

Lenten Study Guide for “Come Back” Sermon Series created by Rev. Laura Taylor
for use with the book COME BACK by Roger Ross

This past year has found many people falling and failing in ways they never could have anticipated with the ripple effects of a global pandemic impacting so many areas of life. Some of the struggles have been out of our control and some have been because of choices we made or choices we refused to make (which is still a choice). Crises, workaholism, addictions, education failures, medical emergencies, divorce and so much more present us reality checks and challenging choices for finding redemption. It's easy to get stuck in a spiral of despair, shame, guilt and frustration, but that's not who we are called to be as followers of the Resurrected One.

We worship a God who orchestrated the greatest comeback ever – the resurrection of Christ to offer hope for all who have fallen away from God. And God offers us guidance and power for a comeback in our lives. As Lent begins, a season of personal examination and spiritual reflection, we are called to come back to God if we have drifted away in despair or put other priorities ahead of God. We are called to come back to God if we have never really experienced a loving relationship with our Creator in the first place. We are called to come back to God even if we think we have sinned so greatly that God would never want us back.

As human beings, we have bounce back ability built into us, but we often let our setbacks and falls define us instead of using them to help us become who God created us to be. It is never too late. We are never too far gone as we look to God to reveal who we can be. Now is the perfect time to explore what God's Word reveals to us about redemption and find your journey back home to hope.

Week 1 (Feb. 21)	It's Not Too Late
Week 2 (Feb. 28)	Your Paradigm Shift
Week 3 (Mar. 7)	The Gift of Guidance
Week 4 (Mar. 14)	Hope-Filled Action
Week 5 (Mar. 21)	Patient Trust
Week 6 (Mar. 28)	Palm Sunday
Easter (Apr. 4)	Easter Sunday

(Some of you will just do the daily devotions as usual and others will want to do the daily devotions and read the book to be part of a personal/small group reflection time. Either way, you will be able to use this guide to go deeper with the sermon messages and find time to connect with God in deeper ways this Lent)

Week 1 “Listen to Feelings” (Intro and chapter 1 It Was All Going So Well)

Monday – Luke 15:11-12. The story of the Prodigal Son is one that Jesus tells as part of a group of parables letting others know that God cares about the “lost”. In these first couple of verses, the younger of two sons asks for his inheritance while his father is still alive. This was like saying he didn’t care if his Dad was alive or dead. What do you think this younger son was feeling that would lead him to make this request? How do you think the Father felt? The Prodigal Son story will be a backdrop story over the next five weeks as we also look at other turnaround stories and elements of a comeback.

Tuesday – John 11:25-35. Some people have been taught not to allow their feelings or emotions to be seen or not to even acknowledge the different emotions they might have. Being aware of how we are feeling and why helps us be better aware of our needs. Why does Jesus weep? Why do you think he cries even when he knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead? How do you think the family felt about Lazarus’ “comeback”?

Wednesday – Mark 11:15-19. A couple days after Jesus enters Jerusalem to shouts of “hosanna”, he is perhaps shouting in the temple because some are taking advantage of temple worshippers during a religious holiday. What do you think Jesus is feeling? What leads you to that belief? Why is Jesus feeling the way he is?

Thursday - Matthew 21:14-20. These verses are right after Jesus has driven out the sellers in the temple. How were the chief priests and scribes feeling about Jesus? Why were the religious leaders feeling like this? In the story of Jesus and the fig tree, what emotion causes Jesus to curse the fig tree?

Friday – Make 14:32-38. In these verses, Jesus has finished the last supper with his disciples and is preparing for what will happen next with his betrayal and arrest. What is he feeling? How do you know this? Why do you think the gospel writers included Jesus’ feelings and emotions in their stories of his life?

Personal or Group Reflection Guide

In the Bible we begin with descriptions of God’s glorious creation and special relationship with humanity, but in just a couple pages, “the fall” happens. The fall has become the term often used to refer to the acts that led to God closing off the perfect garden of Eden and sending Adam and Eve into the harsh realities of survival. We also use the term “fall” to describe someone who has made a mistake, gone down a bad path, and hurt their standing in community.

***Can you think of any examples from the sports or entertainment world of someone who seemed to be on an upward climb of fame and fortune only to take a big fall based on bad choices?**

Roger Ross in his book “Come Back” expresses the belief that self-inflicted falls often happen because of a lack of awareness of our feelings along with a failure to evaluate our experiences in healthy ways. In our pursuit to feel good and be happy, we “are blindly unaware of the feelings that drive us into poor decisions or destructive behaviors.” (Ross, 5)

***Do you believe that humans often make poor choices without awareness of the feelings or deep emotions that might be driving those actions?**

Ross describes four ways that people usually deal with their emotions:

1. **Run with them – life is dictated by how one feels in the moment**
2. **Hide them – don't let your feelings be visible to others or even to yourself**
3. **Run from them – stay so busy and preoccupied that you don't have time to deal with feelings**
4. **Listen to them – pay attention, evaluate and integrate emotions into your life for growth**

***Which way do you tend to deal with your emotions?**

Throughout Christian history, there has often been a tug of war between intellectual faith and emotional faith. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, chose to integrate both head and heart in the spiritual life of a believer encouraging research, discussion and intellectual pursuit as part of the study of God (which is theology) and encouraging “religious affections” with heartfelt feelings for God and from God too.

Jesus was fully human and fully divine. He displayed many different emotions throughout the gospels and allowed those to be part of his spiritual life and teachings both to his disciples and to us today as we read about his life and actions.

***How can paying attention to what we think and what we feel help us to make better choices for our life? What are some of the dangers if we don't pay attention to our emotions?**

It's never too late to begin paying attention to what is going on at deeper levels in our lives in order to help us move toward being more like Christ and making healthy choices for our lives.

Sometimes using a “transforming practice” or spiritual discipline can help us on our journey. **This week the practice is to “listen to your feelings”.**

1. **Schedule one hour on your calendar this week to quietly listen for what thoughts/emotions rise up inside of you.**
2. **Journal your thoughts and feelings as you sit with God seeking God's guidance on what emotions you might need to be made aware of so you can listen to them intently. What's behind the feeling? Why are you feeling this way?**
3. **Talk to God about what you are feeling and pray for God's help in being mindful of your emotions so that you can hear what next steps you can follow on your spiritual**

growth journey to avoid a fall or even begin a comeback if you feel like you're in a pit right now.

Read chapter 2 and practice listening to your emotions by spending quiet time with God this week.

Week 2 "Your Paradigm Shift" (chapter 2 Coming to Yourself)

Monday – Luke 15:14-17. The younger son took his inheritance and went off to "live it up" but ends up poor, hungry and watching pigs eat better than him. What do you think he expected to happen when he left home with the money? What woke him up to the reality he was facing instead of his desired expectations? What shift in thinking happens to him in verse 17? How hard is it for us to see the reality of our life without looking through lenses such as pride, perfectionism, shame or others?

Tuesday – Acts 8:1-3. The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and they began preaching the good news of hope and life in Jesus Christ, but some Jewish officials and religious leaders refused to allow this disruption to their control and their views. Stephen was the first martyr and who was it that approved of his execution? What do you think Saul thought about these early believers? How did he act on his belief? Saul believed that his actions honored God and protected his religious traditions. Does history reflect that he was right?

Wednesday - Acts 9:1-9. What is Saul's focus in the first couple of verses? What happens to radically change his view (literally)? Now that Jesus has his attention, what are Saul's options? Do you think he'll be willing to let others lead him when he has been so used to being the leader?

Thursday –Acts 9:10-19. When other believers are asked to help Saul, what is their response? Why? What do verses 18-19 tell you about Saul? Do you think he truly was a "new person" in Christ? What about all his old beliefs and patterns of behavior, would they just be gone? Have you ever had a significant moment that changed you to the core? How hard was it to stay with the new belief system or goals?

Friday –Acts 9:20-30. How well received is the new Saul (whose name would later be changed to Paul)? Now he has Jewish Jesus followers who don't trust he's really changed and Jewish persecutors who can't believe he abandoned the mission to destroy this Jesus movement called "the Way." How must Saul have felt? When your assumptions or beliefs are challenged and your paradigm shifts, how do you process the new view with God's help? How do you keep exploring this new understanding in light of God's revelation while facing criticism?

Personal or Group Reflection Guide

How did you do with the transforming practice from last week?

In the opening of chapter 2, Ross describes an encounter with a woman named “Jenny” whom he assumes has had the same kind of upbringing as his, but then finds out that she had a very different experience which perhaps contributed to her life struggles. His framework for evaluating her changed as his paradigm shifted.

How often do we get stuck viewing the lives of others through our own lens of experience and make judgements about them? Do you have any examples of making assumptions about someone and then being wrong?

We make split decisions about people all the time, often without knowing their life narrative. We approach life with our own worldview that is usually a combination of what we learned from our family of upbringing along with how we interacted with our education process, but then we tend to make assumptions that everyone sees things the same way we do.

A paradigm shift is a radical shift in the way that something is viewed or understood and is a term used first with science and philosophy. Ross’ example is the challenge that Galileo brought to the common understanding that the earth was the center of the universe when he proposed his research showed that the earth revolved around the sun. His newly discovered view conflicted with Roman Catholic Church teachings and he was imprisoned only to be exonerated 350 years later. The Church blocked teaching this discovery in 1633 and didn’t allow the scientific view to be in textbooks until the 1800s. Moving from an earth centered solar system to sun centered solar system was a huge paradigm shift which eventually proved Galileo was right even though he was punished for years for his view.

Can you think of any worldviews that people have that are being challenged now? Who will be proved right later in history? What is our typical human response to new ideas we aren’t familiar with or which contradict what we’ve been taught?

Our worldview shapes our decisions, but new information is always challenging us to face the possibility of new needs. And it is only through the awareness of needs that we are open to change. However, Ross references philosopher Ken Wilbur who says that most people “are only willing to question 5 percent of what we know at any one time”. (Ross, 23) The challenge to us making baby steps toward change involves whether we have an accurate map of our reality to begin. Ross uses the example of trying to tour Chicago when you only have a map of Dallas.

In our lives “real change is need driven. If we don’t feel any need, we won’t make any changes. This explains why genuine faith is so hard for independent, self-made people.” (Ross, 24)

***A recent Barna study shows that only 25% of Americans claim to be practicing Christians (down 20% from 2000), do you think that our country’s emphasis on pulling oneself up by their bootstraps and being self-made might play into the declining faith? If we think we’re doing just fine, then why would we need to change our direction to follow God’s map for life?**

Losses and failures can give us opportunities to see ourselves as we really are and see who God desires for us to be.

***If you read the book, what did you think of Dave and Cindy's story on pages 26-28?**

In Acts chapters 8-9 we read about a dramatic shift in the life of Saul where his worldview was challenged, and he discovers the need to reevaluate and find a different road map in light of his encounter with God. He honestly believed that he was honoring God by killing the Jesus followers based on his religious beliefs and traditions.

***Are there beliefs or worldviews we have right now that we think honor God but may not be in line with what Christ is doing in the world today? How do we know?**

One way to become aware of our worldviews, our needs and where God might be leading us is through alone time with God, but we often fight this due to our belief that being busy is more important. Ross points out that Jesus spent time alone with God and also had a slow pace to life, not rushing from here to there. Why do we think we have to hurry?

This week the transforming practice is to "choose solitude and stillness":

1. **Schedule at least 10 minutes alone with God each day this week, preferably at the same time each day.**
2. **Seek a quiet place to meet with God without interruptions. (Silence your phone)**
3. **Be in a comfortable position whether sitting, standing or walking in nature.**
4. **Begin by taking some deep breaths to quiet your thoughts and relax.**
5. **Put your palms face down to dump any worries out of your thoughts.**
6. **Put your palms face up to receive what God might say to you in the quiet as you pay attention to messages through your body, mind and spirit.**

Read chapter 3 for next week.

Week 3 "The Gift of Guidance" (Chapter 3)

Monday - 2 Samuel 11:1-17. What sins does King David commit relating to Bathsheba? How does he try to cover for his abuse of power and moral failure? Why did Uriah's loyalty work against David's plan? How does David's lack of impulse control and bad choices spiral into worse choices in verses 14-18? Have you ever made a bad choice that led to other bad choices?

Tuesday - 2 Samuel 11:26-12:7. What happens with Bathsheba and David after Uriah is killed? What story does Nathan the prophet tell David? How does David respond to this story? Why don't you think he recognized himself in it at first? What do you think went through his heart and mind when he hears "you are the man"? What options does David have regarding his relationship with God after being called out?

Wednesday – Psalm 51. This Psalm reveals David's response to having a guide point out his sin before God. What do these verses tell you about David's faith in God? Have you ever prayed

verses 10-12 before? Why is confession so hard for us to do? What does verse 17 tell us about what pleases God?

Thursday –Jeremiah 17:7-10. What do you think God is telling Judah in verse 9? If the human heart alone is not trustworthy, then what does it mean to listen to your heart if you are a follower of God? During this Lenten season of reflection and self-evaluation, what will God find through a searching of your heart and mind?

Friday – Luke 15:11-19. As we continue to look at the Prodigal Son story as a backdrop to the “comeback” theme, who do you believe influenced the younger son to go home and seek forgiveness? How hard do you think it was for the younger son to make this turn around? What role do others play in giving you advice for making your life better? How does the Holy Spirit work as a guide in your life to help you recover from sins and mistakes?

Personal or Group Reflection Guide

How did you do with the transforming practice from last week?

Falls and failures can happen to us because of the choices of others or due to natural tragedies. They can happen because we made an honest mistake. They also happen because we made a bad choice knowingly or a series of bad choices without evaluating the reality of our situation and potential consequences.

Often in our lives, a wise guide can help us avoid mistakes or find a way to navigate back from a fall. Using the example of King David and his sin with Bathsheba, Ross says that falls can be an instrument for powerful transformation with the assistance of wise counsel. (Read 2 Samuel 11-12)

In 2 Samuel 11, what were the mistakes that King David made? In 2 Samuel 12, who was his wise counsel and how was the message delivered? What could have happened if David had chosen not to listen, confess and seek reconciliation?

Many movies or stories with a hero also have a coach, counselor or wise one who advises or helps redirect the hero along the way.

Can you think of any examples? Why do you think these guides exist?

Look at the Johari window on page 51 and explore the four squares of understanding.

Why might the “blind spot” cause us to fall?

Ross uses Jeremiah 17:9 as a way to show we can’t trust our human hearts alone because we tend to deceive ourselves and others by seeing things as we want them to be rather than as they really are.

How can a trusted friend, coach, counselor, pastor, family member or mentor help us move forward when we’re stuck or struggling? Who is your guide? Who are you guiding?

Who is the Holy Spirit and why did Christ send the Spirit to us as guide? (Ross 53-54)

This week's transforming practice is "seek wise counsel":

- 1. Be honest before God about our mistakes and confess (ask the Holy Spirit to help you)**
 - a. Examine your conscience**
 - b. Allow yourself to feel godly sorrow for the mistakes**
 - c. Plan to avoid this mistake from now on**
- 2. Receive the forgiveness and grace God offers to you**
 - a. Make amends and move forward**
 - b. Trust that God has forgiven you and leave the guilt behind**
- 3. Make a decision to turn around and come back with the help of the Holy Spirit and other wise counsel**

Remember that God uses imperfect people in scripture and helps them with their comebacks when they confess and turn back to God. God will help us too!

Read chapter 4

Week 4 "Hope-Filled Action" (Chapter 4)

Monday – Luke 15:14-21. The Prodigal Son comes to his senses about his reality, listens to a voice inside of him and makes a plan of action to try to turn things around. What are the parts of his plan? How hard do you think it was for him to take the first step on his journey back home after making his plan? When you make a plan to change or turn something around, how hard is it for you to take the first step? Do you think of the steps on the journey or only the end goal?

Tuesday - Job 17:1-15. Job lost his family, his property and his health in a short amount of time even though he was a righteous man. His plans for his life were completely disrupted. What do you feel he is expressing in these verses? He contemplates embracing death and depression as his lot, but then is concerned about hope. Have you ever experienced a time when you felt like giving up completely, but hope helped you find a way through? Sometime the first step of a new plan is just deciding not to give up.

Wednesday - Proverbs 15:13-22. What bits of wisdom from these verses speak to you this week? Why? What does verse 22 mean to you? When you make a plan to start something new or try to come back from a "fall," who do you look to for guidance? How does God factor into your plans?

Thursday - Luke 14:27-32. What does Jesus mean in these illustrations of counting the cost? In addition to making a plan that you can follow for becoming a disciple of Christ, how do these verses give wisdom toward making other plans? When God is calling you to make a change in your life, do you think through the steps involved in the plan? Do you set goals that are achievable before you begin? How do you measure your progress?

Friday - Jeremiah 29:4-13. The people were in exile, but God tells them to keep making the most of where they are by living each day to the fullest even if they aren't returning home to Jerusalem any time soon. What do you think verse 11 means in this context? How do verses 11-13 encourage us in our modern times? When we need to make a turnaround plan in our lives, do you search for God with your whole heart and trust that God desires to give you a future with hope?

Personal or Group Reflection Guide

How did you do with the transformational practice from last week?

In the opening of this chapter, Ross shares a mission trip story of meeting Jean Claude of Haiti who had survived an earthquake that killed hundreds of thousands in his country. As the country tried to recover, Jean Claude believed that he survived for a purpose and set out to discover what that was with God's help. He ends up feeling called to start schools for kids whose parents can't afford to send them to private schools which is the only option.

Falls don't have to just be sins or mistakes, they can be from natural disasters or tragic experiences too. Typical responses to tragedy can include feeling depressed, defeated or guilty for surviving.

As we have battled the Covid-19 pandemic this past year, are you aware of anyone who has experienced "survivor guilt" because they lived through being sick while others did not? Do you think battling the virus will defeat us or motivate us to comeback better and stronger than before?

Ross lifts up a couple of roadblocks for a true comeback such as "a lack of motivation and emotional baggage" which he says can lead to a self-defeating "paralysis of analysis" situation. (Ross, 66)

Is there any area of your life that you have tried to turn around or transform but end up feeling stuck and wondering why you even try to change? Is it something you are comfortable sharing with the group?

Michael Hyatt explains part of our feeling stuck through the concept of the "Cynicism Spiral" which is described on pages 66-67. The hope of change bumps up against disappointment which causes frustration and anger that leads to sadness and ultimately ends with a protective layer of cynicism forming. Cynicism is "the self-protective behavior that all of us use to keep from getting hurt or disappointed." (Ross, 67)

What do you think of the idea that the self-protective behavior of cynicism ends up keeping us stuck rather than helping us transform into something better? How does cynicism cause us to resist change in our lives, our church and/or our relationships even when that change is needed?

The four-part process to overcome the "Cynicism Spiral" includes:

1. Conviction – Acknowledging that something needs to be different.
2. Compelled – Feeling inspired to make a change.
3. Course – Having a plan with steps to make the change.
4. Action – Making small successful steps to build momentum for the big win.

In the story of the Prodigal Son from Luke 15, do you see any of this four-part process in the younger son's story?

Ross uses illustrations from the book "Start With Why" by Simon Sinek to talk about finding our inspiration to compel us forward. Before we look at the "what" or "how" of something, we need to think about why we do things.

What do you think of Ross' statement "what without why leads to an endless stream of tasks disconnected from any larger picture" (Ross, 71)? Why is the "why" important?

What is your "why" for being part of Concord Trinity UMC? What is the "why" for Concord Trinity's existence in South County? How can the "why" help our church come back stronger in our community following this pandemic?

After working through the importance of discovering your why for change and then creating a plan you can put into hope-filled action, Ross finishes the story of Jean Claude and lets us know how Dave and Cindy's comeback story is linked with Jean Claude.

What do you learn about this partnership on page 79? Would you have thought that Dave and Cindy could have turned things around in their life after Dave was fired for moral failures? Why or why not?

This week's transforming practice is "plan and act":

1. What is something that you feel compelled to change? Write it down and pray over it.
2. Think of three specific steps you could take to work on this change and write them down using "SMART" goals which means make each step specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timebound.
3. Pick one small thing you can do related to your three steps and do it. Mark down the completion date here _____.
4. Stay focused on the "why" of your desired change and pray daily for God to lead you.

Read chapter 5

Week 5 "Trust the Process" (Chapter 5)

Monday - Luke 8:11-15. Growing a seed is a process where the environment matters. What are some of the things that can impact the growth process? What difference does patience make in verse 15? When you are wanting to see something transform or change, how do you do with having patient endurance? What conditions make you want to give up instead of follow through for a desired change?

Tuesday - Genesis 12:1-8. The chapter opens with God calling Abram to go on a journey, a journey of faith. Go, but without a final destination entered into the GPS. Why do you think Abram does what God says? What kind of trust was there? Are you able to start on a journey of change when you only know the first step? Does not knowing how the whole process will work keep you from trying something new?

Wednesday - Hebrews 11:1-9. When you think of the term “faith,” what definition comes to your mind? How does it compare with Hebrews 11:1? What role does your faith in God play in trying to make your life better? What life changes have you made in the past based on your faith in God?

Thursday - Proverbs 3:5-8. Are there any scripture verses about trusting God that speak to you? How might having a key verse help you remember to trust God in the middle of a transition or change process? What do verses 5-6 mean to you? How is putting God first in your life with a sense of awe and respect healing for your flesh?

Friday - Psalm 40. There are moments in all of our lives when we feel lost or in a pit and need help to find our way again. How does the author seek God’s help? Why does asking for forgiveness for iniquities or sins help with true healing from the past? Where do you see patient trust in this Psalm? As we approach Holy Week, where do you need healing and forgiveness so you are ready to receive the new life offered through the resurrection?

Personal or Group Reflection Guide

How did you do with the transforming practice from last week?

In the opening of this chapter, Ross tells the transformational story of Amy who was a delightful person in his church whose back story was a little shocking as she gave her testimony. Her life was in need of a major transformation, but it was hard for her to trust the One who could help her make that turn around. At some point for a comeback to happen, we have to let go of our excuses and fears and trust that God is with us to guide us.

What does it mean to consider God to be trustworthy? If God is trustworthy, why do we struggle to trust God?

In Genesis 12, God calls Abram to go to a land that will be revealed but he must start the journey with only trust in God to fulfill the promise and plan.

Why do you think Abram was compelled to listen to God and go when it meant leaving his comfort zone? If God called you to go and do something, how likely are you to follow through?

Ross names three invitations God makes to us when we are in a transformation process:

1. Let go of the past in trust
2. Let be an unseen future in hope

3. Let grow God's work by love

(Ross, page 85)

What are some of the painful ways our lives get flipped around that might lead us to a place where we need to “let go of the past” and move forward with God to trust the process of transformation? Why is it so hard to let go of the past? (Ross, 87)

In the section on moving into an unseen future, Ross talks about that awkward space of being in between what was and what will be. It's hard to move forward when we don't have clarity about all the next steps, but sometimes we have to take that first step before we know where the next one might land.

Read the story shared from Brennan Manning's book “Ruthless Trust” about Mother Teresa found at the bottom of page 90.

What do you think of Mother Teresa's answer to John Kavanaugh? How does our search for clarity before taking action really indicate our need for control rather than our trust in God?

If we can't truly control anything, does that mean we don't do anything?

As you think about this past year, what have you learned about letting go and trusting God?

How have these weeks together helped you personally during Lent?

This week's transforming practice is “patient trust”:

Building on your practices from the past few weeks, what is one area that you have identified as an area of healing, growth or reconciliation? Take time to journal your thoughts to the following questions:

- 1. What do you need to let go of from the past in order to move forward with God?**
- 2. Can you trust God to bring you into a better future even if you don't know the outcome right now? How can you manage but not micromanage the future?**
- 3. What outcome are you hoping for in your situation? What are the three goals you set to help you move toward that outcome? As you look at your goals, how can you let love for God and others grow during this process of transformation?**
- 4. Find a verse in the Bible about trusting God that speaks to you and memorize it to use whenever you become impatient in making progress toward your goals.**

Week 6 Palm Sunday/Holy Week

Monday - Read Mark 11:1-11. Why do you think Jesus told a couple of the disciples to go and find the colt? Any guesses on which two he might have sent? How was Jesus greeted as he entered the city? Does verse 11 seem odd to you? After parading into the city, Jesus heads out to another city with his disciples. How do you think Jesus was feeling knowing that this would be a week of suffering and great sacrifice? What do you think Mark is trying to tell us with his entrance story?

Tuesday - Read Matthew 21:1-11. How does Matthew's version of Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem align with Mark? How is it different? Why do you think Matthew includes the reference to what the prophet said in verse 5? Who do you think was asking the questions in verses 10-11? What is your answer to "who is this"?

Wednesday - Read John 12:12-19. How does Jesus get the young donkey in this version? Why do you think they greeted Jesus with palm branches? Palm branches were a symbol of political victory and Jewish self-rule based on their last coins as a nation before being conquered by the Roman Empire. What hopes do you think the people have for Jesus, especially after hearing about the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead? What is going through the religious leaders' minds in verse 19? Why was the response to Jesus so mixed in his day? What is the response today?

Thursday - Read Luke 19:28-44. How does Jesus enter the city? What is the response? Why do you think the religious leaders tell Jesus to silence his followers? As Jesus looks out over the city, what does he do? Why do you think the people did not understand God's hopes for them? Would you have recognized Jesus as God if you were in Jerusalem that day? Why or why not? Do we understand God's hopes for us today?

Friday - Read John 12:32-43. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus moves to cleansing the sellers from the temple shortly after his arrival in Jerusalem. In John, Jesus reflects on his death and the unbelief of the people as he prepares to celebrate Passover with his disciples. How do the "crowds" react to Jesus' comments? Why do you think Jesus wanted to hide from them? Why was there such a struggle to believe? How many of us struggle to truly believe in Jesus and follow him daily because we care more about what others think of us than God? How will you spend the next couple of days reflecting on Jesus' willingness to die for those who didn't even believe?

Week 7 Easter

Monday – Read John 20:1-10. Who was the first one at the tomb? What did she observe and do? Why do you think Peter is named but the other disciple is just called the one Jesus loved? What do you think the disciples must have thought when they saw the empty tomb? How did they feel? What do you think verses 8-9 mean? Have there been moments in your relationship with Christ when you read something in scripture, but you didn't understand it until down the road? How is Christ continuing to be revealed to you?

Tuesday - Read John 20:11-18. Mary stays at the tomb when others go home. In this encounter with Jesus, Mary doesn't fully recognize her Lord until he says her name and then she replies "Teacher". What do you think she was feeling as she wept in front of the empty tomb? How have you been feeling during this past year? How do you think she felt when she heard Jesus call her name? In the midst of our struggles this past year, have you heard Christ calling your name? What was your response?

Wednesday – Read Mark 16:1-8. Mark is the shortest gospel and is considered by many scholars to be the first written. What were the women concerned about as they approached the tomb? What did they encounter when they arrived? As they left to tell others, what mixed emotions did they have? In what ways have you experienced both fear and joy in this past year?

Thursday – Read Luke 24:1-12. In Luke's account of the resurrection, several of Jesus' female followers went to the tomb to finish the burial protocol and are the first to hear that Jesus is alive. Luke's gospel shows that Jesus came to save the least, the last and the lost. In this ancient patriarchal culture, why do you think that women were the first to hear the Good News and then given the role of sharing it with others? How did the disciples respond? What is the Good News? Who are we sharing Good News with today?

Friday– Read Matthew 28:1-10. In this account, there is an earthquake mentioned in addition to the stone being rolled back by an angel. What was the response of the guards present? How did the women respond? What mission were the women given? In verse 8, the women have both fear and great joy like is mentioned in Mark's gospel. How does the celebration of the resurrection bring you joy no matter what might be happening? How will you live out the joy of the resurrection throughout this year even with the fears?

As Resurrection People, we have hope in God's mighty power and trust that Christ gives us power to overcome anything, even the finality of death. Allow that power to transform you into a faithful follower of Christ who knows that home in the Father's arms is the best place to be.