



*Cleta Crisman*

This picture of me between my parents, Hubert and Vivian Thornburg, was taken a year or so ago. As I wrote these Easter reflections, I felt especially thankful for the atmosphere they created in my growing up years. While it was clear that they knew Jesus personally, we were free to question and "argue" and live our own journey to finding truth.

Jesus' suffering and triumph, as told in the Easter story, carry countless truths that affect my life every day...if I remember to absorb them. I have shared a few of them here, hoping that they might help each of us live the abundant life that Jesus so generously offers us.

*BIBLE READING: John 12:28-40*

The story of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem—surrounded by crowds of people shouting his name and proclaiming him as the one who would “save” them—reminds me of the months before a presidential election. Political signs pop up on lawns like dandelions, bumper stickers shout at you from the car ahead, and TV ads blare out worship-like praises for the candidate they support. Passionate opinions about governmental leadership leaks into benign conversations, and relationships are strained when conflicting loyalties cannot be contained.

Today we celebrate this ancient story on what we like to call “Palm Sunday.” (I wonder—if people had brought sycamore branches, would we be calling it “Sycamore Sunday”? That has such a ring to it!) In this story, it is obvious that people were hoping for a different sort of messiah than the one they ended up getting in Jesus. But my attention is caught by their transparent passion for this man. The Pharisees disapproved of the crowd's undignified and politically unacceptable behavior, but Jesus corrected their thinking. He pointed out that the truth of his identity is so great that praise simply must happen; if people did not worship him, inanimate objects like rocks would be jubilantly crying out his name.

Today we can personally know the Jesus who is the Messiah. We can experience, if we are willing, the freedom that Jesus' life and death—and life again—has bought us. Does your passion for Jesus and hope for the future he promises inspire a worship that cannot be contained?

*SONG: Here I Am to Worship*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: King Jesus, you are magnificent and glorious! May my life be an advertisement of your goodness and love.*

—Cleta Crisman

*BIBLE READING: John 13:1-5, 12-15*

One of the biggest challenges faced by parents is teaching children to love their siblings without judging or constantly comparing themselves to one another. Some days, you find yourself just praying that they will not kill each other before they have a chance to grow up.

It's almost comical to see that Jesus faced those same issues in the training of his disciples. They argued about who was the greatest (Mark 9:33-35); begged to be the most honored in Jesus' kingdom (Mark 10:35-37); and even after Jesus' resurrection, as he tried to prepare Peter for his future persecution, Peter pointed to John and said, "What about him?!" (John 21:20-21).

All along, Jesus kept telling his disciples in every way possible to love one another. Nearing the time when he would leave them, he demonstrated his words by washing their feet. It's hard for us to relate to that story since most of us haven't lived in a culture where foot washing is customary. But the principle is timeless: Choosing to love means finding ways to free others from the "dirt" and "grime" of imperfect living.

How do we do that? Maybe we can start by simply overlooking the behavioral "debris" that we all carry from ignorance or past wounds, looking beyond annoying personality quirks or hurtful words and actions. Because Christ continually "washes our feet" with his blood, we extend grace to others—not seeing one another through the eyes of the flesh, but through the eyes of the Spirit, for "love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

*Song: The Servant Song*

*Prayer: Jesus, show me how to love my spiritual siblings as you love me.*

—Cleta Crisman

*BIBLE READING: Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75*

Poor Peter. When we read of his impulsive promise and then his almost immediate reversal, we lose a little respect. Not only did he fail to keep his promise, but he violated it *three times!* Surely you or I would never have been so disloyal.

Betrayal of friendship is hard to take. It is far worse than harsh words from someone who does not know us. When it happens, we typically close up our heart a little (or a lot) against that person; from that point on, we hear their words with wariness and skepticism. Until the air is cleared, the future of the friendship is in jeopardy.

Christ's behavior toward Peter through these events is astounding; even though he knew ahead of time that Peter would seriously disown him, Jesus treated him the same. He included Peter with James and John, asking them to stay while he labored in prayer for the strength to go through the ordeal ahead. And after Christ came back to life, he continued to mentor Peter into the man he was meant to be.

I wish I could say that I have never been disloyal to Jesus, that I have never allowed anything to be more important to me than he is. But I can say that *Jesus'* loyalty to *me* has been flawless. Even now, though he knows the failures that will likely be ahead in my life, he loves me with the same intensity that drew me to him in the first place, and he always treats me respectfully.

*SONG: O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, thank you for your gracious love; help me to be faithful.*

—Cleta Crisman

*BIBLE READING: Mark 14:32-42*

Some years ago, my husband had to be out of town the night before I was facing surgery. Though it was not a life-threatening operation, I dreaded the ordeal and felt scared. When I shared my feelings with my friends, several of them came to keep me company while I struggled with my fears. They spent the evening and night, bringing Jesus' tangible presence by helping me clean my house, then filling it with laughter and prayer.

When I read Mark's account, I am struck by Jesus' vulnerability. He asks his friends to support him as he struggles in agony to do what his Father has asked of him. The disciples clearly did not understand the gravity of the situation (How could they have?!) and failed to provide the support that Jesus' needed.

We are typically too embarrassed to reveal our struggles. We don't want people to know about the areas where we desperately long to cooperate with God but can't seem to get our whole selves into the effort. We're OK talking about addictions to food or times when we "stretch the truth" a little, but might never talk about other struggles like chronic verbal abuse of our families or a bad habit of backbiting and gossip. How much better for us to find (and *be*) safe companions who will keep us company as we wrestle, praying with and for us in the very areas we would naturally keep hidden. Such friendships release the presence and power of Jesus.

*SONG: What a Friend We Have in Jesus*

*PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, teach me how to be a friend to others as you are to me—honest and real and safe.*

—Cleta Crisman

*BIBLE READING: Mark 14:12-16, 22-24*

Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that Jesus ate this meal with his disciples at Passover time, the annual Jewish celebration in remembrance of liberation from slavery in Egypt. The traditional foods of the official Passover meal represented different aspects of the Exodus event—poverty, mortar for cementing bricks, bitter tears of slavery. They also served as reminders of nourishment—bread (unleavened because of time constraints) and lamb (whose blood was applied to the doorposts and whose flesh was eaten the night they were “passed over” by the angel of death). For the Jews, the exodus from Egypt was the beginning of long-denied freedom and a new era fulfilled by the eventual entrance into the land promised to them.

To those for whom the Passover celebration was a common ritual, Jesus declares here that the bread and the wine now represents himself. John the Baptist had already declared Jesus to be the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!” (John 1:29), and Jesus had earlier confounded his listeners by insisting that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood (John 6:25-59) to have life.

If Jesus is the true picture of liberation and promise that the lamb in the exodus represented, then we can be confident that as we receive the spiritual food of his purifying presence, we are “passed over” in regard to judgment and inwardly nourished. As Jesus ate this meal with his disciples, he was actually preparing to create—by his death—a feast of life for them and for you and me, if we will receive it.

*SONG: Breathe*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: In quiet waiting, open your spirit and soul to the life-giving person of Jesus.*

—Cleta Crisman

*BIBLE READING: Mark 15:16-32; Luke 23:32-34*

I can hardly bear to read these passages describing the verbal abuse and physical cruelty inflicted on Jesus; the very idea of having nails pounded through wrists and feet makes me feel sick inside. Add to that the verbal mocking and public ridicule, and you have just about every form of cruelty that exists. All the more reason why Jesus' words recorded in Luke 23:34—"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"—are simply astounding.

We know that Jesus was an advocate of forgiveness, having told Peter that he needed to be willing to forgive 490 times if necessary, explaining that forgiveness is a quality of the kingdom—if we want to be *forgiven*, we have to be *forgiving*. So we know not to hold grudges or condemn someone, even if they deserve it. But in this passage, Jesus takes forgiveness to a new level—he forgives *while the abusers are still abusing him*. What?! Really?! It's hard enough to forgive *eventually*, but this is surely impossible for mere humans.

I think it *is* impossible; but of course, that seems to be Jesus' favorite word.

Thankfully, Jesus knows we are students, learners, apprentices. He gives us time and space as we learn how to be transformed by his Spirit. But we can't look away from this scene just yet. We need to imagine, just for a moment, what this world would be like, what our lives would be like, if each of us learned to forgive like this.

*SONG: Wonderful Grace of Jesus*

*PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, help me learn to release others into your care even while they are hurting me, in the same way as you forgive me.*

—Cleta Crisman

*BIBLE READING: Mark 15:33-47*

Can you imagine the hopelessness and loss in the hearts of Jesus' mother, disciples, and friends as they walked away from the tomb? It must have felt like the absolute end. Luke says they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the law (23:56). What a bleak, dark day that must have been. We know the happy ending, but for them, it was a nightmare from which they never expected to awaken.

But deep inside that tomb, Life was prevailing against death, preparing to emerge, bursting with light and power and beauty. The tomb was a busy place, but no one could tell from the outside.

I'm learning that the same principle is at work in my own life. I'm finding that the darker, the bleaker, the more hopeless I feel, the more confidence I can have that God is at work preparing to bring me into some area of new life if I am open and ready for change. Apparently Jesus knew what he was talking about when he spoke of a grain of wheat having to die before new life could emerge.

Today, as we ponder the horror of what Christ suffered during this time so long ago, we can remember that Jesus chose this in order to bring life to dying people like you and me. We need not be afraid of the dark, sightless times because Christ is present in them. And something is always happening in that darkness that will open the way for greater freedom and deeper intimacy with him.

*SONG: The Light of the World Is Jesus*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Help me trust you, Jesus, even in the dark times; keep me open to your work in me.*

—Cleta Crisman

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*BIBLE READING: Matthew 28:1-10; Isaiah 61:10*

What a morning! The women were “afraid yet filled with joy.” Instead of a sealed tomb, they’d found an angel in dazzling white clothing, calmly telling them that Jesus wasn’t dead anymore and he’d be meeting them in Galilee. How I would love to have been there to see that moment.

Today we don’t have the element of surprise. We can actually get a bit ho-hum about Easter, especially with all the meal preparation, egg hiding, new clothes shopping, special service planning...it goes on and on, doesn’t it?! We already know Jesus rose from the dead, so our attention can easily get so hijacked by all the other ways we celebrate the day that we lose sight of the event behind it.

How does Jesus’ resurrection unleash joy in your life? I like to ponder Jesus’ life on earth as a time when he was crafting a perfect life to swap for my imperfect one. This life was his life, like a beautiful and perfectly clean robe. If I accept the partnership Jesus offers, I get to wear that robe every moment, knowing that repentant dependence upon Jesus gives me the right to wear his perfect life in God’s eyes. And as I cooperate with his Spirit, my imperfect life grows more and more like the robe I wear.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus “for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame” (12:2). His joy is also ours—new life together with him! Sin and death and shame are no longer obstacles to sweet fellowship, fresh hope, new life!

*SONG: Hallelujah, What a Savior*

*PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Refresh my love for you, Jesus, and give me a grateful, joyful heart.*

—Cleta Crisman