

# EARTH & ALTAR

## A SACRED WALK: RECEIVING THE WISDOM OF THE LABYRINTH

[THEOLOGY AND HISTORY](#)

WRITTEN BY [SARAH JAMES](#)



A labyrinth is an ancient spiritual tool designed to foster contemplation and spiritual transformation. Walked by contemplatives and lay people alike for centuries, labyrinths are typically formed as a circle with a singular path leading to a center and constructed out of a wide range of materials.

Labyrinths today can be found embedded into the architecture of old churches, in the middle of remote forests, on rocky coastlines, in home gardens, and near contemporary community centers.

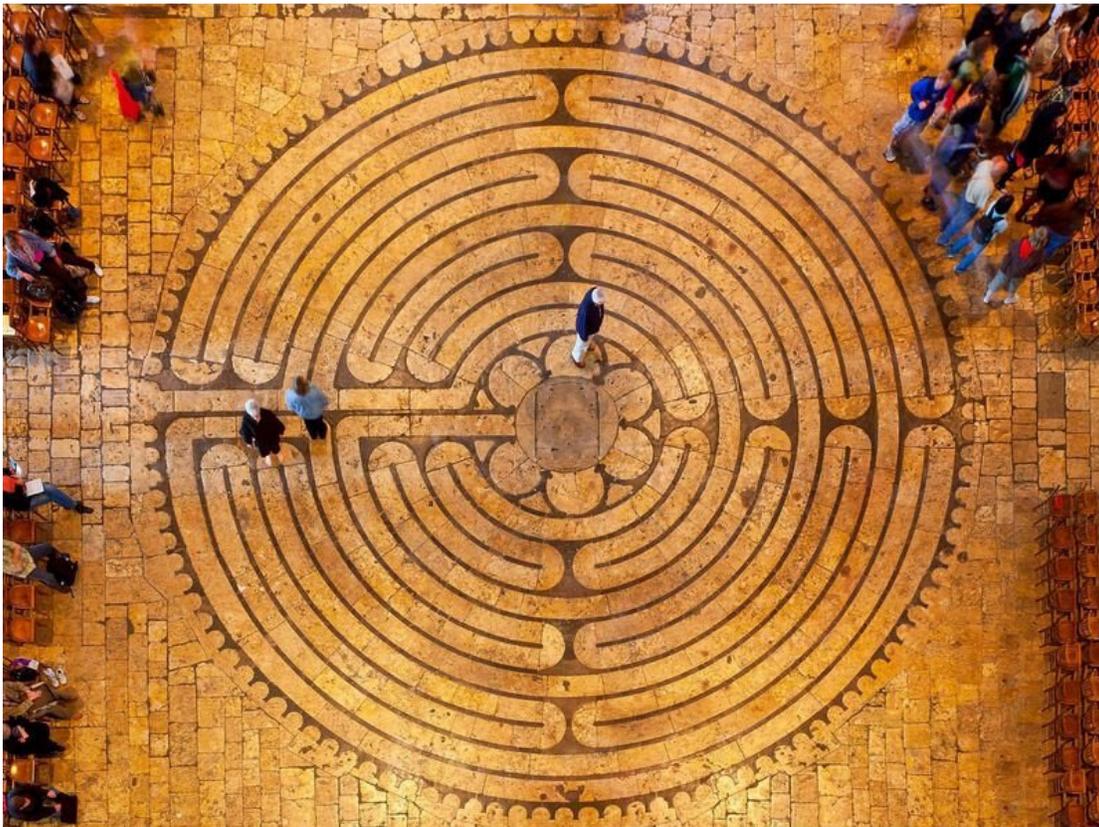
In modern culture, we often use the terms “labyrinth” and “maze” interchangeably, but contemplative labyrinths are distinct from mazes in a key way. As Lauren Artress says, “A maze is designed to make you lose your way, while a labyrinth is designed to help you find your way.” Labyrinths lead you to a center, designed to increase wisdom and discernment; mazes, in contrast, are constructed to be confusing, leading you toward unforeseen dead ends and barriers.

Labyrinths are cross-cultural and ancient, having part of human society for more than 4000 years. Artforms across nearly every continent contain the “classical labyrinth symbol” (pictured below) dating back to 2000 BCE.



Depictions of Classical Labyrinths

Travis Scholl, in *Walking the Labyrinth*, traces the journey of the labyrinth itself, stating, “From the Greek island of Crete, extending south and east into India, north into Europe, west into North America, it took a winding, worldwide path, ever bending, never a straight line, always in circles.” Monks used the labyrinth at the Chartres Cathedral for Christian contemplation beginning in 1205; today, this is one of the most renowned, well-worn labyrinths, drawing countless Christian pilgrims from far and wide.



Labyrinth of the Chartres Cathedral in France

Though labyrinths can be employed as spiritual tools in countless ways, there is a distinctly Christian interpretation, one which monks at the Chartres labyrinth used in their contemplation: the labyrinth as a representation and embodiment of the Christian arc from “sin to redemption.” Additional interpretations of the labyrinth include walking the path Jesus Christ walked, finding the “mystery of Christ who is the center of faith” and life for Christian people, a “discipline of prayer,” and a “living symbol of the journey of faith in a sinful, broken world.” In Christianity, the labyrinth helps pilgrims connect to Christ’s sustaining, redeeming love.

**“Scholars make this clear: whether desiring to unpack a dream, resolve a conflict, find one’s life’s calling, or deepen one’s faith, walking the labyrinth begets transformation.”**

# Walking the Labyrinth Together

We enter the labyrinth with a symbol of peace, sharing the pilgrims' walk together. Each symbol is used as a tool of reflection as we walk the path, and each is left throughout the labyrinth in a place of significance.

**"You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy."**  
(Psalm 16:11)

**and Jesus' words, "I am the way, the truth and the life..."**  
(John 14:16)

**"The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him"**  
(Psalm 37:23)

**"Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."**  
(Psalm 119:105)



## **1. St. Michael icon – we pray for our St. Michael's community**

Saint Michael is an archangel, a spiritual warrior in the battle of good versus evil. He is considered a champion of justice, a healer of the sick, and the guardian of the Church.



## **2. Pitcher with water – we wash away the soiled and unclean**

The pitcher is the container, or the vessel that shapes the soul of man. The fountain is God, and the well is the heart. Just like the life of God is deposited into the golden bowl, the soul is contained in a spiritual vessel.



### **3. Stone – we lay aside our burdens**

Rocks represent struggles to overcome and perspectives to be gained. Many myths, fables and stories use rocks to symbolize the obstacles a character must overcome to complete their quest. What obstacles must we overcome to be closer with God?



### **4. Broken Clock – we lay aside demands of our time**

The clock represents time, but also life itself. Even the tick-tock of a clock sounds like a heartbeat. Therefore, a broken clock represents the pausing of time, but also of life.



### **5. Driftwood – we remember the Eternal relationship between wood and water, between forest and sea, between life & death.**

Some believe that driftwood is a symbol of rebirth because it can represent new beginnings. Other people believe that driftwood represents the journey of life and how everything in it will eventually die. Still others see it as a symbol of tranquility because it is always calm and peaceful near the water's surface.



## **6. Aloe Plant – we give thanks for healing**

Aloe vera is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments as an ingredient in perfumes, as a scent, or as a spice. It was also viewed as an essential addition to embalming rituals. In the bible, Jesus was wrapped in a mixture of Myrrh and Aloes prior to his burial. In many cultures, aloe is also used for healing and keeping away evil spirits.



## **7. Lantern – The Word is a lantern to our feet and light upon our path**

The lantern provides light. Light helps lead the way forward, towards the future and pushes aside the surrounding darkness. A long path before us is useless without the light from the lantern to show us the way.