

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: To the Lowliest

Lesson: John 20:1-18

Happy Easter!

What a precious greeting this is for all of us who have spent the 40 days of Lent meditating on Jesus' love and sacrifice. Our Lenten journey began with Ash Wednesday, and every Wednesday, we gathered at church to participate in Lenten activities and listen to messages, striving to draw closer to God. As we transition from Lent to Easter, let's exchange the traditional Easter greeting. When I say, "Christ is risen," you respond, "Christ is risen indeed!" Let's try it: Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

Included in your bulletin is a Lenten survey. I kindly ask you to take a moment to participate in it. Starting well is important, but I've learned that finishing well is just as crucial. Please reflect on this Lenten season and share what you found meaningful, why it was meaningful, what could be improved, why you feel that way, and any ideas you have for making next Lent even better. Even if you didn't participate in all the activities, you can still complete the survey based on the parts you did join, such as Ash Wednesday or Maundy Thursday. Your thoughts, opinions, and feedback are incredibly valuable and will help us shape our programs for the better. I want to hear from you because ministry is something we all do together.

(Slide 1) We often refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God. Our youth group gathered on Wednesday evening to share a Seder Meal, reading and learning about the Passover event when God delivered the Israelites from Egypt. The Seder Meal is a traditional Jewish ritual meal held at the start of Passover, where Jews remember God's saving act of liberating them from slavery in Egypt.

What we commonly call the Last Supper was, in fact, a Seder Meal. In terms of timing, on the Thursday evening just before Passover began, Jesus and His disciples gathered for a Seder Meal. During this time, Jesus washed His disciples' feet and gave them a new commandment. Later that Thursday night, Jesus was betrayed by His disciple Judas Iscariot and arrested.

(Slide 2) On Friday, the day of Passover, at dawn, Jesus faced trial. Pontius Pilate sentenced Him to death on the cross. After receiving this sentence, without any rest, Jesus was mocked and beaten by soldiers and crowds as He carried His cross

to Golgotha, also called the Place of the Skull. From roughly 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. that Friday, Jesus hung on the cross, enduring suffering, and then He breathed His last.

In the Old Testament, when God sent nine plagues upon Egypt and declared that every firstborn in Egypt would die, the Israelites were spared because they obeyed God's command to mark their doorposts with the blood of a lamb. The blood of the lamb saved them. This is what Passover commemorates.

And it was on Passover that Jesus died. To transform the hopeless fate of death, which all humanity must face no matter how much we struggle, into a bright hope, Jesus Himself became the Lamb. He was offered as a sacrifice on the cross, shedding His blood to wash away the sins of us all.

For the Jews, Passover signified the salvation God granted them in the Old Testament. But because humans are naturally sinful, they often forgot God's salvation, grumbled against Him, and even misused and abused the Law that God gave to guide them to live righteously. As a result, the world remained trapped in a pit of evil. In other words, while the Israelites may have been saved by God at that time and sustained for a while, eventually, they all faced death. Death was inescapable.

In the face of approaching death, we are all powerless because there's nothing we can do. That's why Jesus came. Jesus came to this earth to show us God's will and God's love in His very being and to fulfill the Law. The fulfillment of the Law and the completion of love were accomplished on the cross at Passover. The promise fulfilled by Jesus, the Son of God, was perfect. Jesus came to free us from the fundamental fear, anxiety, and dread of death—something we could never resolve on our own. To liberate us from death, He became the Lamb and shed His blood at Passover. Through His bloodshed, all of God's promises were fulfilled, and the end of our lives is no longer death but an eternal life that follows it. Because of Jesus, Passover signifies salvation for us—a complete and eternal salvation.

At that time, people could not understand Jesus. From the moment He entered Jerusalem, all they sought from Him was short-term relief: freedom from hunger, healing from diseases, liberation from oppression, or release from Roman rule. But Jesus knew better than anyone that such freedoms were fleeting and that, sooner or later, everyone would face the uncomfortable truth of death. So, to address the root problem of our lives—death itself—He became the Lamb of God at Passover.

And so, Jesus died. His body was prepared according to the funeral customs of the time and placed in a tomb.

The Jews strictly observed their Sabbath, which ran from Friday evening to Saturday evening, treating it as a holy day. After Jesus was laid in the tomb, all the Jews spent the Sabbath in their homes. Even though the Sabbath ended on Saturday evening, it was too dark for people to go out, so they typically stayed indoors.

(Slide 3) A woman named Mary, from the region of Magdala, had stayed near Jesus during His crucifixion. Though the Bible doesn't clearly say so, she was likely present when His body was moved to the tomb. For her, Jesus' death was an immense loss and a source of deep sorrow. She probably didn't want to leave His side, but the Sabbath tradition left her no choice. So, as soon as Sunday morning arrived, she went to Jesus' tomb with a heavy heart.

But when she arrived, she was shocked: the body of Jesus, whom she loved, was gone. Overwhelmed with worry, she thought someone with malicious intent had taken His body. There was nothing she could do, so she ran to Jesus' disciples to tell them what had happened.

She returned to the tomb with the disciples, but there was nothing they could do either. The disciples left, and Mary was left alone in front of the tomb, weeping in her distress. At that moment, she encountered two angels inside the tomb, and soon after, she met Jesus Himself and realized He had risen. This is the story we all know well. So, I want us to take a step deeper here by asking one question.

(Slide 4) Now, let me ask you a question: Why did Jesus, after rising from the dead, appear first to Mary Magdalene? Jesus had many followers before His crucifixion, including His twelve closest disciples. He could have appeared to Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him, or to Pontius Pilate, who sentenced Him to death—wouldn't that have made for a dramatic act of vindication in our minds? Or, if Jesus wanted to proclaim His resurrection most effectively, He could have appeared to the most influential person of the time, and everything would have gone smoothly. But Jesus didn't do that. He chose Mary Magdalene and appeared to her first. Why did He do that?

(Slide 5) Friends, do you know who Mary Magdalene was? Luke 8:2 describes her this way: "some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out."

In that society, women's rights were almost nonexistent. Women had little opportunity to do anything significant socially, and their names were rarely recorded in history books or documents. Respect for women was scarce, and Mary Magdalene was even worse off—she had been possessed by evil spirits and afflicted with diseases. She suffered mentally and physically. Though she was healed by Jesus and began a new life, most people still remembered her past and didn't trust her words.

Friends, let me ask you something. Do people change, or do they stay the same? As Methodists, we believe in sanctification, that by following Jesus, we grow closer to holiness. What does your life experience tell you? Perhaps thinking about your spouse might give you an easy answer. Do they change, or don't they? We often judge others based on our own standards, circumstances, and understanding. That's our limitation. So, even though Mary had met Jesus and her life had changed, people, bound by their limitations, couldn't see or accept her transformation.

In other words, Mary Magdalene represented the most despised, marginalized, and powerless group of women in that society. Instead of choosing the most effective or convenient way to announce His resurrection, Jesus went to the lowliest person as soon as He rose, revealed His resurrection to her, and through her, allowed the news of His resurrection to spread to others.

It wasn't because Mary was worthy; on the contrary, it was because she was unworthy that Jesus went to her and shared the most precious news of His resurrection. The love of God given to the unworthy—this is what we call grace.

The world may have despised Mary, but Jesus remembered her name and called her warmly by it. When Jesus said, "Mary," her spiritual eyes were opened, and all her anxiety, worry, and sorrow disappeared. The joyful news of Jesus' resurrection entered her life. With the brightest face in the world, she looked at Jesus and cried out, "Rabboni!"

Friends, Christ is risen to resolve our deepest fears, which we could never overcome on our own. Christ is risen to free us from death and lead us to eternal life. Christ is risen to transform the pain and sorrow of the lowest, the marginalized, and the oppressed into joy and happiness.

Friends, Christ is risen! Do you believe this? If you do, respond with, "Christ is risen indeed!" Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Amen.