. As we work toward a worldwide *Hosanna!* we must constantly, consistently, and prayerfully push for finding the colt. What opportunities can we seek that can help us bring Jesus into this world? What smiles can we show, meals can we cook, nails can we hammer, and hands can we hold? We, my friends, are called to community. A community that celebrates the coming of Jesus in every small opportunity that we have to love one another – in many fleeting ordinary yet sacred moments every day.

## Pray:

---

Lord, Kingdom-living can feel like a lot, too much maybe sometime. Too often, we miss out on opportunities to be who you call us to be, by trying to be who we think we should. Give us wisdom and strength to recognize the holiness in the every day. The repair for a widow. The door for a stranger. The call to a friend. The smile to a stranger. The quick, exhausted prayer. Remind us, Lord, that these too bring you joy. As you call us deeper into radical love for you and this world, remind us that ordinary acts of justice and mercy are radical too. *Amen.*

---

## Fast:

This week, challenge yourself to fast from comparison. When you hear your soul speak "bigger, better, broader, more impact" take a moment to recognize the holiness in the everyday. Take time to prayerfully center yourself around the way that God is working in the routine and small parts of your life, and how you are called to use those parts of yourself to serve others and to live as part of the Kingdom of God. There is power in the normal and mundane. Find your mule and thank God for the opportunity to serve in all ways, big and small.

## Act:

Find the donkey opportunities in your faith this week. Be in tune to how the small parts of your life can make a big impact on showing Christ's love in this world. Find opportunities every day to practice small gestures that point to big grace.

## Palm Sunday

Mark 11:1-11

Zack King

LiveWell Catawba



## Good Friday

Mark 14:1 – 15:47

Rev Karla Woggon  
Episcopal Church  
of the Ascension

### Reflect:

In his book *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* theologian and professor James Cone ponders the mystery of the cross: *God's word*, he argues, "is as the old preachers used to say, *inscrutable. It is a mystery that you neither control nor fully understand...Nowhere is that "inscrutability," more evident than in the cross. A symbol of death and defeat, God turned it into a sign of liberation and new life. The cross is the most empowering symbol of God's loving solidarity with the "least of these," the unwanted in society who suffer daily from great injustices". Cone believes that on the cross "God saw and continues to see the suffering of the least of these and God claims the suffering as his own." The lynching tree Cone concludes is the cross in America. When American Christians realize that they can only meet Jesus in the crucified bodies in our midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross."* (James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*)

The cross is a complex, paradoxical, inscrutable mystery. When we gaze at the cross we see our guilt for the countless ways we continue to crucify God in the lives of the poor and the oppressed in our society. And we also see a God who enters into the fullness of suffering with all those who suffer. On Good Friday we are called to stand in solidarity with Jesus and with all those who suffer unjustly. And we are called to repent of the ways we add to that suffering. One essential step into doing that is admitting to our own brokenness. When we can acknowledge the broken, imperfect, parts of ourselves we are more likely to confess the ways in which we break others. And we are also more likely to be willing to seek the transformation and healing grace that Jesus offers us all from the cross.

### Pray:

---

Gracious God, the comfort of all who sorrow, the strength of all who suffer: Let the cry of those in misery and need come to you, that they may find your mercy present with them in all their afflictions; and give us, we pray, the strength to serve them for the sake of him who suffered for us, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (*Book of Common Prayer, Good Friday Liturgy*) .

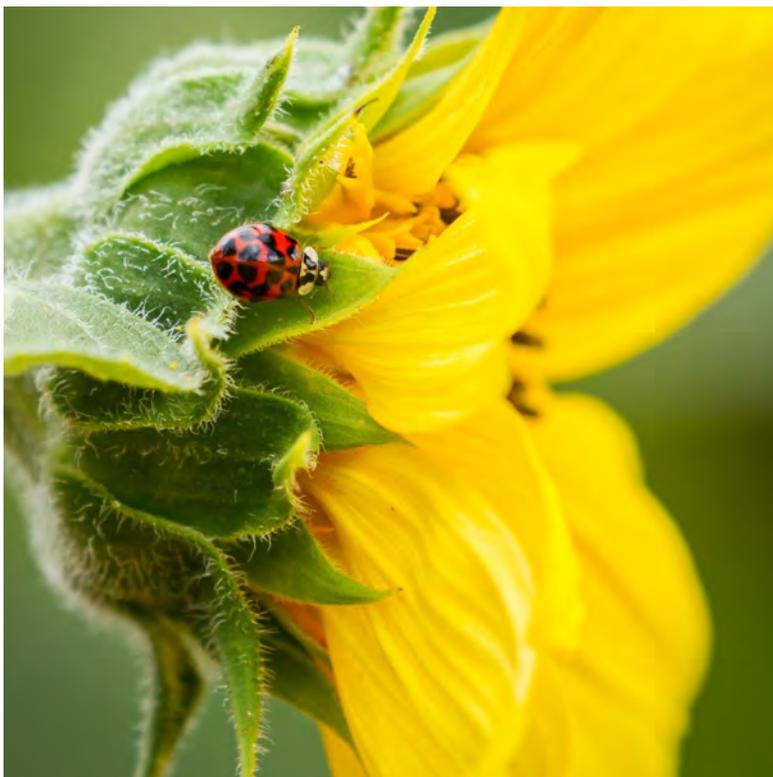
---

### Fast:

Today fast from buying anything and pray for the bodies that are broken by unfair wages that are kept low to keep prices low and profits high. Fast from thoughts and actions that deny the humanity of anyone.

### Act:

Donate to organizations like Habitat that work to provide shelter for the working poor. Take a long hard look at your life. Confess and Repent of the ways that your life adds to the brokenness of our society. Admit to your own brokenness and seek the healing grace of Jesus.



## Reflect:

How emotional Peter, John, and Mary must have been to discover the empty tomb. From our perspective of knowing what they will find, we might think there was only excitement and joy. Let's remember that the disciples were grieving over their dear friend's death. They were sorrowful. They were fearful. They were uncertain. They were confused. But John 20 verse 4 tells us that Peter and John *ran*, and I believe, they *ran* with expectation to the tomb. This expectation was a step of faith. The realization of Jesus' resurrection was the proof of their faith. Now the fullness of joy could come.

This portion of scripture from John 20 brings the Don Francisco song, *He's Alive*, to my mind. I'm currently listening to the Dolly Parton version loudly in my office. My eyes fill with tears each time I hear the chorus of "He's Alive! He's Alive! He's Alive and I'm forgiven, Heaven's Gates are Open Wide." The true and pure joy of knowing I serve a risen Savior is powerful!

After the realization of His resurrection and encountering the risen Jesus, the disciples could not keep this news to themselves. More importantly, they were challenged by Christ himself to take His teachings and commands to the nations. It was a mandate. It was the last words Jesus spoke to His disciples. It's nonnegotiable. It's part of Christian maturity and growth. The disciples didn't hesitate or make excuses; instead they went about making disciples while sharing the love, good news, teachings, and miracles of Jesus.

The challenge for us today is to share the joy of our experience of faith, through the knowledge, salvation, and love of Jesus Christ, with folks in our community who are searching for true love, hope, and meaning in their lives. With our attitude, with our witness, with our life – we can say 'He's Alive,' and act to share this message and invoke change around us. We must put this part of our faith into practical ways. With our attitude – do we operate with integrity? Are we kind and gracious to people around us? With our witness – is there a true difference in our own lives that others notice? With our life – do we use the teachings of Jesus and God's love as the measure of how we operate in our daily actions? To truly evoke change in the world around us, we must ourselves be changed.

## Pray:

---

Father, we love You. Thank you for sending Your son, Jesus, and for the joy of knowing He is risen. Give us opportunities to share this joyful news with others in our daily lives. Let us be strengthened by our knowledge of Your love and forgiveness. Help us to be truthful, authentic, and bold as we share that knowledge with others. - Amen

---

## Fast:

Just as Mary woke early that first resurrection morning, let us be challenged this week to give up our early morning sleep for dedication to rising earlier and spending time in God's word and in prayer with Him. Ask God for practical ways we can share His love and the truth of the Gospel with others.

## Act:

Challenge yourself to think outside "your normal" for ways to connect and impact your community. Volunteer and serve in the community. The opportunities are plentiful and the benefits are immeasurable.

# Easter Sunday

John 20:1-9

Heather Lockman, First Baptist Church of Hickory