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# WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

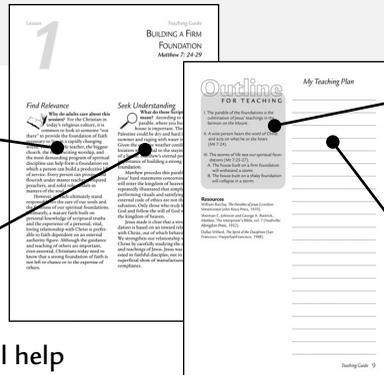
## Teacher Helps

### Find Relevance

helps you zero in on why each session is important for the adults you teach.

### Seek Understanding

presents helpful Bible Background informations and insights that will help you better understand the Scripture.



### Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

**My Teaching Plan** is a convenient place for you to make notes for teaching the session.

## Teacher Options

**Offer Illustrations** presents material that will help you paint a picture of the session. This section often presents items from church history, current events, or interesting anecdotes that help introduce the session.

**Discussion** provides teaching activities that will help learners discuss the Scripture text.

**Questions** presents multiple collections of questions for various kinds of adults.

**Involve Learners** helps learners become actively involved with the Scripture text for a particular session.

**Closure** gives you a means for wrapping up the session.

## You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

### Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

# SO MUST THE SON OF MAN BE LIFTED UP

*John 3:14-21*

## Find Relevance



**Why do adults care about this session?** People do not always think theologically about the ramifications of Jesus' death and Resurrection. Consequently, few people take the initiative to consider relevant questions about what they believe and why. Both the narrative of Nicodemus—which this session addresses—and the recounting of the woman at the well in chapter 4 highlight the importance of asking questions surrounding crucial issues related to an individual's faith. This session assures those people who ask penetrating questions that it is okay to do so. And for those who only casually or rarely consider their beliefs about the Christ event, hopefully this session will stimulate them toward more involved introspection.

The Gospel of John is perhaps the deepest reflection pool of theological insight upon the events of Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection. It is also our best starting point for deliberation regarding the twin theological concepts of judgment and grace. Even though these concepts take on multi-faceted meanings when placed in context with the rest of the New Testament, the author of John presents a unique understanding of these foundational elements of belief.

## Seek Understanding



**What do these Scriptures mean?** John demonstrates a wonderful knack for weaving a single theme and/or character throughout his entire Gospel. This is especially true concerning this session's Scripture text, as it emphasizes the lifting up of the Son of Man. We should note that this theme of "lifting up" recurs in two more places in John (8:24 and 12:32-34). In studying for today's session, it will be helpful to examine these other passages for further clarification regarding the act of lifting up. The repetition of this theme points to the importance of understanding the Crucifixion as an event revealing both the identity and nature of God.

Nicodemus, the subject of our passage, also shows up repeatedly at strategic places throughout John's Gospel. While he is first introduced as a questioner, he reappears in 7:50-52 as a tentative defender of Jesus. His final appearance comes when he and Joseph of Arimathea anoint and bury Jesus' body (19:39-42). Nicodemus becomes a model of how one moves toward believing in Jesus.

Another point to note is that most translations indicate that Nicodemus is a "leader of the Jews" (3:1). These sessions will employ the term "Judean." It will be helpful to explain why the term "Judeans"



## Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ Cheap Grace and Costly Grace

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, the martyred German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer distinguishes between experiences of cheap grace and costly grace. “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church.... Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian ‘conception’ of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins.... Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate” (35-6).

On the other hand, Bonhoeffer also notes that, “...grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a [hu]man the only true life” (37).

### Questions

- ▶ How is grace cheapened by contemporary culture?
- ▶ How do we convey to individuals inside and outside the church the costliness of grace?
- ▶ While the word “grace” is never actually used in John 3:14-21, in what ways is it illustrated?

### ○ Eternity in an Hour

Review with your group the poem by William Blake found in the corresponding session from the Learner’s Study Guide. Explain to them that William Blake (1757-1827) was an English writer,

printer, and engraver. He believed that individuals who are sensitive to the world around them have the capacity for revelatory insights which can lead to experiencing the common world in uncommon ways.

### Questions

- ▶ What are your initial reactions to Blake’s description of the experience of eternal life?
- ▶ If eternal life is not just *length*, but also *quality* of time, how would you define the concept for someone else?
- ▶ How have you experienced eternal life during the past week?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ The Experience of Being Lifted Up

From the Romans' perspective—as well as that of numerous other first-century observers—the lifting up of the Son of Man was a tragic event filled with pain and agony. Yet for those who have the advantage of hindsight, this event was the exaltation of Jesus. Just like those who experienced the episode firsthand, readers of the Gospel also can discern God's love in action through Christ. God's grace was able to transform an experience of shame and pain into one of glory and power.

### Questions

- How have specific tragedies and crises in the world (your local church, your personal family, etc.) been transformed into experiences of God's grace?
- How can we discern God's love in a world filled with so much difficulty and pain?
- How can you as a follower of Christ help others open themselves to the possibility of transformation through grace?

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- How does the story of Moses involving the serpent on the pole foreshadow what will happen to Jesus?
- Does this encounter with Jesus affect Nicodemus? How do you know?
- What does it mean to live in the present under the judgment of God?

### Questions for All Adults

- In what ways have you experienced God's grace this past week?
- How can something as beautiful as love also involve pain and suffering?
- Nicodemus did not hesitate to interrogate Jesus. If *you* could ask Jesus one thing, what would it be?

### Questions for Mature Adults

- What makes love difficult?
- Why do people often choose the darkness of the world instead of the light of God?
- What significance does the phrase "eternal life" hold for you?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- Who has been instrumental in helping you experience the present as "an eternal moment"?
- If grace can be defined as "lovingkindness," how have you experienced lovingkindness this week?
- Why do you think people often associate judgment with wrongdoing instead of disbelief?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- Someone once said that for children, there are not seven wonders of the world, but seven *million*. What have you learned from your children about experiencing the present as a wondrous moment?
- What do you teach your children about grace?
- In what ways have you suffered for or with your children?

## Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ Abraham/Isaac and God/Jesus

A parallel noted by most scholars is established between God's sending Jesus into the world and God's testing Abraham (Gen 22). Draw two columns on a piece of newsprint, heading one "Abraham-Isaac," and the other "God-Jesus." Then read Genesis 22:1-14 and John 3:14-21 aloud to your group, asking them to help you identify similarities in the two passages. Then ask them to identify differences.

### ○ Judgment

Jesus often used simple illustrations to make his points and to generate thought about important issues. Cartoons also can stimulate thought. Cartoonist Gary Larson of *Far Side* fame drew a cartoon that raises interesting questions about how we perceive God's judgment. The single-frame illustration depicts God as a white-bearded man sitting in heaven before his computer. On the computer screen is a person totally oblivious to his environment who is walking down the sidewalk, passing a tall building. Dangling by a puny rope above the person's head is a piano that is in the process of being moved into the building. As God gazes into the computer screen, his finger is poised above a button cleverly labeled "Smite."

### Questions

- Does this cartoon accurately portray some people's perception of God's judgment? Where do you think this image originated?
- Why do people assume that God's judgment is to blame when bad things happen (see Jn 9)?
- According to John 3:14-21, by what criteria does God make judgments?

- How can a person have good experiences abound while under God's judgment?

## Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ God's Love Revealed

Have the class brainstorm some non-traditional ways to reveal God's love and grace to the people in your community. Once you have created a list of five or six ideas, ask your participants which are most viable, considering your group's combined talents and resources. Once you have eliminated all but one idea, ask them if they would be willing to accept it as a class project. If so, you have work to do. In fact, they will need to begin immediately making plans for how they will accomplish the selected task. Close the session with a prayer, asking God's blessing upon your work.

### ○ God's Wide Mercy

Either read or lead the class in singing the hymn "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy." Once you are ready to conclude, lead the class in a prayer, challenging them to share with others the grace of God revealed in Jesus.

# 2

## YOU ARE THE CHRIST *John 17-27, 38-40*

### Find Relevance



**Why do adults care about this session?** Most individuals studying this session are Christians who more than likely have made professions of faith, accepting Jesus as their Lord and Savior. However, many of these confessions were made years ago, others were genuinely made but not sincerely followed up, and still others may have been simply going through the motions of what was expected. This session provides time for class members to reconsider their confessions of Jesus as the Christ and what that means for living in the “nitty-gritty” of everyday life.

This session is relevant also because it deals with the common denominator of every human life: death. Each person in your group can empathize with Mary and Martha in their grief, for everyone either has lost or eventually will lose someone to death. While teaching this session, you will need to be sensitive to any who may have only recently confronted a tragedy like this and are still experiencing the pain of loss. If death is, as one poet puts it, “the worm at the core of life,” this session should help all students reaffirm that for Christians, *Christ* is at the core of life.

### Seek Understanding



**What do these Scriptures mean?** This session focuses on the last of seven signs in John’s Gospel. It is important to help students distinguish between a sign and a miracle. For example, in some translations the turning of water into wine (2:11) is called a miracle (see the King James Version), but in John it is better interpreted as a sign. A sign in John’s Gospel always points beyond itself to something greater, that “something greater” being Jesus and his glory. Signs are intended to inspire belief in Jesus and the one who sent him. However, when individuals in John’s Gospel discern only the miraculous, they miss the sign, mistaking it for a miracle and nothing more. To label the signs in John as mere miracles is to see only the surface action, to neglect the underlying truth. For example, note the crowd’s response to Jesus’ multiplying of loaves and fish in 6:1-15: “Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of loaves’” (6:26).

Typically, the Gospel of John is divided into four sections. Chapter 1 is the introduction. The section composing chapters 2-12 is called the Book of Signs. Chapters 13-20, the third section, is the Book of Glory or the Book of Passion. And finally, chapter 21 is usually under-



## Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ Standing for What One Confesses

The book *Credo*, by the German theologian Karl Barth, is a collection of lectures presented in 1935 discussing the *Apostle's Creed*. On the dedication page of this book are the following words:

1935!  
TO THE MINISTERS  
HANS ASMUSSEN,  
HERMANN HESSE, KARL IMMER,  
MARTIN NIEMOLLER, HEINRICH  
VOGEL

In memory of all who  
stood  
stand  
and will stand

Karl Barth was directing his dedication to ministers standing against the rise of the Nazi party in Germany. Even in 1935, Barth and others could foresee what was coming on the horizon. Many pastors and laity formed what was called the Confessing Church. These were the churches who refused to go along with the state churches which supported Adolf Hitler. Many either found themselves in prison or were executed for their efforts.

### Questions

- Which of your convictions have led you to take a stand?
- What have been some consequences of your confessions?

### ○ Are You Following Jesus or Believing in Christ?

In his article, "Are You Following Jesus or Believing in Christ?" Ernest T. Campbell begs a significant question of all Christians:

Do you *believe* in Christ? It isn't so hard to answer that. What is wanted is an affirmative response to treasured propositions about the second Person of the Trinity. But when someone asks, "Are you *following* Jesus?" this can get to be expensive. This question has to [do] with my lifestyle, my attitudes, my values, my surrender....Are you following Jesus, or believing in Christ? Unfair, you say; the two are inseparable. Theoretically, yes, but pragmatically, no. We separate them all the time. If we must err, let us err on the side of following. For one can believe without following, but one can not (sic) follow without believing. (18-9)

### Questions

- What are your initial reactions to Campbell's quote?
- How can one believe without following?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ **Crossing the Rubicon**

The Learner's Study Guide suggests that Chapter 11 is significant, because "it represents 'the crossing of the Rubicon' for Jesus and his relationship with the Judean leaders." Ask the class if they are familiar with the saying "crossing the Rubicon." If not, explain to them that it is a reference to Julius Caesar's taking his troops into the city of Rome. An unspoken—but quite understood—rule warned Roman armies against crossing the Rubicon River. However, when Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon with his troops in 49 BC, it signified not only the onset of civil war, but also his taking control of Rome. Therefore, the phrase "crossing the Rubicon" becomes a proverb implying that once an action has taken place, there is no going back.

### **Questions**

- Why is this episode between Jesus and the Judean elites such an obvious turning point (see 11:45-53)?
- What experiences in your Christian life have been "crossing-the-Rubicon" situations? How did you feel about others' treatment of you in these circumstances?

## Questions

### **Questions about Scripture**

- Why were the disciples so concerned about returning to Judea and the area around Jerusalem?
- Why did Jesus delay going to Bethany to be with ill Lazarus?
- What was the common perception surrounding resurrection in Jesus' day?
- What inaccurate conclusions about Jesus did the Judeans, disciples, and Martha draw in Chapter 11?

### **Questions for All Adults**

- What burial rituals offer hope for resurrection?
- What songs about personal resurrection can you either recall or find in a hymnal?
- Are there still signs today that inspire people to believe in Jesus?

### **Questions for Mature Adults**

- In what areas of your life have you believed something before you saw results?
- What are some of the most helpful words to offer those who have lost a loved one? What are the least helpful?
- How can we model true confessions of faith?

### **Questions for Younger Adults**

- Whom do you know that truly lives out their confessions of faith?
- How might confessing Christ bring about difficulties at work, at home, or in society?
- In what ways is death glorified more so than life in popular culture? What life-affirming events have you been a part of?

### **Questions for Adults with Children**

- What kinds of questions do children ask about death?
- How do you instill in children a sense of the importance of their words?
- In what ways are you helping your children make their own personal confessions of faith?

## *Involve Learners*

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ **Understanding Signs**

Divide your class into six groups. If only a few members are present, divide the class in half. Give each group a different sign printed in the following list.

- Changing water into wine (2:1-11)
- Healing the nobleman's son (4:46-54)
- Healing the man crippled for 38 years (5:1-18)
- Feeding the multitude (6:1-14, 25-34)
- Walking on water (6:15-24)
- Healing the man born blind (ch. 9)

Ask each group to answer these three questions:

- Who witnessed the sign and what was their response?
- What was the result of the sign's being witnessed?
- What does this sign tell us about Jesus?

After each group has read their assigned Scripture and answered the questions, have the large group convene to discuss any parallels that exist among the texts. If time and interest permit, explore how the seventh sign, described in chapter 11, compares and contrasts with the other signs in John.

### ○ **Raising Lazarus**

Before beginning this activity, give everyone a pencil and paper. Then ask your participants to imagine they are part of the mourning group helping Mary and Martha grieve on the day Jesus arrived at Lazarus's tomb. Tell them that they have been weeping and comforting the sisters. It is a hot day and the wind is kicking up the dust. Many people are surrounding the tomb, and Jesus has just asked them to help move the stone from the entrance. Have everyone reflect on and write about how they would react to this situation.

Once they have completed this part of the exercise, proceed with the scenario. Tell your group that the stone has been removed and they are watching as Jesus beckons, "Lazarus, come out!" To everyone's amazement, Lazarus does indeed come out! Jesus then tells them to unbind him. Once again, have them note their potential reactions. Urge them to consider the incident from all angles. How does Lazarus look after four days of entombment? How does he feel to the touch? What are the onlookers doing?

Finally, have them continue imagining that Jesus asks them to join him for dinner, along with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (Jn 12:1-8). They are seated next to Lazarus. What is the one question they want to ask him? What is his reply? Ask them to record their thoughts. After each person has jotted down some ideas, allow time for the class members to share their reflections.

## *Closure*

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ **Easter Confession**

Print and read the litany responsively as a closing benediction.

Leader: What is our confession for this coming week?

**All: That Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.**

Leader: How then shall we live?

**All: We shall live out this confession in our places of work, our homes, and the streets of our city.**

Leader: Go from this place empowered for the week by the one who is the Resurrection and Life.

## 3

THE WHOLE WORLD  
HAS GONE AFTER HIM*John 12:12-19**Find Relevance*

**Why do adults care about this session?** Sometimes we believe we have Jesus all figured out, who he is and what he is about. This lesson stands as a warning to any with such presumptuous tendencies. In today's text, Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem riding upon a donkey, and the crowd—even Jesus' own disciples—incorrectly interpreted the event's true purpose. Like our ancestors, we often create our own images of what Jesus should or should not be. However, this lesson encourages us to seek the *authentic* portrait of Jesus and his ministry. Likewise, it also should induce a personal sensitivity to the actions and motives of other Christians. One should not make hasty judgments based on false assumptions, prejudice, or unrealistic expectations.

This session also strikes the dissonant cultural chord of violence. We live in a time when the use of violence to achieve a desirable outcome is increasingly prevalent. This session helps illustrate that Jesus did not use just any available method to accomplish a goal. His life exemplifies that the only way we can truly minister and do God's will is to disavow violence in actions and words.

*Seeking Understanding*

**What do these Scriptures mean?** Today's story describes Jesus' last journey into Jerusalem. According to John's Gospel, Jesus came to Jerusalem to celebrate three Passovers (2:13-25; 6:1-4; 12:12-19), the festival of Dedication (10:22-42), the festival of Booths (7:1-52), and another festival that is unnamed (5:1). John's Gospel is the only one to highlight so many of Jesus' journeys into Jerusalem that he took for the purpose of celebration. It is clear that the author wants to portray Jesus as a pious and observant Judean.

A significant transitional chapter, chapter 12 represents the conclusion of Jesus' public ministry. Beginning in chapter 2, Jesus is active among the people. However, from chapter 13 up to the Crucifixion in chapter 19, he steadily withdraws from the public arena, refocusing his attention on his disciples in an attempt to prepare them for his glorification/Crucifixion.

As Jesus enters Jerusalem, the crowd's reaction represents the militaristic element surrounding the hoped-for Messiah. It is important to note, however, that there was no unified image of what the Messiah of Israel would be like. Scholar N. T. Wright summarizes,



## Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ Hindsight

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a Danish theologian/philosopher, was always challenging individuals to be authentic in their practice of Christianity. He once stated, “We live life forward, but only understand it in reverse.”

### Questions

- How is this statement accurate when considering the disciples and crowds around Jesus?
- How is it accurate regarding our *own* life experiences?
- How have distance and time given you a different insight into your faith? Your understanding of Jesus? Your understanding of the Church?

### ○ Mistaken Identity

The renowned artist Paul Gustave Dore (1821-1883) lost his passport while traveling in Europe. When he came to a border crossing, he explained his predicament to one of the guards. In hopes of being recognized and hence allowed to pass, Dore gave the official his name. The guard, however, replied that many people attempted to cross the border by claiming to be persons they were not. Dore insisted that he was indeed the man he claimed to be. “All right,” the official gave in, “we’ll give you a test, and if you pass it, we’ll allow you to go through.” Handing Dore a pencil and a sheet of paper, the guard instructed the artist to sketch several peasants standing nearby. Dore did it so quickly and skillfully that the guard was easily convinced. His work confirmed his word (*Sermon Illustrations.com*, 9 Sept 1999)!

### Questions

- Have you ever mistaken someone’s identity? Describe what happened.
- In this illustration, the artist is recognized for his work, not his word. How does this story parallel the disciple’s recognition of Jesus?
- How do you recognize Jesus?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ Creating Jesus in Our Image

Tony Campolo, popular writer and professor of sociology, writes,

Our society has taken Jesus and recreated him in our own cultural image. When I hear Jesus being proclaimed from the television stations across our country, from pulpits hither and yon, he comes across not as the biblical Jesus, not as the Jesus described in the Bible, but as a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Republican.... A Jesus who incarnates what we are, rather than a Jesus who incarnates the God of eternity, is not the Jesus who can save. (21)

### Questions

- How have we created Jesus in our own image?
- How might the concept of the “priesthood of the believer” have contributed to our creating Jesus in our image?
- How can we avoid molding Jesus into our image, and instead, accept him as he was and is?

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- Why were the Pharisees so concerned about the attention being given to Jesus’ ministry?
- Why could the disciples understand the import and purpose behind Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem only after the Resurrection?
- This particular journey Jesus made into Jerusalem is sometimes called the Triumphant Entry. Is this an appropriate description? What other titles also would suffice?

### Questions for All Adults

- Is there a difference between popular culture’s quest for spirituality and a

quest to know Jesus? Can you have one without the other?

- How have society and culture shaped our understanding of Jesus?
- If Jesus brings a peaceable Kingdom, what are the implications for how we use power in the church, in the family, in the nation?

### Questions for Mature Adults

- Who has most influenced your image of Jesus?
- How has your perspective on Jesus and faith changed over the years?
- What seems to be the greatest hindrance to people’s understanding of Jesus?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- What is the most substantial cultural misunderstanding about Jesus today?
- What motivates most contemporary people to follow Jesus?
- We are so far removed from the time of Jesus. Can we ever *really* know what he was like?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- How do you help your child comprehend Jesus’ identity?
- What types of violence do you fear your children may experience?
- What aspect about Jesus is most difficult to teach children?

## Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ Misunderstandings

A common theme in literature, movies, and plays often revolves around a particular character's being wrongly identified, often leading to consequences both comedic and tragic. Have the class list examples from movies or literature involving this type of mistake. Have them consider also biblical examples (for example, Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 42, Jesus with his disciples on the Emmaus Road in Luke 24, etc.).

### Questions

- Have you ever been involved in an incident when someone's identity was accidentally but totally misconstrued? Explain.
- How was the mistake finally discovered?
- How did you feel when the truth was revealed?
- Why was Jesus "mis"-identified by the crowds?

### ○ The Power of Symbols

In Jesus' day, riding into a city on a horse with the crowds chanting Psalm 118 in the background would have been a clear symbol of military power and might. Jesus, however, chose to sit upon a donkey, symbolizing a peaceable Kingdom. Ask the class to help you list symbols that convey power and might in the modern world. Then ask them to create a second list, this time noting symbols for peace.

### Questions

- Is one symbol sometimes confused for another? If so, why?

- Are any of the symbols mentioned included on both lists?
- Which of the symbols most clearly communicates peace and unity?

## Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ I Arise Today

Remind the class that Jesus' path to glorification was via Crucifixion. Considering that the great crowds were expecting a conquering rather than a suffering messiah, it must have been difficult for Jesus to remain true to God's purposes. Jesus was able to fulfill his mission because of both his assurance that he was God's Son and the presence of God in his journey.

The following excerpt is from "Saint Patrick's Breastplate," an early prayer ascribed to St. Patrick sometime during the seventh or eighth century. Read the prayer to your class, asking them to reflect on these words as they enter the new week:

I arise today  
Through God's strength to pilot me:  
God's might to uphold me,  
God's wisdom to guide me,  
God's eye to look before me,  
God's ear to hear me,  
God's word to speak for me,  
God's hand to guard me,  
God's way to lie before me.... (Cahill,  
117-8)

# I HAVE SEEN THE LORD

*John 20:1-18*

## Find Relevance



**Why do adults care about this session?** Hopelessness, failure, grief, death, defeat, depression—who among us has not suffered at least several of these experiences? Coincidentally, just as I finished writing this sentence, the telephone rang. “David,” my colleague began, “one of our former seminary students has died in a construction accident.” It was shocking news. This former student, a young man with a wife and three children, had manifested a Christ-like spirit in all his efforts. In just a few days, he was to have preached at a church in view of a call to serve as their pastor.

Wrapped in the intense emotion of a difficult experience, we—like Mary Magdalene—can become so blinded by life’s unfairness that Jesus’ Resurrection seems at best a fairy tale, and at worst a hollow joke. When our present pain is so overwhelming, we find little comfort in what God has done in the past, no matter how glorious. Does the Resurrection have any hope to offer us in these times? We know not with our minds, but rather with our hearts, that the answer is “yes,” and in some mysterious way, the truth of the Resurrection is what sustains us even when all other circumstances plunge us into despair.

## Seek Understanding



**What do these Scriptures mean?** Mary of Magdala is the first biblical person to offer an Easter confession. Because John’s discussion of Mary is so sparse, most of our information comes from the other Gospels. According to Luke, having been exorcised of seven demons, Mary was eager to follow Jesus through cities and villages as he proclaimed the Kingdom of God (Lk 8:2). Mark adds a little more to her character sketch by recording that Mary provided help when Jesus was in Galilee (Mk 15:40-41). She is often *misidentified* as the woman sinner—a prostitute—who anoints Jesus’ feet (Lk 7:37-50).

Verse 17 of today’s passage is particularly difficult to comprehend. Although most translations render it a statement, it is possible to translate it as a rhetorical question. It will be helpful for your class members to know that no punctuation was used in the original language of the New Testament. All of the Greek letters were condensed—no spaces between words and no punctuation marks. In fact, the punctuation marks are later additions based upon translators’ suggestions as to whether given sentences were intended as statements, questions, exclamations, or commands.



## Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ Searching and Finding

A man dreamed that a treasure lay buried under a bridge in another town. Naturally curious, he felt compelled to find out if the dream held any truth, so he left his small village, journeyed to the town, and found the bridge he had envisioned in his dream. As he began to dig, he was approached by a police officer. The man recounted his vivid dream about the bridge and the treasure. The officer smiled, claiming that he, too, had had a dream about a buried treasure, only in *his* dream the treasure was buried underneath a stove.

The man returned, disappointed that he had found no treasure, and took a glimpse at the stove, wondering. Wanting to leave no stone unturned, he lifted the tiles beneath the stove and began to dig. To his amazement, he discovered the treasure from his dream.

We often search for something we believe is missing in our lives. And unfortunately, we often look in all the wrong places. Sometimes what we are searching for is right under our noses and we don't even know it.

### Questions

- What motivates people toward initiating spiritual quests or journeys?
- How can our passions sometimes become the very obstacles that hinder our search?
- Who has mentored you in your spiritual quests and journeys?

### ○ What's in a Name?

In the ancient world, pagans were very careful to call their gods and goddesses by their proper names, because they believed that they would not listen or respond otherwise. The following prayer exemplifies the extremes they went to in order to ensure that their prayers were heard: "You are called Juno Lucina by women in child birth, you are called at night Trivia, and Luna, whose light is not your own." Sometimes ancients would add, "or by whatever name you are called" (Ogilvie, 26).

John's portrait of Mary as one who does not know or recognize Jesus poses a poignant contradiction to other religions in ancient culture. It is Jesus, the Christ, who knows Mary and calls *her* by name (Jn 20:16). John illustrates a personal connection between God and humanity that did not exist in pagan culture. While the ancients called upon the names of distant, remote gods and goddesses, God recognizes Christians *by name*.

### Questions

- In what ways have you experienced God as close and personal?
- In the hit TV sitcom *Cheers*, the establishment of the same name is described as a place "where everybody knows your name." How can we make our communities of faith institutions of closeness, places where we know everybody's name?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ The Power of the Resurrection

In *Memories of God*, Roberta Bondi notes that depression overwhelmed much of her life. She recounts more specifically that all her doubts and despair converged on what should have been a happy day in her life, her tenth wedding anniversary. She and her husband were married on an Easter weekend, and although their life together had started well, she writes,

...I found myself pressed down by the weight not only of my failure as a mother, but of all my failures, of my inability not only to have been the mother I wanted to be, but the wife, daughter, friend, niece, historian and teacher...[t]he memory of all my unmet obligations, all the people I had hurt, all the suffering I had done.... (168)

In her despair, she collapsed into a chair and utterly gave up. In that state of complete hopelessness, she escaped—as do many depressed individuals—into sleep. She did not remember how long she slept, but when she awoke, she heard herself repeating, “The joy of the Resurrection renews the whole world.” Over and over, the words came tumbling out of her mouth. In that moment, the Resurrection story once again became a story of transformation. She saw everything differently. Her family, her life, her struggles—all were bathed in the light of Easter.

Bondi concludes, “That Easter weekend the God beauty of my childhood...lifted me from the grave and brought my forty-five year depression to an end” (174).

### Questions

- What is it about the Resurrection that can change a person’s life?
- How has the story of the Resurrection directed your life and thoughts?

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- Why do you think the Other Disciple hesitated and allowed Peter to enter the tomb first?
- What is the significance of Jesus’ command in verse 17 not to touch him?
- What is the implication behind Jesus’ commission to Mary to tell others that he is ascending? What does Ascension imply?

### Questions for All Adults

- What is one of your most memorable Easter experiences?
- Do we place as much emphasis on Easter as we do Christmas? Explain.
- How has the good news of the Resurrection helped you through difficult times?

### Questions for Mature Adults

- In what ways is the Easter message spread most effectively?
- Mary’s weeping turned into great joy when she recognized Jesus. Have you experienced the movement from despair to joy? If so, describe the situation.
- In what ways do funeral services reinforce resurrection themes?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- What does the current search for spirituality indicate about our society?
- Does the good news of the Resurrection affect your everyday life?
- How might the theme of resurrection be more central in our worship?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- How can we help children work through grief?
- How can we describe resurrection in a way that children will understand it as more than a body’s coming back from the dead?
- Besides Mary Magdalene, who are some positive female role models from the Bible for children to emulate?

## *Involve Learners*

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ **Supporting Women Ministers of the Gospel**

In the ancient world, cultural bias hindered a woman's credibility in sharing the gospel. However, the story of Mary Magdalene's commission reaffirms the important role of women as apostles of the gospel. In fact, Mary's message is the first proclamation of the good news recorded in Scripture.

Unfortunately, many women today still face cultural obstacles that hinder their capacity to live out their call to minister. Ask your group, "What do you think are the biggest obstacles for women in ministry today?"

Ask your group to brainstorm ways in which the class can serve as advocates for women ministers in your church.

### ○ **Events of Lasting Impact**

One way to emphasize the importance of the Resurrection in the life of a believer is to consider it in relationship to other historical events. Considering our approaching move into a new millennium, ask your class to list the most important historical events or creations/inventions of the last one thousand years. Note the responses on a chalkboard or markerboard. When the list is completed, ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- Why are these particular events or creations significant?
- How does our culture determine whether an event or invention is of paramount importance?
- Which of the items listed might not seem that important a hundred years from now?

## *Closure*

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ **The Joy of the Resurrection**

Give a hymnal to each class member and ask them to find hymns related to the Resurrection. Ask volunteers to share any verses they find that are particularly meaningful to them and why. After several people have shared, ask what these verses have in common.

End the class with a progressive litany. Ask one person to begin the litany by saying, "The joy of the Resurrection renews the whole world." The next person then joins the first, repeating the phrase. Continue as class members join in one by one, repeating the phrase until everyone says in unison, "The joy of the Resurrection renews the whole world." If your class is very large, you can divide into small groups and bring about the same effect.

## 5

# MY LORD AND MY GOD

*John 20:19-31*

## Find Relevance



**Why do adults care about this session?** According to Benjamin Jowett, “Doubt comes in at the window when inquiry is denied at the door” (117). Oftentimes we try to deny any doubts and questions we have about our faith. We may have been taught that courting difficult questions is an indication that our faith is somehow lacking. This session, however, affirms that Jesus deals honestly and openly with our doubt. He approaches, leads, and teaches us wherever we are along the journey of faith. The questions and doubts that life brings into our faith pilgrimage are okay, and in fact, can actually lead us to a stronger faith.

This session is a helpful reminder that people are unique and that faith grows and develops differently for each of us. The story of Thomas’s doubts affirms that God created us as individuals and allows each of us to come to faith as we are able.

## Seek Understanding



**What do these Scriptures mean?** This story of Thomas is the climax of John’s Gospel. The writer cleverly builds suspense around whether Thomas will continue on the pilgrimage of faith. Note for example that Thomas is introduced as “one of the Twelve” (20:24), a description used of only one other disciple—Judas. With this phrase, John introduces the possibility that Thomas could follow in Judas’s footsteps and desert Jesus.

Note the approaches Jesus uses to help Thomas overcome his disbelief. Verse 26 indicates that Jesus came through closed doors—evidence of his ascended nature. Point by point, Jesus supplies each of the rationalistic proofs Thomas demands. Thomas wants to put his finger in the marks of the nail (25), and Jesus gives him the opportunity to do just that (27). Thomas wants to put his hand in Jesus’ side (25), and Jesus instructs him to do so (27). And while Thomas emphasizes that he will not believe otherwise (25), Jesus encourages, “Do not doubt but believe” (27).



## Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ “We’ve Been to the Moon?”

July 20, 1999, marked the thirtieth anniversary of the landing on the moon. The whole week was replete with commemorative events, special talk shows, and movies. On one radio broadcast, a guest from NASA recalled that in the early days of space exploration, many people doubted, *despite* the recorded evidence offered by the media, whether astronauts actually traveled to and landed on the moon. He recalled unbelievers’ insistence that the scenes supposedly transmitted from the moon were actually taken from a large studio stage. The so-called moon rocks, the doubters claimed, surely were gathered right here on earth. The NASA official went on to comment on how difficult it is to convince people that mere humans have actually walked on the moon they see each night.

### Questions

- Do you know anyone who still doubts the moon landings? Explain.
- In the past, people doubted what they could not see. Today, on the other hand, many people doubt even what they *do see*. What contributes to our current rampant skepticism?
- What things do you believe in even without seeing?
- Do you have to experience something personally before you can put your faith in it?

### ○ In the Midst of Doubt

On November 22, 1873, while Horatio Spafford stayed in Chicago to finish some business, the ship *Ville du Harve* steamed across the Atlantic Ocean from America to France carrying his wife and four daughters. In the dark of the night, the *Ville du Harve* struck another ship, and within twelve minutes, it sank to the bottom of the sea. A cable message informed Horatio Spafford that his wife had been rescued from the sinking ship, but his four daughters were lost. He immediately set sail for Paris to join his wife. On the journey across the Atlantic, the ship’s captain indicated to Mr. Spafford the approximate location of the sinking. After viewing the silent sea, he went to his room and penned the words to the hymn “It Is Well with My Soul.” His hymn has helped many individuals through difficult times.

### Questions

- What experiences usually bring about crises of faith?
- What or who has helped you the most during times when you have questioned your faith?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ **Different Faith for Different Folks**  
Faith arises and develops differently in the lives of each individual. Ruth Graham, wife of evangelist Billy Graham, remembers having always been a Christian. Her parents were missionaries in China, and her faith developed within the context of a missionary family committed to sharing the gospel. For her, faith emerged naturally as a part of growing up. On the other hand, C. S. Lewis's pilgrimage to faith was much different. His conversion from nominal Christianity to atheism, and finally to authentic Christianity is chronicled in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. At the end of his book, he recounts,

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed; perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. (228-9)

## Questions

- Looking back on your faith journey, where has the road taken you? How have you arrived at the place you are today?
- We have affirmed that the journey to faith is an individual one, yet it is not without parameters. How do we discern these parameters?
- Can we discern faith parameters for *other* people?
- How can we encourage the individual faith experience?

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- Jesus instructed Thomas to touch his hands and side. Does Scripture indicate that Thomas obeyed? Do you think he actually touched Jesus or believed without touching him?
- Jesus indicates that the disciples are to receive the Holy Spirit (22). How does this event relate to the Pentecost experience detailed in Acts 2?
- Why is it significant that Jesus commissioned the disciples to deal with forgiveness of sins rather than to testify about his Resurrection?

### Questions for All Adults

- What doubts have you encountered along your faith pilgrimage?
- What are the most common doubts of faith?
- Is it ever inappropriate to test or question God? Explain.

### Questions for Mature Adults

- How has your church demonstrated a ministry of forgiveness? How have *you* done so?
- How has your faith changed over the years?
- How have you helped others deal with doubt concerning their faith?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- To whom do you go when you have serious questions or doubts about your faith?
- What nurtures our doubts in modern culture?
- Is cynicism a by-product of doubt? What should be the by-product of belief?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- In what ways do children demonstrate the ability to believe without seeing?
- How have your children helped the development and emergence of your faith?
- What questions do children frequently raise about God?

## *Involve Learners*

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ **Growing Faith in Different Ways**

Ask your group to form four or five small groups to discuss the faith experiences of Mary and Thomas. Ask them to use the questions below to compare and contrast Mary and Thomas's faith development.

### **Questions**

- How are Thomas and Mary's faith journeys similar?
- In what ways do their paths of growth differ?
- Is one approach better than the other?
- How does Jesus respond to these two individuals?

### ○ **A Questioning Faith**

As mentioned in the Learner's Study Guide for this session, the state of Missouri's slogan is "Show-Me." This motto reflects a philosophy many of us have incorporated into our daily living. Ask your class to make a list of "proofs" that we generally expect before placing our trust in an institution, product, or person. List the group's responses on a marker board or newsprint. For example, investment companies "prove" their success by broadcasting their returns over the last three, five, and ten years.

After you have compiled a list, ask the group if they would trust an institution, product, or person that came with no guarantees or references. For example, if an investment company said, "We have no records to show you, but if you put your money into our fund, you will make money," how many people would risk placing their confidence in the venture?

## **Questions**

- Did the completed list turn out as expected? Is it longer or shorter than anticipated?
- Why is it essential that we have proof before we can believe?
- How often are we manipulated by the "proofs" we are given?
- Does our contemporary culture require more or less proof than was the case 40-50 years ago?
- In what ways is our current culture either more or less willing to "believe without seeing"?

## *Closure*

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ **Believing without Seeing**

As you bring this session to a close, offer these words of Jesus as a blessing: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Remind your class that they never could have believed in the first place unless someone had told them about Jesus. Encourage them to reflect thankfully upon the person or persons who shared Christ with them, and then challenge them to bless another person this week by sharing with them the good news of Jesus' Resurrection.