



**BECAUSE HE LIVES**  
**DEVOTIONAL GUIDE**

# Devotional Guide

Week of:	Scripture	Theme	Author	Page
April 5th	Matthew 28:1-10	“Because He Lives”	Rev. Dr. Cathy Johns	1
April 12th	Romans 8: 5-17	“Identity”	Rev. Dr. Michael Vilaro	2
April 19th	Romans 8: 31-39	“Relationship”	Rev. Nancy Turner	12
April 26th	Romans 8: 28-31	“Purpose”	Rev. Stephanie Tunison	13
May 3rd	Romans 8: 18-28	“Strength”	Rev. Dave Weaver	19

# “Because He Lives”

## Matthew 28: 1-10

What difference does it make if the Resurrection of Jesus Christ actually happened? Dr. Leander Keck articulates it well: “If there were no Resurrection, there would be no Christian faith.” The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of our faith. Without it everything else falls apart.

Pilgrims visiting Jerusalem are taken to two sites, each claiming to be the site of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. While it is tempting to think that one of them needs to be “correct”, they both help us understand the first Easter.

The first site is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which most scholars believe is the authentic site of the Resurrection. In the fourth century Constantine, committed to building a new church, discovered the tomb while destroying a temple built to Venus.

The church is a huge structure standing tall in the Christian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. Inside pilgrims can visit several important parts of the journey of Christ, including the stone where Jesus’ body was anointed, the Rock of Calvary and the tomb of Christ.

Pilgrims stand in line and then bow their heads to enter the small chapel that houses the tomb of Christ. When I knelt down next to the tomb I sensed an amazing presence. My hand extended to glide over the stone, once jagged and sharp, now worn smooth by the hands of millions of faithful disciples of Christ who worshipped in this holy place through the centuries.

In Jerusalem, pilgrims also visit the Garden Tomb. While it is tempting to believe that this is the authentic site because it reminds us of the photographs from our childhood Bibles, it is best to think of it as a helpful site. It is hard to imagine a first century tomb outdoors when visiting the tomb contained within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where multiple shrines and chapels stand inside the walls.

The Garden Tomb was discovered by British general, Charles Gordon, in 1883. He discovered a tomb in a garden cut into the side of a rock that bears a strange resemblance to a skull. “Golgotha,” the place where Jesus was crucified, means “Place of the Skull.” This lovely garden is a place where Christians can gather to worship and remember the power of the Resurrection. The guide puts it well: “Knowing for certain the actual site of the Resurrection does not matter. What matters is that it happened.”

C.S. Lewis, a theologian of the 20th Century, explains in *Mere Christianity* that one cannot escape a decision regarding who Jesus was and who Jesus is. One must choose. Lewis writes:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. ... Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.”

If we claim that Jesus is Lord, what difference does it make in our lives?

Bill and Gloria Gaither, authors of the song “Because He Lives,” wrote it during a time of struggle in their lives. The late sixties brought a challenging chapter to their family. Bill was recovering from mononucleosis, Gloria was pregnant with their third child, and they were belittled and criticized by many. “God is dead” theology was also prevalent in the news. Gloria sat on New Year’s Eve wondering about the wisdom of bringing a child into a crazy world like this. She felt an amazing peace come over her. She reports that

God came and brought her peace and reassurance that God would hold them all in the future and keep them safe. The power of the Resurrection was clear and Gloria once again felt empowered as a daughter of God who could face the future unafraid. Their experience inspired them to write this powerful hymn.

Early Christians believed that the Resurrection was the cornerstone of their faith. When they would go to visit the site of their departed loved ones, they would not call it a grave, but a “Resurrection place,” saying for example, “Let us go and visit David’s Resurrection place.” What a strong testimony of the power of our Risen Lord! John’s gospel is clear: When Martha came to Jesus with the news that Lazarus, her brother, had died; Jesus explained that the Resurrection includes us. “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’” (John 11:25-26)

Because He lives, we have a new identity, a new relationship, a new purpose, and new strength. The Resurrection is not simply an event from history! It is a new way of living today, claiming who and whose we are: beloved children of God, embraced by God in life and in death.

As you begin this study I pray that you will be richly blessed with the joy of our Risen Lord who has set you free from sin and death! May you join in the chorus of the ancient Orthodox greeting on Easter morning that celebrates the news that changed our world forever:

**“Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!”**

Digging deeper questions:

- What is your favorite Easter hymn? Which lyrics (words) make your heart “sing”?

- Review the C.S. Lewis quote from Mere Christianity. Share your thoughts on his conclusion that the identity of Jesus is either lunatic, liar, or Lord. Describe your relationship with Jesus.
- Bill and Gloria Gaither wrote these bold words: “Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives all fear is gone. Because I know He holds the future and life is worth the living just because He lives.” When have you sensed the power of our Risen Lord giving you courage to face tomorrow without fear?

Submitted by Rev. Dr. Cathy Johns



# Because He Lives: “Identity”

Romans 8: 5-17

A friend posted this story about Brother M. Basil Pennington (close friend of Thomas Merton) that caused me to pause and reflect about the resurrection of Jesus:

*A few years ago, an American monastery hosted an event designed to introduce our monks and priests to Eastern mysticism. They asked a Zen master from Japan to be the retreat leader, and since Roshi did not know much English, he was given a Japanese-English New Testament. He studied the scriptures and offered many insights into God’s Word from the vantage point of the Asian mind. One evening, a monk went to see Roshi for some conversation. The holy man was sitting on a sofa with the Testament in his lap. When he saw the monk enter, he broke into a smile and said, “I like Christianity, but I would not like Christianity without the resurrection. I want to see your resurrection!” The monk later wrote in his journal, “In his simplicity and clarity, the master had gone straight to the heart of things. With his directness he was saying what everyone else implicitly says to us Christians. ‘You are a Christian. You are supposed to be risen with Christ in your attitudes and actions. Show me your resurrection and I will believe.’”*

One of the things we can love about the Bible is that it is not a good propaganda tool. Not really. Oh, there are many who try to make it one. But, if we really read it and think about it, this book of books does not work well for giving a simple view of history or humanity or even God. The heroes often lie, steal and drink too much. There is corruption in the institutions; its characters are condemned and redeemed. There is suffering where there should not be, and even the admission from some of its main characters (like Paul) that tendencies toward doing wrong are not easily overcome.

Paul, often misquoted and misapplied by well-meaning Christians, fits right into this complex narrative. In Romans 7:15, just prior to

our reading for this meditation, he confesses what we all know—“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” There is no record or even hint of Paul being a despicable person after his conversion. He just knows, and wants his readers to know, that he IS imperfect and finds himself doing the opposite of what his best-self desires. And he goes on to admit that the more he focuses on the rules (the Law), the worse he does.

Some would say that until each of us acknowledges this part of our lives—the shadow self—that we will not know the fullness of life in Christ. Once Paul sets up his thesis by acknowledging that even he struggles with living his best self, he explains that because of the resurrection, he has a new understanding, a new “world view” if you will, that creates a new identity and purpose for him. “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the Spirit...to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace... (And) you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (vss. 5 and 9).

There are ten pages of commentary in *The Interpreter’s Bible* on verses 5 thru 17 where biblical scholars try to unpack these verses; much more than we want to discuss here. But a pivotal point in all of the interpreting and explaining of these verses is a distinction made in verse 5—“Those who live according to the flesh... (Versus) those who live according to the Spirit...” According to the scholars, a better translation of what Paul is writing here is: “They who are after the flesh set their minds on things of the flesh, but they who are after the Spirit set their minds on the Spirit...” The question becomes, “What are we ‘after’? What is our life’s pursuit?”

An even clearer understanding of Paul’s message to the Romans is found when we understand what he means when he talks about “flesh” versus “Spirit”. Unfortunately, for much of historical Christianity the word “flesh” has been coopted to merely mean the physical and often the sexual. But for Paul this is not his thought. For



Paul, to live “in pursuit of the flesh” is to live in pursuit of all that is self-centered and self-serving. Are we primarily in pursuit of what is self-centered, self-serving? Or, are we in pursuit of life creating and peace fulfilling?

For Paul, we no longer live “in pursuit” of that which is self-centered and self-serving because we have the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God (these appear interchangeable to Paul). We now know that we are all children of God. “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.” To live “in pursuit of the Spirit” is to live in a very different way, with a very different mind, and a very different heart for a very different purpose. And, he suggests, from a very different identity. He proclaims that the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead creates real and profound changes in our lives:

- Our relationships are reconciled (literal interpretation of “righteousness”)
- We are adopted into the family of God (children of God) and therefore-
  - Heirs of God’s promises
  - The object of God’s relentless pursuit
  - Immortal, and
  - Never separated from God

As children of God, we pursue a different treasure, have a different focus and therefore, experience a different destiny. It is not something to be grasped and held onto. It is something to be lived into so that our lives themselves are transformed by it, and in being transformed, transform the world around us. I once read, “Transformed people like Jesus, naturally transform people.” (Rohr)

Digging deeper questions:

- In what ways have you witnessed a person so aware of God’s Spirit in them that how they treated others was a clear expres-

sion of their faith?

- Have you ever paused before entering into a potentially contentious conversation and reflected on how God's Spirit unites us more than divides us? Do you believe this impacted the outcome?
- Paul writes that God's spirit within us makes us children of God, so intimate with God that we cry out, "Abba! Father!" Though we may not give God a gender in the same way, the question is—does this kind of intimacy with God assure you or confuse you? Comfort you or threaten you?

Submitted by Rev. Dr. Michael Vilardo

# Because He Lives: “Relationship”

Romans 8:31-39

So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture: They kill us in cold blood because they hate you. We're sitting ducks; they pick us off one by one. None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.

Last night, I got a call from a friend in tears. She was to come to my house today for a visit, something long planned, but she could not because she was going to testify before the state legislature in Frankfort, KY, telling her family's story in hope of expanding drug care programs in that state. Currently, there are three (yes, 3) beds in northern Kentucky for women drug addicts to receive rehabilitation care. Speaking in front of that state's lawmakers was the last thing she wanted to do, but she was exactly the right person to do it. Her young adult daughter died of a heroin overdose several years ago, not long before I met her.

Up until a month ago, I did not know how her younger daughter died. I just knew there was a butterfly tattooed on this mom's leg showing her belief that her dead daughter had transformed into

something free and beautiful beyond this life. The daughter's story was of receiving needed prescription drugs for migraine headaches as a young teen that moved into addiction. Then she sought out stronger drugs and illegal substances, then there was imprisonment and, finally, an overdose of heroin that killed her. It was a complicated path not a linear one. I heard this story because this mom had been at my house at a time when my husband and I were gathering extra furniture to give away, but just hadn't done the giving. Within the previous week, she had been involved in helping to found a new halfway house in Covington for women drug addicts. They needed furniture. That's where my extra furniture went. That's when I heard of daughter Christy's drugs and death. It's when I heard this mom tell of being pushed out of her comfort zone and the incapacitating vortex of grief to be empowered to create a safe place for women addicts who had alienated their families but still needed help. It compelled her to talk to lawmakers about what drug addiction is really like for real individuals and the impact it has on real families.

A child dying is one of life's worst nightmares. But, for my friend... for any of us and all of us... who are living through life's nightmares or dealing with the more typical of life's challenges... God in our risen Christ is there with us, by our sides, guarding our backs and showing us the way forward. It is a profound relationship that is not about fuzzy warm love or a misery loves company get together. It is about God in Christ, who lived as us and suffered as we do, offering us deep sustaining love that grounds us and gives us courage for the living of our real lives in all that comes. It doesn't matter the magnitude of your challenge. God is present with you and for you.

The late Rev. Peter Gomes, minister at Memorial Chapel at Harvard, wrote that "suffering is not an exception to the human condition, it IS the human condition." Suffering is almost impossible to avoid. The apostle Paul is our tutor in suffering, giving us the liberating good news that God is always where suffering is to be found. Jesus manifested suffering, redeemed it and transcended it. We are not saved from suffering but we know that God is always with us in whatever we experience, loving us through it. Those places of stress

are exactly where we will always find God.

Paul's words in his Letter to the Romans comes to us from mere decades after the torture, death and resurrection of Jesus during a dangerous time when those early Christian believers were being tortured and killed for their faith. Paul was imprisoned twice and eventually killed. Yet he gives us his most mature theological reasoning as he witnesses to this gift of relationship with God, who didn't withhold his Son, but gave him up for all of us. That Christ lived as us and for us, and cements our relationship with God forever. That nothing...nothing...death, life, angels, rulers, powers, things present, to come, height, depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39 NRSV). It doesn't mean that horrible things don't or won't happen. It doesn't mean we don't or won't know fear. It does mean we can face the future despite what happens and in spite of our fear. Faith – our relationship with God – enables us to live without being paralyzed by fear, to become fortified by divine love to be people of courage who can open ourselves to the unknown with hope. In it all, God is for us and God is with us. The love of God is transformative.

Because Christ lives as our resurrected lord, we have the assurance of this great gift of a loving relationship that cannot be put asunder by anything. It means that my friend is not defeated by loss and grief, but empowered by the inseparable love of God to step out into the minefield of drug addiction and proclaim new life.

Digging deeper questions:

- Reflecting on the tougher times of your life, can you identify the ways that God was surrounding you in love?
- What does that love look like to you?
- In what ways do Paul's words give you hope?

Submitted, Rev. Nancy G. Turner, Deacon

# Because He Lives: “Purpose”

Romans 8:28-30

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” NIV

A young man, Pete, was graduating from college. He had a very strained relationship with his dad, but he asked his father for a new car for graduation. Growing up in the church he had been forced to attend worship and youth group. He accepted the basic tenants of the faith until his late teen years. Then he thought the church was filled with hypocrisy. In his mind his parents became insanely strict. His friends had sooo much more freedom. Arguments became more heated and at times there were periods of long silence.

When the big day came, his father handed him a small wrapped gift. Disappointed, Pete received the gift and unwrapped it. A Bible!! Really!?! For GRADUATION!! Peter was furious. Once again here’s dad pushing his beliefs onto him. This was too much! Angrily he tossed the bible aside and left his father’s home. In fact, he didn’t return and refused to speak with his dad, for months.

The phone rang and he heard his mother’s voice, upset. She begged him to come home. He refused. The next time she called he heard the quiver in her voice and he learned that his dad had unexpectedly passed away.

A few weeks later he went back to his house to help his mom clean out his father’s study. He came across the bible his father had gotten him for graduation. Picking it up, he flipped through the pages. Some paper fell to the floor. He picked it up. With utter shock and disbelief he discovered that his dad had written him a check for the

full amount of money to cover the price of a new car. Pete felt sick to his stomach.

This young man missed out on his gift. He had tossed it aside. By not understanding the entirety of the gift, he never embraced it. Pete lost out on the enormous treasure he could have enjoyed.

Beloved, are we not like Pete? Do we hear about the gift of a new life in Christ, say thanks, but toss it away because it's not what we think it should be? It's not the way WE want it?

Romans 8:28-30 tells us how much God loves us. We are justified in Jesus Christ. The Greek word "to justify" is a verb when translated means, "to declare or make one righteous." In Greek times, a tyrannical king tried to vindicate himself from his selfish deeds by justifying himself. He wanted his actions to look ok. Later the term came to mean that actions were correct.

In pagan times the word "justify" meant that someone was without sin. If you were "justified" you were sinless. In Egyptian mythology you could be declared righteous only after the god Osiris weighed your good deeds against your bad deeds.

The Old Testament gave us a foreshadowing of the New Testament meaning of justification. In the Old Testament God forgave the nation of Israel's sin on the Day of Atonement when animals were sacrificed to atone for their misdeeds. In the New Testament it was Jesus' sacrifice on the cross that justified, or cleansed, our sin.

In Romans, Paul writes that the Law of Moses can make no one righteous. It is only possible by the grace of God, through Jesus Christ. Paul's thesis is that we are justified by faith alone.

Because He lives, we are justified by faith. This is not because we deserve it, but because our Father in Heaven has given it to us as a gift. It is when we say YES to the gift HE gives us that we receive it. It's a wholehearted YES that we love Him and accept Him as Lord



and Savior of our lives. It is in that moment of Justification when God sees us as sinless. Some have called it Justifying Grace, Just-as-if-I-Never-Sinned, when we stand before God. It's grace, God's grace. Whew. Thank you Jesus!

A gentleman shares that on a snowy night his car went into a skid and he ran a stop sign. When in court, he tried to justify himself by blaming the slippery surface, but nothing could justify his carelessness. In the same way, we cannot justify ourselves before God. Thomas Watson, a Puritan preacher, said: "God does not justify us because we are worthy, but by justifying us makes us worthy." "Apart from His grace we are all unworthy."

So as we reread the scripture, we see that through our accepting this gift of grace, and not tossing it aside, WE are justified by grace and are therefore glorified with Christ. We are glorified for a purpose. Our purpose is to love God and those whom God loves. We radiate and reflect God's love and we uphold and care for each other.

Digging deeper questions:

- Beloved, how is your relationship with God? Are you close? Or have you gotten angry or upset and pulled away? Do you know He wants you back? He desires a close and endearing relationship with you.

Say YES to his gift. Open the bible; flip through the pages and read of his unfailing love for you. We don't have to understand the entirety of the gift, we just have to accept it and receive ALL his love and blessings. He's already pouring them out; we simply have to be open to ACCEPTING them. Don't be a Pete. Look around, be expectant and just say, "Thank you Lord."

Beloved, go, live out your purpose as a called, grace-filled child of God.

Submitted by Rev. Stephanie Tunison, Deacon

# Because He Lives: “Strength”

Romans: 8: 18-28

Throughout the book of Romans, Paul has argued that God counts us as righteous because of what Christ has done. Even though we sometimes sin, those sins are counted against the old self that was crucified with Christ; our sins do not count against who we are in Christ. We have an obligation to fight sin — not in order to be saved, but because we are already children of God. In the last part of chapter 8, Paul turns his attention to our glorious future.

The Christian life is not easy. Fighting sin is not easy. Enduring persecution is not easy. Coping with day-to-day life in a fallen world, with corruptible bodies, has its difficulties. Nevertheless, Paul says, “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (verse 18). Just as there was for Jesus, there is joy set before us — a future so wonderful that our current trials will seem minor.

But we are not the only ones who will benefit. Paul says that there is a cosmic significance to God’s plan being worked out in us: “For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed” (verse 19). The creation not only wants to see us in glory — the creation itself will also be blessed with change when God’s plan is brought to completion, as Paul says in the next verses: “For the creation was subjected to frustration...in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (verses 20-21).

Even though the price has already been paid, we do not yet see everything the way God wants it. “The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Romans 8:22). The creation is burdened, as if in pain, as it forms the womb in which we are being birthed. Not only that, “but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies” (verse 23). Even though we have been given the Holy Spirit

as an advance payment of salvation, we also struggle, for our salvation is not yet complete.

We do not yet see a perfect creation, neither in space nor on earth nor in our own bodies, but we are confident that it will be transformed. As Paul says: “For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently” (Romans 8:24-25).

We wait, with both patience and eagerness, for the resurrection of our bodies, when our adoption will be completed. We live in the situation of “already but not yet”: already redeemed, but not yet completely redeemed. We are already freed from condemnation, but not yet completely freed from sin. We are already in the kingdom, but it is not yet in its fullness. We live with aspects of the age to come, even as we struggle with aspects of the old age.

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans” (verse 26). God knows our limitations and frustrations. He knows that our flesh is weak even when our spirit is willing, so his Spirit intercedes for us, even for needs that cannot be put into words.

God’s Spirit does not remove our weakness, but helps us in our weakness. God bridges the gap between old and new, between what we see and what he has declared us to be. For example, we sin even though we want to do righteousness (7:14-25). We see sin in our lives, but God declares us righteous, because God sees the end result even while the process has just begun.

Despite the discrepancy between what we see and what we want, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit does what we cannot. God will see us through. “God who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God” (8:27). The Holy Spirit is on our side, helping us, so we can be confident!

Even despite our trials, our weakness and our sins, “we know that

in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Verse 28). God does not cause all things, but God allows them, and works with them for a greater purpose. God has a plan for us, and we can be confident that God will complete this work in us.

During this season of Lent be reflective or do some self-examination with this particular text.

Digging deeper questions:

- How do you envision the glory that will be revealed in us? (Verse 18) What will we be like?
- What is hope? How does hope help us on the journey? (Verses, 24, 25)
- What are your groans? How much does the Spirit intercede for us? (Verses 23, 26).
- Would Paul agree that God works for the good even in cases of child sex abuse, terrorism and genocide etc.? (Verse 28).
- Can we find strength in our weakness? How do you draw strength from God?

Submitted by Rev. Dave Weaver

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