“The Easter celebration does not end with Easter Sunday. Holtz leads us gracefully through the whole season. His deceptively simple book is truly a nourishing companion for all of it. The meditations for each day are based on the author’s experience and lifelong wisdom. The reader is drawn to mine the insights of his or her own stories to discover God’s hand there, too. A lifelong alleluia!”

—Irene Nowell, OSB
Author of Wisdom: The Good Life
Mount Saint Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas

“In these insightful and engaging stories, Fr. Holtz introduces us to an unforgettable cast of characters—some old friends, some chance encounters—who help him understand the many dimensions of the Easter mystery. He also encourages us to see in the faces of the people in our own lives an illumination not only of the mysteries of suffering and loss, but also of spiritual connection, redemption, and hope. What a timely gift this book is.”

—Elizabeth Wiegard, mother of student activist
Emma González
“Fr. Albert Holtz is a good companion to have on this daily walk through the Easter season. As he shares the events in his life we learn to open our eyes to the surprises we might walk past without seeing them. He shines the light of Easter into the drama of the inner city and often, because he is open and hopeful, sees it shining back.”

—Jerome Kodell, OSB
Subiaco Abbey

“Fr. Albert Holtz’s reflections on *Faces of Easter* reminds us both of the homeliness and of the mystery of Easter. The many vignettes of his neighbors invite us readers to look for Christ in our own homes and neighbors. Yet each of his offerings are open-ended, requiring us to look deeper, *lectio*-style, into the moments of every day, willing to be surprised and welcomed by the risen Christ known by faith and encountered anew here and now. Fr. Albert is willing to share his own vulnerability and growing edges, which in turn encourages us to accept our own.”

—Norvene Vest, OblSB
Author of *Preferring Christ, a Devotional Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict*
To all my brothers and sisters
who have taught me about the Easter mystery
and whose stories fill these pages
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Introduction

I guess it was when I was an altar boy in fourth grade that I first became fascinated by the solemn mysteries of Holy Week and Easter. I was drawn by the processions, the incense, the chants, and the candles and, most of all, by the beautiful story that led inevitably from the hosannas of Palm Sunday, through the horrors of Calvary to the glory of the resurrection.

Years later, I learned that there is much more to the celebration of Holy Week than merely commemorating past events or listening to stories about Jesus’ life; rather, I discovered that we enter into those events as “mysteries” on the deepest, most personal level, in such a way that we experience our sufferings as part of Christ’s sufferings on Calvary, and think of our own deaths as part of his dying and rising.

Identifying my sufferings with Christ’s sufferings worked fine for me in theory, as long as I didn’t have any personal struggles or sufferings worthy of the name. But when, as an adult, I began to experience the pains of loss and grief, I had difficulty seeing them as my sharing in Christ’s passion, let alone as part of some beautiful story of God’s loving plan for me. And so, like all believers, I had to
learn how to “walk by faith,” and live in hope, while searching all around me for any small hints of the Easter victory that might appear among my struggles. As time goes on, I continue to catch glimpses of the deeper dimension of the paschal mystery in a number of different ways.

First, as a Benedictine monk, of course, I am in touch with the paschal mystery in the daily celebration of Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours, as you will see in some of the following chapters. Second, I listen for the Easter message in moments of quiet prayer and *lectio divina*, the meditative reading of Scripture.¹

This present book, however, reflects a third and more down-to-earth approach: recognizing the many dimensions of the Easter mystery every day in the people around me. I’ve met the suffering Christ, for example, in a patient in an intensive care unit, and seen Jesus rise as if from the dead in the experience of a freshman named Walter. I’ve felt the presence of Christ’s Spirit in the deep prayer of a street person named Gwendolyn, and caught a glimpse of eternal joy in the face of a first-grader named Karim. *Faces of Easter* shares the stories of these and many other people who have helped me to experience more fully the meaning of the Easter mystery.

There are fifty stories, one for each day from Easter to Pentecost. Each story is followed by a reflection question if you would like to apply its lesson to your daily life. During each of the seven weeks of the Easter season, we will consider a different aspect of the Easter mystery; for example, in week one, we will look at the resurrection as our victory over death. In week two, we will reflect on human suffering as we experience it in the light of the cross. Having moved through all the weeks of Easter, we finally meet, in week seven, people with whom we experience flashes of the joy that awaits us in heaven.

So, I invite you to join me and my brothers and sisters whose stories are told here, on a journey from Easter to Pentecost. Who knows, maybe the risen Lord will decide to walk with us as well, as he walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus on the first Easter day, and show us how to better recognize the presence of the saving mystery of Easter in the people around us. May he walk with us not just in this holy season, but throughout our lives until that day when we see the fullness of Easter glory forever in heaven.
Third Week of Easter

From Fear to Courage

Probably the most remarkable transformation in the lives of the apostles happens during the days immediately after the resurrection: their sudden change from a frightened band of followers into fearless preachers. The reason for this surprising transformation is simple: they have encountered the risen Jesus.

Today the risen Savior still gives us, his followers, hope and courage in the face of our life’s challenges, transforming our doubts and fears into confidence and courage. The transformation is usually subtler than it was for the disciples who met Jesus right after the resurrection, but, as the stories that follow illustrate, there are many ways that we, too, can experience the presence of the risen Lord who tells us “Do not be afraid,” and gives us hope and courage.
Third Sunday of Easter: *A Fearful Disciple*

Walking down James Street, not far from the monastery, past a row of restored brick rowhouses, I suddenly get this closed-in feeling. There’s wrought iron grillwork protecting the windows, and most of the front doors are blank and uninviting, and fitted with tiny peepholes so that the occupants can see who is ringing their bell.

The iron-grilled windows and the sealed-up doors remind me of the gospel passage we heard on Easter—the story of the twelve apostles on the first Easter Sunday evening. They were hiding behind a locked door like one of these, afraid that the authorities were about to come and arrest them. I can imagine them staring anxiously at the door, sneaking glances at one another, expecting at any moment to hear the fateful knock that would signal arrest, torture, and death. Then, just as the suspense becomes unbearable, they see the risen Jesus standing in their midst, greeting them: “Peace be with you.”

Further along James Street, the wrought iron bars on a window catch my eye. When I slow my pace to study them closely, I suddenly feel uneasy for some reason that I can’t put my finger on. Then, as I keep staring, I realize that sometimes my own heart and soul must look like that. When I’m in a situation where I’m not in control, or where I’m not sure what’s going to happen next, or I feel threatened, then up go my defenses—locked doors, closed shutters, iron bars, the works.

Too often I even put up defenses against God, afraid that he’ll ask too much of me—that is, challenge me to
shift the center of my life from myself to him. So, when
the Lord wants to come and meet me or teach me some
difficult lesson, he has to contend with my home security
system, especially my protective bars.

Luckily for me, however, Jesus doesn’t seem to be put off
by the barred windows and locked doors of my heart, any
more than he was by that door the disciples had locked on
that first Easter evening. He has lots of ways to get past my
defenses. For example, I’ll suddenly realize that some per-
son has found their way into my heart despite my carefully
guarded doors, I hear Jesus’ loving greeting as he stands
beside that person inside my defenses: “Peace be with you”!

I continue down the sidewalk past more sealed-up
houses. A young woman is striding toward me pushing
a stroller. When I glance down at the baby’s serene and
radiant face, I feel a tug at my heart; my breath catches
as I glimpse God’s glory for a moment. As mother and
child continue past me, I’m about to thank Jesus for that
surprise splinter of the divine presence, when I hear his
voice—he’s already inside my heart: “Peace be with you”!
He’s done it again.

**Reflection**

Do you ever find yourself putting up defenses against God?
When are the times that this is most likely to happen?
What are God’s favorite ways of speaking to you, of getting
past your defenses? Think of a time when the Lord helped
you to overcome your fear, and gave you the gift of peace.
Monday of the Third Week of Easter:  
*The Dawn from on High*

Across the street from the abbey church, someone has spray-painted a gang logo on the big electrical utility box on the corner. The logo is a grotesque notice that a certain gang has staked its claim here—and is in charge of all drug-dealing, robbery, and murder in the neighborhood—all around our monastery.

Yesterday, this logo took on undeniable reality when, one block down the hill, a man was gunned down in cold blood on the sidewalk across William Street from the abbey church, less than fifty yards from where I’m now sitting, waiting for six o’clock Morning Prayer to begin. The police told us that the victim was a notorious, violent gang member, and that his murder was inevitable.

I start to think about the endless futility of gang warfare, and of those two men, the victim and his executioner. I glance at the crucifix and notice that the body of the African Jesus nailed there in agony seems more slumped over than usual, as if he, like me, is feeling weighed down with sadness this morning.

As my brothers and I stand and begin to chant the ancient verse from Psalm 51, “O Lord, open my lips. . . .” I ask the risen Jesus to give me a word of consolation during our Morning Prayer.

Now we sit and recite Psalm 24; we join in the cry of the priests and Levites as they welcome the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem: “O gates, lift high your heads; . . . Let him enter, the king of glory!” We monks are welcoming God
into our beleaguered neighborhood right now, crossing our fingers in the hope that he will indeed agree to come in.

The psalms and readings follow one another in a peaceful half-hour procession, while a gray morning light slowly washes the darkness behind the stained-glass windows, and I keep listening in vain for that elusive word of consolation from the Lord.

At last, we stand to sing the closing canticle, the Benedictus—“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel.” As the great words of Zechariah disappear into the empty recesses of the church, I resign myself to the fact that there won’t be any word of consolation from the Lord for me this morning. That happens sometimes.

Halfheartedly I join in chanting the final four lines of the poem: “In the tender compassion of our God / the dawn from on high shall break upon us, / to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death . . .”

Finally! I hear it—the “word from the Lord” that I’ve been listening for since we began our Morning Prayer: “the dawn from on high shall break upon us, / to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, / and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

In the closing lines of the last canticle of Morning Prayer, the risen Lord has reassured me that, although my brothers and I are “dwell[ing] in darkness and the shadow of death,” he has already conquered death through his own death and resurrection.

I glimpse a small triangle of the monastery garden through a partially open window; the rising sun has pierced
night’s darkness and is making the bricks of the monastery glow a bright coral red. The “Dawn from on high,” is visiting us as promised, and reasserting God’s sovereign claim over our neighborhood as his territory. God is still promising to overcome despair, drugs, and the darkness of death itself.

Reflection
Reflect on the ways that the saving mystery of the cross is present in your life, perhaps helping you to deal successfully with a problem, or encouraging you in the face of a failure of some kind. Have you ever felt the Lord shining on you in the “shadow of death?”

Tuesday of the Third Week of Easter: Children of the Promise
Smoke swirls from the brazier in the center of the sanctuary, and rises in a column toward the high ceiling of the nave, filling the abbey church with the sweet smell of incense. The monks, standing, chant the first psalm of Sunday Vespers: “Let my prayer arise before you like incense, / the raising of my hands like an evening oblation.”

After many years of praying the psalms, I’m starting to see the world through the psalmist’s eyes: I see my daily life permeated with the saving presence of God, and see all of us as “children of the promise,” waiting and working for the final victory of the kingdom. With the psalmist’s eye, I see that my life and the lives of my brothers and sisters
are chapters in the continuing story of God’s loving care for all of creation.

We sit to sing the rest of the psalms of Vespers. Before long, a verse of Psalm 115 draws my attention: “. . . House of Israel, trust in the Lord; / he is their help and their shield. / House of Aaron, trust in the Lord . . .” But now, the words are no longer addressed to the “house of Israel”: Monks of Newark Abbey, trust in the Lord, He is your help and your shield.

The chanted verses continue rising with the smoke of the incense: “Those who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord; / he is their help and their shield. / The Lord remembers us, and he will bless us; / he will bless the house of Israel. / He will bless the house of Aaron.” Once again, I hear the words of the psalmist speaking to us who are chanting them: He will bless the house of Newark Abbey as he did in 1973, when we were not quite sure if our little community would even survive. The monks facing me on the other side of the choir take up the next verse, “To you may the Lord grant increase, / to you and all your children.” With the psalmist’s help, I see the Lord watching over all of us monks and “all our children:” To you may the Lord grant increase, to you monks and the hundreds of children who attend your school. We’re praying this afternoon that the Lord will continue to bless all of our children, from kindergartners to high school seniors, and bless our efforts to preach the Good News to them.

We continue chanting, “May [we] be blest by the Lord, / the maker of heaven and earth.” In the psalmist’s view, God is the One who created us, the One who delivers us from evil, the One who listens to our prayers.
After a brief pause at the end of the psalm, the next psalm begins: “I will thank the Lord with all my heart / in the meeting of the just and their assembly. / Great are the works of the Lord; / to be pondered by all who love them.”

“Great are the works of the Lord.” King David, when he wrote those words, saw the hand of God acting in his own story and in the history of the chosen people, and of the whole world. Sharing his vision, I praise the “great works” that the Lord has done here on King Boulevard in downtown Newark.

The sweet-scented smoke, I notice, is still rising along with our prayers.

Reflection
Select a favorite psalm and reflect on it slowly, letting it speak to you personally, and ask what the message of the psalm might have to do with your life today. Some psalms to try might be Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my shepherd”), Psalm 51 (prayer of a repentant sinner), Psalm 91 (confidence in God), or Psalm 32 (prayer of a forgiven sinner).

Wednesday of the Third Week of Easter: Dodgeball Players
Six kickballs whiz back and forth across the noisy gym. Several kids from both teams cower against the end walls of the gym, hoping to become invisible to the headhunters at the opposite end of the court, but an intrepid few go charging forward into the thick of battle, hurling balls to left and
right with frightening velocity and reckless abandon. Then they whirl and jump and trip to avoid the dizzying barrage being fired back at them.

The players who charge forward are the ones who truly understand the game: win or lose, they dive in and take risks all the time, throwing their whole self into the effort—even if they are sometimes surprised by a painful smack in the head from enemy fire.

The spiritual life, which St. Irenaeus once called “a divine children’s game,” can indeed seem like a game of dodgeball at times: some of us, hoping to avoid dealing with the Almighty (whose involvement with us can resemble a barrage of kickballs), slither along the back wall, hoping to pass unnoticed by a God who is seeking us, who wants to enfold us in a loving embrace—and who, we suspect, will ask us to give ourselves entirely to him.

But sometimes the gift of grace comes along and mysteriously coaxes us away from the back wall, gently persuading us to take a risk; we are transformed from timid players, afraid of getting involved, into courageous contestants—into saints. Saints, you see, approach the game of relating with God by stepping up boldly, like some of the most daring students on the dodgeball court, and risk everything in the encounter with the Divine.

Francis of Assisi, for example, as a wealthy, charming and carefree young man, could hardly have been less interested in confronting God; then one day the Lord confronted him in a dream that challenged him to turn his life around. In response Francis took off all his clothes and
left them in the town square and walked off, completely vulnerable before the Lord. He stepped into the center of the court and began dealing with everything the Lord could throw at him.

Benedict of Nursia, horrified at the decadence of Rome, gave up the life of a teenage schoolboy and set out, with just the clothes on his back, to give himself completely to confronting God one-on-one in the wild forests of Umbria.

A candidate came to the monastery door asking me if he could “try” the monastic life to see if it was for him. I warned him that you can’t really “try it,” with the attitude of someone dipping his toe into the pool before deciding to jump in. I suggested that he think of the monastic life as a dodgeball match: the best approach is to live it on the front line: encouraged by God’s grace, and in the company of Benedict, Francis, and all the saints—and your community—you dash to the center of the court and start firing those big rubber balls as fast as you can, with everything you’ve got. You get bumped around. You get a bloody nose. A twisted ankle. But in the end, I told him, it’s worth it. He believed me, I guess. He’s been playing the game in his Benedictine habit for five years now.

Back in the gym, the dodgeball game has come down to a showdown between two wily players. Neither one looks ready to back down.

**Reflection**

Imagine that you are one of the players in the dodgeball game; which of their different approaches best characterizes
your way of relating with God? Are you more like someone standing against the back wall of the gym, hoping not to get involved? Are you fearful and constantly on your guard? Or are you more like someone who embraces the situation and joins in with great abandon?

**Thursday of the Third Week of Easter: Charles**

Let me tell you about Charles.

I’m sitting with him in my classroom after school, listening to him talk about his absent father, his overbearing and unstable mother, and his failing grades in school. A single word keeps repeating itself in my head, like faint background noise at first: “victim.” Then, as his list goes on, the word echoes more and more insistently: “Victim!” He complains, blames, and bemoans his fate. “VICTIM!”

At last I lose my patience and shout at him, “You know what? You’re being a damned victim! You’re choosing to be a victim of your absent father, your crazy mother, and of your crappy home situation! A guy with your brains has no excuse for failing all his subjects—especially my religion course!”

He stares at the floor, stunned by the force of my reaction. But I can tell he’s listening, so I lighten up a little.

“I’ve just finished reading a book called *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why.*” I tell him about some of the individuals described in the book, most of them ordinary people who had survived in deadly situations while others around them had died. What kept all these people going
was their “survivor mentality” even when the circumstances were completely against them. He’s bright enough to figure out what this expression means—but he keeps his eyes on the floor.

“Charles, look at me! Thanks. Here’s a question for you: What if you were to start seeing yourself not as a victim but as a survivor?” His expression slowly changes from shocked to quizzical. “I remember a simple sentence from the book: ‘Survival is the celebration of choosing life over death.’ It just seems to me that you can still decide to let go of your ‘victim mentality’ and choose to be a survivor instead.” His expression goes from quizzical to curious.

“Would you like to borrow the book and read it?”

“Sure” (not enthusiastically).

Three months go by, and he never mentions the book I loaned him. Then one afternoon, as class periods were changing, he whispers to me in the hallway, “Father Al, I’m not a victim anymore.” I quickly motion him to sit in an empty classroom. He tells me that he’s getting all B’s in his courses this semester, except for an A in algebra of which he’s extra proud. He isn’t quite sure, he says, how his change from victim to survivor happened, but he likes the way it feels.

“One of the things that helped me get started was that book you gave me. I read it, and I could really see myself in it.”

I feel like jumping out of my chair, pumping my fist in the air and shouting “Yes!” But instead I smile in a calm, “priestly” way.
Pentecost Sunday

Pentecost People

“When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken.” (Acts 4:31)

So, maybe you think that Luke is exaggerating when he describes what happened to the first Christians in Jerusalem: “When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken.”

Well, I think he’s probably describing the scene exactly as he witnessed it—having myself felt a few church buildings almost stagger and shiver with powerful surges of shouts of praise. Take, for instance, the 10:30 Mass last Pentecost Sunday.

Although Mass has ended, and the celebrant has left the sanctuary of the abbey church, most members of the congregation show no sign of wanting to stop singing at the end of the recessional hymn, “The Strife is O’er”—which was chosen, I suppose, because this celebration marks the end of the Easter season. The leader of song directs the choir to repeat the triple shout, *Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!*
She speeds up the tempo a little at each repetition, and we keep singing faster and louder each time, urged on by the full organ, a tambourine, an African drum, and a three-foot long cowbell. Everyone in the church seems to feel the Spirit uniting us as we sing the *Alleluias* with a single voice.

As I look at the people around me, though, I realize that there’s more going on here than just Christians making a joyful noise. The Spirit, after all, doesn’t descend on the church just to liven up the music—the Spirit always comes on business, you might say, with some greater purpose. Those Christians in Jerusalem, we’re told, “were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.” Notice that the Spirit gives them exactly the gift they need at the moment, namely, the courage to keep on preaching the Word despite setbacks, failures, and persecution.

I can imagine the gifts of the Spirit, prophesied by Isaiah, swirling through the church this Pentecost morning, whirling in different directions, each one hovering like a tongue of fire over anyone who needs some particular help.

I can almost feel Wisdom pour down on a single mother trying to raise her headstrong daughter into a good Christian adult. I can easily imagine Courage descending in several places: on the father sitting toward the back who’s just lost his job; on a woman with a walker, and on a parishioner singing in the front row, who told me how hard he struggles to pay his bills. I imagine Understanding shining like sunlight onto the hearts of a newlywed couple in the third row, who were married here just two weeks ago. The
teenagers from the youth group, who like to sit together, are probably flooded with the gift of Right Judgment pouring onto each of them. I’m not sure which gift the Spirit is sending me, but I’m hoping for a bit of Knowledge of God’s unfathomable ways.

The organist opens every stop, and the choir and many of the people in the congregation keep up the joyful shout that can be heard a block away. And I feel the way some of those first Christians must have felt when “they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”

It seems as if the river of Easter fire that poured from the paschal candle and out of the church during the Easter Vigil and flowed all through the city, is pouring back in through every window and door.

Can you think of a better way to end the Easter season?

**Reflection**
If the Holy Spirit gives each of us the gifts we need, what might be a gift that you would ask of the Lord today?