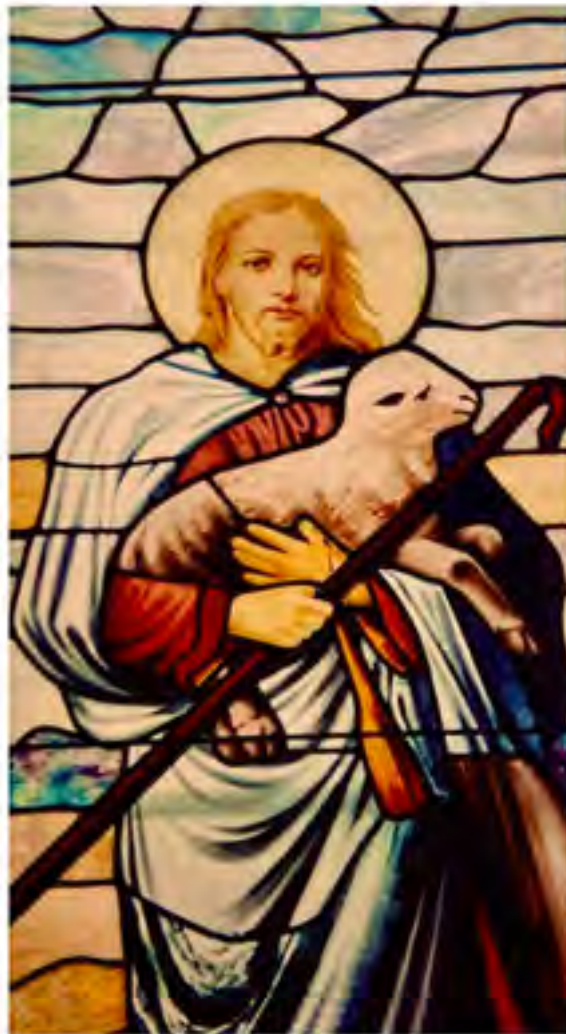


*Holy Week
In Real Time*



When our Shepherd became the Lamb

© Phyllis Clark Nichols

HOLY WEEK IN REAL TIME

There have been many events during my lifetime that I can recall exactly where I was and what I was doing when I learned of them, but two stand out. You, too, may share these experiences. I remember vividly crawling into the front seat of our two-toned, green, 1959 Ford Galaxie when Mama picked me up from Southside Elementary School on the afternoon of November 22, 1963. Mama was crying, crying hard, when she told me that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. I cried hard, too. Maybe it was because I didn't like seeing Mama crying, or maybe it was because of my own growing understanding of what had happened to our president.

And the second event was on September 11, 2001, when the Twin Towers in New York fell because of the hate-filled acts of misguided terrorists. Bill and I had just returned from our morning walk. Our plan was to take a quick shower and start packing for our upcoming trip to Europe. We turned on the television in the bathroom to get the news while we readied ourselves for the day. The second tower had just been hit. We were stunned. We sat speechless and unable to move ourselves from the television all day long as the stories unfolded. Both these events changed the course of American history.

But there was another event that changed my personal history, and I recall that moment with all its details too. That was the moment when I, as a seven-year-old girl, realized that God loved me enough to die for me and that He had hopes for how I would choose to live my life. I was not in church at this moment. It was not a bedtime prayer with my parents. I was alone and talking to God before I went to sleep. God had used my parents, my pastor, my Sunday School teacher, and others to lead me to this moment of reality. That night, I asked God to forgive me for disappointing Him, and I gave my heart, all I understood of it at the time, to my Lord Jesus. I informed my parents the next morning and my church family the following Sunday, and I could hardly wait to be baptized. It was a childlike, limited understanding I had, but I knew without doubt that I needed Jesus, and I believed He was loving enough to do for me what I could not do for myself. I am grateful for God's patience and grace as my faith and my understanding have grown through the years. That's just how God is.

As Christians, we are blessed to have an evidence-based faith—real stories about real people in real places and many witnesses to so many important events. I've had the great privilege to visit the land where our Lord lived and ministered while on this earth. I've walked the Shepherds Fields and the streets of Jerusalem and the Garden of Gethsemane and the Via Dolorosa. And as the old song reminds us, "and (I) felt His presence there." Walking where He walked gave life to the scripture, made it three dimensional for me, and enhanced my imagination.

As a writer, I have a fertile imagination – an imagination that caused Mama great consternation when I was a child, but that same imagination has served me well as an author. I envision scenes in immense detail and in technicolor. When I am writing, I have the complete description of every character—hair color, eye color, size, age, skin tone and the sound of the voice. I draw floor plans and place furniture and live in each room while I am writing. I design gardens and sketch diagrams of small towns. Imagination. I bring that same imagination when I read the Bible, especially when I read the Bible.

I am grateful you are joining me this Holy Week, day by day, walking where Jesus walked as He chose the way of the cross. He could have chosen another way, but He chose His Father's plan and purpose.

I invite you to read the scriptures each morning. I hope you will use your imagination to envision every scene and allow these events to become very real to you. Read them from each Gospel and experience each writer's personality and perspective. If these passages are already familiar to you, maybe you could read them from a different translation. My favorite is *The Message*.

Meditate on the verses, imagine, and try to picture what Jesus was doing and what He might have been thinking and feeling every step of the way. And imagine the other persons in these stories, especially His disciples. Identify with them. Allow yourself to feel their confusion, disillusionment, disappointment, and fear. Those same emotions run rampant in the world today. Emotionally, we may be resonating more with Jesus's disciples this week than we ever have.

Let us begin our journey with Jesus this week. Find a comfortable place to sit in solitude and read each Gospel as though you are reading it for the first time. Close your eyes, meditate, and imagine the scenes and emotions. Listen for God's Spirit as you walk with Jesus this Holy Week.

So, what was Jesus doing on Palm Sunday?

Read: Matthew 21:1-17, Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-44, John 12:1-18

For several days, Jesus had been in Bethany. Bethany, meaning “house of dates,” was a small village on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives and only a couple of miles from Jerusalem. It was known as a village that welcomed travelers and provided rest and respite on their journeys.

It was apparent that Jesus felt at home there, especially in the home of His friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead.

During these days before Palm Sunday, Jesus was preparing those He loved for what He knew was to come. On Sunday, Jesus journeyed with His disciples the two miles to Jerusalem. As He neared city, He looked out over it and wept. Perhaps He wasn't just weeping over Jerusalem. Wouldn't it be like Jesus to weep over all those who refused to recognize Him for who He truly was? He had come to change the world, to change their lives, to give them hope, and to offer them abundant living and life forever.

Before Jesus entered Jerusalem, He instructed two of His disciples to go to a certain place and get a donkey. The crowds had gathered for a royal welcome, a rolling out of the proverbial red carpet. Many of these who gathered had been with Jesus before. They had heard Him teach and had seen the miracles He performed.



The onlookers lined the road, waving their palm branches which were symbols of victory, virtue, triumph, and eternal peace. They were looking for Jesus to be their new king and to save them from Roman rule, but King Jesus entered the city riding the lowly animal, signifying He was a different kind of king. Still the people shouted their *hosannas*, which means *please save us*. (See Psalm 118:25-26.) They spread their coats and shawls on the path in front of Him as they would have done for a leader returning home from a military conquest.

Undeterred by their praises, Jesus went to the temple. Let this scene from the Gospels become real to you as Jesus reminded the religious leaders that His house was to be a house of prayer. Ponder that. Late in the day, Jesus and His disciples returned to Bethany for the night.

So, what was Jesus doing on Monday?

Read: Matthew 21:18-22, Mark 11:12-19, Luke 19:45-48

Jesus had made His entry into Jerusalem on Sunday, and things were astir. People were wondering about this Jesus. They were asking questions. There was something different in the air. Late on Sunday, He had returned to Bethany with His disciples. But on Monday morning, Jesus woke them and said, “We’re going back to Jerusalem.” That was risky business.



While many were hungry for Jesus’s words, the established religious leaders were growing more fearful of Jesus and His followers, and they had begun to plot to get rid of Him.

Read the Gospel accounts as to how Jesus established His authority, especially in the Temple. Imagine being there in Jerusalem, and you had shouted your “hosannas” on Sunday, but what would you be doing on Monday? Would you be excited? Would you be afraid or disappointed?

So, what was Jesus doing on Tuesday?

Read: Matthew 21:23 – 26:5, Mark 11:27—14:2, Luke 21:1—22:2, John 12:37-50

Jesus literally had turned the tables, turned the tables over in the Temple on Monday with some strong reprimands. And now on Tuesday comes the direct confrontation with the high priests, the religious scholars, and the leaders. They pose questions. I’m not certain if they were sincerely looking for answers or for a way to trip Jesus up, but Jesus did something we were all taught not to do—He answered the question with a question of His own. His response was not something these religious leaders wanted to hear.

Jesus spends Tuesday in the Temple teaching, telling them parables, reminding the listeners of the Scriptures, answering questions, and telling them about the future events. Jesus knows this may well be His last opportunity to speak with them in the Temple, for He understands the fulfilling of His purpose is coming soon. Mark tells us how Jesus summed it all up in two great commandments. (Mark 12:29-31).

Can you even imagine being there, sitting at Jesus’s feet, hearing the Truth coming from His own voice? Can you imagine the expressions on His face as He told the parables? What questions might have you asked Jesus had you been there? How would you have responded to His answers?



So, what was Jesus doing on Wednesday?

Read: Matthew 26:6-16, Mark 14:1-10, Luke 22:1-6

Jesus has had three full days of being in the public eye – His entrance into Jerusalem on Sunday, His confrontations with religious leaders on Monday, and His teaching in the Temple on Tuesday. On Wednesday, He withdraws and is still and quiet. He continues trying to prepare His disciples for what is coming.

Sit there at the table in Simon the Leper's house. Watch as Mary enters with her expensive bottle of perfume and anoints Jesus's head. Listen to His response. Which character in this story would you have been?

Then imagine the thoughts in Judas's mind as he plotted to betray Jesus. With all that he had seen and heard, and yet he could turn his back on Jesus and the other disciples for selfish gain.



So, what was Jesus doing on Thursday?

Read: Matthew 26:17-75, Mark 14:12-72, Luke 22:7-71, John 13:1—18:27

All four of the Gospel writers report about the events of Thursday. It was an evening of high drama—life-changing conversations, a foot-washing, disappointments, fervent praying, a betrayal, and a denial.

Read these passages as if you were in the Upper Room and in the Garden of Gethsemane with His disciples. Ponder these questions to help you meditate on these passages.

What would have been your response if you were the one Jesus chose to host the Last Supper?

It was just the night before that Jesus's head had been anointed with costly aromatic oils, and now He knelt to wash His disciples' feet. How would you have reacted if Jesus insisted on washing your feet?

What would you have thought when Jesus said that after His death and resurrection that He would meet them in Galilee?

Would you have understood when He explained the meaning of the Passover?

If you had been there at the table when He told them that one of them would betray Him, what would have been your response?

Would you have followed Him to the Mount of Olives? He went to pray and to wait, for He knew what was coming. Imagine what you would have felt when He was led away from the garden by the soldiers.

Picture yourself as Peter in the courtyard, wanting to be near Jesus and yet so afraid.



Good Friday

So, what was Jesus doing on Friday? Changing human history forever from depths of love and compassion only He has.

Read: Matthew 27:1-61, Mark 15:1-47, Luke 23:1-56, John 18:28--19:42

We've all read this story so many times. Perhaps many of you have seen movies depicting the scenes on this day – the brutality, the beatings, the betrayal.

For six unimaginable hours, the Shepherd becomes the Lamb. Those at the foot of His cross had mixed reactions. Some jeered, others sneered, and those who loved Him could do nothing to stop it. They saw the man they thought would be their Messiah die a cruel death. They didn't understand that Sunday was coming.



Return to the foot of the cross. See yourself there. Maybe you're standing, gazing at Him with your arms reaching to heaven in despair. Maybe you're crumpled on your knees on the ground, weeping over His suffering and your own pain and grief. But I hope somewhere in that experience, you can look into Jesus's face and say, "Thank you, thank you."

Saturday—It's a dismal day, but Sunday's coming.

Read: Matthew 27:57–66, Luke 23:50-56, John 19:38-42

There isn't much written about the day after Jesus was crucified. We know Joseph of Arimathea was allowed to take Jesus's body, and he buried Jesus in a tomb and sealed it with a rock late on Friday. Some of the women who were followers of Jesus were there and observed but went home at sundown, following the rules for the Sabbath. Many have speculated where Jesus was and what He was doing on Saturday, but the one thing we know is that He was quiet.

Jesus had told His disciples that He would die in Jerusalem and that He would rise on the third day and meet them in Galilee. But on Saturday, they found themselves waiting and grieving. They had walked with Jesus, listened to His words, and observed His ways, but now He was gone, just gone. They felt abandoned with unfulfilled hope, unsure of Jesus's return. I can imagine their fear, their grief, their confusion, and even their anticipation as they waited.

Jesus could have become immediately alive again after drawing His last breath, but He didn't. The stone was still and in place for a whole day. Holy Saturday, as it is known, was the day of waiting. So, we should look at Saturday as having meaningful significance and more than just the day between the crucifixion and the Resurrection.

We've all had days of waiting, when God might have seemed absent to us—like the hours in a surgical waiting room, or waiting for a prayer to be answered, or anticipating the birth of a baby, or waiting for our grief to subside. There is a certain quietness in the Holy Saturdays of our lives when all we have are our faith and the promises we find in God's Word. Just as the disciples waited, we wait to see what God will do. What do you do during the waiting?

Think of how Jesus's followers huddled together in their grief, afraid perhaps for even their lives. Imagine what they might have been doing. We know that some of the women prepared oils and spices so they could return to the tomb when the Sabbath was over. Probably some of them were so overcome, they sat in silence. Others might have attempted to give comfort or share stories of remembrance. Imagine how they tried to erase the images of what happened on Friday from their minds. Imagine their conversations as they waited.

As one who ponders and meditates, I have imagined what Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, might have been thinking during those hours following Jesus's death. Listen to her thoughts from my imagination.

The night was long, so very long. Nights always seem long after such a dark day. We came back to the room when it was over, when there was nothing left for us to do. We didn't need to be on the streets, but we needed to be with each other – maybe to share our grief and hopelessness or maybe because we were afraid. The Romans had tasted blood. Who of us might be next?

I had no words, so I sat away from them in silence while they wept and clung to each other. I looked at Mary and remembered losing John. I knew what she was feeling. It was all too familiar to me. There is a cost to being the mother of God's chosen ones. And I looked around at the others. I knew their families and their stories. They left their homes and their work to follow Jesus, but He's gone. What will happen to them now? They've been changed. They can't just go home again to fish. I'm old, and it doesn't matter so much about me. But we're all like lost sheep without our shepherd. Jesus tried to tell us, but we didn't understand.

John offered me a small bed near the window for the night. I barely slept. I could see a faint light in the sky, so I rose early because that's what old women do. There was an unusual chill in the air this morning, but if I start the fire, I'll wake them. They should sleep. Sleep is a rest from their pain. I took the blanket from my bed and climbed the clay steps to the rooftop. I needed to see the morning sky. Besides that's my time to pray. I walked across the roof and gazed out across the city, the city Jesus wept over, the city that cheered his death, the city that went dark and shook when he died. I sat down on the sandy floor in the corner out of the wind and wrapped the blanket around me.

I looked into the morning sky and I prayed.

Dear Lord, my heart is heavy, so very heavy. I don't know what to do except to talk to you just like I did after my beloved son was taken from me. So much I don't understand, Lord. You sent your angel to speak to Zechariah when I was an aging, barren woman. My barrenness disgraced me, and yet you gave me promise - a son and you said he'd be great in your eyes, and he'd be different and filled with your spirit, and that he was the chosen one to prepare for the Messiah. And so he was. And my John did everything you said, Lord.

I'm so grateful my John got to meet Jesus. He preached and baptized until he couldn't because they killed him, too. I didn't think I could bear it. But I knew, Lord. I knew that Mary had birthed the Messiah, and Jesus gave me hope.

Oh, but God, no mother should have to bear what Mary witnessed yesterday. It was too brutal. There could no deeper sorrow. And the horror? She can't unsee it, Lord. It was too much, too much for all of us.

Jesus was your son, God. Did you watch and weep? Did you turn your face away in sadness? You could have stopped them. But you didn't. You didn't.

And Judas, how could he? How could he have led those Roman soldiers straight to Jesus? How could he have been with Jesus and have seen and heard him, and then give him up like that? And he did it to the rest of us, too, betraying Jesus like that.

Oh, Father God, I have so many questions. I know you must have a plan. You've always had a plan. You've always delivered us. My heart is so sorrowful, but somewhere deep inside, I know this world has no sorrow that you cannot heal. Amen.

Silent tears trickled down my hollow cheeks where tears have flowed before. I sat alone for a while humming the songs we would have sung if we'd been allowed to have his body and give him a proper burial. The morning sun warmed my face but could not dry my tears.

I leave this with you now. We know the end of the story, and Holy Saturday wasn't it. For we know that Sunday's coming.

SUNDAY—What we've been waiting for . . .

So, what was Jesus doing on Sunday? Exactly what He said He would do!

Read: Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-12, Luke 24, John 20:1-21

The women who had stayed at the tomb until sundown on Friday returned early on Sunday morning after the Sabbath. They came with spices to finish their burial preparation of Jesus's body but were met with yet something else they did not expect, or rather Someone they did not expect to see. Jesus. He was alive! What joy! What restoration of their hope. Dark Friday and dismal Saturday were over. Jesus was alive and the world was bright in the cascading light of Resurrection Morning.

I can imagine these women could hardly contain themselves and the news they were given. Jesus was alive and with them again. They were probably so happy to see Him that they had little time to ponder what His presence actually meant. That would come later, just like it does for us. And I can imagine as they all grasped that Jesus was alive that Elizabeth's prayer was different on Sunday.



Lord, they're all downstairs with Jesus. He lives. Jesus lives. I can hardly believe it. Our joy and our hope have returned, and if I were not an old woman, I'd be downstairs with them clapping my hands and dancing. But I have a need to say something to you, Lord. My sorrowful heart of yesterday has become a grateful heart. How could I have doubted you? Jesus is alive, and he has buried death forever. Oh, God, the God of my fathers, and the father of our Lord Jesus, I praise you. You have delivered us again. Jesus is with us. He will tell us what to do. And Lord, because of Him and because He is alive, I know I will see my beloved Zechariah and I will hold my son, my son John, again. They wait for me in the home You made for all of us. Thank you, my God. Amen.

In my quietness, I could hear the sounds of joy below as I stood in the same corner where I sat and prayed with such a heavy heart yesterday. But today, the sky is so blue. I feel the warmth of the sun and a gentle breeze. It feels like hope.

Jesus lives. Resurrected. Jesus changed everything forever. That doesn't just *feel* like hope, it IS hope.

So, celebrate! Be joyful and grateful! He is alive! And because He lives, we live today and forever! Hallelujah!

IT'S MONDAY IN A DIFFERENT REAL TIME!

This past weekend, I was remembering many Easters in my life. Maybe you were remembering some significant Easters of your own. I wrote about one of mine in *Sacred Sense from Taking a Second Look*. I have included this excerpt from the book, but be sure to keep reading when you finish. There are some questions you may need to ponder.

EASTER DURING A PANDEMIC

Well, it's Easter 2020 in the middle of a pandemic, and it's an Easter unlike any other that I've experienced. The church doors are closed. We cannot be with our family. But somehow Easter is more meaningful than it's ever been. Easter secures my future, and I'm blessed enough to have beautiful memories of Easters gone by.

When I remember the Easters of my childhood, they mostly involved the new spring mother-daughter dresses Mama made, new hats that had to have small flowers to frame my face and ribbons that trailed in the wind behind me, a new pair of white patent leather shoes from Kramer's Department Store on Broad Street, pink cotton socks with lace trim, my grandmother's coconut bunny cake, and the smell of vinegar from coloring the Easter eggs. These are all fond memories, and I wouldn't trade them, but then there was this Easter . . . the Easter from behind bars.

As a seminary student in Fort Worth, TX, I was contracted by the government to teach English as a Second Language to international inmates. Only two weeks had gone by before the secret was out—a seminary music student was working in the Education Unit. The Protestant chaplain asked to meet with me, and we became friends quickly. She explained the need, and I agreed to plan and lead the music for the Sunday morning Protestant worship services as a volunteer. A few months passed, and I had assembled a choir and other musicians eager to make music, even if it was in the chapel service. Chapel services were not the place most of these fellows had usually made music. Oh, the stories I could tell about choir rehearsals.

In the early spring, I had this idea which I took to the chaplain, affectionately called Sister Teresa by now. She liked and approved it—an Easter Sunrise service in the middle of the compound. Fort Worth, TX is flat, but the prison compound was on a high, bald hill, just perfect for such a service. Housing units, administration buildings, the mess hall, and other buildings outlined the perimeter of the property, and they all faced and opened into this large grassy area where the service could be held.

Easter morning came. The guards were in their places to escort the inmates from their units to the yard. The choir was well rehearsed. The hymn sheets had been printed. The portable pump organ, which I had to pump with my knee, had been carefully positioned. I had even brought clothes pins to keep my music from blowing into the next county. Guards opened the doors of the units housing the prisoners at precisely 6:25 a.m., allowing the inmates to attend the service. After two minutes, the doors were closed,

closed like only prison doors can be closed. Those inmates who were at the door at the appointed time were allowed to follow the guards and gather in the prison yard.

It was a cold, windy morning on that hill. We started with scripture and sang a couple of hymns before it happened—one of those rare moments when your eyes take a picture with every minor detail forever seared into your brain. I remember it as if I were there today—the feel of the cold wind on my face, the smell of bacon coming from the mess hall, the inmates all dressed alike and standing in a circle around the choir and worship leaders. Because of the logistics and the lay of the land, we were like human megaphones intoning the hymns and allowing the melodies and harmonies to soar. The sound was almost mystical.

The soloist stepped from his position in the choir. He was a giant of a man, but with a gentle spirit and one of the richest, untrained, buttery, natural bass voices I had ever heard. I played the introduction, and he joined me in measure five with his first phrase—"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" I accompanied him for a few more phrases and then stopped. He didn't need me, and I was so moved I could no longer play. He stood there with his eyes closed and sang every stanza as though he truly was there when His Lord was crucified, and there when they nailed Him to the tree, and when they laid Him in the tomb, and then finally when He rose up from the grave. By then, we all joined him in shouting glory!

I remember the music and the emotion of it. But that was only the backdrop for what I remember most. As that rich bass voice swirled in the breezes above me, I looked around at the faces, not the faces of those standing in the circle for the service, but the faces of those inmates peering through the windows in the housing units. The windows were double-paned with bars in between, but I could see the hands pressed against the glass and their faces, trying to get a glimpse and to hear what was going on outside because they were not a part of it. Not a part of it. I saw their remorse for having missed that two-minute window when the door was open. I saw their deep sadness and their longing. I saw their longing for freedom, the kind the Resurrection brings.

That scene did two things for me. First, it gave me a whole new sense of what Easter really means. Resurrection means freedom—freedom from death and freedom to be all God created me to be. And secondly, it gave me a sense of urgency about doors closing for people who do not yet know about that freedom.

The world just seems quieter now even amid the chaos of the coronavirus. These days, people have time to think about freedom, the real and forever kind. I invite you to sit and ponder just for a few minutes. Think about the freedom that comes with the empty tomb—freedom from fear, from death, from worry, from anxiety about your own future. Freedom to live with hope, to pray, to know that you'll see your loved ones again, to live joyfully as the beloved of God, and freedom to open doors so that others may know this kind of freedom. And think about what you're doing with your freedom. It wasn't free, you know.

IT'S MONDAY IN A DIFFERENT REAL TIME!

So, here are the questions? What path are you on? And what are you and Jesus doing on Monday?

Matthew 28: 16-20, Mark 16:13-20; Jeremiah 29:11

I hope that last week was a meaningful one for you as you followed Jesus through Jerusalem to Golgotha and then rising and walking away from the Empty Tomb. Truly the greatest story ever. Maybe you experienced deep emotion as you imagined what His followers experienced each step of the way. Perhaps you “pondered anew what the Almighty can do” as the hymn says.

Jesus was alive and walked with His followers for a time after His resurrection. I can only imagine how they soaked up every minute and every word that came from His lips. He had already given them the Greatest Commandments to love God with their whole beings and to love each other. And now before Jesus returned to heaven, He gives them the Great Commission to go and take His light into the dark places, spreading the good news of the Gospel. And so they went, that little rag-tag group of committed men and women whose message changed the world. And now two thousand years later, our marching orders are still the same.

I believe most of life is lived on “Saturday.” We don’t live continually in Friday’s crucifixion hours, and neither do we dwell daily in the mountaintop experience of Sunday’s Resurrection Morning. We are valley people, Saturday people, and we live mostly in the “in-between” times. Some of those times are wonderful, and other times are difficult. But we are to live with faith and with God’s purpose every day.

Sunday morning’s message said Friday’s events and Saturday’s waiting were not the end of the story. And two thousand years later, it’s still not the end of the story. Remember, when Jesus breathed His last breath, the curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom, giving us access



to our most Holy God and His Spirit. God changed history and the human condition—my condition—forever. He’s still writing His story of freedom in our lives.

But now it’s Monday, and it’s real time. We’re Easter people, and that means Jesus’s Spirit dwells in us and our lives are supposed to be different. We are to make a difference by living out His purpose in us. What difference will you allow Him to make in you? What path will you take today? And, how will you let Him continue the writing of your story in real time?