****

**Sunday 24 March 2024 to**

**Sunday 31 March 2024**

****

Sunday 24 March 2024

**I will never disown you**

by Dianne Eckermann

***But Peter insisted emphatically, ‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you’. And all the others said the same (Mark 14:31).***

Read [Mark 14:1 – 15:47](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+14%3A1-15%3A47&version=NRSVUE)

Today’s lengthy reading, starting with a woman anointing Jesus and ending with his burial, includes many significant events in the last hours of Jesus’ life on earth. The opening verses of chapter 14 sound ominous as Mark describes the high priests stealthily plotting the best time to arrest Jesus. Even while Jesus and his disciples plan the Passover feast, we learn that Judas has visited the high priests, who were delighted to financially reward Judas for betraying Jesus. During the Passover, Jesus’ last meal with the disciples, he dramatically reveals his knowledge of this betrayal and his betrayer.

Mark relentlessly unfolds the history of the arrest, trial, humiliation and crucifixion of Jesus. And while Mark’s account begins with Jesus in the presence of his disciples, the disciples quickly disappear from the story, leaving Jesus alone and unsupported throughout his ordeal. Three times, Peter says he will not disown Jesus. All of the other followers say the same but, one by one, they fall away from Jesus. One follower is so afraid when Jesus is arrested that he runs away naked, leaving his linen gown behind. Judas places more importance on money than his relationship with Jesus. Peter, with an instinct for self-preservation, denies any knowledge of his Lord. The speed with which Jesus is left alone with his persecutors, who want nothing less than his death, is horrifying.

However, in our human hearts, we understand why the disciples act as they do, even though their actions may horrify us. We are also Jesus’ disciples. We are Peter. We are even Judas. Just like the followers of Jesus, those people who knew him best but still betrayed, denied and deserted him, we are quite capable of putting ourselves first. We, like the disciples, are truly human. We also act out of fear – or greed, shame or self-interest – even though this is not how we want to act. Jesus understood when he said, ‘The spirit is willing, but the body is weak’ (Mark 14:38). His great sacrifice is that because of his great love, he died to atone for all of us, despite our weaknesses.

***Heavenly Father, thank you for your love and compassion shown through the death of Jesus, a sacrifice for all. Forgive us for our fear and uncertainty, and give us faith in your everlasting love. Amen.***

*Dianne has served in Lutheran education as a teacher, school leader and system leader at Lutheran Education Australia. Now retired from full-time work, she continues to volunteer on several committees and as a school board member. She lives in the Adelaide Hills with her husband, Robert, and is in strong demand as a babysitter for her three grandchildren.*

Monday 25 March 2024

**Filling the house with fragrance**

by Dianne Eckermann

***Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume (John 12:3).***

Read [John 12:1–11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+12%3A+1-11&version=NRSVUE)

Most of us have probably experienced a time when a powerful scent has been able to take us back to another time or place. Each time I smell fresh chestnuts roasting, I remember a special visit to the old produce market with my grandfather when I was a small child. Not only do I remember the smell of chestnuts, but I also remember how safe and special I felt walking through the market with my grandfather as he held my hand as we delivered his farm produce to the market sellers.

Our senses connect us to our world. They not only help to keep us safe, but they also help us to enjoy the world around us. When Mary pours expensive perfume over Jesus’ feet, she is honouring him, demonstrating her devotion and worshipping him. The simple sentence, ‘And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume’, shows how her actions filled the house with honour, devotion, worship and the pure joy Mary had in the presence of Jesus.

And yet, there were other less joyful emotions present at the same time. We hear the voice of Judas condemning her actions by appearing to support the poor while, all along, using his position to fraudulently take money entrusted to him. Crowds of people have come to see Jesus and Lazarus, fascinated by this living proof of Jesus' power over death. However, John also tells us the high priests, alarmed by the support flowing to Jesus, are plotting against both Jesus and Lazarus. There is much happening behind the scenes of this visit to the home of Lazarus that is not evident to those who were present. Jesus reveals that even the perfume used by Mary has another purpose; it was intended to anoint his body after death.

This brief account of a dinner honouring Jesus while visiting his friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha is a joyful event. But John exposes the plotting and danger closing in around Jesus. Jesus knows what is about to happen. Judas knows he is betraying Jesus. Despite this, what remains important is the lingering fragrance of the perfume used by Mary. It is the fragrance of honour, love and worship. It is also an ongoing reminder of Jesus in the lives of all who were present and for all who continue to welcome Jesus into their lives.

***Dear Jesus, we welcome you into our lives and thank you for all you have done and continue to do for all people. We ask for your forgiveness for those times we have not honoured you as we should and pray we reflect the joy of your presence in our lives to those around us. Amen.***

Tuesday 26 March 2024

**Seeing and hearing**

by Dianne Eckermann

***They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘we would like to see Jesus’ (John 12:21).***

Read [John 12:20–36](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+12%3A+20-36&version=NRSVUE)

A recent series of pop superstar concerts captivated many fans in Australia. Those who gained a precious ticket were often reduced to tears of delight. This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see their hero in real life was just too much. There may be plenty of opportunities to hear her music, but being able to see her at the same time was infinitely even more special. Those who were unable to score the magic ticket also shed tears, the tears of those who were excluded from the presence of the person they most wanted to see.

Being able to see Jesus was also special for the Greek men who came to Philip with a humble request, ‘We want to see Jesus’. Behind that simple request is also an implication that seeing Jesus is an important step in believing the message Jesus has been preaching. They are not the only ones who want to see Jesus. Yesterday’s reading ended with dismay on the part of the Pharisees at the huge number of people who were following Jesus. The fact that the two men who approached Philip were from Greece tells us how far the words of Jesus had travelled. Perhaps the Pharisees were not exaggerating very much when they felt the whole world was learning about Jesus.

We are not told if the Greek men were able to see Jesus. We are not told if they became aware that their simple question to ‘see’ Jesus could open up a huge vista of Jesus, the Son of God. We are not told if they hear Jesus’ prayer, ‘Father, glorify your name’, or the thunderous response from God the Father affirming his son. We can, however, put ourselves in their place as we, too, want to see Jesus. We are able to know and understand our Lord and Saviour through his word. In this passage, we hear Jesus talk of his death, and we are made aware of the love he shares with all who are drawn to him as he is lifted up. We don’t need a ticket to see him and to be included. There are no exclusions.

***Heavenly Father, we ask you to help us to know you better and to understand you more. We thank you for your word to teach us and for your love that has saved us. We glorify your name. Amen.***

Wednesday 27 March 2024

**What has Jesus done?**

by Dianne Eckermann

***His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant (John 13:22).***

Read [John 13:21–32](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+13%3A21-32&version=NRSVUE)

There are many things Jesus knows about his immediate future. He knows when and how he will die. He knows the suffering that lies ahead for him. He knows who will betray him. He also knows all of this will happen soon, very soon.

In contrast, the disciples seem to be more confused than ever. They have no idea that one of their close-knit group plans to betray their leader. They have been with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry and must know each other and Jesus really well, but they are struggling to understand what is happening. While Jesus does not come right out and name Judas Iscariot as the person who will betray him, he tells them the person he is sharing bread with is, in fact, that person. Still, they don’t understand and erroneously think that Jesus has sent Judas on an errand.

Whether we are new Christians or have known Jesus for most of our lives, today’s message suggests none of us know God as well as we might hope. We share our humanity with the disciples and also our ignorance. Some years ago, there was a fascination with wearing wristbands with the letters WWJD on them: What would Jesus do? It’s a good question and possibly one where we might arrogantly believe we know the answer. At best, we might say that Jesus would act out of love, not self-interest. We should also expect that his actions would be both totally unexpected and perfectly right for the situation.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see what the disciples cannot. This in no way makes our understanding superior, just better informed. Like Jesus, we are in a position to know what is about to happen to him. With this understanding, we can focus on the amazing love his sacrifice means for each and every one of us and share, as best as we humanly can, that love with all who touch our lives.

***Heavenly Father, thank you for loving us despite our faults and sinful nature. We thank you also for your gifts of grace and mercy, which we know we do not deserve. Help us to share your love with those around us. Amen.***

Thursday 28 March 2024

**Love**

by Dianne Eckermann

***I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you (John 13:15).***

Read [John 13:21–32](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+13%3A21-32&version=NRSVUE)

Today’s Maundy Thursday reading begins with Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, and it ends with a new commandment for the disciples to show love for one another just as Jesus shows his love for them. The section passed over in this reading is the reading from yesterday, describing how Jesus knows he will be betrayed and by whom.

The account of the betrayal is, therefore, bookended by love. It is out of love that Jesus washes his disciples’ feet. He includes all of the disciples, even Judas. John tells us in verse one that Jesus loves all of his disciples and in verse two that Jesus knows already that Judas will betray him. Yet Jesus still washes the feet of his betrayer. Once he has completed this loving service to his followers, Jesus asks them to do as he has done.

There is much we can consider in this apparently simple act of foot washing. Jesus humbles himself in undertaking a task normally done by a servant. We should, therefore, follow Jesus’ example of humility. His actions are also a service to others, so we could follow a life of service to others.

Jesus also makes it clear that his actions come from love, a love so genuine that it also includes love for those he knows who will betray him, deny him and flee from him. The full extent of his love could not be more clearly expressed. This love is more than forgiveness for someone who has wronged him – it is love right to the end for those he knows will betray him. To do as Jesus has done for us is often at odds with our human desire to put self first.

Lutheran theologian and anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew a lot firsthand about suffering at the hands of his enemies. Despite his suffering, he was able to explain in *The Cost of Discipleship* exactly what it means to follow the example of Jesus:

The Christian must treat his enemy as a brother, and requite his hostility with love. His behaviour must be determined not by the way others treat him, but by the treatment he himself receives from Jesus; it has only one source, and that is the will of Jesus.

While most of us will not be called upon to suffer to the same extent, we are still able to seek the will of Jesus in our own small way and, in loving one another, declare that we are Jesus’ disciples.

***We thank you, Lord, for showing us how to love. We ask that you help us to show us how to share that love and truly be your disciples, especially when we find it difficult. Help us always to follow your example. Amen.***

Friday 29 March 2024

**Crucify him!**

by Dianne Eckermann

***But they shouted, ‘Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!’ (John 19:15a)***

Read [John 18:1–19:42](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+18%3A1+-+19%3A42&version=NRSVUE)

By the time we read of Jesus’ body being laid to rest in a tomb in a garden, so much has happened in this extended reading that it is a bit of a surprise to realise this time of chaos, treachery, and brutality also began in a garden. If we think of a garden as a place of sanctuary, neither of these gardens meets that criterion. One is a place of arrest, and the other is a place of burial. In the short space of a night and day, Jesus is led from one garden to the next, and many characters emerge in the story of his arrest and eventual crucifixion. They may have different motives for their behaviour, but their combined efforts lead to death inexorably.

It is easy to blame the chief priests who had been plotting ways of getting rid of Jesus as they realised he was a threat to their power and their control of the religious lives of the Jewish people. We can all recognise their desire to maintain their privileged position in their community, even if we don't approve.

As the representative of Caesar, Pilate had considerable power and could have released Jesus. He could find no reason to condemn him under Roman law. But when faced with the ongoing persistence of the high priests and possibly fear of the mob outside, he handed Jesus over to the Jews. Today, we might say he handballed the problem to someone else. We can also recognise his desire to avoid the responsibility of a decision that would not please the crowd.

The mob outside the palace were swept up in a wave of mass hysteria. They were not rational, preferring the release of a real criminal instead of Jesus. They were certainly not the first mob of people to behave in this way, nor would they be the last. They were certain they were right and reinforced this certainty in their mob behaviour.

Having seen Jesus arrested, Peter was afraid, which led to his denial of Jesus. The other disciples, also out of fear, were nowhere to be seen. They had every right to be afraid of the anger in their community and their powerlessness to intervene.

All of us will recognise these behaviours. It is likely we have all tried to protect our sense of privilege like the high priests; we have passed on responsibility when we have not wanted to make a hard decision like Pilate; we have been caught up in the certainty that we are right and behaved like the mob; we all know what it is to be afraid and to protect ourselves, regardless of the truth.

Jesus knows these all-too-human behaviours. Jesus understands us better than we understand ourselves, but he still loves us to the very end.

***Dear Jesus, there is nothing we can ever say to thank you enough for the sacrifice you made for us on the cross. Help us to look to you and to keep your sacrifice in mind on this Good Friday. Forgive us when we give in to our human nature, and help us to know you better. Amen.***

Saturday 30 March 2024

**Refuge**

by Dianne Eckermann

***My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies, from those who pursue me (Psalm 31:15).***

Read [Psalm 31:1–4,15,16](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+31%3A+1-4%2C+15%2C16&version=NRSVUE)

We live in times when there is a great need for a refuge for many people around the globe. There are reminders each evening on our television screens of suffering due to war and the hope that peace will come again soon. It is hard to see people doing their best to survive amongst the rubble that had been their home, their private place of refuge. It is distressing to know that the carnage we see on our screens is caused by other human beings and for reasons that are not always defendable. There is no time in recorded history when there has been no conflict. We are pretty good at war but less successful at peace.

War, however, is just one kind of conflict in our world. Violence in the family, aggression in the workplace, neighbourhood disputes, and a widening gap between those who have much and those who have little all create a need for a refuge, a place where we can find peace.

Psalm 31 invites us to find refuge in the hands of God. It is a psalm of trust. Our times are in God’s hands, hands we can trust. We can trust in God’s peace because we are loved. Jesus’ last words from the cross, ‘Into your hands I commit my spirit’ (verse 5), portray God as the ultimate refuge. The trust we find in God is not the absence of conflict but the understanding that we can cope with the lack of peace in our world because we have a refuge in God in the times of greatest need.

This does not mean we accept that war and other conflict will always be with us. We can share the peace of God in the ways in which we support those in need of refuge. We can try to be better at peace in those areas where we are able to make a difference. We can trust in our God – our rock, fortress and refuge – for his special peace in our lives.

***Dear Heavenly Father, we pray for peace for those who are suffering at the hands of others. We ask that you provide help for their physical safety as well as a refuge in your safe hands. We also ask that you help us to make a difference in the lives of those who need refuge from the world around them. Amen.***

Sunday 31 March 2024

**What just happened?**

by Pastor Reid Matthias

***Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed (John 20:8).***

Read [John 20:1–18](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+20%3A1-18&version=NRSVUE)

It started with a sprint between a slower athlete and a faster one.

As you read this, you might think, ‘Ah, yes, the race to the tomb’. Brought on by Mary Magdalene’s revelation of the empty grave, the two disciples dashed off to see for themselves. Perhaps Mary’s words, ‘They’ve taken the Lord out of the tomb’, were frightening enough that they needed to run. Maybe their thoughts started with, ‘What just happened?’

I’ve thought those words before, too.

Steven Bradbury was the oldest racer in the 1,000-metre speed skating field. After four races, he had nothing left in the tank for the final. His coach, Ann Zhang, told Bradbury, ‘Look, you are the slowest skater in the field, but the others might make a mistake and crash. Stay behind them and, if the opportunity arises, you could win a medal’.

Zhang’s words were prophetic. Bradbury won gold after the others crashed. In 2002, he also became the first athlete from the southern hemisphere to win a gold at the Winter Olympics.

I remember watching the replay of that race and thinking, ‘What just happened?’ I saw it with my own eyes, but I didn’t understand it.

Like Peter and John on the very first Easter, do you ever feel like that nowadays? Have you experienced the pageantry and pomp, the lilies and triumphant songs, and yet felt a sense of … ‘What just happened? Do I really understand it?’

Maybe this Easter, for the first time, you might experience the true, earthshaking relevance of the empty tomb, the risen Christ – he who was reviled and crucified, the one who seemed to finish dead last – proclaimed as the ultimate victor. When everyone and everything else has crashed, Christ has won, and we are the recipients of his golden deed. And as we ask that question, ‘What just happened?’, Jesus responds, ‘Resurrection. What was once thought dead is now alive. Victory’.

God bless you on this victorious Easter as Jesus, once again, raises his hands and celebrates with us. Death, sin and the devil have no more power. They have crashed.

God wins.

***Heavenly Father, through your son, Jesus, the victorious risen Saviour, we have eternal life – here and now and then. Thank you. Amen.***

*Reid Matthias is the school pastor at St Andrews Lutheran College in Tallebudgera, Queensland. Reid is married to Christine, who, together with their three incredible daughters, Elsa, Josephine, and Greta, have created a Spotify channel (A 13) where they have recorded music. Reid has recently published his seventh novel, A Miserable Antagonist, maintains the blog* [*ireid.blogspot.com*](https://ireid.blogspot.com/) *and regularly contributes to The Lutheran magazine.*