***Embracing the uncertain***

**Lenten Worship Series – Week 4**

***The Uncertainty of Mortality***

**March 22, 2020**

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| **WORSHIP SERVICE OUTLINE**SEach worship outline contains all elements needed for your worship service. The order of each service presented is only a *suggestion*. No doubt changes will be needed to accommodate the flow and worship style of your corps. The outlines are flexible and allow opportunities to “cut and paste” as needed. If you are blessed with instrumental or vocal music resources, you may find there is more structured material here than needed. Sermon manuscripts are included as a *sample* and not to be preached verbatim. |

***The Uncertainty of Mortality***

**Call to Worship:**

I don’t think there is anything that preoccupies our attention or stirs our emotions quite like our own mortality. These are moments when we lie in bed, staring at the dark, thinking about the finiteness of life and the inevitability of death. They’re moments when that part of us we’d rather ignore—the part that acknowledges that we will die—drifts into our consciousness and grips our attention.

You see, we Christian people believe that when we walk on this side of the grave, we do so in the shadow of the eternal. That means the power of the Resurrection and the promise of new life are not simply things that await us when we die, but they can also inform our hope and even our behavior in the way we live today. It’s right here with us. He is right here with us.

 (*Embracing the Uncertain*, pp. 45, 47, 48)

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| **SB#241 – And can it be that I should gain** | TB-445 – Sagina  | HTD4-T13 (4 vs.) |
|  **Additional Optional Songs** |
| **SB#27 – Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah****HC#231 – Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah** | TB-399 – Cwm RhonddaTB-397 – Bread of HeavenHC-231 | HTD3-T7 (4 vs.)No CDHCD22-T11 |
| **SB#38 – Jehovah is our strength** | TB-200 – Darwalls | HTD1-T7 (3 vs.) |
| **SB#258 – Jesus shall reign where’er the sun****HC#264 – Jesus Shall Reign** | TB-11 – Duke StreetHC-264 | HTD3-T8 (4 vs.)HCD25-T14 |
| **SB#271 – Rejoice, the Lord is king!** | TB-200 – Darwalls  | HTD1-T7 (3 vs.) |
| **SB#277 – Thine is the Kingdom, Lord** | TB-162 – Diademata | HTD1-T8 (4 vs.) |
| **SB#358 – Crown Him with many crowns****HC#241 – Crown Him with Many Crowns** | TB-162 – DiademataHC-241 | HTD1-T8 (4 vs.)HCD23-T11 |
| **SB#534 – Give me the wings of faith to rise** | TB-120 – They’ll sing a welcome home | No CD |
| **SB#861 – In Christ alone my hope is found****HC#149 – In Christ Alone** | TB-132 – In Christ aloneHC-149 | No CDHCD13-T19 |

***Embracing the Uncertain***

**[Each week, *Embracing the Uncertain* is a time of silent prayer by the congregation. The leader should walk the congregation through the bullet points below.]**

# Leader: During the course of his ministry, Paul drafted a letter to the church in Corinth—which we now know as the book of First Corinthians. It says this:

 *42It’s like this with the resurrection of those who have died. The body planted in the earth decays. But the body raised from the earth cannot decay. 43The body is planted in disgrace and weakness. But the body is raised in splendor and power. 44The body planted in the earth was animated by the physical, material realm. But the body raised from the earth will be animated by the spiritual. Since there is a physical, material body, there will also be a spiritual body.* (1 Corinthians 15:42-44, The Voice)

 We believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. This poses all sorts of questions about the details of that spiritual body. What age will we look like? What will that spiritual body be like? What will heaven be like?

Jesus said *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”* (John 11:25-26). Do you believe this?

 Thank God for the promise of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

* Spend some time in prayer reflecting on your own mortality.
* Ask God to prepare you for a life everlasting that you can start to experience today.
* Ask God to shape you according to God’s will as you make God’s love real.

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| **HC#110 – He Is Here** | HC-110 | HCD9-T20 |

**Prayer**

God, thank you for sending Jesus, who is the Resurrection and the life. Teach me to trust in you, even when I am grieving and troubled. Grant me the secure knowledge of eternity with you, even with all of my questions. Amen.

(*Embracing the Uncertain*, pp. 51, 53-56)

**Announcements and Offering**

***Lazarus and the Uncertainty of Mortality***

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| **Drama – Better Late Than Never** |

**Choric Reading/Scripture**

[Reader 2 – *Female*; Reader 3 – *Male*]

**Reader 1:** John points to stories where Jesus returns to the issue of faith again and again. The crowds are fickle, believing sometimes and not others. The religious leaders refuse to believe because Jesus doesn’t fit their paradigms. The disciples and close friends constantly face situations that challenge their faith, and this especially happens when Lazarus dies. John is implicitly urging his readers to have faith in Christ, even in difficult times, because He is the source of life and well-being.

(John 11 intro, *The Voice*)

**Reader 2:** You know how the story goes. Lazarus was dying. Mary and Martha made a pitch for Jesus to come to them, but Jesus chose to wait. He didn’t delay out of callous indifference to the family—in fact, we find out he truly loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He waited in order to make a point about God’s glory.

**Reader 3:** It’s a point that is hard for us to hear when we are captivated by grief. But it’s a point that makes all the difference in the world, and all the difference to eternity.

**Reader 4:** When Jesus arrived, Mary and Martha were grieving in the midst of their community. They were angry, perhaps at Jesus, but more at the unfairness of it all.

(*Embracing the Uncertain*, p. 46)

**Reader 1:** 17-18As Jesus was approaching Bethany, He heard that Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. 19Now many people had come to comfort Mary and Martha as they mourned the loss of their brother. 20Martha went to meet Jesus when word arrived that He was approaching Bethany, but Mary stayed behind at the house.

**Reader 2:** 21Lord, if You had been with us, my brother would not have died. 22Even so I still believe that anything You ask of God will be done.

**Reader 3:** 23Your brother will rise to life.

**Reader 2:** 24I know. He will rise again when everyone is resurrected on the last day.

**Reader 3:** 25I am the resurrection and the source of all life; those who believe in Me will live even in death. 26Everyone who lives and believes in Me will never truly die. Do you believe this?

**Reader 2:** 27Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Anointed, *the Liberating King,* God’s own Son who *we have heard* is coming into the world.

**Reader 4:** 28After this Martha ran home to Mary.

**Reader 2:** Come with me. The Teacher is here, and He has asked for you.

**Reader 4:** 29Mary did not waste a minute. She got up and went 30to the same spot where Martha had found Jesus outside the village. 31The people gathered in her home offering support and comfort assumed she was going back to the tomb to cry and mourn, so they followed her. 32Mary approached Jesus, saw Him, and fell at His feet.

**Reader 1:** Lord, if only You had been here, my brother would still be alive.

**Reader 4:** 33When Jesus saw Mary’s *profound grief and the moaning and* weeping of her companions, He was deeply moved *by their pain* in His spirit and was intensely troubled.

**Reader 3:** 34Where have you laid his body?

**All Readers:** Come and see, Lord.

**Reader 4:** 35*As they walked,* Jesus wept; 36and everyone noticed how much Jesus must have loved Lazarus. 37But others were skeptical.

**All Readers:** If this man can give sight to the blind, He could have kept him from dying.

**Reader 4:** They are asking, if Jesus loves Lazarus so much, why didn’t He get here much sooner? 38Then Jesus, who was intensely troubled by all of this, approached the tomb—a *small* cave covered by a *massive* stone.

**Reader 3:** 39Remove the stone.

**Reader 2:** Lord, he has been dead four days; the stench will be unbearable.

**Reader 3:** 40Remember, I told you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God.

**Reader 4:** 41They removed the stone, and Jesus lifted His eyes toward heaven.

**Reader 3:** Father, I am grateful that You have heard Me. 42I know that You are always listening, but I proclaim it loudly so that everyone here will believe You have sent Me.

**Reader 4:** 43After these words, He called out in a thunderous voice.

**Reader 3:** Lazarus, come out!

**Reader 4:** 44Then, the man who was dead walked out of his tomb bound from head to toe in a burial shroud.

**Reader 3:** Untie him, and let him go.

(John 11:17-44, *The Voice*)

**Testimony of Faith – [Choose someone from the congregation who can testify on this theme.]**

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| **SB#565 – All I once held dear****HC#89 – Knowing You** | TB-725 – Knowing YouHC-89 | No CDHCD7-T19 |
|  **Additional Optional Songs** |
| **SB#32 – How deep the Father’s love for us****HC#127 – How Deep the Father’s Love for Us** | TB-663 – sameHC-127 | No CDHCD11-T17 |
| **SB#61 – The king of love my shepherd is** | TB-310 – St Columba | No CD |
| **SB#62 – The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want** | TB-68 – Crimond | HTD6-T6 (4 vs.) |
| **SB#540 – My times are in Your hand** | TB-158 – St MichaelTB-159 – Trentham  | No CDHTD8-T17 (4 vs.) |
| **SB#634 – When from sin’s dark hold Thy love had won me** | TB-903 – Trust in God | No CD |
| **SB#645 – He leadeth me! O blessèd thought!****HC#32 – He Leadeth Me** | TB-14 – He leadeth me!TB-8 – By His handHC-32 | HTD7-T9 (4 vs.)No CDHCD2B-T12 |
| **SB#671 – Rock of ages, cleft for me** | TB-284 – Toplady | HTD5-T23 (4 vs.) |
| **SB#729 – O for a heart to praise my God** | TB-107 – RichmondTB-70 – Fewster  | No CDHTD3-T13 (4 vs.) |
| **HC#179 – Come to Jesus** | HC-179 | HCD16-T19 |
| **HC#205 – Closer Still** | HC-205  | HCD19-T15 |
| **HC#213 – In the Presence of Jehovah** | HC-213 | HCD20-T13 |
| **HC#242 – In Your Presence** | HC-242 | HCD23-T12 |
| **HC#245 – Known to You** | HC-245 | HCD23-T15 |

**Pastoral Prayer**

**Message – Mortality**

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| **SB#540 – My times are in Your hand** | TB-158 – St MichaelTB-159 – Trentham  | No CDHTD8-T17 (4 vs.) |
|  **Additional Optional Songs** |
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| **SB#729 – O for a heart to praise my God** | TB-107 – RichmondTB-70 – Fewster  | No CDHTD3-T13 (4 vs.) |
| **HC#110 – He Is Here** | HC-110 | HCD9-T20 |
| **HC#179 – Come to Jesus** | HC-179 | HCD16-T19 |
| **HC#205 – Closer Still** | HC-205  | HCD19-T15 |
| **HC#213 – In the Presence of Jehovah** | HC-213 | HCD20-T13 |
| **HC#242 – In Your Presence** | HC-242 | HCD23-T12 |
| **HC#245 – Known to You** | HC-245 | HCD23-T15 |

**Benediction:**

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

(Hebrews 13:20-21)

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| **SB#861 – In Christ alone my hope is found****HC#149 – In Christ Alone** | TB-132 – In Christ aloneHC-149 | No CDHCD13-T19 |
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| **SB#271 – Rejoice, the Lord is king!** | TB-200 – Darwalls  | HTD1-T7 (3 vs.) |
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| **SB#358 – Crown Him with many crowns****HC#241 – Crown Him with Many Crowns** | TB-162 – DiademataHC-241 | HTD1-T8 (4 vs.)HCD23-T11 |
| **SB#534 – Give me the wings of faith to rise** | TB-120 – They’ll sing a welcome home | No CD |

DeVega, Magrey R. *Embracing the Uncertain: a Lenten Study for Unsteady Times*. Abingdon Press, 2017.

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| **Lent 2020 – Week #4** |
| **DRAMA****Better Late Than Never****By Martyn Scott Thomas**© Copyright 2019 by Martyn Scott Thomas. All rights reserved. Used by permission. |
| **Topic:** | Death, Resurrection |
| **Scripture:** | John 11:1-44 |
| **Synopsis:** | A couple discusses their disappointment with Jesus concerning the death of Lazarus. |
| **Characters:** | AsherSharon |
| **Props/Costumes:** | Biblical or casual dress. |
| **Setting:** | Bare stage. |
| **Running time:** | 4 minutes |

[*Asher is standing center stage.*]

**Sharon:** [*enters, calling out*] Asher, you’ll never guess who just showed up.

**Asher:** Simon, the tanner?

**Sharon:** No. Guess again.

**Asher:** Justus, the tax collector?

**Sharon:** Wrong. [*announcing*] Jesus.

**Asher:** Jesus?

**Sharon:** Yep. He’s at Mary and Martha’s house right now.

**Asher:** It’s about time.

**Sharon:** Uh, a little too late if you ask me. They sent for him about a week ago.

**Asher:** And when did Lazarus die?

**Sharon:** Four days ago.

**Asher:** I’d say that’s more than a little late.

**Sharon:** I’m not even sure why he’d show up at this point.

**Asher:** I guess he can still comfort the girls.

**Sharon:** What comfort can there be at this point? He’s too late to do anything.

**Asher:** He’s a family friend. Maybe he can help them grieve.

**Sharon:** Some friend. If he cared that much, he should’ve come right away.

**Asher:** What do you mean?

**Sharon:** When they sent word to him, he waited. He could’ve come right away.

**Asher:** Maybe he was busy.

**Sharon:** Too busy to help a dear friend.

**Asher:** What did you expect him to do?

**Sharon:** The same as he’s done for countless others.

**Asher:** And that is . . .

**Sharon:** Heal him. He could’ve healed him.

**Asher:** What are you talking about?

**Sharon:** [*explaining*] It’s Jesus. Of Nazareth. He’s the one who’s been going around healing everyone.

**Asher:** [*disbelieving*] He’s that Jesus?

**Sharon:** The one and only.

**Asher:** I can’t believe that he’s friends with Mary and Martha.

**Sharon:** I guess he’s known them for a while.

**Asher:** And Lazarus, too?

**Sharon:** That’s what I mean. If they really were his close friends, he should have put everything else aside and got here as quickly as he could.

**Asher:** He’s been healing people all over the country.

**Sharon:** Maybe this one was too tough for him.

**Asher:** Is that possible?

**Sharon:** Lazarus went downhill pretty quickly. Whatever he had, it was pretty aggressive.

**Asher:** But too tough for him? For Jesus, the healer?

**Sharon:** What else could it be?

**Asher:** Maybe he didn’t get the message.

**Sharon:** Then why is he here now?

**Asher:** Maybe he didn’t realize how serious it was?

**Sharon:** I doubt that. He seems to know everything about everybody.

**Asher:** Then why did he wait?

**Sharon:** I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.

**Asher:** And how are you going to do that?

**Sharon:** Do you want to take a walk with me?

**Asher:** Where are you going?

**Sharon:** I saw them heading to the grave site.

**Asher:** Who?

**Sharon:** Mary, Martha, and Jesus.

**Asher:** What do you think they’re doing?

**Sharon:** There’s only one way to find out.

**Asher:** You can’t be serious.

**Sharon:** They’re our neighbors. We should help comfort them.

**Asher:** And find out what Jesus is up to at the same time?

**Sharon:** Wouldn’t you like to know?

**Asher:** [*turns, takes Sharon’s hand, and exits*] Let’s be good neighbors.

[*Blackout*]

***Embracing the Uncertain***

**Lenten Sermon – Week 4**

***Mortality***

**March 22, 2020**

by Rev. Magrey deVega

[Based on *Embracing the Uncertain*, by Magrey R. deVega

Chapter 4: *Lazarus and the Uncertainty of Mortality*]

**Scripture:** John 11:17-37

The truth of the matter is, the certainty of our death and mortality is a truth that most of us would rather ignore—if not deny altogether. We have developed so many systems and approaches for us to escape the certainty of our mortality, only to discover that, like sandcastles or ice sculptures or skywriting in the clouds, every attempt we make to avoid our death and mortality ultimately fails.

Today’s sermon is not about what happens after we die. There are certain Christian convictions that we anchor ourselves to, but today’s sermon is not about that. It is also not about end-of-life planning, although it is important to make those decisions for your family on your behalf before you die, as one of your last best gifts you can give them.

Instead, today’s sermon is a simple reflection on how not to be afraid of death; on how to see death not as a source of fear, but as a mystery to embrace. It is something we can embrace together in community.

You may have heard this Bible story from John before about Mary and Martha—two sisters who are grieving the loss of their brother Lazarus. You know what happens: by the time Jesus finally shows up at Mary and Martha’s house, He discovers a family in disarray, torn apart by their grief, grieving deeply and in shock. They had an expectation that Lazarus would not have died. They had their systems in place. They had a timeline established in which Jesus (in their minds) would have shown up on time. One which Jesus would have done for Lazarus what He clearly had done for masses of people before then: healed him, prevented him from dying. So that if Jesus had shown up for them on their timeline according to their schedule and expectation, their brother should still be alive.

But like sandcastles or ice sculptures or skywriting in the clouds, even our best attempts at denying mortality somehow fade away. So Mary and Martha say these words to Jesus, *“If you had only been here, my brother would not have died”* (John 11:21). By the time they say that, they are really speaking on our behalf, aren’t they? Because in those words they echo something that is deeply resonant and continually disturbing within our own human condition. When it comes to death, we have been there. We know how hard it is to stand amid the ambiguity of our mortality. To claim, on the one hand, our certainty of our Christian beliefs that God has the power; that in Jesus there is resurrection and new life. But there is a wide, wide gulf that separates the certainty and clarity of our Christian convictions and the undeniable uncertainty of our own mortality. When Mary and Martha say these words, we are speaking them along with them. It is not easy to confront the uncertainty of mortality.

You might agree that one of the greatest comic strips of all time is “Calvin and Hobbes.” It is an enduring tale about a little boy and his best friend, a stuffed tiger doll named Hobbes. In one of the most poignant episodes of the entire series, Calvin and Hobbes discover a baby raccoon outside on the ground, hardly breathing. Calvin is distraught so he runs to get his mother. She shows up on the scene and scoops up the raccoon and wraps it up in a blanket and tucks it in a shoebox to keep it warm in their garage. Calvin offers to feed it his dinner—which would be a noble gesture except, as his mother says, “Calvin, you don’t even know what we’re having for dinner tonight.” By the end of the 9-strip story, the raccoon has died. Calvin is left to wrestle with how something like this could happen.

In the final strip of this 9-strip series, he and Hobbes offer what I think is one of the most poignant conversations in the entire series, where Bill Watterson (the author) offers something of a meditation on the nature of death. Calvin and Hobbes are walking in the woods, and Calvin tells his buddy, “My mom says that death is as natural as birth, and it’s all part of the life cycle. She says we don’t really understand it, but there are many things we don’t understand, and we just have to do the best we can with the knowledge that we have.” In the second to last frame of that strip, Hobbes says to Calvin, “I guess that makes sense.” And then in the final frame, Calvin hugs his buddy Hobbes tightly and says, “But don’t YOU go anywhere,” to which Hobbes responds, “Don’t worry.”

At the end of the day, the one thing that endures, the one source of our comfort in the midst of our fear is love. That’s what Paul says time and time again, “God has not given us a spirit of fear” (2 Timothy 1:7), not even fear of death! God has given us the power of love that will endure to the end. And one of the greatest hopes that you and I have in the face of death is the gift of each other. It is the gift of community. It is the warm embrace of friends and family; the relationships we tend that we can hold tightly to, even when we are grieving the loss of loved ones, even when they die suddenly and shockingly. Just as Calvin and Hobbes exchanged a warm embrace and promised to be there for each other, God has given us the gift of community to face our future without fear.

That’s not the only thing we believe about death, of course. Of course we believe that death is not the final word. Of course we believe in the resurrection as given to us in Jesus. Of course we believe in eternal life and that once we step from this earth we step into life eternal. Of course we believe in eternity and God’s embrace. Of course we believe in the resurrection.

But before we get to the raising of Lazarus in this story, there is something here in this moment with the breathing Mary and Martha and Jesus that John does not want us to miss. Yes, of course, at the end of the story Lazarus is raised back to life. But that’s a different sermon for a different day. That’s a sermon for Easter morning. For now we pause here, rather than skipping ahead to the end of the story, we stay in this moment to recognize that Jesus shows up on His own schedule to offer a gift that Mary and Martha were not expecting. They had expected Jesus to show up on their schedule to raise Lazarus and prevent him from death, but instead Jesus gives an even more astounding gift that is hard for us to comprehend. In John 11:35, Jesus weeps. He cries. What an astonishing moment for the Son of God to shed a tear. Certainly, if Jesus were fully human, this would not have been the only time He cried. I would imagine there were many times that He shed tears. We are told that He was moved with compassion time and time again throughout His ministry. But for some reason in only this instance John—of all the Gospel writers—decides to record this moment when Jesus cries. Why? We wonder why Jesus might have cried in that moment. There’s a part of us that wonders if Jesus had maybe been a little regretful for not showing up on time. Or maybe Jesus was just so moved by the fact that He had lost His friend and maybe He could have done something to prevent it. But maybe His tears were not shed out of remorse, but given as a gift. If Jesus—the Son of God—could cry, maybe God has given us permission to do the same. And if Jesus could share the fullness of His human emotion in the company of beloved family and friends, and could find solace in community, then maybe God is encouraging us to do the same.

Yes, of course, Jesus would raise Lazarus to life. Yes, we believe in the resurrection and eternal life for those of us on this side of the grave. But before we get there, with every death, with every grief, with every embrace of uncertainty, let’s remember it’s okay to cry, and there is solace found in community.

C.S. Lewis once said, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else” (*Is Theology Poetry?*, 1945). It reminds me that, yes, we can believe in resurrection and eternal life. But we can believe it because, *because* of the eternal life and resurrection we can see things we would have otherwise missed. The joy of solidarity and the comfort of community; that in each other in the wake of death of loved ones we can find in each other hearts that are open with grief, strong shoulders for us to lean on to find solace, ready and listening ears for us to receive stories and memories, and for all of us to form together a communal vessel to contain our tears—tears that have been blessed by a Jesus who shed the same. That is the gift of Christian community that the Holy Spirit has forged among us.

To the children who are here this morning, and to all of us who are children at heart, I remind us that it is okay to wonder about our death. If there is anything that you are wondering about death, it is good for you to ask those questions of people that you love and trust. It is okay to ask your moms and your dads, Sunday school teachers, pastors and church leaders, because we have all wondered those questions. We’ve all been Calvin looking at a baby raccoon, wondering about death. While there are no perfect answers to these questions, simply asking them of people you trust can actually make your life easier.

And so there was Mary and Martha who had wondered what had happened to their beloved brother Lazarus. For now, all they had was each other—they and all the others like them living with their uncertainty—but Jesus was with them.

Jesus was not only with them, but he was commiserating with them to remind them that even though they could not see past their uncertainties, to see what had happened to Lazarus, they were there together crying, weeping, loving and supporting each other. Just as Calvin and Hobbes exchanged a warm embrace in the mystery of death, God has given us the gift of each other to do the same.

For any of us today who are staring into the mystery of the grave, let us acknowledge that we have each other as well. God is among us. He has given us a spirit of love that can cast out our fears.

You are not alone in your deepest and most profound questions. We are here for each other in the bond of Christian community and love. Whatever eternal life looks like down the road and beyond the grave, we will find out someday. But for now, we join our hearts together, looking through that glass dimly, and know that in God’s love we are not alone.

Let’s pray:

God, we thank you for the gift of eternal life and for the promise of a resurrection. We also thank you for your gift of companionship and love that sustains and supports us through the darkest and most difficult questions of our lives. We thank you that in Jesus we have someone who understands our pain, who himself exhibited through his own tears an acknowledgement of what it means to be human. As we make this journey through Holy Week and into the glory of the resurrection, transform our tears and receive our grief. Let us find solace in one another so that our mourning can be turned into celebration and our hopelessness turned into promise. For all these things we are grateful. We ask all these things in the name of Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Recorded: March 11, 2018

Hyde Park United Methodist Church

500 W. Platte St., Tampa, FL 33606