

It seems like everyone has an opinion about Jesus. Some people describe him as a spiritual person, some as a visionary, others as the founder of a religion. Jesus is sometimes painted as a tragic figure caught up in a warped political system and other times as an authoritative leader inspiring revolt.

Yet, we often see that our descriptions of Jesus reveal more about us than him. People tend to view Jesus more in terms of who they want him to be rather than what is told about Jesus in the Bible. If we want to truly discover Jesus, we need to encounter him as he is described in the Bible. Too often our perception of Jesus is slanted because of how our parents describe him, or how people on TV describe him, or how we tend to think about him. Over the next six weeks we will be looking more closely at who Jesus really is by investigating some of the titles that are ascribed to him in the Bible.

We will come face to face with Jesus the way his first followers did.

They met Jesus as the Good Shepherd. They encountered Jesus as a Wise Teacher. They watched the work of Jesus the Compassionate Healer. They were challenged by Jesus the Humble Servant. They celebrated Jesus the Triumphant King. Finally, they rejoiced with Jesus the Risen Lord. Let's all learn together more about the different faces of Jesus.

In order to get the most out of this booklet, there are four different areas of focus:

Weekend Services: Every week we will focus on a particular “face” of Jesus. We hope you are able to attend and celebrate together with us each Sunday. If you are not, be sure to remember there are CDs of all the services. You can also download each Sunday’s message from our website at www.communitycc.net/media/podcast.asp

Group Life: Get into a small group and take this journey together with other people just like you, people who are trying to encounter Jesus in a full and real way. Within this booklet there are six small group guides you can use as you gather together.

Daily Thoughts: Each week there will be five different short readings intended to help us get a handle on some of the “faces” of Jesus. Reading these consistently will help you get a better grasp on who Jesus is.

Bible Reading: Each daily thought has an accompanying Bible verse that you are challenged to read (and reread) as we learn more about Jesus.

If we truly want to follow and serve Jesus, we need to put forward the effort it takes to learn who he really is. It is worth all of our time and energy if we are able to come face to face with Jesus.

Week One, Day One

Read: John 10:1-10

The first face of Jesus we will be encountering is Jesus the Good Shepherd. This image, while vivid and alive for people of the first century, has lost much of its luster for people living in modern, industrial nations. Most of us have only the most rudimentary understanding of what a shepherd does, that is, they watch over sheep. While this is true (duh!), we need to understand a little more to get a full picture of how beautiful of an image this truly is.

During the night, sheep would be kept in a fold. These sheepfolds were usually in an enclosure made of stone, a circular wall with no breaks except for the door. A shepherd who wished to guard his flocks for the night would sleep in the opening or would post a watchman at the gate, thereby ensuring that nothing could easily get to the sheep and that the sheep could not easily wander away. Anyone (or anything, such as a wolf) who wished to gain access to the sheep would have to pass by the shepherd or watchman first. Thieves and robbers could never enter through the door. Instead, they would have to climb over the wall and break into the sheepfold.

Jesus says he is the gate to the sheepfold. He is the shepherd guarding the door, keeping watch over the sheep. He enters the fold openly, without deceit or coercion. Thieves, on the other hand, are those who will attempt to break into the sheepfold to steal or kill the sheep.

We live in a world full of thieves and wolves, full of things and people that don't have our best interests at heart, but who wish to rob and destroy us. We, like sheep, can be lead astray and deceived. We, like sheep, can leave the safety of our Good Shepherd.

Jesus says that those who are a part of his flock enter through him, the gate that leads to full and abundant life. This portion of the Bible was originally written in Greek and the word for full, *perissos*, means overflowing, abundant, more than we could ever use. This is the kind of life Jesus promises to those who follow him. The thieves seek to kill, but Jesus wants us to have life to the fullest.

What are the thieves and wolves in your life?

Week One, Day Two

Read: John 10:11-13

There were essentially two different types of people who would watch and tend sheep: hired hands and shepherds. A hired hand is exactly that, someone who was hired to watch over sheep. The sheep are not his, and he doesn't care about them. He wouldn't know the sheep personally. At the first sign of trouble he would run, leaving the sheep behind to be attacked or carried off.

Shepherds, on the other hand, care about the welfare of the sheep. They would fight off a predator or thief to protect their flocks. Yet, even a shepherd would know their limits and would run if the danger grew too high.

Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd. He doesn't run from dangers but actually gives his life up for the sheep. In the old way of things, sheep die for the shepherd. Now the Good Shepherd dies for the sheep. This word "good" does not mean mediocre (as opposed to great) but means beautiful, honorable, or worthy of praise. It is a way of saying that the Good Shepherd is the ideal, the highest standard possible. This ideal Shepherd lays down his life for us. Jesus is making it clear that he did not die as a martyr. He was not forced to die, but he gave up his life willingly for us.

There are many people in our lives who will run at the first sign of trouble. There are people who we thought we could count on who will let us down right when we need them the most. There are other people who will stand by us, who will help us fight our battles, and support us along the way. It's a wonderful blessing to have such people in our lives. Yet, even these people can't supply for our truest needs. Jesus alone, the Good Shepherd, laid down his life for us.

It might seem foolish for a shepherd to die for his sheep. After all, they're just sheep. If you think that, it's only because you don't fully understand the heart of a shepherd who loves and cares for his sheep. It might seem equally foolish for God to die for humans. Yet, with Jesus we get a glimpse at the great heart of God, a God willing to lay down his life for us.

When troubles come in your life do you depend on 'hired hands' or on the Good Shepherd?

Week One, Day Three

Read: John 10:3-5, 14-15

When we see shepherds herding sheep, on those rare occasions they're on the Discovery Channel, we often see sheep dogs helping to keep everything in order. These highly trained dogs make sure the sheep stay together and assist the shepherd in moving the herd from one location to another. In the Middle East during the times of Jesus, the shepherds would use nothing but their voice to guide the flocks in their care. Shepherds would call their sheep by name when they began to go astray.

This requires the shepherd to know each of his sheep personally. The shepherd must know the differences among their sheep in order to direct them effectively. He must know what things may frighten or endanger the sheep so he can lead them to safety. He must know if a certain sheep is afraid of heights or is spooked by thunder. He must thoroughly know the sheep under his care. As opposed to the use of dogs, a shepherd who directs his sheep with only his voice must have a personal connection with those sheep.

Likewise, in order for the sheep to be led, they must recognize the shepherd's voice. The sheep must know, in an instant, the difference between the trusted voice of the shepherd and the voice of anyone else. The sheep must learn to be responsive to the shepherd's voice to avoid danger.

Jesus says that those who follow him recognize his voice and he knows them by name. In a world where our identities can be lost in an instant, it's a comfort to know that the Good Shepherd knows us by name.

The Good Shepherd knows his sheep and his sheep know him. The more they listen to his voice and experience his care, the more the sheep will learn to trust the Good Shepherd.

How do we learn to listen to and recognize Jesus' voice? What does it mean to you to hear that Jesus knows you by name?

Week One, Day Four

Read: Psalm 23:1-3

Psalm 23 is possibly the most recognizable part of the entire Bible. For generations, people have found it encouraging, comforting, and a source of reassurance. I think this is the case because of one little word. There is a single word that makes this one of the most beautiful passages in the entire Bible.

The author of this psalm is David, a central figure of the Old Testament portion of the Bible. David became a great king of Israel and was God's chosen ruler over his people. Yet, before all of his fame and fortune, David was a humble shepherd.

David understood what it meant to be a shepherd. He understood the amount of time and care it took to tend sheep, animals that have a talent for getting into no end of trouble. He understood the almost constant attention it took to keep sheep safe and secure. He also understood the personal nature of being a shepherd, the specific care that each sheep needs.

It is from this context that David pens the one little word that makes all the difference. It might very well be the best monosyllabic word you'll ever hear.

In the first verse of Psalm 23, David writes, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." Did you catch it? Did you see the amazing little word? It's the word "my." David doesn't say the LORD is the shepherd of the universe. David doesn't say God is the shepherd for all the lost and frightened sheep of the world. David doesn't say God is a great shepherd or even a shepherd for his chosen people.

David says, "The LORD is *my* shepherd." God is the shepherd who watches over me. Personally. Intimately. When we begin to embrace this two-letter word in our own lives, it changes how we perceive God. When we are able to say, "God is my shepherd," God moves from being a distant, aloof deity to a loving, involved caregiver. And that makes all the difference.

What would it look like if you lived with the constant knowledge that God is your personal shepherd?

Week One, Day Five

Read: Psalm 23:4-6

Shadows creep across the ground, inch by inch eating the fading light. The darkness comes early in the valley where the mountain peaks block the setting sun. The temperature drops noticeably as night takes hold.

In moments, the darkness will be complete.

A shiver runs down my spine, a shiver that has nothing to do with the cold. My destination lies on the other side of the valley. I wanted to reach it during the daylight hours, but that is not to be. I will have to walk in the darkness. My hope fades with the day.

Nightmare creatures seem to threaten from behind every tree. A cruel fate looks as if it hides in the dying brush on the side of the road. My feet hesitate to continue onward, but to stay in the valley will mean my ruin. Surely I am walking in the shadow of my own death. I feel the weight of it pressing down on me, the death of not only my body, but of my soul. Yet, how can I go on? The gray of dusk fades to the deep blue of night. Even the stars refuse to shed their light.

It is then I hear a voice. It echoes from a distance, but its sound is still clear and distinct. The words bring comfort to me. It's the voice of my guide. It's the voice of my friend. It's a voice that's familiar and welcome. I'm not alone.

The fear of this place is nearly overwhelming. The distance left to travel seems insurmountable. The path before me is black and indiscernible. The valley is deep and cold. But I am not alone. I do not wander aimlessly through the night. I am protected. I am comforted. I am not alone. No matter where I walk in the darkness of the valley, I am not alone.

What are the dark valleys of your life? What would your journey look like if you knew you were not alone?

Week One, Small Group Guide

1. Some people have more experiences with farms and animals than others. What is your experience with farms and livestock?
2. If you were to meet a shepherd face to face, what do you think the experience would be like? What do you think you'd see, hear, smell, or think?
3. Most of us are not familiar with shepherds in our culture. From the reading this week, what is your understanding of the characteristics of a shepherd?
4. We normally don't think of Jesus in terms of being a shepherd, yet Jesus calls himself the good shepherd. In what ways does this support or disagree with your concept of Jesus?

Read John 10:1-21

5. Sheepfolds are traditionally made from stone and have a wall with a single door where the shepherd would sleep. In what ways is Jesus like a gate for a sheepfold?
6. In verse 10, Jesus says he came so that we, the sheep, "may have life, and have it to the full." What does an abundant or full life look like? Are you personally experiencing a full life? If so, give an example? If not, what do you think is missing?
7. The Bible says there are thieves and wolves who want to steal or devour the sheep. Jesus says the Good Shepherd is willing to die to rescue the sheep. What are the 'thieves and wolves' in your life? What would it look like for Jesus to rescue you?



Week Two, Day One

Read: Mark 1:14-20

The second face of Jesus we will be studying is that of Jesus the wise teacher. Even some of the most staunch opponents of Jesus acknowledge that his teaching is brilliant and deeply wise. If we want to understand Jesus more fully, we must learn who he was as a teacher.

I have been in a number of different classes over my life, and I have experienced a variety of teachers. Some of these teachers were exceptional and had the ability to make the subject matter come alive. Others were, how should I put this nicely, terrible. Yet, no matter what the case, when we think about the relationship between a teacher and a student we are primarily thinking about an exchange of information.

This is not primarily role of a teacher during the time of Jesus. A teacher, also called rabbi in Hebrew, was not just a lecturer or dispenser of information. Rabbis were not chiefly concerned with getting all the right data into people's heads. Instead, teachers and rabbis were people whose main goal was to show others a better way to live. Rabbis taught and displayed truth to base a life on. This is the way Jesus taught. Jesus' main goal was not to have his followers know the information he knows, but to live like he lives.

When Simon, Andrew, James and John first meet Jesus, they are all busy with their day jobs: fishing on the Sea of Galilee. Yet, it's pretty clear that they were looking for something more. Jesus gives each of them the same simple invitation: "Follow me." It's an invitation to learn from Jesus, not just information, but how to live. It's an invitation to a new life. Each, in turn, drops everything they're doing, leaving family and friends behind, at the prospect of a new life. The call of Jesus the teacher is a call to a new life. He still calls today.

Learning from Jesus is not simply an intellectual exercise. Learning from Jesus is a chance to live differently. It's a chance for a new beginning. It's a chance to become something more.

What is the difference between learning information about Jesus and learning from Jesus how to live?

Week Two, Day Two

Read: Mark 1:21-34

Why do we listen to some people but not to others? Why are we more inclined to take financial advice from someone who's an accountant than from a circus clown? Why would we take lessons from a pro sports star yet not from that team's mascot? Why are we more likely to attend a class taught by a professor with a Ph.D. than by someone with a BLT (unless, of course, it's a class on making delicious sandwiches)? What it comes down to is authority and credibility.

The synagogue was not the place to offer sacrifices, as was the temple, but was a place to read the Bible, to pray, and to worship God. The synagogue was not led by "professional clergy" but by laypeople, all under the guidance of a board of elders. It was customary for traveling rabbis to teach in the synagogue, which is why this is where we often find Jesus teaching.

One of the things we see over and over again in the Bible is that people respond to the teachings of Jesus with amazement. Why? Because he taught "as one who had authority." He didn't teach in the same way as the religious leaders of the day, the teachers of the law, but instead taught with real power. These religious leaders were said to teach *from* authority, but Jesus taught *with* authority.

In the Bible reading for today, we find Jesus once again teaching at the synagogue. As soon as he was done teaching, his authority is tested. A man who is possessed by an evil spirit confronts Jesus. Who knows how long he attended the synagogue without revealing he was dealing with such a serious issue. Yet, at the presence and teaching of Jesus, the man comes forward. Jesus confirms the authority and credibility of his teaching by displaying power over the demon. Jesus commands the demon to be silent and then drive the demon from the man.

I'm not sure what you think about evil spirits, but the Bible speaks of their activity. It also speaks of Jesus' authority and power over them. Jesus teaches with authority because he *has* authority.

What do you think it means that Jesus taught with authority? Does it make a difference in how you respond to the teachings of Jesus?

Week Two, Day Three

Read: Matthew 5:1-12, Matthew 7:28-29

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were showy. They were largely concerned about the outward appearances of things. This led them to be superficial and inauthentic. The main focus of their teaching was about lists of rules and restrictions. They could tell you what foods were allowed and which were not. They could tell you what days were set aside as "holy" and which were "common." They lived as the gatekeepers of what was right and wrong. Yet, they never went below the surface.

Jesus was a different kind of teacher. Jesus taught from the center of who he was, and went below the surface unlike anyone ever had before.

The religious leaders, the keepers of the list of right and wrong, taught that the only way to be righteous was to follow their rules and regulations. If people would become more like them, they argued, then they *might* be saved. In general though, the common people, according to these leaders, had no hope of restoration with God or to be a part of his kingdom.

Once, Jesus was on a mountainside teaching a crowd of people. Jesus taught a message that was different than any they had heard before. Jesus said that the kingdom of God is for those who are poor in spirit. It's for those who are mourning and for those who are hungry for righteousness. The kingdom of God is for those who are pure, for those who are peacemakers, and for those who are meek. When Jesus was done teaching, the Bible says the people were amazed. They had never heard a teacher like him before.

Jesus was not concerned with the things on the surface. He was always probing below the surface to get to the heart of what matters.

To what degree are you concerned with the things on the surface of life? What would Jesus find if he looked below the surface of your life?

Week Two, Day Four

Read: Luke 4:18-21

Mike Breaux tells the story of when he took his two young sons to the grand opening of a department store in their small town. Being that there weren't many stores in the area, it was a pretty big deal. The store pulled out all the stops: a mini-carnival out front, food, games, and lots of entertainment. They even hired some of the local college students to pose in the store as living mannequins.

Mike tells of his younger son, who was four years old at the time, staring with astonishment at these mannequins. He turned to his brother, who was six, and told him, "Those are real people."

The older boy wasn't buying it. "They're fake. They have them in all the stores," the older boy said with confidence.

Yet, the younger boy was convinced. "Those are real people! I just saw one breathing." But still the older boy wasn't persuaded.

At that moment, the college student nearest to them looked at the older boy and said, "Hi."

The six year old nearly jumped out of his skin.

Every time they went to that store from then on out, the two boys would creep up to the mannequins and poke them, just to be sure they weren't real.

People back in the days of Jesus were looking for something real. They were looking for something to give them hope. They were looking for something of significance. When they heard the teaching of Jesus, they knew they had found something amazing. Here was someone with whom everything seemed possible. Here was someone who spoke words of life, words that refreshed weary souls.

People of Jesus' day were familiar with the promises of the Bible found in the book of Isaiah, which speaks of healing, of restoration, and of freedom. It was a promise of good news. Jesus was teaching in his hometown when he read these words to the people, a

reminder of the promise of God. Jesus then set down the scroll and announced that this was the very reason for his coming. This is who I am, Jesus said. I'm here to proclaim the good news. I'm here that there might be freedom and healing. I'm here to teach you that God's favor is here, right now.

It was not just back in Jesus' day that people were looking for something real. We're all hungry for something like this. We are hungry for a teacher like Jesus.

Are you hungry for something real in your life? How has that hunger manifested itself?

Week Two, Day Five

Read: Matthew 13:10-17, John 8:31

On the surface, Jesus shares many of the characteristics of Jewish rabbis of his time. Jesus taught in the local synagogues. Jesus taught on the Sabbath day, the day of rest instituted by God (in the Jewish faith the Sabbath is on Saturday). Jesus taught in accordance with Jewish customs. Jesus has disciples who followed him. Jesus was often called rabbi.

With traditional Jewish rabbis, disciples would come to the rabbi and ask to study under them. People who wanted to follow a rabbi would do so because they sought to imitate their teacher.

There is an old story of a rabbi who walked with his feet pointed outward, waddling like a duck. His disciples so respected him that they would also walk with their feet pointed outward. So when this rabbi walked down the road it looked like a mother duck being followed by a line of ducklings.

Yet, Jesus does not require mindless imitation. Jesus does not desire that we literally walk in the same manner that he did. He wants us to draw near to God and to be a part

of the kingdom of God. This isn't about looking a certain way or walking a certain way, it's about living a certain way, the way Jesus did.

Traditional rabbis called their disciples to be committed to not just their teaching, but to become rabbis themselves. The idea was that you would follow a rabbi, learn what you could from them as a disciple, go through the prescribed program the rabbi required, and then becomes rabbi yourself.

Jesus' disciples were always to remain his disciples and to follow him only. Those who choose to follow Jesus are not entering into a program or a system; they are entering into a relationship. This changes discipleship forever. Discipleship is no longer a temporary state on the road of becoming a master, it is a way of life at the feet of the Master. Those who want to follow Jesus will find life. Those who have ears to hear will experience the words of life. Those who have eyes to see will encounter the teacher of life. And those who follow after Jesus will draw nearer to God.

Are you more concerned with getting all of the information correct or getting your life correct?

Week Two, Small Group Guide

1. Who was your favorite teacher in school? Why?
2. What are some qualities that make a person a great teacher? Why are we more inclined to take advice from some people as opposed to others?
3. What do you normally think about when you hear the word authority? What do you think it means that Jesus taught with authority?
4. What is the difference between gaining information about Jesus and learning from Jesus how to live?

Read Mark 1:14-34

5. People followed Jesus because they were hungry for something real and authentic. To what degree do you long for these things?
6. What difference does it make that Jesus taught as “one with authority?” Does it change how you listen to, respond, or react to his teaching?
7. Jesus did not primarily want to give us information, but an example to follow in our lives. To what degree are you concerned with information gathering as opposed to changing your life to more closely resemble Jesus? What is one thing you can do this week to follow Jesus’ example?



Week Three, Day One

Read: Mark 1:40-45

Every culture and society has people it considers untouchable. Sometimes it’s for social reasons; other times it’s for health reasons; other times it’s for economical reasons. During the time of Jesus, the untouchables were people with leprosy.

Leprosy is a horrible disease. It begins with an aching in the joints, a pain that might be attributed to other causes until the patches begin to appear on the skin. These patches are telltale signs of leprosy and, in the time of Jesus, they were a death sentence.

A person could cover up such patches for a time, allowing him or herself to remain in society for just a little while longer, but eventually they would spread. Nodules and

lumps would form on the face and neck. Before long, the person is completely unrecognizable.

The patches and nodules would soon ulcerate, giving off a horrific stench, yet the most dangerous symptom of the disease is the loss of feeling, especially in the hands and feet. Hands and feet would rub raw without the person even knowing it. Fingers and toes and ears would literally be worn off to the bone.

The Bible book of Leviticus prohibits touching someone with leprosy. People with leprosy were run out of towns to live on the margins of society. They were required to stay away from their families. People suffering from this horrible disease would always have to suffer alone.

They were not even allowed to worship God. There was a moral stigma attached to leprosy, and it was widely thought that those who suffered from leprosy were under God's curse.

This man with leprosy breaks all social boundaries to come near Jesus. He is breaking the law by even approaching Jesus, but he knows something about Jesus; he knows that Jesus is his only hope. Throughout this week, we'll be looking at an encounter between a man with leprosy and Jesus.

Who do you think are the “untouchables” in our society? To what degree is Jesus your only hope?

Week Three, Day Two

Read: Mark 1:40-45

A man with leprosy comes to Jesus, hoping to be healed. Jesus had every right to deny this man's request. He had the right to have this man arrested, yet Jesus wants to show us the heart of God, and with God there are not worthless people. There are no throw-

aways in the kingdom of God. There are no untouchables with him. Jesus' reaction to this man with leprosy reveals how God feels about hopeless, wretched, hurting people.

What we read in the book of Mark is a man who is deeply desperate. He has come to the point where he has nothing to lose. He approaches Jesus and asks to be healed.

It's interesting to note how he asks. This man does not say, "if you are able," but he says, "if you are willing." The leper believed that Jesus could heal him; he just wasn't sure if Jesus would want to. In verse 40, we find the phrase "if you are willing."

In Greek, the language in which this was originally written, this phrase is called a conditional particle. A conditional particle implies the possibility that something will happen. This is called a third class conditional sentence, which means something will most likely happen in the future, as long as the condition is met. Here we see that the condition is Jesus' desire to do it. The leper believes he can be healed, if Jesus wants to.

"If you are willing, if by some extreme miracle you won't slam the door shut in my face, if you would stoop so low, will you heal me?" This is the heart's cry of a man facing his own death.

It's a shocking story, and no one would expect anything except for Jesus to reject the request. But the Bible tells us that Jesus was moved by compassion for this man. Jesus says yes. Jesus breaks all tradition: he breaks the law, and he shocks those who are following him by healing this man.

What impresses or challenges you about how the leper comes to Jesus?

Week Three, Day Three

Read: Mark 1:40-45

We have been looking at an encounter between Jesus and a man with leprosy.

Jesus is moved to compassion by the leper, and so he reaches out to touch him. We miss the significance of this in our modern culture, but to this man with leprosy, it would have made all the difference. The touch of Jesus may well have been the first time someone touched him in years.

Jesus didn't have to touch him. There are several instances in the Bible where we see Jesus healing people from a great distance. There's no reason to think that Jesus had to touch this man to heal him.

But perhaps Jesus knew something else about this man with leprosy. Perhaps Jesus knew there is something essential about contact, about reaching out a hand to someone who needs to know they aren't garbage. Perhaps Jesus knew this man needed to feel the touch of another human to remind him that he's still human, too. Jesus is willing to enter fully into this man's sickness. Jesus identifies with his illness and does not run away from him.

Jesus touches the leper and notice what happens. Jesus does not get sick. Jesus does not catch an illness. Jesus was not made impure by touching someone who was called impure. When Jesus touches the leper, it is not the impurity that passes but purity. It is not uncleanness that gets transmitted but cleanness. The sickness doesn't infect Jesus; it's almost as if Jesus infects the leper.

Jesus intended for his church to follow his example. The church is not to be a quarantine zone. The church is not to be a place that flees from the world's untouchables. Instead, the church needs to be a place that reaches out and touches people. We sometimes seem to worry that the church will be infected if it reaches out to others who they deem unclean.

To what degree do you see the church and your life as a “quarantine zone?” How can you reach out to people like Jesus did?

Week Three, Day Four

Read: Mark 1:40-45

There's a story about Thomas Jefferson crossing a river. There was another man who needed to get to the other side of the river but had no way to cross. Not recognizing Jefferson, the man asked if he could cross the river with him. Jefferson said yes and during the ride to the far shore, he asked why this man singled out Jefferson for a ride without asking any number of other people around. The man said that all the other people's faces said 'no,' but Jefferson's face said 'yes.'

Perhaps the leper saw something in the face of Jesus that said 'yes.'

Jesus, through stories, parables, and the example of his life, came to reveal to us God and God's kingdom. What he revealed deeply upset the religious leaders of the day, but maybe not for the reason you might expect. Over and over again, Jesus paints a picture of a God who is very approachable and accessible.

In the opinion of the religious leaders, Jesus was far too approachable. Jesus was supposed to be a representative of God, they reasoned, and so there was an appropriate way to conduct himself.

After all, God was not approachable. God made distinct lines between those who are in and those who are out. God would never rub elbows with sinners and unclean people. God would never associate with a lower class of folk.

Jesus comes and totally flips this idea on its head. Jesus says that God cares deeply for the sheep that runs away. God's heart breaks when one of his children is far from home. God came not for those who think they have it all together, but for those who know they are broken and sinful.

Jesus eats with sinners. Jesus invites prostitutes and adulteresses to follow him. Jesus surrounds himself with country bumpkins and illiterate laborers. There was something about the face of Jesus that was inviting, that offered healing and wholeness to everyone.

The healing of Jesus is available to us all. Jesus longs to make us whole. There is no one who is disqualified. There is no one God does not long to touch. Through Jesus we see God is approachable and he cares for us all.

Do you often think of God as approachable? What would it look like in your life to live with a face that says ‘yes?’

Week Three, Day Five

Read: Romans 5:8, Matthew 9:11-12, 1 John 4:10

Daniel Taylor writes a story in his book *Letter's to my Children* about when he was in sixth grade. Daniel notes that during the sixth grade, he was at the height of his coolness. It was all downhill from there in junior high and high school, but, for Daniel, in sixth grade he was at his best. During this time, the 1940's, Daniel's school required its students to take dance classes. All of the boys and girls would line up on opposite sides of the room. Then the boys would go down the line and pick girls to have as dance partners.

One day Daniel's class had a substitute teacher, a woman that Daniel knew from his church. She pulled Daniel aside before they began the dance lesson and told him that he should choose Mary. Mary was not the prettiest girl in the class. Mary was by no means the most popular. She had suffered through a bout of polio and had come out the worse for it. She walked with a limp. Her right arm was drawn up a little against her chest.

Daniel didn't want to spend all of his coolness picking Mary as his dance partner, but, as the day went along, Daniel became more and more convinced that picking Mary was the right thing to do. Daniel actually writes that he prayed to be last in the line of boys because then he could pick Mary without giving up what little status he had.

But of course he was first. When the picking began, Daniel selected Mary. Mary was shocked. Soon her shock turned into amazement and joy. She had never been picked

first before. No one had ever looked past her deformities before to find anything of value.

I sometimes wonder what I would do if I were in Daniel's shoes. We often see ourselves as Daniel, but the truth is we are all Mary. All of us are flawed and broken in one way or another. The amazing thing about Jesus the healer is that in our brokenness Jesus draws near. Jesus does not run away from our flaws. Jesus is not embarrassed by our weaknesses. While we were still far from God, Jesus died for our sins to bring healing.

In what ways are we all like Mary in this story? What does it mean to you that Jesus selected you while you were still messed up and broken?

Week Three, Small Group Guide

1. Do you go to the doctor at the first sign of sickness or do you wait until it's really bad? What are some reasons people hate going to the doctors?
2. Who do you think are the "untouchables" in our society?

Read: Mark 1:40-45, 1 John 4:10

3. What impresses or challenges you about how the leper comes to Jesus?
4. Do you think of Jesus as approachable? What difference does it make to your view of God?
5. To what degree do you treat the church and your life like a "quarantine zone?" How can you reach out like Jesus did to the leper?
6. What does it mean for you that Jesus selected you while you were still messed up and broken?



Week Four, Day One

Read: Mark 10:45

We are continuing our series on the faces of Jesus by looking at one of the most challenging descriptions of Jesus: the humble servant. If you're anything like me, then it's far easier for you to imagine God as being powerful and almighty. I mean, God created the universe (and everything in it) in a week and still had time to take a day off to rest. This is the God who parted the Red Sea for Moses and who makes himself a pillar of fire for the Israelites to follow in the wilderness.

Yet, the Bible tells us that Jesus is God in flesh (incarnate), and when we look at Jesus, God is revealed to us, and what we see is a humble servant.

This is a challenging teaching about Jesus and God.

If you've ever played sports, no matter what the level, there needs to be a focus on the fundamentals. After a bad game, even the pros will often make comments like, "We have to get back to the fundamentals," or "We have to get back to the basics."

When we are looking at the person of Jesus, this gets down to the basics of who he is and why he came to earth. Jesus says that he came not to be served, but to serve. Jesus didn't come to earth to boost his own ego. He didn't come to build up his own status or to start a public relations firm.

Jesus came to earth to serve.

This might be a brand new thought for you, and I would encourage you to wrestle with it during this week of readings. It's important that we understand this 'face' of Jesus because it gets right down to the heart of who he is, what his mission was on earth, and what it means for us to follow him.

How do you normally think about Jesus and his purpose in coming to earth? To what degree do you think of Jesus as a humble servant? What difference would it make to envision Jesus this way?

Week Four, Day Two

Read: John 13:1-8

There are many customs and traditions that different cultures follow which we might find strange. Some cultures shake hands, others bow, and others kiss upon greeting. In some cultures it's acceptable to enter a house with your shoes on and in others it is not. The things that are conventional or taboo change from culture to culture. The same was true during the time of Jesus.

In order to fully grasp the meaning of the story from today's Bible reading, we must understand a little more about the customs of the time.

During the first century in the Middle East, people walked in sandals over long distances. It was traditional for a household to provide a slave or servant to pour clean water over any guest's feet. This slave or servant was always the lowest of the household, and the task of cleaning off people's feet was the most humiliating task a slave could be asked to perform. It was actually so humiliating that it was against the law for a Jewish slave to be required to wash people's feet (though a slave who was not Jewish could be required to for different cultural reasons).

It was also common during the time of Jesus for rabbis or teachers to emphasize humility. Most rabbis had some degree of humbleness in their teaching, but there was always a limit. One rabbi was known for saying he would do anything for anyone, except relinquish his superior position.

One ancient rabbinic passage says that all forms of service a slave does for his master a disciple should do for his rabbi, except taking off his shoes. Foot washing was just too embarrassing and humiliating.

Washing someone's feet would be the ultimate loss of status, respect, and station in life. It would have been shocking to the disciples when Jesus lowered himself to wash their feet. It would have challenged their ideas about social standing and status. It might have embarrassed them to not think of washing his feet first. This is the reaction we see from Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends. It's often the reaction we see in ourselves when faced with the service of others.

It's often our reaction when faced with the loving service of God.

Jesus was willing to lay aside all status and respect in the eyes of this world to serve and love others. Jesus laid aside everything to serve and love you.

How does the humility (and humiliation) of Jesus challenge you?

Week Four, Day Three

Read: John 13:1-8

A rabbi would never wash someone's feet. A disciple would never wash someone's feet. No Jewish leader would wash someone's feet. Certainly no holy man would wash someone's feet. It was just too low of an act.

Jesus teaches about humility, but then he demonstrates that there are no limits to being a servant. Jesus took a towel and wrapped it around his body. The word for towel is *lention* in Greek, a word that refers to a long piece of cloth that was draped over the shoulder and covered the body but still allowed the end of the cloth to be used for cleaning. It was the clothing of a lowly servant. Jesus took on the clothing that no rabbi would wear and performed a task that no rabbi, teacher, or respected person would do: he washed the feet of his followers.

It is said that this story was once told to Roman Emperor Caligula, who delighted in making his senators wait on him wearing a *lention* and washing his feet. It was a mark of his high standing and an attempt to humble the senators. It was a way of stroking his ego, showing off his dominance, and maintaining his high status.

Yet, while others are intent on asserting and maintaining their status, whether they are a Roman Emperor or a Jewish Rabbi, Jesus does not. Jesus feels no need to assert his status since he knew he was the son of God. Jesus didn't demand to preserve his status and took on the role of a servant.

There is another interested play on words that is easy to miss in the English translation of the original Greek. The word used for Jesus taking off his outer garment is not the word we would expect. The word that is used, *tithemi*, is an uncommon word to use when referring to clothing. Instead, it is normally used in the Bible when it speaks about Jesus laying down his life for us. Through this act of washing his disciple's feet, Jesus is giving an allusion to his imminent laying down of his life, the ultimate act of humility and service for us all.

How does the humble servanthood of Jesus fit together with how you normally think about Jesus and God?

Week Four, Day Four

Read: John 13:1-17

Jesus humbles himself lower than any teacher or rabbi would dare and washes his disciple's feet. Maybe you wonder why. Why would Jesus do such a thing?

I think it's an important question to ask. Why would the only Son of God lower himself so far? Why would Jesus, who calmed a raging storm with a single word and who could heal a leper with a single touch, put on the robe of a servant? Why would Jesus, who gave sight to the blind and mended a cripple's legs, kneel with a basin of water before his disciples? Why would Jesus, who raised the dead to life, humble himself so deeply?

Why did Jesus wash his disciple's feet?

One reason is because of love. In our world, that little word "love" has become something of a cliché. It has become synonymous with bright red hearts and cheap stuffed animals. For many of us, love is something ethereal and hard to put our finger

on. Love means different things to different people, and so we're able to pick and choose what we want love to mean for us in a given situation.

The meaning of love has become (excuse the pun) a half-hearted attempt to capture our emotions and desires without ever expressing them in meaningful ways.

Jesus takes on the mantle of a servant because he wants to show the full extent of his love. This isn't a love that's gushy and emotional. This isn't a love that picks and chooses. It's a love that's self-sacrificing, that serves others above itself. It's a love that lowers itself.

Why does Jesus wash his disciple's feet? Because Jesus loved his disciples deeply, and he wanted them to know his love fully. Jesus humbled himself because of love.

How do you think Jesus humbling himself is related to his love for us?

Week Four, Day Five

Read: John 13:1-17

Why would Jesus humble himself to the point of being a servant? One reason is because of love. Verse fifteen of today's reading gives another reason: because he was setting an example for us to follow.

Jesus says the reason he washed his disciple's feet was because he wants us to humble ourselves and serve others, too. We are not greater than Jesus, just like no servant is greater than his or her master. This is one of the final lessons he wants his disciples to learn.

Just before this scene unfolds, we see Jesus' followers debating about who was the greatest among them. The mother of James and John, two of Jesus' closest friends and followers, asks that they be allowed to sit at Jesus' right and left hand when he comes

into power. Over and over, we see the people closest to Jesus arguing about who among them is the greatest.

Yet, Jesus knows that they will never be able to carry out their mission in this world with an attitude that is constantly concerned about preserving their status. As long as they are jockeying for position and fighting for power, they cannot be what Jesus wants them to be. Instead, they need to take on the attitude of servants. Jesus wants them to have servants' hearts, and so Jesus sets an example for them to follow, an example of servanthood and humility.

It's the same example we are called to follow today. Jesus lowered himself completely to serve others, yet how often do we balk at lowering ourselves only slightly? Pride, selfishness, and conceit all battle within us against humility and servanthood. Jesus tells us to follow his example and to serve each other out of love.

In your life, does pride and selfishness or humility and servanthood prevail most often?

Week Four, Small Group Guide

1. What is a job or task that you find disgusting?
2. What perceptions or images come to mind when you hear the word "servant?"
3. If you were going to describe Jesus, what sort of words would you use? Are humble or servant very high on that list? Why or why not?

Read: John 13:1-17

4. One reason the Bible tells us that Jesus washed his disciple's feet was to show the full extent of his love. In what ways does this act show Jesus' love?

5. A second reason Jesus washes his disciple's feet is to give an example for his followers to follow. To what degree do you follow this example? What is one thing you can do this week to serve someone else out of love?
6. Jesus sets aside all status for the sake of love. Often in our lives, pride gets in the way of us doing the same. In your life, do love and servanthood or pride and selfishness win out more often?



Week Five, Day One

Read: Matthew 21:1-11

We are in week five of “Faces” where we’ve been looking at what the Bible has to say about Jesus. We have been focusing on several different titles that the Bible gives Jesus and this week we will continue by looking at Jesus the triumphant king.

What would it mean to be a successful king? We might come up with different answers depending on our personal bent, but I’m sure there would be some common themes. It certainly would include some level of material possessions. After all, it would be hard to convince someone you’re good at being a king if you’re poor. It would also be significant for a successful king to have important people as subjects. I mean, it’s hard to be a king if no one wants you to be king. Finally, you’d need to have some power and authority in the political system to thrive as a king. Otherwise, you would just be a figurehead without the ability to do anything worthwhile.

During the last week of Jesus’ life on earth, the crowds embraced him as a king. We often remember this event by what is called Palm Sunday.

Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem amidst the cheers of the people. Yet, he is not riding a powerful horse or in the back of a chariot as the emperor did. He entered the city riding

a young donkey. This would be like the president riding a moped. What kind of king is this? Jesus does not have an entourage of powerful people following behind him, just a handful of fishermen, prostitutes, and other people completely devoid of political or social clout. That would be like a king whose closest friends are lowly laborers and homeless people. What kind of king is this? Jesus not only lacks political power, but he is a target of those who have it. Soon after Jesus' entry into the city the wheels begin to move that ultimately leads to Jesus' arrest, trial, and death. What kind of king is this?

One thing we need to understand is that Jesus is not the sort of king we normally picture, he is a different kind of king. We'll be spending some time over the next few days looking more closely at Jesus as the triumphant king.

How would you describe a king? In what ways does this description seem to fit Jesus and in what ways does it not?

Week Five, Day Two

Read: John 6:14-15

Sometimes our expectations have a way of crashing down on us. Mike Meeks once told the story of a little town where he used to live. He would often jog or take walks but would always dread going past one specific house. It was nothing about the house itself but about the two Doberman Pinchers that lived there. Whenever he was forced to pass by this house, these two massive dogs would come bolting out of the door ready to brawl. Mike says that there was never a time he walked past that house when he wasn't on edge, ready for the inevitable barking and commotion the dogs would cause.

One day, just as night was beginning to fully set in, Mike pulled up in front of his house after a long day of work. He got out of his car and turned toward the house when he noticed two large shadows outlined on his lawn. Even though he could only see a rough outline of each, Mike knew in an instant it was the two Dobermans. One was lying on the ground, the other was sitting bolt upright, watching him. Mike had a moment of panic. He was afraid to move. Should he go back to his car? Should he try and make it to the house? For long minutes he waited, trying to decide. Finally, there was a motion

inside his house and the porch light was turned on. It was then Mike realized that the two dogs were really a bush and a lawn chair. Mike had expected those dark shadows to be those vicious dogs, and that is what he saw.

Our expectations often shade our view of things. The same was true during the time Jesus was on earth. Many of Jesus' followers had expectations of what a king sent from God would look like. They had expectations of what a king would do, what things would be a priority for a king.

One time Jesus fed a crowd of thousands of people through a miracle. The people were amazed. One look at the miracle, and all they could see was their expectations. They saw in Jesus the powerful king they always dreamed of, a king with the ability to throw off the chains of oppression they suffered under. Here was a king who could flex his muscles and make things happen. And if Jesus wasn't interested in the job, they would simply make him a king by force.

Jesus knew what they were thinking. He knew their expectations. What's more, he knew that if he was the sort of king the people expected, he would not be fulfilling his mission — his purpose for coming to earth. Never forget that Jesus had the ability to be a king of power and authority here on earth, but he laid that aside to be the sort of king God desired him to be: a king of God's design not man's.

What expectations do you have about what it means that Jesus was a king? How do these expectations color how you react to Jesus?

Week Five, Day Three

Read: Matthew 27:11-31

If you were asked what crime Jesus was charged of and ultimately sentenced to death for, what would you say? What reason was given for his execution? Throughout Jesus' trial, he made no reply or defense against the charges brought against him. This is, except for one: when Jesus is asked if he is a king. To this Jesus answers, "Yes."

One of the great ironies in the life of Jesus is that he was executed for the crime of treason for saying “Yes” when asked if he was a king. Pilate, the governor in charge of the trial, knew Jesus is innocent and that there was no basis for a charge against him. Again and again, Pilate tried to pass the buck, to shirk the responsibility, even going so far as to literally wash his hands of the whole affair. While this might have eased his conscience, it, of course, did nothing to alleviate his responsibility.

The soldiers arresting Jesus found the idea of him being a king funny. The thought that this poor, broken man was a king was just too ludicrous for them. Jesus just didn’t look the part. He had no honor guard to fight for him. He had no money or wealth to display. He didn’t even have the support of the people, whose fickle nature was on full display as their shouts of praise for Jesus turn into curses.

If Jesus didn’t look like a king, the soldiers joked, then they would be happy to help. The soldiers, in a cruel game of dress-up, stripped Jesus and draped a scarlet robe over his bleeding and wounded back. They twisted thorns into a brutal crown and pressed it on his head. They gave him a staff and knelt before him, mockingly worshipping Jesus as the “King of the Jews.”

What it came down to was whether Pilate believed Jesus was truly a king or not. In the end, Pilate decides to look out for himself, and sides with the chanting crowds. “Are you a king?” Pilate asked. Jesus answers simply, “Yes, it is as you say.” But Pilate doesn’t believe and Jesus is killed because of it.

What about us? Is Jesus a king? Is Jesus worthy of praise or mocking? What are the crowds chanting around you? What will your response be? “Are you a king?” we ask. “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replies. The rest is up to us.

In what ways do people respond to Jesus’ claim that he is a king?

Week Five, Day Four

Read: 2 Corinthians 2:14-16

The triumphant procession was a major event in the Roman Empire. There are records that indicate at least 300 such processions took place. The highlight of the procession was the parade. This was the highest honor that could be afforded a general and was often used to reward exceptional service to the empire, normally for the successful completion of a war. The parade would lead into the city of Rome itself and finally to the temple of Jupiter.

During the parade, the victorious general would ride into the city on a gilded chariot, traditionally lead by white horses to the cheers of the crowd. Behind the chariot would march soldiers with the spoils of war, priests of the Roman temple with burning incense, and those captured during the conquest.

The captives would be divided into two distinct groups: those who voluntarily surrendered to Rome of their own accord and those who resisted and were subdued by chains. Those who willingly surrendered would be set free after the procession. Those who resisted would be executed. How differently the incense wafting around must have smelt for these two different sets of captives. To one, it is the scent of life. To the other, it is the smell of death.

Paul, the author of this book of the Bible, would have been familiar with these processions. It's possible he witnessed them in person during his life. Paul wants to direct our attention to this victory parade of the Romans to make a point about God and our lives by using it as a powerful metaphor.

Instead of a military general, Jesus is now at the head of the procession, Jesus the triumphant king. Jesus is given the highest place of honor and praise. Behind him, the "fragrance" and "aroma" is not from ritualistic incense. Instead, the Bible tells us that the fragrance is Jesus working through us, a scent that works among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To some, the fragrance is the smell of life. To others, it is the smell of death.

Paul, through a very detailed metaphor, is emphasizing that Jesus is the triumphant king and that each of us who come into contact with him chooses how we will respond. The

encounter can be the smell of life or death. Do we respond to Jesus by willingly becoming obedient to him and honoring him as lord or do we resist and struggle against him? This is a hard teaching, but one that the Bible makes clear over and over again: our response to Jesus makes all the difference in our lives.

In your life, how have you responded to Jesus the king?

Week Five, Day Five

Read: Revelation 19: 1-16

The book of Revelation in the Bible is strange. The imagery and language used is poetic, confusing, and sometimes even disturbing. To our modern ears, which are more attuned to hearing the nightly news and black and white statistics, the writing of Revelation seems out of place. Yet, through all of the confusing images and metaphors, truth about God and Jesus is revealed. In Revelation, the curtain is pulled back and we are given a “behind the scenes” look at the heavenly realms. What we find there is Jesus the triumphant king.

In this passage, Jesus is described with the names of Faithful and True. He rides a white horse, a sign of purity and victory. Out of his mouth come the words of God, described as a sharp sword. And on his robe is written the name “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

Jesus is King and Lord.

We read in the book of Philippians in the Bible that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. We use the word Lord so frequently to refer to Jesus we might not stop long enough to consider what it means. The Greek word for lord, *kurios*, means master or ruler. It is often used in Greek writing to refer to the emperor, and is derived from the word for supremacy.

Jesus is supreme. Jesus is master. Jesus is ruler. Jesus is the lord over all other lords, the *kurios* above all others. Jesus is the king over all kings.

No matter what problems or issues you're dealing with, Jesus is bigger than they are. Jesus is stronger than our sin. Jesus is mightier than our troubles. Jesus is more powerful than any other power. Jesus is the triumphant king and is worthy of praise.

What does it mean in your life that Jesus is the triumphant king?

Week Five, Small Group Guide

1. What are some images that come to mind when you hear the word "king?"
2. If you were going to describe the qualities and features of a successful king, what would they be?
3. What are some of the possible ways that people respond to Jesus' claim that he is a king?

Read: Matthew 21:1-11, John 6:14-15

4. What expectations do you have about what it means that Jesus is a king?
5. In what ways does Jesus fit into the description of a king you gave for question 1? In what ways doesn't he?
6. At any time Jesus could have taken up earthly power and become a king here and now. Yet, he flees from those who would make him a king by force. Why do you think this is? What does this teach us about Jesus and God?



Week Six, Day One

Read: John 20:1-9

I remember hearing about Easter when I was little. I remember hearing about how Jesus died and about how sad it was. I guess it's sad when anyone dies, I figured, but I didn't really understand what the big deal was all about. I mean, don't people die all the time? I remember some years later hearing that Jesus' death was somehow *for me*, but I just didn't understand how someone could die for me, much less why someone would.

I just didn't get it.

We are in the last week of "Faces," where we've been looking at different aspects of Jesus. This week we'll be looking at Jesus the Risen Savior.

One thing you'll see all throughout the story of Jesus' last days on earth is people not getting it. Jesus is betrayed by a close friend who doesn't get it. Another of Jesus' followers and friends, another person who didn't get it, denies he even knows him. Jesus is arrested and charged with treason and blasphemy by a religious system that didn't get it. Jesus was tried by a legal system that didn't get it. The crowds chanted for Jesus' death because they didn't get it. Jesus was sentenced to die by a governor who didn't get it.

Every step along the way, when people are confronted with who Jesus is they just don't get it. Almost no one got it.

I wonder sometimes if we get it. I wonder sometimes if I get it.

We will be taking time this week to look more closely at what it means that Jesus died and was raised again to life again.

**What is your understanding of the last days of Jesus' life on earth?
What are some things about this story that you "don't get?"**

Week Six, Day Two

Read: Romans 3:22-24

There is one thing we must all understand before we can truly grasp the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It's something we know already, at least intellectually. It's the fact that we've all messed up. All of us have blown it. We all have lives that are broken. We all know what it's like to look in the mirror at someone who is profoundly imperfect.

The Bible says the same thing. We've all drifted away from God. We've all failed. The way the Bible puts it, we've all sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

This is tied together with the story of Jesus, though it might not seem so at first glance.

We're all busted. We understand this part, I think. But there's something else that I think we understand much less. We can't fix it. We can't make it under our own steam. We can't pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.

We try. People have always tried.

Politicians try to create systems to legislate and control brokenness. Philosophers try to explain failings. Counselors try to handle weaknesses. Educators try to teach about mistakes. People in every generation and in every culture have tried to fix the world and the brokenness it contains. Some of them have done great work, but nobody can heal our world and the people in it.

No one except God.

Jesus came to earth, lived a perfect life, died a brutal death, and was raised back to life in order to restore a busted world to wholeness. This is why Jesus died. It is through the power of God that he is raised to life. It's that same power we have access to through Jesus, power over death and freedom from sin.

What are ways people often try to work harder in order to overcome or contain sins and mistakes in their lives? How do you?

Week Six, Day Three

Read: Romans 6:5-14, John 15:1-8

We have a closeness with Jesus that's hard to explain. We're united with Jesus in his sacrifice, in his death, and in his resurrection.

It's a closeness that parallels the level of contact needed to graft a branch onto a vine. This is not a familiar process to many of us in our culture, so let me explain a little more about it. You begin with a branch from one plant, normally one that bears fruit, and attaching it to another plant, normally one with very strong roots.

The first thing you must do is cut the branch from its original source. Once this is done, there needs to be a cleft or crevice in the vine to receive the freshly cut branch. This will create a wound in the vine, but it is only through this wound that the new branch can be grafted.

The branch is then inserted in the cleft and wrapped tightly. As the wound heals, the vascular system of the vine begins to feed the branch. The vine and branch begin to become intertwined. The nutrients from the roots and vine are now accessible to the branch.

Jesus once told a story about a branch and a vine. Jesus said that we are the branches and he is the vine. Jesus said if we remain in him, he will remain in us. Through Jesus, the vine, we have access to life.

When Jesus died, we died with him. When Jesus was raised, we are raised with him. When we choose to put our lives into Jesus, when we abide in Jesus and allow Jesus to abide in us, we have access to life and hope. We are just like a branch grafted into a vine, from which we get our nutrients and life.

This is the promise of the Bible about Jesus, that his death and resurrection gives us life.

What would it look like for you to abide in Jesus? In what ways do you desire the life that only Jesus can give?

Week Six, Day Four

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 14-19

I was once putting together a bed from a certain Swedish furniture store (which shall remain nameless). The instructions were less than clear, relying more on stick figures and pictures than on words to clarify what part went where. I thought I was making good progress; the pile of boards and screws was beginning to resemble a bed. I believed I was finished, only to discover two large pieces of wood left unassembled. I consulted my ambiguous directions, trying to discover my mistake, to find that these boards were intended to be installed first and were crucial to the structural integrity of the bed. I decided to just ignore the problem, but one collapsed bed and a sore back later, I had to take the bed apart and reassembled it correctly.

The bed was simply useless without those boards.

The word 'useless' is a pretty hard one. I don't think anyone likes the idea of being useless. No one wants to look back at his or her day and realize that it was useless. No one wants to come to the end of assembling a bed, only to find that the time and effort put in was useless. How much worse would it be to come to the end of our lives only to find that our toil and faith was useless?

Paul, the author of 1 Corinthians, writes that if Jesus was not raised from the dead, if he wasn't resurrected, than our preaching and our faith is useless. We sometimes put other things in the center spot of our faith. We sometimes put the spotlight on other issues, doctrines, or concerns, but if we get this part wrong then none of it matter.

The resurrection of Jesus is absolutely central to the Christian faith. It's not on the periphery. It's not just another holiday where we give candy to each other. It's not just a day to get dressed up and go to church. It's vital to our faith.

If Jesus was not raised from the dead then none of the rest matter.

As we approach Easter and the celebration of Jesus' resurrection, how central to your faith is Jesus' being raised from the dead?

Week Six, Day Five

Read: Luke 24

I think the Bible stories of Jesus' death and resurrection contain what might be three of the most heartbreaking words ever spoken. There are people who say these words every day. They are words of desperation. They are often words spoken out of despondency and pain. They are words that rend the heart.

We find these three words in verse 21 of Luke 24. Two men are making the seven-mile walk home to Emmaus from Jerusalem, the sight where Jesus was arrested, beaten, and eventually killed. They were walking along the road discussing what they had seen and experienced during the last tumultuous week.

Just a week before Jesus had entered the city of Jerusalem to great fanfare and celebration. It seemed as if the whole world had turned out to welcome Jesus like a conquering king. Then the whole scene changed. Jesus was arrested, faced trial, and was ultimately sentenced to death by crucifixion. His dead body was taken down from the cross and laid in a borrowed tomb.

The two men walked, discussing these things, when Jesus joined them on the road, though the Bible says they were kept from recognizing him. Jesus asked what they are talking about, and they explain the events of the last several days.

Then they speak those three words – “we had hoped.” We had hoped that this Jesus was the one we were waiting for. We had hoped that Jesus was going to set things right. We had hoped that Jesus was something more than just another false promise. We had hoped. Then everything went wrong and he was killed. Even more, when the women went to the tomb, the body was gone. They told a far-fetched story of angels proclaiming that Jesus was raised from the dead, but no one really believed them. We had hoped. But now that hope is dead, and we're going back home.

Jesus cuts in, explaining the Bible to them, explaining how the chosen one of God had to suffer. Yet, they still didn't recognize who he was.

When they came to their village, the two men insisted that Jesus join them for dinner. At the table, Jesus gave thanks and broke bread, handing a piece to each of them. It was

at this moment their eyes were opened and they saw Jesus for who he was. They got up and ran back to Jerusalem (seven miles!) to tell of what they'd seen.

Every single day people live with those three words stuck in their hearts. We had hoped. People look at their marriages. (We had hoped . . .) People look at their children. (We had hoped . . .) People look at their broken dreams laying in pieces on the ground. (We had hoped . . .) People look back at the years of their lives. (We had hoped . . .)

These men had heard the reports that Jesus was alive, but reports couldn't push those words away. (We had hoped . . .) Jesus enters into their conversation, but they didn't recognize him and so the words still echoed. (We had hoped . . .) Jesus even explained what the Bible said concerning God's promised one. But still those words lingered. (We had hoped . . .)

What brought hope back into their lives was sharing a meal with Jesus. During the personal contact with Jesus their eyes are opened. It is Jesus' closeness that makes a difference. Jesus, close enough to hand you a piece of bread. Jesus, risen from the dead and close enough to touch.

It is still the same way with us today. Those words (We had hoped . . .) still assail us, and we still need to draw near to Jesus to find a new hope, a hope built and based on him. Jesus is the one we are waiting for to set things right. Jesus, the one who was slain but who raised from the dead, victorious over the grave, is the one worth hoping in. Now, because of Jesus, we have hope.

Have you ever felt a loss of hope in your life? In what area of your life would you like to know the hope of Jesus?

Week Six, Small Group Guide

1. How important was Easter in your family when you were growing up?
2. What are some things that people make central in their lives?
3. What are some ways that people attempt to overcome or contain sin in their lives?

Read: Romans 3:22-24, John 20:1-9, 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 14-19

4. How central is the resurrection of Jesus to your faith?
5. In what ways do you rely on yourself instead of Jesus to overcome sin in your life?
6. What does Jesus' resurrection mean for your life?
7. As we come to the end of "Faces," how has your understanding of Jesus changed, been challenged, or been reinforced?

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