

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible, light a candle, and place a spring flower beside it. Pray together:

LEADER: Dawn is your hour, risen Jesus, the moment when birds begin to sing and the night chill lifts.

ALL: Dawn is the hour of your new life and its promise to us.

LEADER: Your resurrection shows us the power of God's love.

ALL: You are spring in our dormant world.

LEADER: You are new life stirring in our hearts.

ALL: We fix our eyes on your promise. Alleluia.

Our celebration of Holy Week originates in our instinct to visit the graves of the dead in order to remember them. Pilgrims flock to Jerusalem during Holy Week each year to walk its narrow streets and visit the sites where Jesus died and was buried.

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built by Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, stands on the site where crucifixions took place. Greek Orthodox monks keep lamps lit above the rocks where executioners stood upright beams. No one knows exactly where Jesus' tomb was but the gospel says nearby. Tombs



abound under the foundations of the church and give the church its name.

The liturgy visits the holy places in its worship during Holy Week—the upper room on Holy Thursday, Golgotha on Good Friday, the empty tomb on Easter morning. Every Eucharist recalls the events that happened in these places. We gather for a meal as Jesus did with his disciples in the upper room. In the signs of bread broken and wine poured out, each Eucharist celebrates Jesus' gift of himself on the cross and the promise of eternal life that his resurrection opens for all of us who believe in him.

The Easter gospel places Jesus' resurrection at dawn

on the first day of the week—Christian Sunday, the day after Jewish Sabbath. The Easter Vigil anticipates the dawn of Jesus' resurrection day. Catholics follow the Easter candle into darkened churches, lighting their candles from its light, experiencing the promise of Jesus' resurrection light up the church.

The Easter Song, the *Exultet* in Latin, identifies this night with the night God led the Hebrew slaves through the sea to freedom. This is the night catechumens make their baptismal journey into new life in Jesus Christ.

We celebrate our own resurrections with the Easter feast, ways we have gotten our lives back from overwork or addictions, ways relationships have sustained us.

● What new life has Holy Week and Easter stirred in you?



GOSPEL

What do Jesus' friends see and believe?

NARRATOR 1: Early in the morning on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. She saw that the stone had been moved away, so she ran off to Simon Peter and the other disciple (the one Jesus loved) and told them:

MARY MAGDALENE: The Lord has been taken from the tomb! We don't know where they have put him!

NARRATOR 2: At that, Peter and the other disciple started out on their way toward the tomb. They were running side by side, but then the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

NARRATOR 1: He did not enter but bent down to peer in and saw the wrappings lying on the ground. Presently, Simon Peter came along behind him and entered the tomb.

NARRATOR 2: He observed the wrappings on the ground and saw the piece of cloth that had covered the head not lying by the wrappings, but rolled up in a

place by itself.

NARRATOR 1: Then the disciple who had arrived first at the tomb went in. He saw and believed.

NARRATOR 2: Remember, as yet they did not understand the scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

NARRATOR 2: Peter and the beloved disciple left, but Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb. She saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

ANGELS: Woman, why are you weeping?

MARY MAGDALENE: They have taken Jesus away, and I do not know where they have laid him.

NARRATOR 1: Then Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was he.

JESUS: Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?



NARRATOR 2: Mary thought Jesus was the gardener.

MARY MAGDALENE: Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him.

JESUS: Mary!

MARY MAGDALENE: Rabbouni!

NARRATOR 1: This word means teacher.

JESUS: Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my friends and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

NARRATOR 2: Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples.

MARY MAGDALENE: I have seen the Lord!

John 20.1-18

They did not understand the scriptures.

Easter Sunday celebrates Jesus' resurrection from the dead. This is the core of Christian faith: that God raised Jesus, who was crucified, from the dead. His resurrection promises all who believe in him will be raised up to new life with God as he has been. He is the firstborn of a new humanity.

The act of raising Jesus from the dead reveals who God is—the one who gives life. By

accepting death, Jesus reveals that God's power lies not in magic or military might but in love. Love is the power that gives life, especially its concrete forms such as forgiving, serving others, sharing. These are the powers death cannot defeat. These are the human actions that reveal God as people go out and beyond themselves.

Jesus' resurrection calls us to trust ourselves to God at our own

deaths as Jesus trusted God on the cross. Our Easter faith calls us to trust the life-giving Creator whose presence shows forth in all that is and the sustaining Spirit who holds us in being.

Most adults know death as well as birth. We know the absence of those we have loved. We know we have left them in graves we often visit. We recover from watching

them suffer and die. In their absence we have to settle for remembering them instead of having them with us. The death of loved ones or facing our own death calls the real Christian question. It is one of the baptismal promises. Do you believe in Jesus, who suffered, died, and was buried, and on the third day rose from the dead?

● **How do you live your faith in new life?**

First-century Jews imagined a messiah that called the hosts of heaven to arms, not a messiah who became like us, humbled himself, and accepted death on a cross.

The Romans crucified insurrectionists to discourage opposition. Roped or nailed by the hands to a crossbar and to an upright pole at the feet, victims could breathe only by painfully pushing themselves upward by the feet, before falling back. Death by strangulation on a cross could take a week of hanging in public shame and mockery.

Whether people imagined the messiah as a great king like David or a prophet like Moses or a great priest and holy man, no one imagined the messiah without power, dying by crucifixion.

● **What in my life tempts me to distrust God? What makes me doubt God's promises?**

Only by hindsight do Jesus' followers understand the scriptures that the messiah must suffer and rise from the

dead. In the fourth gospel, the evangelist John has Jesus' crucifixion take place at the same hour the Passover lambs are being slaughtered at the temple. This is his way of comparing Jesus to the first Passover lambs, whose blood saved the firstborn of the ancient Hebrews on the night of their exodus from slavery in Egypt. John uses Israel's scriptures to reflect on why Jesus had to suffer to come into his glory.

Jesus makes no end run around death but leads us through death to God's promises. He shows us that self-giving, forgiving, sharing, and including outcasts take people beyond the boundaries of their selves and open them to God's presence and power among them. The power of these actions in our lives and the lives of others gives us the same hint as spring does that we have the Spirit at work in us, more power than our own for building human community.

● **What do you see in the empty tomb?**

● **What affirms your faith in Jesus' self-giving way of life?**

● **What leads you to trust the promises of God?**

Each year the Church reads the gospel from John 20.1-9 on Easter Sunday. The beloved disciple sees the empty tomb and believes; his response is ideal. We don't continue and hear that a grieving Mary Magdalene stays at the tomb, meets her risen teacher, and announces



to Jesus' other followers, "I have seen the Lord," (John 20.10-18).

Mary Magdalene hears a man she supposes to be the gardener speak her name. Like the sheep who know the shepherd's voice in John 10, she recognizes Jesus' voice.

In John 20, the evangelist's resurrection chapter, people come to faith in Jesus in multiple ways. The beloved disciple sees and believes. Mary Magdalene hears and believes. In next Sunday's gospel Thomas comes to believe through questioning.

The pronouns in Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene stress his continuing relationship with his disciples. Jesus says, "I am ascending to *my* Father and *your* Father, to *my* God and *your* God."

Jesus commissions Mary Magdalene to tell his disciples he is risen. She is the first witness of the resurrection and the one sent to tell the others—the apostle to the apostles.

● **What do you hear in Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus that affirms your faith?**

● **In what way is Jesus' God your God?**

We are witnesses.

Sunday's first reading from Acts contains one of the many sermons Luke composed for his account of the first years of the Church. In this passage Peter speaks to the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household in whom he has just witnessed the Spirit poured out.

Peter proclaims the same basic story and message the gospels include. Jesus' ministry begins with the preaching and baptism of John. Jesus does good, heals people, and casts out demons. He is put to death but raised to new life. Peter is a witness of all these events. At the end of his sermon Peter adds to his witness the testimony of the Hebrew scriptures.

God raised up Jesus.

Peter proceeded to speak and said: "You know what has been told all over Judea about Jesus of Nazareth, beginning in Galilee with the baptism John preached—how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all under the power of the devil because God was with him.

"We are witnesses to all that he did in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him finally, 'hanging him on a tree.' God raised him up on the third day and established that he be seen, not by all, but by witnesses who had been chosen beforehand by God, by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

"He commissioned us to preach to the people and to bear witness



that he is the one whom God has sent as judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets testify, saying that everyone who believes in him has forgiveness of sins through his name."

Acts 10.34,37-43

- What witness in your own life can you give to the truth of the gospel?
- If you could quiz Peter as a witness of all Jesus said and did, what would you ask him?

PRAY

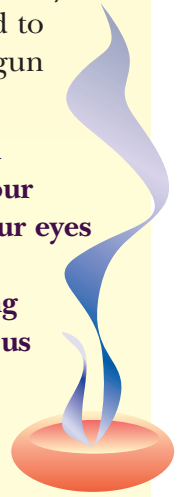
Take a brief time to surface your concerns this Easter and shape them as petitions. Place these concerns in a joyful Easter context by singing an alleluia group members know.

LEADER: Loving Creator, we believe you raised Jesus from the dead. We believe you will raise us up, too.

Take turns making your prayers of petition.

LEADER: This is the day the Lord appeared to those who had begun to lose hope.

ALL: May the risen Jesus breathe on our minds and open our eyes that we may know him in the breaking of bread, in all of us gathered together around his word and table. Amen. Alleluia.



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, editor of Sunday by Sunday, holds a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

DO SOMETHING



- Mark Earth Day, April 22, by working with young people or inviting them to work with you on a local environmental project. Read *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis's encyclical on repairing our common home. Plant trees. Restore prairie. Help clean up a brown site in your city. Plant a small vegetable garden. Learn how to compost together.