

Telling God's story

re-inhabiting the Easter story

AIM

To provide opportunity to reflection the Easter story.

INTRODUCTION

Here are a series of scripts and suggestions for an evening exploration of the Easter story on the premises of a local church.

Practicalities

- As presented, this 'exploration' requires participants to move from room to room to share a guided meditation on seven or eight scenes from the Easter Story.
- As some rooms are used more than once, it will need the pre-preparation of scenes in four rooms and one larger hall or church space.
- As many of the rooms will be entered in low light, particular care must be taken when setting up the rooms that electric flexes do not form trip hazards
- Participants will have to be able to move from room to room and may need to be able to hear what other people are saying without the assistance of a loop system
- Chairs may be provided for all or some participants in each room. Seating for everyone is particularly recommended for scene seven (in the large space)
- Whilst candles might be attractive in many of these scenes, please do not plan to leave candles burning in unoccupied rooms
- Please feel free to adapt what is offered for your own setting in **any** way you think would help people's engagement with the Easter Story

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SPACE ONE – THE SCENT ON THE AIR

based on Mark 14.3-9 & parallels

We enter a room with a table in the middle with some of the debris of a dinner party on it – perhaps some plates and cups or glasses, crumpled napkins, fruit peelings, some covered dishes, crumbs and broken bits of bread... but, significantly, a strong smell of perfume hanging in the air. The lighting is low, a lamp on the table, or beside the table, would suffice. We enter and stand or sit in the shadows.

It is the middle of the week that came to be known as Holy Week. We are in the house of a man called Simon in the village of Bethany, just over the hill from Jerusalem. There has been a dinner party here. Jesus was one of the guests. Unlike his daily confrontations with the religious leaders in the Temple, which have taken so much of Jesus' insight and energy, this dinner party had been a very quiet affair. This was an attempt to share fellowship with friends, to be normal, to be quiet and relaxed despite the rising political and religious tension in the city. It went the way dinner parties go - till something very strange happened. A woman had burst in with a jar of expensive ointment – the sort of anointing perfume that was used for burials. She came in and smashed the jar and poured the unbelievably-expensive ointment all over Jesus' head (or it may have been his feet) and the intense scent billowed out until it overwhelmed everyone.

Can you recall the reactions of the other guests?

They shared a total shock at this extravagance, this intrusion, this eccentricity.

In no time they had turned to resistance and rejection and began scolding the woman.

But Jesus, what did Jesus say?

"Let her alone; why do you trouble her?"

She has performed a good service for me.

For you will always have the poor with you and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.

She did what she could. She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.

Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." (Mark's version)

This is one of very, very few stories in the Gospels where someone else does something for Jesus; almost everyone he meets asks favours of him; but here, remarkably, this woman offers extravagant care for the deep hurts that are building up within Jesus.

What lingers, for you, as you stop to re-inhabit this story?

A pause for silent reflection, followed by a time when those who wish can share their thoughts.

Then we move on....

Note that if you are returning to this room to share 'Scene Eight' (Cleopas' house in Emmaus), you may wish to let everyone else leave first, then put three chairs round the table, ready for later.

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SPACE TWO – BREAD EATEN AND A CUP DRAINED

based on Mark 14.17-31 & parallels

We enter another room with a table in the middle. A desk lamp spotlights a partially-consumed pitta bread on a plate and a cup or goblet with the merest hint of red wine left at the bottom. Otherwise the room is in darkness. We enter and stand around the table in the shadows.

Another evening, another meal – it's Thursday now. This meal is a very, very special one. We are in an upper room where Jesus has been eating with his disciples. They must have shared so many meals before this; at home in Capernaum and all across the Galilee. Yet this meal was different. It seems to have been their shared celebration of the Feast of the Passover – the festival meal that you would normally share with your close family – here Jesus shared it with his followers, just as if **they** were his family. In these tense times they shared this safe, familiar meal, that annually, for as long as they could remember, reassured all of them about their identity and their God. But now, at this shared table, Jesus radically reinterprets the significance and meaning of the feast. The unleavened bread and the cup of blessing had always served to remind faithful families of the meal their ancestors shared just before God led them out of Egypt, out of the House of Bondage, and made his covenant with them on the holy mountain at Sinai.

Now, in the hands of Jesus, these familiar symbols took new meaning. The bread became his soon-to-be-broken body and the wine his soon-to-be-spilt blood, standing for his self-offering, his willing acceptance of all the ugliness and degradation which the conspiring religious and political powers could fling at him. This self-giving would make possible a new covenant between God and people. These symbols would invite so many more to receive God's costly covenant of love, to find here God's wonderful welcome.

And what did Jesus have to say about them, his faithful followers?

He warns them that there would be failure, and desertion and betrayal

– that he alone would prove to be ready for the hour of darkness that hung over them.

And when Peter protested, what did he say?

He predicted that before the cockerel had crowed twice,

Peter would have denied even knowing him three times.

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SPACE THREE – IN A DARKENED GARDEN

Mark 14.32-42 & parallels

We enter a room in almost complete darkness. We may have to enter very slowly and tentatively. In the middle of the room – either on the ground or on a table – there is a collection of plants that we can only dimly make out in the darkness. This is the garden of Gethsemane. We enter and feel our way around the walls until everyone is in and the door is closed, sealing the darkness. If someone is to read the script they will need a tiny torch. Better, if possible, if it can be memorised and somehow voiced in the dark.

Jesus and his followers have left the city, but they are not sneaking away. They pause in this darkened garden in the valley, immediately beyond the city walls. Jesus prays, the others remain confused, bewildered and worn out by all that has happened. Lacking Jesus' sense of what must lie ahead, one by one these faithful followers fall asleep.

A short step away from these scattered, sleeping bodies Jesus engages in intense personal questioning with God. Must he stay to face the full onslaught of the forces of evil and exploitation? Is this what God requires? Is this the only way that good can ultimately overcome evil? Must it be he, Jesus, who does this? Even when reviewed in God's company, this overwhelmingly awful task seems to be Jesus' only option. Stay he must – and drain the last dregs of this strange cup of suffering.

So he stays, he prays, he waits for the impending torches of his night-time betrayal and arrest.

For us, he lingers in the darkness, declining any chance to save himself.

What lingers, for you, as you stop to re-inhabit this story?

A pause for silent reflection, followed by a time when those who wish can share their thoughts.

Then we move on....

Note that if, as suggested, you are returning to this room for 'Scene Five' (the High Priest's Courtyard), you may wish to let everyone else leave first, then switch on the 'fire' or 'brazier' before you shut the door, ready for Scene Five

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SPACE FOUR – QUESTIONS IN THE SHADOWS

based on Mark 14.53-65 & parallels

We enter a room with a number of chairs laid out on three sides of a square. In the middle of the middle side one chair is obviously grander and more important than the rest. In the middle of the room, is a table with a number of tea lights on saucers by whose light we can make out the shapes of the chairs formally laid out. For now, this is the meeting room in the High Priest's House – set out for a late-night meeting. We enter and stand or sit around the edges of the room, outside the space set for the confrontation.

Partly through the betrayal of Judas, the authorities have found and arrested Jesus in the darkened garden and taken him away to be questioned in the house of the high priest.

Where, before, the presence of the people in the Temple had given Jesus some room for manoeuvre in his arguments with these religious leaders, now, in the depths of the night, he stood alone to face their questions. They had assembled an array of witnesses and accusers; but their stories often contradicted one another and Jesus felt not need to respond. None of it would have stood up in court. So, the proceedings wore on and on through much of the night to little effect, until the High Priest directly confronted Jesus. "Are you," he said, "the anointed Son of God?"

Jesus' response must have been taken as a yes, and he went on to offer them a prophecy – that one day they would all see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the power of God. It was enough! Who was he to say such things? How could this village rabble-rouser from the backward badlands of Galilee claim to prophesy in God's name or to be God's agent? How could he claim to outshine the Jerusalem Temple, its worship and its priesthood. This had to be blasphemy! He must be rejected. He must be destroyed.

In the morning, he would surely be taken to the Roman Governor – for this danger to the peace and wellbeing of the whole province and its people had to be executed, and had to be executed now.

What lingers, for you, as you stop to re-inhabit this story?

A pause for silent reflection, followed by a time when those who wish can share their thoughts.

Then we move on....

Note that if, as suggested, you are returning to this room for 'Scene Six' (the trial before Pilate), you may wish to let everyone else leave first, then switch on the lights before you shut the door, ready for Scene Six

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SPACE FIVE – MORE QUESTIONS IN THE SHADOWS

based on Mark 14.66- 72

We return to the darkened room with plants in the middle which stood for Gethsemane in 'Space Three'. This time, there is the glow of a fire (possibly a lamp with a covering of red crepe paper and some short branches over it, to suggest an open wood fire; otherwise some sort of brazier with a red glow (also from a lamp and some crepe paper). Now, we are in the courtyard of the High Priest's house. Even as we stand or sit around the edges of the room we can see each others' faces lit up by the red glow.

All the time Jesus has been facing false witnesses and questions inside the High Priest's house, outside in the courtyard, where we have gathered now, another scene was developing. After Jesus' arrest in the garden, all but one of his disciples had fled into the night. The exception was Peter. He, you may recall, had followed at a distance as Jesus' captors had led him off to the High Priest's house. Now he stood in the shadows on the edge of the strange mix of servants, soldiers and hangers-on who had gathered around the night fire in the high priest's courtyard.

What happened then?

A young woman in the high priest's service and then two other bystanders accused Peter

of being a follower of Jesus and each time he denied it.

The cockerel crowed, or crowed a second time.

Peter went away, shocked at himself and his failure, and wept bitterly.

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SPACE SIX – SOMETHING OF A SHOW TRIAL

based on Mark 15.1-15 & parallels

We return to the room laid out with chairs on three sides of a square that we were in as Space Four. This time all the lights are on to signify a daytime court room space. The central formal chair is become the Roman Governor's chair as he sits in Council – the chair of Pontius Pilate. Once again, we enter and stand or sit around the edges of the room. This time **we** are the watching crowd and can clearly see one another.

As daylight strengthened and the day warmed, those who had arrested and accused Jesus in the night brought him before the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. Where before the issue had been a religious one, the honour of God and Temple, now, it seems, the issue had become a political one. Jesus, they said, claimed to be a king, a usurper of Roman power, a challenge to the military might of the great world-empire and its resident representative, Governor Pilate.

What do you remember of this legendary encounter?

The Gospels agree that Pilate asked Jesus "Are you the King of the Jews?"

They also agree that Jesus responded, "You have said so."

John's Gospel adds another question by Pilate, "What is truth?"

Pilate, with or without the help of Herod, cannot find a clear reason to condemn Jesus.

Pilate next offers to release a prisoner to the crowd, according to established custom.

He particularly offers them Jesus.

What happens then?

The crowd cry for Barabbas, a convicted murderer and terrorist.

Asked what to do with Jesus, they respond "Crucify him!"

Pilate sends Jesus to be crucified.

The soldiers dress him and mock him, then he is taken away to be crucified

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SPACE SEVEN – UTTER DEGRADATION

based on Mark 15.21-41 & parallels

We enter a large room or hall that is lit but not brightly so, but bare, apart (perhaps) from chairs around the sides. Somewhere in the middle stand three bare wooden crosses (with bases to keep them upright and freestanding). We enter and sit or stand around the sides of the space, keeping our distance from the crosses that occupy the centre of the room.

This is the strange and awful climax of our drama. We have reached Golgotha, 'The place of the skull'. Here is where the degradation of Jesus is made complete. Already we have watch popularity, friendship, understanding and acceptance being stripped away. Now every last vestige of dignity, of humanity, of respect is deliberately and oh-so-publicly removed. Crucifixion, with its nakedness, cramps, retchings and evacuations – all clearly visible to any passersby – left you utterly degraded even as you slowly died in excruciating pain. And, all the while, over Jesus' head, there was a sign put there by Pilate that said, in three languages, "The King of the Jews".

And as we hang back and warily watch Jesus facing his final, agonising hours, the four Gospels fill the scene with a large cast of other characters, all watching and responding in various ways...

Can you remember who was there and what they thought?

There were the two thieves crucified with him – one mocking, one seeking his help.

There were his distraught women followers, watching from a distance.

There were the soldiers casting lots for his clothes and offered him vinegar on a sponge

There were passersby who mocked him, including chief priests and scribes

There was the Roman Centurion who, at the moment of death and degradation recognised Jesus as a Son of God

What lingers, for you, as you stop to re-inhabit this story?

A pause for silent reflection, followed by a time when those who wish can share their thoughts.

Then we move on....

Note that if you are working with these materials during Holy Week, it may be appropriate to finish at this point and leave out Scene Eight

However, if you are reviewing the Easter Story after Easter Sunday, then Scene Eight, or some other way of acknowledging the Resurrection Stories, is vital...

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SPACE EIGHT – THE PRESENCE IN OUR MIDST

based on Luke 24.13-35

We re-enter the room we used in 'Scene One' with a table in the middle with some of the debris of dinner on it – perhaps some plates and cups or glasses, crumpled napkins, fruit peelings, some covered dishes, crumbs and broken bits of bread.... but, still, a smell of perfume hanging in the air. This time the scent represents the presence of the risen Jesus. The lighting is low, a lamp on the table or beside the table would suffice. There are three chairs at the table. We enter and stand or sit in the shadows.

It is the evening of what came to be known as Easter Sunday. We are in a deserted house with the remains of an abandoned evening meal. It is the house of Cleopas and his wife, both followers of Jesus, who live a day's journey from Jerusalem in the village of Emmaus. This evening, Cleopas and his wife, arrived home at dusk after having spent a week in Jerusalem, a week which may well have been the most painful and fraught week in their entire lives. A week ago they had entered the city with high hopes, looking for a Jerusalem climax to the powerful ministry that Jesus has been exercising all across the Galilee. They had watched Jesus confront abuses in the Temple, argue with the religious leaders, share meals with his followers, but then, after his night arrest and show trial, they had watched or heard all the awful details of his judicial murder, crucifixion and death. After this, they were too stunned by what had happened to think or hope or believe. Now, this morning, they had heard that some of their women folk had gone to the tomb after the Sabbath to prepare Jesus' body. The women had returned saying that the tomb was empty and that they had seen a vision of angels who told them that Jesus was alive. They could take no more. They'd set off home.

Can you recall what happened on the road?

A stranger joins this sad pair on the road, claiming to know nothing of the week's events

They stop and tell him all their disappointment, but as they travel on the stranger talks

It is the risen Jesus, though they cannot yet see it

He tells them, from 'all the Scriptures' how it had to be like this – the Messiah had to suffer

Somehow his words are deeply healing; they realise their hearts are 'burning within' as they walk on

They reach Emmaus at evening and press the stranger to stay and share a meal in their home

So, what happened when they all sat down to eat together?

As the stranger broke bread and blessed it, they realised it was Jesus

They rush back to the city to tell all to Jesus' other followers

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EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

If you want more items please revisit the menu.

Acknowledgements

This material was prepared by John Campbell with help from those attending a 'Thinking ahead about Easter' event in NW Synod.

HOW TO FEEDBACK TO VISION4LIFE?

If you wish to offer any feedback – brickbats and bouquets are equally welcome! – you can do so in various ways.

You can email the Vision4Life steering group and the coordinator about general issues via the website or at admin@vision4life.org.uk

Website issues can be dealt with through web@vision4life.org.uk

If you want to make contributions or ask questions about V4L you can email:
Year 3 – Transformed for Evangelism: evangelism@vision4life.org.uk