

*Season of
Bright Sadness*

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

A FEW WORDS ABOUT LENT

Lent is the period of time between Ash Wednesday and Holy Thursday (also known as “Maundy Thursday”), leading up to Easter. It is observed as a time of intentional, Christ-centered devotion for the believer and often becomes a time of refocusing and commitment to the Lord.

Lent is a time of mourning the death of a Savior, as well as the sinfulness of the human heart. But it is also a time of great rejoicing in the resurrection of that same Savior and the future and eternal celebration to come. For this reason, Lent is referred to as the Season of Bright Sadness in some traditions.

This season is most often associated with the practice of fasting as a way of drawing nearer to Christ. While some people practice 24-hour fasting each week during Lent, most of us choose to give something up such as unhealthy food, drink, spending or other distracting behavior. This is a gentle reminder that we do not belong to creation but to its Creator.

Fasting is just one aspect of humbling ourselves in a tangible way for Lent. But fasting is not the only way to draw closer to the heart of Christ. Sometimes, adding a practice is just as valuable. Committing to daily prayer or meditation is a good place to start, and helps us, just as fasting does, to re-order our loves and re-orient our hearts. We hope that this devotional, in a small way, can aid in your study, prayer, and reflection during the season of Lent.

HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL

This booklet is a good place to start for Lenten devotionals, and has writings for five themes of Lent: Preparation, Repentance, Reconciliation, Anticipation, and Celebration. There are also writings for Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. It would be a good idea to use it in tandem with the devotional or scripture you are currently reading. We encourage you to read the verses referenced throughout, to pray the prayers, and to use these reflections as a starting point for reflecting on your own heart and relationship with the Lord as you continue to draw nearer to him.

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Ash Wednesday

by Brendan Michael

“For dust you are, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19).

“Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean” (Ps. 51:7)

In our comfortable modern life, we are often lulled into thinking that we’re self-sufficient, wonderfully independent, even invincible. We live simply unaware that our existence is a paradox. We were created from lowly dust by the Lord God for a glorious destiny, and also cursed to return to that same lowly dust as the cost of our frailty. We were called to co-labor, co-reign, and cultivate with God; instead, whatever we build turns to ash.

For centuries, the Church has observed Ash Wednesday as a consecrated moment to stop, remember our weakness, and prepare ourselves for the penitent road toward Easter. When Christ entered into Jerusalem a week before his crucifixion, the people lay

palm branches on his path in honor and reverence. We celebrate that event as Palm Sunday —and traditionally, the palms from this celebration are burnt to provide the ash for Ash Wednesday. This is a fitting testament to the paradox at the heart of the Good News: the very path of glory and kinship is also the way of suffering, of humility.

On this day, believers have also traditionally received the sign of the cross in ash upon their forehead, as a visible, solemn marking of our need to confess, repent, anticipate, and celebrate both the coming crucifixion of our Lord and His resurrection from the dead. We wear the emblem of our frailty, of our need for rescue, and the ashen remains of the glory for which we were loved into being. In so doing we may, as our fathers and mothers in the long lineage of the Church body have done before us, “Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

Preparation

by Mike Weisman

“The voice of one calling in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him’” (Mark 1:3).

“I’m going to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2-3).

Just a few hundred years ago, if someone wanted to come visit you from out of town, they would “send word” to let you know they were coming. Regardless of your answer, they were on their way. And as a good host, you would ready your home for their arrival. You’d set up extra beds, clear out the unnecessaries, and stock up on the best food you could find. You made sure you had a place prepared for them.

I wish that still happened. In some ways it does, but there’s a lot less riding on it these days. There’s always an Air B&B that can accommodate loved ones if we find it too inconvenient to be a host.

It’s no wonder then when Jesus says “I’ve gone to prepare a place for you”, it doesn’t mean as much as it used to. It doesn’t strike the chord that it should, and we find his choice of words rather odd. See, every act of preparation requires the setting aside of one’s own will, time, and resources. Preparation requires a thousand little “deaths” to ensure that the other can thrive in the newly prepared place. It is completely “other-focused”.

We too have been asked to “prepare a place”. Not for a friend from out of town, but for the one who breathed life into us. And the place we must prepare is our hearts, not for a long weekend, but for permanent residence. Our God asks us to do as he does, so a thousand little deaths are required: death of our convenience, death of our lesser loves, death of our own wills. All so that our hearts may be prepared for the best guest our lives could ever have, and as he thrives in us, so we thrive in him.

A Prayer of Preparation

by Mike Weisman

My Lord,

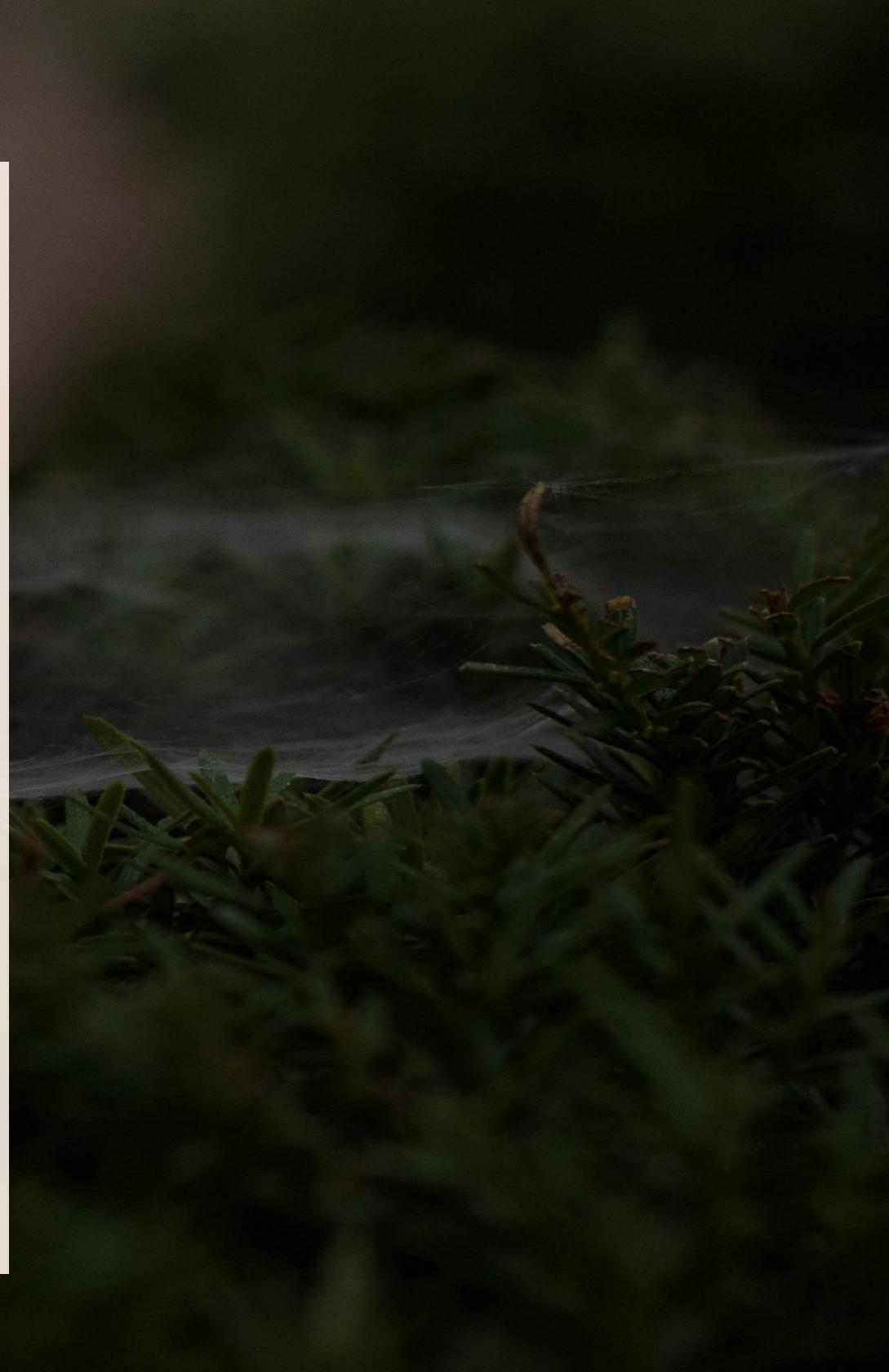
Teach me to prepare a place as you did. Show me how to lay down my lesser loves, the things that steal my heart away from you.

I see the tomb as it was prepared for your temporary stay. The cobwebs swept out, the dirt and grime wiped clean, the rubble cleared, all to make room for the suffering—God’s resting place. Little did we know that a place of emptiness and death would soon become the place of victory, the place of new life, the place of resurrection.

My God, help me to prepare my heart as they prepared the tomb. Show me how to clean away the cobwebs of forgotten truths, the dirt of falling short, and the rubble of broken dreams. Give me strength to say “No” to that which is easy, so that I may say “yes” to your loving-kindness. Help me to see my heart as a place of permanent residence for the Sustainer of the universe, for my body is indeed a glorious temple. And when I’m tempted to cry out against your healing work as you clean out my heart-tomb, help me to understand that it was never a tomb at all. It was never meant to be a place of emptiness or death, but rather my heart is a place of victory, a place of new life, a place of resurrection.

Lord, I invite you to prepare my heart with me. That it not be an act completed in isolation, but a co-laboring work done in unity with your Spirit. That the preparation be a joy, and that I see you for what you are: My God, My Father, My Salvation. Do not be temporary in your residence of my spirit, but rather, *let me live in the permanence of your visiting.*

Amen





Repentance

by Amy Peterson

A garden once held the beginning of creation, now a betrayal for the world's renewal. The divine meets humanity, as Heaven suffers agony, with the cries of the cross. Just as a seed must die to produce life, buried deep in the darkness of the garden bed. It is in the cracking, that life conquers death.

Oh death where is your victory? Oh death where is your sting?

The cries in the garden of Gethsemane ring out of the agony felt, as Jesus pleads for the cup to pass. Yet in His pleading, there is an obedience rendered, as He receives this cup of suffering. His perfect obedience, so that I may be clothed in His perfect righteousness.

The cries of the cross echo the agony felt, as Jesus bears the weight of Godforsakenness. Jesus receives the greatest suffering, as His own Father turns away. His perfect obedience, so that I may be clothed in His perfect righteousness.

The cries of the cross meet my very lips, as I ponder the magnitude of the bread broken and cup poured out for me. For He died the death I should have died, and walked in perfect obedience that I should live. Just as the seed cracks in the darkness, so I too must receive this breaking to bear the newness of life. My repentant heart bears the weight of the cross, and moves towards the Father's self-emptying love as Christ is formed in me.

For just as the garden cries out in the dead of winter for springtime, so my heart longs for newness to grow forth.

*Father,
Thank you for the redeeming work of the cross. For Your life poured out and obediently lived, that I may receive the fullness of Your righteousness. Help me to face with a repentant heart that which separates me from living fully in this self-emptying love. May the cries of the cross echo in my heart of Your deep love for me.*

Reconciliation

by Jill Carnuccio

*“Be reconciled to God”
(2 Cor. 5:21).*

Ahh, the blank page. Clean. Empty. Full of potential. This paper holds my offering to you the reader. The joy of self-expression only goes so far, I hope for more—I hope to get you on the same page with me. Together on this page we initiate a transaction in which we both play a part. My part is complete; yours has just begun.

A very, very, VERY long time ago God wrote on the blank page of time. His words, an offering of His thoughts—an expression of His unique being. Over a specific period of dark and light and dark and light. God was in a flurry of joyous self-expression.

Why did God go to all that trouble; especially when in His omniscience He knew His words would be rejected, his offering torn to shreds? Well, He wanted us on the same page with Him, so to speak!

All that was before what is—that is where He wanted us.

All Love, all Joy, all Peace, all Understanding, all Kindness, all Goodness, all Gentleness.

God, All-contained, wanted to expand His life to include us, enjoying the endless space He filled. We walked away from His offering, all of us. But God, BUT GOD! He wrote a new page and on it, The Word: Jesus.

Have you read this page? Have you considered this Word?

Jesus is God writing still, so that we will get on the same page with Him! His initiative, His thoughts, His joyous self-expression given in hope that we will read and believe.

Faith is our part of the exchange. “...if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ...And gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though

God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:17-20).

Notice, the past tense of His work of reconciliation and the present imperative tense of ours. His part is complete; ours has just begun.

“Father God, You are the author of my life. Only by accepting your offering in Jesus can I get to know and experience Your thoughts, intentions and all the potential for my life. Thank you that Jesus enabled me to “get on the same page with You”! My hope is in Him- the answer to Your hopes for me. Amen”

Anticipation

by Nathanael Manthey

In our culture of instant gratification, we have lost the tension of waiting and anticipating. Think about a bride-to-be approaching her wedding day, or the expectant mother nearing her due date. Anticipation grows stronger as it gets nearer to its fulfillment, and we grow weary of waiting. But we must wait, and there are lessons in the waiting.

Most of us have heard the anecdote of the man who helped a butterfly struggling to free itself from its cocoon, only to watch it flounder around unable to fly. The difficult work of shedding its former home strengthens the butterfly's wings so it can fly; but freeing it from the struggle too soon actually hinders its development. Sometimes it feels as if we are stuck in the struggle with no hope of deliverance.

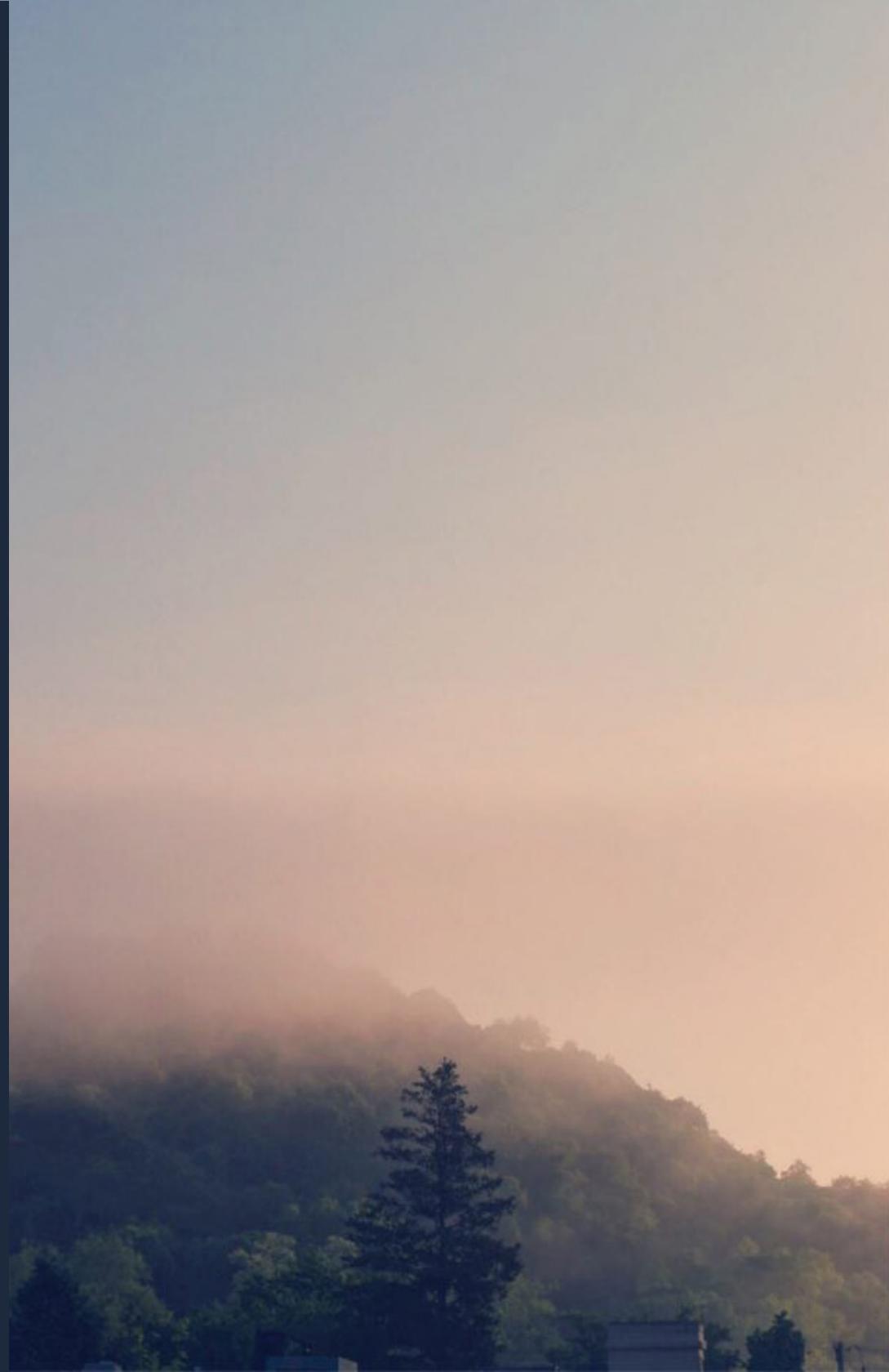
“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life”
(Prov. 13:12).

*Like a sputtering flame on a diminishing wick
Hope deferred makes the heart sick
But a desire fulfilled is a tree of life
Like reconciliation bringing an end to strife*

*We live in this precarious position of balance
Of well-formed plans and haphazard chance
Stuck in this equilibrium of instability
Of firm foundation and flexible pliability*

*Yet a consistent vein of truth remains
Through tragic losses and colossal gains
Whether peace on earth or living hell
Our God is with us, our very present Immanuel*

The day is coming soon when our investments of blood, sweat, and tears will be achieved in the return of King Jesus and the true fulfillment of His kingdom. For now, we live in the tension of our identity in Him, and in dying and resurrecting as His ambassadors of grace. Do not lose heart, dear one, the fulfillment is coming.



A Prayer of Anticipation

by Nathanael Manthey

God of Hope, we come to you during this season of Lent, recognizing that our anticipation brings the very real risk that we may be disappointed. As we hope and wait, we trust you with our risk.

Lord, often we are like the two disciples travelling to Emmaus on that first Easter morning, completely unaware that you were resurrected. Some of our hopes have been buried in a borrowed tomb.

Lord, we need you to join us on our journey. We don't need you to condemn us, but to walk with us in our grief.

Immanuel, awaken us to your presence and remind us that this time between the crucifixion and the resurrection is a vital stage.

Through the power of your promises, cause our hearts to burn within us with hope renewed.

"We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:3-5).



Celebration

by Kate Skinner

In a biblical sense, to celebrate is to praise; to extol; to commend; to make famous; the name of the Most High. The celebration of Lent is not a commandment, but rather a divine invitation, to renew your faith and to center your mind and your heart on Jesus as we journey to Easter. We see Celebration woven and modeled all throughout the Word of God. In the Old Testament as Israel dedicates the wall in Nehemiah, and in the New Covenant, as He gives us baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is clear throughout His word that the Father has designed celebration as

a spiritual discipline for his people to practice.

And yet, even given His constancy, His fidelity, in my life and in Scripture, my memory so easily forgets. I am so easily swayed by the enormous and the insignificant challenges alike that I fail to remember the time and time and time again that God has parted the water, has dropped Manna, has delivered from the lion's den, from the belly of the whale. When the mortgage is due, when the next medical bill comes, when the blood work comes back, when the voice on

the other line just does not sound the same, I confess that there are times when it feels better to stomp my feet and point my finger at God than it does to gather party supplies.

Learning to celebrate is central to our spiritual life. The very act of celebrating, of living in the fullness of joy regardless of circumstance, tethers us to a story much bigger than any one person, one that began long before any worldly struggle or trial, even triumph. Scripture says that Christ came so that we, His people, may have life and life more abundantly—by his death, burial, resurrection and ascension to the Right Hand of the Father (John 10:10). Dear friends, this abundant life includes celebration.

The celebratory narrative of God founded in the Garden sprang forth as He called us into loving covenant with each other and with Him. It goes on as Jesus put on flesh and bore the sins and brokenness of a hungry and desperate world and died, and it will culminate in a celebration, the grandest of all, in the wedding feast of Christ Jesus with His bride.

Faith filled anticipation, joy fueled celebration ties us to our Father, and cuts through any power of doubt and fear. So, may we praise him for his perfect life on Earth, extol him for His love poured out on the Cross in death, commend Him for the victory over death and make Him famous for the life-lacking-death found only in Him.

A Prayer of Celebration for Easter Sunday

by Kate Skinner

We give blessing and honor to you, Father—

Your people shout Hallelujah and Amen!
For the Lord our God is risen,
Christ Jesus has risen indeed!

May this proclamation bring death to life, and darkness to light,
As the glorious sound of revival echos not just in these walls,
But in the lives of all who seek to know, how long and how high, how
deep and how wide—
Is your love for us.

May the words of victory ring through truth we speak.
For Love was planted in a garden, cultivated in Your people,
birthed to a World, to be neglected and rejected,
Look up O sleeper and see how He rises in victory,
Over the grave
On this third day.

Lord, Your people shout Hallelujah and Amen!
For the Lord our God is risen,
Christ Jesus has risen indeed!

Heavenly Father, we praise you for the gift of Lent,
for the perfect life, death and ascension of Jesus.
We thank you for the celebration of the third day. We thank you that
it is not for one person, or one people, but for all people. Your love
and salvation are for all who confess with hearts and minds and voices
raised. For the tomb is empty and Jesus is risen so your people shout in
exclamation—

Hosana!
Hosana!
Hosana in the highest!

