

2007

April 2

He knew He was about to die. So on Thursday of the first Holy Week Jesus asked His disciples to watch and pray. He did that Himself, alone, but when He rejoined the boys, they were asleep. "Could you not keep watch for one hour?" He asked (Mark 14:37).

What would we say about watching and praying for one hour, one whole hour of valuable time? Many of us are so sleep deprived, you'd think we'd sleep too. We don't because we think we need to be busy. Does Jesus come to us and praise us for staying awake? No, Jesus comes and says, "You didn't turn your cell phone off!" Jesus comes to us but we say, "An hour? We've watched our watches, and You've been gone an hour and a half! We've got things to do!" To that Jesus says, "Aren't there times to leave your watch and cell phone in the drawer? Watch and pray and don't wonder what time it is."

We are so conditioned by our culture. Fast food, cell phones, Blackberrys, even Velcro to speed dressing...we're addicts to speed and efficiency. "Jesus, You want us to watch for a whole hour?" "Yes, I do," He says. "You say you're a Christian. You carry My Name. This Holy Week, watch and pray with Me!"

April 3

"Could you not keep watch for one hour?" Jesus asked His disciples (Mark 14:37). Could you do that, sit for an hour and pray? No phone, no TV, just you, just silence, just God. What to say?

Who are you talking to? Many churches use versions of the ancient Litany during Holy Week. "O God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth, have mercy upon us. O God the Son, Redeemer of the world, have mercy upon us. O God the Holy Ghost, Sanctifier of the faithful, have mercy upon us. O holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity, one God, have mercy upon us."

A lot more stuff to talk about there than just the bland, "O God." Got material problems, physical or financial? Talk to the first person of the Trinity, the Father, the Creator and Sustainer. Troubled by what you've done wrong? Talk to the second person, the Son, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer. Need more faith, hope and love? Talk to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost. The Spirit is our spiritual trainer.

OK, forget about an hour. Try sitting for 15 minutes and talking to this God, God your Creator, your Redeemer, and your Sanctifier. You're telling me you don't have stuff to lay before Him? You don't need Him to have mercy on you?

April 4

"Could you not keep watch for one hour?" Jesus asked (Mark 14:37). An hour? We're so busy! You are, but consider this: One day you'll stand before God in judgment. Too late then to learn how to talk to God!

The Great Litany, often used in Holy Week, addresses God, Father, Son and Spirit, and then begins a laundry list of troubles that threaten each of us. "From all sin, from all error, from all evil." "From all," not from some. Judgment is coming and you're praying for total holiness, a laundry list of no stains, no sin.

"From the crafts and assaults of the devil; from sudden and evil death; from pestilence and famine; from war and bloodshed; from sedition and from rebellion; from lightning and tempest; from all calamity by fire and water, and from everlasting death." We easily pray over physical things but the Litany also leads us to pray about spiritual realities, "the crafts and assaults of the devil," "and from everlasting death." After that list of physical and spiritual dangers, the Litany pleads, "Good Lord, deliver us!"

How can you be satisfied with nanosecond prayers with so much at stake?

"In all time of our tribulation; in all time of our prosperity; in the hour of death; and in the day of judgment: Help us, good Lord."

April 5

Do you believe in marital fidelity? I assume so. How could we be unfaithful to one to whom we've pledged lifelong love? On every front, we want only the best for the one we deeply love. But faithfulness is threatened when people in love don't spend time with each other.

The Bible often uses the picture of marriage to talk about God's love for us. Sitting in prayer is sitting with your Beloved, keeping the love strong. On every front, we pray for the best for the cause of the God and Savior we love. So the Litany leads us to pray, "To rule and govern Your holy Christian Church; to preserve all pastors and ministers of Your Church in the true knowledge and understanding of Your wholesome Word and to sustain them in holy living; To put an end to all schisms and causes of offense; to bring into the way of truth all who have erred and are deceived; To beat down Satan under our feet; to send faithful laborers into Your harvest; and to accompany Your Word with Your grace and Spirit: We implore You to hear us, good Lord."

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April 6

If religion isn't personal, what's the use? Earlier this week, chapel at Concordia Seminary was a service of confession and absolution. One by one individuals came forward and had these words spoken over them individually: "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." That's personal.

"Remember not, Lord Christ, our offenses, nor the offenses of our forefathers," goes a version of the Litany, "neither reward us according to our sins. Spare us, good Lord, spare Thy people, whom Thou hast redeemed with Thy most precious blood, and by Thy mercy preserve us forever."

From the cross Jesus asked, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Answer: God was unleashing His anger at the only One who could both take your place in punishment and also fully take God's anger against your sin. That was His Son, a true human like us, but also the Son of God, able to do it. He suffers for you. He does it because HE LOVES YOU.

Good Friday is as personal as it gets. You, fill in your name, are forgiven because God sent His Son to pay the price for your sins. Amen.

April 9

If Jesus were your typical American, what might He have done this Easter Monday? My guess is that He would have slept late. After all, last week was brutal. Staying, I presume, with His friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Jesus would surely have talked with Lazarus about resurrection. They had both experienced it, though in different ways. I imagine that one of these days after Easter Jesus would go out to buy some retirement clothes, His working days behind Him. Perhaps He might even go up to Jerusalem Motors where He'd purchase an RV. In that RV He and the disciples could see the Holy Land in a more leisurely way than when they had been busy preaching, teaching, and ministering to the needs of people.

I know all that is silly, but there is point. Jesus didn't retire. Easter is essential, of course. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17). But Easter wasn't the end for Jesus. He kept working:

Appearances through 40 days, Ascension, His Spirit poured out on Pentecost. He's still working today, active in His Church through Word and Sacrament. Retire? No. He who came for us, comes now to us, and will come again at the end of time. Easter points us ahead!

April 10

If the Spirit of God fills the world...

It's a familiar scene, people coming up from the subway, briefcases and newspapers in hand, their minds someplace else. Some wear earpieces, talking on the phone or listening to their iPod. And coming up the escalator, you might notice a street musician playing for a few bucks...might notice.

So last January 12th for 43 minutes a "street musician" played at L'Enfant Plaza in Washington D.C. Over 1000 people passed by, but only John David Mortenson stopped to listen ("It made me feel at peace") and only Stacey Furukawa recognized that the "street musician" was world famous violinist Joshua Bell. Bell had taken up a suggestion from The Washington Post to see what kind of reaction, if any, he would get as a street musician at rush hour. Not much, people too numbed by their daily routine. ("The Washington Post Magazine," April 8; p. 10ff.)

Mary, weeping in the garden, thought the voice was that of the gardener...until Jesus said, "Mary!" (John 20:11-18). It was His way after Easter, show up unexpectedly and surprise His followers wherever they happened to be.

The unnoticed "street musician" was a classical violinist. How we deprive ourselves if we let ourselves be numbed by workaday routines! If the Spirit of God fills the world...

April 11

I don't have a transcript of the quotation, but I heard it clearly Sunday night on ESPN News. Zach Johnson, 31 years old, had just won a surprise victory at the Masters golf tournament. After last year's champion Phil Mickelson helped him put on the honored green sports coat, Mr. Johnson thanked many people. At the end of his list of thanks, he noted that he had won the Masters on Easter Sunday...and he thanked Jesus.

No surprise, that didn't show up in our local newspaper and maybe not in yours. Public newspapers carry secular news, so religious stories usually get relegated to a Friday or Saturday human interest column. I understand that, but I also know that public references to Jesus get politically correct types twitterpated, especially if the confession comes from someone who is successful. Jesus people, their stereotype goes, are simple-minded bumpkins. OK, just don't try to impose your Jesus beliefs and morality on us. Call 911! What palpitations come when someone who is successful in the world, like Zach Johnson, mentions Jesus!

That leads me to this conclusion: Won't the church's witness to our Savior be more compelling if we try to be the very best at our worldly jobs? Saved by grace does not mean that Jesus is an excuse for sloth in His followers.

April 12

What's the word on Don Imus' racial rant?

"Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:6). Don Imus' racial remarks started a firestorm. Scripture is fulfilled.

What's the word? "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). Media people like Don Imus aren't your traditional kind of teachers, but teachers they are, influencing millions of people. Yes, there is a standard for public personalities and their judgment is stricter. Scripture is fulfilled.

Jesus says, "From within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile you" (Mark 7:21 -23). Sinful language, the word tells us, is more than a slip of the tongue.

Don Imus will finally answer to God. My prayer, and I hope yours: "May the words of my mouth...be pleasing in Your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." (Psalm 19:14) Let that Scripture be fulfilled!

April 13

Hi, Christian here! Last week I had my first birthday. People came to celebrate my birthday. Opa and Oma came from St. Louis . Grandpa and Grandma Pittman came from Texas . They speak Texan. I call them Papaw and Mamaw.

Before my birthday party began, Mamaw was down on the floor. She put paper around the toys so I couldn't see the toys. I watched her put paper around the toys. I think you big people call that wrapping the presents. "Christian," she said, "I'm wrapping your presents right here in front of you!"

Opa heard that. Opa says, "Hmmm.... That's interesting. 'Christian, I'm wrapping your presents right here in front of you.'" Opa says that is like reading the Bible. Read the Bible and you see God wrapping presents right in front of our child eyes. Read about old people who believed God. Read about Jesus. Read the Bible and you see God wrapping His presents for us." That's what Opa thinks.

All I know is I had my first birthday. I saw people who love me wrap my presents right in front of my eyes. I want to learn how to read. I want to read how God wraps His presents right in front of His children.

P.S. Opa says there are still a few seats for his August trip to Germany . Would traveling with Opa be fun?

April 16

Years ago I was in a field with a friend who is a farmer. He picked up a clod of dirt, played with it in his hand, and said, "Not yet." He explained that when dirt will crumble easily in his hand, then it's time to plow and plant. An illustration there: When you feel that your life is crumbling, it's the time when God will plant big spiritual growth into your outlook on life.

Martin Luther wrote about God's goodness, "The comfort is too great and the joy too glorious and the heart of man too small and narrow to have attained it" (John Nicolaus Lenker, II, 252). How hard for us to know the comfort and the joy of God when our circumstances are crumbling.

That's the right time when passages from God's Word can plant hope in our crumbled circumstances. "When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy" (Psalm 94:19). Then we learn that God really means "all," not some, but "all." "In all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). So Luther concluded, "Through suffering, we may finally succeed and attain this heart and cheer, joy and consolation, from Christ's resurrection" (p. 253). Out of crumbled circumstances, resurrection!

April 17

Don Imus' cruel slander no longer dominates the news. The unjust charges against the Duke players are off the air. Some people think they know what to say about Virginia Tech. "This proves we need stricter gun control," or, "If someone had a concealed weapon, the slaughter could have been stopped." Could things so terrible be eliminated simply by passing a law? Could the Imus type sin be eliminated from society by passing some law? Could miscarriages of justice, as in the Duke case, be eliminated by hanging out that prosecutor to dry? I get cynical about people who get right on TV and tell us how to eliminate such evils.

How about more of us keeping quiet...but getting angry? I mean unspoken, brooding anger, anger resolved not to take any of this any longer. Anger is a natural emotion. It can easily result in sin, as with violent attacks on abortion clinics. Let's certainly not go there. But anger against evil in society, anger that does not violate the Ten Commandments, anger that works itself out through peaceful societal structures, such anger can be a power to change for the good. "In your anger, do not sin. Do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:26 -27). Who can definitively explain this terrible deed? Who cannot feel angry? Why delay working for righteousness?

April 18

Imagine... authorities come and tell you that your daughter or son was a victim at Virginia Tech. An ocean of tears floods into the place where your heart was ripped out.

Imagine... authorities come and tell you that your son has committed that crime, or some other terrible crime. You tried to be a good parent, but... The pall that settles over you is heavy as lead. It stays for years.

What do you do? Pray? Good possibility you won't. This is not simply about Virginia Tech, about parents plunged into the worst possible nightmare. It's not about only one set of parents, about parents shamed for the rest of their lives because of their son. It's about more people than that. Maybe it's about you from time to time. Something happens, whatever happens. You cannot pray. It's not to say that you wouldn't like to; you just can't pray.

Sometimes the only prayers that ascend to the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort are the prayers that other people pray for that devastated and depressed soul, intercessory prayer. Jesus identifies with that overwhelmed person. "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" He prayed from the cross. Is your bond with Him and with suffering humanity so tight that you are praying for those devastated and depressed?

April 19

Some seminarians were telling me what they hope to do when they become ministers in congregations. Between the lines I heard them saying that they would arrive at their new churches, analyze what needed improvement, lead a change toward the better, and all would live happily ever after.

When I became the pastor of a congregation, I'd occasionally seek counsel from an older pastor, Rev. Henry Kuring. One time I was complaining that there always seemed to be some problem or other going on in the church. Henry laughed. "That's what the ministry is," he said, "one brushfire after another." So we won't live happily ever after?

On this date, April 19, 1995, 168 people died in the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Since that day 12 years ago, evil has struck too many times, Virginia Tech the latest terrible installment.

Jesus' promises heaven to His followers, a promise that grows stronger with each occurrence of evil. "I saw a new heaven and a new earth.... God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:1, 3-4). Yes, we will live happily ever after.

April 20

The Supreme Court announced it will let states pass legislation banning the abortion procedure called "partial birth abortion." Usually performed after the unborn child has reached 21 weeks, this procedure kills and extracts the unborn child, a partial birth...to death. Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote for the majority, "The government may use its voice and its regulatory authority to show its profound respect for the life within the woman."

Nancy Northrup of the Center for Reproductive Rights said, "Today's ruling is a stunning assault on women's health and the expertise of doctors who care for them. This court believes that members of Congress—not doctors—are in the best position to make medical decisions for their patients." (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, April 19; A5)

Doctors know best? There are doctors in Congress. Dr. Kevorkian is a doctor. Besides, isn't the thought these days that we should not blindly hand over our medical care to doctors but should participate in our health care decisions? Might this be a societal issue, not for the dictatorship of any group? One thing for sure: Political awareness and involvement, electing the right candidates, working the wonderful system we have under the Constitution, can make a difference. Let's pray that this is only the beginning of more protections for the unborn. And let's work toward that goal as well.

April 23

Last evening I was sitting in the front yard, watching the world go by. Adults were taking springtime walks. Kids were playing. I was thinking about what to write for the Minute, but I wasn't thinking too hard. The end of the day comes, you're tired, and you're content to let the world go by.

Walter A. Maier was a pioneer in religious broadcasting, delivering weekly messages from 1930 until 1950 on The Lutheran Hour. How did he come up with something new every week? I don't think he did. I once heard that someone had studied all his messages over those years and discovered there were only five or so basic themes. Those basic themes were dressed in different ways, timely sermons, but basically were timeless.

There's no lack of things swirling through your head and heart today. Do you know the basic themes of your life, basic themes to help you navigate through the day's challenges, or does the complexity swamp you? "Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the duty of every human being. For God will bring every deed into judgment" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). Sit, because the end of life's day will come. How good for you if God's timeless truths have not been overwhelmed by the timely.

April 24

Hi, Christian here. Opa and Oma came to my house. We went to church. I met Paul. Paul is a big person. Paul picked me up. That was strange. I don't like to be picked up by big people. I am a mommy's boy. I love my Mommy. I am always looking for my Mommy. When some other big person tries to hold me, I think, "This is not my Mommy!" Then I cry and throw my body to get away. My Daddy can hold me. I love my Daddy. But Daddy is not my Mommy. Oma can hold me. Sometimes she's OK. Not Opa. I don't like Opa to hold me. But Paul picked me up. I started to cry and throw my body but something stopped me. Paul rocked me with his arm. Paul told Opa that he even rocks a grocery bag like a baby. Opa says Paul knows how to rock me because Paul has had many foster babies. What's a foster baby? I didn't know Paul but he rocked me right to sleep. Now I like Paul. Paul is nice.

Jesus says, "Let the little children come to Me" (Mark 10:14). Would I let Jesus hold me? If he holds me like Paul. I learn about Jesus from how big people act.

April 25

God said to Abraham, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." Abraham didn't say, "Let me check it out and I'll get back to you." The Bible simply says, "So Abram went" (Genesis 12:1, 4).

Today is "Call Day" at Concordia Seminary. Almost 150 men will be told where God through the Church is sending them to serve as pastors. They will line up in chapel, step forward one by one, and hear where in the country or in the world they are being sent as they receive their first "calls" into pastoral ministry. Some have an inkling where they might be sent, those headed for team ministries, but no one knows for sure and most have no clue. It is a very real demonstration of putting oneself into the service of God, faith being put into action.

Jesus says to you and me, "Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will save it" (Luke 9:23 -27). You may not be called to move to an unknown land, but is your faith ready to venture into service today for Him?

April 26

Newspapers reported yesterday that the European Southern Observatory in Chile discovered a planet 20 light years away. "On the treasure map of the universe, one would be tempted to mark this planet with an X," said Xavier Delfosse of Grenoble University in France . The planet, named 581C, is in the "Goldilocks Zone," not too hot, not too cold, just the right distance from its sun. Its temperatures range from 32 to 104 degrees Fahrenheit, a good retirement spot for Baby Boomers! Five times the size of Earth, 581C's gravity is 1.6 times the gravity of Earth (retired Boomers would put on weight anyway), and it orbits its sun every 13 days (lots of birthdays!) Is it truly an earthlike planet? Some scientists are cautious, but what's known is intriguing.

How far away we have to go to find something that is perhaps, perhaps comparable to the home God has given us on Earth. "What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:4)

The famous astrophysicist Stephen Hawking said, "I expect there will be planets like Earth, but whether they have life is another question. We haven't been visited by little green men yet." That's true, but we have been visited by God more than we know.

April 27

What does it mean to forgive others?

Years ago I spoke at a prayer breakfast for guards at the military prison in Leavenworth , Kansas . My topic was forgiveness, the heart of the Christian message ("Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us") and something we all need. If you don't think you need it, ask your wife...or your husband...or a co-worker. "There is no one so righteous on earth that he always does what is good and never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

So I'm speaking to the prison guards and I sense I'm not getting through to them. Their faces tell me they're not with me. Later my friend, a military chaplain, explained it to me. The guards thought I mean "forgive the prisoners and turn them loose." Oh, no! That's not what I meant.

Forgiveness does not mean condoning wrong. Forgiveness does not mean letting the wrong happen again. Forgiveness does not mean turn the criminal loose. Forgiveness does mean that God for Jesus' sake forgives every sincerely repentant sinner... but earthly justice may well keep that forgiven sinner in jail for a long, long time. Forgiving others for the wrong they've done does let you out of jail, out of the jail of hurt, resentment and bitterness, cleansing your soul of the poisons that come from unforgiveness.

April 30

Many who went to church yesterday heard the words of Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." The text rushes on, but stop and think about the sweep of that statement.

I do want! I do want peace in my relationships. Why do work and family always get hung up on personal conflict? I do want some health. I'm not asking to be an athlete, just to have some relief from... you fill in the blank. I do want a bit more money. Not to be a Rockefeller but I'd like to sleep knowing I'm secure. I do want my loved one back. Death has come to our home and I am not content. I do want someone to end my loneliness.

The 23rd psalm is a psalm of pronouns. After "I shall not want," come numerous references to the Good Shepherd, to the things "He" does for me. He gives peace. He guides into righteousness. Then it shifts to personal dialogue, to the things "You" do for me. You're with me in times of fear. You vindicate my trust in You. Your goodness and love are with me. I shall not want? The only way that audacious claim of faith can be made is to let yourself be held close to the heart of the Good Shepherd.