

Please Don't Give Up Chocolate for Lent
Sermon based [on post by Andrew Thayer](#)
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Andrew Thayer Studio

Tonight, I've invited a guest preacher, my closest friend from seminary, and a brilliant priest and theologian, the Rev. Dr. Andrew Thayer. He's technically in New Orleans, but he wrote this piece for Ash Wednesday that I want to share with you. I've adapted it slightly, but this is essentially Andy as our guest preacher...

"When I was a kid, I gave up chocolate for Lent on at least one occasion—maybe more. It felt serious, almost heroic in the way childhood sacrifices do. Chocolate was not incidental to my life; it was currency, delight, reward. Giving it up felt like a genuine offering, a small participation in the ancient rhythm of fasting and feasting that I vaguely understood to be the point of the season. Although I must admit that any sacrifice comes with the temptation of loopholes and exceptions. I distinctly remember having a prolonged debate with my sister about whether Tootsie Rolls counted as chocolate. (Do they? The theological case remains ambiguous.)

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When Easter morning arrived, what was the first thing I did? I devoured my entire oversized chocolate bunny before we even left for church. Christ is risen, and so was my blood sugar. Whatever spiritual clarity I imagined I had cultivated dissolved quickly into sugar and celebration. The fast had an expiration date, and once it expired, so did its meaning. Very little had changed about my relationship to desire. Nothing about my character had deepened. It was a contained religious exercise that ended exactly where it began. I could congratulate myself—job well done—and file it away under the category of minor self-improvement.

Which makes me wonder: if nothing changes—if the fast does not reshape your loves, your habits, your instincts—then what was actually formed? Lent becomes a kind of spiritual intermission, a brief interruption in normal life. We temporarily restrict ourselves and then return, relieved, to exactly who we were before.

I have come to think about Lent very differently. Lent is not a spiritual diet plan. It is not a religious self-optimization challenge. It is not a yearly opportunity to prove that we can survive without sugar, caffeine, or social media. Lent is practice for Easter. It is rehearsal. It is a forty-day immersion in becoming Easter people. The point is not deprivation for its own sake. The point is formation.

Consider Jesus in the wilderness. After his baptism, after hearing the voice name him beloved, he is driven into forty days of testing. The temptations he faces are not random; they are distortions of his vocation. Turn stones into bread. Seize power. Secure glory. Each temptation offers him a shortcut, a way of being Messiah that conforms to the logic of domination, spectacle, and self-preservation. When he resists, he does not do so in order to indulge later. He does not finish forty days in the desert only to start performing miracles on demand, consolidating political control, or throwing himself off the Temple for applause. His resistance is not temporary restraint. It is alignment. He is conforming himself to his identity as the beloved Son, refusing forms of power that would betray his vocation. The wilderness is not about proving endurance; it is about clarifying who he is and how he will live.

That is what Lent is meant to do in us. It is a season in which we examine the ways we are tempted to live out of fear, ego, resentment, or control, and begin practicing another way. The goal is not to grit our teeth for forty days and then resume business as usual. The goal is to become people whose instincts have shifted, whose desires have been retrained, whose lives are more deeply aligned with the dream of God.

Research on habit formation reinforces this ancient wisdom. It takes—yes, about forty days—to meaningfully interrupt ingrained patterns and begin forming new ones. Forty days, roughly the length of Lent (minus Sundays), is long enough to disrupt automatic behaviors, long enough to surface cravings, long enough to establish the beginnings of something new. Lent offers a container in which neural pathways and spiritual pathways can both begin to change.

And here is where I want to humbly invite us to think about Lent a little differently. Many traditional Lenten disciplines—daily meditation, Sabbath rest, prayer, fasting—focus primarily on the self. And I believe in those practices. We cannot give what we do not have. Interior work matters.

But this year feels different. The world feels brittle. The divisions feel deeper. The grief feels heavier. Being Easter people—practicing resurrection—is desperately needed, and resurrection is never private.

What if our Lenten discipline was intentionally conforming our life to Easter. What if Lent became a season not simply of self-examination, or self-denial but of self-giving? What if our practice was about participating in agape—the kind of love that turns outward, binds wounds, and refuses to let death have the last word?

The world needs Easter people right now. The world needs people who see through resurrection-tinted glasses. Giving up chocolate doesn't do the trick. Resurrection is not a sugar fast. It is a way of being alive in places that feel dead. If Lent is practice for Easter, then perhaps we should ask what Easter people actually do.

I am not a fan of top-ten lists, but sometimes specificity helps. Easter people:

1. Help people mourn. There is so much unprocessed grief in the air right now—grief for loved ones, grief for churches, grief for institutions, grief for the version of the country many of us thought we lived in. That sick feeling we have for our country may well be grief. Grief is love without a place to go. In a culture that numbs itself with distraction and denial, helping someone grieve is hard, holy work. Invite someone who is hurting to tell their story. Sit with someone without trying to fix them. Walk patiently alongside sorrow.

2. Find a place to do justice. Resurrection insists that injustice does not get the last word. Volunteer monthly at a food bank, or a feeding site. Support a restorative justice initiative. Mentor a teenager. Advocate for policies that protect the vulnerable. Find a group you believe in and attach your life to it. Easter faith becomes credible when it has hands.

3. Practice stubborn hope in ordinary conversations. When a discussion turns cynical or dehumanizing, Easter people refuse to join in. They ask better questions. They lower the temperature. They choose curiosity over caricature. Write a thoughtful response to someone with whom you disagree—with patience and invitation—and see what happens.

4. Reconcile where they can. Make the phone call. Send the letter. Offer the apology. Clarify a boundary without cruelty. Resurrection sometimes looks like two people deciding pride will not win.

5. Stand with the vulnerable. Scripture speaks of widows and orphans, but today that list is long—immigrants, foster children, the elderly in retirement communities, single parents, the disabled, the isolated, LGBTQ+ members of our community. Seek out an opportunity to serve those whose voices are easily overlooked. Volunteer with children. Visit a nursing home. Support families navigating displacement. Let your presence communicate dignity.

6. Cultivate belonging. Invite someone to dinner who would otherwise eat alone. Learn the name of the new neighbor. Expand your table by one or two chairs. Start a reading group. Build small communities where strangers become neighbors.

7. Tell the truth. Not weaponized truth. Not performative outrage. But steady, costly honesty. Refuse to share misinformation. Refuse to baptize cruelty with religious language. Write a letter to the editor. Speak carefully and courageously.

8. Steward attention. Fast from the outrage machine. Replace thirty minutes of doom-scrolling with reading something beautiful or baking a loaf of bread—and the bread is awful, don't stop. Mark it up as practice and try again. When it's finally presentable, give it away. Plant a garden.

9. Practice generous self-giving. Give money beyond comfort. Find something you truly believe in and support it in ways that may pinch a little. Offer your skills freely. Show up consistently somewhere that cannot repay you. In a world where so much is transactional and commodified, give with grace.

I could keep going, but I am stopping at nine because, as I said, I'm not a fan of top-ten lists. And this is where you come in. Perhaps the thing you are being called to do didn't make this list. Perhaps there is already something stirring in your heart that feels like your Lenten discipline—not for forty days only, but as the beginning of a new way of living.

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The world does not need more people who can grit their teeth for forty days without chocolate. It needs people who can look at what appears to be a lost cause and refuse to surrender to despair. It needs people who are not afraid of what looks dead—relationships, institutions, neighborhoods, even nations—and who dare to believe that resurrection is still possible there.

It needs people who will weep with those who mourn instead of explaining their pain away, who will stand near the tomb rather than rushing toward distraction. It needs people who can stay tender in a time that rewards cynicism, who guard their hearts against turning to stone when disappointment hardens into contempt.

The work before us is not seasonal restraint but long obedience in love. It is the courage to keep showing up in places that feel beyond repair, to keep practicing mercy where bitterness would be easier, to keep choosing hope where resignation feels more realistic. Easter people are not those who avoid sorrow; they are those who walk straight into it and refuse to let it have the final word.

That is resurrection. That is Easter. And that is a Lent worth practicing.
Amen.