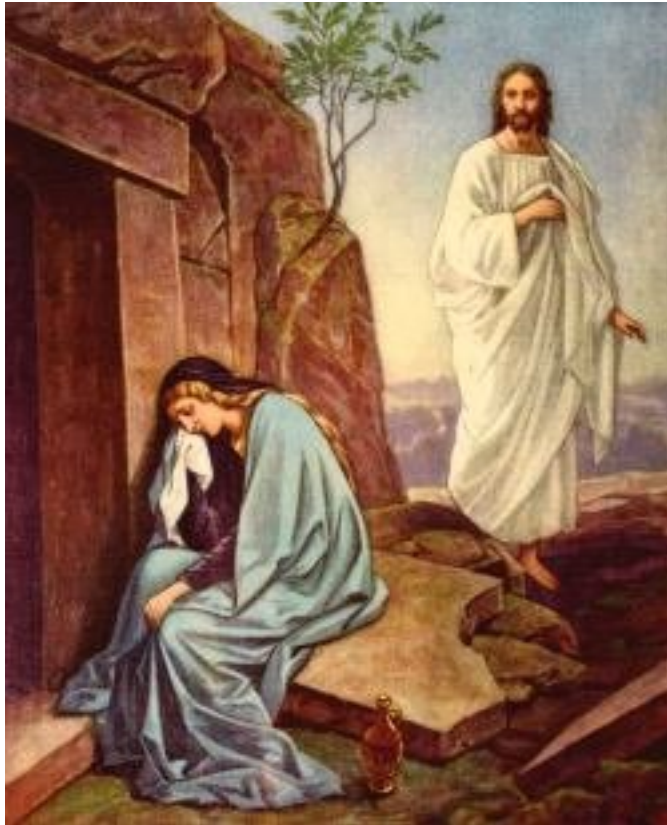


Easter 2008

A mile in their shoes: Reflections on the characters of the Easter story.



Why Easter?

Welcome to Easter – the high point in the Christian year - where Christians celebrate our new life given through the sacrificial death and triumphant Resurrection of God's Son. At Easter, we see the fulfillment of all God's promises – the breaking of all shackles that hold us back from our true identity as dearly loved children of God.

Many people think Christianity places barriers between people and God. To get to God, they think, we must obey the right rules, chant the right prayers, hang out with the right people – and Christians are far from innocent in giving this impression.

It is not, however, the truth. In reality, Christians believe in a God who breathlessly sought us out; who ruthlessly eliminated any barriers that might keep us from the ideal relationship with God and with each other, and from our true identities.

Easter, then, is the centrepiece in the exhibition of God's love that is life on Earth. If he lets imperfect human beings into relationship with him he would himself, in a sense, cease to be perfect. Yet he loves us too dearly to ignore us. It is a terrible dilemma, but finally, a solution materialises. We can't come imperfect, but imperfection is part of who we are. And so his only option is to make us perfect.

Enter Christ. For centuries, Jewish people offered flawless doves, cattle, and lambs to God – symbolic sacrifices that were perfect because we couldn't be. Christ was the last sacrifice. In him, God had a perfect offering that not only covered over our imperfection, but completely *destroyed* it. Gone. And in his Resurrection, we too have new life – not just the absence of our burdens, but *real* life in all its abundance. Without Easter, Christians believe, there can be no hope. Because of Easter, anything is possible – even that a flawed, insignificant human being like you or I can, without shame or fear, be a friend of the Architect of it all. Here we will view Easter through the eyes of those who were there. People who had a personal relationship with God, just as we can.

Passover Thursday – Blood, Sweat and Tears

- *Decisions, decisions, decisions* -

The story begins inauspiciously. It begins with a meal. History has rendered this meal “the Last Supper”, and consequently it is easy to forget how oblivious the disciples were to the drama that would unfold over the weekend. Only a few days earlier, Jesus and his followers had been greeted on their arrival in Jerusalem by an adoring crowd of thousands, and the question “what will he do next?” must have been at the very forefront of the minds of his followers.

The shocking answer to that question would come soon enough, but for now life was remarkably normal. Jesus is having dinner with his friends, as he had many times before. It is Passover, the annual commemoration of the escape of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. Jesus’ friends know nothing of what will happen over the next few days – of the symbolism of this feast in light of the freedom from slavery that God offers all people – and for now, it is time to celebrate.

It is easy to see this meal as inconsequential in light of what is to come, but this misses the point: Jesus, who alone knew what would follow, *chose* this meal, this time, this place. For the rest of his life; the few hours of captivity and torture he had left to look forward to, he would have few choices. Yet even knowing this, he chose to celebrate with his closest friends.

We will be looking at the story through the eyes of those involved, and the three characters we will follow today also face agonizing choices – choices remarkably familiar to all of us. Mary faces the choice of devotion – will she risk the tears of humiliation and ridicule to show her devotion for Jesus? Judas faces the choice of self. Will he decide to pursue the greater good, or look out for number one, even if blood is spilt? And twice, Peter will face the choice of trust – when he’s sweating - when his very life depends on making the right decision, does he *really* believe that the man he’s devoted his life to knows what he’s doing. Their decisions will chart the course for one of the most dramatic stories in history.

Mary Magdalene - Tears

"In Memory of Her"

*She comes into the male gathering,
(How much time has she spent already
wondering is this is the right thing to do?)
heart beating wildly, uncontrollably
she crosses the room
the object of her devotion focuses her mind,
silently, trembling, she fumbles a little
she pours out the perfume
all over his head.
Weeping now, her life and heart exposed before
she wipes his face, her long hair a towel
her dignity, her reputation no cover to hide.
He does not mock nor shy away.
Relief begins to flood
the pounding of her heart obeyed
he turns his head and through her tears
she sees him look at her
She distantly perceives some voices raised,
"What a waste, what does she think she's doing,
what about the poor?"
but **he** responds lovingly, holds her intently
honours the gift and defends the giver.
"I receive her worship, she alone has understood"*

*Can she know the significance of her action?
A king is anointed with oil.
A burial anointing, for the time has come.
She's been listening.
She alone senses the time!
He will not always be amongst us.*

Then Judas went out to betray Jesus.

- Helen Harray -

Luke 7: ³⁷When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, ³⁸and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

*....
⁴⁸Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."*

⁴⁹The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

⁵⁰Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

- What do you think may have motivated Mary to her dramatic and extravagant act of worship?
- What would she have sacrificed to obtain the perfume?
- Imagine her joy when told that her faith has saved her.

John 12: ⁴But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages"⁶He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

⁷"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

- Why is Jesus so damning of Judas' criticism of Mary's act of worship? Are we also guilty of serving God at the expense of worshipping God?
- Notice Mary uses all of the perfume in her worship of Jesus. Is there anything in your life that you are so thoroughly devoted to? Do you worship God wholeheartedly? Half-heartedly? At all? Does this need to change? Pour an amount of perfume on the rose petals which symbolizes your worship of God. Think about whether you want this amount to change, and what that might mean practically.

Peter - Sweat

John 13: ¹It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. ²The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. ³Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

⁷Jesus replied, "You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

⁸"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

⁹"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

¹⁰Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." ¹¹For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

¹²When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

- Why do you think Peter denied Jesus permission to wash his feet? What changes his mind? What does he wish to be cleansed from, and what does this represent in your life?

- Notice that this passage implies Jesus does this because he knew “the father had put all things under his power” – it is only when we are truly secure in our own identity that we are able to serve selflessly. What is your place in God’s family? How does this shape your identity, and does this help, or hinder you in serving others and God?

- On that last night with his disciples, Jesus left us two powerful symbols of his love for us – Communion and the washing of feet. What do you think it says about the Church and human nature that Communion became a key Christian ritual, but foot-washing did not?

- This passage teaches us the importance not only of serving, but also of being served. Using the towels and water provided, wash someone’s feet and allow them to wash yours as a symbol of your commitment to a community in which serving and being served is the norm, not the exception.

Judas - Blood

Matthew 26: ¹⁴Then... Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests ¹⁵and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. ¹⁶From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over. ... ²⁰When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. ²¹And while they were eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me."

²²They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?" ²³Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." ²⁵Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you."

²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

- Judas is seen as the great criminal of the Easter story. We often ask "When Judas had walked with Jesus, heard him speak, seen miracles, learned with the other disciples that Jesus was no mere man, how could he then betray him?" In a way, though we are all guilty of this. In our faithlessness, our selfishness, our laziness, at times we also betray Jesus. For Judas maybe the motivation was vengeance, maybe power, maybe disappointment, or perhaps it was simply silver. Take a coin and think about what it represents for you – what you put ahead of God.

Matthew 27: ³When Judas... saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴"I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility."

- The story needn't have ended this way. As Judas died, the one he'd betrayed was dying to give him life, but Judas was too overcome with guilt to accept God's complete and extravagant forgiveness. Take a moment to contemplate this, and when you feel ready, place your coin on the scales as a symbol of the fact that your sins need no longer weigh you down, but that your burden was gladly accepted by Jesus.



Peter's Denial – More Sweat

Mark 14: ²⁷"You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written:

" I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.
²⁸But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

²⁹Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not."

³⁰"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."

³¹But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

Luke 22: ⁵⁴Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance.

⁵⁵But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. ⁵⁶A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him."

⁵⁷But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said.

⁵⁸A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them."

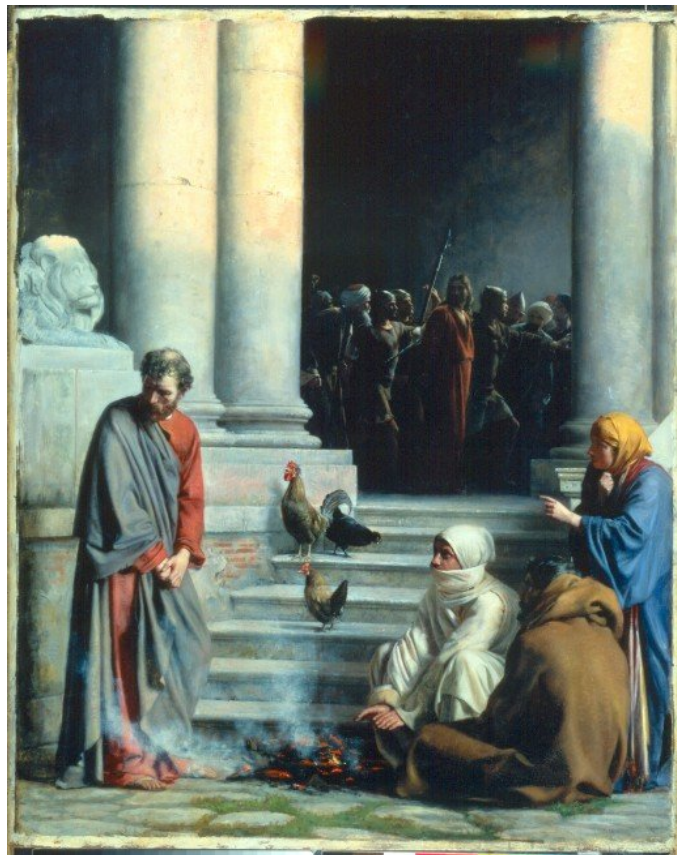
"Man, I am not!" Peter replied.

⁵⁹About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."

⁶⁰Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." ⁶²And he went outside and wept bitterly.

- It is easy to be critical of Peter, but in that situation, and with his life on the line, how many of us would have confessed to following Jesus, and would that even have been the right thing to do?

- On one of the pieces of paper provided, write a time when you've found it difficult to follow what you believe in, and perhaps have failed to do so. When ready, go outside and burn the piece of paper in the brazier, and think how you can be more courageous in upholding your principles.



Good Friday – Whose Burden is it anyway?

No one likes to clean up someone else's mess. Few mature adults would dispute the notion that if you make your bed, you must then lie in it. That is the doctrine of self-reliance – a logic that is so interwoven into our society that we are often not even aware that it exists.

The logic of Christianity – God's logic – is different. Here, and most poignantly in the Easter story, we are presented with a God who sees us struggling under our own weight; sees that we are small and the burden is large. But to see someone struggling is no great achievement. The Easter story is special because it represents a moment in history where God reaches down to Earth and says "Hey, let me carry that". A simple offer, but yet so powerful.

In Christ's sacrifice on that first Easter Saturday, Christians believe that he took upon himself all of our burdens: the emptiness of a missing parent, the regret of a selfish act, the pain of a broken friendship. And he bears this tremendous weight – the collective suffering of millennia of mankind – not under duress, but of his own free will. God does not promise to undo our past, but he does promise to free us from it if we allow him to – in the words of Jesus, "in this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

That first Easter Friday is full of burdens – wherever we turn, someone is suffering. The central symbol here is Christ, battered and bruised from unspeakable torture, yet forced to carry his own cross to the place of execution. The characters surrounding Jesus are no exception. Pilate, the Governor who sentences Jesus to death, struggles with the weight of that brutal decision. Barabbas, a prisoner who is released by Pilate as Jesus is executed, suffers from the burden of guilt, and must later have deliberated on the burden of reprieve – the responsibility that comes with undeserved freedom. Finally, Simon, who is forced to carry the cross that Jesus is too weak to lift, is weighed down – very poignantly – by a burden that should never have been his to carry.

Matthew 27 – Jesus before Pilate

¹¹Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

¹²When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. ¹³Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" ¹⁴But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.

¹⁵Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. ¹⁶At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. ¹⁷So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"

¹⁸For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.

¹⁹While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

²⁰But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

²¹"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.

"Barabbas," they answered.

²²"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked.

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

²³"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

²⁴When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

²⁵All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"

²⁶Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

Pilate – the Burden of Decision

- Put yourself in Pilate's shoes. He believes Jesus is innocent, and tries on several occasions to set him free, but Jesus refuses to defend himself, and the crowd calls all the louder for his blood. Even Pilate's surefire plan of having Jesus pardoned falls apart when the crowd demands Barabbas instead. In such a circumstance, under such tremendous pressure from so many fronts, how many of us would crumble? Have you ever been in a situation where you had to make a difficult decision, and felt the pressure of your friends, family, leaders and others? Amongst such a cacophony, how can we hear the voice of God and make the right decision? And could you live with disappointing those you love in order to do this?
- Pilate's hand-washing is an attempt to shift the blame for the death of an innocent man from himself to the crowd. To what extent is this reasonable, and to what extent is it a simple act of cowardice – passing on the buck that should have stopped with him?
- Who holds the power in this situation?
- Are we also guilty of refusing to accept responsibility for our part in Christ's death? Knowing that Christ died for our sins, it is easy enough to forget the significance of them. Do you take Christ's death for your sin seriously enough, or do you also wash your hands of it?

Barabbas – the Burden of Guilt

Barabbas, where did you go
suddenly freed from death row?

Cowering under a filthy hood,
hiding in the “crucify” crowd
stood gazing up at Him
who knew no sin.

Did a nail not stab your heart,
understanding He bled your part
of punishment due?

Barabbas, was your mouth not dry
when He thirsted, cried,
“Why”?

Did you not consider your dirty hands,
murderer, prisoner,
when crimson bands of blood
crowned His brow;
offering opportunity to bow?

You slipped through the mocking crowd –
a serpent’s son –
wrapped your enameled skin in a stinking shroud.

Barabbas, we hear of you no more,
slithering through death’s door.

- Joyce Carr Stedelbauer -

- Barabbas wore chains, Pilate wore robes, judge over all in the land. But on that first Easter morning, which one was really free? What does freedom mean here? What does it mean for you?

- How must it have felt for Jesus to watch Barabbas take the freedom that he deserved? Would he have been devastated, or elated?

- How must it have felt for Barabbas to receive his sudden and unexpected reprieve?

- How do you respond to the freedom Christ gives you? Does the thought still move you, or has the idea become so familiar that it no longer means anything? Or is it something that you don't understand or believe in?

- Does your response need to change? How?

Simon of Cyrene – Someone else's burden

Matthew 27: ³²As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross.

- Put yourself in Simon's shoes. How would he have felt when plucked out of the crowd? How must it have felt to be forced to carry someone else's cross?

- What about Jesus? How would it have felt for him to carry a burden that should never have been his?

Matthew 16: ²⁴Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

- What about us? What does it look like for us to carry our own burden? What does it mean for us to help others with theirs? How does this feel? In the space below, draw a picture or write some words that make this clear to you.

What was Jesus doing on Saturday night?

-Abandonment, Hell, and glimpses of grace -

Saturday's story is often left out of our commemorations of Easter. What happened then lacks the drama of Thursday's prologue, the tangibility of Friday's horrors, or the excitement of Sunday's renewal, but it is no less important.

On Saturday, the followers of Jesus dealt with their grief, not only at the death of their friend and teacher, but of their hope. In the midst of this despair, though, a few amazing things happen. Firstly, one of the thieves who died beside Jesus – according to Jesus' promise as they died together – wakes in Heaven. We don't know what Heaven looks like – what exactly that *means* – but it is symbolic of the Kingdom Jesus came to create that the first person he brings into it is a petty criminal. The message is clear: Jesus' offer of forgiveness is open to all comers – regardless of whether your fellow man would judge you “good” or “bad”. All that is expected of us is to accept the offer, and place our trust in God.

Secondly, Jesus' followers begin to come together to care for his body. A drop of mercy in a sea of darkness, certainly, but a drop of mercy nonetheless. In what must have been a very risky move, two of Jesus' followers go to Pilate and ask for the body, and they begin the process of burying it properly, while elsewhere, Jesus' mother adopts his closest friend as her own son. They didn't know what was coming, but perhaps they had a hint that this wasn't the end – that they had a role yet to play. That this community could outlive the man it followed.

And what about Jesus? Well, we don't really know. What we *do* know is that he was dead. Not pretending, not a clever illusion, but dead, with broken legs and spear wound through his torso to boot. As if breaking his perfect community with the Father and the Spirit to come and live amongst us were not enough! Now he lacked even the messy, flawed community he had enjoyed on Earth. Alone. Desolate. Abandoned. Everything that we could have been, he was – and he went through it so we wouldn't have to.

The Thief – Irrational Grace

Luke 23: ³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

⁴³Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

- What do you think made the second criminal react as he did? What may have convinced him that Jesus was innocent?
- What made him believe that his request to be remembered might be honoured by Jesus? How would it have felt to ask a question so seemingly ridiculous? How would it have felt when Jesus responded as he did?
- How do you picture paradise? On the next page, draw your impression of what Heaven may be like. Imagine how it must have felt for the thief to arrive in such a wonderful place so abruptly and “undeservedly.” How does he feel? Welcome or out of place? Happy or regretful?

Joseph and Nicodemus – Dignified in Despair

John 19: ³⁸Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. ³⁹He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. ⁴⁰Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. ⁴¹At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

- What risks must Joseph have taken to go to Pilate and ask for the body of an executed criminal? How would he have felt as he approached Pilate, and as he carried Jesus to the tomb?
- Read John 3:1-20 and John 7:45:52. What connection do you think there may be between the interaction of Jesus and Nicodemus here and in those passages? What does Jesus do that inspires such devotion? How does knowing of this past history between Jesus and Nicodemus change the mood of this story?
- What history do you think there may have been between Joseph and Jesus?
- How does this story relate to the anointing of Jesus before his death by Mary (see pages 3-4)? What can we learn from this?

John and Mary – A New Family

John 19: ²⁵Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," ²⁷and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

- Try and imagine the emotional journey that Jesus, Mary and John must have traveled by this point on the first Easter. What emotions is Jesus feeling as he says this to his mother and his friend?
- What about Mary?
- John?
- What might the relationship between John and Mary have looked like down the track?
- Read Romans 8:12-23. What parallels are there between this story and the way God treats us?

Jesus - Abandoned

Matthew 27: ⁴⁵From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"— which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

⁴⁷When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."

⁴⁸Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ⁴⁹The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

⁵⁰And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

- What do you think Jesus means when he asks God why he has been “forsaken”?
- What do you think may have been the last thought to cross Jesus’ mind before he died?
- What do you think it means that Jesus “gave up his Spirit”?
- What do you think it meant for God to allow death – the frailest of human experiences – into his field of experience?
- Which part of Jesus’ journey do you think he would have dreaded most? The crucifixion or the aloneness that followed?

Sunday – The Case of the Empty Tomb

- *What will it take for you to believe?* –

In a society with any Christian heritage, it is very difficult not to have an opinion on what happened on that first Easter Sunday. Some believe the events described never occurred at all, let alone as described in the Bible. Some believe Jesus' disciples stole the body. Some believe that the Resurrection – the perfect combined expression of God's power and God's love – occurred just as it is described.

It was no different on that first Easter. Everyone had an explanation. Unsurprisingly, many were cynical – even aside from the self-interest of the Roman soldiers in going along with the wishes of their superiors, claiming that a body you were guarding got up and walked away leaves one liable to charges of insanity. And so the soldiers – who hours before were terrified by the God's power – lied to protect themselves.

Even amongst Jesus' closest followers, there was skepticism. Thomas dismissed his friends' excitement as simple wishful thinking – and who could blame them? However, whether or not you believe in the accuracy of the Bible's account, you must concede that *something* happened that changed “doubting Thomas” into a man who would devote the rest of his life to proclaiming Jesus' death and Resurrection.

And there were those who simply believed. The women who went to tend Jesus' body didn't expect to find what they did, and they couldn't explain *how* God did what *he* did. They simply believed what they had seen – that God was not limited by their understanding of how the world works.

As you read through the final pages of this journey, think which character you identify most with. The soldiers, Thomas, and the women all had more or less the same evidence before them, yet their responses were so radically different. Faith is always a choice. No one can *prove* the truth of the Gospel story, but the evidence is there – in the Bible, in changed lives both then and now. How you respond to it is up to you.

The Guards

Matthew 27: ⁶²The next day ... the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ⁶³"Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' ⁶⁴So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first." ⁶⁵"Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." ⁶⁶So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

28: ²There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

- How would the guards have felt when assigned to guard the body of a dead man? How must it have felt when Jesus' absurd prediction appeared to be coming true? Draw the scene below, then write some words that describe how you would feel if you were one of the guards. Why is this?

Matthew 28: ¹²When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, ¹³telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

- It is always easy to explain things away, and at the end of the day, faith is always a choice. However, there are plenty of good reasons to believe for those who look for them. Take a moment to contemplate the choice you've made regarding faith (whatever that choice may have been) and the reasons for it. Have you made a choice at all?
- Think about how you can take ownership of the decision you've made. How can you make it more your decision, and less that of your parents, family, friends, or culture?
- If you'd like to discuss anything contained in this booklet, or there are questions you need an answer to, contact someone you trust, and ask them to explain why they believe what they do.

The Women

Luke 24: ¹On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' "⁸Then they remembered his words.

⁹When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹²Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

- What were the women expecting when they arrived at the tomb?
- Put yourself in their shoes – imagine the roller-coaster of emotions they went through in this situation. Think of an experience you've had in which you felt similarly overwhelmed.
- What do you think causes the women to believe immediately? Would you believe if you saw what they did?

Thomas

John 20: ²⁴Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

²⁶A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"

²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

- Imagine you are Thomas. All the hope of the past few years has been destroyed by Jesus' death, and you're no longer sure what your life means. Suddenly, the others come to you and say they've seen Jesus. Can you blame him for seeing it as simply wishful thinking on the behalf of the others? How would you react?
- Legend has it that this same Thomas went on to travel as far as South India to tell the good news about Jesus, founding a community of Christians that exists to this day. What do you think may have changed Thomas from being the faithless character we see here, to someone who would devote his life to Jesus' teachings?
- Jesus was quite happy to give Thomas the evidence he demanded of his Resurrection. What would you need to see in order to believe? How could you go about finding this out? Who can help you in this journey? If you have no friends you can ask, consider contacting one of the people listed on page 25 and challenging them to answer your questions.