

# IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBILITIES

2017 LENTEN DEVOTIONALS



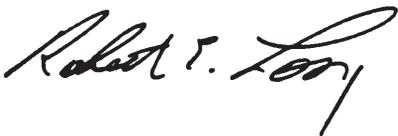
**St. Luke's**  
United Methodist Church

# Impossible Possibilities

Lent is the 40-day period (not counting Sundays) before Easter. Historically, it was a time of preparation for people who were going to be baptized on Easter. It continues to be a time when we prepare our hearts and minds for a better understanding of Easter.

The spiritual journey begins with Ash Wednesday, when we consider our mortality, and ends with the Resurrection of Christ, in which we realize our immortality in Him. To move from death to life eternal seems impossible - and it is. But the Heavenly Father sent His Son into the world to remind us that He makes the impossible, possible.

Join us for worship and through these daily devotionals as we explore "Impossible Possibilities."



Dr. Robert E. Long  
Senior Pastor



*When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. - Psalm 8:3-5*

It was on February 6, 1971, that perhaps the greatest golf shot was ever made. It was made with a six iron and covered a great distance.

The shot was not made on any golf course or driving range, nor did a professional golfer make the shot. It was made by Alan Shepard, the commander of Apollo 14 and the pilot of the lunar module *Antares*. Before piloting the Antares away from the moon, Shepard attached the head of a six iron to a telescoping pole. He hit two golf balls from the surface of the moon. The second swing connected and, as Shepard himself stated, it went, “miles and miles and miles.”

Striking the golf ball from the surface of the moon is an amazing feat that no one else can claim. What makes this golf shot all the more impressive is that Alan Shepard almost did not take the shot or a trip into space.

In 1961, Alan Shepard was the second man in history to go into space. He was the first American to do so. His first flight appeared to be his last flight. Shortly after Alan would be diagnosed with Meniere’s disease. This problem causes swelling in the inner ear and dizziness. There was no known cure. Shepard was grounded.

It was not until 1968, seven years after his space flight, that Shepard would learn of a possible cure for his infection. A doctor in California had developed a procedure that would relieve the pressure by inserting a small tube. He immediately went through the procedure and within the year he was restored to flight status. Shepard thought that he would never return to space, much less stand on the moon. But because a doctor was able to insert a small tube in his ear, Alan Shepard was able to hit the biggest golf shot in history.

Often our dreams seem out of reach. Because there are obstacles in our way that seem insurmountable, we often give up hope. There is always hope. As a people of faith we believe that God, the one who created the heavens and the earth, is with us. The one who spoke all things into existence is beside us as we take the journey of life. When things appear impossible to our eyes, I hope that we will remember that God, who is infinite in wisdom and power, is able to take us, “miles and miles and miles” beyond what we perceive to be impossible.

# Thursday, March 2

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.* - Ephesians 4:32

To live in a spirit of forgiveness is hard for some of us. I can forgive the person who cuts me off on the highway; I can forgive those who are rude and obnoxious in public; I can forgive family members for their lack of sensitivity because they were running late. But how do we forgive those who hurt us so intensely that the instant the hurt occurred, life changed forever? We live in a world of hurtful divorce, devastating layoffs, malicious gossip, and even just petty exaggerations. How do we forgive at those times? What do we do when someone hurts our child, bullies us, uses us, lies to us, especially when it's the very people who we trust to be honest and supportive?

When Jesus told His Disciples that one of them would deny and disown Him three times before the rooster crowed, they refused to believe. Their love and loyalty to Jesus wouldn't allow them to believe this prediction. But isn't that what happens in an injury to our emotions? When someone lies to us, gossips about us, bullies us, they have caused injury to our heart. They have denied and disowned us for an instant. As much as Peter loved Jesus, he still betrayed Him repeatedly. Yet Jesus returned and forgave Peter. Peter had denied Jesus three times; three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him to which Peter answered, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." With these words Jesus reinstated Peter as one of His dearest and strongest Disciples.

Even when we love our friends and family members, there are still those all too human moments when betrayal occurs. If we demand they repeat, "I love you" three times, has forgiveness occurred and has our broken heart instantly mended? I think forgiveness takes a bit more time and patience on all sides. But I think saying "I love you, I love you, I love you!" is a nice starting point.

God's unconditional love for me guides me to offer that same love and forgiveness to others who stand in need of my forgiveness. My goal today is to offer forgiveness where I have previously withheld it.

Sherry L. Pemberton, *Receptionist*

Lent is a time of reflection, meditation, sacrifice, and repentance. As we come to worship each week, we acknowledge the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We also kneel in prayer to receive the grace of the Almighty God. We recognize our need for forgiveness and mercy. We are challenged to give up our selfishness in order to pursue God's will for our lives.

Often we choose to give up habits or material items in order to bring us closer to God and allow us to focus our time, energy, and thoughts on spiritual things. These are all very meaningful ways to lay our hearts and minds before God.

However, I was recently reminded how easy it can be to give up things that really are trivial. A friend told me he was willing to give up fruits or vegetables. Another said he would gladly give up doing the laundry. And one more said he would give up raking leaves. While all teasing, it reminded me how quickly we will give away the things we already do not want to do, and how hard it is to really look introspectively at our selfish desires.

I believe God asks us to give up even greater burdens, like guilt over the past and over bad decisions, or mistakes that we have made. God wants us to let go of bitterness or resentment toward family members or friends for words or actions that were hurtful. God invites us to let go of the things that keep our hearts and minds from focusing on our spiritual growth.

These are the burdens that hinder us from being the whole persons God created us to be. When we are weighed down by the past or too easily distracted by our present occupations, we can easily miss what God has placed in front of us. When we focus our thoughts on these aspects of life, we are unable to experience the fullness of life found in Christ.

This year, I will probably give up something such as chocolate or caffeine. But I also pray that you will join me in examining our hearts and let God's offer of healing take away guilt, bitterness, resentment, jealousy, or anger for good! God wants each of us to know His love, to receive His hope, and to live a meaningful life every day - starting right now!

Rev. Phil Greenwald, *Executive Pastor of Administration*

## Saturday, March 4

Sometimes we underestimate our own power and ability. This can be especially true when it comes to expressing our faith. We may not feel comfortable praying aloud in a group, feel qualified to teach, or question whether God is really calling us to start that conversation or make that visit. We may not feel like we know what to do or how to do it when it comes to sharing our faith, either through our words, our service, or our example.

Jesus says in John 14:12 *“Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”* Can Jesus really be telling his disciples (or us) that we would do greater things than him? This seems impossible. Until we really start to think about it. God is doing his work to transform lives and he uses us to be a part of this transforming work. God has sent his Spirit to be with us, so we are not doing these things just on our own abilities, intellectual capabilities, or will – but God is with us.

If we want to do the “greater things” then first we must trust as the spirit leads and guides us. If he is calling us to call up a friend, mentor a young person, pray at a moment of crisis, or go to a place of need, then we should listen and obey. And we can know that God is with us and using us. It’s not just our words that we are called to share, but God’s words through us. As each of us takes a step of faith to go where God leads us and needs us, we are able to make a real difference of sharing God’s love in the world around us. Especially together, we can do greater things, and we all have a role. That’s what it means when we become the “hands and feet of Christ.” We are the body of Christ. Don’t let your insecurities or your weaknesses become stronger than the power of Christ that is in you. As we trust further in his power in us, we can do these greater things by doing our part to share his love with others.

Amy Givens, *Director of Youth Ministry*

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.* - Hebrews 13:2

I had a fraternity brother in college who, to me, was the epitome of a true Christian. He always had uplifting things to say, always went out of his way to make people's lives better, was always quick to pray with anyone in need. He was someone I always looked up to. It is at this point that I ought to let you know that my friend had an obsession. He was obsessed with Air Jordans. And by obsessed, I mean he collected them. He had more pairs of Air Jordans than I had pairs of shoes. They all were very important to him. He even organized them in his closet by color and preference.

I'll never forget the time we were in a group and headed to a ballgame. Outside the ballgame was a man that was begging for anything that anyone would give. This man was obviously down on his luck and in desperate need. Most of our group walked by like the man didn't even exist, but not my friend. He not only spoke to the man in need, he sat down on the ground beside him and began to have conversation with him. I let the group move on, because I wasn't about to miss this opportunity. As the conversation progressed, my friend noticed that the man didn't have any shoes. Without missing a beat, my friend reached down and began to unlace his shoes. His precious, favorite pair of Jordans. He gave them to the man. He then lifted the man up, bought him a ticket to the game, and bought him dinner inside the ballpark.

On the way home, I asked my friend, "Why?" He simply said everyone wants to feel loved and cared for. I told him that I understood that, but what about his shoes? He told me that as he was speaking to the man, God helped him to realize that there were more important things in life than Air Jordans. I was blown away... but it didn't end there. He proceeded to donate all but one pair of his shoe collection to those in need. I know his intention wasn't to teach me anything, but he sure did.

Rev. Jeremy Sanders, *Pastor of Program Ministries*

## Tuesday, March 7

*But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. - Genesis 50:19-21*

The forgiveness of a family is the most precious gift we can receive. It is also the most precious gift we can give.

Forgiveness is not necessarily easy. It seems that forgiveness is only required when we or someone we love has been hurt in some way. God put pain in our bodies to keep us from injuring them: Don't put your hand in the flame, it's gonna hurt! Our natural reaction to a spiritual or emotional pain is, don't ever let that happen AGAIN! Our fear of pain, both physically and emotionally, can keep us from fully forgiving the cause of that pain. We may be holding back on forgiveness because we are afraid of letting that same pain into our lives again.

Forgiveness is the very best healer for those who are hurting. When we forgive, we stop thinking hurtful thoughts. We begin to see the other side of the story, to try to understand what caused those actions that hurt us. When we forgive, we regain the power from those who hurt us, and return that power back to our own lives to further heal our minds and spirits.

Forgiveness is like a circle. The more you forgive, the stronger you become to live and forgive and grow in Christ.

Sue Gibbons, *Administrative Assistant, Worship Team*

4:30 a.m. is not a good time to get a phone call. It's actually a terrifying time to get a phone call when you have a loved one in the hospital. My heart sank when the caller was a nurse. "You better get here soon. She may not have much longer." *What? Why? What happened? She went in for a 'simple procedure!'*

I raced to the hospital and found my grandmother - my Mamaw - in ICU. The previous day, she was supposed to have a few benign colon polyps removed. But we were told as soon as the surgery began, her blood pressure dropped. The surgeons had to stop the procedure.

We thought she would need a couple nights rest to fully recover. But suddenly, there we were - my entire family crammed into a hospital room, overcome with shock and anguish. This wasn't supposed to happen. *This isn't fair.*

I remember hearing, "Doctors don't know *why* her blood pressure keeps dropping. We're doing everything we can." Talk about 'helpless.' All we could do was cry, pray, and wonder if she could hear our expressions of love through the 'beeps' of what seemed like a hundred machines.

I remember staring at her beautiful face... eyes closed and motionless. I thought of all our precious visits from years past: snapping green beans together, making ice cream, playing cards, shooting basketball ("pitching baskets" as she said), and sitting beside her in pews as her husband, my Papaw, preached in small town Methodist churches across Virginia.

My mom suggested we all stand around her mom's bed, hold hands, and sing Mamaw's favorite hymns. I remember us singing *Old Rugged Cross*, *Amazing Grace*, and others. It was a beautiful, magical moment - the purest expression of love I had ever experienced.

Somehow, she would survive. My grandmother lived another seven years. Seven more birthday cakes. Seven more Christmases. I am forever grateful to God for that extra time. Doctors had no explanation for *why* she recovered. They called her "*the miracle lady*." Medically, her survival seemed impossible.

I don't want to imply that my grandmother lived *because* we prayed and sang hymns around her hospital bed. How many families have done the same thing, only to watch their loved one pass away? How does that work with God? All I know is... I've learned to lean on Proverbs 3:5 - "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.*"

Regardless of any outcome, God has the final word. And because of that, *nothing* is impossible.

# Thursday, March 9

*I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears*  
- Psalm 34:4

I grew up in a small town - where everyone knew everyone. It had its pros and cons. What I loved most about growing up in that setting was that my friends pretty much remained constant through my adolescence. I found a friend when we were two years old in the church nursery, and we've been inseparable. My first sleepover was at her house, we went to school dances together, played on the same sports teams, took family vacations together, and went to proms together. Then one special day, I was able to stand beside her as she married the love of her life.

Some of my favorite memories with her are from the many different mission trips we took throughout middle school and high school. It never mattered where we were; we were having fun and being silly. That is, until one day when the fun and silly became very serious, very quickly.

Her headaches and dizziness came on fast, and her overall health was deteriorating at a rapid pace. What she thought was the flu became her worst nightmare.

She was diagnosed with brain cancer at the age of 23 and her life changed forever. Although she was going through so many different struggles and trials, she never let her faith dim. She knew that God was in control, and she never let her worries or fears get in the way of His power and love. As she journeyed through the next year of life, undergoing multiple surgeries, chemotherapy, and proton therapy - she became an inspiration not only to me, but also to many others. She had gone through so many trials in such a short amount of time, but she never let any of that slow her down. Now after almost two years of remission, life is good.

One of the things that had changed for her was - after treatment - she was told she would not be able to have children. God works in many different ways, and they are now expecting a baby in July. She never let her faith in God and her love of life out of sight. Expecting the unexpected is something her life has been full of, and she's living it to the fullest.

*Taylor Easttom, Edmond Campus Director of Children's Ministry*

I contend that sunrises outshine sunsets every time. Both have immaculate color, mazy clouds weaving through the horizon, and just a few moments of pure burst that recall for me the beauty I've experienced in this world. Sunrises hold the promise of a new day, with new possibilities, and new dreams to chase down with abandon. I believe with each sunrise comes a reminder that God isn't finished with us yet - that we have at least one more day of life to live and love to give.

For as long as I can remember, I have struggled to understand the unconditional love and acceptance God has for me. It has always been hard to perceive the depth of His love that always perseveres and always forgives. How could a perfect being consistently forgive such a flawed person like me? I make the same mistakes over and over; I turn to things other than prayer for solace and guidance. And yet, I find redemption in Christ. Dwell on that for a moment. We all have some ugly. God doesn't love us despite the ugly; He loves us *with* and *because of* the ugly. Our imperfections are part of who we are and His grace covers all.

There's a moment just before the sun starts rising in the morning when the deep indigo turns to a deep red just along the horizon. It's then that I know the colors are just about to emerge into a piece of art only God can paint. The season of Lent is much like that moment each morning... so much is going on in the life of the church and we know what Good News is coming next, but it's just not here quite yet. Take a moment today to reflect on God's grace in your life. How has he shown you the beauty of His forgiveness in a new day?

Beth Armstrong, *Director of Welcoming Ministry*

# Saturday, March 11

As our Pastor of Congregational Care at St. Luke's, I see many people who are very ill and some who are near death. Oftentimes these are people who I have known for years and have come to love and appreciate. I consider it a sacred privilege that they allow me to spend time with them, especially when their earthly time is dwindling.

I believe in dying, many of them receive a gift of sorts. It is a clarity that some people seem to have before their death about their lives and the life about to begin. Many times, that clarity is accompanied by a calmness of spirit that I imagine a person of great faith should exhibit as their impending death draws near. People who have celebrated Easter all their lives seem to finally understand what the resurrection is all about - the realization that God truly never leaves us. He has guided us through our earthly life, and now he waits to greet us as we take that step from this life into the next. What will they discover on the other side? They're not sure, but they're convinced that the God who makes everything new has something wonderful for them to experience. There will be new things to discover and new ways to love.

Not too long ago, I went to visit someone in our family of faith who was dying. We visited for a time and then I offered to pray for them. I said a prayer of thanksgiving for their life and then thanked God for receiving this person into His heavenly kingdom. The second I said amen this person began to pray for *me*. They asked God to continue to bless my ministry and to let me know we shouldn't be afraid. "Our God is not a God of fear," they prayed, "but a God who has overcome death." They said death is a beautiful transition to the life to come, and that life is full and just as abundant as our life here.

I will always remember that prayer and the final gift that person offered to me - and to all of us - as we contemplate the gift of eternal life this Easter. Be not afraid... God has not abandoned us, but beckons us to one day join Him as He reveals the mysteries of this life and the next.

Rev. Dave Poteet, *Pastor of Congregational Care*

*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.* - Philippians 4:13

This is my favorite Bible verse. It's the verse that comes to mind when I can't go any further. It's my knot at the end of my rope. But, I've had to learn to trust God to provide the strength to tie that knot, to trust Him to make the impossible possible.

I'm not one to learn lessons the easy way. I'm one of those who have had to learn the lesson several different times. I was a single mom of three for just a short time, but it was then I learned hard lessons about impossibilities. Many times, during that time, I found myself looking for strength beyond what I had and asking God for that strength.

I remember when I was newly divorced and looking for an affordable place to live in a safe neighborhood. To most rental agents, three kids meant at least three bedrooms. I couldn't afford a three-bedroom home! I looked for several weeks and never found anything. I remember sitting in a tiny apartment thinking that I would lose custody of my kids if I couldn't find a place for us to live. I was at the end of my rope – and I just couldn't deal with it anymore. It was then God spoke and reminded me of whose strength I needed to rely on. Not mine, but His. It wasn't long after that God revealed His possibility – a church member contacted me with an offer to rent a small house that she owned. It was small but it became home to a grateful family. God had turned my impossible to His possibility.

As my family got older, my challenges changed. For a time, it was dealing with a busy family with three teenagers and a new marriage! Now, I look for strength to care for aging parents and a special needs daughter. But with each of my struggles, God is always there. I have found out that I *can do*, but only with God's strength.

Looking back, I can see the many knots in my rope and I can see where my rope has been frayed and nearly broken. What I have realized is that I can depend on the strength of God – who without fail – succeeds at completing my impossible. He is there during those messy, dirty times in life when it seems like I can't go any further. He provides the strength to muck through and get on to the other side. God gives me what I need – His love and strength.

If you're facing an impossible situation, never forget that God's strength is there for you. Trust in Him to provide a way to put a knot on the end of your rope and give you a way to hold on. His strength and love turns our 'impossibles' into His possibilities.

# Tuesday, March 14

*In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.*

- Proverbs 16:9

I love to plan! I love to plan parties, events, projects, shows, meetings for our teachers, trips, my day, anything! In fact, I must have “a plan” in just about everything I do or I feel a bit out of sorts.

My husband grew up taking annual trips to the mountains to ski. He learned as a child and is quite good at it. Myself, on the other hand, had never skied a day in my life until my in-laws planned a trip to Big Sky, Montana. I was panicking! I would be the only one who didn't know how to ski. You see, I'm more of a warm weather beach girl or 'visit the mountains in the summer' kind of girl. So what did I do? I planned it all out. I researched horseback riding, snowmobiling, and of course the spa. I bought the matching ski outfits with matching snow boots. I made sure I had “long johns,” hand warmers, the works. I was going to look the part, I would go to ski school, and I was confident I could pick it up with a few lessons.

I was finally ready to try skiing alongside my husband. I told him how my instructor would signal for the ski lift to be slowed down to help me get on/off, how he told me when to stand up, and would grab the back of my arm to guide me. As we rode the lift, I kept reminding my husband of the “plan!” We motioned over and over to the guy working to slow the lift. However, he was on his phone and didn't notice us. When it came time to get off, my husband went and I didn't. Without knowing what to do, I leapt forward and face-planted right in the snow! This was not part of the plan!

I plan because without it, things seem impossible and chaotic. But how many times do our plans go just like we thought? In life, when we pray and listen to God's plan, isn't life so much more fulfilling? Sometimes we have to take a leap of faith when our plans don't work out the way we'd hoped... sometimes literally! Sometimes these unplanned events bring us the best memories. Through Him we are able to find our way. When I release control, I'm able to have peace of mind, find joy in the small things, and laugh when MY plan doesn't go my way. That's because I know he always has a greater plan - even as I lay face down in the freezing cold snow!

Meredith Lee, *St. Luke's Children's Center Management*

*But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God. - Ephesians 2:4-8*

It is amazing to me that God's grace is so difficult to accept. Not that others struggle with the gift, but that I myself struggle to receive this incredible gift that God has given. No, I don't struggle with it often, but there are times that I do. There are times that I don't believe that I am deserving, or worthy, or whatever else I can convince myself. But that is what is so amazing about God's grace. I don't deserve it, but because of Christ and what He did for us all, I am worthy... because He is worthy.

Receiving God's forgiveness is tough, because I am so reluctant to forgive myself - to see myself as God sees me. This is something I work on consistently, because it is so important. As I learn to forgive myself, and to see myself as God sees me, I am even more ready to receive God's grace and forgiveness. As I am able to live in to these realities, I am better able to share God's love and bring hope to the world. I am better able because now it is not just something I do, but a part of who I am.

I hope that I continuously view God's grace as amazing. Not because of struggles, but so I can continuously rejoice in its power to transform lives, mine included.

Rev. Jeremy Sanders, *Pastor of Program Ministries*

# Thursday, March 16

Martha is a pediatrician and member of St. Luke's. For many years, she's been teaching the Bible lesson in our 2-year-old Sunday school class. Our 2-year-olds love Martha and look forward to her arrival each week!

Ms. Twila is a homeschool teacher to her daughter, Abbey, and a member of St. Luke's. For many years, Ms. Twila has been teaching our 4-year-old Sunday school class. Our preschoolers love Ms. Twila and enjoy her lessons very much!

These are just two of the many volunteers who serve in Children's Ministry at St. Luke's Downtown Campus. Both ladies have busy family lives and responsibilities, but they recognize their God-given teaching gifts and use them to share His love with others. Our St. Luke's children will grow up and move on, and it's unlikely that Martha, Ms. Twila, or any of the other numerous volunteers will see the long-term results of their teaching. So why do they do it? They love the children and want to help them be all that God created them to be!

Proverbs 22:6 says, "*Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.*" The phrase "train up" in the original Hebrew refers to a midwife dipping her finger into crushed fruit and then putting it in the mouth of a newborn. This stimulated the infant's thirst for milk. From this example, we can understand that "train up" a child means to create a thirst within him or her. That is what God has called us to do. We are working to develop within our children a hunger to know and love God.

Have you ever not been hungry at all, but then you smelled something like french fries, or maybe cookies right out of the oven, and suddenly you were starving? Just as the smell of food can create hunger in us, the best thing we can do to create a hunger and thirst for Christ in others is to live it ourselves. If others see something in us that they want for themselves, they will gravitate toward it. In the Beatitudes, Jesus told the people in Matthew, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*" Don't we all want to be satisfied? Don't we want that for our friends and family members?

Even if you aren't a Martha, Ms. Twila, or one of the many other St. Luke's volunteers, you are an influencer. Children observe adults! I pray that they'll see Christ in us and have a ravenous hunger to know Him, too!

Susan Easttom, *Director of Children's Ministry*

*You will grieve, but your grief will suddenly turn to wonderful joy. It will be like a woman suffering the pains of labor. When her child is born, her anguish gives way to joy because she has brought a new baby into the world. So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again; then you will rejoice, and not one can rob you of that joy. - John 16:20-22*

I'll never forget lying in that hospital bed and thinking that the task before me was absolutely and utterly impossible. It didn't matter that I knew millions upon millions of women had given birth to children over countless generations. Too bad for me... there was no way that baby was coming out. I remember looking around at my family in the room, thinking, "I'm glad you all are having a good time, but this ain't happenin'!"

My labor lasted so long that the epidural, which I refer to as "happiness," had long worn off, and there was no relief for this mama. It was in that moment, I realized that my generation was completely unaware of the pains of the women that had gone before us. My hats are off to all of you warrior women who never had the pleasure of "happiness."

Being my first time to deliver a bundle of joy, each experience was an unknown. The doctors looked ridiculously confident that I could accomplish this task... I thought they were supposed to be smarter than that. Oh well, I knew they would figure it out sooner or later.

However, they were right. Many HARD hours later (there is a reason they call it labor), Kalli Joy arrived with creamy, peach fuzzy skin and a head full of dark hair. And what once seemed impossible, found it's way into reality.

Are you in a time of dark suffering? Are you in the midst of the impossible? Does everyone around you seem to be living life to the fullest, yet all you see is an impossible task looming before you? Jesus reminds us in the 16th chapter of John that our grief will turn to "wonderful joy!" This may be a time of sorrow for you, but Jesus promises the impossible - a joy that cannot be taken away.

*Dear Savior,*

*I give thanks to You for a joy that cannot be taken from me. In the midst of my struggles, please remind me that You are the doer of impossible things - You turn my sadness into joy. - Amen.*

Stephanie Greenwald, *Director of Worship*

# Saturday, March 18

*But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." - Luke 18:16*

I have never seen the love of God more at work in someone than I do when I watch the mentors with the students of Rancho Village Elementary. The patience and love these mentors show to the children touches my heart so much.

Each week my husband and I prepare the snacks for the boys and girls in the mentoring program. I deliver the snacks to the school for the girls, and when I walk into the school and I see all the mentors waiting for the girls to arrive, I can see the dedication and love that each of them has for the girls. As the girls get out of class, they come running to the mentors and give them hugs and say hello. Each mentor makes these girls feel so loved and so special. They take the time to listen to each girl, focusing their attention completely on them at that time.

When they all go to the room they use for mentoring, each mentor pairs up with their girl and they focus the whole time on that child. They help them with homework, they talk, and they play games. It is so wonderful to see the love of God work through the mentors to make a difference in each child's life. They are truly sharing God's love and bringing hope to these girls!

Thank you to each one of you for all that you do!

Lee Ann Simpson, *Administrative Assistant, Asbury Campus*

Baseball had always been a major part of my life. When I was a young boy, my father would come home after a long day at work and play catch in the front yard with me. I loved playing in games and looking up and seeing my mother and father in the stands cheering me on. As I entered 10th grade, I moved from the intermediate school to the high school and that meant I had to try out for the high school baseball team at the large Houston high school where I attended. After a week of practices and tryouts, the coach called me into his office. He told me that I would make the high school team, but I would remain on the bench and not see any playing time. He told me that he was letting me know in case I didn't want to be on a team where I would be sitting on the bench. I was so disappointed - I had played baseball since I was eight years old. I couldn't imagine not being able to play. I then told him that I hoped to prove him wrong.

Of course now I have an understanding that getting to play baseball isn't one of the most important things of life - but when I was a 16-year-old boy, I felt that it was. I was determined to not only be on the team, but also get to play. But one of the difficult things about a team sport is that once the season begins, it is through actual playing on the field that you demonstrate how well you are doing. If you don't have any time in a game, it is difficult to show that you are playing well enough to be in the game. It seemed like an impossible situation. But I had grown up with the support and faith of two wonderful parents. They encouraged me to give my very best and to trust God for results.

I worked as hard as I possibly could. I gave 100% in every practice throughout that year and into the next. I wouldn't give up, and by my junior year I earned a starting position on the team. By my senior year I was hitting leadoff in the lineup and then finished with a .533 batting average, highest in the city of Houston, and made the All-City Houston All Star Team.

I faced an impossible situation for a 16-year-old boy, but I discovered a valuable lesson. If you work hard and refuse to give up on your passions, it could be that it forces you to focus on what is most important to you. Being denied any playing time as a sophomore probably made me a better player by the time I was a senior because I had to work so hard to achieve it. It puts you in a position that you have to become even better at the things that are most important to you. Sometimes God encourages by helping us to focus on what is meaningful. God gives us strength and hope to make the impossible, possible.

# Tuesday, March 21

*He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you." - Matthew 17:20*

A new childcare center in 90 days... is that possible? St. Luke's Senior Pastor Dr. Bob Long had just come back from lunch one Friday in May 2007, with the pastor of First United Methodist Church. He said they had a lot of classrooms that had been redone after the 1995 bombing. They were not being used during the week, and they thought a childcare center would be a great asset to the church and the community.

Within two weeks, Rev. Phil Greenwald and I presented a plan to the board of First Church, and the wheels were in motion. New equipment had to be ordered, teachers hired, and most importantly, we needed a director. I had recently hired a teacher to work in our three-year-old room downtown who had previously been a director. Her name was Roxanne Lloyd. She was perfect for the position, and she agreed to take the job. With key people in place, we started ordering equipment and hiring staff and on August 21, 2007, we opened our second childcare center. The center filled quickly, and things were going so well. Two centers... what a blessing!

Early in 2012, I got a phone call from a lady who simply stated that they had a center near St. Luke's that was going to be closed down, and she asked if we could possibly take all the children enrolled in the school. After a meeting with Phil, Bob, and the other center, we decided to take over their center, which is Trinity Child Development Center. We painted, put down new carpet, and bought some new equipment. In April of 2012, they also became part of St. Luke's Children's Centers. Now we were up to three centers.

A new childcare center in Edmond? A new church building in Edmond? Another new adventure? We started hearing this conversation in 2014, started building in 2015, and opened our fourth center in September 2016. This was made possible with the help of so many people, including the director, Quisha Beardsley, who came to us with a long history in childcare. We spent six months ordering everything from classroom equipment to thermometers and first aid kits. We hired and trained over 40 staff members, and in September 2016, we opened the fourth center and are now full.

All of these projects seemed impossible when they were just a thought, but when we sat and worked through all the problems and scenarios we could think of, we made them all possible. They have all blessed many lives, from teachers to parents to the children we nurture and love every day.

When life throws you a curve and you think it is bigger than you, with God's grace and love, there is always a way to make it a reality.

Gaby Moon, *Executive Director, St. Luke's Children's Centers*

One of the impossible possibilities Christ introduces to us is the ability for strength to manifest itself in gentleness. This is something many of His contemporaries thought impossible. It is widely believed that Judas himself was expecting the power of the Messiah to be expressed in a conquering army, overthrowing the Roman Empire with human force. Jesus has not come to destroy. He has come to confront and forgive: a true expression of strength.

Forgiveness does not ignore sin or wrongdoing. Forgiveness first confronts it. While many expected Him to confront Rome, Jesus confronts the sin within His own people. “*Woe to you!*” He says seven times to the faithless teachers and the Pharisees (Matthew 23). Jesus’ goal is not their condemnation, but their repentance. “*Sinners need forgiveness and salvation like the sick need a physician*” (Mark 2:17).

Jesus does not lash out and destroy those who sin or have wronged Him. Have no doubt; He could have made Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) look like a sparkler on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Instead, to those who saw their need, He showed His power in the form of forgiveness and the admonishment to sin no more. Tax collectors? Forgiven. Adulterers? Forgiven. The unclean? Forgiven. Roman soldiers? Forgiven. Mockers at the cross? Forgiven.

The more you get to know Jesus Christ, the more He will confront who you are and how you choose to live. Confronting us, He opens our eyes to our chains and offers us the key to the shackles: forgiveness. Will you accept the keys that lead to full life? Beloved, your sins are forgiven. Go and leave that former life and walk into the joy of God’s grace.

Rev. Drew Haynes, *Pastor of Campus Operations*

# Thursday, March 23

*With God all things are possible* - Matthew 19:26

“That’s not possible” and “That will never work” are two strains we often chant upon hearing something unbelievable about someone or some event, and when we are sure an idea or concept will never fly.

One of my favorite pastimes is watching home renovation shows on television. Often a homeowner will convey skepticism to their contractor or designer’s plans, pretty confident “that will never work.” I love the end results when the doubted design far exceeds their expectations. It’s all about trust. It is amazing to me how in everyday living, trust in God alone can transform us from “it’s impossible” to endless possibilities.

Many times we are challenged to forgive someone or something that seems impossible to forgive. In our hearts, revenge seems to trump forgiveness. But the grace and peace of Jesus Christ always makes forgiveness a possibility.

I remember a year or so ago, hearing the news story of a young man in Charleston, SC, gunning down members of a church participating in their weekly prayer and Bible study. That act of violence enraged me. How, possibly, could anyone forgive such cruelty? Days later, family members of the victims of this tragedy stepped forward and expressed their forgiveness to the young man who injured or killed their loved ones. Wow, what a reversal. Forgiveness trumped revenge in a huge way.

I do believe we can always choose forgiveness in any situation. We will be reminded of that possibility when we gather on that glorious high and holy day and celebrate the Risen Lord and Savior who forgave us all by death on a cross.

Robert Fasol, *Organist and Choir Master*

I have always loved the thought of angels. In Scripture, angels are messengers that praise God and remind us of God's love. The author of the venerable comic strip "Family Circus," Bil Keane, loves to use angels in his comics. He often shows one of the children in the comic strip being escorted through a dangerous intersection, or being watched over at play by a protective angel. A nice touch is that the angel is often Bil's father, who left this life some years ago. Bil's father was a messenger of God's love in his life and it is easy to see why Bil imagines angels to resemble his father.

When I was a young teenager, my mother and I were driving to my sister's home, she lived about 50 miles away on a cold, windy, snowy Christmas Eve night. Mother decided she would take a shortcut, which meant we would be on country dirt roads. We had never taken a shortcut before, so I was hoping my mother knew where she was going! Before we knew it we had a flat tire and no jack. Fortunately we had coats, but no gloves or hats to protect us from the bitter cold Kansas winds. We walked for hours, hoping to find a farmhouse with lights on. It was, after all, Christmas Eve.

Finally after four hours, we found one... and thankfully the family was still up. My mother gave the man of the house the best directions she could to our abandoned car, while his wife made us hot cocoa and wrapped us in quilts to warm us. The man and his two sons returned with our car, then led us back to the main highway. This family lived out the message of God's love for us in a very real way. I know that God used them in our lives that evening. We were not alone - God was with us in the angelic efforts of this family.

Thanks be to God!

Today... be an angel. Do something kind for another person. You can make it even more special by doing something kind in a way that no one will know about.

Rev. Connie Barnett, *Asbury Campus Pastor*

## Saturday, March 25

I have a smooth black stone in my office that may look like an ordinary rock, but in fact, there is nothing ordinary about it at all. I have had it for many years as a reminder of God's great love for us through the gift of His son Jesus Christ. More than 10 years ago now, I was given that stone at our Ash Wednesday service with this scripture attached: *"Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."* (John 8:7)

We were asked to keep our stone in a visible place during the season of Lent to remind us not to judge one another, but to look at our own lives and the way we live them. It was powerful. I began to find comfort in the tangible reminder that I kept on my desk. We were to bring our stones back to lay on the altar at a special worship service before Easter, releasing the judgments we felt for others, as well as those we felt for ourselves. But what we heard from our congregation spun a common thread. We didn't want to give up our stones! St. Luke's purchased additional stones for us to leave on the altar. We found it a bit comical, yet poignant at the same time.

Although we do not live in a society where people are stoned as capital punishment, we still throw stones in other ways. Many people have become calloused to the feelings of others as they type messages of judgment in emails, text messages, or social media posts. Why is it easier to hit send on a written message or post than to address an issue or express an opinion to someone in person or on the phone? It's as if the Internet has freed us up to say things to strangers that we wouldn't dare say if we met them in person.

Most of you will remember the saying: "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me." Although antiquated now, the obvious message is that you may hurt me by physical force but not by your insults. The truth is we do hurt each other with our words. Bullying is alive and well in our society and we have the power to beat each other down with words, but we also have the power to change.

During this season of Lent, I will be remembering the times in my life when I have harmed others with my words and asked them for forgiveness, but I will also strive to change. True courage comes from doing what is right, not picking up the next stone. We hold a great deal of power in our words. I pray that God will help me use them wisely and I invite you to join me on this journey!

Marsha Long, *Director of Hospitality Ministry*

I once heard a comparison between the conversion of the Apostle Paul... and the conversion of Darth Vader.

While this analogy obviously has to be taken tongue-in-cheek, I could imagine how this CliffsNotes conversation about Paul's story might be very effective with someone who isn't that familiar with the Bible.

*"Paul used to be a bad guy? But then he suddenly became a good guy?"*

*"Yes. Paul encountered Jesus and experienced a change of heart."*

*"Kind of like when Luke Skywalker told Darth Vader, 'Let go of your hate,' and Vader unexpectedly turned against the dark side?"*

*"Well... I guess you could... kind of..."*

Sure, Luke was lucky to have such a powerful character switch sides in the Star Wars saga. But even that world-famous movie scene doesn't hold a candle to the inspiring, *true* story of Paul's conversion.

God was well aware of Paul's fiery determination to persecute Jesus' followers. But He was also aware of how Paul could be the *ultimate ally* to spread the Good News throughout the Roman Empire. Being both a Jew *and* Roman citizen, Paul could skillfully preach to both audiences. His knowledge of Jewish law allowed him to explain to other Jews exactly how Jesus Christ fulfilled Old Testament prophecy.

Thankfully, conversion stories are alive and well 2,000 years later - even with criminals. Shawn Green was aggressive, driven, and creative. Unfortunately, he was focused on selling drugs and moving up the gang ranks since the age of 13. He inevitably ended up behind bars.

Green remembers being furious with God when, one night, he noticed light from the prison door shining on a Bible. He opened it and randomly touched a page. His finger was on 2 Corinthians 7:9-10. "It said, I did not put you in this situation to make you sad, but I put you in this situation to turn you from your sins," Green recalled, "and I just could breathe, and just got on my knees and started crying because I felt the love of God."

He eventually started a ministry called "Christ Hop." He's now a preacher, a Christian clothing designer, and a Gospel rapper. "I want (to keep) that same intensity," he said, "... but with Jesus in it." As with Paul, God knew how talented Green was.

An archenemy of the Disciples ended up writing much of the New Testament. A gang member became a role model. What once seemed impossible... *became* possible through the grace of God. So how could any of us doubt God's ability to use our own talents? We can *all* be used as a force for good.

*"You said 'force'."*

*"Well... I guess Star Wars did have a happy ending..."*

## Tuesday, March 28

Forgiveness is never easy, but perhaps the hardest person to forgive is ourselves. For some reason, we don't always think we are worthy of forgiveness. We may judge others harshly, but often not nearly as harsh as we are on ourselves.

Several years ago, when my first marriage ended in divorce, I was adamant I was not to blame. I remember thinking I wasn't unfaithful; I wasn't verbally or physically abusing her. I did my part to financially support the family, holding down a full-time job in broadcasting at the time. I thought I was a good father to our daughter. How could she ask for a divorce? Still she left, won full custody of our daughter, and eventually moved out of state. I was devastated and very angry at my ex-wife for a long time.

Over the years, I had time to think about my failed marriage and what had really happened. With the help of a wonderful counselor, I began to piece together the puzzle of why my ex-wife left. My counselor was able to help me see how I had transferred to her the role of my mother... instead of my wife. I have seen this many times over the years in visiting with other couples. We love our mother or father and when we marry, we sometimes expect our spouse to take over that role in some form. In my case, my mother had been a very caring person, doing many things for me. She loved to cook for her family and, if I am honest, I must admit she often went around picking up after me when I was a teenager. Can you see where this is going? In hindsight, I could look back and see where I had expected my ex-wife to do many of the same things. For a while she did cook and clean like my mother. Only difference was... my mom was a stay-at-home mom, and my ex worked a full-time job. When our child was born, my wife rebelled at our current arrangement. Imagine that.

As the picture of how my marriage had failed became clearer to me, the guiltier I felt. Not only was my wife gone; my child lived in another state, and I saw her once or twice a month, usually for a weekend. Guilt led to anger at myself. I couldn't forgive myself for what I had done to my wife and my child... to our family. It was over 30 years ago; I finally had a discussion with clergy at my home church in Tulsa. I shared with them how I couldn't forgive myself for being so selfish and immature in my first marriage. I still remember my pastor's response like it was yesterday. He simply said, "God has already forgiven you... shouldn't you do the same?" He was right. If God could forgive me, how could I not do the same?

In this Lenten season, who do you need to forgive? Is it your name at the top of your list? By the grace of God, He can forgive you. Maybe you should too.

When I look at the story of the last week of Christ, I am reminded of many things: Palm Sunday, The Last Supper, Praying in the Garden, The Arrest, The Trial, The Persecution, The Crucifixion, The Resurrection. Today I want to think about Jesus and his prayer in the Garden. You may remember that He took His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane and told them ‘stay here while I pray.’

Many times when I read this passage, I look at the Disciples and their inability to stay awake. Today I want to think about the words that Jesus prayed. Matthew 26:39 reads; *“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”*

I believe that Jesus knew that His fate was already planned. Judas would betray Him. Peter would deny Him three times. He would suffer a violent death. However I don't think He was saying *“let this cup be taken from me”* because of the pain He was about to go through, but He knew the pain His death would cause to those He loved the most.

The latter part of the scripture, *“Yet not as I will, but as you will,”* reminds me of the prayer Jesus taught His disciples to pray. *“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven.”* Even though He knew the turmoil that was to come, He prayed just like He taught us to pray.

There are times in our lives where we can see the trouble coming, and others that we cannot. May we follow Christ's example to pray for God's will to be accomplished on this earth - everyday.

*Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*

Brent Manning, *Director of Communications*

# Thursday, March 30

*Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. - Ephesians 4:31-32*

One of the most important lessons I learned about forgiveness was presented to me during a pre-marital counseling session with my now husband and Rev. Wendy Lambert. Whenever a couple decides to get married at St. Luke's, they are required to complete a set of counseling sessions with the minister who will be performing the wedding ceremony. These sessions are very helpful in that they introduce the couple to the officiating minister, open up the couple's eyes to potential issues they may run into down the road, and ultimately confirm a couple's decision to join their lives together as one.

In one session, Wendy asked us to share about conflict resolution and the ways in which we fought. At the time, I dreaded having to answer her questions on this topic since, to me, that felt like admitting that our relationship wasn't perfect. She asked if either of us had ever brought up something that the other one had done previously in order to "win" a fight. I took a few moments to think about it, and when I answered I shared that I couldn't recall a time when I'd done this in the past, but I was afraid that it might be something I would do in the future.

She explained that while dredging up your spouse's past wrongdoings can really help to win a fight, or make your spouse feel bad when you're upset with them, it isn't good for your relationship. Once an issue has been resolved and forgiveness has been extended from one person to the other, it is important to stay true to that forgiveness and not bring the issue back up - just for the sake of making someone feel guilty all over again.

I believe this is the sort of forgiveness that God is calling us to practice in this passage from Ephesians. When you say you forgive someone, but you still harbor bitterness, anger, and ill will towards them for their wrongdoings, have you truly forgiven them?

Forgiveness can be such a tough virtue to practice, but I believe that when we forgive others for their transgressions in a spirit of kindness and compassion, we understand even more the way in which Christ has forgiven us.

Morgan Jones, *Director of Small Group Ministry*

*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. - Philippians 4:13*

Sometimes in our lives, we find ourselves faced with obstacles that seem impossible to overcome. As Christians we believe that God will provide for our lives and watch over us, but it can sometimes feel like we are in too deep, too far in the darkness for God to see us.

I came across a story on the news about a man named Tarec Atkinson, a 37-year-old who had grown up in Jamaica and came to the United States as a young man. In Jamaica he dreamed of becoming a professional soccer player and of a better opportunity in America. But like many, Tarec found it harder to make his way in America than he had thought, and for the past year he has been homeless - living in a tent beside the freeway in San Francisco. He often went days without food and sometimes survived by foraging for berries. Without money, food, or adequate shelter, he found it impossible to find a job.

One day, Tarec was sitting outside a Starbucks when 28-year-old Adam August was on a coffee run for his office. Adam had seen him before, and something compelled him that day to stop. Adam asked Tarec if he would like to have lunch with him. As they ate and talked, Adam learned of his past and his hardship, and Adam realized that one meal was not enough to help get his new friend back on his feet. Adam offered for Tarec to take a shower at his apartment, and then took him to buy some new clothes for job interviews. Since most businesses now only use online applications, Adam took him to the library to fill some out. He found that Tarec even needed help filling out the questions in the application, and Adam went with him on his interviews to provide support. The team eventually landed Tarec a job at a local grocery store, and Adam is now raising money to find Tarec a permanent place to live. When asked about the experience, Adam said, "My hope in sharing this story is that it will inspire others to spread love. We all need help in one way or another. Sometimes all someone needs is a friend."

While we often can't see it at the time, God has the power to make the impossible, possible. God used Adam's friendship and kindness to bring Tarec out of the darkness and show him that he is not alone. God uses each one of us to share His love and hope with the world, even if it is one person at a time. Think of a time when God has used someone in your life to bring you hope, and ask yourself, will you be ready when he calls you to do the impossible?

Candace Fish, *Edmond Campus Director of Traditional Worship*

# Saturday, April 1

*When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments, and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." - John 13:12-15*

God blessed me with many things when I married into the Williamson family. Besides my sweet husband and beautiful kids. He blessed me with the most amazing, loving, generous mother-in-law.

It truly is awesome and inspiring when you see the love of God at work in another person who helps make a difference in our world. I know this rings true in the hearts of many, but it definitely is imbedded in the heart of my mother-in-law. She has a servant's heart and serves her church and church family through every means possible - time, charity, monetary gifts, etc. Her grace, forgiveness, and humility make everyone aspire to be better.

One year ago, a few weeks before Christmas, she got the worst news of her life. Cancer. Still, in the midst of surgeries, chemotherapy, sickness, and her brother passing away - she still had the love of God in heart. She continued to think of others in their time of need.

Through her darkest days and sickest nights - she never wavered. She loved and served God wholeheartedly. A year after her diagnosis, she is in remission - and for that we are so thankful. I am amazed that through it all she hasn't skipped a beat. She is back to doing anything she can to serve others.

I am so thankful for the example my mother-in-law is to my family and myself. She reminds me that even in those difficult moments in our lives, we can still make a difference in other's lives. Watching her over this last year has reminded me that worry, fear, and pain are not as strong as love, mercy, and generosity. When we choose to love and serve others as God has loved and served us - we bless life.

During this season of Lent, I want to encourage you to find a way to be a blessing to others. You may see your current circumstances as keeping you from making a difference, but blessing others is always a possibility.

Jamie Williamson, *Edmond Campus Director of Administration*

Christ's mighty works of doing the impossible has beautiful expression in Revelation 5. A powerful angel challenges the world: "*Who is worthy to open the scroll? Who can look inside?*" As John looked around heaven and earth, he saw that no one and nothing was worthy. So, he wept. He knew the scroll had the utmost importance. He wept for sadness. He knew it was meant to be opened, but no one was worthy. He wept for despair. He saw no one in all heaven and earth who was worthy. John wept.

Human existence is plagued with insurmountable obstacles. Sometimes by no fault of our own - sometimes through our own knack for self-destruction - we come to stand before an unconquerable obstacle. In that time, we tremble and we weep.

But then someone draws John's attention to the Christ. Did you notice how Christ's presence previously went unnoticed? Intriguing! I believe Christ was already present in John's experience. However, I also believe that we, like John, may become so overwhelmed by the unconquerable that we fail to see the presence of the one who conquers.

Christ conquers human wisdom. He conquers nature, especially death. Christ is Lord of all things. We can be assured that we will have trouble in this world. *But take heart, dear one, Christ has overcome the world.* (John 16:33) No one else is worthy, but Christ is. John had to keep his eyes open in his despair to see the one who conquers.

You will come before an unconquerable obstacle. You may already be there. But look for Christ who is worthy, the one who conquers all things. It may not be pretty. In fact, I can almost promise it won't be. But He will help you overcome if you let Him. In that time, there will be great rejoicing.

Rev. Drew Haynes, *Pastor of Campus Operations*

## Tuesday, April 4

In my deep and lasting relationships, like those with my family and friends, I have found that we have the most extraordinary ability to bring each other absolute joy and absolute pain. Of course, no one complains during the times of absolute joy. There are plenty of smiles, hugs, and laughter. We look forward to seeing each other and are sad to depart. However, there are other times when I have hurt and been hurt by these same special people. I find myself feeling full of guilt when I have been the offender - guilty that I hurt someone special to me. Guilty that I didn't see how my behavior or words would impact them. And when I feel guilty, I hide. I don't call. I don't text. I won't answer the phone. And, as you know, this does nothing to help the situation.

As I turn to prayer, I am able to remember that our Lord and Savior offers shelter and forgiveness in an unconditional way. That through Him, I find vision to recognize my own shortcomings and the strength to admit those shortcomings - and to ask for forgiveness from those I have hurt. I rely on His foundation to prop me up. Asking for forgiveness is hard because there is always a chance the other person will not accept your apology.

It's the risk we take when we choose to have deep relationships. Knowing God has forgiven me for my transgressions provides the path for me to ask others for forgiveness and to offer forgiveness when I have the opportunity. I know I am always grateful to receive a heartfelt apology and a chance to clear the air. I know that I am truly blessed to experience God's forgiveness.

Robyn Hilger, *Executive Director, El Sistema Oklahoma*

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. - Romans 8:28*

I used to have a professor in seminary that always loved to tell us if God could take one of the worst forms of torture the world has ever known (crucifixion) and turn it into an occasion for bringing about the greatest good the world has ever seen (resurrection) in just a matter of three days, then what can God do with our daily challenges? Of course, this never means that God causes these bad things to happen, but it means that in the midst of the valleys of life, when we are faced with the impossible, we believe in a God who can still bring about good.

Ultimately, that's where our hope lies as Christians. We believe in a God who can conquer death with life. We believe in a God who can conquer hate with love. We believe in a God of hope who is full of goodness and wants nothing but the best for us.

It can be tempting to put our faith in things that we can see and measure in this world. I know I am often guilty of trying to solve problems by logic, determination, and my own abilities. When times get difficult, my pride can lead me to place my faith in myself before I place my faith in God. Time and time again this leads to disappointment, because I am only capable of the possible.

However, when we choose to place our faith in the God of resurrection and hope, we find that new possibilities are created where there were none before. Seas are parted, dry bones can live again, and stones are rolled away. Are you in need of hope? Strength? Peace? Turn to the One who makes the impossible, possible.

Rev. Josh Attaway, *Edmond Campus Pastor*

# Thursday, April 6

1 John 1:9 says, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* In Psalm 103, we’re promised, *“As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.”* God’s forgiveness is a beautiful thing, isn’t it? We mess up... God forgives! He even put it in writing that we would mess up. Ecclesiastes 7:20 tells us *“Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.”* These verses really boost me when I’m feeling remorse for something I’ve said or done. Sin catches us off guard, and we fall into its trap. Sin can also be calculated and intentional, without regard for consequences. I’ve been guilty of both!

Matthew 18:21-22 tells us, *“Then Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’* I like this scripture when I think about God forgiving me for my transgressions. But when it applies to me forgiving others, that number seems high!

Let’s think about why Jesus wants us to forgive. Whether it’s an argument with your spouse or an unresolved issue with a family member or friend, conflicts can go deeper than we may realize. They may be affecting our emotional, mental, and physical health. On the bright side, we know that forgiveness can reap benefits for our health, lowering heart attack risk, improving sleep, improving cholesterol levels, and reducing pain, blood pressure, and stress levels.

“There is an enormous physical burden to being hurt and disappointed,” says Karen Swartz, M.D., director of the Mood Disorders Adult Consultation Clinic at The Johns Hopkins Hospital. “Chronic anger puts one into a fight-or-flight mode, which results in numerous changes in heart rate, blood pressure and immune response. Those changes, then, increase the risk of depression, heart disease and diabetes, among other conditions. Forgiveness, however, calms stress levels, leading to improved health.

“Forgiveness is not just about saying the words. It is an active process in which you make a conscious decision to let go of negative feelings, whether the person deserves it or not. As you release the anger, resentment, and hostility, you begin to feel empathy, compassion, and sometimes even affection for the person who wronged you.”

Jesus taught forgiveness, because it’s the right thing to do! How do we forgive someone who has hurt us deeply? There’s only one way; the greatest impossibilities of life can be made possible by the power and love of God.

*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ.* - Galatians 6:2

Have you ever been to an elementary school open house? Sometimes I liken it to the Chisholm Trail cattle drive - lots of animals moving together... and smelly.

But there is one elementary school open house that sticks out in my mind for better reasons. It was early 2014 and our daughters, Kalli and Tori, were so excited to share with us all that they had been working on over the weeks and months that led up to Open House. They wanted us to see their artwork, their classrooms, and their amazing teachers. Kalli, who was a third grader at the time, was particularly excited to show us the classroom of one of her favorite teachers - the Pre-K special needs class. Kalli had been given the privilege of helping with the special needs class for preschoolers since the beginning of her third grade year. She would assist the teacher at certain times of the day and would provide help and friendship to those special preschoolers, who truly admired this amazing third grader. Once we had seen Kalli and Tori's main classrooms, along with all the other stops along the way, Kalli tugged on my arm and wouldn't let go - until we reached the special needs classroom. She introduced me to the teacher and several of the kids in the room. It was as though she was the nectar and all those little bees were drawn to her instantly. My heart warmed at the sight!

But it wasn't until we were leaving the room that my tears began to flow. As we walked out the door, two parents were walking in, one pushing a young boy in a wheel chair. I was struck by worn looks on the faces of the parents. My heart ached for them and what each day must be like taking care of such a precious boy with so many needs. But before I could form another thought, I witnessed something that will forever be in my heart. Kalli immediately called the boy by name, bent down to kneel beside him, grabbed him by the hand and began talking to him. She asked him how he was doing, told him that she was so glad to see him, all the while stroking his little hand resting on the wheel chair.

I was speechless. I looked up and saw the faces of the parents soften into a look of gratitude as they watched Kalli interact with their child. We smiled and all said hello; then Kalli popped up and we were on our way, as if that was a normal occurrence for her. I was certain it was.

Jesus came to show us the nature of God. He directs us to care for those who are hurting, to look beyond the needs of ourselves, and to show love to those around us. I pray that we are all able to follow His commands, and then pop up, as if it is a normal occurrence, because we would think of doing nothing less.

# Saturday, April 8

Mark Twain once said, “Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.”

A number of years ago, during a difficult time in my life, I felt very betrayed by some people very close to me. Assuming they knew what I was feeling, rumors were spread, stories were told that were untrue, and I felt like everything in my world was being sabotaged.

I tried to put on a happy face, but inside I was so hurt and angry. It started taking a toll on me. You see, I had recently become divorced, which in itself is hard - but now because of the things being said, I began doubting myself, questioning my motives, my friendships... my self-esteem sunk to a low point. I became paralyzed.

It's not easy to admit, but I secretly waited for something bad to happen to those people who hurt me.... a ‘passive revenge’ as I learned it is called by one of my favorite pastors and author, Rob Bell. It was while watching a sermon of his that everything came boiling to the surface, and I believe I came to truly understand forgiveness.

He said, “Forgiveness is not condoning a behavior and forgiveness does not always mean reconciliation. Reconciliation takes two parties. Forgiveness is always personal. Forgiveness is a process. Forgiveness is freedom and liberation. It (forgiveness) is a death that leads to resurrection instead of the lifelong living death of bitterness and cynicism.”

Hearing his words gave me a profoundly different view and understanding than ever before. In the past, I always thought that if I was a “good Christian,” I was required to forgive immediately and be over with it, never to think of it again.

Rob offered one more suggestion - a visual way of releasing the anger and hurt and surrendering all ideas of “revenge” to God. I wrote the names of each person who hurt me on separate pieces of paper, drove to a small chapel in a church where I grew up, and laid each name down, one by one, at the foot of the cross on the altar. As I did this, I felt an incredible wave of peace come across me.

Being able to own the hurt allowed me the ability to entrust that hurt to God - not bury it or let it simmer inside. I felt liberated. I felt joy. I no longer felt the “hold” that I allowed the hurt to have over me.

Forgiveness is setting someone free... and that someone is you.

Julie Robinson, *Executive Director of Studio 222*

Life is full of challenges. Each day presents its own obstacles. Some of these challenges seem to be more difficult than others. At times they are simple distractions, and at other times life's problems seem insurmountable.

Recently, Angie Tyma experienced one of those terrible days. At 89 years of age, Angie was evicted from the home she had lived in for over 35 years. It seems that after the death of her husband, a family friend purchased Angie's home. Angie made monthly rent payments to the family friend for many years.

Unfortunately, Angie was not aware that her family friend had stopped making payments to the bank. One very sad day, Angie and all of her belongings were evicted from the home. Angie described it as one of the worst days of her life. At 89 years old, Angie went to a local motel until she could find a new home.

When Angie's neighbors saw all of her possessions lying on the curb, they knew they had to do something to help. Her neighbors collected her belongings for safekeeping. Angie's neighbor, Danielle Calde, went to the bank that had repossessed the home and made an offer to buy the home herself. She was successful.

It took a little bit of time, but Angie's neighbor purchased the home, and with the help of many others in the neighborhood, they were able to give the home a fresh coat of paint inside and out. They moved all of the possessions back into her home and invited Angie back into her home.

Although the day Angie was evicted was one of the worst days of her life, the day she moved back in was one of the best. Not only did Angie have her home back, but realized that she was not alone and had a community around her that loved and cared for her.

When the challenging times of life come our way, it is easy to feel abandoned and alone. Our faith teaches us that we are not alone. The God of love and mercy is with us everywhere we go. When we love God and love our neighbors, we find that even the most difficult of times - those days that seem overwhelming - are filled with love and hope because of the love of God and God's people, our neighbors.

Rev. Keith King, *Online Campus Pastor*

# Tuesday, April 11

*They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" - Mark 16:3*

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. - John 20:1*

As we approach Good Friday and remember the death of Christ, it might be helpful for us to imagine the thoughts and feelings of the first women to go to the Garden. They were the same women who had stayed by Him at the Cross. They saw the horrific pain He endured. They were there when He drew His last breath. They had seen the crucifixion and death of Jesus. They understood death to be the end.

Now, going into Sunday morning, they were still so overcome with grief that they couldn't sleep any longer and got up before the sun. While it was still dark, they made their way to His tomb. I can only imagine how difficult and lonely it must have felt to make their way in the darkness. But they didn't let the fear of the unknown stop them. Along the way they were reminded of the stone in front of the tomb; it would be impossible for them to roll it away. But they didn't let the impossible stop them from going.

Think of what could have happened. They could have very realistically thought that there wouldn't be any point in going to the tomb since they wouldn't be able to access the body. Or they could have considered waiting till later in the day when more people would have been out and they might have been able to ask someone for help in opening the tomb. But, even though they considered the impossibility of their situation, they didn't let it stop them from their pursuit. In the darkness and without a way to access the tomb - they set out.

There will be times when we face things that seem impossible. Perhaps we have been given a diagnosis that seems insurmountable. Maybe we have experienced a job change or the loss of a loved one. We might not know how we will make it. We might not be able to see the next step we need to make. But even in the midst of darkness, we can trust the presence of Christ to provide all that we truly need. And then, we might encounter those extraordinary moments when darkness yields to the light, where that which is imprisoned is set free, and death gives way to life. Christ is the living witness to God making the impossible, possible.

Rev. Wendy Lambert, *Senior Executive Pastor*

We believe it was on the very first Maundy Thursday, the night that Jesus gathered with His disciples and celebrated the Last Supper, that Jesus would end up going to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. It was there that Judas would come with the religious authorities to betray Jesus and have Him arrested. After that, our Bibles don't tell us what happened to Jesus the rest of the night. However, the tradition of the early church says that Jesus was taken to the house of Caiaphas, the high priest.

Caiaphas's house was a very large palace with a massive underground system of cisterns beneath the home. This past summer, a group from St. Luke's traveled to the Holy Land and we got to see Caiaphas's palace. There was one cistern in particular, the deepest one below the house, that the tradition of the early church says was used to hold Jesus as a prisoner on that Thursday night.

We had an opportunity to go down in that prison cell and stand in the place we believe Jesus was held. We could close our eyes and imagine how dark, cold, and lonely it must have been that night. We remembered that even in our own lives we sometimes find ourselves trapped in metaphorical dark and lonely prison cells. Yet, we also remembered that the prison cell did not have the final word. It was just three days later that all of the darkness of the world was conquered by the light of resurrection.

All around the walls of the church that now sits on the remains of Caiaphas's house are signs that say in all different languages, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." As I looked at these signs I was reminded of the power of what Jesus endured and why He did it. Our sins can sometimes lead us to feel trapped in a dark, cold, and lonely place. But Jesus has already endured all of that in order to forgive all people all over the world. Even when it seems impossible to free ourselves from those prison cells, Jesus makes it possible.

Maybe today you are feeling trapped in a dark and lonely place. Maybe you can't see a way out and you are losing hope. Find assurance in the reality of a God who has already been there and endured it all for us so that we might find forgiveness and peace. Have faith that our God loves us enough to go down into the pits, only to overcome it all three days later. Rest in the promise of deliverance from sin and death through the hope of resurrection.

Rev. Josh Attaway, *Edmond Campus Pastor*

# Thursday, April 13

Take a look at your hands. Maybe they're holding this devotional in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, or maybe they're holding your smartphone as you read this online. Think about where your hands have been, what they've done, who they've helped, how they've folded when you prayed, and the history they exhibit with each line, curve, or scar.

The story of the Last Supper has always been compelling to me. Passover was an annual celebration wherein thousands of Jews would flood into Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the temple and remember their exit from slavery in Egypt. Exodus describes God's direction to the Jews to mark their doors with blood of a lamb so the plague would pass over their house, sparing the lives of their firstborn children. This is one of the most famous stories of the Old Testament, and was brought full circle on the evening of the Last Supper.

With His disciples, Jesus shared a powerful evening that shaped the way we live out our faith today. Even knowing what would happen, knowing of Judas's betrayal, Jesus knelt down and washed the feet of the Disciples. He shared with them a Passover meal. He demonstrated the first Holy Communion. He showed the Disciples unconditional love, even in the face of what was to come the next day.

Jesus' death became the new Passover. His blood covered our sins so that we would know God's grace in our lives. The same hands that performed miracles, that washed the Disciples' feet, that broke bread saying, "*This is my body, broken for you,*" and held the cup saying, "*This is my blood, shed for you,*" also carried the cross. The same hands that have prayed for you and for many were also pierced on the cross. His hands cover us. His love redeems us. Even while we are fragile, while we are sinners, His grace is poured out for us.

Beth Armstrong, *Director of Welcoming Ministry*

Not everyone starts out on the same playing field in life. I was blessed beyond measure to have the parents I was given. My father worked incredibly hard as an electrician all of his life. He would put in a full day's work at the factory to provide for his family, then come home and often toss the baseball back and forth with me or watch one of my ball games. He worked hard all day and then continued to give - all for the sake of his family. I knew from watching my father that hard work would get you a long way in life.

My parents married when he was 19 and she was 16 and shortly thereafter, they moved to Houston. It would be 10 years before I was born, and during that time, my mother worked at IBM in the keypunch department. She worked hard and was great at what she did. Her supervisors were really impressed by her work ethic and ability. They approached her about a promotion - to become the supervisor of the keypunch department. They asked her if she had her degree, which was a requirement of the position. She told them she was working on it. They went ahead and promoted her and told her to bring her diploma when she finished her degree.

At that moment everyone was excited, but no one knew the specific degree that the other was referring to. My mom had never finished high school and so she was working on completing her GED. Her supervisors were referring to the college degree, which was necessary for the position. They were quite surprised when, later on, she proudly handed them her GED certificate. It was an impossible situation - the position required a college degree and they had already promoted her to it. She was doing so well that they made an exception for my mother. She truly had filled the position without having everything that was needed for it.

I have learned from my parents that hard work and enthusiasm are an important part of achieving anything in life. If my mother had originally known that her supervisors were referring to a college degree, she would have told them from the beginning the reality of her situation. They would have known from the beginning that the promotion was not possible. But she innocently - and truthfully - told them she was working on finishing her degree. Sometimes you just find out along the way that certain things were possible without ever knowing they were impossible in the first place. These are the "grace moments" that God sprinkles throughout our lives. The unplanned moments that can change the course of our lives - yet, on our own knowledge and ability - would not have been possible.

Work hard, find joy and meaning in what you do - and then, give God thanks for all the unexpected blessings that come your way.

# Saturday, April 15

*Trust in the Lord forever; For in God the Lord, we have an everlasting Rock.*

- Isaiah 26:4

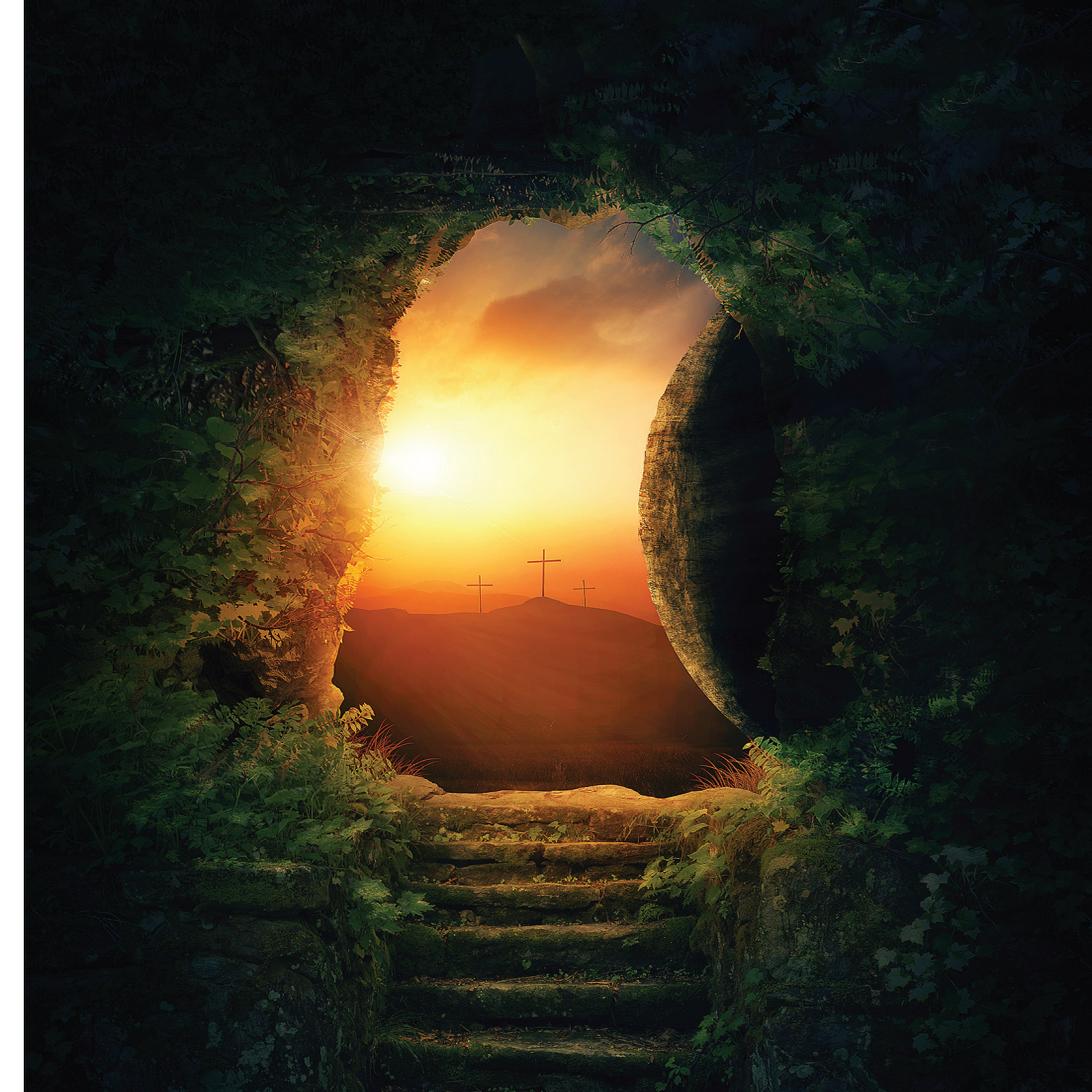
Growing up in Christian schools, I heard the story of Christ's death and resurrection many times; I could almost recite the entire passage by heart. I always attended church services and listened intently to try to learn something new. But I developed a new appreciation of that story during my first Lent as a mom.

In February of 2016, at six weeks old, my daughter Cate contracted Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) and was admitted to Integris Hospital's Pediatric ICU. Cate had IVs, pulse oximetry monitors, and multiple tubes. My heart was completely broken, as the fate of my daughter rested in the hands of the doctors and nurses caring for her. I sat in the chair next to her bed, crying and blaming myself for her sickness. I begged God to let me take her place. Why did it have to be her that was sick? Why couldn't it be me, instead? I continually prayed for Cate to get better, and for God to give the medical team wisdom on how to care for her. After 10 days in the hospital, Cate was finally well enough to come home.

As I was sitting in the Good Friday Service, it finally occurred to me the pain and anguish that Mary, as a parent, had to go through. She had to watch her son being beaten, spit on, and eventually nailed to a cross to die. I can only wonder what Mary was thinking. Were her thoughts similar to mine, as I had to watch my daughter suffer through sickness? Did she beg to take his place?

Mary showed incredible faithfulness to God's plan, even through the pain of watching her son die. Just as I was able to see Cate healed and make a full recovery, Mary saw her son make a full recovery through the resurrection.

Mandi Moon, *Assistant Director, St. Luke's Children's Center*



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# EASTER

## SUNDAY SERVICES

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# APRIL 16

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