

Text
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Community
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In the MIDST
(V 1.2)

For more "In the MIDST" resources, including video and audio versions of these reflections, visit:

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Whom might you invite to join you "In the MIDST"?

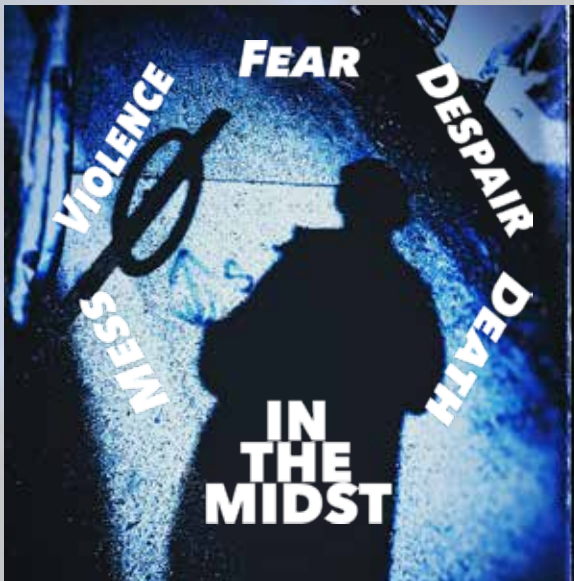
Would you consider sharing this offering with them?

Small group considerations:

The optimal size for a small group will depend on the people who participate, but generally, twelve is a good number for a small group. Anywhere between eight and fourteen is manageable, but the closer to twelve, the better.

In addition to simply making an announcement at church, consider making personal invitations to individuals who would benefit from this type of relational formation. When you make your invitation, be clear about expectations. Small groups function best with consistent participation.

Below is a poster template that you can customize.



IN THE MIDST meets us where we are: in this world marked by mess, fear, despair, violence, and death. **Can it be true that God is here, in our experience of pain & grief?** Join the Brothers of SSJE in this five-part exploration of the invitation that waits in even the hardest, messiest parts of life.

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in the midst of **OUR MESS**

Healing | Mess | Transformation

*Do you believe that Jesus saves? What about that Jesus heals? **Br. Keith Nelson** puts his finger on our doubts, as well as on our need for exactly the saving help that Jesus offers unconditionally to us all. However imperfect, broken, even forsaken we might sometimes feel, Jesus actually meets us exactly where we are. All we have to do is invite Jesus in - mess and all - and let the transformation begin.*

Jesus saves.

In the church, knit together as his Body, *we believe* that Jesus saves us from sin - our own and the sins of the whole world. Jesus saves us from death: by his incarnation, by his freely given human life, and by his freely chosen death on the cross. Jesus saves us from the worst in ourselves: from our daily blindness, ignorance, resentment, and failure to love. As we name in the Nicene Creed, all that he did, and all that he does, is offered "for us and for our salvation."

Jesus saves. Today I believe that with my whole heart - though I haven't always.

It's not hard to imagine that somewhere there is a person who doesn't believe they are in need of saving. The message that "Jesus saves" rings hollow in their ears, little more than a tired slogan tied to a narrow-minded agenda. In fact, they and their many friends hear this proposition and yawn, or chuckle, or roll their eyes. The offer of that kind of Savior is not what they need. Perhaps you yourself struggle with the assertion that Jesus saves.

OK, let's start again.

Jesus heals.

If the historical portrait we have inherited told us nothing else, it would point to a man known far and wide as a healer. As a band of pilgrims tracing his footsteps, we believe that Jesus, our Savior, was also a healer at heart. We have seen and known in our own aching flesh how he bends down and reaches out to touch the leper, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the bleeding and broken and forsaken of the world.

In healing bodies, he healed hearts and souls, and lives even now to do the same. Jesus heals.

Our imaginary friends don't believe they are in need of saving. But if pressed, they might admit that, in some sense, they are in need of healing. Deep down, they have felt the dis-ease of living - that feeling when they rest from all their motion and commotion that things are not entirely right, that something is off kilter, out of balance. A bruise, a burn, an open cut throbs beneath the surface. They long to say, "I'm sorry," but to whom? If they were to come across Psalm 51, if they were to read the words, "The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" they might remove the bandage from the wound within and yield themselves, even if for one trembling moment, to God's healing touch.

But healing hurts. After all, the wound has been there so long. It's easy to give up on the course of treatment.

OK, Jesus says. I'll meet you where you are.

OK, Jesus says. I'll meet you where you are.

Jesus meets us where we are.

Jesus does not wait for us to get our act together. He doesn't wait for us to clean the snot off our noses or put on a clean shirt. He doesn't wait for us to decide what exactly we think of him. He certainly does not wait for us to solve the mystery of human suffering, or articulate an airtight personal theology, or establish an invariable routine of daily prayer. He does not wait for us to prove that we deserve his love.

If your experience is anything like mine, here's what Jesus does:

On a Thursday night at 9pm - when your heart feels as empty as your refrigerator - Jesus pulls a chair up to the dinner table and helps himself to a piece of your leftover pizza.

If we let him eat our leftover pizza and
use our dirty towels; we can be certain he
will return the invitation.

Jesus doesn't care that you didn't cook, that you didn't even know he was planning a visit, or that you don't have any clean towels. Shhh. I'll meet you where you are, he whispers. Jesus met Andrew and Peter by the Sea of Galilee, mending their fishing nets, because that's where they were. He met Zacchaeus standing in a sycamore tree; he met Mary Magdalene in the prison of her own mind, possessed by seven demons; he met Paul on the road to Damascus intent upon persecuting the early Church. Jesus met Matthew sitting at the tax booth. And he met all of Matthew's friends at dinner in Matthew's house - a group of people who had likely never had dinner with a rabbi and felt disillusioned and cynical about the institutional tradition that had labeled and judged them. That's just where they were.

But, you see: that is how Jesus saves. That is where Jesus heals. Jesus saves us and heals us by meeting us where we are.

If we let Jesus do this; if we open the door to let him in, even once; if we let him eat our leftover pizza and use our dirty towels; we can be certain he will return the invitation. He will invite us to be with him where he is. Jesus takes us where we are, as we are - and, before we know anything about it, summons out what we shall be, one moment of meeting at a time.

To Consider

How does the idea of Jesus meeting us where we are challenge your expectations of spiritual growth and transformation?

What parts of your "mess" do you try to hide? What would it look like to allow Jesus to meet you in your imperfections and brokenness?

How might you open yourself more fully to the transformative love of Jesus?

To Try

Take some time praying with Luke 5:1-11. Peter is exhausted after spending a whole night fishing and has caught nothing. At first he is doubtful that Jesus can contribute anything to the situation. When the presence and power of Jesus are made known through a catch of fish that begins to break the nets and even sink the boat, Peter cries, "Lord, go away from me, for I am a sinful man!" In the midst of his dim assessment of himself and his prospects, Jesus chooses him to be a "fisher of people."

When have you felt like Peter, protesting that your life situation was too messy to let Jesus get involved?

What does it feel like to practice consent to Jesus' power and presence in those moments?

in the midst of FEAR

Fear | Trust | Transformation

*Storms of fear can suddenly engulf us - prompted by what is happening or what could happen in our lives or in our world - leaving us feeling small and powerless. Drawing from the teachings of Jesus and the Hebrew scriptures, **Br. David Vryhof** explores the universal, human experience of fear, one that even Jesus surely shared with us. Taking to heart Jesus' reassurances in the face of fear, this meditation invites us to trust in the transformative power of God's steadfast love. Take Jesus as his word: we need not be afraid.*

You may know what it is to be sailing through life in radiant sunlight when, swiftly and unexpectedly, a storm arises, and you suddenly find yourself swamped by mighty waves and tossed about by terrible winds. Perhaps it's an unexpected calamity - a health issue, an accident, some kind of assault, or some other unforeseen suffering - that affects you or your loved ones. Or maybe it's tragedy on a national or global scale that frightens you: the threat of violence, political upheaval, or environmental disaster. Or perhaps it's something that hasn't happened, but *could* happen. There is much to be afraid of in life, and at times our fears can seem truly great, and we can feel so weak and small in the face of them.

Fear is no respecter of age, gender, or social standing. Fear may be the most common experience we share with all of humankind: the consuming, crippling, sometimes irrational visitation of fear. Fear arrives when we face impending danger, pain, evil, confusion, vulnerability, or embarrassment. Whether the threat is real or imagined does not matter. What does matter is our sense of *powerlessness*. We don't feel we can control this thing that threatens to swamp our lives and cause us to sink. Whatever its source, our fear is real.

Jesus speaks a great deal about fear and anxiety, which is quite revealing. He would have learned about fear in part from the Hebrew scriptures. The scriptures he would have known - what we call the "Old Testament" - are replete with messages about worry and

fear. We are told very plainly that we do not need to be afraid because God's steadfast love and unfailing faithfulness will provide for us. Fear's tight hold on us is loosened, the Bible assures us, when we put our trust in God.

"I sought the Lord, and he answered me," the psalmist says, "and delivered me out of all my terror" (Psalm 34:4).

Jesus would have known these words, just as he would have known the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Isaiah 43:1-3).

Jesus would also have learned about fear from his own life. I am not talking about the fear he observed in other people, but about his own personal fear, what he experienced. We don't know the specifics of what Jesus feared, but we do know that Jesus lived a fully human life and experienced the full range of human emotions, and therefore he must have been acquainted with fear. We see him withdrawing to pray in solitude as he wrestles with his own calling and with the challenges he and his followers face. We catch a glimpse of real fear when he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane for the cup of suffering to pass him by (Matthew 26:36-46). We can trust that when Jesus talks about not being afraid, he is speaking about fear from the inside-out, autobiographically.

Jesus would have learned about fear from his own life.

Jesus was able to speak reassuringly about fear because he had taken to heart the words of scripture and learned to trust in God. In prayer he received the assurance that he was not alone, that God would always be with him, strengthening him to face every trial. He wanted others (including us) to know the inner freedom and deep assurance that comes from trusting in God. Over and over again, his message was "Do not fear." He promised his followers that his power, his provision, and his presence would be with them (and us) always, to the end of the *storm*, and to the end of *life*.

If your life now is swamped with fear, or if you are afraid about an incoming storm, remember this: our fear is not an obstacle to God but rather an *invitation* from God to

take Jesus at his word. We need not be afraid. Jesus knows every reason why we *could* be afraid; he's been there. For us, fear can seem such an immovable impediment. But it is no obstacle for God. Our fear presents an *opportunity* to experience first-hand God's presence and power and provision by trusting in God's promises.

Our fear is God's invitation, and Jesus will make good on his promise to be with us always. Let Jesus have the last word: "Do not fear, for I am with you, always" (Matthew 28:20).

Our fear is God's invitation.

To Consider

What fears are storming in your life right now? Can you imagine that Jesus might have known a similar fear?

Can you recall a time when a particular verse or image from scripture helped you to face your fear in a difficult situation? What words comfort you?

When angels appear to human beings in the scriptures, their first words are almost always, "Don't be afraid." Who are the "angels of consolation" who have helped you face your fears in life? A particular friend or relative? A mentor or teacher or pastor? How have they been able to comfort you?

To Try

Set aside time this week for a period of prayer in which you speak aloud your deepest fears to God and listen for God's reassuring words and comforting presence within you.

Carry in your heart a mantra which you can repeat to yourself whenever you feel afraid, such as: "Whenever I am afraid, I will put my trust in you" (Psalm 56:3) or "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." (Psalm 46:1)

in the midst of **DESPAIR**

Destruction | Idolatry | Conversion

*Facing a personal crisis at age nineteen, **Br. Lucas Hall** was feeling lost and empty. In a moment of desperation, despite rejecting religion for years prior, Br. Lucas Hall prayed for guidance, only to receive in response a cold, dark nothingness. This deeply personal narrative of the transformative experience of vulnerability invites us into the dark and challenging places of our own hearts, where idols might need to be overthrown before we can move into greater wholeness.*

Eight years ago my conversion started. Sort of. "Conversion" begins at each person's beginning, and ends somewhere between here and eternity. But eight years ago, I was nineteen, and not terribly interested in someone dressed as I am right now, in a religious habit, sagely dismissing my crisis.

No, I had reached a breaking point. I was out in the middle of the night, wandering the college campus, anxious and confused. I'd had a basically hostile attitude toward religion for several years, but my own sense of being, of purpose, my old answers to the great "why?" echoing along the canyon walls of human hearts just weren't working anymore. I could no longer justify my existence through my own happiness, because why should I care about my own happiness? Everything was empty, and death was not far from my thoughts.

Out of desperation, I prayed. To no one, or anyone, I prayed. I tearfully offered my uncertainty, my instability, my weakness, hoping for something to alleviate it. I waited for some assurance from heaven, whoever's version of it existed. And what I got was... nothing. No warmth, no light, no angel song. Cold, dark, silent nothing.

But this Nothing was greater, more powerful, than anything I'd experienced up until that point. I felt broken. Destroyed. I felt like a demolished city, burnt to the ground. It was horrifying. And it was good. Because the abject admission of weakness and vulnerability

I encountered in this experience was the great clearing of the brush, the great pouring out of old and perishing things. I was shattered – and I was made new.

I was shattered – and I was made new.

In the Gospel, Jesus issues a half-warning, half-lament, to the city of Jerusalem. “Had you only listened!” But they didn’t, and so Jesus tells of impending destruction, enemies at the gates, leaving no stone untoppled. This idea of violence and destruction as a result of sin often doesn’t sit well in modern ears. It can be especially galling to see such religious violence play out across the pages of Scripture and championed as a good and righteous thing. It is only more awful when such religious violence leaves the pages of holy texts and unfolds in our world. We like a creative God, but a God who destroys, or commands destruction, is far less attractive.

Following in the example of Jesus, however, we can take such old stories and give them new life. We can learn to appreciate them not just as the unfolding drama of a particular people of the Levant, but more: we can see them as our own story, as giving common language to the universal human experiences of *inner* tumult, *inner* upheaval, even *inner* violence in relation to God. Many stories of the ancient Jewish people have a theme of righteous destruction, with violence purging the land of idols and the altars of false gods. Perhaps surprisingly, this theme has become a great comfort for me – not out of bloodlust or an inflated sense of my own righteousness, but actually, the opposite. If I cast my gaze inward, with this destruction in mind, I find I have new language to approach my experiences of pain, sadness, anger, and disgust. I can begin to process these experiences, wondering where the pain is coming from, with a question: which idol is being overthrown here?

I am full of them. And so many of those idols seem to be not obviously evil or hideous things at all, but rather, good and beautiful things that, for all their goodness and beauty, are still not God, and so cannot give life. Good thoughts and feelings, good relationships, good work, good social, political, or religious causes, good values and principles... all of these can be quite good! Because of their goodness, we’re perhaps even more susceptible to make idols of them. But idols cannot save us, and when we build up our inner altars and temples to them, we place our hopes of eternity in things that cannot match that hope, and as a result we experience great pain, and there will be strife and destruction in the city of our hearts.

“Had you only listened!” There is remarkable resonance between this moment and the earlier episode when Jesus stands outside the walls of Jerusalem and laments at how

He has known the thousand deaths we are called to die. He still knows.

long he has desired to lovingly gather up that city in his arms, upon his breast, near to his heart, but now they are forsaken. These laments of Jesus are poignant, because we might expect that he has thus abandoned the city, abandoned all of us in our inner Jerusalems, washed his hands of us, so that we might be destroyed.

But no. Destruction comes, yet we are not abandoned. Jesus, in the great crescendo of everything the Incarnation was, is, and ever could be, enters into that destruction with us. He goes first! Like the high priest, who dons the breastplate with each of the twelve tribes' names written on it to enter the Holy of Holies and make atonement, Jesus does indeed gather us up into his bosom. And in the destruction of our idols, our falsehoods, all that would consume us utterly, he is there, making atonement, ever interceding for us. He has known destruction. He has known desolation. He has known the thousand deaths we are called to die. He still knows. And on the cross, Jesus shows forth this knowledge, offering his whole being, even to the gates of death, as the Way of life.

To Consider

What idols reign in your heart? How can you topple them?

When have ever had the experience of destruction and loss becoming an opportunity for growth and conversion?

What "gates of death" in your life right now might be the way of life?

To Try

Take time to reflect on the “idols” that are ruling in your life. What needs to be overthrown? Offer that intention to God in prayer.

You might make a plan for how to topple that idol. Consider writing it on a piece of paper and either ripping it, burning it, or in some other concrete way setting yourself free from it.

in the midst of VIOLENCE

Violence | Witness | Hope

Br. Geoffrey Tristram invites us behind the locked door of the upper room, where the disciples gathered in fear after the gruesome execution of their Lord. This scene from two thousand years ago replays itself in neighborhoods and cities all around the world even today, as violence continues to shatter the lives of individuals and communities. As Br. Geoffrey confronts the reality of the way violence permeates our world, he urges us to consider how we can join with the Good Shepherd, echoing Jesus' courageous words of promise, hope, and peace.

I picture the disciples after the terrible, terrifying experience of seeing their dear Jesus crucified. I imagine how they must have gathered together in lockdown as, shocked and anxious, they surely stayed off the streets. "The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear," we read in John (John 20:19). No doubt the disciples kept describing again and again to each other what they had seen - the scene on Calvary: his words from the cross, his final giving up of the spirit. They were shaken and, I imagine, shaking still, with the violence they had witnessed, and which they worried might be coming for them next.

Violence can tear, break, and shatter not only individuals but whole communities. Think of all those whose lives have been shattered by violence during this last year. Individuals and whole communities in places such as Syria, Ukraine, the Holy Land, but also in Maine, Alabama, Maryland, California - and even closer to home, the senseless murder of children and teenagers here in Boston, in Lynn, Brockton, New Bedford. The violence which is everywhere in our country, and our world, profoundly touches all of us.

In some of these places, lockdown is a daily experience: places where at night, and even in the day, you lock your doors and don't go out. Violence can kill individuals, but it can also deaden whole communities, when fear locks down their spirits, and imprisons their hopes and dreams. That is especially tragic for those who are young.

In my meditations on such violence, I've been reflecting on a scene from John's Gospel, one of a succession of confrontations between Jesus and the religious authorities. These confrontations take place, symbolically, at a series of Jewish festivals, and at the climax of each confrontation, there is such anger that stones are picked up to throw at Jesus. He escapes each time, but there is a growing sense that they will eventually get him, as they make their plans to put him to death.

By the Feast of the Dedication, the level of impending violence and hatred surrounding Jesus has gotten very high. John, with consummate skill, simply and laconically states: "It was winter." Jesus was walking up and down in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. His opponents were waiting for him. John says, "They gathered around him" - like a gang. "Are you the blessed?" one says. "You're a blasphemer," says another. "We're going to stone you," says another.

Imagine how frightening it must have been for Jesus. But Jesus looked deep within them - and saw their wintry, frozen hearts, full of a violence which froze out God's love. His voice could not penetrate the hardness of their hearts. Yet with great courage, Jesus confronts them with a highly provocative word of truth: "You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

"No one will snatch them." The verb used here is the one used for wolves, who creep up and *snatch* a vulnerable sheep. The wolves are always seeking an opportunity; but, so too, the good shepherd is always looking out for his sheep, and they are always listening for his voice, because they know and trust his voice to guide and lead them.

That seems to me a powerful metaphor for so much of the violence that is happening in our nation, especially among young people. What is happening when mainly young men are shooting people dead in schools, in movie theaters, in our inner cities, on Boylston Street?

What voices are they listening to? Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd and my sheep hear my voice."

But there are many, many other voices, loud, strident, persuasive voices in our society - voices of violence. And these voices can snatch our young people away, like a wolf does. Violence in our movies, violent games and websites all over the internet. Gun laws in this country which are so lax, but which, for political reasons, scandalously cannot or will not be reformed. Violent voices, violent organizations, take root especially where there is little family support, high unemployment, and poor education. In such places especially, it is our responsibility as Christians to stand up in Jesus' name and speak with his voice of peace. We must counter those voices of violence that speak so loudly.

We must counter those voices of violence
that speak so loudly.

When I was ordained a priest the following words were spoken to me by the bishop, and I think they are true for each one of us who are called to live the way of Jesus:

"You are called to be servants and shepherds among the people to whom you are sent. You are to tell the story of God's love. You are to search for his children in the wilderness of the world's temptations, and to guide them through its confusions, that they may be saved through Christ forever."

These words have always been close to my heart. They say to me now, "How are we being asked to actively face up to the voices of violence in our land, and witness to Jesus' voice of peace, in our cities and beyond?"

When Jesus set his face to Jerusalem on that final journey, for the last confrontation on the Jewish festival of Passover, he walked right into the heart of darkness. The voices of violence surrounded him on every side: "Crucify him, crucify him!" But in the midst of the violence and terror, Jesus' gentle voice, the voice of the Good Shepherd, spoke: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

We who love Jesus are called to speak courageously with Jesus' voice, to bring hope and peace to places filled with violence and hopelessness. What part will you play?

The voices of violence may seem loud and overwhelming, but we are a resurrection people. "Fear not," says Jesus, "for I have overcome the world."

What part will you play?

To Consider

What voices of violence and evil do you hear and witness in the world around you? How are you hiding in fear in the face of them?

Where do you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling to you?

How might you actively embody Jesus' voice of peace for others in the face of fear and despair?

To Try

Take concrete action to speak a word of hope and peace in places filled with violence and hopelessness.

Visit or call someone who might be facing fear or destruction in their own life. Write or call an elected government official about a cause of violence in our world that moves your heart.

What part will you play?

in the midst of DEATH

Death | Life | Self-Offering

*Reflecting on a misremembered phrase from the Prayer Book burial rite, **Br. James Koester** realizes how even our errors can sometimes reveal poignant truths. In the midst of this world marked by death, pandemic, rampant gun violence, and hate, this reflection celebrates the paradoxical truth that while death has become familiar, it is actually the possibility of life that renders us speechless. A Spirit-filled life, lived in the footsteps of the Risen Jesus, challenges our expectations, embraces unpredictability, and prompts a profound reorientation towards life, in all its unexpected manifestations.*

It's not unusual for me to get something in my head, convinced that I have it correct, only to discover that I have it wrong. Recently I have found myself repeating in my mind a phrase, which I was positive I had right: *In the midst of death, we are in life*. The phrase comes to us from the Prayer Book burial rite, and we Brothers sing it at the midday service on Holy Saturday.

The problem is, I have it backwards. What the text actually says is, "in the midst of life we are in death."¹

Yet I think that the trick my mind has played on me has some merit. These past years seem to have been one long, long season of death. While the pandemic might seem to some a distant memory at this point, it surely remains achingly present to the minds of those who have loved and lost one of the 1,151,435 people who have died in the United States from this disease.² *In the midst of death*.

Nor may it surprise you to hear that since the beginning of the year, there have been 565 cases of mass shootings.³ In America, we lose 121 people every day to gun-related

¹ *In Media Vita, Book of Common Prayer, 1979, page 484*

² <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker>; downloaded 3 November 2023

³ *A mass shooting is generally defined as an occasion when 3 or more people have been injured.* (<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2023/10/u-s-hurtles-toward-new-record-for-mass-shootings-says-atf-director>)

violence, which has taken the lives of 35,000 people so far this year, and is the leading cause of death for American children.⁴ *In the midst of death.*

We see unfolding in the news every day reports of violent death: police brutality and racial violence; wars in Ukraine and the Holy Land; and hate crimes on the rise in the United States. *In the midst of death.*

With so much practice, you might say we are good at dying. We know what to do in the face of death. We know what's expected, even when gripped by shock and grief. *In the midst of death.*

In this way, we are no different from the three women who made their way to the tomb, that first Easter morning. They, too, knew what to do when confronted with death, even a death as horrific as the one Jesus had suffered. "When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb" (Mark 16:1-2). They had the supplies, they knew how to perform the rituals, and carry out the customs that went with a death. They came prepared, with the necessary spices. They knew what to anticipate, and at least one of them was practically inclined in her expectations, for we read that "they had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'" (Mark 16:3).

Like us, these women had seen death. They had lived with death, and they knew what to do, what was expected of them, how to behave. Death, it seems, is simply part of living. *In the midst of death.*

You might imagine that these three women, even when numb with grief, were beyond shocking. Death, even a horrific death, could not shock them. Yet Mark is quite clear that when they reached Jesus' tomb, these women were so alarmed, terrified, amazed, afraid, and speechless that they fled, probably dropping the spices, "and they said nothing to anyone" (Mark 16:8b).

It was life that terrified them; it was life that made them speechless.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_mass_shootings_in_the_United_States_in_2023; downloaded 3 November 2023; <https://abcnews.go.com/US/116-people-died-gun-violence-day-us-year/story?id=97382759>; downloaded on 3 November 2023

What is significant here is that it wasn't death that frightened them. No, what shocked them was life, and the possibility of life. It was life that terrified them; it was life that made them speechless.

Whether it comes quietly, after a long life, well-lived; suddenly, in a blaze of bullets; shockingly, dragged from your home and killed by terrorists; tragically as bombs rain down from above; agonizingly, with a knee at the neck; or slowly, gasping for breath, alone in a hospital room, death no longer shocks us. Yes, we may grieve, but no, it does not shock.

What shocks, alarms, terrifies, amazes, and makes us afraid and speechless is life, and especially the kind of life Jesus offers us in the resurrection.

A life given away is a life given back.

SSJE's founder, Richard Meux Benson, reminds us that "our coming to Christ changes everything."⁵ If, as Father Benson encourages us, "we live in the world as [people] who have been with Jesus," then the risen life of Jesus is no mere abstract idea, but a concrete reality. Such a life is shocking, terrifying, and alarming, because it manifests itself not in some conjurer's trick with a bag of missing bones, but in Spirit-filled lives which are unpredictable, risky, and reverse the ways of the world. A Spirit-filled life reminds us that life does emerge from death, joy can be found in sorrow, and a life given away is a life given back.

No wonder the women fled in terror: something told them that following the Risen Jesus to Galilee, even in the hope of seeing him again, would cost them their lives. And it did. And it still does.

Life is so much easier when we know what to do, what is expected of us, how to behave. But a life empowered and emboldened by the Spirit of the Risen Jesus is unpredictable and risky, for that life is no longer ours, but Christ's, who lives in us (Galatians 2:20).

That life, that Spirit-filled life - Christ's risen life lived in us - should alarm, terrify, and amaze us; it should grip us with fear and render us speechless. This is the life which will shock us back to our senses and rouse us from death.

In the midst of death, we are in life, because we are willing to take the risk that Jesus did, and give our life away, only to have God give it back in unexpected and unpredictable ways.

5 *Spiritual Readings: Christmas, page 260*

To Consider

Does death still have the power to shock you? How so?

Where in your life are you in the midst of death? Where are you in the midst of life?

What steps can you take to embrace the Spirit-filled, unpredictable life that the Risen Jesus offers, even if it means taking the risk of stepping into the unknown?

To Try

If you have never done this before, spend some time praying the Burial Office.

Where the Prayer Book provides space to add a name, add your own name. Reflect on the reality of your own death and what a life risen with Christ might look like for you.

Need More (on) Chaos?



The Cowley series **Chaos Better** tries to sit with what is hard: those places where we are struggling, whether on a personal, interpersonal, or global level. It recognizes and offers ways to navigate the very real chaos within us, between us, and around us – from reckoning with America’s racial past, to dealing with community conflict, from asking questions of theodicy in light of global violence, to wrestling with mental illness.

**Articles are available now
More coming in Summer 2024.**

[SSJE.ORG/CHAOSBETTER](https://ssje.org/chaosbetter)

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