**

# *Gathering,* L/E 2020

Ash Wednesday to the Last Sunday of Easter

[Ash Wednesday to the Last Sunday of Easter 2](#_Toc23508560)

[Lent and Holy Week 2](#_Toc23508561)

[Easter 2](#_Toc23508562)

[February 26 – Ash Wednesday 4](#_Toc23508563)

[March 1 – Lent 1 6](#_Toc23508564)

[March 8 – Lent 2 8](#_Toc23508565)

[March 15 – Lent 3 10](#_Toc23508566)

[March 22 – Lent 4 12](#_Toc23508567)

[March 29 – Lent 5 14](#_Toc23508568)

[April 5 – Palm/Passion Sunday 16](#_Toc23508569)

[April 9 – Maundy Thursday 18](#_Toc23508570)

[April 10 – Good Friday 20](#_Toc23508571)

[April 12 – Easter Sunday 22](#_Toc23508572)

[April 19 – Second Sunday of Easter 24](#_Toc23508573)

[April 26 – Third Sunday of Easter 26](#_Toc23508574)

[May 3 – Fourth Sunday of Easter 28](#_Toc23508575)

[May 10 – Fifth Sunday of Easter 30](#_Toc23508576)

[May 17 – Sixth Sunday of Easter 32](#_Toc23508577)

[May 21 – Ascension Day (Thursday) 34](#_Toc23508578)

[May 24 – Seventh Sunday of Easter 36](#_Toc23508579)

Excerpted from

*Gathering: Resources for Worship Planners*

Published four times a year, *Gathering* is a worship planning magazine for ministers and lay leaders, music directors, and United Church of Canada worship committees. Subscribe or browse single issues at [UCRDstore.ca](https://www.ucrdstore.ca/magazines/gathering).

## Ash Wednesday to the Last Sunday of Easter

## Lent and Holy Week

**Dates**

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, which falls 40 days prior to Easter. Sundays are not included in the count of these days, as each Sunday is a “little Easter,” meant to celebrate resurrection.

Feast Days\* and Special Days

**\*Ash Wednesday –** the beginning of the Lent– Easter cycle. It is marked by the ceremonial distribution of ashes as a symbol of entering into the penitential Season of Lent. The wearing of ashes, made from the burning of the previous year’s palms from Palm Sunday, is considered a sign of repentance, sorrow, and mourning, an appropriate way to begin Lent.

**Women’s World Day of Prayer** – first Friday in March.

**International Women’s Day** – March 8.

**\*The Triduum** – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday.

Meaning of Name

The name Lent comes through Middle English *lente* and Old English *lencten* or *lengten*, referring to the season of spring and the lengthening of days. It is also related to the French word *lente*, which means “to move slowly.”

Liturgical Colour: Purple

Purple is a cool colour on the colour wheel, reflecting divinity, wisdom, dignity, mystery, and creativity. Dark purple is a penitential colour, evoking sadness and deep reflection. In the first century CE, purple dye was very hard to come by, so only the wealthy could afford purple garments.

## Easter

**Dates**

Easter is currently a moveable feast, celebrated in Western Christianity on the first Sunday after the first astronomical full moon on or after the vernal (spring) equinox (fixed as March 21 for ecclesial purposes). Thus Easter falls between March 22 and April 25 on the Gregorian calendar. Easter Day within Eastern Christianity is calculated in the same manner but following the Julian calendar, using the actual vernal equinox date at the meridian of Jerusalem, and with the added condition that Easter must fall after Passover. There are talks underway exploring the possibility of fixing the date of Easter to the second or third Sunday of April. This would allow all Christians to celebrate on the same day.

Feast Days\* and Special Days

**April Fool’s Day** – April 1.

**Holy Humour Sunday** – the Sunday after Easter Sunday.

**Earth Day** – April 22.

**\*Ascension Day** – 40th day after Easter.

**Camping Sunday** – last Sunday of April.

Meaning of Name

The name Easter comes from the Old English *Eostre,* rooted in the Proto–Germanic *austron*, meaning “dawn,” and the Proto–Indo–European *aus*, meaning “to shine.” The word *east* has the same roots. Bede, a seventh–/eighth–century English monk, made a connection between the name Easter and an early Germanic goddess of the dawn or spring, possibly named *Eostre*, whose feasts were celebrated in the month of April, though there is current debate about who this goddess might actually be. Within Greek and Latin traditions, the celebration is referred to as Pascha, a name rooted in the Aramaic word for Passover.

Liturgical Colours: White and Gold

White, which is all colours of light combined, denotes goodness, innocence, and God’s faithfulness. Gold reflects glory, triumph, wealth, richness, and extravagance. Gold is also associated with illumination, love, compassion, courage, and wisdom. Together they are colours of celebration.

## February 26 – Ash Wednesday

*Worship materials for Ash Wednesday were contributed by Geoff Wilfong-Pritchard, St. Andrew’s U.C., Edmonton, Alta.*

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

The day of the Lord is near.

or Isaiah 58:1–12

A fast that is acceptable to God.

Psalm 51:1–17 (VU pp. 776–777)

Create in me a new heart.

2 Corinthians 5:20*b*—6:10

We are ambassadors for Christ.

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Give alms and fast in secret.

To Ponder

Where has the unforeseen and unbidden provoked the potential for growth in your life? Consider that the ashes remind us of the fertilizing possibilities of such moments.

Spark

Re-imaging Ash Wednesday: Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent, 40 days reflecting the 40 days of fasting Jesus undertook in the desert, where he was tempted by Satan. As such, Ash Wednesday has often been associated with a self-reflection that easily slips into self-recrimination. To cast the imagery of Ash Wednesday and Lent in a more powerful and positive light, we can return to the root of the word *Lent*, which means to lengthen. Lent refers to the growing and lengthening of the day, which can be a metaphor for our individual and collective growth as disciples. We recall that, while ash is the detritus of the destructive power of fire, it is also a potent fertilizer.

With Children

Before the service, burn a small quantity of paper or briquette to generate ash. Ask the children what value ash has and remind them how ash helps things grow. When we place ashes on our foreheads, we are reminding ourselves that we are committed to growing in our relationships with our faith community and with God.

Sermon Starter

“Remember that you are dust, and to the dust you shall return.” These words that accompany the imposition of the ashes can sound like a morbid fascination with death. The good news is that we are created from the very stuff of life itself, earth enlivened with the breath of God, and to that source our living returns. When we mark ourselves with ashes, we remind ourselves of the source and the goal of our living.

Hymns

***Joel 2:1–2, 12–17*** *or* ***Isaiah 58:1–12***

VU 701 “What does the Lord require of you”

MV 79 “Spirit, open my heart”

“Return to God” by Marty Haugen

*Psalm 51:1–17*

VU 559 “Come, O Fount of every blessing”

*2 Corinthians 5:20*b*—6:10*

VU 595 “The Servant Song”

MV 179 “Sisters let us walk together”

SFGP\* 13 “Morning glory, starlit sky”

*Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21*

VU 105 “Dust and ashes touch our face”

VU 107 “Sunday’s palms are Wednesday’s ashes”

VU 581 “When we are living”

MV 10 “Come and seek the ways of Wisdom”

*\*Songs for a Gospel People*

**The Gospel of John** has been used through the centuries to stir up antisemitism, especially with its declaration about “the Jews” in relation to Jesus’ death. While hostile references may reflect the historical context of the gospel, they are contrary to the actual gospel message of loving neighbours and enemies. Remember, Jesus and all of the disciples were Jewish. In our current context, these hostile references are unnecessarily divisive. When reading from the Gospel of John, you might choose to say “Judeans” instead of “Jews,” an acceptable translation of the original Greek word. You might also use “the religious authorities.” For other suggested wording options for the Gospel of John readings, see *Celebrate God’s Presence*, p.177.

## March 1 – Lent 1

*Worship materials for Lent 1 to Lent 5 were contributed by Peter Chynoweth, Yellowknife, N.W.T.*

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Psalm 32 (VU p. 759)

Blessed are those whose sins are forgiven.

Romans 5:12–19

Through one came death; through one came life.

Matthew 4:1–11

The temptation of Jesus.

To Ponder

Consider a point in your life when you reached an edge, a time when you had to make a choice about which path to follow. Who or what helped you make the choice?

Spark

With a camera or mobile device, take photos of “edges.” Read the news with edges in mind. Use these images and words to create a collage, scrapbook, slide presentation, or tag cloud of edges and add to it each week to mark the journey through the season.

With Children

Can you remember a time when you had to make a really hard decision? Who helped you with your decision? What did you do to help you decide? How did the decision work out? The scriptures today are about hard decisions. Sometimes your brain and stomach and heart are telling you to make one decision while friends and others are leading you to a different choice. How do you feel before and after a hard decision? We are starting a new church season today. It is called Lent and it is about choices. Hard choices. We’re going to talk about them each week and try to figure out some ways to help us make the right choices. Books that can help with this theme include any of the Scaredy Squirrel books by Mélanie Watt (Kids Can Press) and *Are You My Mother?* by P.D. Eastman (Random House Books for Young Readers, 1998).

Sermon Starter

The season of Lent is often depicted as a journey. Lent is also a liminal time—a time to explore the danger and creativity that comes from spending time on the edge. Imagine a journey along an edge, whether that is a physical edge, like a cliff, a lakeshore, a beach, or a roof, or an edge that exists within your community where cultures or land use or socio-economic realities meet. Consider those edges, both real and metaphorical, as the locale for this year’s Lenten journey.

How does a progressive faith respond to the story of the loss of innocence that we find in Genesis? What would it be like to dialogue with Paul about his take on the lessons from Genesis and the life of Jesus as laid out in the passage from the letter to the Romans? The temptation of Jesus is one that arcs through history to present times. How can we frame the allure of power and glory in today’s context? What edges do these questions lead to?

Hymns

***Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7***

VU 287 “Wellspring of wisdom”

VU 346 “There in God’s garden”

MV 17 “God in the darkness”

***Psalm 32***

VU 271 “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy”

VU 364 “Forgive our sins as we forgive”

VU 611 “Out of the depths, O God”

*Romans 5:12–19*

VU 337 “Blessed assurance”

VU 559 “Come, O Fount of every blessing”

VU 686 “God of grace and God of glory”

MV 76 “If I have been the source of pain”

*Matthew 4:1–11*

VU 113 “To the desert Jesus came”

VU 115 “Jesus, tempted in the desert”

MV 64 “Because you came”

MV 65 “When we are tested”

*Seasonal*

Consider using short musical responses throughout the season as prayer responses, introits, and blessings, including them at the same point in worship each week of Lent.

VU 105 “Take us by the hand and lead us” *refrain only*

VU 118 “Wonder and stare”

VU 619 “Healer of our every ill” *refrain only*

MV 14 “Where two or three are gathered”

MV 90 “Don’t be afraid”

MV 95 “How deep the peace”

## March 8 – Lent 2

Genesis 12:1–4*a*

God calls Abram to be a blessing.

**Psalm 121** (VU p. 842)

I lift my eyes to the hills.

Romans 4:1–5, 13–17

The promise of God rests on grace.

John 3:1–17

Nicodemus learns that “God so loved the world.”

To Ponder

When have you felt reborn? What made it so?

Spark

Add to your “edgy” collage, scrapbook, slide presentation, or tag cloud. This week’s edge is about transformation in thinking, acting, and feeling as sparked by Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus and the mystery of the statement about being “reborn.” Find or draw a labyrinth and highlight how it can be used as a Lenten discipline. Finger labyrinths are useful during worship, but a full-sized labyrinth is preferable. Find a creative way to incorporate the labyrinth as a resource in weekly worship. The journey into the centre is often depicted as a time to shed, while the journey out from the centre is a time of building. This connects with the gospel passage about “rebirth” in the spirit.

With Children

Who has seen a mountain\*? Has anyone climbed a mountain? Talk about how big mountains are and how high they are, with the aid of photos or stories of your own mountain experiences. The psalm writer thought about hills and mountains and how tall and big they are, but even so, to them, God is stronger and bigger. What’s the tallest or biggest thing you know? The smallest thing you know? Can you use your imagination about those things to describe what God is like? For example, “God is bigger than \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” “God is smaller than \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” “God’s love is taller than \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

*\*or adapt to a challenging location in your context.*

Sermon Starter

In keeping with the focus on edges during this Lenten season, read a couple of verses further in the Genesis passage. Verse 6*b* reads, “At that time the Canaanites were in the land.” How does the call to be a blessing resonate when taking up residence or settling on the lands of other peoples? We reach out and welcome refugees and immigrants with compassion, even as we search out and explore relationships with original dwellers on the land in the quest for reconciliation. In this light, the question posed by Paul in the first verse of Romans 4 takes on deeper meaning. Romans 4:1 poignantly asks, “So how do we fit what we know of Abraham, our first father in the faith, into this new way of looking at things?” (*The Message*). The calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission create an edge with the story of Genesis and its interpretation as God’s call to Abram and Sarai to be a blessing. For many people in the faith community, the call to reconciliation could be experienced as the kind of rebirth that Jesus and Nicodemus were talking about. This edge is deep with opportunities for Lenten reflection, exploration, and action.

Hymns

*Genesis 12:1–4*a

VU 286 “If you will trust in God to guide you”

VU 634 “To Abraham and Sarah”

VU 643 “Faith, while trees are still in blossom”

MV 20 “God of still waiting”

MV 148 “Hope of Abraham and Sarah”

*Psalm 121*

VU 266 “Amazing grace”

VU 636 “Give to the winds your fears”

VU p. 842 “Unto the hills”

MV 82 “Bathe me in your light”

MV 129 “To the high and kindly hills”

*Romans 4:1–5, 13–17*

VU 642 “Be thou my vision”

VU 663 “My faith looks up to thee”

MV 139 “True faith needs no defence”

MV 162 “Christ, within us hidden”

*John 3:1–17*

VU 210 “You, Lord, are both lamb and shepherd”

VU 308 “Many and great, O God, are your works”

VU 382 “Breathe on me, breath of God”

VU 567 “Will you come and follow me”

VU 582 “There’s a spirit in the air”

## March 15 – Lent 3

Exodus 17:1–7

Water from the rock.

Psalm 95 (VU pp. 814–815)

Let us shout to the rock of our salvation.

Romans 5:1–11

Hope in God does not disappoint us.

John 4:5–42

Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

To Ponder

What is the most edgy or challenging conversation you have ever had? What made it so?

Spark

There’s a slightly different take on edginess this week. The Hebrew people were understandably “hangry” in the desert, and the gospel passage depicts a conversation that has an edge to it. The challenge is to find graphic portrayals of these moods to add to the collage, scrapbook, slide presentation, or tag cloud. Another option is to use pictures of water edges—beaches, lakeshores, coastal cliffs.

With Children

Bring a container of water. Let everyone touch the water and describe what it feels like. Connect this discussion about water and its importance with the story from Exodus and the story from John. For a bit of fun, have what I call a “church-sanctioned water fight” by dipping an evergreen branch in the water and then flicking it toward the children and other congregation members, with a reminder about the promises of baptism. With the children, reflect on why we use water to remind us of God’s love.

Sermon Starter

Water is the backdrop for a deep (pun intended) conversation at a well in Samaria. Lack of water is the reason for a grumbling and complaining mob in the desert. Physical and spiritual needs collide in these passages. How do physical needs influence our spiritual quest? How does our mood influence our openness to new ideas? If you can set the Christological claims aside in the gospel reading for a moment, this edgy conversation is full of insight and teachable moments (although other versions of this story in other gospels, with women from other areas, have an even greater edge to them!). It is important to emphasize just how remarkable the encounter at the well is, even the very fact that it took place. Is it possible that this conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus is in itself the living water to which Jesus points?

Hymns

*Exodus 17:1–7*

VU 421 “Lead on, O cloud of Presence”

VU 651 “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah”

MV 92 “Like a rock”

MV 144 “Like a healing stream”

*Psalm 95*

VU p. 815 “Come, worship God”

MV 2 “Uyai mose”

MV 9 “O Come and Let Us Sing”

MV 181 “Lord, your hands have formed”

*Romans 5:1–11*

VU 373 “As comes the breath of spring”

VU 424 “May the God of hope go with us”

VU 559 “Come, O Fount of every blessing”

VU 654 “All my hope is firmly grounded”

MV 12 “Come touch our hearts”

*John 4:5–42*

VU 449 “Crashing waters at creation”

MV 87 “Living Water”

MV 117 “By the well, a thirsty woman”

MV 138 “My love colours outside the lines”

## March 22 – Lent 4

1 Samuel 16:1–13

Samuel chooses one of Jesse’s sons as king.

Psalm 23 (VU pp. 747–749)

God is my shepherd.

Ephesians 5:8–14

Live as children of the light.

John 9:1–41

Jesus heals the man born blind.

To Ponder

What edge in your life requires a change in how you express or perceive someone or something?

Spark

The edge this week is the seasonal equinox. In the northern latitudes of Canada where I live, this time marks a threshold when the light starts to gallop back in large chunks every day. The gathering light (northern hemisphere) or dwindling light (southern hemisphere) connects or contrasts with the mood of Lent as we head to Palm/Passion Sunday. Add images of the edges of light (sunset, dawn, sun through clouds, candle in the night, or metaphorical insight) to the growing presentation.

With Children

If possible, find a farmer who keeps sheep (perhaps there is one nearby) or someone else you can ask about what it is like to be a shepherd. (Or try an online search for information or a sound recording you can use, with permission.) How does this learning from a shepherd help us to understand the psalm writer, who thought that God was like a shepherd? An alternative would be to imagine with the children the most safe, secure, and comfortable place possible, a place without any worries, fears, or needs. Relate that to the image of the shepherd caring for the sheep. God provides us such a place. In our faith community, we seek to create such a place.

Sermon Starter

I am drawn to the passage from Ephesians because of its focus on light. The edge for me is the unhelpful contrast between darkness and light. A few years ago, I recorded a segment for *Tapestry* on CBC Radio that dispelled the myth of darkness as a bad thing. Many important things in the Hebrew Bible happen in the dark of night. As someone who resides north of the 60th parallel, where we spend long periods of the year in significant darkness and long periods with significant amounts of daylight, it is important to draw “goodness” out of both darkness and light. This also leads to a natural connection to the gospel passage. What can we become aware of in the dark? What do we miss in the light? Take time to challenge the assumptions about light and dark made by Paul in the letter to the Ephesians and to name how this passage has been used to feed racism.

Hymns

*1 Samuel 16:1–13*

VU 509 “Here I Am, Lord”

VU 670 “Precious Lord, take my hand”

MV 161 “I have called you by your name”

MV 167 “Hush! Hush!”

MV 172 “God says”

*Psalm 23*

VU 273 “The King of love”

VU 398 “Great Shepherd of your people”

VU p. 747 “The Lord’s my shepherd”

VU p. 748 “God is my shepherd”

MV 126 “Are you a shepherd?”

*Ephesians 5:8–14*

VU 82 “A light is gleaming”

VU 284 “Joyful is the dark”

VU 588 “Many are the lightbeams”

MV 17 “God in the darkness”

MV 44 “Shadow and substance”

MV 82 “Bathe me in your light”

MV 147 “Moments of Myst’ry”

*John 9:1–41*

VU 326 “O for a thousand tongues to sing”

VU 371 “Open my eyes, that I may see”

VU 605 “Jesus, teacher, brave and bold”

MV 171 “Christ has no body now but yours”

## March 29 – Lent 5

Ezekiel 37:1–14

The valley of dry bones.

Psalm 130 (VU pp. 852–853)

Out of the depths I cry to God.

Romans 8:6–11

The Spirit is life, not death.

John 11:1–45

The raising of Lazarus.

To Ponder

Consider a situation where you changed sides in a discussion/argument. What brought you to that change?

Spark

An Internet search for the valley of dry bones will produce a wide variety of images to add to the edgy presentation. Might a local artist be commissioned to provide their own interpretation?

With Children

Read or play a recording of the story “Lazarus Is Alive!” by Ralph Milton. It is available in a few places, such as the *Lectionary Story Bible* (Year A and Year B) and the *Family Story Bible*. An MP3 recording of the author reading the story can also be purchased. They are all available from Wood Lake Publishing (www.woodlakebooks.com).

Sermon Starter

If you read a few verses past the end of today’s gospel reading, you will discover an edge. We are told in the words of *The Message* that the raising of Lazarus was a “turnaround” for many, but reading a bit further, we learn that this event was also the catalyst for the coming arrest, trial, and execution of Jesus. Dramatic events can cause dramatic reactions, the choosing of sides, strongly argued positions, and unhelpful contrasts that lead us to refuse to see value in the words of others. The feature film *The Grizzlies* (2018), based on the true story of the formation of a lacrosse team in the Nunavut arctic coast community of Kugluktuk, is instructive and inspiring. Arguments for and against the decision to provide financial support are all compelling. Sometimes an edge is fuzzy, with no right or wrong way to turn. How does our faith respond to solutions that require a process and are evolutionary rather than once and for all?

Hymns

*Ezekiel 37:1–14*

VU 382 “Breathe on me, breath of God”

MV 15 “Holy sacred Spirit”

MV 20 “God of still waiting”

MV 83 “Let my spirit always sing”

MV 115 “Behold, behold, I make all things new”

MV 150 “Embracing Change”

*Psalm 130*

VU 611 “Out of the depths, O God, we call to you”

VU p. 852 “Up from the depths I cry to God”

MV 72 “Why stand so far away”

MV 73 “O God, why are you silent?”

MV 143 “We cannot own the sunlit sky”

*Romans 8:6–11*

VU 376 “Spirit of the living God”

VU 381 “Spirit of Life”

VU 383 “Wa wa wa Emimimo”

MV 79 “Spirit, open my heart”

MV 182 “Grateful”

*John 11:1–45*

VU 375 “Spirit, Spirit of gentleness”

VU 385 “Spirit divine, attend our prayers”

VU 409 “Morning has broken”

VU 622 “Your hands, O Christ”

MV 93 “What calls me from the death”

## April 5 – Palm/Passion Sunday

*Worship materials for Holy Week were contributed by Geoff Wilfong-Pritchard, St. Andrew’s U.C., Edmonton, Alta.*

Liturgy of the Palms

Matthew 21:1–11

Jesus enters Jerusalem.

**Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29** (VU p. 837)

The stone the builders rejected.

Liturgy of the Passion

Isaiah 50:4–9*a*

The suffering servant struck and insulted.

Psalm 31:9–16 (VU p. 758)

My times are in your hands.

Philippians 2:5–11

Let the same mind be in you as was in Jesus.

Matthew 26:14—27:66 or Matthew 27:11–54

The passion of Jesus.

To Ponder

What’s it like to experience a life-changing (or world-changing) event?

Spark

The readings for Palm/Passion Sunday through to Easter Sunday are the most dramatic of the lectionary. As L. Michael White reminds us in *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite* (HarperOne, 2010), these were the stories the early followers of Jesus most wanted to hear. The gospel stories that we now have were shaped and reshaped by the interaction of the strorytellers and their listeners. These stories call for dramatic rendering. Keep in mind that many who gather on Palm Sunday will not gather again until Easter Sunday and will miss the drama of Thursday and Friday unless it is at least foreshadowed by what happens on Palm/Passion Sunday.

With Children

Invite the children to go into the congregation and ask people what the word *hosanna* means. Gather up the answers. Remind the children and the larger congregation that one of the meanings of hosanna is “save us.” Why were people shouting “Save us,” when Jesus passed by? What did they want Jesus to do? Did he do what they wanted? Remind everyone that sometimes we expect people to do things for us, or other people expect us to do certain things for them or behave in a certain way, and it doesn’t always work out how we expect. What does Jesus do in response to the crowd? Feel free to leave the questions and the answers open!

Sermon Starter

As mentioned above, these stories beg for dramatic telling. It can be as simple as a dramatic monologue or a play in which the whole congregation can participate. If you are new to storytelling, start with just a few characters selected from those mentioned in the story; for example, Pilate’s wife. They also can be ones alluded to but not directly mentioned; for example, the owner of the donkey that the disciples borrowed for Jesus. Allow these characters not just to tell but also to interpret what they noticed, felt, and experienced. Remember that the gospel writers had to struggle to place the events of the last week of Jesus’ life into a greater story. A well-told reflection can ground our current listeners in the same struggle.

Hymns

*Matthew 21:1–11*

VU 124 “He came riding on a donkey”

VU 126 “Ride on, ride on, the time is right”

MV 128 “When they heard that Jesus was coming”

“Blessed Is the King Who Comes” by S.T. Kimbrough Jr. (One License)

*Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29*

“Celtic Alleluia” from Celtic Mass by Fintan O’Carroll & Christopher Walker

MV 8 “And on this path”

*Isaiah 50:4–9*a

VU 143 “My song is love unknown”

VU 614 “In suffering love”

*Psalm 31:9–16*

VU p. 780 “My soul finds rest in God alone”

*Matthew 26:14—27:54*

VU 127 “Ride on! Ride on in majesty!”

VU 132 “Bitter was the night”

VU 135 “Beneath the cross of Jesus”

## April 9 – Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12:1–4, (5–10), 11–14

Instructions for the first Passover.

**Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19** (VU p. 836)

How can I repay you, O God?

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

An account of the Last Supper.

John 13:1–17, 31*b*–35

Jesus washes the disciples’ feet.

To Ponder

What is your experience of being served? Is it easier to serve or to be served?

Spark

The word *Maundy* derives from the Latin “mandatum” or commandment. Maundy Thursday allows us to experience the commandment that Jesus gave his disciples to love one another. The service ritualizes that commandment through acts of service (e.g., handwashing). Sometimes the custom has been to precede the service with a variation of a Seder/Passover meal. Those of the Jewish faith, however, remind us that this is cultural appropriation. Moreover there is no reason to believe that Jesus was eating a Passover meal with his disciples at the Last Supper. In John’s gospel, for example, Jesus dies before the Passover was eaten. However, this evening service lends itself to a meal beforehand, remembering not only the Last Supper but the many meals that Jesus shared with those gathered round him. At the conclusion of the service, it is sometimes customary to strip the sanctuary by removing all liturgical artifacts and emblems. Only the Christ candle remains. This can be an effective and dramatic conclusion to the service, especially if the action is carried out in silence.

With Children

This service can allow for maximum participation of the whole congregation, children included. They can help serve the meal, pour the water for handwashing, and participate by washing the hands of others. If you are stripping the sanctuary as part of the service, ensure that there are items small enough for them to handle so they can join in the stripping and carrying out.

Sermon Starter

This service is one where the actions express far more than any prepared message. Allow the liturgy to convey all that needs to be expressed.

Hymns

*Exodus 12:1–14*

VU 131 “If our God had simply saved us”

VU 460 “All who hunger”

VU 466 “Eat this bread”

*Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19*

MV 103 “Ka mana’o ’I ’O”

MV 221 “I am walking a path of peace”

*1 Corinthians 11:23–26*

VU 462 “Before I take the body of my Lord”

VU 469 “We gather here”

VU 471 “Eat this bread and never hunger”

*John 13:1–17, 31*b*–35*

VU 130 “An upper room did our Lord prepare”

VU 133 “Go, now, to Gethsemane”

VU 593 “Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love”

MV 199 “When at this table”

## April 10 – Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

The suffering servant despised and rejected.

**Psalm 22** (VU pp. 743–746)

Why have you forsaken me?

Hebrews 10:16–25

Provoke one another to love and good deeds.

or Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9

Jesus, the high priest who knows our weakness.

John 18:1—19:42

The Passion narrative.

To Ponder

How do you believe death and life are related?

Spark

The stories of the persecution and death of Jesus were valued by the early followers of Jesus because so many of them had suffered a similar fate when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The Good Friday story is pure drama and the gospel writers wove their narratives out of the psalms and prophetic writings that lamented the suffering of the innocent. The Passion narrative allows us to share in the lament of those who have gone before us and those with whom we now journey, without having to explain or solve it. As powerful as suffering is, these stories remind us of the strength that may come from the shared experience of grief and loss.

With Children

Good Friday offers children a wonderful opportunity to ask questions: “Why is it ‘good’?” “Why do we go to church on a Friday?” “Why is the mood so different today from Sunday?” Rather than address these questions during the service, think of as many questions as you can that a child might ask about what is happening. Then do a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) sheet and have it available to parents a week or so before the service. It can be a source of conversation between parents and children both before and after the service.

Sermon Starter

The passion narrative deserves to be presented (read or dramatized) in its entirety on Good Friday. It can be broken up at appropriate junctures with spoken reflections, music, and silence.

Hymns

*Isaiah 52:13—53:12*

VU 141 “They crucified my Lord”

VU 145 “O sacred head”

*Psalm 22*

VU 118 “Wonder and stare”

VU 154 “Why has God forsaken me”

MV 90 “Don’t be afraid”

*Hebrews 10:16–25 or Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9*

VU 143 “My song is love unknown”

VU 147 “What wondrous love is this”

*John 18:1—19:42*

VU 132–154

## April 12 – Easter Sunday

Acts 10:34–43

Peter’s account of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

or Jeremiah 31:1

God’s everlasting love.

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24 (VU p. 837)

God is my strength and my song.

Colossians 3:1–4

Set your mind on things above.

John 20:1–18 or Matthew 28:1–10

Mary and the empty tomb.

To Ponder

How do you participate in resurrection?

Spark

For many, Christmas and Easter are the only times they encounter church. Before Easter Sunday, reflect on the practical ways that people who are a part of the community for only this day can be made to feel welcome. Are there elements of your order of worship that might need a word of explanation (e.g., the way communion is served, the movements involved in the service, and provisions for children’s programming if they are in the sanctuary for the beginning of the service).

With Children

What does *hallelujah* mean? Invite the children to go into the congregation and ask members what it means. Get them to bring back the answers and share them. One of the most important things it means is “praise God!” If we are praising, what’s a good way to say “hallelujah”? Encourage everyone to say it with enthusiasm. Ask the congregation what kind of situations warrant a hallelujah. The birth of a child? The end of winter? Planting a garden? Sponsoring a refugee? *Hallelujah!*

Sermon Starter

Matthew and John tell very different Easter stories, but they begin the same way. In Matthew, Mary goes to see the tomb. In John, Mary sees the stone rolled away. In both stories, Mary starts as an observer but ends as a participant in the resurrection. What moves us from observing to participating in the new life of the resurrection? What is that like in our lives and in our faith community?

Hymns

*Acts 10:34–43*

VU 159 “The strife is o’er”

VU 448 “We know that Christ is raised”

*Jeremiah 31:1–6*

MV 45 “You are holy”

SFGP\*105 “Vine and fig tree”

*Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24*

VU p. 876 “Song of the sea” *refrain*

*Colossians 3:1–4*

VU 158 “Christ is alive”

VU 170 “O sons and daughters, let us sing”

MV 162 “Christ within us hidden”

*John 20:1–18 or Matthew 28:1–10*

VU 176 “Who is there on this Easter morning”

VU 178 “Because you live, O Christ”

VU 183 “We meet you, O Christ”

*\*Songs for a Gospel People*

## April 19 – Second Sunday of Easter

*Worship materials for the Second, Third, and Fourth Sundays of Easter were contributed by John Moses and Sarah Keedy, Aylesford U.C., Aylesford, N.S.*

**Acts 2:14*a*, 22–32**

Peter preaches on Pentecost.

Psalm 16 (VU pp. 737–738)

In you, God, I take refuge.

1 Peter 1:3–9

Salvation is the outcome of faithfulness.

John 20:19–31

Jesus appears to the disciples and to Thomas.

To Ponder

Some Christian churches talk a lot about salvation or “being saved.” In The United Church of Canada, not so much. What does salvation mean for you?

Spark

If you are really brave, you might situate someone at the church door wearing or holding a sign that asks, “Are you saved?” Alternatively, you might display pictures of grief, disaster, dismay, etc., on the screen or in a montage and ask people to imagine what or who could make these right or offer “salvation”?

With Children

Talk about a time when you felt really overwhelmed—perhaps by sadness, perhaps by too much work—and you didn’t see how you were ever going to get through it. Then someone offered to help just by being there or by taking on some of the work. Depending on their ages, the children may want to share their stories (e.g., chores that seemed way too much, homework that wasn’t getting done, learning to ride a bike). We can’t always do everything by ourselves. Sometimes we need help. Who are the helpers we know? (Include God and the faith community.) “Saving help” is one way of speaking of salvation. God offers us salvation through Jesus.

Sermon Starter

Climate crisis; the proliferation of racism, homophobia, and misogyny; the continued decline of the church we have known—there are reasons enough for despair these days. This despair is born of a sense of helplessness before the forces tearing the world apart and threatening to usher in a horrific future. Imagine how Jesus’ disciples and friends must have felt in the aftermath of the crucifixion. Their dreams had been crushed by the combined powers of religion and empire. The future loomed bleak and foreboding. And yet, today’s texts are anything but despairing. In Acts, Peter speaks about the power of God to overcome the worst that corrupt human powers can do. God raised Jesus up. The epistle of 1 Peter celebrates a “new birth into a living hope” and an imperishable inheritance that endures even in the midst of suffering and trial. And then, in the Gospel of John, there is Thomas with his doubts and questions, who, nonetheless, wants to be fully a part of the resurrection community. He wants to know that Christ is alive, that hope is alive, and that death has not won. Returning to Acts, Peter tells the people of Jerusalem, “All of us are witnesses.” How can we be witnesses to the resurrection rather than lost in despair? Note that the salvation of resurrection is not a rescue; it is empowerment. How are we empowered? How can we help others find their power?

Hymns

*Acts 2:14*a*, 22–32*

VU 157 “Christ the Lord is risen today”

VU 161 “Welcome, happy morning”

VU 164 “The day of resurrection”

*Psalm 16*

VU p. 737 “Protect me, God”

VU p. 806 “O God, our help in ages past”

MV 81 “Love us into fullness”

MV 84 “In you there is a refuge”

*1 Peter 1:3–9*

VU 215 “Hope of the world” (Alternate tune: WELWYN [VU 329])

VU 271 “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy”

VU 337 “Blessed assurance”

VU 382 “Breathe on me, breath of God”

*John 20:19–31*

VU 170 “O sons and daughters, let us sing”

VU 173 “Thine is the glory”

VU 396 “Jesus, stand among us”

MV 215 “Peace be with you”

## April 26 – Third Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:14*a*, 36–41

Three thousand new followers of the Way.

Psalm 116:1–4, 12–19 (VU p. 836)

How can I repay you, God?

1 Peter 1:17–23

Souls purified through obedience.

Luke 24:13–35

Jesus’ appearance on the road to Emmaus.

To Ponder

How do I repent of something that I didn’t do personally but that has been part of the culture that has shaped me?

Spark

Put up a number of signs or pictures denoting such things as climate crisis, residential schools, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Ask people to respond in writing to questions like, “How am I involved?” “How can I repent (turn away from) this?” Find a way to share some of the responses in the service, or, depending on the culture of your faith community, there may be people who would personally share their responses. (Keep names private, if requested, when sharing responses.)

With Children

One would think that, after all that has been said and done over the past few years, we would not need to say anything to children about bullying. Sadly, as with many things that should have been left behind us, this is not the case. Talk a bit about what bullying is. Be aware that some children may know first-hand. Then ask what we should do or say when we see bullying happen. This could be a way of introducing the concept of collective responsibility. Just because we are not doing it ourselves doesn’t mean we are not involved. Discuss ways for children to safely respond (e.g., telling an adult rather than intervening in a fight). As followers of Jesus, we all have a responsibility to care for others (see Sermon Starter).

Sermon Starter

In the Acts text, the people who hear Peter’s Pentecost speech are “cut to the heart” by his story of how Jesus was put to death by the power of religion and empire, then raised from death by the power of God. They ask, “What should we do?” Peter says, “Repent and be baptized.” He is not saying that every single person there was involved in or directly responsible for the crucifixion. Rather, they are all in thrall to a system that crucifies. This is how the status quo is maintained. This is how the powerless are forever deprived of power. This is how the outsiders are forever kept out. Peter asks that his listeners turn their backs on the crucifixion system and enter into a radical alternative, that is to say, the resurrection community, the church. What would the church look like if we understood ourselves to be this kind of alternative to what is on offer in our culture?

The theme continues in 1 Peter where Christians are reminded that they have been ransomed from “the futile ways inherited from your ancestors.” In other words, we are not doomed to be prisoners of the past or of whatever system our culture has constructed. The church’s faith story is always saying, “It doesn’t have to be this way.” The Luke text witnesses the empowering nature of scripture interpreted in light of who Jesus is—death and all that death signifies cannot and will not leave us bereft.

Hymns

*Acts 2:14*a*, 36–41*

VU 179 “Hallelujah, hallelujah, give thanks”

VU 371 “Open my eyes, that I may see”

MV 8 “And on this path”

MV 33 “Jesus came bringing us hope”

MV 135 “Called by earth and sky”

*Psalm 116:1–4, 12–19*

VU 575 “I’m gonna live so God can use me”

VU 581 “When we are living”

MV 196 “We will take what you offer”

*1 Peter 1:17–23*

VU 331 “The church’s one foundation”

VU 337 “Blessed assurance”

VU 595 “We are pilgrims”

VU 663 “My faith looks up to thee”

MV 18 “Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary”

*Luke 24:13–35*

VU 169 “Good Christians all, rejoice and sing”

VU 182 “Stay with us through the night”

VU 184 “As we walked home at close of day”

## May 3 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:42–47

The believers share everything in common.

Psalm 23 (VU pp. 747–749)

God is my shepherd.

1 Peter 2:19–25

Christ’s example in suffering.

John 10:1–10

Jesus the good shepherd and the gate.

To Ponder

Would you be willing to share any of your possessions (your home, for example) with other members of the congregation? Would you want other members of the congregation to know if you were in need?

Spark

Put some cash (perhaps loonies, toonies, and a few small bills) in an open container at the door of the church with a sign that says, “If you need some, take some.” Will anyone take you up on the offer? Why or why not? Reflect upon this in the service.

With Children

Tell the children you are going to ask them to draw a picture of anything they want to draw. Then hand out paper and crayons but not enough for everyone. A few children will be left without and you will have to admit that you don’t have any reserves. (Plan carefully who will be left out and maybe talk to those children ahead of time.) What to do? Sharing is the obvious answer. Then everyone will be able to draw. This could be related to the Acts story of the sharing community. This could lead to a discussion of other things we might share and with whom. Also, it is important that the children know it is okay to be the one who needs to be shared with as well as the one who shares. That’s what we do as disciples of Jesus.

Sermon Starter

The story in Acts about how the early believers shared everything in common is one of the most explained-away passages of scripture ever. It is at odds with the ethos of a capitalist culture, so we say that it only applies to the unique situation of the infant church when the faithful believed that the return of Christ was going to happen any day. It wouldn’t be practical to try something like that in our situation. After all, people might take advantage. But what if this story is meant to be an example of how a Christian faith community should behave? Of course, we don’t work this way, though some groups, such as the Hutterites, have committed to living like this. Sometimes people drop out of church because their ability to contribute financially has diminished. God forbid that the other people in the pews should know about this. If they did, would they respond with anything other than condescending pity?

Our difficulties with sharing and with admitting need are rooted in the fact that, unlike the sheep in the gospel reading, we do not know the shepherd’s voice very well. So, the call is for us to keep on receiving the gospel message and to keep on trying, always searching for the abundant life that is freely offered. Life is not abundant if we can’t bring ourselves to share it.

Hymns

*Acts 2:42–47*

VU 120 “O Jesus, I have promised”

VU 389 “God is here”

VU 626 “I heard the voice of Jesus”

MV 154 “Deep in our hearts”

*Psalm 23*

VU 273 “The King of love”

VU 657 “He leadeth me”

VU p. 747 “The Lord’s my Shepherd”

VU p. 748 “God is my shepherd”

*1 Peter 2:19–25*

VU 149 “When I survey the wondrous cross”

VU 348 “O love, how deep”

VU 360 “A woman and a coin—the coin is lost”

VU 559 “Come, O Fount of every blessing”

VU 561 “Take up your cross”

*John 10:1–10*

VU 635 “All the way my Saviour leads me”

MV 8 “And on this path”

MV 126 “Are you a shepherd?”

MV 161 “I have called you by your name”

SFGP\* 93 “Saviour, like a shepherd lead us”

*\*Songs for a Gospel People*

## May 10 – Fifth Sunday of Easter

*Worship materials for the Fifth Sunday of Easter to the Seventh Sunday of Easter were contributed by Wanda Winfield and Caroline Linton, Blenheim U.C., Blenheim, Ont.*

Acts 7:55–60

Stephen is stoned.

Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16 (VU p. 758 Parts One and Three)

My times are in your hands.

1 Peter 2:2–10

A chosen race, a royal priesthood, living stones.

John 14:1–14

I am the way, the truth, the life.

To Ponder

What does it mean to be a “chosen race”? Are other people not chosen? What does this say or not say about the meaning of belonging in the church?

Spark

What time is it? Are these the times when Jesus will come? Use a large clock, a stopwatch, and a calendar and play with images and ideas of time.

With Children

Explore the meaning of time with the children. Ask them when their birthdays are. How long until the day comes, or comes again? Ask them how long they can hold their breath (or not blink). Is it a really long time or a short time? (Use the stopwatch, clock, and calendar to measure times). In the Bible, it says that our times are in God’s hands. What does that mean? It means that God is always caring for us.

Sermon Starter

I live in a rural area, so I often drive by signs in farmers’ fields proclaiming, “I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE.” As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, these signs make me uncomfortable and I usually drive on and find another place to stop. These words have been used to emphasize that membership in God’s family is exclusionary. How can they be read as a promise of abundant life for all? The words *the way* (“hodos” in Greek), *the truth* (“aletheia” in Greek), and *the life* (“zoe” in Greek) can also mean conduct or a way of being, a freedom of the mind, and absolute fullness of life. How do these definitions open up a path so that all people can follow the way, the truth, and the life? Also, remember that Jesus was talking only to his disciples, not the whole world, in this story. He was the Way for the disciples.

The stoning of Stephen was a ritual murder carried out according to the law. Many places in our world have the death penalty. Some of them still use stoning, which is a brutal, horrible way to die. What is our Christian response to these violations of human rights? How do we seek to bring abundant life in the name of the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life?

Hymns

*Acts 7:55–60*

VU 615 “When quiet peace is shattered”

VU p. 894 “Holy God, We Praise Your Name”

MV 1 “Let us build a house”

*Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16*

VU 614 “In suffering love”

MV 92 “Like a rock”

*1 Peter 2:2–10*

VU 325 “Christ is made the sure foundation”

VU 331 “The church’s one foundation”

VU 660 “How firm a foundation”

VU 686 “God of grace and God of glory”

*John 14:1–14*

VU 344 “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds”

VU 356 “Seek ye first the kingdom”

VU 421 “Lead on, O cloud of Presence”

VU 661 “Come to my heart”

MV 115 “Behold, behold, I make all things new”

MV 176 “Three things I promise”

## May 17 – Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 17:22–31

Paul points the Athenians to “the unknown god.”

Psalm 66:8–20 (VU pp. 784–785 Parts Two and Three)

God preserved us.

1 Peter 3:13–22

Do not repay evil for evil.

John 14:15–21

The Advocate, the Spirit, will be with you.

To Ponder

Who or what are our unknown gods today?

Spark

Play the song “Friend like me” (from *Aladdin*). Invite people to share stories of a special friend they have had throughout their lives.

With Children

Describe your best friend, or someone you would like to be your best friend. Why are they your bestie or BFF? Invite the children’s stories of best friends. Acknowledge that sometimes we have a falling out with friends, but we can become friends again. One of the ways we describe God is as a friend. Explore the qualities of a friend that God has. God is a friend who will never reject or betray us. God is always our friend.

Sermon Starter

“Do not repay evil for evil.” Our justice system is based on retribution, not reconciliation. More jails are built, but this doesn’t solve the problem of repeat offenders. What if we could imagine a society in which the objective was not punishment but reconciliation?

In my work as a community chaplain for the Ontario Multifaith Council’s Reintegration Project, I visited a lot of people in many of the provincial jails. They are dehumanizing places for both the inmates and the people who work there. There’s got to be a better way. Restorative justice may be one of the answers. (For more information, search *restorative justice government of Canada* on the Internet.) How does restorative justice better reflect the Way of Jesus? What is happening related to restorative justice in your community? For example, is there a youth justice committee? How might your congregation learn more about and engage in restorative justice?

Hymns

*Acts 17:22–31*

VU 264 “Immortal, invisible, God only wise”

VU 316 “Praise our Maker”

MV 44 “Shadow and substance”

MV 145 “Draw the circle wide”

*Psalm 66:8–20*

VU 343 “I love to tell the story”

*1 Peter 3:13–22*

VU 161 “Welcome, happy morning”

VU 286 “If you will trust in God”

VU 570 “Jesus’ hands were kind hands”

*John 14:15–21*

VU 318 “Christ be with me”

VU 333 “Love divine, all loves excelling”

VU 368 “Holy Spirit, truth divine”

MV 48 “I can feel you near me God”

MV 49 “When we seek language”

## May 21 – Ascension Day (Thursday)

(*These scriptures may be used on May 24.*)

Acts 1:1–11

The promise of the Spirit and Jesus’ ascension.

Psalm 47 (VU p. 771)

Clap your hands, all you people.

or Psalm 93 (VU pp. 812–813)

Majestic is our God.

Ephesians 1:15–23

I do not cease to give thanks for you.

Luke 24:44–53

Jesus’ last words to the disciples bring joy.

To Ponder

What is it like to lose somebody? Is it possible to find joy in grief?

Spark

This is a great time to have a “messy church.” You can order a messy church kit from United Church Resource Distribution (UCRD) or go to www.facebook.com/MessyChurchCanada or www.messychurch.org.uk to get some ideas. Basically, you gather around food, have a craft for children, read a short Bible passage or message, and say a closing prayer.

With Children

Use noisemakers, tambourines, horns, and so on to make a great noise. Does that make you feel happy? (Remember, for some children, noise might be overwhelming, not happy. Honour their responses.) Where in your body do you feel happiness? In your tummy? On your face? If possible, have someone teach the American Sign Language (ASL) for *happy* (as well as signs for other emotions). You can find ASL words at www.handspeak.com. God wants joy for us, but God knows that we also feel sad, angry, frustrated, impatient, and other emotions. God loves us through all that we feel. Isn’t God great?

Sermon Starter

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross described the five stages of death and dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These have often been adapted as “stages” of grief, but actually, there are no stages, just many emotions that can make up grief. Each person has an individual journey, rather than travelling through set stages. Resources on grief can be found at www.grief.com or at www.centerforloss.com. The disciples didn’t display any of the typical emotions of grieving after they experienced Jesus’ risen presence. Is this evidence that Jesus was raised from the dead? Is it evidence of their profound experience of the risen Christ?

Hymns

*Acts 1:1–11*

VU 336 “Christ whose glory fills the skies”

MV 75 “Holy Spirit, Come to Us”

*Psalm 47 or Psalm 93*

VU 294 “Clap your hands”

MV 59 “Alleluia, praise to God”

*Ephesians 1:15–23*

VU 168 “The risen Christ”

VU 512 “Lord, you give the great commission”

MV 171 “Christ has no body now but yours”

*Luke 24:44–53*

VU 211 “Crown him with him many crowns”

VU 314 “Come now, almighty King”

VU 481 “Sent forth by God’s blessing”

## May 24 – Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts 1:6–14

The ascension of Jesus.

Psalm 68:1–10, 32–35 (VU p. 787)

God makes a home for the poor.

1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11

Cast your cares on God. Be alert.

John 17:1–11

Jesus prays that his disciples “all may be one.”

To Ponder

Has there been a time when you have felt spiritually homeless and alone? How did you find spiritual grounding once again?

Spark

To celebrate spring and to evoke the care we are called to offer to all God’s creatures, human and animal, create a display of birdhouses and nests or photos of birds nesting, being fed, growing, and leaving the nest.

With Children

Use the display or photos of birds. Birds may not be our pets, but we care for them. Invite the children to list the ways we care for birds (e.g., bird feeders, bird baths, growing flowers). Birds give us joy but we don’t own them. They are free. Some birds go south for the winter, but then they return. People sometimes come and go in our lives. Sometimes, someone we care about has to move away for work or school. Do we still love them? Yes, we do. Tell the story of Jesus’ ascending (or going away). That didn’t stop the disciples (and us) from continuing to love Jesus. It didn’t stop Jesus from continuing to love us.

Sermon Starter

I used to work for non-profit agencies that worked with people who were homeless. They had a saying: “Homeless but not hopeless.” People are sometimes spiritually homeless. Think of a time when you have not felt spiritually grounded, when you have felt spiritually homeless and hopeless. What was it like? Did you feel like it was possible for you ever to be joyful again? Considering the words of 1 Peter 4—5, did you feel as if you were sharing in the sufferings of Christ? Did you cast your cares upon Christ? Or did your journey follow a different path?

In the reading from Acts, the disciples are asked why they are standing around and looking up into the sky. I had a picture on a postcard with an image of Jesus and the words “Jesus is coming! Get busy!” Don’t get caught just waiting around. You might consider this in relation with Psalm 68. Why do we still have homeless people? We have the resources to house, feed, and clothe every person, but we fall short. This is the definition of sin. Do we expect God to pick up the pieces we leave behind? We might say, “There, but for the grace of God, go I,” but everyone has the grace of God. As disciples, we are called to live that grace. (In exploring this, move gently, with awareness of anyone in your congregation who might be homeless or who has experienced homelessness.)

Hymns

*Acts 1:6–14*

VU 213 “Rejoice, the Lord is King”

VU 337 “Blessed assurance”

VU 338 “Ask me what great thing I know”

MV 75 “Holy Spirit, Come to Us”

*Psalm 68:1–10, 32–35*

VU 559 “Come, O Fount of every blessing”

MV 144 “Like a healing stream”

MV 221 “I am walking a path of peace”

*1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11*

VU 427 “To show by touch and word”

VU 664 “What a friend we have in Jesus”

MV 119 “God our protector”

MV 161 “I have called you by your name”

*John 17:1–11*

VU 395 “Come in, come in and sit down”

VU 402 “We are one”

VU 691 “Though ancient walls”

MV 141 “We are all one people”

MV 145 “Draw the circle wide”