

A publication of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

LENT REFLECTIONS



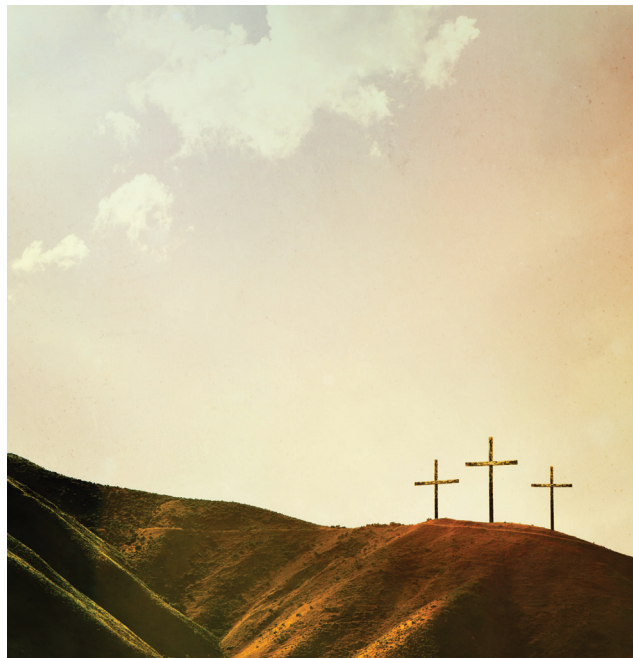
For those engaged in theologically reflective ministry

TABLE OF CONTENTS

From Lent through Easter is both an important and an especially busy time for pastors and Christian leaders. In these pages, some of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's faculty and program directors offer fresh insights and practical ideas to foster the spiritual nourishment of your congregation—and yourself. The informal remarks of these pastor-theologians have been excerpted from "Conversations with the Dean" on a variety of topics relevant to Christian ministry and witness at this reflective and celebratory time in the church year. May they enrich your ministry and your soul.

- 3 **Leading Faithfully during Lent**
 Anthony Rivera
- 5 **Preaching from Lent through Easter**
 Angela Dienhart Hancock
- 8 **Choosing Music for Worship during Lent**
 Kendra Buckwalter Smith
- 11 **Nurturing Congregational Enrichment during Lent**
 Don Dawson
- 13 **Connecting the Church and Community during Lent
 and on Easter**
 Kimberly Gonxhe
- 15 **Practicing Inner Silence during Lent**
 L. Roger Owens
- 19 **Using Your Unique Gifts on Easter and After**
 Cathy Brall

LEADING FAITHFULLY DURING LENT





Anthony Rivera

Director of Admissions

4

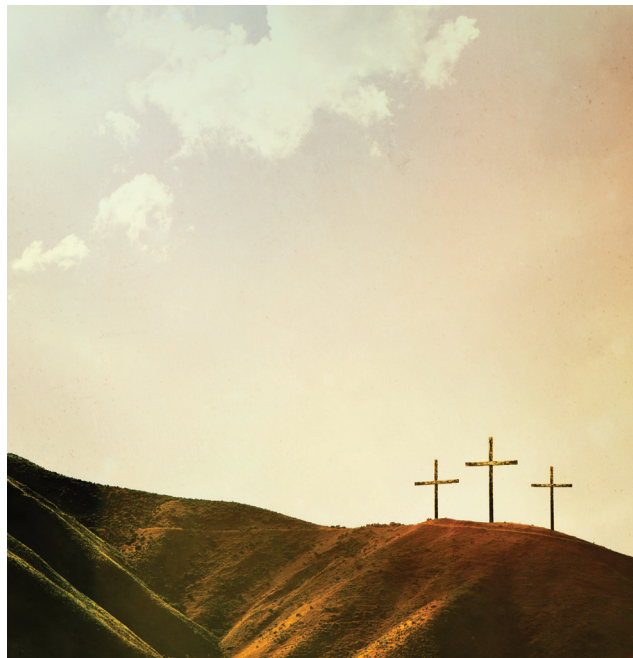
I believe God is calling the church to speak up, to be a witness in these times in which we're living. We hear a lot of voices all around us, especially here in the United States. Everyone is saying something, many are shouting something, but most of the things that are being said have no validity, no weight, no substance. I believe that God is calling the church to be a witness in this darkness and to say something that is worth listening to—something that an individual or a community can hold on to with a sense of hope that God is aware of what is going on in their lives and their community.

With that in mind, the best advice I can give to pastors and church leaders during this busy church season is, number one, take the time to pray; number two, stick to the biblical text; number three, look around at what's happening in the community, the neighborhood, and for that matter the nation; and number four, go back to prayer and the biblical text.

I'm always reminded of the late Karl Barth's statement, "Exegesis, exegesis, exegesis." Stick to the text; let the text speak to you. If you pray and pay attention to the text, God will give you words that are worth the world's listening to.



PREACHING FROM LENT THROUGH EASTER





Angela Dienhart Hancock

Associate Professor of
Homiletics and Worship

6

I believe that my job as a preacher is always to preach the good news of God's way with us in Jesus Christ, and that includes the news that Christ has risen. So I can't pretend that that's not true during Lent, and actually it's interesting in the development of the season of Lent as a practice of the church: In the 40 days we count as Lent, the intervening Sundays don't count as among them. So on the Lord's Day even during Lent, we're always in a sense celebrating resurrection.

What is different for preaching during Lent, as opposed to the rest of the year, is that the lectionary takes us to texts that bring us into the valley with Jesus and into the valley with Israel; therefore, we are explicitly trying to enter into that part of Jesus' story. And I think that's really important for us to do—not because Lent is explicitly the time to preach about sin or repentance or to “forget” somehow that the Gospel is good news even in Lent, but instead because reading the story backwards, in a sense (as we always do post-Easter), can help us see things in the valley that we might not otherwise see.

If I were preaching on Jesus' temptation in the wilderness at the beginning of Lent, I would first speculate about and be drawn to the fact that the story begins with the Spirit driving Jesus out into the wilderness. That's not always the way people think or speak about the Holy Spirit, and I would want to press there a little bit—think about what it would mean for Jesus to be driven out by the Spirit, driven out to this time of



trial and contention. Do we think about the Spirit ever working in our lives in that way? And what does this tell us about the triune life of God, about the interior relationships in triune life?

Another place I'd want to press has to do with the remarkable exchange that goes on between Jesus and the Devil in this story, with the Devil even quoting Scripture. And that's not just a matter Satan's citing chapter and verse. In that story, we see Jesus engaging in a kind of rabbinical conversation with Satan, the tempter, and they have an argument about the interpretation of Scripture. What I think is really interesting about that, and what I would want to think through for a sermon, is the way in which, in this adversarial situation, Jesus doesn't withdraw, stay silent, or push away, but instead he actually engages in the discussion about Scripture's interpretation and debates about its meaning. I think that would be a good model for Christian communities in thinking about their relationships with others relative to the things they disagree about.

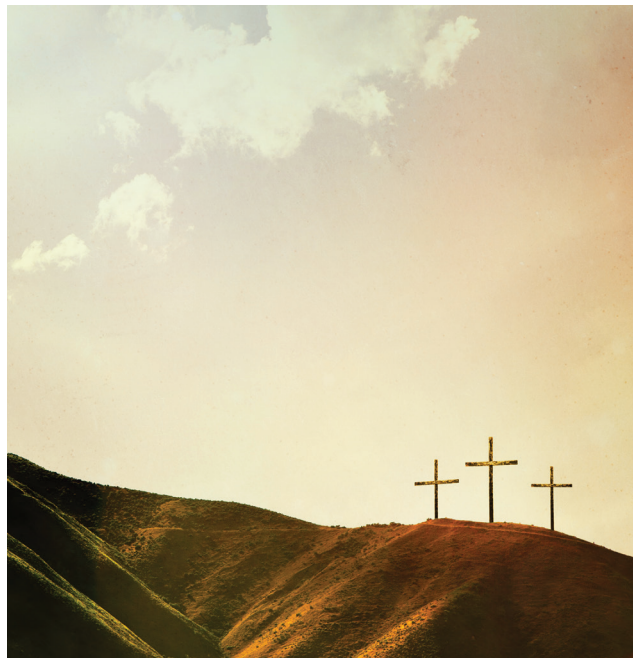
7

Easter Sunday is clearly an important celebration in the life of Christians and churches, and it's often also a very well attended Sunday. So how should one or both of those things play into how one preaches on that day? The thing I'm concerned about as I prepare for a day like Easter is that I understand my task to be going to the Scriptures on behalf of a particular community and listening on their behalf. And what makes a day like Easter challenging to preach on is that many people who are new to me attend. It's harder to take those people with me as I'm engaging the biblical text. The other issue is, the new people may not have been following the whole story during the season of Lent, so they may not have been "in the valley" with us. And that might change some of my choices about what to include in my sermon. I might include some pieces of that story just because I suspect some of the people there on Easter aren't seeing into the context of what we've been exploring in the previous few weeks.



SO ON THE LORD'S DAY
EVEN DURING LENT,
WE'RE ALWAYS IN A
SENSE CELEBRATING
RESURRECTION.

CHOOSING MUSIC FOR WORSHIP DURING LENT





Kendra Buckwalter Smith

Worship Coordinator

9

Music is one of the most effective ways that we can draw ourselves into the pathos of this season, because music necessarily expresses more than just words. We often think that appropriate Lenten music is sad or has to be in a minor key or be somber. All of those things are certainly appropriate in the context of Lent, but we can actually draw on a much wider range of musical styles and tone. Certainly music that's stark and solemn and causes us to think about repentance and Christ's death is very appropriate, but in Lent we also have this sense of assurance of the end of the story. So I think our music should point to that as well.

During Lent there's also an emphasis on growth, on deepening relationship and discipleship, so a lot of our music is going to draw on that call to discipleship, to deeper relationship—not something to be sorrowful about but something to embrace with joy and gratitude. I think, therefore, that a lot of our music in Lent can actually have a happier or lighter tone than we normally think of its having. Yes, it's pointing to repentance, but it's also pointing to mercy. It's not only pointing to Christ's death, but also to Christ's life and all that we learn from Christ's life; both to the cross and to the overwhelming love that that saving, self-giving act came out of, and our gratitude for that.

As always in any worship service during any liturgical season, our musical selections are going to be guided by the texts from Scripture we are proclaiming that day. So the music has to support the message and what we want the congregation to experience and learn out of that Scripture both textually and tonally. The trick in Lent is that we're holding all these things in tension. So we really have to go for that tension in our music—the tension between our expectations and the reality of who God is, the tension of the already but not yet. All the things that we tap into a little more intentionally during Lent need to be expressed in our music.

Lent is a sort of unsettled time in the calendar because, spiritually, we are journeying during this time. So our music can reflect that journey. Music, both in different worship services and in different times during those services, can convey the ups and downs of the journey, the bumps in the road, but also the hope and assurance of the destination. And we can reflect this sense by pushing beyond the familiar with our musical selections. We all, in our own particular contexts from church to church, denomination to denomination, get particularly comfortable with a certain canon of music. But Lent can be a great time to be intentional about pushing the envelope, pushing out of that comfort zone a little bit, and introducing some of the unfamiliar in worship.

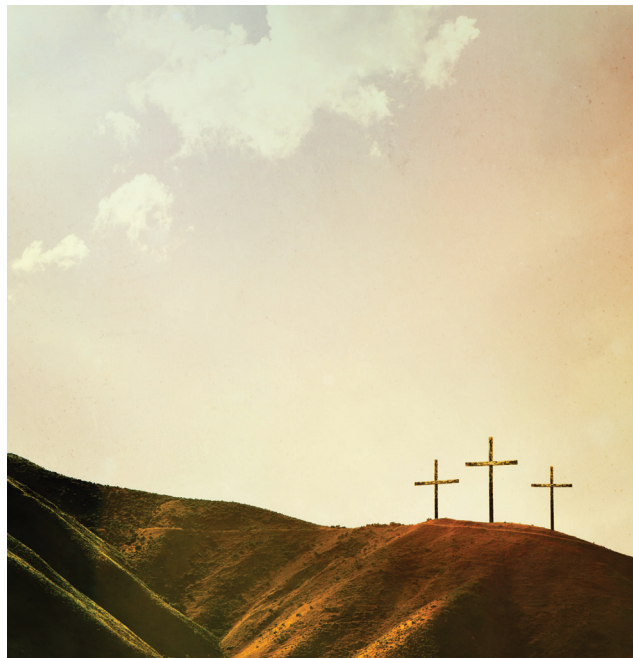
There are a couple of styles that I like to draw from during Lent. For example, African-American spirituals can be very powerful during this time, in part because of their tonality, but also because they express the very real experience of crying out for God's deliverance. And that can inform how we draw into Israel's experience of bondage and crying out for deliverance in our own journey with Christ to the cross. The other style is blues/jazz, which is fitting because it incorporates a lot of improvisations, slides, and accidentals—itches in a song that are not necessarily part of the key. And for that reason it has an unexpected nature, a kind of disorienting effect. You're not really sure where home base is tonally. So it has a sense of overturning our expectations and then taking another look at ourselves, looking at God, and learning what God is doing, rather than just settling into what we are comfortable with doing.



**MUSIC CAN CONVEY THE
BUMPS IN THE ROAD,
BUT ALSO THE HOPE
AND ASSURANCE OF THE
DESTINATION.**

NURTURING CONGREGATIONAL ENRICHMENT DURING LENT

11





Don Dawson

Director of the World Mission Initiative (retired)

12

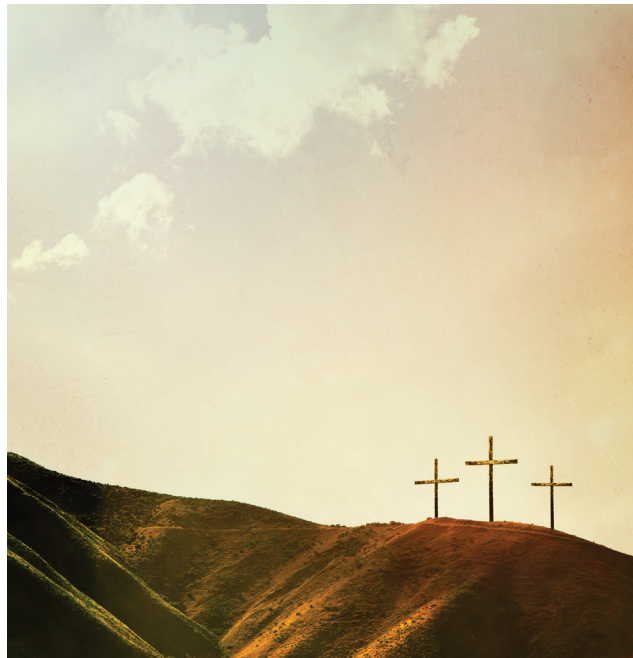
In the Presbyterian church I used to pastor, we developed a lot of small groups just for Lent. (Sometimes it's hard for people to sustain small-group commitments indefinitely, but for a short, six-week period people are more prone to come together to study the Word.) As the pastor, I would often develop my Lenten sermons on a particular passage of Scripture, and for each upcoming Sunday I would give the small groups a series of questions to look at around the passage I would be preaching on next. It was amazing how much more the congregation got out of my sermons when they'd studied the passages beforehand. It wasn't that my sermons were so much better—it was that people came to the service with such great anticipation, which shows a lot about how important what we bring to worship is.

And that applies on Easter, too—a Sunday when the story of Scripture seems so familiar to us. In the Orthodox Church, the all-night Easter Vigil on Saturday is still practiced, and it makes Sunday morning come alive with the opening of Jesus' tomb and his resurrection. Again in the Presbyterian church I used to pastor, the Easter Vigil idea got incorporated into the life of our congregation as a prayer vigil that started on Good Friday. Some people would stay after the Good Friday service to pray, and people would sign up to come to the sanctuary and pray for specific periods of time throughout the night and Saturday. To help people along, we developed a prayer list that included individual concerns, community concerns, and world concerns. A prayer vigil provides people with an opportunity for personally exercising their participation in the observance of Jesus' Passion and Resurrection. It not only spiritually enriches individuals—it actually gives life to the entire congregation.



CONNECTING THE CHURCH AND COMMUNITY DURING LENT AND ON EASTER

13





Kimberly Gonxhe

Director of the
Metro-Urban Institute

14

It seems to me that people are becoming more and more fascinated with the Stations of the Cross. And some of the churches in Pittsburgh have done an amazing job of putting their Stations of the Cross events in the public sphere. Those events not only draw commuters who are driving in to a kind of destination-church event, but they also make members of the local community where the events are happening feel that they are actually invited in. On top of that, these public-sphere events provide a wonderful way for churches to become neighborhood welcoming places.

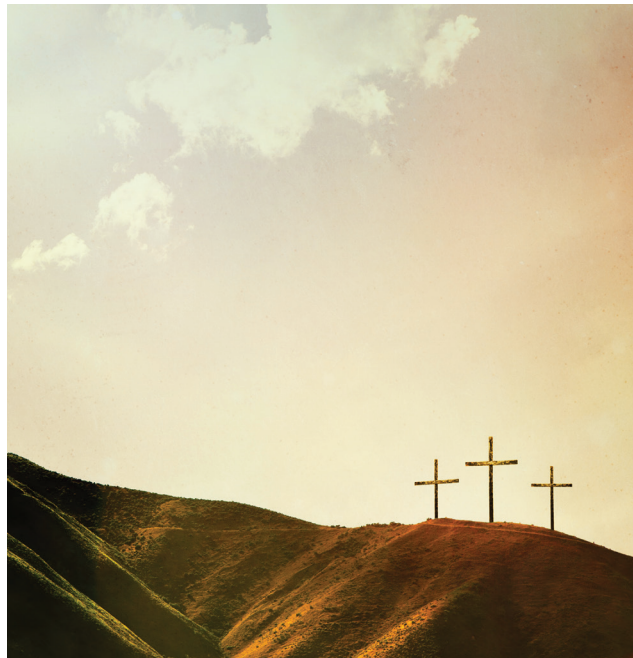
Some non-traditional Easter services are intentionally made seeker-friendly, in part because churches get the most attendance on Easter Sunday. I've seen a number of churches that have even relocated their services to a larger venue and made them something like an attraction. I know I'm walking a thin line here relative to "performance churches," but in so many ways we expect the community to come to us, whereas Jesus never called us to do that. Jesus says "Go ye therefore . . .," so sometimes we need to be purposefully attractive to the broader community and translate the gospel in meaningful ways that are relevant to people's lives.

One of my favorite ways of doing that is practiced in a number of African American churches in Pittsburgh—at Easter they do a fabulous job of recounting the Seven Last Words of Christ. And oftentimes this recounting has a wonderful undergirding of homiletics associated with it. I love to see those Seven Last Words brought to current-day meaning for us and to be challenged as to how we can fully live out and exemplify all that Christ has put before us.



PRACTICING INNER SILENCE DURING LENT

15





L. Roger Owens

Associate Professor of Christian Spirituality and Ministry

16

In talking about the paradox of silence in my book *What We Need is Here*, I quote Henry Nouwen, one of the greatest spiritual writers of the last century. He said, “As soon as we’re alone with nobody to talk to, no books to read, no TV to watch, no phone calls to make, an inner chaos opens up within us.” And he says the inner chaos can be so confusing and disturbing that we want to get busy as fast as we can. He says when we remove the outer distractions, the inner distractions manifest themselves to us in full force. And that is exactly what I mean about the paradox of silence. I’m busy. You’re busy. We stay busy, and somewhere deep within us there is a longing, even if we’re not immediately aware of it, for that silence and that stillness. But as we soon as we have a moment of that quietness and the inner chaos begins to open up, we listen to our favorite podcast or we hit Pandora—we want to escape it.

But Lent is a great time to say, “Okay—I’m not going to do that. Instead, I’m going to give myself to the silence, allow myself to experience it just for a few minutes.” Because here is what the silence does: the silence helps us become aware of the attachments and temptations that drive so much of our lives. It helps us become clearer about the things that we cling to and the things that we long for that get in our way of loving God and loving other people completely, as we might. A former Archbishop of Canterbury calls this the self-dramatization of fantasy—and we’re often engaged in it. But without the silence and the space to notice it, these fantasies just drive and control our lives. Silence gives us the space to notice them for what they are—illusions—so they don’t control us as much.



Let me give you an example. There have been times in my life when I really wanted to be famous and well-known and recognized for something: in middle school, as a famous pianist; in high school, as a famous Broadway singer; when I was a pastor, as a famous preacher. Now I guess I want to be a famous professor, whatever that means. But a decade ago, when I really started practicing silence, I began to realize this fantasy for what it is; and I'm sure it hasn't gone away, of course, but it doesn't have that much control over me now. That wanting to be recognized has no basis on which to make good life decisions. So here we are in Lent. At the beginning of Lent we read about Jesus going into the wilderness alone for 40 days, and he's tempted—by the Devil, maybe, but that could also be his inner chaos opening up, the temptations to popularity and power. He had to face this trial at the beginning of his ministry so he wouldn't be derailed from his divine mission. The silence gives us the chance to do the same kind of thing, and in the silence we can pray for the grace to be free from our attachments and fantasies.

My advice for pastors and church leaders especially during Lent should come as no surprise, then: practice silence in Sabbath. And don't wait till Holy Week to start. We survive the fullness of Holy Week when we have the habits and practices throughout our lives that help us stay in ministry through these busy times. But we're prone to busyness in ministry as one of those kinds of fantasies that can make us think that we're important, that we can prove to our congregation that we do something that matters. Silence in Sabbath helps us just be honest with ourselves. One of my favorite Holy Week practices from a former church I pastored was a noontime Friday service that involved just the reading of the Passion narrative and, every 10 verses, a response of organ music. That's all. And even though I was the one leading the service and reading the Gospel lesson, the "loud silences" of the rich organ music that completely filled the sanctuary between readings really allowed me to worship.



**THE SILENCE HELPS US
BECOME AWARE OF THE
ATTACHMENTS AND
TEMPTATIONS THAT
DRIVE OUR LIVES.**

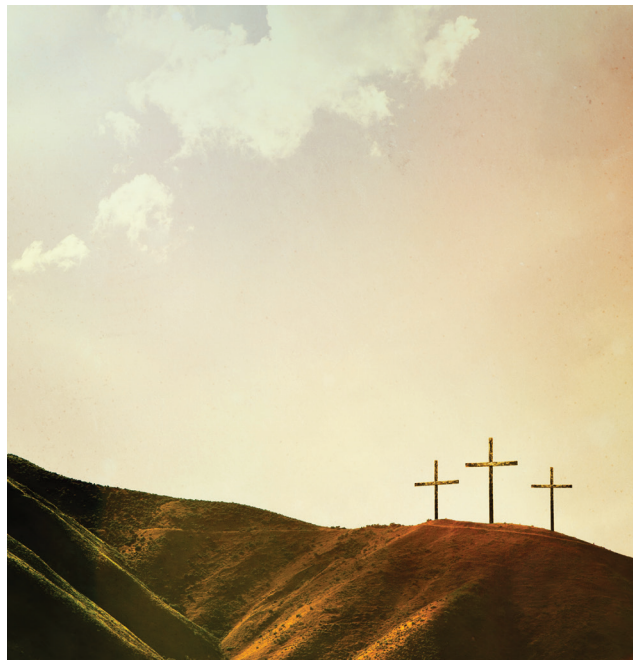
Holy week is a full week for a pastor. There is lots of worship—Thursday night, Friday noon, Friday night, and then showing up on Sunday morning at 6:30 to preach outside before preaching two more services. It's a full week! But the work we give ourselves to in that week is good work. It's the drama of the most important church week we're leading a congregation through, so it's going to be busy, it's going to be full, it's going to make us tired. But we become tired doing good work. So I say two things: First, prepare in advance—don't wait till Wednesday to prepare your Thursday services. Prepare one week, maybe two weeks in advance, so that you know what you're doing on that day, and so that when you're in that moment you can actually worship even while you're leading the people. That can be a fulfilling path for you as the pastor. And second, on the other side, block out Easter Monday as your Sabbath and maybe add Tuesday to that as well. Read something you've wanted to read, take a long walk with a friend outside, get coffee, and take that space to renew after a full week. Celebrate the abundant life that you've just finished preaching about. Practice some Sabbath silence.



**MY ADVICE FOR PASTORS
AND CHURCH LEADERS
... PRACTICE SILENCE IN
SABBATH.**

USING YOUR UNIQUE GIFTS ON EASTER AND AFTER

19





Cathy Brall

Director of Field Education

20

I think it's always important to be aware of your unique gifts and to be honest about what those are. Sometimes a pastor's unique gift is not preaching. Still, people will expect you preach on Easter Sunday, and you need to do that. But perhaps you have a stronger gift in crafting liturgy or making sure people are welcomed or doing hospitality events. Be up front with your congregational leaders and your church congregation and focus their attention where your gifts and the gifts of the congregation happen to be.

Just because on Easter one church features its 80-person choir and an orchestra and shoots off fireworks when they get to the verse about the Resurrection doesn't mean that your 60-seat sanctuary with 30 worshippers in attendance has to copy that model. Sometimes in your context you need to say, "The gift of our church is that we hug like nobody else, and when you come here and get an Easter hug, you can feel Resurrection." So own and use your unique gifts and ask what God is calling you to focus on at Easter.

The Sunday following Easter, then, is a wonderful Sunday to recognize people who have contributed months of time and energy in using their particular gifts to make Holy Week and Easter what they are—so name names and name groups of people in that congregational setting. Mention them in the bulletin. Write notes to them, if that happens to be your gift. Be genuine to whatever your giftedness is as a pastor or as a clergy team, and, as the leaders, reflect that giftedness in appropriate ways throughout the days and weeks to come.

LEARN MORE ABOUT PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Rooted in the Reformed tradition and in relationship with Christ-followers from other traditions, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary forms and equips people for ministries familiar and yet to unfold and communities present and yet to be gathered.

www.pts.edu