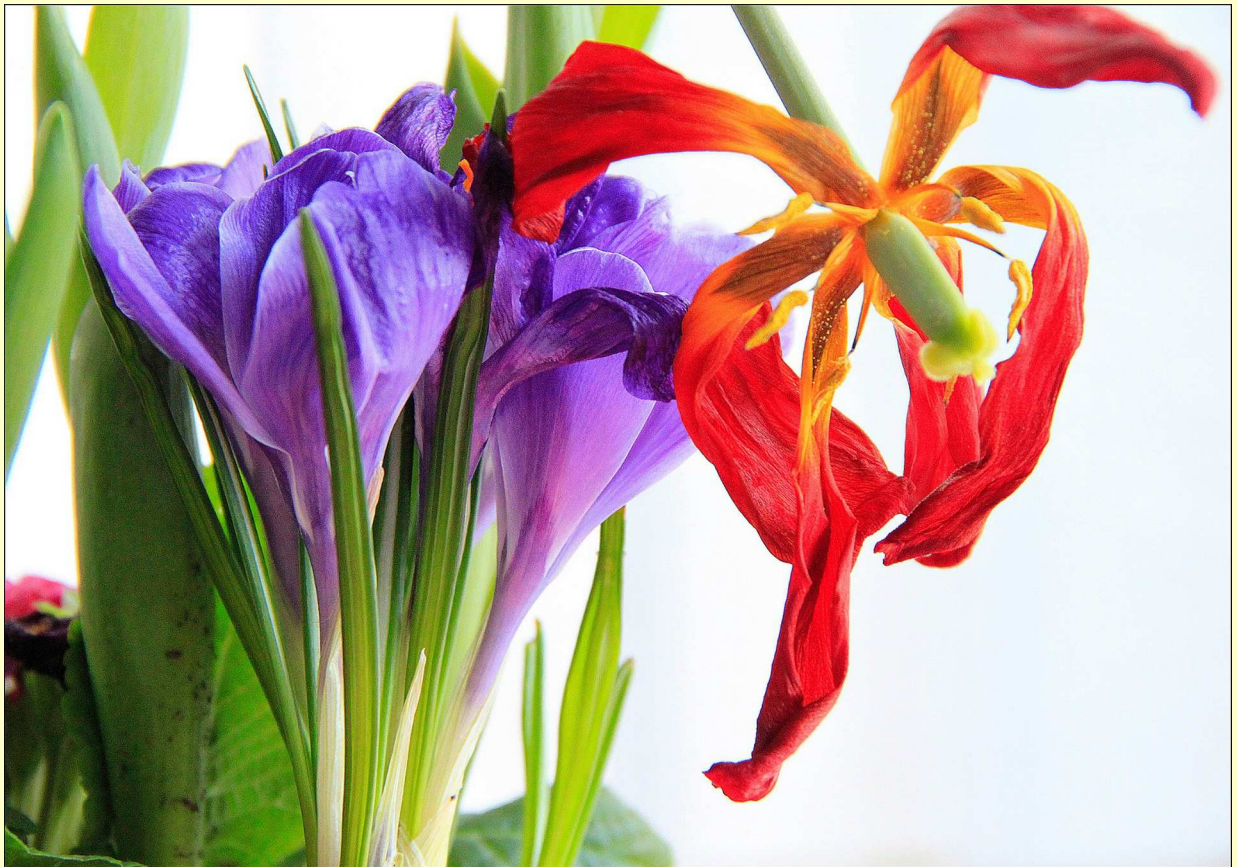


*Hope for our
Highs and Lows*



Marja Bergen

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HOPE FOR OUR HIGHS AND LOWS

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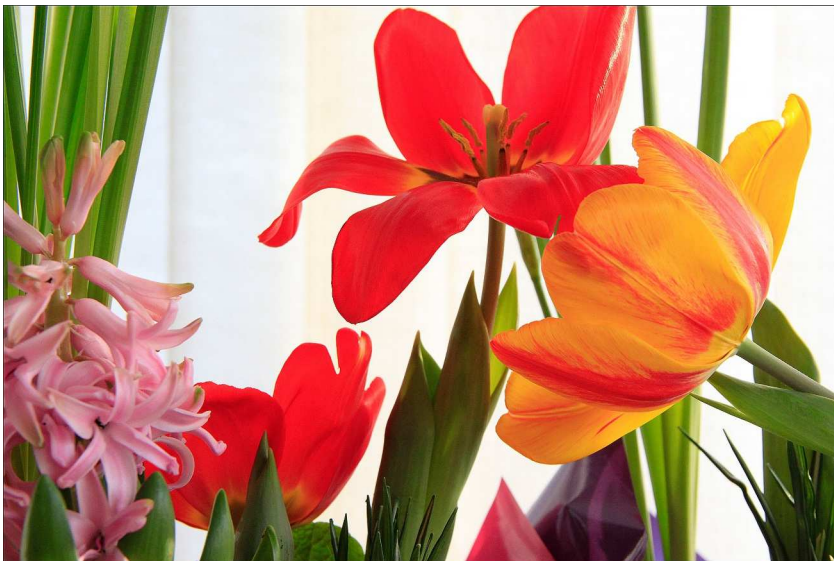
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I dedicate this book to my good friend Royd Hilstad. This godly man gave much of himself to help me through rough times. I'm very grateful for what he has done for me.



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In 2014, when I put together the first *Highs and Lows* book, I photographed crocuses growing in a pot which I had recently purchased. I loved watching those purple blooms as they grew and went through their various changes. Those photos became a part of that book, spread throughout its pages. At the time I wrote, “The crocuses became a symbol to me of the new life we all pray for. They became a symbol of hope.”

As I began working on this book, I also photographed spring flowers. I bought three pots of bulbs: tulips, hyacinths and crocuses. The light coming in the windows of our condo was plentiful, providing wonderful photographic opportunities.

Every time I walked past the plants I couldn’t help picking up my camera and taking a few more pictures. Many might think my effort excessive, and maybe it was. But taking a few hundred pictures ensured that I had some good material to choose from. Not only that, the photography gave me great joy.

I’m very happy to have been able to illustrate this book with these colourful flowers. For me, once again, they are a symbol of new life and the hope it brings.

marja



Jesus' Love and Humility

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

Philippians 2:1-2

A few years ago an Iranian man told me, “I’m not very religious, but I have a soft spot in my heart for Jesus.”

What was it that made Jesus appealing to him?

In *Speaking of Jesus: The Art of Non-Evangelism*, author Carl Medearis who teaches Muslims about Jesus, tells how excited some are to hear stories about Jesus. Muslims don’t accept Jesus as God, instead believing Him to be a prophet. But many of them, though not believing in Christ the way we as His followers do, still love and admire Him as an amazing person. They see Him as a folk hero of sorts, a person who humbly did wonderful things for people in need.



It’s this humility and love that I also appreciate most about Jesus. As a follower of Christ, it’s this nature I would most like to emulate. In Philippians 2:4 Paul tells us: “*Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*” Can we do that?

As you read this, why not imagine the Jesus we worship today as the living and breathing person He was, joining us in our world? Could you imagine what it would be to spend time with Him as one of His disciples when He did His ministry.

To truly know Jesus, look at Him in human form – human, though God. While in the world He was as one of us, having needs like we have: feeling hunger, tiredness, pain and grief. Trying – somehow – to see Him like this would help us truly appreciate Him. It would enrich our understanding and intensify our love for Him.

What would it have been like to talk with Him, to eat meals with Him, to walk from town to town with Him? Imagine hearing Him tell His parables firsthand. How would His voice have sounded? Authoritative sometimes and, I suspect, gentle at other times.

What would He have said to you as you walked side by side with Him? He would most likely be a good listener when you had troubling things to talk over. Would He, like a close friend, have put His arm over your shoulder?

Around the fire at night might you and the other disciples join with Jesus to relax for fun and laughter? Surely, Jesus, as one of us, would have laughed. What did Jesus' laughter sound like? Was it the contagious kind, Him starting, and joyousness spreading throughout the group? How delightful it would have been to be part of that!

Or at other times, might the evenings around the fire have been time for quiet talk about life and how we felt about it? Or would talk at other times center around what Jesus had come into the world to do?

Imagine standing next to Jesus as He healed the blind, the crippled, the lepers. Imagine being there to see how well He treated those the world looked down on and stigmatized. He could have shown us how to care about them and respect them.

Remember how Jesus joined with those who were grieving the death of Lazarus? Jesus felt their pain and had compassion. He wept alongside them. If you were to spend such time with Jesus you too would witness the great love and compassion He has for hurting people - for people like you and me.

I'm wondering how spending time with Jesus two thousand years ago might have changed me. How I would have loved to learn His kind of love and humility firsthand!

But He *can* still teach us – even now. We *can* still spend time with Jesus – even today. He can *always* be our friend.

He Humbled Himself

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Philippians 2:3-4

One of my favourite books of the Bible is Paul's letter to the Philippians. I underlined so many of its verses that sometimes I think to myself – I might as well have underlined the whole thing. Such a lot of valuable material!

My favourite part of this book is the description of Christ's humility. If we've decided to follow Jesus, these verses are certainly worth studying. How amazing and what an inspiration it is to read: "[He] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.... And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:7-8)

This description of Jesus makes me want to be more like Him. He was a giving person who served others rather than asking to be served. I don't think the Bible asks us to die on a real cross as Jesus did, but when we're obedient to God's call on our lives we do end up with some kind of cross to bear. Much of what God asks us to do requires courage, strength and perseverance because the work can be challenging. Some of it may bring pain and suffering.

Yet in spite of this there is a joy in knowing we're not living for ourselves alone. There's a joy in the giving. Winston Churchill said it well: "We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give." I want to have that kind of life – a meaningful life.

This is such a great lesson! Yet I find that even though I've learned it and taken it to heart many times, I still forget as I get sucked into the daily busyness of life. Most days my concerns seem to involve looking after my own personal comforts. In thinking of my own difficulties I too often forget about others' needs. I forget that others have interests, important to them as mine are to me.

And that takes us back to the verses at the top of this piece: In humility we're asked to value others above ourselves, looking to their interest before looking to our own. That certainly speaks to the problem I have with self-centeredness when I talk with people! Paul encourages me to do better. He encourages me to listen to others, realizing that they too have stories. They too, want to talk about their lives. They too, have a need to share their struggles. They would benefit from talking about their joys.

Putting ourselves in another's shoes is all we need to do. Consider what it's like for them to be our friend. How can we be there for him or her today? We'll probably find that all we need to do is listen.



Because He Lives

“If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”

John 14:15-17

Before Jesus died, He promised to send his disciples the Holy Spirit, an advocate who would help them. This spirit came to the disciples, and will come to live within us too when we accept who Jesus is and what He said and did while He walked the earth. Jesus can always be with us – always within us.

Have you ever had a great teacher, one you adored because of the way he seemed to change your life? He taught lessons that helped your approach to life, improving your outlook. He inspired you to live in a way you had never imagined possible. Jesus is that kind of teacher. And He’s a lot more than that.

Through His spirit, Jesus can stay with us as companion, mentor, and friend - daily helping us know how best to live. Being aware of His presence within us will help us find a joy that nothing can take away. Jesus is always ready to listen, always ready to cheer us on, always eager to explore the world with us. Not only that. He fills us up with a presence that reveals His great love – a greater love than we could ever imagine. Love we can pass on to others.

When we draw near to Jesus whatever tough tasks we are called to, whatever pain or sorrow we may suffer, whatever trials we may experience, He is alive and at our side. Even now His light shines in our dark places, revealing hope and a meaningful future.

He said: *“...surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*
(Matthew 28:20)

Try reading the stories about Jesus. Turn to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in your Bible and you will learn how He befriended and helped the most unlikely individuals – those considered the outcasts and stigmatized of the world He lived in. Jesus taught us, and a great portion of the world today, how to live and love.



Where is Compassion, Love, Kindness?

*The Lord is gracious and compassionate,
Slow to anger and rich in love.*

Psalm 145:8

Compassion. Love. Kindness.

Who but our Lord has sufficient of these attributes available to us to meet the needs we sometimes have? Who can give us these when we're not doing well? God will. He will understand what we're going through when no one else seems to be there for us.

How badly we need God! How we need to cling to Him, especially when we feel let down by earthly friends! How vital it is to remember that we can trust Him to always be with us! Always.

When you've been in need of support, have you ever wished you had someone like yourself in your life? Someone who understands you and what you need? The thing is, there isn't anyone like you. The only One who fully knows you is your heavenly Father. He is the only One who can give the amount of love and compassion so essential when times are hard. And how great our longings for those sometimes are!

Why is life so often tough Lord? Why the loneliness that comes with it?

Is it perhaps because this is when we are more likely than ever to draw closer to you? Is it because when we hurt most we are more likely to seek you - more fervently to look for you? Yes, we must search for you Lord. Please call out to us to do that.

The trouble is that in the midst of our pain, we might not have anyone to remind us. We might forget about you and your presence with us. All too often you seem far away, further away than at any other time.

Yet how good it is when we remember to open our Bibles and find verses like the one above. Your love comes home to us once more, bringing relief from our lonely suffering: The Lord is compassionate and rich in love. When we read words like this, Lord, and truly take them in, it's as though you wrap your arms around us and fill our hearts with your peace. When life is hard, how wonderful to read your promises, to read about all you have to offer!

Though we hurt, Lord, and sometimes forget, please know that we trust the fountain of your compassion and love to always be available. When we respond to your invitation to spend time with you, your friendship is there. We don't have to feel alone. Your Word is always available, a place to meet you, a place where we can drink deeply, drawing sustenance to keep going.

How precious it is, Lord, to spend time with you!

We love you...and we know you're good.



*Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.*

Lamentations 3:22-23





Now I See

As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."

He called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Luke 18:35-38

In his book, *Love Walked Among Us*, author Paul E. Miller writes: "We instinctively know that love leads to commitment, so we look away when we see a beggar. We might have to pay if we look too closely and care too deeply. Loving means losing control of our schedule, our money, and our time. When we love we cease to be the master and become a servant."

As a result of the world's attitude towards him the life of this blind beggar must have been a very lonely one. Passersby probably didn't talk much to him, afraid to get involved. Many in this world are in such a position, even if they're not beggars. Disorders, disease, or disabilities of all kinds cause many to be avoided. I'm sure some of you might be in that category and able to identify.

The story about this blind man is a familiar one. It appears in all four Gospels, relating how Jesus healed him and the joy that brought. I've been wondering how I would feel if I were him. And it occurred to me that there was much more cause for joy here than the physical healing itself. Much more than what appears on the surface.

Come with me as we try, in whatever way we can, to understand what this healing might have meant to the blind man, and what it could mean to us if we had been him.

When He came near the man, Jesus drew close to him and asked:

“What do you want me to do for you?”

“Lord, I want to see,” he replied.

Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.”

Luke 18:41-42

If we were like the blind man, pretty well ignored by those around us, I expect we would have been surprised to have someone like Jesus, the great rabbi, pay attention to us. Very likely we would for years have been feeling we had less value than others. We were ill-thought of, though we had done no wrong – considered sinners.

To have someone bend over us and speak kindly, asking about our needs would be a source of joy in itself, even if there were no physical healing. Jesus made us feel that we mattered and that He cared. He treated us with compassion and love in a way we had never before experienced.

Imagine what that must have felt like!

This story shows us the kind of person Jesus was for the blind man. It shows us the kind of person Jesus can still be for us today.

We may not be blind, but everyone has tough times now and then due to illness and other problems. When that happens to us, we too have Jesus we can cry out to for help.

We may feel as though the world is passing us by, ignoring us, not interested in our needs. But with love Jesus comes, bending over us as He bent over the blind man so many years ago. With compassion He reaches into our hearts where we most need healing. He tells us He will be the friend we’ve longed for. We are valued. And we no longer need to be alone.

This is joy.

Time with God

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

Mark 1:35

It's great to spend time with a good friend. Easy times. Comfortable be-who-you-are times. Nothing forced. I believe this is how God wants us to spend time with Him too.

The best way to get to know someone intimately, including God, is to spend such time with him. Relaxing and reflecting together, quietly discussing what matters to us, shedding tears when we're sad, sharing our joys and our pains. Maybe even sharing in God's pain as well as our own?

The trouble for most of us is building such time with God into our schedules. I'm fortunate. I don't have a job to go to. I happen to be an early riser as well. Making time is not a struggle for me. Yet it's important to reserve thirty or sixty minutes of the morning for God. We need to try for that. Going to bed earlier would help make that happen.

Morning is the best time because the stresses of the day have not yet hit. Distractions have not had a chance to develop. This should be a solitary time, spent with God alone. Holy time.

I love my early mornings. It's beyond doubt the best part of my day. Sitting in the darkened living room, a circle of light cast on me from the ceiling above, I journal and tell God the first things that come to mind: yesterday's stuff, today's stuff. good stuff, painful stuff. As I write, God helps me sort through things that might have been bothering me. I ask Him to show me what I could bring to the day. I share with Him the kinds of things I might share with a good friend. I sense His response. He comforts me and He leads me.

Sometimes the first thing I do when I get up is a Sudoku puzzle. Working with numbers helps clear my mind, preparing it for the rest of the morning. Sudoku puzzles calm and settle my mind. I know others who feel the same way. Even here I feel God's presence. As I puzzle, God gives me bits of things to think about. I scribble them in the margin.

Holy time does not only involve holy activities like Bible reading and prayer. And it isn't necessary to follow a set pattern when we spend time with God. There's a variety of things we could do in God's presence. I'm sure God wants us to feel free to be with Him in whatever ways are best for us.

But we mustn't forget the basics. Reading the Bible is one and prayer is the other. We can pray through our journaling. But don't be tempted to do all the talking. It's only fair to listen to what God has to say as well. We'll hear Him speak through our Bible.

God has much to tell us. Much that could help us as we navigate the complexities of life. And, when we read what God says to us in His Word, there is evermore for us to talk with Him about - evermore to guide us. This is what a good relationship looks like: we talk to God and God talks to us. A closeness develops. We more fully appreciate God and our love for Him grows.

Can you think of a better friend to spend time with?



Ashamed No Longer

When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

Mark 5:27-29

As Jesus was walking toward the home of Jairus, a synagogue leader, to heal his daughter, the usual crowd gathered around Him. Amongst them was a desperate woman who had suffered from vaginal bleeding for twelve years. Medical treatment had cost her all she had but did not help.

Her condition caused physical weakness and other health problems. But almost as serious was the shame it brought her. She was considered unclean, which meant that everyone she touched would be considered unclean as well. Neither was she permitted to enter the temple.

Have you ever felt ashamed about embarrassing things you've done? About embarrassing illnesses, disorders or other health conditions you might have?

If you are one of the many who have, you will understand how this woman felt. Shame makes a person feel worthless, disrespected, hopeless as a person who will ever be accepted by others. "Dirty."

Yet she believed that Jesus could heal her if she could only get close enough to Him. But how could she do that with all those people crowding around Him? If she wanted Him to heal her she would have to tell Him her problem, as Jairus had done. But what shame that would bring her! Everyone would hear and realize that she, an unclean person, had touched so many. Shame upon shame!

And so, seeing that asking Jesus to heal her was not an option, she thought, *"If I just touch His clothes I will be healed."* So she drew close to Him and touched a corner of His cloak, not thinking He

would notice. *Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"* (verses 28-30)

When the woman identified herself, Jesus asked her to do the unthinkable – to openly tell her story. Trembling in fear at His feet, she poured out her shame in front of everyone.

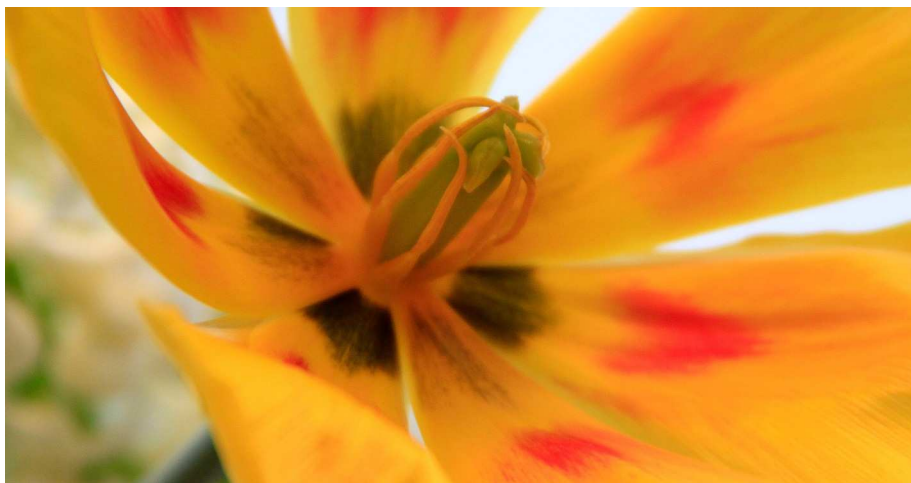
Jesus must have been moved by this woman. He bent over her and said, *"Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."* (verse 34)

He called her "daughter." It must have been a wonderful thing for her to hear! After twelve years of living with shame, someone showed acceptance and love.

What does this story mean to you? What might Jesus do for you?

Although we may not experience a physical cure from illness in this lifetime, our faith in Jesus can bring healing in other ways. He sees who we are on the inside and will bring healing to our heart and soul. We don't need to feel shame before Him.

Maybe you too will hear Him tell you, as He told the woman in this story: "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."



A Visit with Jesus

Jesus reached the spot where Zacchaeus was. He looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay at your house today." So Zacchaeus came down at once and welcomed Him gladly.

Luke 19:5-6

A while ago I took a taxi ride for the first time in eight months. To my surprise, the driver greeted me by name. He knew where I had lived before I moved and he remembered where I had always wanted to go. At one time I frequently took taxis very early in the morning to my volunteer work. The person who drove me this last Thursday was one of many drivers I had and yet he knew me!

Amazing! Can you understand how I must have felt?

This experience helps me understand how Zacchaeus must have felt as he sat in the sycamore tree to get a good view of Jesus passing by. I understand how he must have felt to have Jesus call him by name. He had not realized Jesus even knew him. And then to have Jesus tell him He was coming to spend time with him at his home! Jesus, this person who Zacchaeus, along with so many others, was eager to see and hear. He must have felt very special.

Wouldn't you feel that way too? Imagine if it were you...

We all know the story: Zacchaeus was a wealthy tax collector, despised because he, like most tax collectors in his day, was dishonest and cheated people out of their money. I imagine he must have been an unhappy and lonely man.

If we, like Zacchaeus, were visiting with Jesus in our home, what would Jesus say to us? I'm just guessing, but because of what I know of Him, I would think Jesus would tell us that He believes in us because we love Him and have searched for Him and found Him. I believe too that He might have told us He wants us to work with Him to make the world a better place.

How would you feel if you heard Jesus tell you – as He has told so many – that He has work for you to do?

Would it scare you? Would you feel overwhelmed? Would you say to Him: “Who? Me? But I’m so small.

Or would you be stirred as I and so many have been? When I first read Jesus’ words: “*with God all things are possible.*” (Matthew 19:26) I was so inspired. Think of the difference believing that promise could make in our lives! Can you imagine all that might be possible? What became possible in Zacchaeus’s life?

At the end of his visit with Jesus “...*Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.’*” (Matthew 19:8) Spending time with Jesus and talking with Him – perhaps about the kind of things we discussed here – changed Zacchaeus in a big way. I wonder how it would change us? Would life be more meaningful?

Many of us have lost direction and have come to think there’s nothing to live for beyond ourselves alone. But Jesus tells us that through Him we can have a life worth living – a life where we will discover what we can do to help build God’s kingdom, a world according to God’s plans.

Today Jesus is telling us: “I need you.” In His love, God stoops down from His throne, and invites us to follow Him – to partner with Him. No matter how small we may think we are, no matter what struggles or disabilities we may live with, God values us as people He can use us – in whatever ways we are personally able to manage. *With Him all kinds of things are possible.*

In the midst of what you’re dealing with, is Jesus calling your name?

But God is Good

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.
His love endures forever.*

Psalm 136:1

When you see beautiful things growing in the midst of ugliness, not only surviving but thriving, doesn't that amaze you? I don't know about you, but seeing life grow beautifully in the midst of chaos moves me to exclaim, "But God is good...Thank you, God!"

When, in the midst of a deep sadness, I'm still able to recognize God's goodness, just saying "But God is good" makes me feel better. The words help me realize the truth. God *is* good. Saying it helps me know it in the depths of my heart. My mood shifts, even if only a little.

Verbalizing how good God is when we're in a dark or messy place, will help us believe it. Saying it while thinking back to those times when God was so obviously present for us will lift our spirits. We will believe that God is good.

He was yesterday, He is today, and He always will be.

Though God's goodness may not be evident at this moment, try to remember God's goodness, even when you were in the midst of trouble. Think back to those times He helped make you aware of Himself. Think about those days when you were healthier and happier - when everything was fine. Though you might be hurting now, the God you remember from yesterday is the same God who is with you today.

This God who is so full of deep love for you is, through Jesus Christ, feeling your pain along with you. Jesus knows you, understands you, and has compassion. You are not alone.

Our God is good – so very good – and He is with us. Always.



In Pastures Green

*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters*

Psalm 23:1-2

Do you ever have days when everything goes wrong? I had an especially bad one a while ago.

I was in a grocery store. The clerk had rung up my bill, but when I looked for my credit card it wasn't where it usually is. I panicked. Thankfully I live close by. The clerk held on to my groceries and not too long after I returned with my husband's card. How it embarrassed me!

Returning home at dinner time, I felt too stressed to eat. All I could do was lie on the sofa, trying my best to settle down. Yet no matter how I tried, I couldn't come to rest.

Ever have that kind of day? Ever feel like everything's wrong with your world and you feel beside yourself? Ever been so stressed that everything irks you? What a relief it would be to receive God's peace! To truly come to rest.

But how?

Phillip Keller wrote a wonderful little book describing a shepherd's role in looking after his sheep. In *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* Keller explains what a sheep's needs are. He describes the difficulty they have relaxing enough to rest. He shows how important an earthly shepherd is to his sheep when they need to lie down. The shepherd "makes them lie down." Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is important to us in the same way. We are the sheep of His pasture.

Keller writes about the many disturbing influences that keep sheep from resting. To be at rest, sheep need freedom from fear, stress, aggravation and hunger. We all probably need such freedom to be able to rest well.

Sheep receive relief from fear and stress from their shepherd. Rest for us is possible in the same way. We have Jesus, our Good Shepherd with us, calming us, helping us find the peace we need.

Sheep know their shepherd. He's the only person whose presence makes it possible for them to be content and quiet, able to lie down. They don't trust the next door neighbour. The only person they will trust is their own shepherd.

Jesus, is the same for us. By being aware of Christ's presence, fully trusting Him and the peace that only He can give, we find rest. Stress, aggravations and anxiety gradually fade away.

Keller writes: "It is the humble heart walking quietly and contentedly in the close and intimate companionship of Christ that is at rest, that can relax, simply glad to lie down and let the world go by."

I like the first part of Keller's statement. But I have trouble with the last few words - "letting the world go by." The way I see it, letting the world go by may be all right for a while as we get some rest. But in the world we live in, God can bring us peace and a restful spirit even while we actively do what He calls us to do.

When we keep our Good Shepherd close and follow Him, many things become possible.



*“Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.”*

Isaiah 43:18-19



Lost no More

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

Luke 7:36-38

When my son Jeff was two he came down with epiglottitis, a condition where the epiglottis in the back of the throat swells. His air supply was rapidly being cut off. We rushed him to hospital in the middle of the night where he immediately went into surgery.

Early the next morning I went to see him. The moment I walked through the door, Jeff burst out crying. But he cried without making a sound. To save his life, the surgeon had to create an opening in his neck into the trachea. A tube was inserted to provide airflow. For a while he was not able to talk. I've never seen him so relieved to see me, showing such great need for me, longing for someone familiar, someone who loved him. I took him on my knees, and held him close.

Jeff's emotional reaction to me helps me understand how the woman's emotional reaction to Jesus in the above story might have come about. Both had been separated from a source of love while undergoing difficult times. The woman felt great relief, as my son did.

I wonder if the woman, thought to be a prostitute, instinctively recognized Jesus as someone who regarded her as a special person, someone He deeply loved. Did she recognize Him in the way someone might recognize a long lost mother or father whose love she vaguely remembers but hasn't felt for a long time?

What would life have been like for her, making a living by giving herself to strange men? How would she have felt about herself? Unclean? Worthless? Very likely. What she needed was someone to show her real love – someone who would love her for her heart, not her body. Did she even recognize that need in herself? Or did she simply experience an emptiness, an emptiness she had not been able to fill?

Then Jesus came along, the person who could offer love and who could fill the emptiness she had inside. She was overwhelmed.

Her tears tumbled down like the tears of a child. In the greatest expression of gratitude, one that she didn't plan and couldn't have helped, they spilled over Jesus' feet as He was reclining. With love, and in an act of worship, she wiped His feet with her long hair. She kissed them and poured perfume over them.

For so long she had been without care or guidance, lost in a world that didn't care about her as a person – a world where others received love, but not her. She knew Jesus' reputation for kindness and compassion. She had heard how He loves and understands, even those deemed most sinful. He promised the kind of love a parent might show a child. How she longed for that! In Jesus she found it. In fact, she found much more. In Jesus she found a love greater than any other love in the world.

The woman's tears gave expression to the huge release she felt, knowing that Jesus would forgive her sins and not judge in the way the world judged her. With His forgiveness He gave her opportunity for a new life.

This woman's experience can be true for you and me as well. We too can approach Jesus, grateful for his love, releasing all that is painful inside. Better than anyone or anything in this world, Jesus can provide what we need: compassion, love, forgiveness. He can help us get a fresh start. We will hear Him say:

“I love you deeply. You are clean and you belong to me.”

Loved

...a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.

Luke 10:33-34

The above is part of the story Jesus told to an expert of the law who had asked Him what he should do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked the man what the Law said about it. He answered correctly: “*‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’*”; and, “*‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’*” Jesus replied. “*Do this and you will live.*”

But the lawyer had another question for Him: “*And who is my neighbor?*” To answer him, Jesus proceeded to tell him the story of The Good Samaritan:

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.”

Luke 10:30-33

Most of us know the story quite well, but have you thought exactly what it means? What would it mean to you if you were that man lying by the side of the road, desperately in need of help? How would you feel to be ignored by the Pharisee, a priest who has taught you how to love God and others? And yet this “godly” man moves on without another glance. He’s finding himself too busy. Would that affect your faith? It shouldn’t.

The Levite also passed by, another religious person who didn’t want to get involved. Another person who believes we need to love God and others, though he doesn’t himself have God’s love in him to share.

But how would you feel as you lay there, when a Samaritan, a foreigner who is considered an outcast by your Jewish people, finds you – a Jewish man – and takes pity? In spite of threats from more robbers, he pauses in his travels and takes time to tend to your needs. Think of the relief!

What a comfort to be cared for by a compassionate person as he treats your wounds in sympathy with your pain! He pours on healing oil and wine from the provisions he carries, not just dabbing these on, but pouring them – generously. Doesn't that bring to mind the great love God lavishes on us? (1 John 3:1) The Samaritan had a heart like His – full of love, ready to care for you in every way he is able.

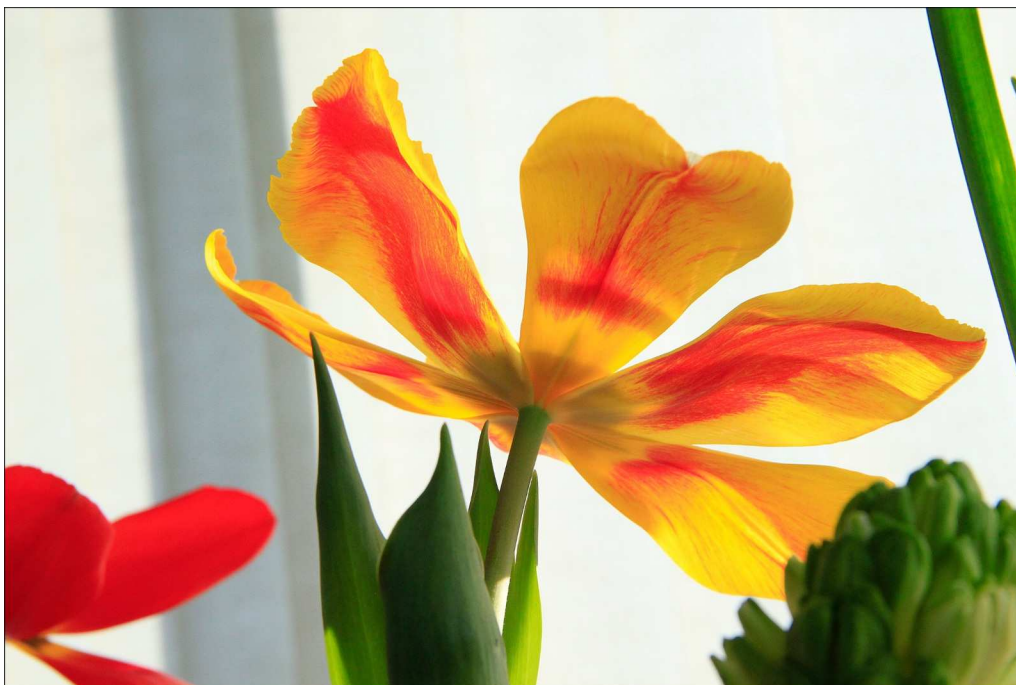
Returning to the Scripture, Jesus asks:

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” Luke 10:36-37





Your Presence - Always There

*Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

Psalm 139:7-12

Lord, there are times of painful darkness when I truly don't feel you with me, no matter how I long for you. Oh, I know you're there – in a bookish kind of way I do. The Bible tells me you are. But I don't feel your love or your peace or your joy. I feel so utterly uncared for and alone. All around is the cold of a dark night. How could I possibly find you again, Lord? What must I do?

"But child," you say, "I'm always with you – in the dark of night or the brightness of day. Trust me. Though you may not sense me with you, I'm always there. My love for you does not dim with the night. How very much I love you!"

But Lord, what must I do to actually experience your presence again? You're so far away. In fact, there are times when I feel absolutely abandoned. I fear that I'll always be alone – far from your love. Lord, I can't live like this. Being without you in this dark night is as no existence at all. Lord, where are you?

"Dear child, please don't worry so much. I understand where your feelings come from. I feel along with you, because I too once went through unbearable pain. I too experienced abandonment. Alone.

"Suffering alone is the worst of all sufferings. But please know I'm here. Know that I will stay with you throughout this darkness. Yes, though you may not realize it, you are in my presence – always."

"Trust in me as I care for you. You are my child and I will never let you go. You are of utmost importance to me. I will always love you – through all the ups and downs. Can you feel my arms around you? Believe me, they're there."



Lavish Love

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

1 John 3:1

Many of us lose our appetites when we're spiralling downward. It happens to me. Even the finest meal becomes tasteless and causes me to push it aside. It occurred to me that this happens to us spiritually as well when we're down. Although we hunger for God, we are not able to taste His goodness in the way we do when we're well. The poor appetite we have for physical food extends to spiritual food.

Are we looking for, and finding, nourishment in God's love? We need Him. Are we soaking up all He has to give us?

I've been thinking a lot about healing – the kind of healing we'd like to receive for our emotional pain. And I pray to God:

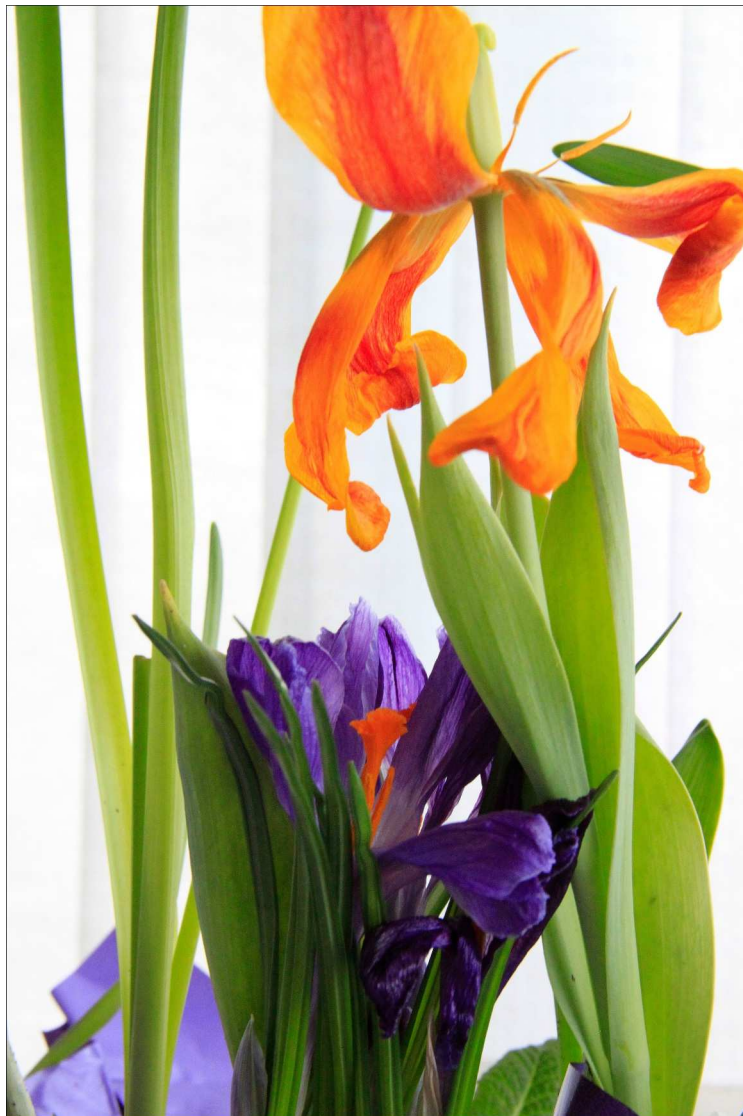
"I know you heal, Lord. I believe you heal. But so often your healing touch seems beyond our reach. How can it be ours?"

"Lord, you say – and I believe – that it's through your love, accepted in trust, that we can find healing. We need to surrender, to relinquish all to you. But how can we when we're held so tightly captive by the pain? How can we release all the stress and what hurts us and accept your great love? You have the love that comforts, the love that gives peace. You are able to give the kind of love that holds us in your arms when we need the security that only One like you can give."

"Your Word talks about the love you 'lavished on us.' That wonderful word, 'lavished,' speaks to me. It encourages me. It shows that there is no doubt – absolutely no doubt – that your love is wholehearted and real. Your love is big and huge and available to us all. Your love for us is an overflowing love that knows no bounds. It is like a banquet, rich with mouth-watering food. Plenty. Far beyond our needs."

“Help us Lord to relax and let go of the pain, leaving it with you. Help us to hunger for, and accept, your lavish love. Help us to build an appetite so we can partake in the abundance of your table, that abundance you give to us in love. Help us, Lord, to eat and fully enjoy what you offer.

“Given time I know we'll find healing. Little by little you will heal us.”



He Weeps with us

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

"Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

Jesus wept.

John 11:32-35

Some think that being emotional is something to be ashamed of. They believe feelings need to be kept hidden from the world. They tell us to be strong and "hold it in." Yet the Bible shows that Jesus Himself had strong emotions. And it's probably those very emotions that gave him the compassion and deep love He expressed throughout His ministry. He was able to put Himself in others' shoes and feel what they felt. That's what happened in the above story when Lazarus had died.

Jesus wept with His friends.

Throughout the Gospels Jesus shows His compassion for others - for people like you and me. Just a few examples:

- *"I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."*
(Matthew 15:32)
- *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*
(Matthew 9:36)
- *When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."* (Luke 7:13)

When we grieve and call out, Jesus comes to us too, in the way He came to Mary and Martha. He joins with us in our pain. Though He is the Son of God, Jesus humbles Himself to share in our human nature and in our suffering as the sinful mortals we are. The Bible says that He is as an older brother to us – human but divine. (Hebrews 2:11)

As I've gone through hard times, I've discovered that Jesus will share in my suffering when I let Him. And I've learned that, as His human sister, I can share in His suffering as well.

Jesus puts Himself in our shoes and feels compassion for us in our troubles. But can't we do the same for Him? Can we feel how it must have been for Him in the Garden of Gethsemane when He needed His disciples and they fell asleep? Can we feel the pain of rejection He suffered to be treated as evil by the very people He had ministered to – people whom He loved? How can we help but weep as we see Him hanging on the cross, not thinking about Himself, but you and me as He cried out: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* (Luke 23:34)

Can we feel His pain? It isn't easy, and yet would be good for us to try.

Jesus comes alongside us, helping us carry our pain – feeling our grief. Can we be moved as He is moved? Can we join with Him in fellowship – suffering with Him as He suffers with us? Heart touching heart, tears joining tears, participating in His suffering as He participates in ours? Brothers and sisters in God's family.

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:16-17, ESV)

There's nothing wrong with having strong emotions. If you find yourself that way, don't be ashamed. You'll have something in common with our dear Lord Jesus.



Gratitude and Wellness

Then [Jesus] said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

Luke 17:19

Luke 17: 11-19 tells the story about ten lepers Jesus healed. He instructed the ten to show themselves to the priests. On their way there, they were cleansed. Only one of them, when he saw that he was healed, came back to Jesus, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked Him for what He had done.

But Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” (The man was a Samaritan.) Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” (Luke 17:17-19)

Why did Jesus say that to him? Hadn't He already healed him? Was He healing him a second time?

I believe what Jesus meant was that showing his gratitude made the man well in the true sense of the word. He received complete wholeness, a life he could live to the full. Being thankful is necessary if we're going to live this kind of life.

How could this apply to our lives? Would gratitude give us a life of wholeness and fullness too?

We don't have to go far to find out.

Have you ever noticed the feeling of joy you feel when you thank God for something? Even the smallest things become a source of joy when we look at them with appreciation, one item at a time. I especially notice that happening to me when I examine the flowers in an early spring garden. After a long winter, it's a delight to see them blooming. I can't help but thank God for them. And as I do so I notice the joy rise up within me. My thanks multiplies the joy.

The same kind of joy comes to me when I photograph flowers. I show my appreciation to God by trying to capture the beauty with my camera. Looking through my viewfinder at what God has made thrills me. Through photography I thank Him.

Imagine how it would be if we expressed our thanks to God on a regular basis as we go through our days. We'll find we have many things we could thank Him for? I believe it would make an amazing difference to our lives.

Maybe we should adopt a gratitude habit. Like the Samaritan leper, we too could live life to the full.



*The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.*

Zephaniah 3:17 (ESV)



Meeting Jesus

“Do you believe in the Son of Man?” “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.” Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

John 9:35-38

The above Scripture (part of the story in John 9:1-41) describes what happened after Jesus healed a blind man on the Sabbath. When the man was brought before the Pharisees they questioned him to determine if it had been Jesus who healed him, suspecting Jesus to be breaking their law by working on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were proud and arrogant religious leaders. They had contempt for Jesus who challenged the validity of their rules and regulations.

When they didn't get answers from the healed man, the Pharisees interrogated his parents. His parents would not answer either, fearing they would be shut out of the synagogue.

When the Pharisees again turned to the man, hoping to hear something that would incriminate Jesus, the man avoided giving straight answers. They abused and insulted him, accusing him of being Jesus' disciple. But he stood firm. The Pharisees responded by casting him out of the synagogue.

So here he was, rejected, shut out of his religious community. That must have been painful. Where would he join with others to worship God? How would you feel if you had to leave your church, leaving everyone and everything you knew behind?

It was at this point that Jesus came looking for the man he had healed and revealed Himself to him. Encountering Jesus this way was welcome consolation for the pain he had suffered. To have Jesus seek him out after such rejection was exactly what he needed. The man drew closer to Him than he would have if he had not been cast out of the synagogue. Now he *truly* met Jesus. The man turned to Him and worshiped Him.

Many of us have had occasions when we were rejected. For some the painful memories seem to repeat themselves over and over. As long as people are human this kind of situation can happen.

How can we deal with the pain?

One thing we can be sure of is that Jesus never rejects us. When we believe in Him, He will always be there for us. He does not wait for us to come to Him, but *He's* the one who will come to us as He did for the man in this story.

When Jesus comes during especially hard times we can experience Him in ways unlike any others. The love we receive when we most need it – when we're hurting badly – tends to affect us more deeply than any other. It's healing.

When you're hurting think of where Jesus might be in all this. Think of the man He was when He walked the earth two thousand years ago. Bring to mind the stories of love and compassion He showed the prostitute, the tax collector, the blind man – all the people He befriended and healed. You will know that He's ready to come to you too. Do you believe?

Jesus' love is still alive today – here for you and me.



"Don't Cry"

As he [Jesus] approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”

Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

Luke 7:12-15

Having a hard time? I have been lately. Will you join with me as I deal with it and try to bring closure?

Think back to when you were youngsters and something bad happened to you: something that meant a lot to you, broken or lost; a friend you loved, ignoring you; a parent going on a trip, leaving you behind. Remember the comfort of having your mom or dad telling you, “Don’t cry. Everything will be alright. I’m here.” How encouraging those words can be when they come from someone who cares about you!

Do you need that kind of encouragement now? Jesus can give it to you like He did to the widow.

Filled with love and compassion, Jesus told the widow “Don’t cry.” And he brought her son to life again.

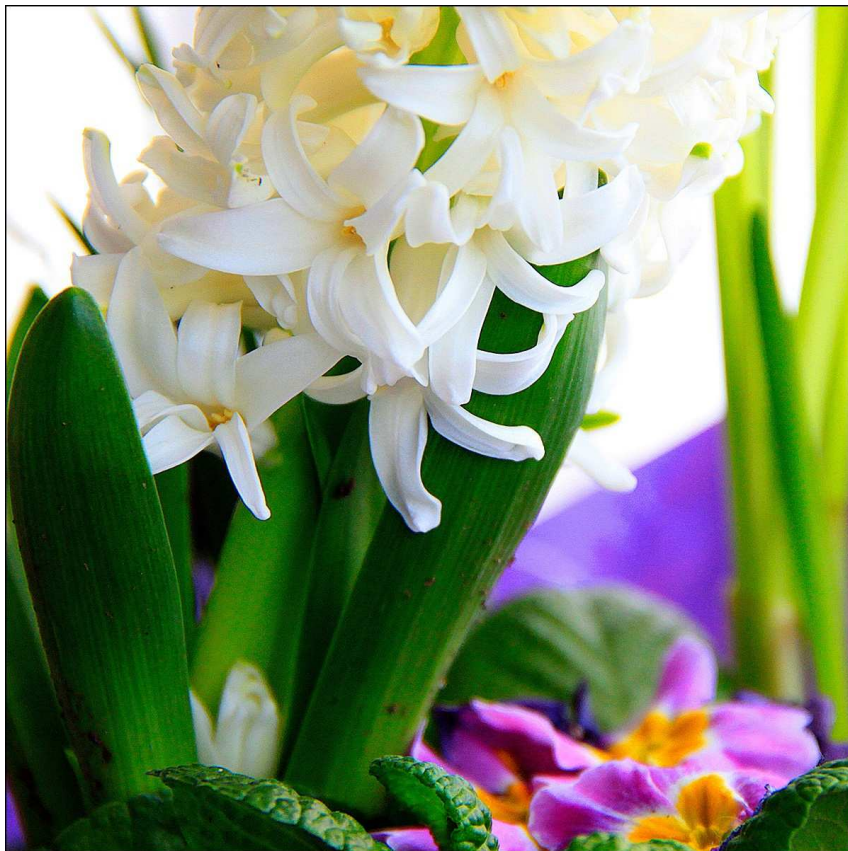
With compassion He says the same to each of us when we’re in pain or suffering great loss: “Don’t cry, I’m here.” His heart goes out to us as He says, “I love you. I care about how you feel. I want to make things right for you again. Trust me.”

Daily Jesus prepares us for a return to wholeness. All we have to do is to accept that He is able to do that. We can trust His healing hand. Trust that He loves us, no matter what we've been through, no matter what our behaviour, no matter what our misperceptions or disappointments might have been.

We don't have to cry on our own for the irretrievable. Jesus will join us in our sorrow and help us move on, as difficult as it may be.

“Don't cry!”

Jesus will always love us, even when we don't feel like we're the same person we once were. God will bring us back. The Master Healer will revive us.



Remembering God

*“I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
I will consider all your works
and meditate on all your mighty deeds.”*

Psalm 77:11-12

When you read what precedes these verses in Psalm 77 you'll see how they follow expressions of great despair. Many of us have been in such despair. We wallow in a mire of godless messages going round and round in our heads. Often we're so focused on our ugly feelings and sense of hopelessness that we forget God is there, waiting for us to turn to Him.

We know when we've wandered too far away from God when a non-believing friend, desperate to help, persuades us to go to the God we believe in. We know when we can't find it in us to pray on our own as usual, needing a brother or sister in Christ to pray with us.. We know when we're calling the crisis line too often, because we so badly need to talk to someone.

Forgetting God is a bad place to be. But something good can come out of it too. At times like this we might come to see how lost we are and how very much we need God. We realize how we've forgotten all He is and all He can offer. His love, compassion and strength. We've forgotten what He has done for us in the past.

...And all we needed to do was to seek Him, to reach out to Him. How we need that reminder! What a blessing it is to remember!

Not long ago, in the midst of relentless struggles, I had forgotten the daily routine that kept me anchored in my faith. I usually enjoyed my early mornings, journaling, praying and reading my Bible. But during those troubled times I let it all go. And then – how quickly I failed to remember God! How quickly He had faded from my confused mind! God, who had helped me through stormy times! The God I trusted; the God who loves me, no matter what.

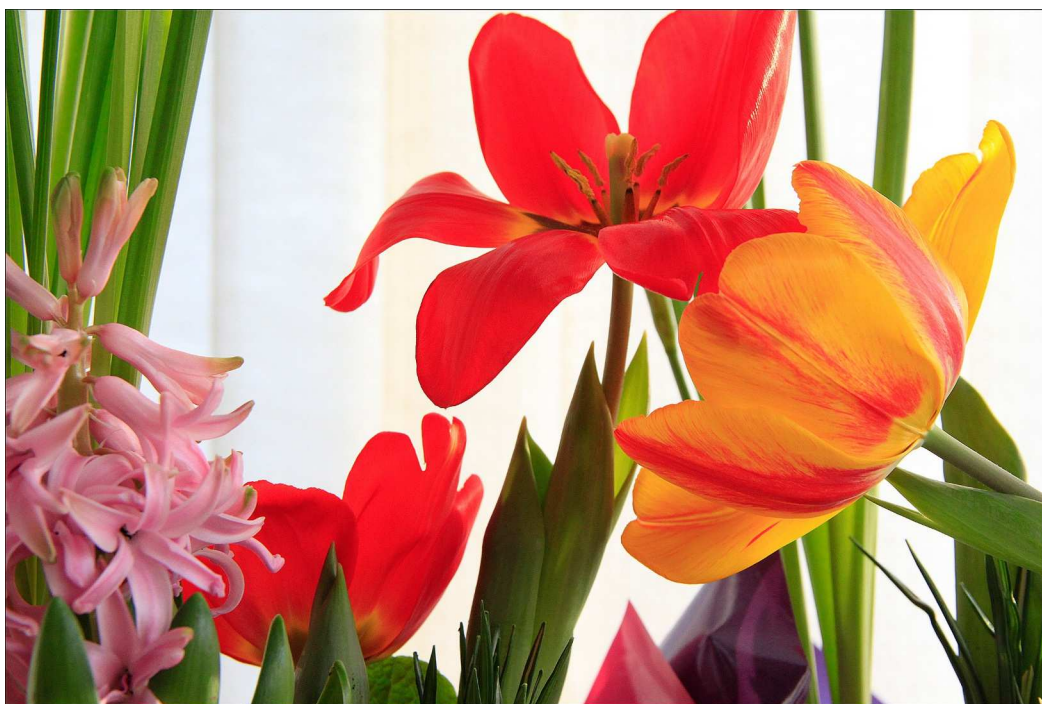
Have you ever forgotten?

And then...Do you remember how good it was to find God again? Still there, still ready to receive you back as His child. How good to know that His healing touch was still available! How good to know He was waiting for you to come back and trust Him again! All you had to do was reach out. All you needed to do was spend time with Him.

Don't be like me. Don't believe what you might be telling yourself – the hopelessness of your situation, your worthlessness, your feelings of inadequacy. Those are all lies that make you miserable. If you're not careful your mind will find a way to make them true. Unless you remember something greater – something much greater:

God is the God of the impossible. And He's there, waiting for you.

Now we just need to remember that.



At His Feet

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.

Luke 10:38-39

Isn't it great to see how eager so many children are to learn? It seems to me that Mary must have had such a childlike eagerness, sitting as close to Jesus as she was, clinging to His every word. He had wonderful lessons, many stories, and a love inside Him that He freely shared. In those days women were discouraged from learning. For Mary to sit closer to Jesus than His disciples and men from the community was unheard of. Yet Jesus welcomed her. He respected her. She was important to Him.

Although her sister had complained that she wasn't helping with the housework, Jesus encouraged Mary to stay and listen to Him. He told Martha, *"Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."* In other words, He did not want her to be deprived of anything as special as the spiritual food He was offering.

Why was Mary so eager to hear Jesus? What made Him so special? This teacher was different from any other man she had ever known. He spoke in a way she hadn't heard before. Jesus was wise, though humble. He revealed truth to Mary's hungry heart. By current standards He was a radical, showing compassion for the sick and befriending those who were considered outcasts. He spoke about a heavenly kingdom, one that she would not have to wait for, but one that had already arrived.

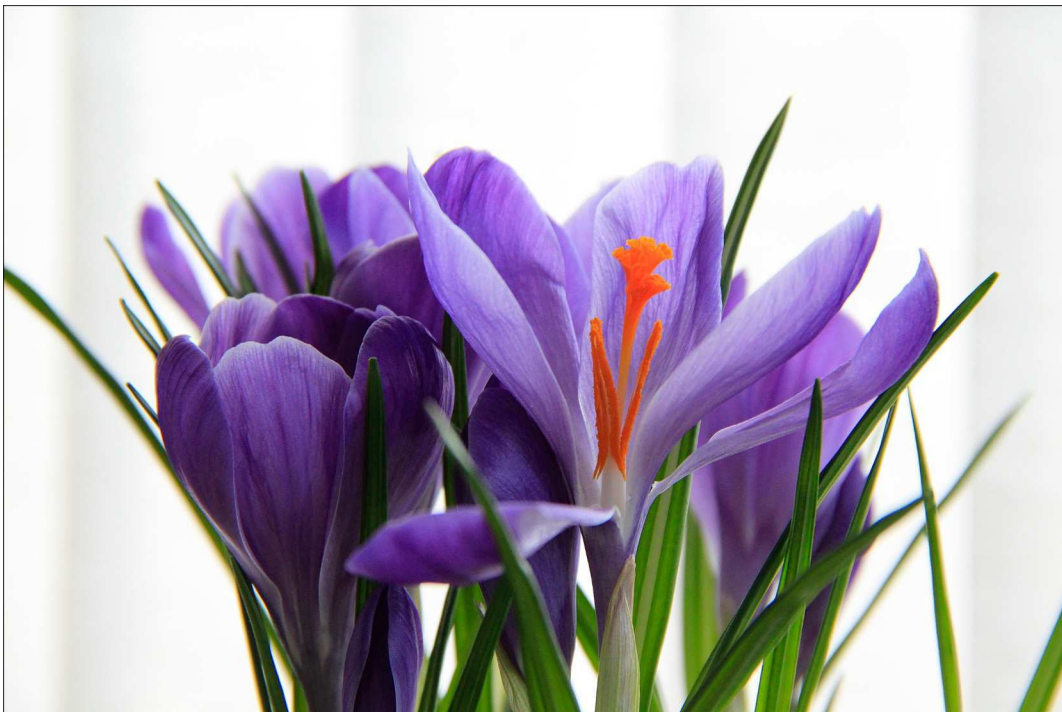
When I read about Mary I see her as someone who still has a child's heart within her. The abundant enthusiasm and openness she has for learning is very much like that of a youngster.



Does Mary remind you of yourself – today, or as you once were? Jesus once said “*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.*” (Matthew 19:14) I think Mary was like one of those children. Are you? Somewhere deep inside?

Are you, too, hungry for more of Jesus? Are you eager to worship Him? Would you like to find better closeness with Him? Maybe you're still an innocent searching for love but never finding enough to fill that hole you have inside. Maybe you're in need of a better sense of self-worth. Jesus can provide all those, as He did for Mary long ago.

The place Mary found at Jesus' feet is available to all of us. It's a place of comfort where you can be yourself, completely known and loved. It's a place where you'll be sure to find intimate friendship and spiritual rest. Spend some time there, and listen to the many things He has to tell you.



Come to Me

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30

Long ago when I was a new believer these were some of my favourite verses in the Bible. It seemed like they were written especially for me. Later I learned that Jesus had been talking to Jews who had been under oppression from the Pharisees, the religious leaders at the time. Nevertheless, this invitation from Jesus was one I personally wanted to respond to. I longed to come to Jesus, to His gentle and humble heart. I needed His love.

As I prepared this for you I thought of how it would have been if Jesus had spoken these words to us directly. What if He were to invite you and me for dinner so that He could personally tell us what He is offering? Of course, the setting for this Scripture was not truly a dinner, nor are we under the rule of oppressive religious leaders. However, I think with imagination we might capture how very special this invitation could be.

I appreciate this scripture as much as I do because I know it comes from Jesus, the compassionate rabbi with the radical teachings. This will be an evening to look forward to.

As we sit down to the table and start eating and drinking, Jesus speaks these tender words: *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened...”* Right away I for one think to myself, “He understands me!” Continuing on, He tells us how He knows about our hard times and our need for peace. He offers release from our many burdens: our anxieties, heavy responsibilities, feelings of meaninglessness. He expresses His concern for us.

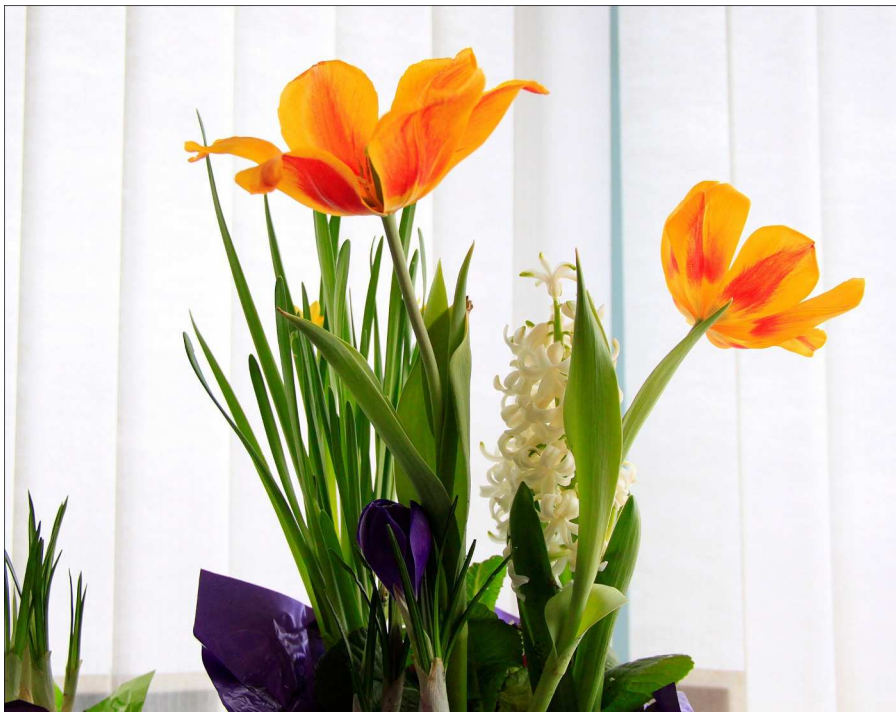
Our host offers us a way of living and worshiping that’s different from what the Pharisees have demanded. Under their leadership with its man-made rules and regulations, the true meaning of God’s law had become lost. But Jesus tells us we no longer need to be

yoked to the Pharisees in the way a pair of oxen might be yoked together as they pull their heavy loads. The Pharisees' yokes were a struggle to carry.

Jesus tells us there is a better way. He invites us to take on *His* yoke, to join together with Him, yielding to Him and learning from Him as He leads. We will find rest because Jesus' yoke fits well and He will be our partner, walking beside us as we carry our load.

Jesus' way offers relief from oppressive religious rule. He is not at all like the arrogant Pharisees. Life with Him promises to be meaningful and fulfilling. He tells us what God and His laws are really like. Jesus is humble and, as He talks, His love for us becomes obvious.

As we finish the meal, we savour the time we have left together, discovering the blessings and joy of being with Jesus. Our journey as a follower of Christ has begun. Little by little, we will learn to be more like Him. Our lives will change. We will find ourselves transformed.





*The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.*

Zephaniah 3:17





Marja Bergen has lived with bipolar disorder since 1965. She turned to God and began following Jesus twenty years later when she realized she could no longer live without Him.

Marja's book *Riding the Roller Coaster* was published in 1999, the beginning of her efforts to reduce the stigma held towards those living with mental health issues. Her second book *A Firm Place to Stand* came out in 2008, showing how one can find meaning in life in spite of severe struggles. Trying to reduce prejudice in the faith community, she has written many articles from the perspective of a Christian living with mental illness. The articles encouraged those who live with such problems.

In 2006 Marja founded the Christian peer support ministry *Living Room*. Thanks to media attention, news about *Living Room* spread. It quickly gained recognition as an effective model for faith-based mental health assistance. *Living Room* is now part of *Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries*. (www.sanctuary-ministries.com/contact)

Marja realized she found fulfillment in supporting others through her writing. In early 2013, this led to sending out devotionals via email to the contacts she had made over the years with people needing support. Being an avid photographer, she included photographs with the writings.

In 2014 she published selections of devotionals in a gift book called *Reflections for our Highs and Lows*. Today, in 2017, it's her pleasure to make available two more collections of writings: *Hope for our Highs and Lows* and *Highs and Lows for Our Inner Child*.

Marja lives in the Vancouver area with Wes, her husband of forty-eight years. She has a son Cornelius and daughter-in-law Jeannette.

Marja's website/blog is at www.marjabergen.com

A few years ago an Iranian man told author Marja Bergen, “I’m not very religious, but I have a soft spot in my heart for Jesus.”

What was it that made Jesus appealing to him? The author decided to find out by trying to put herself into the world in which Jesus lived and in that way to make Him come alive to readers.

Using devotional writings she tried to show who Jesus was as the man who walked the earth 2000 years ago – human but divine. You will read about what He did, what He said, and the changes He made in the lives He touched.

This book focuses mostly on Jesus, His life and ministry. You will have an opportunity to find out how it would have felt experiencing Jesus up close. You will learn how Jesus is there for you, even today.

Marja Bergen is the author of five books for people dealing with mental health issues. In her life with bipolar disorder, the effects of trauma, and features of BPD she has learned how faith can help one survive and thrive.

