

*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. -Len Andyshak*

## The Easter Story

### **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. She could not remember everything. He 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 listened while Jesus continued his teaching about loving God with all of our hearts and loving even our enemies.

Popular people can be very dangerous. They can lead people in the wrong directions. The 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.

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

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 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 dream 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. 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 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? 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! 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 could 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! We can know him and he is always with us to help and guide and teach us. He is alive - and we really are forgiven and loved by God. He is alive - and therefore what he said was true.