

# THE HARDEST PART



*hurt we carry, hope we find*


## Dear Group Leader,

Life is this strange, tender mix, isn't it? Joy and sorrow. Love and loss. Big wins and even bigger failures. We cling tightly to the beautiful moments, but then the phone rings, a diagnosis drops, or some creeping ache reminds us that everything—*everything*—is so much more fragile than we'd like to admit. Life can be too much. And Lent is the season where we sit in that heaviness. For 40 days, we stop pretending things will suddenly get better and face the truth: life is fragile, and so are we.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, when we hear the words no one really wants to say out loud: *you are*

*dust, and to dust you shall return.* It's not exactly the kind of thing you'd embroider on a pillow, but it's a truth we need. Lent invites us to stop pretending we can hold it all together and instead sit with the weight of what we carry—the grief, the regrets, the messes we can't untangle, no matter how much we try.

Here's the hardest part: to be human is to carry the weight of our own mortality, and to be Christian means accepting Christ's mortality. We love the joy and triumph of Easter morning, but first, we have to sit with Good Friday, when God is on the losing team. Jesus, the one we



look to for hope and healing, suffers and dies. His pain is real, just like ours. We can't rush past it. We can't skip to the good part, because it's through the deepest hurt that we begin to understand what it means to be fully human, fully broken.

If you would like to use this free guide as a group, great! You're in the right place. This discussion guide is meant to be used by small groups, Sunday schools, book clubs, or informally among friends, neighbors, and family. Each week includes scripture to read, suggested discussion questions, and a prayer to close your time together. We

hope these lessons give your group an opportunity to practice honesty, where we acknowledge how heavy the world can feel, but where, bit by bit, we might also hold out hope for what might still be possible.

Because when we do the hard part, something else happens: we get to the good part.

*\*Warning: the last few weeks get pretty sad... because Lent is sad. But this is the only time of the year we all get to think about what it means to be on the losing team of pain and suffering.*

# *How to Use This Group Discussion Guide*

We've designed each entry in this group discussion guide to take around 45 minutes. Pick the parts that fit whatever day you and your group are having. Sometimes that might mean spending more time in prayer or maybe a single question takes up all the time because of the richness of discussion. That is totally okay. There are no rules to follow here—other than we recommend starting and finishing on the timeframe you and your group have agreed to. Consider this your official permission slip to adapt this content to your setting.

If you want to go deeper, consider using our daily devotional guide for your individual study this Lent. It's totally free. You can access it, [here](#).

We also have a corresponding sermon guide for churches and pastors that follows the Lectionary Text (Year C). It includes theme ideas for sermons, additional areas to research, and corporate blessings to use during worship. Access it all for free, [here](#).

## TIPS TO LEADING A DISCUSSION GROUP

Whether this is your first time leading a group or your 34th time, welcome! We're so grateful for you—for the ways you long for connection and community and the ways you're practicing it now.



#### WHAT MAKES A GREAT CONVERSATION?

A great conversation happens when everyone learns something new. Often, that learning comes from engaging with the least popular opinion in the room (I know! Easier said than done. But let's practice respectful listening and open-hearted curiosity, shall we?). It also happens by asking really great questions instead of "typical" answers. Respond with curiosity and compassion to what people have to say. Remember these three vital words: "tell me more." And don't forget to laugh—people remember more when they are having fun.

#### HOW MUCH SHOULD THE LEADER TALK?

Be concise and don't speak for more than 2 minutes at any time. Be nonobvious. If you think more than 30% of the room has heard what you are going to say, skip over it and get to the good stuff.

#### HOW DO WE KEEP SOMEONE IN THE GROUP FROM TALKING TOO MUCH?

Remember that your role is to act like air traffic control (but you are not the pilot). Your goal is to help participants learn something new from a thought-provoking exchange. Guiding a conversation towards what is interesting or insightful is part of leading this group—even if it goes in a direction you didn't expect or strays from the discussion questions laid out. That is totally okay! Sometimes the richest moments and shared experiences will happen in those moments of discovery together.

# Acknowledgments

These are our favorite kinds of group projects. A huge thank you to our sponsors who make it possible to make resources free for you to use: The Duke Endowment and Lilly Endowment. And to our team members who put this guide together.

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Sunday, March 2 to Saturday, March 8



BEING  
HUMAN!



Week 01



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## Introduction

Lent begins with human touch as oil and ashes are traced in the shape of a cross on our foreheads. *From dust we were made; to dust we will return* (Genesis 3:19). The intimacy of this symbolic act expresses God’s invitation to “be reconciled” right here, right now, in this moment, no matter how ready we feel—for “now is the acceptable time” (2 Corinthians 6:2b). Jesus has flung open the door and said, let nothing stand in your way. Come and see how loved and how precious you really are, in all of your humanity. Jesus will speak strength and love into all the places where you feel fragile and inadequate. He will speak hope into your fears and eternal life into your very mortality. For know this: you were never meant to do this alone.

## Opening Questions

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**O1.** For those of you who have participated in an Ash Wednesday Service before, what was your experience like? Even if you haven’t attended one before, reflect on the words of the leader when they say, “from dust you came, and to dust you will return” and trace a cross on your forehead or hand.

**O2.** What does “belonging” mean to you? What do you think of when you hear that you belong to God? Or that we belong to one another?





Belonging is central to Father Greg Boyle’s ministry and work through Homeboy Industries. For over 30 years now, he has worked to rehabilitate gang members in Los Angeles, and he has learned invaluable lessons from those whom he lovingly calls “homies.” They teach him about what it means to heal, to belong to one another, to practice compassion, and to embrace their goodness and the goodness of one another. Kate had an opportunity to speak with Father Boyle and dive deeper into how belonging and goodness operate within Homeboy Industries.



## Discuss

Everything Happens.  
WITH KATE BOWLER

Father Greg Boyle:  
Unshakable Goodness

EVERYTHING HAPPENS  
WITH KATE BOWLER

WATCH OR LISTEN  
TO THE FULL  
CONVERSATION

01. What stood out to you from this conversation?
02. How does Father Boyle describe the difference between seeing someone’s potential versus seeing someone’s inherent goodness?
03. Do you believe that God sees potential or goodness when God looks at us?

# Read

*“So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we entreat you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, ‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’ Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: in great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; in purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors and yet are true, as unknown and yet are well known, as dying and look—we are alive, as punished and yet not killed, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything.”*

—2 CORINTHIANS 5:20-6:10 (NRSVUE)




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There is trouble in the church in Corinth, and so the apostle Paul writes to them, beseeching them to be reconciled to God and to one another. Paul doesn’t specifically mention what quarrel made things so difficult in the church or what hurt their relationship with God. But he does list all the things that can cause pain and suffering (2 Corinthians 6:4-5).



04. How has pain or suffering caused strife in your relationship with God or with others?

05. What do you think it means to be reconciled with God? How have you seen reconciliation in practice within your family or community?

*“Two principles that we embrace at Homeboy is everybody’s unshakable good, and we belong to each other. And then [the interviewer] said, ‘Do I think, every vexing, complex social dilemma would disappear if we embrace those two?’ And I said, ‘Yes, I do.’”*

—FATHER GREG BOYLE

06. How easy or difficult is it for you to see someone’s inherent goodness instead of their potential or maybe their mistakes?

07. What does it mean that we belong to each other? What does this look like in practice, not just in theory?

08. How might the ashes rubbed on our forehead during Ash Wednesday serve as a symbol or reminder of today’s conversation about reconciliation, belonging, or the ability to see one another’s goodness?

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# BLESSING FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

These days of dust.  
These days of despair.  
We can hear reality speak to us  
in a clear, ringing voice.  
So we approach. Carefully. Barely ready  
to hear the hard truths we long to be told  
about beautiful, terrible death.  
How strange that it feels so right and good  
to move forward together  
wearing our finitude,  
a mess of ash smeared on our foreheads  
to be told:  
remember that you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return.

How strange that it feels so right and good  
at the edge of awareness  
—the balance point  
of being and non-being.  
I catch my breath as I turn and look  
to see the shining faces all around.

I see it all in a glance:  
how precious  
how precious  
how precious  
how holy each single, imperfect life,  
how beautiful  
how great  
how unconquerable  
each single, unfinishable life,  
because you deemed it so.  
You looked on us, covered in death,  
as a man about to follow a darkening path,  
the only one who could wipe away  
our ashes  
with a single act of love.<sup>1</sup>



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1. Kate Bowler. "A Blessing for Ash Wednesday" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 99.

*Sunday, March 9 to Saturday, March 15*



*Week 02*



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## Introduction

You don't have to go very far to find the wilderness. Most days we wake up living in this reality. Things in this world are not as they should be—no matter how hard we try to bright side or have a cheerful attitude. As the Dread Pirate Roberts said in *The Princess Bride*, “Life is pain, Highness. Anybody who says differently is selling something.” We don't want to see it, but we need to. That's why one of our favorite prayers is “God, let me see things as they really are.” So what are we to do here, in the meantime? We've been given a template, but it's not just a formula, it's a person—Jesus. Though he was full of strength and wisdom and power, Jesus showed us how to navigate the beautiful and terrible (and psst, we don't have to do it alone!).

## Opening Question

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**01.** Reflecting on this past week, what was something beautiful and what was terrible? Or as some people say, “what is your happy and what is crappy?” (Don't skip the crappy. Today, we are going to hold both the good and the bad together.)

*\*Special note to the leader—when someone shares their happy or their crappy, try not to talk after them. Just say “thanks for sharing.” We are so often tempted to fill space with accolades or wisdom, but today just let it be what it is and sit in that space with them.*

Taylor Leonhardt  
HOLD STILL

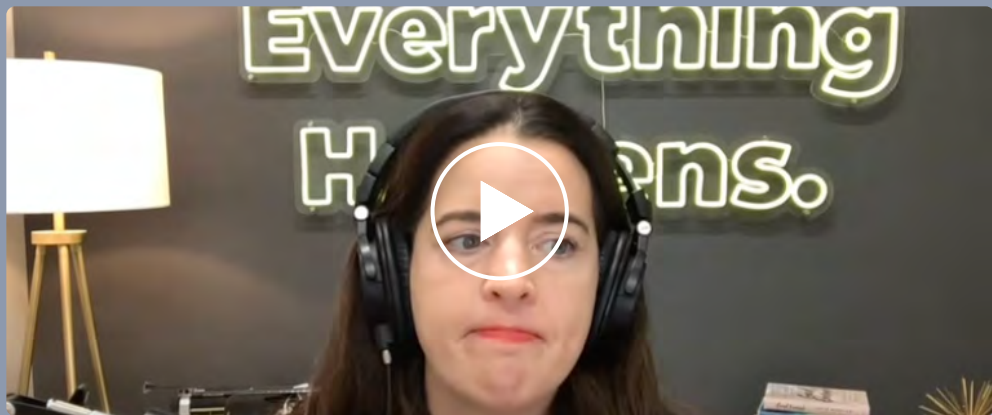
Happy or Whatever  
TAYLOR LEONHARDT

LISTEN

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Author and historian Kate Bowler believes that the cultural pressure to be cheerful and optimistic at all times has taken a toll on our faith. But what if we could find better language than forced positivity to express our hopes and our worries? When you live in the wilderness every day, it can be an obstacle course. In this clip, Kate talks about how she finds the beautiful and the terrible—and how doing so invites us to live with more honesty, courage, and love.

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## Discuss



01. What stood out to you from this video? What did Kate say that made you think, “Yes, me too!”?

# Read

*“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tested by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over he was famished. The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.”’ (Deuteronomy 8:3) Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’ (Deuteronomy 6:13) Then the devil led him to Jerusalem and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,” (Psalms 91:11) and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’ (Psalms 91:12) Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ (Deuteronomy 6:16) When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region.”*

—LUKE 4:1-14 (NRSVUE)




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In the wilderness, Jesus faced the same kind of pain, suffering, and temptations that all humans face. Throughout the Bible the metaphor of wilderness is used to describe uncertain and unpredictable seasons of life where we realize there are forces we can't control in life (illness, natural disaster, loneliness, fear, etc.)





TERRIBLE &  
BEAUTIFUL?

*“When we live like this, with that kind of awareness, an awareness that we’re living inside of forces that we can’t control, I think that is when the beautiful and the terrible become so much clearer to us.”*

—KATE BOWLER

02. When have you experienced the wilderness in your own life? What forces did you realize were outside of your control?

03. How did you handle the temptations of your own wilderness? Did you try to find comfort (e.g., binge-watching TV, scrolling on your phone, substance abuse)? Did you try different ways of coping (e.g., denial, isolation, overeating)? Did you try to take control of your own life or someone else’s?

04. Looking back at Luke 4:1-14, how did Jesus resist these temptations? What did God do after each instance where Jesus resisted these temptations?

*“God is the presence that spares us from nothing, even as God unexplainably sustains us in all things.”<sup>2</sup>*

—JAMES FINLEY, PSYCHOLOGIST & AUTHOR

05. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain.

TERRIBLE &  
BEAUTIFUL?!

?

06. Even as Jesus faced real hunger, powerlessness, and vulnerability, he chose to trust in God to sustain him (and he wasn't alone, read Luke 4:1 and 4:14 again). How has God sustained you through your beautiful, terrible days?

*“There is the part of us that waits for the next bad thing to happen, and at the same time we look to the horizon expecting to see the sun rise. The terrible will come, the pain will come, the joy will come, the beauty will come. All these things we hold as truth.”*

—KATE BOWLER

07. How can we help each other hold these truths together? How can we resist the temptations of the wilderness together?

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# BLESSING TO SEE CLEARLY

Yes, we will grieve,  
but not as those in denial.  
We will suffer,  
but not as those entombed in  
loneliness.

We will join the ranks of the afflicted,  
the weak, and the vulnerable.

We do it willingly. (Okay, not always.)  
But you are showing us what is plastic  
and what is gold.

Blessed are we, looking to you, God,  
and to Jesus, our friend,  
in the dawning of that unshakable  
kingdom  
we know but cannot see.  
Lead us there.

We would choose self-preservation  
at all costs

if you had not given us a glimpse,  
a preview that reminds us that evil  
always  
destroys itself in the end.

Now that we've seen it,  
we have learned the true value  
of what needs to be hated—  
disarmed without cruelty or disdain—  
and what needs to be cherished.

We will carry forward only what is  
true  
and good and beautiful,  
knowing this: love never, ever fails.<sup>3</sup>



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3. Kate Bowler. "Blessing to See Things Clearly" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 146.

*Sunday, March 16 to Saturday, March 22*



*Week 03*



## Introduction

I'd like to make a strong case for complaint as a spiritual virtue. There is something cathartic when you can say, "This did not go well. I am not pleased. Everyone needs to do better." Complaining allows us to see that the world is not as it should be. Complaining to God allows us to locate ourselves in a situation and figure out where God should be. When we say to God, "I am tired of being sick. I am tired of people not listening to me. I am angry that this is happening. Where are you?" Then we might find that God shows up in surprising ways—when a friend knows a friend, when someone brings you dinner, when the doctor finally listens. Your complaints might help you figure out the next right step or just help you get it all out. Either way, God can handle your complaints. God will listen.

## Opening Questions

**01.** There are common phrases that are said to people who are going through a difficult situation. "You're in my thoughts and prayers" or "God works all things for the good of those who love him." What type of responses have you heard (or said to friends) when bad things are happening?

**02.** When you are going through a difficult time, how does it make you feel when you hear these typical kinds of responses?



When our lives come undone or when we see our loved ones in pain, we are quick to jump to justifications, reasons to make sense of it all. But answers to why things are happening are often not easy to determine, leaving us wondering—*where is God in this?* How do we respond to what has happened? New Testament Theologian N.T. Wright and Kate explore the practice of lament as the appropriate response to the terrible.



## Discuss

Everything Happens.  
WITH KATE BOWLER

N. T. Wright: The Mystery of God

EVERYTHING HAPPENS WITH KATE BOWLER

WATCH OR LISTEN TO THE FULL CONVERSATION

01. What stood out to you from this conversation?

02. Have you ever experienced lament in a community setting? How did people mourn or lament together? How did the community respond?

## Read

*“At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’ He said to them, ‘Go and tell that fox for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.””*

—LUKE 13:31-35 (NRSVUE)




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Jerusalem, the metropolis of the people of God, should be most receptive to Jesus and his preaching, but will turn out to be the city which refuses him—in spite of an initial, enthusiastic welcome (Matthew 21:1-11). Eventually, this will be where Jesus is crucified. Jesus is grieved by the fact that Jerusalem is not able to receive the words of God. In all his compassion, Jesus is like a mother hen lamenting over her lost children who choose to turn away from her love.



03. What kind of emotion is Jesus expressing in this short interaction?

*“And the point about lament is that we’re not telling God what he ought to be doing and we’re not telling one another what God is doing. We’re saying, ‘Hey, what’s going on? This is not the way it should be.’”*

—N.T. WRIGHT

04. How do we know that something in the world is “not as it should be”?

05. How can honesty and complaint allow us to locate God and help us find community?

06. What is the purpose of lament?

*“In those moments of, of unknowing, when even God the Holy Spirit hasn’t got words to say, the Spirit is groaning without words (Romans 8)... There is no explanation for this except it’s just horrible, and we have to lament.”*

—N.T. WRIGHT

07. Why is it so hard sometimes to allow people to lament?

08. What are some ways that we can incorporate lament into our prayers, worship, and community?



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# BLESSING FOR LAMENT

Teach us how to pray, God,  
when our faith doesn't feel like  
comfort.

When there are not easy  
answers or tidy scripts.

When there are no other words  
but lament.

Teach us how to pray, God,  
when we see Christ in  
Gethsemane at the center of it  
all.

Teach us how to pray, God,  
when the Spirit groans  
alongside of us. Speechless, too,  
at the pain, at the inexplicable,  
at the unfair. Joining the  
chorus of others in this  
agonized prayer.

Teach us how to pray, God.  
May our words of lament turn  
toward acts of love as we  
remake this beautiful, terrible  
world together.<sup>4</sup>



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4. Kate Bowler in "The Mystery of God," October, 10 2023 in *Everything Happens*, presented and produced by Kate Bowler, podcast, 48:03, <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-mystery-of-god/>.

*Sunday, March 23 to Saturday, March 29*



**IMAGINATION!**

*Week 04*





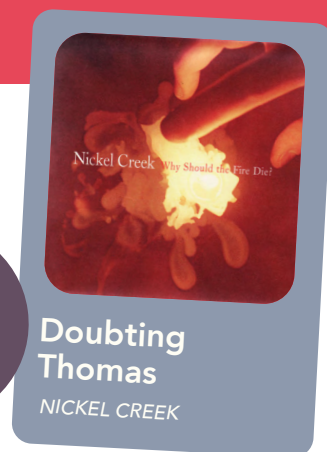
## Introduction

Imagine yourself when you were 6 years old. Do you remember what you were going through when you turned 10? Remember how you felt at 16? Do you remember your dreams at 21? All those versions of who you used to be are still inside of you. Your 7-year-old self still gets excited when you remember the joy of that special day. Your 35-year-old self still wants to cry when remembering the pain of that year. Like a nesting doll, every version of you has been a part of becoming who you are today. Some versions of you went through some terrible and painful experiences and some felt great joy. But all versions were held by God.

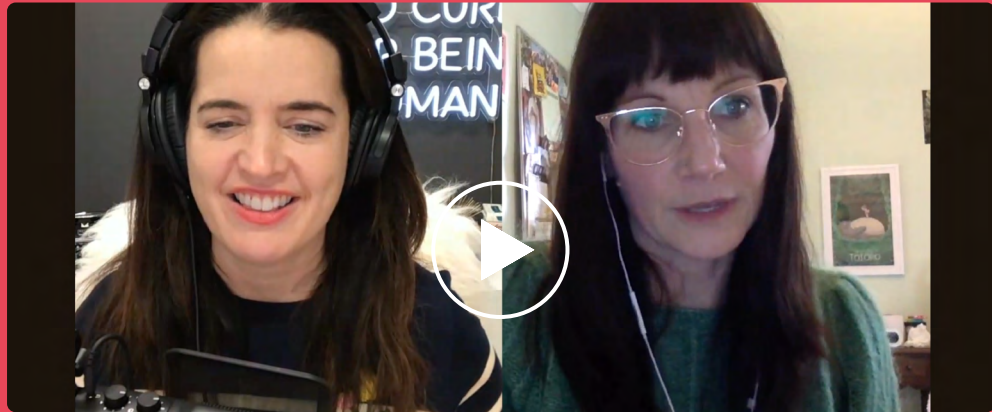
## Opening Questions

**O1.** When you were younger, what did you want to be when you grew up?


**O2.** As we grow, learn, and experience life, our ways of thinking change and evolve. We no longer dream only of a career but of *becoming* a certain way—becoming wise, becoming kinder, becoming more patient, etc. Who are you *becoming* in this phase of life?



Maggie Smith (poet and author of books like *Keep Moving* and *You Could Make This Place Beautiful*) chronicles the aftermath of a painful divorce she didn't see coming. In this clip, Kate and Maggie talk about how we talk about the paradox (the yes, and) of beauty and tragedy in the world.



## Discuss



Maggie Smith: This Place Could be Beautiful, Right?

EVERYTHING HAPPENS WITH KATE BOWLER

WATCH OR LISTEN TO THE FULL CONVERSATION

01. What stood out to you from this conversation?

02. When you were younger, was there someone who tried to protect you from the confusing paradoxes of this life? Did you feel protected or not?

03. What do you think is better: the ugly truth? Or a beautiful lie that protects someone?

# Read

*“Hear, everyone who thirsts; come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your earnings for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. Now you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”*

—ISAIAH 55:1-12 (NRSVUE)




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Isaiah is speaking to the people of God who have been kicked out of their promised land. Each day is a struggle for God’s people. And yet, the prophet declares God knows what you need and what will sustain you. This is a reminder that we can know the beauty of God’s presence and yet never understand the ways of God (“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8)).



*“How do you protect with honesty? How do you tell without fear? That’s this balance. I don’t know if I’m ever doing it right. Every day I’m like, should I have said less? Should I have said more? Should I be telling them more about this thing that’s going on in our town, in this state, in this country, in the world? Should I be telling them more or less? Should I have said it differently? Should I have framed it in a different way? It’s so tricky.”*

—MAGGIE SMITH

04. At that time, the people of Israel were outcasts and struggled to survive. Every day, they wrestled between hope and despair. How would it feel to hear these words about great feasts given their circumstances?

05. When life gets confusing, it may feel natural to reflect on the why—*Why does everything feel so difficult? Why do I work so hard and do not feel satisfied? Why is it so hard to find the good?* What do you imagine is the “why” for the people of God to whom Isaiah speaks? Have you ever pondered these same questions?



*“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”*

—ISAIAH 55:6-8

06. Isaiah invites God’s people to repent and return to God. What if we considered repentance as a new way of thinking or becoming? What would that look like in your own life?

07. How do we live with the great paradox that we may know God *and* never understand the ways of God?

08. There are so many things in life that are so hard and so beautiful. How has drawing close to God helped you through the hard and beautiful parts?

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# BLESSING FOR STRETCHING YOUR HEART



God, my life has too many things.  
Awful. Lovely. Full. Shockingly incomplete.

Will you help me learn to live with a greater  
capacity for this?  
Living in the tension between a life that has  
worked out...  
and one that has gone to hell in every  
handbasket.

Let today be a divine exercise of *yes...and*.

Yes, I have so much to be thankful for,  
*and* this hasn't turned out like I thought it  
would.  
Yes, I feel moments of joy,  
*and* I have lost more than I could live without.  
Yes, I want to make the most of today,  
*and* my body keeps breaking.  
Yes, I am hopeful, *and* this is daunting.  
Yes, I am trying to be brave, *and* I feel so  
afraid.

So bless me,  
trying to live in between those two words:  
*yes...and*.

May I understand this is where  
the real work of life is found.  
Where it takes courage to live.  
Where grief can strip me to the studs  
and love can remake me once again.  
Where my heart can be both broken  
and keep on beating.  
Never sorry to have broken at all.

*Yes...and*.

Make me capable of great joy,  
great love,  
great risk,  
even fear,  
as you expand my heart  
with this *yes...and* today.<sup>5</sup>

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5. Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For Stretching Your Heart" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 18-19.



Sunday, March 30 to Saturday, April 5



**WISDOM!**

*Week 05*

## Introduction

We may never make total sense of the pain and suffering we endure. But, somehow, we may find bits of hard-won wisdom in the midst. These precious gems do not erase the pain or justify its presence. People have had many ways of describing these unlikely (unasked for) takeaways. Like President Abraham Lincoln, who tried to make sense of the death of his son and live with courage in the light of what he knew. This kind of wisdom was the “delicate fruit of a lifetime of pain.”<sup>6</sup> Sometimes we can only mine a couple of true things, and the rest is still garbage. We get to choose if we sift through the garbage to find the gems. As Rabbi Steve Leder says, “If you’re going through hell, don’t come out empty handed.”<sup>7</sup>

6. Joshua Wolf Shenk. *Lincoln’s Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled his Greatness*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005.) 192.

7. Steve Leder in “Don’t Come Out Empty Handed.,” April 4, 2023 in *Everything Happens*, presented and produced by Kate Bowler, podcast, 53:03, <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/dont-come-out-empty-handed/>.

## Opening Questions

**01.** What is your favorite fruit?

**02.** In Galatians 5:22-23, we learn about the fruits of the spirit:

“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

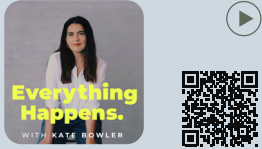
What is one fruit of the spirit that you are waiting to ripen in your own life?



Rabbi Steve Leder is a bestselling author and a rabbi who has presided over a thousand funerals with wisdom and kindness. In this clip, Rabbi Leder and Kate talk about those moments when life is forever changed, and how we learn to live through our before and afters.



## Discuss



Rabbi Steve Leder:  
Don't Come Out  
Empty-handed

EVERYTHING HAPPENS  
WITH KATE BOWLER

WATCH OR LISTEN  
TO THE FULL  
CONVERSATION

01. What did you find most interesting from this clip?

02. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

# Read

*“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we no longer know him in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

—2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21 (NRSVUE)



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The Apostle Paul was transformed by the before and after of the death and resurrection of Christ. In fact, Paul believes that through this, all of creation was transformed. Therefore, we can no longer look at the world or the people in it the same way as before. Paul believes that the entire good news of God can be captured in two words: new creation.



03. Imagine how the disciples, Jesus' family and friends, experienced the before and after of his death (before they saw him resurrected). How did they feel living in the after?
04. How do you think their relationship with Jesus changed after Jesus rose from the dead? How do you think they experienced or saw Jesus differently?
05. What kind of truths do you think the disciples discovered through the pain of this experience? What hard-won wisdom did they discover from this experience?

*Great love and great suffering are both teachers who do not let you go back to the innocence of “before.” There are things you just can't unknow. Jesus made the choice to live, suffer, die, and to come back to this world—and Jesus did this out of love for us.*

06. How have you been changed by Jesus' sacrificial love? What lessons do we learn about ourselves and about others from the knowledge and awareness of that love?
07. Do you see the world and other people differently knowing that Christ died for them as well? Why or why not?
08. How do we live into being a new creation as a community? How do we live into the “after” of Christ's love?
09. How can we continue to be aware of the fruits in our lives (whether bitter or sweet) that are helping us live into the new creation, reconciled to God and to others?

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# BLESSING FOR THE LIFE YOU DIDN'T CHOOSE

Blessed are you when the shock subsides,  
when vaguely, you see a line appear  
that divides before and after.

You didn't draw it,  
and can barely even make it out.  
But as surely as minutes add up to hours and  
days,  
here you are,  
forced into a story you never would have  
written.

Blessed are you in the tender place  
of awe and dread,  
wondering how to be whole  
when dreams have disappeared  
and part of you with them,  
where mastery, control, determination,  
bootstrapping, and grit  
are consigned to the realm of Before  
(where most of the world lives),  
in the fever dream that promises infinite  
choices,  
unlimited progress, best life now.

Blessed are we in the After zone, loudly  
shouting:

*Is there anybody here?*  
We hear the echo, the shuffle of feet,  
the murmur of others  
asking the same question,  
together in knowledge  
that we are far beyond what we know.

God, show us a glimmer of possibility  
in this new constraint,  
that small truths will be given back to us.  
We are held  
We are safe.  
We are loved.  
We are loved.  
We are loved.  
We are loved.<sup>8</sup>

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8. Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For the Life You Didn't Choose" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 188-189.



*Sunday, April 6 to Saturday, April 12*



*Week 06*

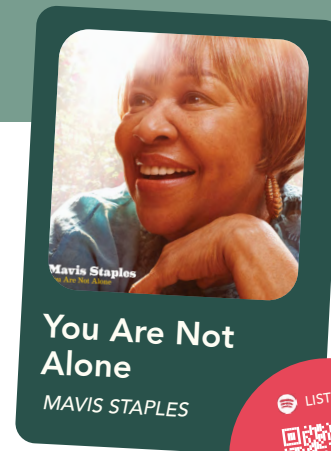


## Introduction

Really loving people goes beyond what we think we can afford. But it has a multiplying effect. Even as we are diminished by loving action to the point of costing us time, money, or energy, it makes more. Love generates a ripple effect that starts by the change in the heart of the person being loved and expands into the hearts of others. Costly love does not extinguish itself in the effort and leaves us all changed.

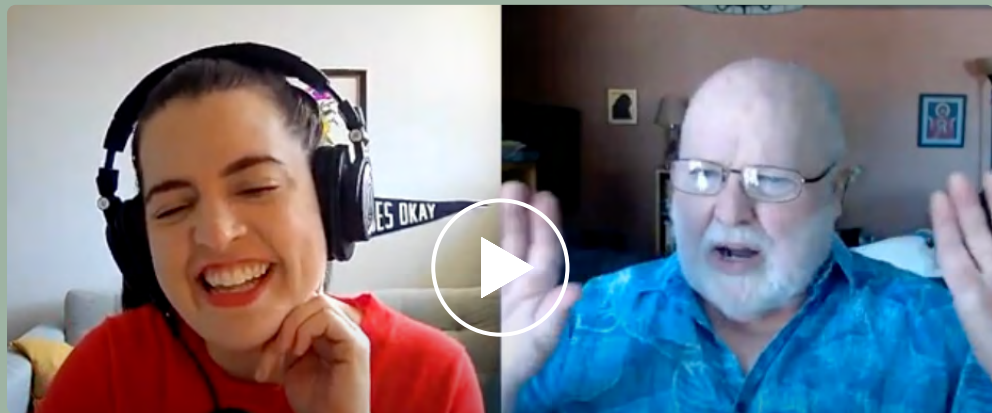
## Opening Questions

01. What is one thing that is bringing love and joy to your life right now?
02. Where have you witnessed the love of Jesus recently through someone else? Perhaps it was through a casserole that was dropped off to the new mom, or sitting awkwardly at the doctor's visit with a friend.

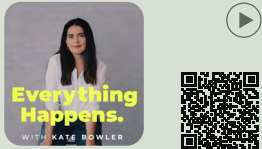




Father Richard Rohr is everyone's favorite preacher of love. Love for each other. Love from God. In this clip, Kate and Father Rohr talk about how we spend a lot of our life counting and measuring life, but luckily, God is a horrible mathematician.



## Discuss



Father Richard Rohr:  
Learning to Hold On,  
Learning to Let Go

EVERYTHING HAPPENS  
WITH KATE BOWLER

WATCH OR LISTEN  
TO THE FULL  
CONVERSATION

01. What stood out to you from this conversation?
02. In what ways do you feel the pressure to measure and count your life?
03. Can love be measured? Should it be?
04. Do you believe that there is a cost to love? Why or why not? What would be an example of costly love?

## Read

*“Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ‘Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?’ (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.’”*

—JOHN 12:1-8 (NRSVUE)



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Mary’s brother Lazarus had just died. She was grieving and angry at Jesus for not being there (John 11:17-37). But then, Jesus comes and cries with Mary and raises Lazarus from the dead. Mary was so moved that while Lazarus and the disciples were eating dinner with Jesus, she washes the feet of Jesus using an expensive perfume and her hair to wipe off his sandy feet. This would have been a strange act by any time’s standards. But perhaps especially then. She broke the social norm of a woman touching a man in public. People typically anointed people’s faces and not their dirty feet. Mary used an extravagant amount of a very expensive perfume. In fact, John notes that she used so much of the perfume everyone in the room experienced the sweet smell of her love for Jesus.



LOVE!

*“Get to the heart of the matter. So what we’re all doing in the first half of life is counting, counting, measuring, weighing, deserving. I gave you this much, you give me back that much. As long as we’re caught up in counting, it’s a dead end. It really is. And our capitalist countries have just furthered that as the framing. This is the way you frame reality. It’s about mathematics.”*

—FATHER RICHARD ROHR

05. How much and in what ways did this act of love cost Mary?

06. Why do you think Judas had such a hard time understanding this act of love? What got in his way?

07. How does measuring and counting love actually keep us from spreading the love of Jesus?

*“[Jesus] got up from supper, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.”*

—JOHN 13:4-5 (NRSVUE)



*“If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.”*

—JESUS (JOHN 13:14, NRSVUE)

08. How does Mary’s small act of love get multiplied? (Think about how many washing of the feet worship services are happening during Holy Week.)

*“Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love.”<sup>9</sup>*

—MOTHER TERESA

09. What are some ways that you can multiply Jesus’ love with small acts of love? In your families? Community? Country?

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9. Mother Teresa, 1910-1997 and Brian Kolodiejchuk. 2007. *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light : The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta"*. New York, Doubleday.

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# BLESSING FOR WHEN YOU NEED TO HOLD ON OR LET GO



God, sometimes it feels like a better person  
wouldn't be like this:  
tethered to so many hopes,  
and fears, and expectations.

Blessed are we pulled between wanting to let go  
—sometimes needing to let go—and also needing  
to hold on.

Blessed are we when we yearn  
for connection and love and touch.

Blessed are we when we hunger  
for the beauty of life itself and the people to fill it.

Blessed are we when we are unable to say,  
“I'm letting it go.”  
Because we feel like we will be washed away into  
an ocean of nothingness.

Teach us to cling to the truths  
that enliven our spirits,  
and loosen our grip on the painful untruths:  
like the one that says we are alone, or unlovable.  
Or that desire itself is the enemy.  
Teach us to hunger for what is good, and be filled.

There will be no easy addition and subtraction.  
We will lose and we will gain,  
and almost none of it will make much sense at  
the time,  
and it will force our hands open.  
In the ebb and flow of wins and losses, comings  
and goings,  
may we look for the divine in the mystery of it all,  
the stubbornness of flowers that still smile at  
us at the grocery store, and the need for endless  
small reminders  
that the pain of it all, the comedy of it all,  
will point us back to love.

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4. Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. “For When You Need to Hold on or Let Go” in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 178.

*Sunday, April 13 to Saturday, April 19*



*Week 07*

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## Introduction

Jesus had said all the things he could to prepare his closest friends for the momentous events about to unfold. He gave them all the information he could, but it was as if they couldn't take it in. As he spoke, the disciples were living a split-screen experience—the now that was his real presence with them and the unreality of the future when Jesus would be really gone. Perhaps the disciples experienced anticipatory grief, wondering, *How much is this going to hurt? What will I do? Who will I be in the aftermath of what is coming toward us? And what will it all mean, considering that Jesus was supposed to be the answer to all our grief, not the cause?*

## Opening Questions

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**01.** What is one thing you love about Holy Week and Easter? What is one thing you don't like?

**02.** It is tempting to skip some of the painful parts of Holy Week and prepare for Easter (after all, there are dinners and easter eggs to get ready). How can we prepare ourselves to be present this week to the hard, ugly, and painful parts?



A Princeton professor and researcher, Elaine Pagels shares how her young son was diagnosed with a fatal lung disease before the age of 5 years old. In this tender conversation, Kate and Elaine discuss living with anticipatory grief and how love keeps pulling us forward.



## Discuss

What is your understanding and experience of anticipatory grief?



Elaine Pagels: Love Pulls You Forward



EVERYTHING HAPPENS WITH KATE BOWLER

WATCH OR LISTEN TO THE FULL CONVERSATION



# Read

*“After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” just say this, “The Lord needs it.”’ So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’ Then they brought it to Jesus, and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. Now as he was approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’”*

—LUKE 19:28-40 (NRSVUE)




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As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the disciples could not contain their excitement. This one moment fulfills so many prophecies (Zechariah 9:9-10, 14:4-5; Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 52:12-53:12). The king of Jerusalem has arrived and the Kingdom of God has finally come. The disciples knew what the prophets had foreseen and even what Jesus had told them would happen (Luke 18:31-34).



02. Who in Luke 19:28-40 is living in the in-between of what is and what is to come? How were they handling this knowledge of what was to come?

*"It's called mourning," she said. "It doesn't start when somebody dies. It starts when you hear a diagnosis like that, or it can."*

—ELAINE PAGELS

03. How did Jesus try to prepare everyone for what was to come?

04. Despite what is coming, Jesus keeps moving towards Jerusalem. Read Luke 18:31-34, how do we see Jesus mourning and yet choosing to fulfill his passion?

05. How does love keep pulling us forward in the face of terrible things that may be on the horizon (e.g., a diagnosis, the end of marriage, a death)?

06. What are some ways we offer love and comfort when we know someone is experiencing anticipatory grief?

07. How are you going to journey with Jesus through Holy Week (and not skip to Easter's joy)?

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# BLESSING FOR PALM SUNDAY



Jesus, from that mountain  
high among the olive trees,  
it would have been an easy journey  
down to the city,  
to Jerusalem, which lay below.

So why choose to make your way  
on a donkey,  
on an everyday beast of burden,  
your feet almost dragging on the ground?  
And who are these people running,  
bending low,  
to spread their precious cloaks  
on the road before you,  
waving palm branches and shouting,  
“Save us! Hosanna to the Son of David!”?  
What is the raw and urgent hope that  
rises in their songs?  
“Blessed is he who comes  
in the name of the Lord!”  
And, Jesus, why are you smiling?

Because it is true what they are saying,  
though they can't yet know the whole of  
it.

It is happening. It is unfolding  
in slow motion,  
the fulfillment of that promise from of  
old:  
their savior would come,  
humble, and riding on a donkey.

Blessed are we, on this side of history  
shouting, “Come, Lord, save us too!”  
We know how it ends, and still we forget  
to rush toward our humble,  
forgettable king  
and yell, “Hosanna, hosanna,  
our hope is in you!”

*Sunday, April 20 to Saturday, April 26*



*Week 08*



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## Introduction

“Every time we both keep living, there’s a kind of glorious surprise.” That’s what Kate said to her friend and colleague Richard Hays (they were both diagnosed with cancer at the same time.). Richard preached a memorable Easter service outdoors, and just at the moment he was discussing Jesus rising from the dead, the sun rose behind him, spilling over the rooftop. The glorious surprise. The mystery of our faith, that life conquers death.

## Opening Questions

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**01.** How have you experienced a glorious surprise this week—it can be a sunrise, absurd generosity, or another special joy?

**02.** Anticipating Easter is easier for those of us who know how the story ends. We know that the tomb will be empty even before Holy Week begins. But imagine or recall how you felt when someone you loved died. How do you imagine Mary, Peter, and John felt the morning after Jesus’ death?



# Read

Pay attention to the details of each part of this story as it unfolds. Try and read this as if you were one of Jesus' friends.

*“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’”*

*Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord,’ and she told them that he had said these things to her.”*

—JOHN 20:11-18 (NRSVUE)



N.T. Wright is a highly trusted New Testament scholar who thinks John 20 is one of the most comforting texts in the Bible. Listen to how Kate and Tom find hope through tears.



## Discuss



N. T. Wright: The Mystery of God

EVERYTHING HAPPENS WITH KATE BOWLER

WATCH OR LISTEN TO THE FULL CONVERSATION

01. What new details or insights did you notice reading this story with a fresh lens?
02. What did you find confusing from the point of view of Mary, the disciples, or the angels?
03. What stood out to you from this conversation?

*“It’s when [Mary Magdalene] is weeping that she sees two angels. Peter and John have been to the tomb and they have gone in and seen the grave clothes, but they haven’t seen the angels, apparently. And I’ve often thought that maybe tears function as a kind of lens through which one might just see angels.”*

—N.T. WRIGHT

04. What do you see unfolding in this interaction between Mary and the angels? Why is this important to include in the story?

*“And then, of course, Jesus shows up. And she thinks he’s the gardener. The misunderstanding is part of the deal. It’s people not getting it. And yet Jesus is there.”*

—N.T. WRIGHT

05. Think back to a time when you were going through a hard time. How was Jesus present to you in your time of need? Maybe someone brought you comfort or you glimpsed something life-giving in the midst of your darkness and despair.

06. Just as Mary is pulled into a greater story, so are we. How can we understand our lives and our hope to be found as part of God’s bigger story?



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# BLESSING FOR EASTER SUNDAY



Oh God, I stretch out my hands to you  
in this early Easter darkness.  
I need you to pull me up  
and set me on my feet again,  
for I am weak and tired.

*God, have mercy.  
Christ, have mercy.  
Spirit, have mercy.*

God, on that first Easter morning  
while it was still dark,  
one woman went alone to the tomb  
to do what could be done to honor you,  
though hope had drained away.

Two bright angels met her there, and  
then—  
*how is it possible?—*  
you were there, fully alive, beyond belief.

Blessed are we who stretch out our  
hands to you  
in doubt and grief,  
in sickness of body and mind and spirit,  
our prayers not fully realized,  
rejoicing...anyway.

For that is what makes us Easter people:  
carrying forth the realized hope  
of the Resurrected One,  
singing our alleluias great and small,  
while it is still dark.

*Christ is risen. Christ will come again.*

*Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.*<sup>11</sup>

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11. Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For Easter Sunday" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 210.



What does it mean to die, in a society that insists everything happens for a reason?

hard-won observations on dying and the ways it has *taught me to live.*

learn more here



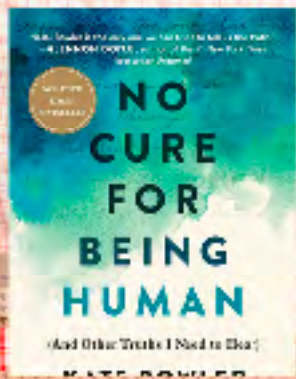
Everything Happens is a podcast for people who know that life is, well, *complicated.*

This season we're on a quest for more —more wisdom, more connection, more hope. And I'm bringing some brilliant minds along for the ride.

join us here!



*How do you move forward with a life you didn't choose?*



learn more



*Friends?*





award-winning  
podcast host

*KB*



4x New York Times  
bestselling author



# HELLO, I'M *Kate*



Professor of Religious  
History at Duke University.



Put on your  
lipstick.  
We're gettin'  
life-y.

## *The world of Kate Bowler is beautiful.*

She's a four-time New York Times bestselling author, award-winning podcast host, and Professor of Religious History at Duke University. She also has two honorary doctorates, an award from Yale University for service to theological education, and seven books to her credit. Additionally, she is the only person ever to hold the prestigious titles of mother to Zach and wife of Toban.

## *The world of Kate Bowler is terrible.*

At 35, Kate was blindsided by Stage IV cancer and the aftermath of its grueling treatment. After that colossal suck and her subsequent recovery, Kate began to rethink pretty much everything she thought she knew about life, loss, grief, and even joy.

## *The world of Kate Bowler is as human as it gets.*

She is on a mission to unravel our complicated humanness. She's not looking to add to the cultural library of lovely stories about hard work and positive attitudes and yet-to-be-revealed reasons things happen. Because those lovely stories are fiction, and Kate knows that an ugly truth will always serve us better than a beautiful lie.

[learn more](#)



*peace be  
with you.*

THE  
HARDEST  
PART

THE EVERYTHING HAPPENS PROJECT