

Monday, April 10 – Read Luke 19:28-20:8. Most of us see donkeys as nothing special, even a bit comical. In Jesus' day, a donkey was a royal mount. Kings or generals only rode horses in war; when they came in peace, they rode a donkey. Jesus' ride into Jerusalem used symbols from Israel's history (see 1 Kings 1:38-40, Psalm 118:19-29) and from prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Zechariah 9:9-17). Jesus' followers rejoiced, but Luke wrote that Jesus wept for Jerusalem. He said the city's people were blind to what would bring them peace. The attitudes driving the leaders to plot his death would in the end lead to Rome's brutal destruction of the city. Like them, we live in a world of cause and effect. Open your heart to God and ask, "What attitudes do I have that will keep me from having your peace if I don't change them?" The religious leaders tried to discredit Jesus by asking about authority. Their authority was based on human credentials and contacts. If Jesus came today, from a small town, with no significant degree or denominational credentials, would you listen to and accept him? Without devaluing human learning or belonging, what does it take to let the Holy Spirit be the final authority and guide in your heart?

Tuesday, April 11 – Read Matthew 21:28-46. Jesus told two "vineyard" stories to challenge his listeners' thinking about their submission to God. In the first, a father told two sons to work in the vineyard. He got a "no" that became yes, and a "yes" that became no. In the second story, a vineyard owner rented his vineyard to tenants and took a trip. When it was time to pay what they owed, the tenants refused to submit to the owner's authority. They beat and killed his messengers—and finally the owner's son. Matthew said the religious leaders "knew Jesus was talking about them." Jesus' first story contrasted a son who talked a good game, saying he'd work but then not doing so, with a son who eventually did what his father asked. In what areas, if any, are you aware of a need to grow toward greater authenticity in your spiritual life? Ask God for the courage to be honest about your life with yourself, others, and God. 2000 years later, it is easy to look down on the religious leaders of Jesus' time—they refused to submit even in the presence of God in the flesh. What have the authority figures in your life been like? How have your experiences with them affected your ability to trust and submit to Jesus? How are you responding to, or resisting, Jesus' call on your life?

Wednesday, April 12 – Read Mark 14:1-9, John 12:1-9. Though some details in these two stories differ, their essence is the same: in the last week of his life, a grateful woman anointed Jesus with very expensive perfume. Some criticized her extravagant act of gratitude, but Jesus staunchly defended her. He knew the cross waited at the end of the week, and said Mary had anointed him in advance of his burial. Imagine the deep love and gratitude that led Mary to give Jesus this extravagant gift. What does Jesus' response tell you about how much her fervent love meant to him as he faced death? How can you show your love for Jesus, both in your inner "sacred space" and outwardly, with Mary's beautiful spontaneity and urgency? "Leave her alone," Jesus said to those who criticized Mary's act of worship. Are you ever tempted to criticize the way someone else praises or serves God? How can this story help you move beyond a critical spirit, and to value the uniqueness of each giver and each heartfelt gift?

Thursday, April 13 – Read Mark 14:10-50. As with his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus arranged in advance for a Passover meal. His hope-filled words changed that annual supper into the Lord's Supper we still observe. The meal over, Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives. He had come to this moment by choice—but still he struggled with the awful suffering just ahead. Crucially, he prayed, “Not what I want but what you want.” In the darkness, the rulers and Judas put their dark plot in motion. In the shadow of the cross, Jesus made a confident promise: “I won't drink wine again until that day when I drink it in a new way in God's kingdom” (verse 25). How can Jesus' example, and the Holy Spirit's presence, help you look beyond the often painful facts of this life to the greater reality of God's world? How can that kind of hope give you more strength and energy for today's challenges? Sooner or later, we all face a situation in life that seems unbearable. What do Jesus' prayers as he faced the cross teach you about the value of honestly facing and voicing your feelings in those times of anguish? What is helping you learn to say, “Not what I want but what you want”?

Friday, April 14 – Read John 19:4-37. John said that, on the cross, Jesus tenderly gave his mother to the care of “the disciple whom he loved.” He said he was thirsty, and John noted that a hyssop branch (a Passover symbol) carried the red sour wine (or vinegar) drink. Then, perhaps in the loud shout Mark recorded (see Mark 15:37), Jesus said, with spiritual as well as physical significance, “It is completed”—and it was. How does Jesus and Pilate's dialogue (verses 7-11) contrast external power with inner spiritual strength? How did Jesus nurture and build up the inner strength that upheld him on that awful Friday? When, like Pilate, you have to choose between pleasing a human power (even social or family pressure) and doing what's right, what gives you the moral strength to do the right thing? If a non-religious or nominally religious friend asked, “What was completed when Jesus died?” how would you answer? In what ways do you internalize the meaning of Jesus' death for you?