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**Sunday 14 March to Sunday 21 March**

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Sunday 14 March 2021

# Gravestones

by Rev Thomas Paulsteiner

**Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms (John 14:1,2).**

The devotions for the coming week are taken from LCA International Mission’s 2021 '40 Days – a Lenten Devotion and Prayer Guide' and are written by mission partners around the world. LCA International Mission invites you to pray for God’s global mission and churches beyond our borders. You can download an electronic copy of the '40 Days' guide at the LCA International Mission website or request a printed copy by emailing lcaim@lca.org.au or phoning 08 8267 7330.

Read John 14:1–14

Maybe it sounds a bit strange if I tell you that I love strolling around cemeteries. It is not because I have a hidden desire to die but because I love looking at gravestones.

We know what gravestones look like and what we can read there. It is usually the name, date of birth, day of death, ‘RIP’, or sometimes the person’s profession. Sometimes we can find symbols of life, like a branch of a palm tree, a cross or even a Bible verse. Gravestones speak their own language. Some messages go much deeper than many long sermons.

On the stone of a 16-year-old girl who died in a car accident, I noticed there were none of these Christian symbols. There were only a few capital letters, chiselled with heavy hammer blows: ‘WHY?’. At the age of 16, life is only just starting – finishing school, dating, looking for a job. All the despair, impotent anger and grief of this family cried out of this one little word: ‘WHY?’.

More than 30 years ago, I discovered a very different gravestone at the cemetery in Neuendettelsau, Germany. Shaped like a simple cross and at the bottom, you can read the name and the dates – nothing special. But what impressed me was one single word, written at the crosspiece: ‘Daheim’, translated as ‘At home’. Not a long sermon on a resurrection – only the German word meaning ‘At home’. What a deep peace and comfort that flows out of here. Of course, the relatives of that person were crying and mourning as well. This farewell was definitely not easy for them. But they had a view and a perspective that reached further than six feet under.

What enables and drives people to turn a gravestone – the ultimate sign of death – into a sermon of life? Hope in the presence of grief – this is what Christ brings into this world and what we celebrate at Christmas. Life in the presence of sickness and death – this is what we celebrate at Easter. Christ is not the great magician who spirits away all our doubts, difficulties, challenges, sickness and death. He is the one who comes into our life. He is the one who walks with us side by side like with the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. He is the one who leads us through. He is the one who promises to take us home.

What do you want to be chiselled at your gravestone?

**Prayer: Pray for Christ to lead you through life in the presence of doubts, difficulties, challenges, sickness and death. Thank God that he promises to take you home.**

Rev Thomas Paulsteiner is Head of Department for Papua New Guinea/Pacific/East Asia, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria.

Monday 15 March 2021

# Fix your eyes on Jesus

by Bishop Terry Kee

**Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endures the cross (Hebrews 12:2a).**

Read Hebrews 12:1–13

‘With Jesus I have hope …’

These words echoed in my mind as I sat there, looking at him and that little empty shack he called home. I recalled the words of Hebrews 12:2: ‘Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endures the cross …’

It was a truly unforgettable visit. We listened to Ta Mo as he told us his story of survival. As a young man in the 1970s, he avoided the killing fields and risked minefields and border guards, travelling on foot through the jungle into Thailand. He told his story of living in the jungle for years, before settling down with his wife. He told of losing three of his seven children, and of how he came to faith in Jesus Christ.

During our visit, we learned that each week he walked for more than an hour to get to church, seldom missing a worship service. A friend who was with me during that visit asked, ‘What is it about Jesus or the church that draws him to church week after week in spite of such inconvenience?’

Ta Mo told us, ‘I was poor and probably will continue to be poor. Without Jesus, I had no hope but with Jesus, I have hope’.

With his eyes on Jesus and hope in his heart, Ta Mo has endured his suffering. Looking forward to that eternal joy, he faithfully goes to church to worship God and be nourished by his word and sacraments.

May we fix our eyes on Jesus who for our salvation endured the cross so that we do not grow weary or lose heart.

O soul, are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There’s light for a look at the Saviour
And life more abundant and free

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace
(Helen H. Lemmel, 1922)

**Prayer: Pray for Lutheran Church in Singapore that they will turn their eyes upon Jesus and the light of his glory and grace. Pray for God’s love and healing for those going through difficult times that they can fix their eyes on Jesus through it all.**

Bishop Terry Kee is from the Lutheran Church in Singapore.

Tuesday 16 March 2021

# Grief and weeping

by Mick Hauser

**The Lord has heard the sound of my weeping (Psalm 6:8).**

Read Psalm 6

Grief is usually accompanied by weeping, but I am sure many people would confess to hiding their tears and stifling their sobbing. We do not like to let people see or hear that we are hurting or in the agony of grief. In grief, we feel vulnerable and naked, often accompanied by feelings of shame. We compound our grief in the private, dark prison cells of our lives. We keep it pent up and unresolved, and we feel hopeless in our grief.

But perhaps you also know that sometimes we just need a good cry. God has created us in such a way that crying actually makes us feel better. Crying releases oxytocin and endogenous opioids (endorphins). These feel-good chemicals help ease both physical and emotional pain. What a gift this is for us. Our tears, like the waters of baptism, provide a salve to ease blinding pain. They make space for hope to emerge so that we might meditate on and call upon the one who has steadfast love for us, Jesus Christ.

In Psalm 6, the songwriter reflects on a long period of private grief, ‘every night I flood my bed with tears’ (verse 6). Three things are ‘turned’ within the poem. Firstly, the psalmist asks the Lord to turn and save his life for the sake of his steadfast love (verse 4). Secondly, the psalmist turns from his moaning. He confidently proclaims that the Lord has heard the sound of his weeping and commands workers of evil to depart from him (verse 8). Lastly, the psalmist displays a prophetic hope that because the Lord has taken to hand his prayer, his enemies will turn back and they will be put to shame (verse 10).

**Prayer: Pray that the Lord Jesus Christ will help you to grieve without shame. Pray he will take to hand your prayers, your groaning in grief, the whimpers of your weeping, and the mumblings of your moaning. Pray he will help you through the waters that flow over you, by your tears and in your baptism, to meditate on his steadfast love for you. Pray that he will grant you the hope and confidence to command your foes to depart in the power of his holy name, that your grief may dissipate in the light of his love.**

Mick Hauser is the LCA missionary lecturer at Martin Luther Seminary, Lae, Papua New Guinea.

Wednesday 17 March 2021

# Our very present help

by Ridwin Purba

**Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and body with grief (Psalm 31:9).**

Read Psalm 31

Almost everybody experiences grief – the death of someone loved, a divorce, a job loss or a significant change in health. At these times, pain can seem unbearable. We feel powerless, helpless, ashamed, guilty, and without hope.

In 2004, I got fired from my job, without knowing the reasons why. I was in pain emotionally, physically and spiritually. It was not easy to find relief from the grief I felt at that time. Family and friends encouraged and supported me, counselling me to open my heart and give God a place there. I tried to open my heart; I prayed and read some texts from the Bible: ‘He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds’ (Psalm 147:3) and Psalm 31:9.

God shows compassion and his love is unfailing. He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone. This is a great truth to remember when you feel tempted to blame God (Lamentations 3:31–33). The Lord is a very present helper. Imagine him taking your grief in his hand and examining it. Next, imagine him becoming your helper. God sees your trouble, and his nature is to help you. You are not alone in your feelings and grief. Many before you – even those with tremendous faith – experienced great sorrow and anguish of heart.

Through his word, God recharges our dim hope. Jesus is the ground for our hope, saving us from our sin through his blood. Hope is ‘confident expectation’ and firm assurance regarding things unclear and unknown (Romans 8:24,25; Hebrews 11:1,7). Hope is a fundamental component of the life of the righteous (Proverbs 23:18). Without hope, life loses its meaning (Lamentations 3:18; Job 7:6) and in death, there is no hope (Isaiah 38:18; Job 17:15). The righteous who trust or put their hope in God will receive help (Psalm 28:7). Hope is an enduring virtue of the Christian life (1 Corinthians 13:13), and love springs from hope (Colossians 1:4,5). Hope produces joy and peace in believers through the power of the Spirit (Romans 12:12; 15:13).

So, hope in the Lord Jesus because he cares for you and shares his life with you now and always.

**Prayer: Pray for Ridwin in his support of education within the Lutheran schools in Indonesia and as he encourages the partnerships between Australian Lutheran College and Indonesian Lutheran schools. Pray that believers will have hope that produces joy and peace by the power of the Holy Spirit.**

Ridwin Purba is Education Secretary, National Committee of LWF, Indonesia.

Thursday 18 March 2021

# The God of hope

by Rev Dr Wilfred John Samuel

**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).**

Read Romans 15:1–13

Paul structures this verse in the form of a prayer, inviting us to ponder two vital and interconnected points. The first is a fundamental question: who can offer hope, peace and joy amid suffering and grief? The second is an invitation to put our trust in God, who, through Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, has drawn people to himself and remains the source of hope. Since no-one is exempt from pain, suffering and grief, we need to prepare for such situations.

Paul reminds us that help is near us if we put our trust in God. The recent COVID-19 pandemic, political unrest and wars in some countries, famine, economic crises and other similar situations may have led some congregations, individuals and families to experience extreme pain and grief.

In this text, Paul reminds us that we are not left alone and helpless because the God of hope will fill us with ‘all joy and peace’ as we put our trust in him. The power of the Holy Spirit enhances our spiritual journey, enabling us to understand the grace of God and find joy and peace in his presence. The very title Paul gives God is ‘the God of hope’. This helps us to understand the inclusive nature of the gospel, which draws us to Christ by grace through faith and aids us to embrace the joy, peace and hope offered by God.

As we face trials and difficult times, we need to allow the Holy Spirit, with whom we have been sealed, to minister and revitalise us through an overflow of joy, peace and hope.

**Prayer: Pray for Churches in Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei that the progress of the gospel and missionary task will not be hampered, despite the depressing socio-economic and political challenges they face. Pray for Rev Dr Wilfred, the staff and the students studying through the Lutheran Study Centre in Sabah. Pray for more young people to feel inspired to offer themselves to full-time ministry.**

Rev Dr Wilfred John Samuel is from the Lutheran Study Centre, Sabah.

Friday 19 March 2021

# Comfort and peace

by Rev Shigeo Sueoka

**Praise be to the … God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we receive from God (2 Corinthians 1:3,4).**

Read 2 Corinthians 1:1–11

The spread of COVID-19 has meant worldwide sorrow and suffering for a huge number of people. Our regular daily life has been taken away, and we have to fit ourselves into a so-called new lifestyle. Our church life has also changed. Some congregations had to close their Christian gatherings and Sunday services. Thousands of people have lost their lives to the virus, and families have not been allowed to go close or see their faces at the funeral.

The fear of COVID-19 weakens our hearts. Social distancing makes us distant from each other. We shout to the Lord, ‘Why do you allow such things to happen? How long do we have to be patient?’ We need comfort and peace.

In this extraordinary year’s Lenten season, we remember the pain of Christ suffering on the cross. We will be led to the forgiveness of our sin and true peace by the suffering of Christ. We can put all our anxieties and troubles on him. You feel limited if you rely on yourself or focus on human actions. But the Scripture points out that Christ, who rose from the dead, is living with you now.

‘Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we receive from God’ (2 Corinthians 1:3,4).

Jesus Christ understands and accepts all our hardship and suffering because he has experienced all kinds of unreasonable suffering. That is why we again receive hope to live during this Lenten season. Your prayer in suffering brings you to joy and peace by the grace of the risen Christ.

**Prayer: Pray for an end to the expansion of the virus as soon as possible. Pray for a cure for this world and the peace of Christ to those who are suffering in our neighbourhood.**

Rev Shigeo Sueoka is from Kinki Evangelical Lutheran Church, Japan.

Saturday 20 March 2021

# Hope in his promises

by Rev Martin Lalthangliana

**My soul longs for your salvation; I hope in your word (Psalm 119:81).**

Read Psalm 119:81–88

The year 2020 might have been an extraordinary one if the pandemic had not broken out. Many people had prepared for an exceptional year, with a lot of things in mind. Unfortunately, the pandemic destroyed those expectations, plans and hopes for 2020.

Many families around the world have lost loved ones and faced many kinds of problems, suffering and phobias that we could not have imagined beforehand. Some of the damage that the pandemic has caused is immeasurable. Many people have lost their faith and hope in God. Questions, doubt, criticism, judgement and lack of confidence has surpassed hope in God. Is that how human beings should continue to live in this world amid the pandemic?

Hope is faith in the absolute promise that miracles will prevail when darkness tries to overcome our despair. Hope is a gift from God that helps us yearn and live a life that believes and moves with the pledge of a better tomorrow. Hope brings resurrection life and draws us near to the love of Christ who can make the way for everlasting life.

Martin Luther lived through a plague, which lasted for about four to five months. He did so because he deliberately chose not to flee from it. Unlike the COVID-19 pandemic that we face, the bubonic plague Luther endured was an epidemic. Even so, his courage and facing the reality of those days would not have emerged if he had not put his faith in God’s word.

Is there any hope for the world? King David yearned for God’s salvation during his time of suffering. He knew that his hope in God would renew and transform his life. So, during Lent, how can we hold on to hope when there is so much struggle, trouble and grief in our lives? The simplest answer will be to put our faith and trust in God. Only the Saviour born in Bethlehem can be our help and refuge.

**Prayer: Pray that you will have faith in the absolute promises of God made certain in Jesus, which has the power to overcome your despair. Pray for the Lutheran Church of Myanmar that they will put their faith and trust in God to be their help and refuge.**

Rev Martin Lalthangliana is the President of the Lutheran Church of Myanmar.

Sunday 21 March 2021

# A kernel of wheat

by Dianne Eckermann

**Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds (John 12:24).**

Read John 12:20–33

This is not the only time during this Lenten season we hear Jesus talking about what will happen to him: his death and even an indicator of how he will die at the end of the passage.

Here in verse 33, he uses a rather beautiful image of a single seed of wheat becoming more than one seed after it falls to the ground, germinates, grows and produces so much more. One seed is a sacrifice for ongoing life. Similarly, Jesus sacrifices his life for so many so that through him, each of us has life, like a field of wheat growing and ripening in the sunlight.

During our lives in this world, we will have times of disappointment when our hopes and dreams do not go as planned. We could respond by only surviving, like a single kernel of wheat. But knowing that Jesus knew that his life and death had a purpose, we can live life fully sharing in the love of Jesus.

In verse 26, Jesus goes on to say: ‘Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be’. Living with Jesus is about being a part of his death and resurrection. It can be easy to focus on the resurrection and the joy of Easter. But without Jesus’ death, the resurrection not only could not occur, but it would also be meaningless, just as a full ear of wheat could not grow without the sacrifice of a seed. Through serving and following Jesus, we invite him into our lives. God is with us as we live our lives to the full through him.

**Jesus, we thank you that your life, suffering, death and resurrection was all for us so we can grow in your presence. Guide us each day as we share your love through our service to those around us. Amen.**