

Reflecting

On Sunday's

Readings

April—2025

The following series is **free, downloadable small-group materials** based on each week's Mass readings and the seasons of the liturgical year. Each study provides an introductory reflection on some aspect of the readings or on personal spirituality. Each of the readings is provided along with a few questions designed to engage the heart and stimulate the group's discussion. These small-group materials will be provided on a continuing basis in monthly segments.

We would suggest the following 60-to-90 minutes format for the small group:

1. Open with a moment of quiet reflection and prayer.
2. Discuss the introductory reflection with a question or comment like, "What do you feel is important for us to grasp in this introduction?" or "What stood out to you from these opening paragraphs?" As the facilitator of the discussion be ready to share one or two things which were important to you from the introduction. Have someone read the First Reading and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions. **Effective group-dynamic techniques should be used to further stimulate the discussion and affirm the participation.** (The booklet *A Facilitator's Guide* is available from Emmaus Journey to provide additional practical training for leading lively and informative small-group discussions.)
3. The Responsorial Psalm provides a reflective transition from the First Reading to the Gospel Reading, so have the Psalm read aloud. You may do this without additional comment, or you may want to draw their attention to something you feel is pertinent.
4. You can either read this week's Second Reading next and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions, or cover the Second Reading after you cover the Gospel Reading. The Second Reading does not always have a clear connection to the other Sunday Mass readings, **so do not feel like you need to force a connection.** However, you can provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to draw a connection by asking, "How do you see this passage tying into the theme of the readings?"
5. Move on to the Gospel Reading, repeating the process by asking several people to share their answers to the reflection questions.
6. Approximately equal time for discussion should be given to each of the sections: Introduction, First Reading, Gospel Reading, and the Second Reading. Obviously, if one section is especially stimulating, you should give some additional time to discussing it.
7. Close the discussion with group prayer, using various prayer formats.

We trust that God will use these materials to make His Word more meaningful to you, both within the small group environment and during Mass as you hear the Scripture is read and taught. **We would appreciate knowing if you are using the *Reflecting on Sunday's Readings*, and would welcome your feedback, either through the Emmaus Journey web page form, or by direct e-mail.**

Sincerely,

Richard A. Cleveland

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THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT—April 6, 2025

Introduction: “One afternoon my four-year-old niece and my six-year-old daughter started an argument, which grew louder and louder. I was about to intervene when my daughter stomped down the stairs, ‘Mom,’ she yelled, ‘Jesus wants us to be salt of the earth and Paige is being the pepper!’” (Cherish Ann Marie Eile, in the *Christian Reader*) Though comical, this incident aptly introduces the subject of this week’s Gospel Reading, which is the difference between righteous judgment and unrighteous judgmentalism.

“What do you say about her (the adulteress)?” is the question with which the Pharisees and scribes confronted Jesus. It was not a legitimate question for they had already determined their views about her. In their minds condemnation and the consequential stoning of this woman was the conclusion to which they had already jumped. Now having caught and condemned her, they used this occasion and this question to endeavor to catch and condemn Jesus. But Jesus, “knowing what was in the heart of all men,” authorized the ones without sin to begin the stoning process. These men, so accustomed to condemning others, now could not escape self-condemnation, so in guilt they slunk away one by one.

Did Jesus by his actions condone this woman’s behavior? Of course not! What he did was to judge righteous judgment, but simultaneously avoided judgmentalism. Righteous judgment recognizes the difference between right and wrong, but it also with mercy and grace properly assesses the situation. This woman, like many of us, was experiencing a desert and wilderness experience in her life similar to that which is spoken of in this week’s First Reading. Also, like many of us who turn to the empty things of the world in hope of finding our way and finding something to satisfy, this woman turned to adultery, which failed to satisfy her as it always does. Righteous judgment not only recognizes the problem but it also recognizes the solution. In this case the solution was mercy and forgiveness, forces which compel us to stop living for ourselves and to begin living for him who is the source of this love. (2 Corinthians 5:14) Righteous judgment accompanied with mercy and forgiveness offers a way in the wilderness and water in the desert, it offers life.

The judgmentalism of the Pharisees and scribes also recognizes right and wrong behavior, but it is not based on the nature and character of God, but on one’s own supposed self-righteousness. And because self-righteousness can only be maintained by making others less righteous, judgmentalism always roots out sin in others and condemns it ruthlessly while ignoring one’s own sin and failure. Unlike the First Reading, judgmentalism does not offer “a way in the wilderness,” or life-giving water “in the dessert,” but instead speeds the dying process. Ultimately that is what this incident is all about, judgmentalism. In their self-righteousness the Pharisees and scribes wanted to be able to condemn Jesus. If he let her go without punishment, they could accuse him of ignoring the Law. If he also condemned her they would accuse him of hypocrisy. In their minds they had already condemned Jesus, now all they needed to do was to find an acceptable accusation against him. In the end their spirit of condemnation ensnared them, as the pointed finger of accusation turned to focus on their own unrighteous histories and reckoned them, “Guilty!”

Hopefully, as we near the end of our Lenten journey, we have been able to assess our relationship with Christ and our commitment to follow him in obedience. But we must ask ourselves whether our view of ourselves, and others, is being controlled by aspects of righteous judgment or by judgmentalism? If it is the latter we will find our spirit dragged down by a sense of guilt and condemnation. If it is the former we will find our long faces turning to joyous smiles as we recognize Jesus’ saying also to us, **“Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.”** We will understand the truth Monsignor Romano Guardini proclaims in his book, *The Lord*, that, “God is moved by the suffering human heart; the pain of it clouds his face, and we understand who he is and what St. Paul means when he speaks of the goodness and kindness of God.”

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult with your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website.

First Reading — Isaiah 43:16-21

1. What is meant by a “desert” or “wilderness” experience?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 126:1-6

Second Reading — Philippians 3:8-14

2. Explain what it means to have “a righteousness of my own.”
3. Restate in your own words Paul's desires, found in this passage. Which part of Paul's statement is most meaningful to you?

Gospel Reading — John 8:1-11

4. In what aspect of life do you find yourself being most judgmental?
5. How can we develop and maintain righteous judgment about things, yet insure that we don't become condemning in the way we relate to people?
6. Regarding Jesus' statement, “Neither do I condemn you,” would you say that you quickly mirror this response towards others, or are you usually slow in applying this attitude?

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PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION—April 13, 2025

Introduction: This Sunday, Passion Sunday, completes the Season of Lent and introduces the beginning of Holy Week, the most memorable week of the liturgical year. For one week of the year we are encouraged to focus all of our faculties on recalling and reliving Jesus' Passion, culminating in an explosion of joy at Jesus' resurrection. We must all confess that in some years Holy Week has been much more meaningful than in others, usually depending on the degree to which we have been able to grasp the significance of his death and resurrection for us.

Jesus' Passion is introduced with the joyous acclamation of the people of Jerusalem proclaiming, "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord," as Jesus entered Jerusalem. Jesus' Passion nears its end with many of the same people tumultuously yelling "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Jesus comes humbly riding into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt, and exits by being taken outside of Jerusalem to be crucified and carried in burial garments to a tomb beyond the city's gate. One thing holds true in this week of contrasts, that is the disciples' inability to grasp what is taking place or the significance of this Passover. Praise be to the Holy Spirit who later made all things clear to them and caused these things to be recorded for our edification for all eternity.

In this recounting of Jesus' Passion there appear many characters in whom, with just a little bit of reflection, we can discover ourselves. With dismay we may find ourselves among those who contributed to his death, for as Fr. Richard John Neuhaus points out; "For whom does he pray forgiveness? For the leaders of his own people, a fragile, frightened establishment that could not abide the threat of the presence of a love so long delayed. For pitiable Pilate, forever wringing his hands, forever soiled. For the soldiers who did the deed, who wielded the whip, who drove the nails, who thrust the spear, it all being but a day's work on foreign assignment, far from home. **And for us he asks forgiveness, for we were there.**" (From *Death on A Friday Afternoon*) If it is with dismay that we discover our complicity in Jesus' death, it is with relief and joyous exaltation that we also discover that we are included among those for whom Jesus prays, asking the Father to forgive.

Fr. Neuhaus rightly draws attention to our inclusion both among the guilty standing at the foot of the cross and among those forgiven by Christ from the cross. Sin and its accompanying guilt has been with humankind since the beginning. Someone has jokingly said, "Guilt is the gift that keeps on giving." Unfortunately, never ending guilt is no joke, when it remains unrecognized, unclaimed, and unforgiving. Rather, guilt hangs over us like an ever-abiding cloud blotting out the Son's warmth.

If there is no recognized guilt, then there can be no recognized forgiveness. So it is important as we enter Holy Week that we come face to face with both our guilt, and Christ's forgiveness. We must, looking through the eyes of Christ, see ourselves standing in the crowd, unwittingly participating in his crucifixion. However, it is also imperative, lest we not be able to bear it, to hear ourselves included in Jesus' request to the Father for forgiveness. If Christ died to secure our forgiveness and relieve both the penalty and guilt of our sin, we do him and ourselves a great disservice by not acknowledging his completed work of forgiveness, and claiming it as our rightful inheritance as his followers. As the reality of forgiveness grips our soul we too will experience an explosion of joy.

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult with your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website.

First Reading — Isaiah 50:4-7

1. What does this prophesy indicate about the Messiah?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24

Second Reading — Philippians 2:6-11

2. What aspect of Jesus' humility is most significant to you?
3. What ramifications should verses 9-11 have on the way in which we live in the future?

Gospel Reading — Luke 23:1-49

4. With whom do you most identify in these passages?
5. What contrast do you see between the disciples and Jesus?
6. What do you think it means to share in Jesus' passion?
7. With what points of his passion can you identify?

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EASTER SUNDAY—April 20, 2025

Introduction: Easter, when delight was turned to disappointment and disappointment was turned to delight. Surely Satan and the forces of evil must have thought they had won the great battle. If the forces of evil could have danced, surely they must have been dancing in the streets. They thought they had killed the Son of God.

Darkness seemed to have been reigning supreme from the time when Judas and an armed crowd, came to arrest Jesus under the cloak of darkness. Darkness provided the cover for the evil intentions of those persecuting Jesus but also for the shameful abandonment of Jesus by his disciples. Even Peter had to slink away into the darkness to hide his shame.

How the forces of evil must have rejoiced as “from noon onward there was darkness over the whole land,” until at last Jesus “gave up his spirit.” How they must have believed that this darkness was just a foretaste of the spiritual darkness which would envelope the earth unabated by the Light of the World. But God had another plan and turned their delight to disappointment.

While darkness still seemed to reign, Mary Magdalene and her companions, and later Peter and John, came “while it was still dark” only to find an empty tomb. Disappointment upon disappointment, or so it seemed at first. But when they realized that the face cloth was separate from the other burial wrappings, a ray of hope and light pierced the darkness, never to be extinguished again. Rather, it was a ray of hope and light which was to grow in brilliance as Christ’s resurrection became known and its meaning understood. Praise God, disappointment is now turned to delight!

“The New Testament writers speak as if Christ’s achievement in rising from the dead was the first event of its kind in the whole history of the universe. He is the ‘first fruits’, the ‘pioneer of life’. He has forced open a door that has been locked since the death of the first man. He has met, fought, and beaten the King of Death. Everything is different because He has done so. This is the beginning of the New Creation: a new chapter in cosmic history has opened.” (C.S. Lewis, from *Miracles*)

Christ’s arrest, suffering, death, burial and resurrection introduced a new creation, a new life that has not only escaped the bonds of death but also the chains of enslavement to our natural passions and their subsequent evil behavior. With Jesus’ resurrection comes power to live differently. Jesus introduces a whole new perspective and purpose to life—life lived in union and communion with the Trinity. This new-creation life is described in Ephesians 5 as walking in the Light because through the Holy Spirit’s abiding presence we are able to see life with new insight. In addition, walking in the Light implies a life of holiness is possible, free from the shadows of darkness.

Wherever or whenever you are experiencing darkness of the soul, Jesus is there, a Light shining in darkness just as John said in the beginning of his Gospel. We should no longer shrink into our fears believing the lie that evil will triumph, but follow the disciples’ example and seek out the resurrected Christ. He is risen, he is triumphant, we are in him, full recipients of his victory. In Christ, we are a new creation, and can experience living as a new creation in the peace and power of Jesus. Contrary to the disciple in today’s Gospel reading, we need not see and believe, but instead we have the opportunity to believe, and see.

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult with your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website.

First Reading — Acts 10:34, 37-43

1. To what do you attribute this great change in Peter from being one who cowardly denied Christ to one who boldly proclaimed him?
2. How do you feel about being a witness? What makes it difficult? What makes it easy?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23

Second Reading — Colossians 3:1-4

3. What does “your life hidden with Christ in God” mean to you?
4. What have you found helpful to enable you to “set your mind on things above”?

Gospel Reading — John 20:1-9

5. What is the significance of such detail in reporting the resurrection?
6. Through this incident, what value do you see of living your faith in companionship with other believers?
7. The events at the tomb provide an analogy of the conversion process. In what ways are we to be evidence of Jesus' resurrection?

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DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY—April 27, 2025

Introduction: Easter has come, the stone has been rolled away, the work of salvation finished! Now it is time to receive marching orders, now is the time for us to assume the mission. In all of this week's readings we have some aspect of empowerment for mission; the Holy Spirit is given, the Word is sent, the disciples have been imbued with miraculous power. Why? So that they might go forth into the world with the message of salvation even as Jesus went forth into the world; "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."

The story is told of an imaginary conversation that took place between St. Michael and Jesus after his ascension into heaven. St. Michael asked, "Jesus, now that you have returned to heaven what are your plans for reaching the world with the Good News?" Jesus replied, "I've given the task to my disciples." St. Michael, knowing that the disciples were "unlearned and ignorant" people, asked, "What is your back-up plan if they fail?" Jesus replied, "I have no back-up plan!"

And so it is, Jesus fully entrusted the task of world evangelization to us, his Church. When Jesus appeared to the Church he gave them peace, he gave them purpose, and he gave them power—and he gave them a mission. We believe and have just recently celebrated that we too were there at the cross, fully included in the saving work of Christ. It is essential that we understand that we were also there, fully included in the commission which Christ gave to his followers. If we profess our inclusion in the first truth and deny our inclusion in the second truth, we deceive ourselves. Full experience of the saving work of Christ propels believers to willingly participate in the mission of Christ. It (salvation) is the cause that brings about the effect;(a desire to share the Good News). If there is no urgency or willingness to participate in the mission we must question whether we have fully experienced and understood the gift of salvation. In Pope Paul VI's words, "It is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn." (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 24)

Thomas gives us some great insight into the chemistry of believing. He did not say, "I cannot believe," but rather, "I will not believe." He had more evidence than we do but he willed to not believe. Consequently, Jesus sought Thomas, offered evidence of his resurrection, and invited him to conversion: "Do not be faithless but believe." And Thomas did believe. In like manner Jesus commissions us to go forth into our world to offer non-believers the opportunity to believe and experience conversion.

"Adult faith is clearly and explicitly rooted in a personal relationship with Jesus lived in the Christian community. 'The Christian faith is, above all, conversion to Jesus Christ, full and sincere adherence to his person and the decision to walk in his footsteps.' Our understanding of the person and the way of Jesus continues to grow by our meditation on the word of God, by prayer and sacrament, by our efforts to follow Jesus' example, and by the sure guidance of the Church's teachings." (*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, 55)

The responsibility is ours, we cannot and should not attempt to shirk it. "To the question, '*why mission?*' we reply with the Church's faith and experience that true liberation consist in opening oneself to the love of Christ. In him, and only in him, are we set free from all alienation and doubt, from slavery to the power of sin and death. ... *Mission is an issue of faith*, an accurate indicator of our faith in Christ and his love for us.

"Those who are incorporated in the Catholic Church ought to sense their privilege and for that very reason their greater obligation of *bearing witness to the faith and to the Christian life* as a service to their brothers and sisters and as a fitting response to God." (*Mission of the Redeemer*, 11)

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First Reading — Acts 5:12-16

1. How do you see Christ's power manifested today in the lives of people?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24

Second Reading — Revelation 1:9-13, 17-19

2. How does John's experience with the risen Christ affect your experience with the risen Christ?

Gospel Reading — John 20:19-31

3. To whom is the commission given in verse 21?
4. Explain what you believe about *your* having been sent forth by Jesus.
5. To what extent are you able to identify with Thomas?

