

# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

April 2018

The following series is **free, downloadable small-group materials** based on each week's Mass readings and taking into account 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 minute 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.
3. 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.**
4. 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.
5. 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?"
6. Move on to the Gospel Reading, repeating the process by asking several people to share their answers to the reflection questions.
7. 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.
8. 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 in Christ,

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# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

EASTER SUNDAY, THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD—April 1, 2018

**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. And 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 their evil intentions and also for the shameful abandonment of Jesus by his disciples. Even Peter had to slink away into the darkness to hide his shame.

How they 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 rule the earth unabated by the Light of the World. But God had another plan and turned their delight to disappointment.

For the followers of Jesus, for several days, disappointment had reigned supreme. Their leader, their Lord and teacher, the one they loved and left all to follow, had been arrested, brutalized, humiliated, and killed. Their lives were devastated and they were left with only memories and questions. While this 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. 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 was 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.”\*

Wherever, or whenever you are experiencing darkness of the soul, Jesus is there, just as John said in the beginning of his Gospel, a Light shining in darkness. 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, you are a new creation, and can experience living as a new creation in the peace and power of Jesus. Like the disciple in today’s Gospel reading, we must see and believe.

\*C.S. Lewis, from *Miracles*.

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday’s Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/040118.cfm>

## First Reading — Acts 10:34, 37-43

1. How do you see darkness manifest in the ordinary existence of the people in your environment?
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 is hidden with Christ in God” mean to you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. What have you found helpful to enable you to set your minds on things that are above?

**Gospel Reading — John 20:1-9**

5. How do the responses at the tomb provide an analogy of the conversion process?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. What is the significance of such detail in reporting the resurrection?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Through this incident, what value do you see of living your faith in companionship with other believers?

# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER OR, DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY—April 8, 2018

**Introduction:** Holy Week and the Easter celebration has enabled us to emotionally and spiritually walk with Jesus and the disciples through their spiritual warfare and victory. On Holy Thursday our hearts were alternately warmed and chilled as we entered into Jesus' inauguration of the Eucharist, and heard the warning of his coming betrayal. Our hearts became burdened with heaviness when on Good Friday we recalled Jesus' arrest, abusive trial and crucifixion, even though we knew "the rest of the story". Then in the Easter vigil and during the Easter celebration we were able to exalt in Jesus' resurrection and victory over Satan, the forces of evil, and death. We rejoiced knowing that death is destroyed once and for all and that we have new life through faith in the merits of Jesus.

Sadly, for many, the Easter story ends on Easter morning. Actually, Easter should be just the beginning of a new reality which we should ever experience for the future. What are we celebrating if we are not celebrating entering into a new way of living? How tragic it would have been for the disciples to have participated in this fateful week in Jesus' life and to have walked away unchanged. How tragic it would have been if they simply returned to their homes and picked up their lives where they left off before they met Jesus. The whole message of the Gospel of John is captured in the opening paragraph; "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." And in the closing chapters of John's Gospel, Jesus' Passion fulfilled this truth uttered at the beginning of his ministry. Would it be possible to really comprehend this truth, celebrate it, and walk away unchanged by it? I think not!

There are three expected changes that are fully recognizable in today's Gospel reading. The first is when Jesus twice said, "Peace be with you." No more should our lives be characterized by fear; fear of death, fear of God's retribution, or fear of powerlessness in our lives to overcome the darkness. As we contemplate the finished work of Christ and entrust ourselves to him, we will see a diminishing of fear and an up-surg-ing of peace filling our being.

A second change should come about as we grasp Jesus' statement, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." This commission provides purpose and direction for a lifetime. No more must we wander meaninglessly about trying to discover why we exist, or what our purpose is. The resurrection and this commission provides the ultimate promotion; to be ambassadors of Christ to a world that lives in darkness and from which we have been delivered. We have become carriers of forgiveness to a world experiencing the affects of condemnation.

The third change is captured in John's statement, "that believing you may have life in his name." If we walk away unchanged, only to experience life as do the nonbelievers around us, we are missing out, really missing out. Jesus truly offers us new life, a life with new attitudes, with a new spirit, with new power over sin, with new relationships, both with God and with God's people, a new family. We need not walk away unchanged. We can continue to walk with the disciples emotionally and spiritually for the remainder of our lives. The process for us is the same as it was for them. We need to go to Jesus and ask him to breathe into us new life, then join with his disciples to follow him. "If our life in God is to become vital in our experience, we must be involved in ongoing and repeated transformation. It does not have to be forced, but it does have to be real. God's grace will do most of it, but our cooperation is required."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Gustin in *Living the Liturgy*.

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/040818.cfm>

## First Reading — Acts 4:32-35

1. What are the evidences that major transformation has taken place within the disciples?

2. How would you respond if you met a group of people like these early believers?

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

**Second Reading — 1 John 5:1-6**

3. Why do you agree, or disagree, with the statement, “his commandments are not burdensome”?

**Gospel Reading — John 20:19-31**

4. What is the relationship between the disciples’ having been sent, and their forgiving sins?
5. Was Thomas’ response commendable or not? How much should we rely on our own validation of truth?
6. Why do you think these other signs were not recorded?
7. What do you think John means by, “you may have life in His name”?

# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER—April 15, 2018

**Introduction:** The wellspring of reconciliation, Christ's sacrifice on the cross and bodily resurrection, is the message of hope that we believers must communicate to the world around us. For through his death on their behalf the world can find release from a life of sin and the guilt and condemnation that comes with it, even for the most righteous non-believer, Jesus' bodily resurrection communicates to them the hope of transformation.

In this week's Gospel passage these dejected and defeated disciples exemplify how this message of hope can set people free and turn their world around and put them on a new road of life. Jesus did not choose some miraculous or exalted means to communicate with them, but rather chose two simple means of communications, means which we can also utilize to communicate this hope. Jesus made himself present to them through friendly and significant conversation around a simple meal. We who know Christ are reminded of the privilege we have of dining with Christ through the Eucharist. In this simple celebration we are able to commune with him, and experience his grace filled fellowship.

But what about the poor non-believer who hasn't yet entered into the fellowship of his Body by putting their faith in Christ? How is the non-believer to share in a simple meal of fellowship with Christ? Only through us. As we make ourselves available to them, Christ who dwells in us, also becomes present to them. It is through our words and actions that Jesus can engage the non-believer in meaningful conversation, communicating the message of salvation and his love and care for them.

It is interesting to note that Jesus was not satisfied that they simply became aware that he was alive and present. In addition, Jesus made himself known to them by opening the sacred Scripture to them so that they could understand the significance of his death, and resurrection. Once he had accomplished this, those disciples were prepared in both head and heart to be "witnesses of these things." When believers have allowed both their heart and head to be converted they become enthusiastic about "witnessing to these things."

As we relate to non-believers it is important that we also open the Scripture to them, so that they too can understand the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We can do this by simply discussing with them a passage of Scripture that has been meaningful to us, or a thought based on a passage of Scripture. We can also invite them to read and discuss the Bible with us. It is amazing what the Holy Spirit will do in their life when they allow their mind and heart to be engaged by God's Word.

"The wellspring of reconciliation, John Paul writes, is the cross of Christ. Its vertical beam symbolizes the human need for reconciliation with God, and its horizontal crossbeam represents the need for reconciliation within the human family. Because the Church is the Body of Christ, its 'central task' is 'reconciling people: with God, with themselves, with neighbor, with the whole of creation.' One of the ways the Church lives out that ministry of reconciliation is to remind the world of the reality of sin, for reconciliation is impossible without naming the evil that had caused division and rupture in the first place."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*, by George Weigel, page 473.

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/041518.cfm>

## First Reading — Acts 3:13-15, 17-19

1. What do John's message in the second reading, and this message of Peter's have in common? How are they different?

2. Why would these messages be perceived as being “hopeful”?

**Responsorial Reading — Psalms 4:2, 4, 7-9**

**Second Reading — 1 John 2:1-5**

3. Illustrate the role of an “advocate.”

4. Define “expiation.”

**Gospel Reading — Luke 24:35-48**

5. Why was (is) it important to know that Jesus’ body was real?

6. How can this passage affect your view of the Old Testament?

7. Give an example of a mind not opened to these things.

8. What makes being a witness most difficult for you?

# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER—April 22, 2018

**Introduction:** Many of us in the baby-boomer generation can recall learning, and reciting from memory, the Twenty-third Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” Though thousands memorized this wonderful psalm it is doubtful how many actually gave any consideration as to what it meant to have Jesus as our shepherd. This week’s Gospel reading, and the verses from John 10:1-21, begin to open up for us the significance of Jesus as shepherd.

For the most part shepherds were not particularly esteemed in the time of Jesus’ life and ministry. As this passage indicates there were many that were hirelings, irresponsible and unreliable, especially in the face of danger. But by communicating this simple allegory Jesus elevates the role of shepherd to something significant which we are to emulate.

Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd which is in contrast to the evil shepherd. The evil shepherd takes his responsibility for the sheep lightly, and puts his own interests ahead of the sheep’s well-being. Whereas Jesus takes this responsibility as shepherd very seriously, even to the point of dying to save the sheep. He is devoted to their care and protection.

By contrast the hireling does not own the sheep, he does not know the sheep individually, and does not love the sheep, therefore he has no qualms about abandoning the sheep in the face of peril. Jesus on the other hand owns the sheep, having bought us with his own blood. We are his prized possession. He also knows us individually and calls us each by name. In this intimacy of knowing and being known personally by Jesus there is great assurance and peace. In addition, he loves us with an everlasting love, even as the Father loves us. Consequently, he brings all of his resources to bear to sustain our life and relationship with him. That is why in the parable of the lost sheep the shepherd is so intent on finding the one that is lost, because he knows the lost sheep personally and loves it deeply.

It is also important to note that the sheep respond differently to the Good Shepherd than they do to the hireling. The hireling they do not know, whereas Jesus they know. Some of us have been born into a Catholic Christian home and have grown up with a vicarious relationship with Jesus based on the faith of our parents. When a vicarious relationship is the sum and substance of our faith we often cannot say that we “know” Jesus the Good Shepherd. For those of us who fall in this category it is imperative that we personally embrace Jesus as our Savior. “This is crucial: we must be converted—and we must continue to be converted! We must let the Holy Spirit change our lives! We must respond to Jesus Christ.”\* This conversion will enable us to be ever more confident in our relationship with him.

When Jesus speaks the sheep listen to him. This passage implies that the Good Shepherd is desirous of communicating with us, but also that we need to listen to him. Very simply this means that when we hear the Scripture read, read them ourselves, pray, or listen to the Scripture proclaimed we should not simply listen with our ears, but endeavor to have our heart attuned, asking, “What is Jesus saying to us?”

Having heard his voice the sheep follow him wherever he goes, obeying his voice. As his followers this is where our faith becomes alive. It remains no longer simply an intellectual tenet of faith, but becomes a belief that we act upon. Faith and obedience are really one in the same. If you look at Hebrews 11 where is listed an honor roll of faith filled believers, you will find that these heroes’ faith is always expressed by obedient behavior. Our faith becomes alive and vibrant only as we follow the Good Shepherd and respond to his leading in loving obedience. Only then do the truths of Psalms 23 become a reality for us.

\* *Go and Make Disciples*, published by the National Council of Catholic Bishops.

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**First Reading — Acts 4:8-12**

1. How do you respond to Peter’s statement that “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”?
2. Explain why this must be true. (A helpful reference is *Mission of the Redeemer*, paragraph 5)

**Responsorial Reading — Psalms 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 29**

**Second Reading — 1 John 3:1-2**

3. Children usually manifest some characteristics of their parents. As a child of God which characteristics of the Father would you like to see become prominent in your life?
4. What is the most outstanding benefit of being God’s child?

**Gospel Reading — John 10:11-18**

5. Who are the “other sheep” to whom Jesus was referring? What “fold” was he referring to?
6. What helps you to listen to his voice?
7. What new thing have you learned about Jesus from this passage?

# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER—April 29, 2018

**Introduction:** Any of us who have ever gardened realize the significance of Jesus' allegory about the vine in this week's Gospel reading. Nothing can be more disheartening than to labor for weeks and months in anticipation of reaping the fruit of your labors, only to find that the seemingly healthy plant is failing to produce any fruit. We will go to great lengths inquiring about a remedy for the problem of a plant that doesn't produce. Why? Because the whole purpose of cultivating the plant is to enjoy its fruit. On the other hand, when we have a plant that is highly productive we go out of our way to show off its fruit to others. We enjoy some degree of glory from the healthy fruit our plant produces. So, in the allegory, Jesus is communicating that bearing fruit is included in his purpose for us and critical to our purpose of glorifying the Father.

The questions immediately come to mind, "About what kind of fruit is Jesus speaking? Is it the fruit of godly character or the fruit of new believers?" We know from Galatians 5 that character, love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control, is the fruit of the Spirit. Could this be what Jesus is referring to since it is the result of his life dwelling in us? Fruit by its nature is the reproductive element of the plant. The nature of fruit is that it contains the seeds that produce new plants. So, it is quite possible that Jesus is also talking about the ability to see Christ's life in us reproduced in others, i.e.: the spread of the Gospel from person to person. And in reality, it is as non-believers see Christ's life reproduced in our words, attitudes, and actions, that they are attracted to the faith.

Jesus in his wisdom did not lay on us the responsibility to produce fruit, but rather to remain in a relationship with him in which the Spirit could produce fruit in our lives. Fruit is the excessive life of the plant, its overabundance and vitality. If a plant only receives enough nourishment to survive it will not produce fruit. On the other hand, if a plant is robust with health this extra nourishment is channeled into the production of fruit. Jesus knows that this kind of life comes through him, and so he does not put the stress on being fruitful but rather on the need to remain intimately attached to him, living our life in union with him, and allowing his life to permeate us. This is from where spiritual vitality and fruit come.

Abiding in Christ need not be a complicated thing. Jesus was in fact talking to simple, ordinary, people just like us. The word "abide" means to continue dwelling in a relationship. When we become believers, we are indwelt by Christ, we enter into a new relationship of dependence and grace, wherein all that is needed for life and godliness (1 Peter 1:3) comes through him. Jesus is reminding us to continue to dwell in union with him, and as we do his life will increasingly permeate our lives. The need is to simply deal with those things in life that distract us from him as they arise, through confession and rededication. As we do we are constantly restored to that dwelling place in him.

"...for the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one's neighbor with limitless zeal."\*

\* *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, by Pope Paul VI, (41).

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/042918.cfm>

## First Reading — Acts 9:26-31

1. How would you feel if someone who was notorious for abusing Christians dropped in on your small-group meeting?

2. How can we facilitate the acceptance of strangers in our various Christian meetings?

**Responsorial Reading — Psalm 22:26-28, 30-32**

**Second Reading — 1 John 3:18-24**

3. From where within us, do you think feelings of self-condemnation arise?
4. Of what can we be assured, based on this passage?

**Gospel Reading — John 15:1-8**

5. What is the primary topic about which Jesus is speaking?
6. What role do Jesus' words play in this process?
7. What is the most difficult aspect of abiding for you?
8. How do you respond to the statement Jesus makes to his disciple, about bearing *much* fruit?