

Easter is the most important holiday of the year for Christians. To appreciate this holiday it is necessary to really grasp the drama and significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. This story is one of the most dramatic in the whole Bible. However, the Bible is an old book and not written like a modern novel. Therefore it is easy to miss the drama and significance of this story when reading it for the first time. I have written this short version of the story to help you understand this story and the significance of this holiday for us who follow Jesus.

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## **The Story of Easter**

Matthew 26-28, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-24, John 18-21

It is noon and something has changed. The morning has been sunny and the sky blue. But now it is noon and the sky is dark. Heavy clouds hang low in the sky blocking the sun. It is noon, but it seems as if night is coming. Everything is quiet. Birds are still and people speak in whispers. Something is very wrong.

Blood is slowly oozing from the nail which has been driven through Jesus' hand. He is weak and struggling to breathe as he hangs on a wooden cross by three nails which have been driven through his hands and feet. In the dim light he can hear his own heart beating, but he knows that he will die on this cross - under these dark and eerie clouds.

For three years Jesus had been one of the most well known people in Israel. Everyone knew that he was the healer and that he talked about the kingdom of God wherever he went. He was like the holy men from long ago through whom God had done wonderful and amazing things for His people. The common people were glad to know that Jesus was in their country. It was always good to hear of sick people being healed and it was encouraging to hear that someone was speaking with a strong voice for what was right and good. There was very little hope since the Roman armies had come and taken control of the land, but perhaps God was going to change all that. Perhaps Jesus would not just heal and preach, but also fight.

The little girl was very very sick. The doctors had tried to help and the mother had held the child and rocked her gently day and night hoping her love would bring health. But her child was only getting weaker as it lay in her arms. It was early morning and the air was cold as the mother walked along the road. She had been walking for two hours already. Friends had told her that the man named Jesus was

in a nearby town. "Take Sarah to him, perhaps he will heal her". Hope moved her feet and her pace was slow, but steady. She would be there soon and she would find Jesus. 'God will hear my prayers', she told herself. 'God will use this man to heal Sarah'. She was sure of this, but she was also frightened.

It was a small village and Jesus had been easy to find. He had been surrounded by a crowd of people who were listening to his stories when she arrived. As she came to the crowd, she hesitated. Was this right? Would he help her? Should she wait till he finished? Her emotions overcame her and she had pushed through the crowd crying and afraid, but finally she was there on her knees by Jesus, begging for his help. No one tried to stop her. Several of them had come to Him for help only yesterday - they understood. She could not remember everything that happened in the next moments. Jesus had calmed her and then stroked little Sarah's hair and spoken gentle words. Sarah was asleep now and breathing peacefully - healed! You could feel the strength in her little body again. Her mother held her tightly and listened while Jesus continued his teaching about loving God with all of our hearts and loving even our enemies.

But popular people can be very dangerous. They can lead people in the wrong directions. The religious leaders did not trust this healer who became more popular with the people each day. So much that he did and said was simple and good, but sometimes he was confusing - and sometimes it did not seem good at all to them.

A man who could not walk came to him for healing but before Jesus healed the man, he announced that the man's sins were forgiven - as if he were God! And even though he presented himself as a holy man, he ate dinner in the homes of people who constantly broke God's laws and he even spoke to women who sold themselves for sex! Didn't he know that this looked bad? A holy man should only talk to good and religious people! Why did he talk to sinners?

And the way he spoke about himself was hard to understand:

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever."

"I am the way, the truth and the life, no one can come to God except through me."

"Before your ancestor Abraham was born, I existed."

"I am the vine and you are the branches, if you are in me you will bear much fruit, but apart from me you can do nothing."

" I will be handed over to the religious leaders and they will sentence me to death... and kill me..... for I did not come to be served but to serve others and give my life as the price for setting many people free."

"I and God are the same."

-- How could he say these things? Did he really think he was so important? Did he think he was God? This was wrong! This was dangerous!

Too many people began to follow Jesus. They were starting to believe that he was the savior promised in the Bible. And they cheered when he criticized the religious leaders. He had to be stopped before it was too late! They had tried to challenge him publicly, but his answers were clever and the people always sided with him. Several of the leaders had argued that he must simply be killed. Now their voices were the loudest. It was decided.

The sky was dark. Jesus was dying as he hung on the cross. He was dying in the way that was reserved for the worst criminals. It was slow. It was painful. And it was meant to bring shame to the one dying. Jesus had been arrested, tried, beaten severely - and died that day in shame.

For those who followed Jesus, it was the end of their hope. Some had followed because he had healed them. Some followed because they thought his teaching would bring good to their nation. Some followed because they believed he was the promised savior and that his claims were true. But when he died, their dreams died. There would be no more healing, no rebirth of morals and truth. And now it seemed that he could not have been the promised savior. Surely, God's savior could not die in defeat and shame.

On Friday he was buried.

Mary had been a prostitute when she met Jesus. She had watched him, listened to him - and her life had changed. She had followed him ever since then, but now he was dead. She had cried as she watched him die. She had been there when they took his body off of the cross and wrapped it in the burial cloth. And she had followed and watched as they laid him in the tomb. That had been on Friday. All weekend she had grieved and wrestled with how this could be. How could Jesus not be the savior? How could he have been wrong? What would happen now? Who could she believe? What was true? Was God even real?

This morning she and her friend were out early in the cool morning air. It was Sunday. Sabbath (the Jewish holy day) was over and they were carrying spices to Jesus' tomb to finish the burial customs. Despite her questions and confusion, she still loved her memories of Jesus - was still thankful for the way her life had changed, and was glad for one last time to express her love by honoring him in his death. The women walked mostly in silence, noticing little around them. As they walked along the path to the tomb, the sun was rising in the morning sky and the colors of the garden were beautiful again for the new day. Life continued on, seeming not to notice that Jesus was gone.

Suddenly Mary stood as still as a statue. Her eyes were wide with surprise. Something was wrong. The stone door of the tomb was open! What was happening? Then she heard the voice even before she saw the man -- "Don't be afraid. You are looking for Jesus. Why do you look for the living among the dead. He has risen! He is not here." Mary fell to the ground in fear. Now she saw that there were two men. Their clothes were shining like the sun. Things were happening too fast. Mary could hardly believe her eyes or her ears. Angels! She was seeing angels! And Jesus was gone! Risen! Alive?? Jesus was alive again? "He is risen, just as he said", they repeated. "Go and tell his disciples". Mary ran from the tomb. As soon as the disciples heard Mary's news they raced to the tomb to see for themselves. How could this story be true?! What they found was startling. The cloth which had been used to wrap Jesus' body was lying there - and nothing else. Jesus was gone.

The body of Jesus was never found again. Some have said that the disciples stole the body and lied to deceive the world. Others say the Jewish enemies of Jesus stole his body. Others even claim that Jesus never really died, but simply revived, struggled out of the tomb and crawled off into the countryside. However, the men and women who followed Jesus tell a different story. They say that not only did the angels meet them at the tomb, but that Jesus himself came and met them over the next several days. They listened to him, touched him, ate with him and saw him finally rise into the heavens after saying that he would return again.

The lives of these followers showed a remarkable change after Jesus' resurrection. When Jesus died, their hope died, their confidence died, their courage died. They were hiding from the authorities, fearful that they too would be killed. But after that Sunday they became different people. They preached in the streets, just as Jesus had done. They paid no attention to the threats of the government. They were arrested, beaten, ridiculed - but still they continued to tell the story about Jesus and to claim that He was alive and that He was the promised savior. They were now convinced that their hopes had come true and that Jesus' words were

all true. He had claimed to be God and they believed Him. He had taught them that His death would pay for our disobedience to God's law. He said that forgiveness was now possible and that our shame could be removed because He had suffered our punishment for us -- and they believed Him! They knew that He was alive. They were full of hope and joy, and nothing could stop them from telling others.

And others believed! Many of the Jewish people had seen and heard Jesus. They knew about his death and they knew that His body was gone - and they believed that His followers were telling the truth. The church began and grew quickly. Today it has spread to the entire world. People in every country have found the same thing -- that when we ask God to forgive our sin and follow Jesus, we meet God and our life is changed.

Easter is the Christian's greatest holiday because on this day we celebrate that Jesus is alive!

Jesus is alive - and so He really is the savior and we really can be forgiven and loved by God.

And if he is alive - we can know him and he can always be with us to help and guide and teach us.

Thanks be to God for this wonderful gift!

## **What does it Mean to Follow Jesus?**

I was a college student when I began to hear God's voice in my heart and realized that He was telling me that Jesus really is His Son and that my life was about to change. I am sharing these brief thoughts because perhaps God is speaking to your heart and you are wondering what He wants you to do if this news about Jesus is true.

Thankfully, if you have a desire to do something, it means that God is already

doing something -- He is speaking to you -- calling you back to Himself. He is not calling you to do a list of duties or religious rituals -- He is calling you into a relationship with Himself. He is your Father in heaven who created you, who loves you, and He wants you to know Him in a daily relationship -- as a child knows a mother or father. In this relationship, you will do things and obey Him, but not to win His love or forgiveness. Rather you will obey Him because He changes your heart and you want to please Him and say thank you to Him for His forgiveness and help and love.

The key to beginning your relationship with God is Jesus. If He is God's Son -- the savior -- actually God Himself come to us in human form, then it is logical to listen to Him and follow Him. When He spoke of starting our relationship with God, He said you must do two simple things -- repent and believe. (Mark 1:15)

**Repent** means to turn around and go the opposite direction. Instead of dishonoring and disobeying God in what you think, say or do; you must come to Him and tell Him you are sorry and ask Him to forgive you and take away your shame and guilt.

The great news is that when you ask God to forgive you, He smiles and hugs you and says "yes, yes, yes!" This was His plan all along! Even though you deserve to be punished and sent away from God, He has allowed Jesus to be punished for you. He sent Jesus to pay the price that you could never have paid for yourself. And this means that Jesus has done everything necessary to make your relationship with God possible. He now offers this relationship to you as a gift! So after you ask God to forgive you, you can simply rest in knowing that Jesus has done all of the work that must be done. You simply **Believe** -- or trust -- in what God has done for you -- and say thank you to your loving Father.

Once you have done this, you are at the beginning of a wonderful new relationship

with God. Now you are free to start over again and walk in harmony with God day by day. You simply say "please help me to live in a way which pleases You in all that I think, say and do."

Jesus is again the key. His life is our example. His words are our instructions. He is our teacher. He is our king. In fact, He is God the Son and so as you follow Him, you are following God. As you talk to Him each day, you will grow to know Him more and more. He will listen to you -- and as you listen to Him, He will speak to you in prayer and through His words in the Bible. Your life will change, He will make you into a new person, and your future will be set on a totally new course.

Finally, if you do choose to enter into this new relationship with God, make sure you tell a friend who is a Christian so that they can answer your questions, help you and encourage you in this new life. You cannot live the Christian life alone. When you follow Jesus, you become part of a worldwide family of people who are committed to loving God and loving others.

I hope you do join our family and come to know God as we have.