

UNDERSTANDING THE CROSS

.....
A HOME-BASED HOLY WEEK
DEVOTIONAL ON JESUS'
"SEVEN LAST WORDS"
.....



INTRODUCTION



The cross is everywhere: inside sanctuaries and atop church steeples, in jewelry and art, tattoos and logos, billboards and graffiti.

But what does the cross actually mean? How should we understand it?

Over the centuries, the Church has sometimes called official “ecumenical councils” to settle key theological questions - but when it comes to the meaning of the cross, no such council has ever been called. This openness itself is significant: the cross is a great mystery at the very heart of Christian faith, and so multiple avenues for understanding it are both possible and welcome.

In this devotional, we explore seven such avenues, using as points of entry Jesus’ traditional “seven last words” (seven key comments he makes in the New Testament passion narratives). Each avenue approaches the cross from a different angle. Taken together, these lines of sight create a kaleidoscopic, complementary whole, as well as a reminder that there is no single “right answer” to what the cross means for us today. To approach the cross is to embark upon a lifetime of contemplation and struggle, inquiry and insight, wonder and praise.

Some of these avenues of understanding will be familiar, others new; some we may find intuitive and convincing, others less so. But keep your mind open as we move through the week. Each avenue is an attempt, after all, to make some sense of a great mystery, and we often find beauty and insight precisely where we least expect it.

USING THE DEVOTIONAL

Each evening follows a simple order of service in the “tenebrae” tradition (“tenebrae” means “shadows,” and refers to the growing darkness as candles are extinguished, one by one):

PRAY
READ
REFLECT
PRAY AND SING

The week begins by lighting a circle of seven candles (pillar candles, tealights - whatever works best in your household). Then, as the days go by, the candles are extinguished, one by one, until the wreath is shrouded on Holy Saturday. On Easter Sunday morning, the shroud is lifted and all of the candles are lit (and a few more are added), along with flowers, sprigs of green, and/or some favorite Easter sweets.

MAKING THE CIRCLE OF LIGHT

You can simply gather the seven candles into a circle, or give them additional structure with evergreens, bare branches, thorny stems (evoking the Crown of Thorns), or whatever you have on hand.



For the “shroud” on Holy Saturday, try a simple rectangular cloth (tea towels work beautifully!), and for Easter Sunday morning, plan a little ahead so you can add some flowers, some green sprigs or leaves, some extra tealights, and/or a few of your favorite sweets - whatever most clearly says to you, “Alleluia!”

SUNDAY: THE FIRST WORD

Begin by lighting all seven candles. Then read the prayer. If more than one person is participating, take turns as the service unfolds.

PRAY

God of love and mercy, forgive us. Free us from all wrongdoing and shame, and let us shine as your beloved children. In Jesus' name, Amen.



FORGIVE THEM,
FOR THEY DO
NOT KNOW
WHAT THEY ARE
DOING.

+ LUKE 23:34

READ

Luke 23:32-34

Extinguish one candle.

REFLECT

One way of understanding the cross is as a vivid portrait of divine mercy. In our everyday lives, many people understand wrongdoing as requiring some sort of "payment" or penalty in order to be made right. With the cross, God essentially urges us to set aside this idea, since Jesus has paid every price on our behalf - thereby clearing all accounts once and for all, liberating humanity from shame, and reconciling us to God.

In other words, for those of us who despair that our guilt is too great for God to forgive, the cross declares: *Fear not*. God loves you, and has graciously paid every price - so there's no more price to pay. Not for the things we have done and left undone, and not even for those sins we don't realize, or which manifest as larger systems and structures of corruption in which we are complicit. *Forgive them*, Jesus says, *for they do not know what they are doing*.

PRAY AND SING

God of love and mercy, thank you for your liberating grace. On Easter morning, help us to rejoice that all debts are cancelled, all prices paid. Show us what we are doing, and help us to change. In Jesus' name, Amen.

"WHAT WONDROUS LOVE IS THIS"

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul,
What wondrous love is this, O my soul?
What wondrous love is this, that caused the God of bliss
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul!

OTHER SONG IDEAS:

"O Sacred Head, Now Wounded"

"Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended"



MONDAY: THE SECOND WORD

Begin by lighting six of the seven candles.

PRAY

God of kindness and compassion, remember us. Hold us close. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

READ

Luke 23:39-43

Extinguish one candle.



TODAY YOU WILL
BE WITH ME IN
PARADISE.

+ LUKE 23:43

REFLECT

One way of understanding the cross is as a vivid portrait of divine love. Jesus has been abandoned and deserted by his friends, mocked and tortured by his enemies - and yet still shows compassionate love for all. In the eyes of the world, the man next to him is a criminal, both guilty and disposable; but when he asks Jesus to "remember" him, Jesus doesn't give him a moral or religious exam. He simply declares, with breathtaking, heartbreaking kindness, *Today you will be with me in Paradise.*

In other words, for those of us who despair that we are not good enough or pious enough to deserve God's love, the cross declares: *Fear not.* God loves you and cares for you, not because of what you have done, but because of who you are: God's beloved, in whom God is well pleased, a human being made for Paradise.

PRAY AND SING

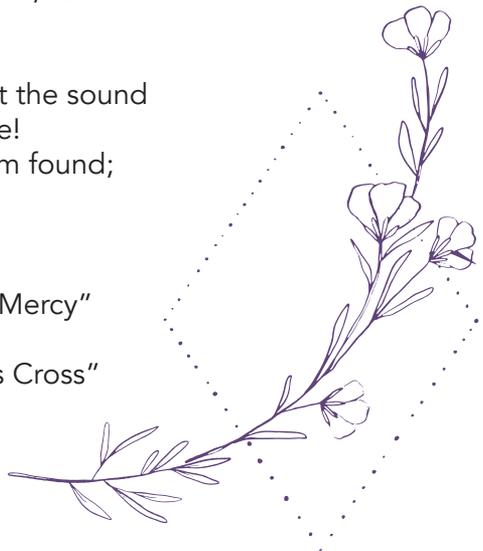
God of kindness and compassion, thank you for loving us. Make us channels of that love for your world and all that is in it, on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

"AMAZING GRACE"

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
was blind, but now I see!

OTHER SONG IDEAS:

"There's a Wideness in God's Mercy"
"Ubi Caritas"
"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"



TUESDAY: THE THIRD WORD

Begin by lighting five of the seven candles.

PRAY

God of community, it is not good for us to be alone. Help us to connect with each other, and take care of one another. In Jesus' name, Amen.

READ

John 19:25-27

Extinguish one candle.

WOMAN, HERE
IS YOUR SON.

+ JOHN 19:26



REFLECT

One way of understanding the cross is as the center of a new kind of community. Too often, we build bonds with each other by excluding others, defining an “us” by creating a “them” of supposed outsiders and scapegoats. But in the story of the cross, Jesus steps into the role of the scapegoat, the outsider, the excluded, the other. And around the foot of the cross, a new kind of community is created, a family based not on bloodlines or exclusion, but rather on inclusion and mutual care. *Woman, here is your son... Here is your mother.*

In other words, for those of us who despair in the face of the world's scapegoating, polarizing, us-and-them-creating ways, the cross declares: *Fear not.* Another kind of community is possible. Understood this way, the cross can remind us of exactly where scapegoating leads - and whose side God is always on. In truth, there is no “us” and “them.” Only us, all of us, God's beloved family.

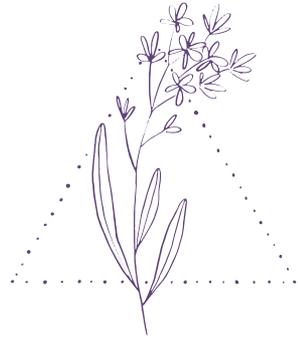
PRAY AND SING

Dear God, thank you for making us all part of one beloved community. Help us to reach out and connect to your children,

our brothers and sisters, your great family of creation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

"BLEST BE THE TIE THAT BINDS"

Blest be the tie that binds
our hearts in Christian love:
the fellowship of kindred minds
is like to that above.



OTHER SONG IDEAS:

"For the Beauty of the Earth"

"This Is My Song"

WEDNESDAY: THE FOURTH WORD

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Begin by lighting four of the seven candles.

PRAY

God of love, when we feel
abandoned, come to our aid.
When we feel alone, be with us.
In Jesus' name, Amen.

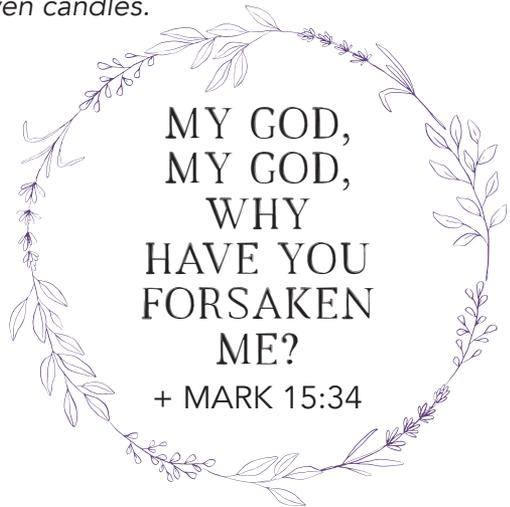
READ

Mark 15:33-34

Extinguish one candle.

REFLECT

One way of understanding the cross is as testimony to God's solidarity with the oppressed and downtrodden, the victimized and disinherited. God does not merely behold the world's violence and hate crimes, its pain and its suffering; rather, God enters into the suffering of the world, identifies with it, and



so clearly signals God's passionate care for all those who are suffering today.

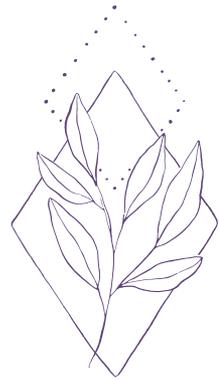
For those of us who despair in the midst of suffering, who feel godforsaken and alone, the cross declares: *Fear not*. God has experienced suffering and abandonment, and so is present with you now. And if God is with you in your suffering, so too will you be with God in the restoration, healing, justice, and new life to come.

PRAY AND SING

Dear God, thank you for being with us, even in the shadows of loneliness and despair, suffering and injustice. And for others in those shadows, help us be signs of your radiant presence, and instruments of your justice and peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

"JESUS WALKED THIS LONESOME VALLEY"

Jesus walked this lonesome valley,
he had to walk it by himself;
O, nobody else could walk it for him,
he had to walk it by himself.



OTHER SONG IDEAS:

"When Jesus Wept"

"Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child"

"Abide with Me"

THURSDAY: THE FIFTH WORD

Begin by lighting three of the seven candles.

PRAY

Dear God, give us this day our daily bread. Quench our thirst: for water, and for justice. In Jesus' name, Amen.

READ

John 19:28-29

Extinguish one candle.



I AM THIRSTY.

+ JOHN 19:28

REFLECT

One of the oldest ways of understanding the cross - indeed, the primary way the cross was understood for roughly the first thousand years of Christian history! - is as part of God's victory over death-dealing powers. And while on the surface the story of the crucifixion seems to be a story of defeat, the Gospel writers embed it with clues that it's actually a story of divine victory.

What clues? First, Jesus' remark, "I am thirsty," along with the report that he was given sour wine to drink, echoes Psalm 69: "for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink" (Ps 69:21). In the world of the psalm, God will deliver the psalmist from this distress, and this deliverance will be emblematic for other subjugated people: "Let the oppressed see it and be glad" (Ps 69:32). Likewise, the "branch of hyssop" in John's account echoes the exodus story: the Israelites use hyssop branches to mark their doorways with lamb's blood on the eve of their escape from bondage in Egypt (see Ex 12:22).

In other words, by including these key details - the thirst, the vinegar, the hyssop - John is saying that Jesus is actually about to be delivered, and a New Exodus is about to begin. Accordingly, for those who despair that death-dealing powers have the upper hand, the cross declares: *Fear not*. Easter means God ultimately is and will be victorious over the powers of evil and death. Just as in the days of old, a New Exodus, a new deliverance is underway!

PRAY AND SING

Dear God, we thank and praise you for your victory, unfolding even now, over the death-dealing powers of the world. Let us

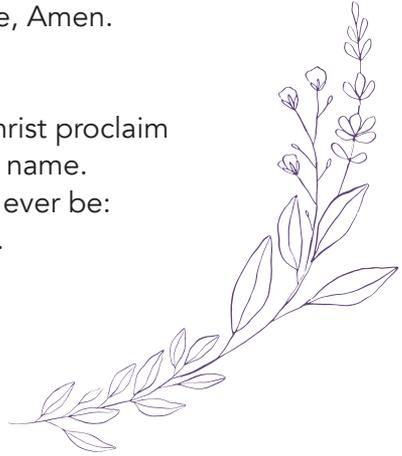
play a part in your ongoing mission, your New Exodus, from bondage to freedom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

"LIFT HIGH THE CROSS"

Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim
till all the world adore his sacred name.
So shall the our song of triumph ever be:
praise to the crucified for victory.

OTHER SONG IDEAS:

- "Go Down, Moses"
- "We Shall Overcome"
- "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"



FRIDAY: THE SIXTH AND SEVENTH WORDS

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Begin by lighting two of the seven candles.

PRAY

God who lifts up the lowly and turns the world around, restore creation. Transform our hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen.

READ

John 19:29-30

Extinguish one candle.

REFLECT

One way of understanding the cross is as part of God's surprising, transformative work of turning the world upside down - or rather, right-side up! From a Jewish point of view in first century Palestine, the Roman cross was arguably the worst thing in the world: a brutal



imperial instrument of torture, terror, and disgrace. And yet, in and through Jesus' death, God co-opts, subverts, and transforms this "worst thing in the world" into one of the best: an instrument of salvation, a sacred sign, not a desecration but a consecration.

In effect, God takes a sword and turns it into a ploughshare. And if this is what God does with the world's "worst thing," imagine what God will do - and is doing - with the rest of creation!

In other words, for those who despair that the world is beyond saving, the cross declares: *Take heart!* If God has remade the Roman cross into the Tree of Life (*It is finished!*), one of the worst things into one of the best, then surely God will redeem and restore the whole wide world.

READ

Luke 23:44-46

Extinguish the last candle.

REFLECT

Another way of understanding the cross is as a testament to Jesus' faith. His last words here are an echo of Psalm 31, at once a prayer for help and a vulnerable expression of trust: "Into your hand I commit my spirit; / you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God" (Ps 31:5). Despite the severe difficulties of death, Jesus gives himself over, trusting God's faithfulness. Our faith may falter, but God's faith is strong.

PRAY AND SING

Dear God, thank you for being faithful, for making and remaking the world again and again and again, for taking the worst of what we have done and transforming it into something beautiful and new. In Jesus' name, Amen.



“WERE YOU THERE?”

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? (x2)

Ooooh - sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble,
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Verse 2: Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Verse 3: Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

OTHER SONG IDEAS:

“Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow”

“There Is a Balm in Gilead”

“Be Thou My Vision”

HOLY SATURDAY

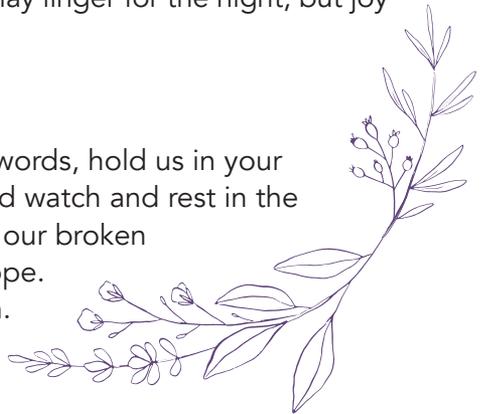
To symbolize the sorrow and uncertainty of the day, suspended between life and death, hope and fear - shroud the circle of candles with a cloth.

REFLECT

For those of us who despair in the deepest shadows of life and death, when all light seems gone and all hope seems lost, the cross declares: Take heart! Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning.

PRAY

Dear God, when we run out of words, hold us in your hands. Be with us as we wait and watch and rest in the tomb with Jesus tonight. Mend our broken hearts. Help us hope against hope. Stay with us. Have mercy. Amen.





EASTER SUNDAY



Rejoice and be glad: Jesus is risen!

Remove the shroud from the Circle of Light, light every candle (and add a few more!), bring in some signs of God's spring, and sprinkle onto the table something sweet, so you can taste and see that God is good!

PRAY

Alleluia! Thank you, God, for this new and dawning day. Thank you for your steadfast faith in us, for forgiving and loving and remaking the world, lifting us up, again and again and again. In Jesus' name, Alleluia, Amen!

READ

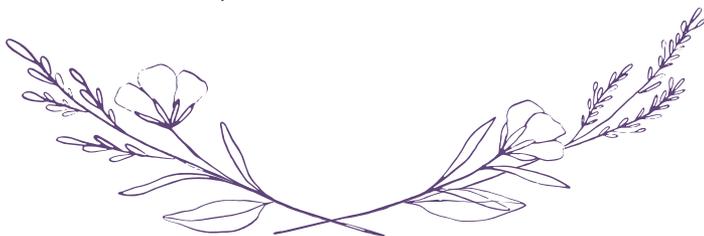
John 20:1-18

REFLECT

Easter Sunday is the beginning of fifty days of Eastertide, just as Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of a new era of resurrection, mercy, love, and joy. In your life, where do you see signs of new life springing forth? How does understanding the cross help you understand the new life of Eastertide?

PRAY AND SING

Dear God, in the weeks and months and years ahead, let us take part in your work and play of resurrection. Let us be living signs of renewal. In Jesus' name, Amen.



“CHRIST THE LORD IS RISEN TODAY”

Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!
All creation join to say, Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, O heavens, and earth reply, Alleluia!

OTHER SONG IDEAS:

“Alleluia! Sing to Jesus”
“Now the Green Blade Rises”
“This Little Light of Mine”

 ALLELUIA! 

What’s the good news of the Gospel on Easter Sunday? Is it that Jesus, through the cross, shows us love and mercy even unto death? Is it that Jesus, by rising from the dead, defeats death-dealing forces once and for all? Is it that Jesus, by paying every price, cancels all debts and in doing so sets us free? Is it that Jesus subversively transforms some of the worst things in the world (the Roman cross and betrayal among friends) into some of the best (the Tree of Life and forgiveness among enemies) - thus effectively proclaiming that God will redeem everything in the end? Is it that the cross declares God’s compassionate solidarity with all those who suffer? Is it that, to borrow a phrase from the poet Mary Oliver, this story will break our hearts open, never to close again to the rest of the world? Is it all of these things and more?



NOTES

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing notes.