What is capable of delivering us from fear?

Two-thousand and twenty
Holy Week Retreat

A retreat-in-place with the monks of St. Benedict’s Abbey
## Contents

**Prologue** ........................................................ 3

**Synthesis of Retreatant Comments** .......... 4

**Friends on the Way - A Resource** ........... 17
Throughout the eight days of the Easter Octave the Church had us sing this question in the Easter Sequence chant: *Tell us, Mary, what did you see on the way?* In the same spirit we asked this question of ourselves: What have we seen in these days capable of conquering fear, capable of showing a way *through* this time, when the most basic realities we live by have overnight been called into question by a microscopic particle?

We sent this question to the participants of our 2020 Holy Week Retreat-in-Place, to really put to the test of our experience the truth of the retreat’s theme: “God is always with us, for *All my desires are known to You*” (RB 7:23, Ps. 38:10). The number of contributions sent in and the seriousness with which the question was taken up has greatly moved us. One thing that is clear is that many of us have experienced what Pope Francis has called “the contagion of hope: ‘Christ, my hope, is risen!’” He goes on, in his *Easter Urbi et Orbi* message,

This is a different “contagion”, a message transmitted from heart to heart – for every human heart awaits this Good News. This is no magic formula that makes problems vanish. No, the resurrection of Christ is not that. Instead, it is the victory of love over the root of evil, a victory that does not “bypass” suffering and death, but passes through them, *opening a path* in the abyss, transforming evil into good: this is the unique hallmark of the power of God.

In the pages that follow we have tried to trace how the features of this hope and the path it opens up have emerged in our experience during this time, to help us continue to follow this new hope which embraces us today.
**I. A Bewildering Discomfort**

One retreatant sent us the following judgement he had made:

One of the biggest takeaways from the retreat for me and the quarantine experience in general has been the realization that there are so many different and effective ways of responding to this situation. If I am faced with something discomforting, I can try to dull out this discomfort through a million different TV shows or movies that are available at an instant, and like I said, that’s effective, at least in dulling the reality of the circumstances. But it’s only effective temporarily, and it is far from the truth of the situation...

Once this discomfort intrudes upon our lives we have, he points out, a decision to make: we can numb it with distraction, or we can stay in front of it. We can be like the guards in Giotto’s painting, sunk in the oblivion of sleep, while the event of the resurrection takes place right in their midst and angels dangle their feet over their heads! Or we can have a different position before the event confronting us.

The other disciples went away in bewilderment to their various distractions, but Mary stayed in front of the empty tomb, and she wept, for she did not understand it’s meaning. But notice what happens – by staying and looking she sees something new emerge which the others do not: “And [Mary] saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been.” She looked and there were two angels – not what she expected.

The word “angel” (ἄγγελος) literally means “one who is sent”, one who bears a message. Many of us, as we stayed before the bewildering circumstances we are in, also saw a “message”- something new- emerge with great urgency:

I have been afraid. I am like many hunkering down during the pandemic, already in somewhat rough circumstances. I am a 67 year old female without family. I am low income and have diabetes. I am on food stamps and a state medical program. Happily, I was recently hired to substitute teach again after 20 years service. I taught countless children of all ages, backgrounds and abilities in countless classrooms. I loved them all...Then, the pandemic hit. Schools closed. So, now I wait. I tried to ready myself. I believed, “Look, I can do this!” As the pandemic continues, I realize I have to surrender to God in ways more dire than I can imagine...

We understandably try to “bypass” what is before us by trying to maintain a kind of manageable “normal” (“Look, I can do this!”), but when this does not hold up or satisfy a new realization (a “message”) is born: reality is defined by more than what I can do or imagine.
II. The Impact with Reality Provokes a Question

At first, the admittance of our powerlessness can feel devastating.

I admit I have had great fear regarding the pandemic. I have asked God why has this happened? What are we not being told? How many are going to die? Will I die? But, God, I have so many plans...I cannot die in this pandemic... My two grandsons are so important to me, Lord. I want to see them grow up... Yes, I am very afraid. I try not to now show it and remain calm. On the inside I want to cry.... The Retreat has helped me.... silence helps us to discover who we really are. I am allowing silence to allow me to understand my fear of the pandemic.

The silence of staying is a place of discovery. And one of the things we find is that our need to cry out is not an obstacle, but rather an opening, the point from which we can “discover who we really are.” This is why the angels press into it! Consider the message given to Mary – it is a question: “And they said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’” They ask her: What do your tears mean? What are you missing?

The time that we’ve spent in quarantine here [in the monastery] has put my own shortcomings under a magnifying glass for me (and I’m sure for others). There have been weak points exposed that I didn’t really know were there or I thought that I had mastered and gotten over through self-sufficiency. It has been painful at times to be shown that there are places where I still (even after a whole year and a half!) need to grow into truly belonging here. Instead, what I saw happening to me was an increase in desire expressed by my superiors and my brothers that I be aware of what makes me belong here. What I saw happen in me was an increase in my desire to live that belonging more fully.

The impact with these discomforting circumstances invites our heart to simply ask (simply because our own solutions – our “self-sufficiency” – have not satisfied us and so now we look with a greater openness): What is it that I desire?

But notice the factor of time (a year and a half) – there is a journey for us to make in order to have this simplicity. This is true also for Mary Magdalene:

She said to them, “They have taken my Lord, and I don’t know where they laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus there, but did not know it was Jesus.

She turned to this new presence that had unexpectedly appeared. She turned – it is the beginning of conversion (con-vertere: to turn with someone, to someone), but only the beginning, for she sees, but does not know – she does not recognize him! And, we should note this well too, she has been thinking a lot about him! It is easy to imagine our faith would be easy if we just stood before Jesus like the disciples did, but if we read the Bible, especially the readings the Church gives us during these days of Easter, it is clear that God spares none of us the journey of recognizing Him. We are engaged in the same journey as Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, Thomas, Cleophas and his friend on the road to Emmaus, and all the Christians who have lived from then until now.
III. Out of the Depths We Cry for You

So what is this journey we see Mary make? Why does she not recognize him? She is preoccupied. She turns, but she turns with all her preoccupations and assumptions in front of her sight. Mary has already answered the question (What do I desire?) for herself: to take his body back from whoever (she assumes) took it. To hold onto the last semblance of order she can control in this bewilderment. And what is the method we see God use to bring us out of our preconceptions and into reality? Jesus does not tell her who he is. He asks her questions, he asks her to use all of her reason – to be open to all the factors which the circumstances have provoked in her: the pain, and the desire it points to.

Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” She thought it was the gardener and said to him, “Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him.”

Mary does not answer the questions! She clings to her thoughts – her preconceived problems and solutions! And yet the questions must have rung in her ears, struck so close to the origin of her tears, and cut to the depth of her heart’s need, that she could not find the voice to dare and speak what everything in her was already crying out regardless of her thoughts: I am weeping for Him, I am looking for Him – not just his remains, but Him, His life, His eyes, those eyes that gave me back to myself, that freed me from my shame, that voice that filled me with new life, that cast out the darkness in me, that voice that made sense of my life, that opened it up and made life worth living, made it something beautiful! That is why I am weeping – for whom I am weeping!

As one of us wrote,

... Behind fear is loss. Loss of loved ones, loss of “how it was supposed to be”, loss of control, loss of something. But though I am in the midst of whatever it is, there is Christ. I have felt this deliverance from fear, concretely, in the darkness of my crying out, yelling at, and asking Jesus why. I have felt the deliverance through the concrete actions of the Body of Christ. Through the encouragement and care of my brothers and sisters, I am delivered from fear.

And so the Psalmist words become our own: “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you” (Ps. 139:11-12).

The substitute teacher who wrote about the need to surrender to God in ways greater than she could imagine (i.e. greater than her thoughts), went on to clarify, “I have to maintain surrender throughout my day - like a new blood flow - a transfusion of sorts.” When we allow ourselves to be provoked by what is happening, and accept that we do not author reality, the depth of our need begins to make itself known: new blood, that is, a new life, a transfusion, a life I cannot give myself, for a transfusion can only take place through the action of another! Why does the Easter season in the Church place baptism so front and center in our consciousness? Because the event by which this new life begins to be born in us has already happened! This is the event of our baptism, when Christ seized us and plunged us into his divine life, what St. Peter describes as “a new birth to a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3). And for this to become more and more a living reality within us, what needs to change is not the circumstances around us but our awareness of what He began on the day of our baptism – our awareness not just of who we are (dependent creatures who do not create reality), but whose we are.
IV. A Presence Who Knows All My Desires

It is only at this point, when he has helped Mary clarify what her true need is in front of reality, that Jesus – this Other who gives us new life and who, we should remember, has been before her the whole time – calls her name:

“Mary!”
She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni,” which means Teacher.

She turns a second time. But this time she knows who stands before her – why? Because this conversion is to this new presence with an open heart that was allowed to vibrate with all its need. She recognized the voice that corresponded to her need, that voice which spoke her name like no other, full of tenderness for her need and yet full of authority because it showed her a road forward, full of an unconquerable life which had embraced her whole history and brought it to an unimaginable life, and was doing so now. Let us note how she recognizes Jesus: teacher. She now sees that he has been leading her on this journey the whole time, educating her to this recognition of what her tears were made for, her heart, her whole life, and all of the reality which provoked her – what they were made for, their destiny.

The encounter was both a surprise, and also exactly what she had been waiting for outside the tomb. And how do we recognize this for ourselves?

I had been studying abroad this semester and when everything started getting worse in the middle of March, I was gripped by fear of being trapped, alone, in Spain... When I did get home to my family, I was still kept in a type of quarantine in my room for two weeks. During this time, I still could not see where God was in all this. In addition to this, I have been feeling like a lost child for almost a year, but finally, thanks to the graces this retreat has given me, along with the help of the people God has placed in my life, I can say that I am starting to feel like myself again, like the beloved daughter of God.

I am starting to feel like myself again. This student felt herself lost in these dizzying events, but this was true for the whole year! The pandemic only made her more aware of her need which had always been there. And then, suddenly, through “the graces [of] this retreat” and “the people God has placed in my life”, –through an event!– she is given herself back to herself: I am myself again. Here we see the unmistakable sign of the encounter: Christ “fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (Gaudium et Spes, §22).

The title ‘All my desires are known to you’ was my invitation to enter into the retreat. I have come to realize that the meaning of ‘my desires’ was not to focus on my own self but rather on ‘His desires for me’

V. Going to the Origin

Following this unexpected encounter which changes our path and opens up new vistas of life, a new question enters: How do I not lose what I have met?

God, I want to know You better – How can I keep the retreat experience alive in my heart and home . . . especially when this quarantine is over, and I return to babysitting grandchildren, caring for an elderly parent, attending to a brother for whom I am guardian? How do I continue to move from “knowledge” to “faith, hope, love”? I don't want this to be just another “mountaintop” experience – I want communion with the Holy Trinity to be my lived experience.

This is the same drama that Mary Magdalene, herself, faces:

Jesus said to her, “Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”
Immediately after she hears Jesus speak her name, “Mary!”, and she is given the true meaning of herself in that voice, she does what comes naturally upon finding “him whom my soul loves,” like the woman of the Song of Songs: “I held him, and would not let him go” (3:4). But notice how Jesus, again, gently and firmly educates her (and each of us, for we are Mary) to the great mystery of his Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit, so she can understand how this profound desire in her heart for union with the meaning of her life will be fulfilled in a more profound way than she can imagine. A much greater union, in fact, for when Jesus returns to the Father he takes all of her humanity and ours with him and unites it with the origin and destiny of all people and things, such that union with him can no longer be limited by time and space.

In other words, he can be met in every time and space, which is what we desire to experience:

As a college student, there has certainly been a lot of fear and uncertainty in the past month. I went from happily living out a busy Spring Semester, to the uncertainty of where I would end up, and finally, to being back at home... In the past, my faith life often did not thrive when I was at home. The opportunities to grow in my faith are not as convenient as they are at Benedictine College. I really took these opportunities for granted, which I did not truly realize until this retreat. Praying with all the monks at the Abbey as well as with the other retreatants has struck my heart. My heart aches for the “city on a hill”. However, I realize that I will not be a student at Benedictine for much longer... I will not have the same community, but I will have the foundation that Benedictine has given me.

What a gift this student gives us in writing this because it shows us that Mary Magdalene’s desire is our own, and Christ’s response is the same! The circumstances have helped her to see this same desire persisting in herself, like the Psalmist’s: One thing I ask of the LORD; this I seek: To dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life (Ps. 27:4). What is the house of the Lord (the “city on a hill”) except that place where His presence dominates, where everything is determined and given meaning by that presence? To have this be true in all my days, a permanence that cannot be excluded by any circumstances, we must like Mary recognize the origin, the foundation, of what we have encountered.

VI. The Defining Features of this New Life

When we recognize someone’s biological origin – whose son or daughter someone is – we do so by reference to certain characteristic features that are present (“You have your mother’s eyes, your father’s ears,” etc.). So also here we need to ask what are the defining or characteristic features of the new life we have met?

I am a French doctor in Paris, France. With my husband and our 5th child, we have been lockdowned for 4 weeks. However, I have been working at the hospital twice a week since the beginning of the pandemic. Paris has been hit very hard by the Coronavirus, and one of my secretaries is very severely ill. I have been very anxious about working at the hospital. During this lockdown, I felt that I could get sick and die anytime. My parents are very old and in bad health, especially my father. I am afraid. At the same time, God has
blessed me with so many good graces. During my personal prayer in silence, I experienced a deeper relationship with our Lord, fewer distractions, and I felt his presence with more perceptible signs. We lived this Holy Week with greater and deeper unity. Even at work with my head of Department, who was born in Algeria in a Muslim family, and rejected all religions: she married a French man and follows an occidental way of living. Last week, we had a long talk on God, Trinity, spiritual freedom to believe in God and to follow Him, to go where he wants us to go.

In the midst of trials, an impossible unity! First she discovers this unity within herself (“fewer distractions”), then with her family in how they lived Holy Week, and then it embraces her colleague who does not believe. A contagion of hope. What makes this last “unity” possible is important to note. Her colleague finds herself attracted to talk to this doctor – about what? The freedom she has found in following God! When we discover what makes our own heart free (that voice which speaks our name – Mary!) we live a union with the desire of every heart for real and true freedom. As one of us wrote, “I continue to await in silence. I continue to live in community with all who so hunger and thirst and who await Our Lord and Teacher, Jesus Christ.” Just as the angels and Jesus question Mary to help her freely recognize who is before her, so we discover His presence in the same way, in and through freedom:

A grace I received as a result of the retreat, was an awareness of the fact that although God directed me to this specific [religious] community in a truly miraculous manner, I was nonetheless maintaining an emotional distance from them. I realized that I have been afraid to completely share my true self... for fear that they would not love me back!... I gained this insight during these days of watching all of you interacting with each other at such a deep level of love, honesty and trust. I realized that I felt envious as I perceived how comfortable you are with each other—which made me examine my relationship with my Sisters here...

Christianity always communicates itself through envy! When I see someone living in a beautiful way I want it too (“Rabbi, where are you staying?”), and this life freely invites me to follow it (“Come, and see.”). Let us be grateful for the great reasonableness of this sister, for she does not stop at the surface level of the sign which communicated this attractive reality (seeing the free interactions of the monks during a retreat conference), for this would mean reducing what she experienced to only a passing thing, perhaps just a momentary sentiment, bound to decay in time and space. No! “...you were ransomed [i.e. you were freed] from your futile conduct, handed on by your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold” (1 Peter 1:18). What passes away does not satisfy. Her heart perceived- and desired- more. So she investigates the reality before her! She searches for the origin of this new life there in the relationships that have been given to her:

... And then, something happened which revealed a humiliating weakness of mine to them- but I was NOT judged... NOT made to feel ashamed- instead, they embraced me, showing me that I had no reason not to trust them, and that they do indeed love me. I cannot express how wonderful this is, how filled with joy I am, knowing that I am truly welcome here, that (as one of you said during a Conference), God is with me in THIS place, among THIS family which He chose for me—that this is the place where I will experience His Presence day by day, if I am open to the Holy Spirit.

“Something happened!” What a perfect description of the encounter: something I did not create (and so it may sting!) happens and involves all of me (it embraces even my weakness), and it invites all my freedom to respond. This is why we intuitively ask the Holy Spirit for the grace to respond, for the Spirit who filled Mary’s heart to say Fiat to what is happening – to say Yes. May it happen, may He happen, He whom the same Spirit raised from the dead.
And the way He communicates this new life to us is as true in the heartland of America as in the southern part of Africa:

The retreat made me get in touch with the harsh realities and struggles in my life. I am from Zimbabwe... When this COVID-19 was announced and seeing the reality on the news I was filled with so much fear if Zimbabwe were to be hit. [I took] time to pray more and get the assurance that God is in control and trust. I am a Lupus patient-Hydroxychloroquine as a possible drug to treat COVID-19 patients [made my] fear grow. [It is also used to treat lupus and so would deplete available supplies.]... I was meant to have a retreat but did not have a guide. I then Googled and behold your retreat was being advertised and you were still taking new registrations. I told myself I was going to go for it. The theme resonated with me and my longings. I felt that my religious call and charism was renewed and especially our Dominican Pillars of Study, Prayer, Service & Community. I saw the creativity of the sisters [in my community] and how each one was responsible.... I observed a change in my sisters, they have started to have community prayers together and also eating together. I am going to be joining them from Thursday 16 April [on].

By recognizing the resonance in her heart provoked by “harsh realities” (like Mary before the tomb), and “going for it” (freely following what she found which corresponded) she experienced a renewal in her identity- a new birth to a living hope. And what are the signs of this new life? A capacity for creativity, for responding to the circumstances, and an attentiveness to a change in others and in herself, a change which expresses itself in affirming a living unity (praying and eating together).

The fruit of living this unity which we find growing in us is a new freedom to respond to what is given to us, such that the present moment is no longer a burden or a problem to be solved, but an opportunity to meet Him:

I have noticed that I have been less anxious about tasks/chores, to-do-lists, and more drawn to quiet times in my home. I have been more focused on the present moment, e.g., when talking with a friend, I sit down with the phone (rather than continuing to move about the house, doing tasks).

Even power outages and social distancing can become moments within the event of His presence!

During this retreat I was encouraged by the emphasis on surrendering to God in the moment in whatever situation we find ourselves, for it has come through God’s hands, and it is there that we can encounter God. I was given opportunities to practice this... when our power went out before the Holy Thursday Mass and I needed to transfer my cooking for the family from the stove to the top of our fireplace insert. It was slower and I missed the Mass, but I was able to provide food for my family. Likewise, when I went to pick up a couple of last minute items at the grocery store Saturday morning, I found a line halfway around the large store and had to return empty-handed to continue the retreat. I sensed at the time that this was an opportunity to put this surrender into practice, and God provided later when a family member was able to pick up the items for me.

We should not take for granted that this great reality can be affirmed in the simple embrace of the ordinary tasks of life. They have the capacity to become a sign of His face and His love for us and the world, and so a moment to live and offer the salvation of the world.

My experience during the retreat surprised me with how much joy I received everyday and how connected I felt to you and the retreatants...My fear in the present is dispelled...I was still and quiet for days, [so] that the thunderous sound of Easter is immense. My heart is bursting with joy and love for the precious heart of Jesus. I have moved from my grief and fear and moved to joy, standing in
eternity with him, now. I have loved a quote from Plato... time is the moving image of eternity. The reminder of we’re part of eternity, here and now. Briefly, I have had major depression, these past 3 years, it’s like being in a deep, dark, hole. [During] this retreat and with God’s help, I have come out of the darkness. I have renewed my [Benedictine] Oblate promise and dusted off my breviary. I thank God for all of you, the retreat and those that walked this retreat with me... Graces Abound and my prayers are with you all!

VII. The Birth of a Witness

Mary of Magdala went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and what he told her.

Mary is sent by Jesus to tell “my brothers” (we are so intimately taken up by His new divine life in us that only familial terms can now compare) that he is going “to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God,” but first she exclaims (she cannot help it – how could she not?): I have seen the Lord!

Bonum diffusivum sui: what is good naturally spreads. A witness is spontaneously born. She shares what she has seen, what has happened to her in via, on the way – it would be impossible not to. This event has defined her, introducing the newness so long awaited for, that to deny it would take an effort, like calling yourself by the wrong name, or saying it is raining outside when the sun is shining.

It is within the context of this new life within her, which trembles in each of her words, that the “Apostle to the Apostles” tells them the rest of the message: I am going to my Father and your Father... And we have seen the same experience among us: by paying attention to and following those who witness to us of this new life capable of embracing (not simply enduring) everything, we are changed and we belong more and more to this life. Then, without necessarily thinking about it, we cannot but help witness to what we belong to through the way we live and speak and look at things (just as a son cannot help but show the defining features of his father), down to the simplest realities of our day.

During the last weeks I was very often in contact through phone and zoom calls with friends that love me and that live in a way that attracts me, because in this situation it is clear more than ever that they entrust their life to God and because of this they have hope... I noticed that in this situation I was pushed to look not just at how they are, but at the proposal that they bring with themselves, at the origin of how they are. ... I decided to adhere more to prayer... to life as it was coming.. To discover the origin changes everything. I discovered that in a simple thing that happened... [one of the monks] told me that because they were staying more at the monastery during this pandemic, they were cleaning more and he said “because this is the place I belong to, I want to take care of it”. In that moment it came to mind the fact that I was not living in that way, but what he said gave me the desire to take more care of my house because that is the place I belong to, and as an act of love for my husband. Because that monk shared with me the origin of the way he lived, he changed me.

She continues with an experience that clarifies why so many of us have found living with a rule of life to be generative:

Very often I live relying on my capacity, on my strength, while this rule of life [of regularly praying and meeting with friends who help me live] introduced in my days in a stronger way the awareness that I belong, that I am God’s beloved daughter and this gave me more freedom. Freedom does not mean not to be afraid... but to have a rock of hope on the fact that I belong to God and that He loves me.

A rule of life is not as a tool to increase my willpower to “produce” this new life, which is impossible. Remember, it is a blood transfusion! Rather, she discovered that...
it invites moments of awareness of what I belong to, of recognizing whose I am, and of remembering and asking for the source of this life I am taken up by. Then quietly, “little by little,” life is changed and permeated with this awareness:

...probably the biggest shift I saw was in the way I treat my husband. I noticed that a lot of times my way of loving is very violent, I almost “impose” good things on him. So the result is an oppression, not love. On Good Friday ... I proposed that we watch the Way of the Cross of the Pope together. He had to work so he did not join me. The following morning, I woke up at 6 am and I heard that he was listening to the way of the cross of the Pope while working. I could not understand why, but then I read that on a WhatsApp group our friends had written how much the Way of the Cross of the Pope was moving and I understood that probably that was the origin of what he did. What a surprise! I discovered that a lot of times I have the presumption to think that I am the master and that my husband needs to follow me, while in that moment I saw that my husband is in a relationship with God, God is the Master! So I realized that I don’t know my husband and that I need to look at him, to look at how God is acting in him. I have to follow him! I started looking at my husband with new respect like I would have for a holy place, because I discovered that he is a relationship with God in the present, not already known, but in the present. I understood that even in this the problem is not my effort, but that the best thing I can do for him and for others is to invite them to participate to what is helpful for me and at the same time to watch for how God is going to change my heart and other people’s hearts in the present. So my attitude started to be a desire to give space to the work of Another.

What she discovered in her relationship with her husband is true for our relationship with everything. When we have been met by Someone who loves our freedom, who meets us on the way of our life – who is the way of our life – suddenly everything becomes a place of meeting Him, a place to respect His presence, to see what He will make happen, and therefore, a place of witness. Then our “task” in life, so to speak, becomes simple – perhaps not always easy, but simple, and with God’s grace, possible.

VIII. To Give Space to the Work of Another

When St. Benedict exhorts his monks, “Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ” (RB 72:11), he is quoting St. Cyprian, who in a third century treatise followed it with, “...for He has preferred nothing to us.”

If any of us found value in the “monastic tools for living” proposed for the retreat it was precisely because these are gestures which have arisen out of the Church’s life, as an education to responding to His preference for us, to this task of giving space to God’s love in us and in the world. And many of us made this discovery:

Rising early in the morning and praying with you instead of watching the news helped me set the tone for the day. Lectio inspired me and made me love the Gospels more. Fasting helped me look forward to dinner with my family where we shared our thoughts about our loneliness, stress and disappointments. I was able to share some experiences from your talks to help them through it.

See how we naturally witness to what changes us!

This retreat gave me so much life and renewal. Specifically praying morning prayer, something I used to do very regularly and haven’t in almost two years,
brought me a sense of intimacy and closeness with God I didn't even realize I was missing.

And another wrote: “I realized how... how hungry I am for the fruit of silence: simplicity and an obedient heart.” When we give Him space, we lose nothing, but gain what we have been longing for the whole time.

Through praying the Psalms with the monks, I was able to express my deep longing that God be with me in this time, and instead of feeling Him suddenly “there” with me, I felt His steady presence that had never left me.

The stability of a relationship is borne and begins to conquer everything.

I think the words of the Psalms and the reflections in Vigils and Lauds of the Church Fathers and the saints are capable of delivering me from fear. I am feeling provoked to reconsider my daily schedule, the general attitude of my life, my choice of leisure activities and more. I want my life post-pandemic to be different from the life pre-pandemic. The signs of this in my life are a renewed desire for prayer, for the daily work in front of me, for my relationship with others in my household.

The saints, the scriptures, living by a rule — these all become our friends because they free us to desire more in our life! And so the decision we are faced with at the beginning (do we stay in front of the provocations of reality or try to avoid or control them?) becomes more simple:

It's easy to turn away to other distractions, evens sins, but I must turn back and look at my beloved Lord, let Him gaze upon me, with his loving compassion for my poverty and misery. What helps to turn my eyes back to Jesus is particularly the psalter, especially the psalms of supplication, “Help me, O Lord”. But also in particular the long psalms that tell the history of the Chosen People, their failures and the Lord's faithful marvels. Now I see why. The psalmist is telling his part of the “Great Tale”, and we are participating in it too! ... Holding on to the Resurrected Christ, with His wounds visible, now I can see that somehow I am participating in a mystery.

And we discover by allowing ourselves to be embraced by this Mystery, that He, through us, embraces the whole world:

Far from dulling [suffering] out by diving into some TV show, I am called to unite whatever sacrifice I've entered into to the cross. Christ's suffering was just as real, and He didn't dull out a second of it... It is a scary situation, but it has been an opportunity for me to open my eyes even a little to the suffering that has been, is, and always will be in this world. Just because it has been easy to be blind to it doesn't mean it's not real.... Now, the range of emotions played out through the Psalms are relatable more than ever.

And through all of these following a simple rule of life has helped us allow our time to be punctuated by moments of memory — of remembering He who is making me now, and asking for His assistance.

In a very concrete way, routine allows me to let go of fear... The fact that I can pray the same prayers Jesus did in His moments of unrest and agony... as well as his moments of peace and calm... helps me tremendously. Something I noticed in the panels as well was that the panelists, both monks and lay alike, are more free when they have a sense of “normal.” My prayer life, my sanity, my very being needs a schedule. I can’t meet God, and I can’t be who I’m called to be, without the beautiful...
monotony of scheduled times to pray. That routine allows me to get closer to the constant connection with Christ that I seek. And that connection is where this world makes sense...

It is, at the end of the day, a simple thing: to participate in Christ’s life, which is to participate in the life of the Church, to pray and work, to give ourselves to the work of Another. And rather than this being an experience of losing our vital connection with ourselves and the world, or of an “addition” of duties that burden us with more obligations, we find it frees us to live creatively, to weep because we are wounded, to rejoice because we are loved, in short, to embrace everything.

I am delivered from fear because I know that God handles everything. I have seen this concretely when I was a CNA during The HIV pandemic. We made a pact that whoever we cared for would not die alone. Back then in the beginning, many agencies wouldn’t come... The chaplains that would come were overworked and stretched thin. So some of us were determined none would die alone... We asked their favorite poems, songs, hymns, whatever they needed to pass over. I said to God that I can’t do this. I said to God that I am not a pastor, priest, rabbi. BUT we gave our word. And our word was kept. We stayed so that they would know someone loved them, that they were human beings, that God loved them; that we loved them.

...when my friend died last week I know he didn’t die alone. I found out the day the retreat began. I was quarantined because I had been caring for his pet, and had to isolate. Without your retreat, it would have been harder releasing it all to God.

**IX. Opening a Path**

We have shared only a few of the beautiful witnesses of what we have seen on the way. But what they have in common is that it is a Presence who conquers our fear and makes it possible to embrace the path we are given to walk. The strange gift of these particular days is that they do not allow us to take anything for granted, which, though it can hurt, makes it easier to recognize what endures, what makes up reality every day. And it is clear from our experience that reality is made by Another; Another who does not abandon us but loves us and holds us in existence; Another who meets us on the way – who is the way.

The retreat experience, your authentic and honest sharing and witness, the time of prayer and being united with so many others in this lived, shared experience truly shifted something in me. The reality of the communion of saints, that we are connected in one Body, one Spirit in Christ was made truly present and I see it is a TRUTH in fact and not just something we say.

This new life is a fact – something I can bump into! We only need to pay attention to the way in which it reaches us. It is by following the particular faces which radiate His presence, this certainty of His fidelity, of the ultimate positivity of reality, those who are certain of the journey, that we can follow Him on the journey. Then each step of the path becomes clear and possible. This is beautifully illustrated in an easily overlooked detail in the bottom right hand corner of Giotto’s painting on the cover, the *Noli Me Tangere* (*Do not hold onto me*). The whole painting has an oddly stark and barren landscape except in one place: wherever Christ’s pierced and glorified feet tread, plants and shrubs and greens spring up – *where He is, new life – otherwise impossible life – grows!* While educating Mary to the way the new and unimaginable depths of union with the source of her life will be realized, Christ simultaneously shows her the way: follow the signs of new life! The answer to the question *Whose am I?* (or to put it another way, *What generates this new life in me?*)
What saves me from fear in these days? The truly tangible reality that I am never alone...

has a precise face, a precise time and location, just as at our baptism, when Christ seized us for this new life and set us on this journey. This is what we remember every time we make the sign of the cross: I belong to Another.

What saves me from fear in these days? The truly tangible reality that I am never alone: that the arms of the Church through your own gesture have reached into the isolation of my own home, and gathered me in to share this most dear and precious time. To be in communion, in the heart of the Church, even across physical distance this year, made only that much more tangible to me the unshakeable depth of our spiritual communion: the fact that the Risen Lord still reaches me in the very ordinary, concrete flesh of my daily life... has never been more real to me. He doesn’t come merely in a “spiritual”, abstract way: He comes in the very real flesh of my circumstances... every one of your proposals through these days increased my certainty that I can trust Him to always show Himself, not somewhere else, but right where I am. We belong to a reality so much deeper, truer, and more beautiful than any obstacle or difficulty in our way...

Nothing can stand in the way of His life reaching us today.

I am writing this on Monday, April 13 in the afternoon. I happen to be working from home today utilizing the same home office and desk space that I used during the Holy Week Retreat. When I finished the retreat yesterday I did the same thing I always do when completing an onsite retreat... After I have all of the bags packed and placed in my car I go back to the room where I had been staying and sit quietly and soak in all that has happened there during that retreat experience. Those moments are some of the most contented and Spirit filled moments that I ever experience. To know that in that space (and time) I had experienced a unique and sacred bonding with our Lord and that I will emerge in a renewed state of grace under His protective guidance. It’s a wonderful feeling. As I approached my in-home retreat space this morning I was overwhelmed again with that same experience... It was an enormous blessing and so very uplifting to use that same space this morning for my Divine Office this morning at 6 a.m. To me that space now feels like a consecrated haven that I can always utilize and it is right here under my roof!

What changes are not the circumstances but a new way in us of looking at reality. Then the circumstances are not a burden but we begin to look at everything with fascination and reverence. As St. Benedict says in his Rule, we “regard all utensils and goods of the monastery [our home, our life, our office desk] as sacred vessels of the altar” (RB 31:10).

My life is the same as it was before the retreat but my perspective has changed. Instead of fear and uncertainty, I now carry the knowledge of the presence of the Lord in all things. Having that knowledge brings an incredible peace.

It is impossible to cheat the heart – no matter our interpretations, either there is peace or there is not, either there is life or numbness. If this new life has met us and awakened the deep expectations of our heart then the only reasonable thing to do is to keep asking for the grace to see and following the signs in our life each day. This is why we ask for Mary’s help every day, every morning, because in her life we see a heart that is more open, more human, more willing to adhere to these signs of her son’s life. And this is already happening among us!

... since my initial submission [she has written twice because she has kept seeing more on the way!], I realized that the single most life-changing counsel I received was the teaching that God’s Will for us is what is facing us right now! I have repeated this in my heart daily and it has completely changed and transformed everything! I now approach each day with joy that I have been given another opportunity to serve Our Lord by fulfilling the tasks the day requires. I have been blessed with the deep grace of gratitude in all things and have been freed from the tendency to slide back in to self-pity which is so damaging to the spiritual life. Thank you and God bless and keep you all in His Heart!
Here is someone who walks, whose life shows us a path! The fruit of walking on the way, of asking and waiting for the Lord in every circumstance, and following, is gratitude. It is not something we need to manufacture, but is the simple response the heart makes when it is embraced and freed from its own smallness (self-pity). He frees us. When we experience this, our weakness, our poverty of ability (which we had tried for so long to use to free ourselves) no longer becomes a place of fear but of waiting, of expectation, that is, of hope – a privileged place to encounter His merciful presence again, a place to beg him to come again into our lives and make them grow with his new life.

I don’t belong because I am worth my salt. I belong because God has chosen me and continues to choose me and he manifests that choice... in the mercy He has given and continues to give through my brothers [which] shows me that I am not defeated by my inability to cope or measure up.

I was lonely when I started this retreat. I have always lived alone. And have been fine with that. But since March 12, I have not left my apartment and have not had anyone over. I have RA and Lupus, my [white blood cell count] and [red blood cell count] have been low along with my hemoglobin. So it was decided that I would just stay put. Long days indeed. The retreat opened the door for me to keep busy. Plan my day with prayer. Reach out to fellow shut in to make sure that they are okay. And to family to say hi and check on them. Keep active. Working on Rosaries and other crafts. Turning the TV off and enjoying the silence, learning to listen more to others. I loved your talks. My favorite was the group one. You can see the love and how close you all are. How you encourage each other. I hope you do this again next year . It is great for those of us who are disabled and cannot get out much. Please keep me in your prayers. Another favorite part was [on Good Friday] when the father talked about his son’s suicide and how Father comforted him and talked to him. It was beautiful. 5 of my cousins have committed suicide. So it had always been hard for me to talk about. God bless again. Thank you so much. Hope to join you again next year. I am sorry but I have no pictures. My left arm doesn’t work well. But I did sit up a TV tray with a pretty cover, crucifix and a candle. I will be leaving it up for my daily prayers.

May we all have such a heart. On behalf of Abbot James and all the monks here at St. Benedict’s Abbey, we wish you a blessed Easter season full of the healing life and joy of His presence, today and in all our days!

Fr. Jay Kythe, OSB
Retreat Master

Br. Angelus Atkinson, OSB
Assistant

The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering. The Lord awakens so as to reawaken and revive our Easter faith.

-POPE FRANCIS MARCH 27, 2020, URBI ET ORBI

All we need is the simplicity to respond to the event of His presence. In the monastic tradition this simplicity is known as purity of heart – to desire one thing. Although it would be possible to share many more words from the cloud of witnesses that have been sent, we do not want the sheer amount of words to obscure the great simplicity of the Word for us: how simple God’s love is for us, and how simply He reaches us – using any shred of desire for Him in our hearts – and how all we need to do is respond with the same simplicity and we will see the fruits of His life. For this reason, we would like to conclude this synthesis by sharing a particular contribution whose humanity and purity of heart was a great witness to us.
For us, the Holy Spirit is the comforter that can transform fear into hope. We find the Holy Spirit most active in a community of believers... we see [Mary the Mother of God] immersed within the community of believers and it was there she experienced the Pentecost and the explosion of hope released to her and the whole world.

With the truth of this contribution in mind, we offer below a few practical resources for continuing on the way together.

I. **Continue Following What has Helped You**

The “Monastic Tools for Living Holy Week” in the Retreat Guide are also ways for living every week! Based on your experience of the retreat, identify which gestures helped you the most, experiment with implementing these in your daily schedule. It may take different tries to see what is possible (only if it is possible to be faithful to it will it bear fruit) and the most helpful for where you are at right now, so don't worry if the schedule doesn't fit at first. Enjoy the process of discovery!

Also, pay attention to those witnesses in your life who help you to live this way. Stay in touch with them. Call a friend once a week to share how reality is provoking you, what you have seen on the way, and to pray together. Read a book together that helps you recognize Christ in your life today. Read and pray with the end of John's gospel (Ch.20-21), the book of Acts, and 1 Peter. The point is not to "produce" something together but to help each other to see and follow the signs He is giving you in your life.

II. **Unite Yourselves in Prayer with Us at Mass**

We continue to livestream our daily mass: 12:10 p.m. Monday-Saturday and 10:00 a.m. on Sunday (CDT UTC-5:00).

Alternatively, many have found it fruitful to do a “Celebration of the Word.” This guide could be adapted, using the readings for the day.

Keepthelordsday.com has an arrangement of each Sunday's morning prayer and Mass readings and prayers.

III. **Breathe with the Church: Pray the Liturgy of the Hours Each Day**

While we are no longer streaming our liturgy of the hours, remember that we always pray with the whole church when we pray the hours, whether in the choir stalls of a monastery or in our own room! That being said there are ways that can help us live this more easily and fruitfully, and make this reality more concrete for us.

- **Pray slowly, thinking about the meaning of the words.** Try chanting in recto tono. (This way of chanting on one note was demonstrated in the first conference of the retreat).

- **Pray with a friend.** Many people find it useful to pray with a friend either in person or via phone or video chat (usually because of the sound delay groups no larger than 2-3 work the best). If they have never prayed the hours before just share what your experience of the liturgy of the hours has been and ask them if they are interested in trying it out together.

- **Pray at the same time as a friend,** on the phone or not. You can pray some of the hours with us using the Abbey's Horarium of prayers (see page 19). We can think of the medieval farmers who stopped their work to pray the Angelus at the sound of the monastery bells, to pause for a moment to remember God and join the church in lifting their hearts and work up to Him.
- Begin and end the day in prayer. Do what you can do faithfully. The important thing is to pause for this moment of memory first thing in the morning before we eat, in the middle of the day at noon, and at night before we sleep. The most important hours are the beginning and end of the day (morning prayer and evening prayer or compline). You could also substitute a particular hour for a prayer like the Angelus (or Regina Caeli during the easter season), or an Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be.

So how does one pray the Liturgy of the Hours without a streaming video to follow? There are many useful websites and apps that provide the Liturgy of the Hours texts for the day such as:

- Univeralsis website and app
- iBreviary app
- Laudate app (Apple / Android)

That being said, it is often difficult to pray with screens because they easily distract our attention and tire out our eyes. It is usually easier to enter into prayer with a book. There are two books/sets people typically use to pray in English. Both include instructions and texts for each day. There is also an abundance of guides and tutorials on the internet.

- The Shorter Book of Christian Prayer contains Morning Prayer (Lauds), Evening Prayer (Vespers), and Night Prayer (Compline). This is a good place to begin. (The link goes to our store, but you can also find it sold elsewhere on or offline).

- The Liturgy of the Hours Four Volume Set includes the Office of Readings (Vigils), Midday Prayer, and much more, including all the seasonal variations. (The link goes through smile.amazon.com which you can use to support "St. Benedict's Abbey" with no extra cost).

If you like to pray in Latin useful resources include:

- The Monastic Diurnal, a 1963 edition with the Benedictine hours of Prime, Lauds (Morning Prayer), Terce, Sext, None, Vespers (Evening Prayer) and Compline (Night Prayer), in Latin and English in parallel columns.

- (Nota Bene: the psalms for each hour will vary from the Roman breviary above.)

IV. Live the Rule of St. Benedict with other Lay People

Consider becoming an oblate of St. Benedict’s Abbey. An Oblate of St Benedict (from the Latin oblatio, “offering”) is a Christian man or woman who associates with a Benedictine community in order to enrich his/her Christian life. Oblates shape their lives by living the wisdom of Christ as expressed in the Rule of Saint Benedict. If you are interested in learning more, a good place to start is attending the conference Living the Rule and Q+A with Fr. Meinrad Miller, our oblate director livestreaming on Saturday, May 9 at 10am (CDT). (Available for playback afterward) This is a good chance to hear from the director of our oblate program and ask him your questions.

The Rule of Saint Benedict can be found in many places for free online. Our gift shop also has a softcover Rule and hardcover Rule book available, which are conveniently pocket sized (at least for our habit’s pockets).

V. Stay in Touch!

- Receive our free quarterly magazine Kansas Monks (sign up here). The next issue will be, in part, dedicated to the Holy Week retreat, and include texts from the conferences.

- Receive the Abbey email newsletter (sign up here in the right hand column). You’ll receive regular updates, including our weekly 60 Seconds for Sunday video with reflections on the gospel, digital versions of our publications, and more.

- Subscribe to our YouTube channel to be alerted when new videos are released. Our lay communications director who produces our media also posts news and updates from the Abbey on Facebook and Twitter.

- Make an in-person retreat at the Abbey when circumstances allow! Our retreats website is here. You can also email Fr. Jay Kyth, the retreat master, at retreats@kansasmonks.org.

- If you or someone you know feels called to the monastic life we invite you to explore our vocations website: monkvocations.org, and to get in touch with our vocations director, Br. Leven Harton, here.

- Please remember our community in your prayers, that we may say Yes to Christ’s presence in our lives each day. And know that we are praying for you as we walk together on this beautiful journey to our destiny together.
**Sunday**
Vigils (Office of Readings) - 6:30 AM
Lauds (Morning Prayer) - 6:45 AM
Mass - 10:00 AM
Midday Prayer - 12:05 PM
Vespers (Evening Prayer) - 5:00 PM
Compline (Night Prayer) - 7:30 PM

**Monday-Saturday**
Vigils - 5:45 AM
Lauds - 6:00 AM
Midday Prayer - 11:45 AM
Mass - 12:10 PM
Vespers Mon-Fri - 5:00 PM
Vespers Saturday - 5:45 PM
Compline - 7:30 PM

**Holy Hour for Vocations with Compline**
Saturday - 7:00 PM

The images used in this booklet are from Giotto di Bondone’s (1266-1337) *Noli me Tangere*, a fresco in a series on the life of Christ on the walls of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy.

The text and translation of the *Easter Sequence* on the back cover is taken from Wikipedia, with some changes made.
Victimae paschali laudes immolent Christiani.

Agnus redemit oves: Christus innocens Patri reconciliavit peccatores.

Mors et vita duello conflixere mirando: dux vitae mortuus, regnat vivus.

Tell us, Mary, what did you see on the way?

Sepulcrum Christi viventis, et gloriam vidi resurgentis

I saw the tomb of the living Christ and the glory of his rising.

Angelicos testes, sudarium, et vestes.

The angelic witnesses, the clothes and the shroud.

Surrexit Christus spes mea: praecedet suos in Galilaeam.

Christ my hope is arisen; into Galilee, he will go before his own.

Scimus Christum surrexisse a mortuis vere: tu nobis, victor Rex, miserere.

We know Christ is truly risen from the dead! On us, victorious King, have mercy!

Amen! Alleluia!