

EASTER TRIUMPH,  
EASTER JOY

*Meditations for the  
Fifty Days of Eastertide*

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**Forward  
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# EASTER TRIUMPH, EASTER JOY

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## Introduction

Easter celebrates the astounding claim that a dead person was raised to new life. If it weren't for Easter, Jesus would simply be another good teacher or perhaps even a prophet. But with the empty tomb, we see the utter and complete victory of God's grace, mercy, and love over the forces of evil, sin, and death.

Saint Paul recognized that Easter is crucial to our profession of Christian faith when he wrote, "if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:14). It's a strong claim, but it's true. Easter is what proves that Jesus was no mere prophet but the savior of the world.

I found myself pondering these truths during the global pandemic in 2021. The disruption and isolation of the pandemic didn't shake my faith, but it did lower my spirits. As I moved through the Lenten season, I decided to write fifty days of meditations through the Easter season. There were two reasons for this.

First, I thought that spending time reflecting on the joy and triumph of Easter might shift my perspective away from the struggle of the pandemic toward larger truths. This is not to say that disease and suffering aren't important to see but rather that Jesus Christ has redeemed creation so that we are ultimately defined by grace and mercy. When I see myself as the recipient of grace upon grace, I will naturally be moved to offer that grace to others and to respond to the needs of the world.

Second, I had noticed over the last few years that the church doesn't seem to talk about Easter and its implications much, except perhaps around Easter Day itself. While Easter isn't the only important season of our faith, it is an essential part of our faith. Shouldn't we talk about Easter more? Shouldn't we celebrate the stunning victory of love over evil more? Shouldn't we reflect on what it means to be an Easter Christian more?

So, this book is the result of my effort to put my own heart in a better place and also to encourage all of us who follow the Risen Lord to celebrate Easter not just for a few days each spring.

## **About this book**

The fifty meditations here originally appeared on 50days.org, a blog that celebrates the fullness of the Easter season. The site was originally conceived by the Rev. Laurie Brock as she noticed that we spend a lot of energy on Lent but maybe not as much energy on the Easter season. For several years, she organized a group of bloggers, including yours truly, to write meditations for the fifty days of Easter. After lying fallow for a few years, we brought back the site in 2021 with my fifty reflections.

Most of the reflections are based on the eucharistic lectionary for the Easter season as found in *Lesser Feasts & Fasts 2006*. On Sundays and Ascension Day, I used readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, either years A, B, or C.

To make things a bit more interesting, each week includes Musical Monday, when the meditation is based on an Easter hymn or anthem. There is a YouTube playlist of the songs for this book available at [forwardmovement.org/eastertriumph](http://forwardmovement.org/eastertriumph).

We dive into ancient Christian writings each week on Throwback Thursday, with an exploration of a sermon or teaching from the first few centuries of the church. Many of these excerpts have been translated over the years. The sources are listed in the back of the book.

You'll find the Easter narratives from the four gospels at the back of the book, along with some teachings from Saint Paul. I hope you might be drawn to savor the riches of the Easter proclamation in scripture.

Lastly, I mention RenewalWorks a couple of times in the meditations. RenewalWorks is the result of the Rev. Jay Sidebotham's vision to help Episcopalians shift the conversation in our churches away from maintenance and toward discipleship. Through a process of collecting data on parishioners' spiritual lives, church leaders can map out a plan to help the church thrive spiritually. We've worked with enough churches now that we have a reliable picture of the spiritual life of the Episcopal Church, and so I share some of our insights. If you want to know more, visit [renewalworks.org](http://renewalworks.org).

## **Gratitude**

I am grateful to the staff of Forward Movement, who tolerated me spending quite a bit of time on this project in the spring of 2021 and again to finish up the book in the fall. Particularly, I am thankful for the editorial gifts of Richelle Thompson, who edited these meditations—often with very short notice—during Eastertide 2021 and to prepare them for publication. I’m thankful to Sherilyn Pearce, my spouse, who encouraged me to keep writing when my enthusiasm flagged and who also brought espresso at key moments along the way.

Above all, I am of course grateful for the triumph of love that Easter celebrates. I couldn’t say it better than Saint Paul: “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57).



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## **Easter Day and the First Week of Easter**

*Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ overcame death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of the Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

—THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, P. 222

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# Easter Day

## *50 Days and Then Eternity*

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

—JOHN 20:15B



Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb early, even before the dawn. While she may well have harbored hope in Jesus’s predictions that he would be raised to life on the third day, on this early morning she was there for more quotidian aims. The other gospels tell us she was there with spices and ointment to care for the body of Jesus. John is silent on her purpose, so we might assume she was there with the spices and ointment, or we might imagine she had come for the simple reason of grieving her rabbi and friend.

Reading back with our lens, we might wonder how it is that Mary didn't recognize Jesus. Imagine in our time if you attended the funeral of a beloved friend and then saw your friend standing on the sidewalk a couple of days later. I don't know about you, but my mind would have trouble making sense of this "impossible" sight.

Mary saw the impossible. Or so it seemed. And this is the very heart of the Easter mystery. Jesus Christ—who had been stone cold dead—is raised to new life. It is impossible, and yet it happened.

Easter is not for the faint of heart. If we can, like Mary, grasp the majestic truth of Easter, we can begin to believe that everything we think we know about the universe is changed. Death is not the end. Evil does not triumph. Might does not assure victory. Fear cannot reign supreme.

Thanks be to God we have a fifty-day season ahead of us to celebrate the joy and the triumph of Easter. We can retell the story of the empty tomb. We can see how belief in the impossible shaped the lives of those first disciples of Jesus. We can begin to glimpse the possibilities for our world when death, evil, might, and fear do not get the

last word. We can see what it means for ourselves to be baptized into Christ's death and raised to new life in him.

We are embarking on a great journey. If we can overturn our notions of what is possible, we might find that the journey is not just the next fifty days but an entire lifetime. And a glorious, eternal life to come.

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# Monday in Easter Week

## *Our Joy That Hath No End*



If you're like me, there's one hymn you have to sing in order for it to feel like Easter. For me, my must-sing-on-Easter hymn is "The Day of Resurrection," translated by John Mason Neale from the ancient Byzantine hymn by John of Damascus.

When I was a parish priest, we always sang this at the end of the Great Vigil of Easter. After a glorious liturgy filled with imagery of the passing over from death to life, this hymn makes the perfect summation and expression of praise and joy.

1. *The day of resurrection!*  
*Earth, tell it out abroad;*

*the Passover of gladness,  
the Passover of God.  
From death to life eternal,  
from earth unto the sky,  
our Christ hath brought us over,  
with hymns of victory.*

2. *Our hearts be pure from evil,  
that we may see aright  
the Lord in rays eternal  
of resurrection light;  
and, listening to his accents,  
may hear so calm and plain  
his own "All hail!" and, hearing,  
may raise the victor strain.*
  
3. *Now let the heavens be joyful,  
let earth her song begin,  
the round world keep high triumph,  
and all that is therein;  
let all things seen and unseen  
their notes in gladness blend,  
for Christ the Lord hath risen,  
our joy that hath no end.*

This is one of the oldest hymns we sing, written in the sixth century or so. I love how the three verses take us from the stunning triumph of Easter itself, on to the meaning of Easter in our own lives, and then the dazzling victory of Easter that shines forth throughout the whole universe.

Let all things seen and unseen sing the praise of Christ's triumph on Easter, for everything is changed. God's mighty love has brought death to life, defeat to victory. As they say on Twitter, "big if true." Truly, our joy will have no end.

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# Tuesday in Easter Week

## *I Have Seen the Lord*

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.”

—JOHN 20:18A



### I. Have. Seen. The. Lord.

This short witness has made possible 2,000 years of Christian faith and life. Mary was the first witness, the one who told the apostles about the astounding news of Jesus’s resurrection. With good reason, Mary Magdalene is often called the apostle to the apostles.

Imagine if Mary had been reticent. She might have said, “I don’t intellectually understand how this can be, so I won’t share it for now.” Or she could have deferred, saying, “I

just don't feel ready to share this kind of news." Thanks be to God, she boldly shared the Good News. The men heard from her the Good News and rushed to see. From her proclamation, all subsequent proclamations flow.

It's not so different for us. I am a Christian because some generations ago, a follower of Jesus shared the Good News with someone who did not yet know Jesus. I have friends who have become Christians as adults; they are followers of Jesus because they heard the Good News.

Proclaiming Good News is essential, but statistics tell us we're not very good at it. I wonder why. Perhaps when we overthink it, we would do well to follow Mary's lead. We don't need a specialized education or an engraved invitation to say, "I have seen the Lord."

It's really that simple. So often we imagine that inviting people to follow Jesus will involve disputation or complexity. But we can keep it simple. "Every Sunday I encounter Jesus in the sacraments. Come and join me." "The church is not perfect, but together we are the body of Christ, carrying out his ministry on earth. Come and join me."

This Easter season, what if we all tried to practice Mary Magdalene's bold witness? Perhaps, like her, we are uncertain at first. Our brains cannot wrap themselves around God's impossibly generous love at times. We might not be sure that we're really seeing Jesus.

Yet, if we look around, we can see the signs. I myself have seen impossibly estranged relationships made whole. I myself have seen people experience abundance after practicing extravagant generosity. I myself have seen people who wander suddenly find meaning and purpose. I have seen the Lord.

Most likely, you have seen the Lord, too. Will you proclaim Jesus? Will you share the amazing news of Easter with a world that yearns for hope?

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# Wednesday in Easter Week

## *Inviting Others to Love Jesus*

Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

—LUKE 24:31



The disciples met Jesus and didn't recognize him at first. They weren't expecting to meet him because they had seen him die a few days before. I wonder how often we meet Jesus and do not recognize him at first.

Some years ago, I was in Shanghai on a Sunday morning. Having done some research, I knew there was a Chinese Protestant church that had some English translation equipment for visitors, so I decided to visit the church. I made sure to arrive plenty early in case I had trouble finding it.

Though I arrived at least fifteen minutes before the service, I was surprised to see crowds outside the church. The windows were open, and people were standing on the lawn so they could hear what was happening inside. Even those spots were pretty full.

I'm pretty tall, and there weren't many white people there, so I stood out. Literally. As I walked a bit closer to the church, a woman asked me if I was there to visit the church. I said yes. She said to wait a few minutes. I wasn't sure why, but wanting to be a good guest, I agreed that I would be glad to wait.

A few minutes later, I noticed one person leaving the church. She gave me a big smile. The woman who had asked me to wait pointed me to an usher who took me to a seat. The inside of the church was packed. The usher led me to a perfect seat right in the balcony where the English-language headphones were. For me, it was the best seat in the house.

I quickly realized that this woman had cheerfully given up her perfect seat for a stranger. Everyone in the church was hospitable in ways I have trouble putting into words.

These Christians welcomed me, a stranger, just as Jesus teaches us to in Matthew 25.

Of course, every gathering of Christians is by its very nature the body of Christ, so I shouldn't have been surprised to be awed by kindness and hospitality. These Christians taught me something about warm welcome, even though we could exchange few words due to our language barrier. Looking back, I realized that every single person had welcomed me from the moment I got close to the church campus. I have every reason to believe they are one of those churches who pray for their guests before they arrive.

I know that I meet Jesus every Sunday, in every church I attend. But this particular Sunday, my heart was warmed by the sheer extravagance of it all. Everything about the service—the welcome, the music, the care of the building—showed that they love Jesus and want others to love him, too.

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## Thursday in Easter Week

***Rejoice This Day,  
for the Table Is Bountifully Spread!***

First and last alike, receive your reward. Rich and poor, rejoice together! Conscientious and lazy, celebrate the day! You who have kept the fast, and you who have not, rejoice, this day, for the table is bountifully spread! Feast royally, for the calf is fatted. Let no one go away hungry. Partake, all, of the banquet of faith.

—SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (C. 4TH CENTURY)  
EASTER SERMON



The first Episcopal church I attended had a lovely custom of reading Saint John Chrysostom's brilliant Easter Sermon as the sermon at the Great Vigil of Easter. I've grown to love this short, fiery sermon because I think it

says just about everything we need to hear as we begin our celebrations of Easter.

Easter is for everyone. Whether you have carefully kept the Lenten fast this year (and every previous year of your life) or you just stepped into a church for the first time, Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead for you. Death is defeated, and sin is vanquished for all of us.

I also love the reminder within the sermon that Easter is not some kind of cosmic party trick in which a dead person resuscitates and that's that. In fact, Jesus's death and resurrection shows us that God's love is for the whole creation. There is no one and no circumstance that is beyond the reach of God's love.

Even hell is redeemed. We don't talk about this much, but the scriptures tell us that Jesus offered salvation to those who were in hell while he was dead. This harrowing of hell shows the utter defeat of Satan and evil.

*Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with. It was in an uproar because it is mocked. It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed. It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated. It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive.*

*Hell took a body, and discovered God. It took earth, and encountered Heaven. It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.*

If Jesus can do that, he can certainly love me and save me when I mess up. And he loves you and saves you when you are messed up, too.

Easter changes everything. We don't have to fear evil and death, because we know that God's love and life are triumphant.

Christ gives life to the dead, and he gives life to the living. He offers eternal life to all.

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# Friday in Easter Week

## *Making Easter Dangerous*

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.

—ACTS 4:1-2



Surprise, surprise. Religious leaders were “much annoyed” at someone teaching the people. This is probably a constant from before the time of Jesus right up until the present.

Here, the irritation partly comes from the fact that the Sadducees denied the resurrection of the dead. But I suspect the main point of contention has to do with

authority. By whose authority is this teaching happening? What does this teaching do to the balance of power in the status quo?

In the 1500s, Martin Luther got into hot water for pointing out ways that people could find salvation unmediated by the church. Others have gotten into trouble for suggesting that the church should surrender its wealth. More recently, those who insisted that the church examine its legacy of racism and sexism have found themselves at odds with powerful people.

The fundamental issue is that people in authority and power almost always want to preserve their authority and power. While we can understand this as part of our sinful human nature, it's especially distressing in the church. After all, we follow Jesus Christ, who lived among us in humility and who taught us to reject conventional markers of might and privilege.

I'm sorry to say I've been on both sides of this. At times, I've been the one who annoyed the powers-that-be. (No one has ever locked me up, but that could be because churches don't have jails these days.) At other times, I've

been the person in power who was annoyed at some challenge or other.

We as a church have to do better. And it's not just our leaders. It's all of us. Too often, the church finds it easier to align ourselves with the conventional cultural wisdom, with the social powers-that-be. We'd do well to find ourselves on the outskirts of society with Peter and James, the ones doing the challenging.

I know I have work to do on this front, both as a leader in the church and as a member of the body of Christ. A good question to ask ourselves is, "Does the thing we are debating liberate people? Does this free them for transformation in Jesus Christ? Do I hold this view because it is comfortable for me?"

Easter is a disruptive season, for it is in Eastertide that we celebrate God's gracious gift of liberating love for all people. Let's make Easter a bit more dangerous, shall we?

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# Saturday in Easter Week

## *Let All Teach with Boldness*

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus.

—ACTS 4:13



There's a lot to read into this description of Peter and John. The authorities seem surprised that “uneducated” people should be able to teach so effectively. It's remarkable to the powerful people that “ordinary” people can be so bold, so effective.

In the last few years, I've been thinking about how we raise up leaders in the church. Ordained leaders are sent off to graduate school or to a substantial local formation

program, but that's almost always in addition to a full college education. This kind of learning is costly, both in time and money.

Many lay leaders are expected to engage in extensive learning programs such as Education for Ministry. In most Episcopal congregations, the leaders are nearly all college educated. Our congregations tend to skew toward the middle class and wealthy.

At least in the Episcopal Church, we don't end up with many leaders who could be called "uneducated and ordinary." Now, as a well-educated person, I certainly have nothing against education! And I am glad we welcome people of economic means into our churches.

I also know there are exceptions. Some leaders with diverse backgrounds have been celebrated in the church, and some congregations are more welcoming than others of the uneducated and ordinary people who seek to know Jesus. But all the data suggest that we have work to do for the body of Christ to match the diversity of society.

I'm left wondering if our church would be richer for celebrating the leadership gifts of "uneducated and

ordinary” people. After all, wisdom is rarely correlated with educational attainment. Some of the best teachers of the Gospel I’ve known are people whose knowledge came from studying the scriptures and listening to sermons, not from seminars and graduate-level courses.

This is not a zero-sum world. We could still savor the learning that comes from a corps of clergy with graduate degrees while also savoring the teaching of those of different educational backgrounds. We could still welcome the wealthy while also making space for the poor. It shouldn’t be remarkable among the followers of Jesus that “uneducated and ordinary” would teach with boldness. I wonder how we might work toward making the church more open to a variety of gifts and backgrounds.