

R E M E M B E R I N G

Holy Week

FIVE REMARKABLE STORIES
OF UNREMARKABLE PEOPLE

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Rediscovering Holy Week: Five Remarkable Stories of Unremarkable People

BY SHAUNA LETELLIER

Discover how five lesser-known people honored Jesus during his last days on Earth. They've been called wasteful, overbearing, even criminal, but he accepted their worship. If the biblical scenes of Holy Week seem overfamiliar, this 5-day plan will bring them back to life. You will learn that no matter how you honor Jesus, it is never too little, too messy, or too late.

To receive a devotional for Easter Sunday, please visit www.shaunaletellier.com/holyweek.

INTRODUCTION

The Familiar Strangers of Holy Week

When it comes to the Easter story, we find ourselves in the precarious place of overfamiliarity.

On the one hand, our close acquaintance is a gift. We know Peter and John as old friends. We recognize the words, "He is not here. He is risen," as the declaration of an angel. Knowing these parts of the Bible so well helps us understand the less celebrated passages.

On the other hand, we live in a world that is constantly careening toward the next new thing. The availability of news and data keeps us craving current and up-to-date information.

What, then, are we to do with the old story of Jesus demonstrating his love on a gruesome cross? As Christians, we know it is essential to remember and celebrate all God has done in Christ. But when we stumble upon the scenes from Holy Week, we tend to skim the familiar story with a bulleted ticker sliding through our minds:

- ✓ Jesus born
- ✓ gets disciples
- ✓ does miracles
- ✓ crucified
- ✓ Jesus raised
- ✓ glory

Yes. I've read that...and that. Uh-huh...Yep. Next!

Sometimes the colorful images of the Sunday school flannelgraph fade over time. Instead of reading the Bible with wonder, we tend to gloss over the words, yawn, and flip the page.

But for the apostle John—who saw Jesus, who heard him teach, who grabbed Jesus' hand to help him up after they'd eaten fish and bread—it was more than he could possibly record. John

writes, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

Beyond the many other things Jesus did, there were many other people Jesus knew and met. We know a few of their names, like Bartimaeus. But some we know only by their afflictions, like "the leper" or "the lame man." Others appear in Scripture as individuals in a crowd, and we don't know their name or story. But one thing is certain. They were humans like us.

Joseph of Arimathea, Simon the former leper, Martha the sister of Lazarus, the man who owned a donkey outside of Jerusalem, and even the criminals on the cross were not so different from you and me.

Although 2,000 years of history separate us, we have our humanity and our Savior in common. They believed, by faith, in a coming Savior who would rescue. We believe, by faith, in the already-accomplished saving work of that same Savior—Jesus Christ.

In each daily reading, we'll zoom in on one of these lesser-known participants in the Easter story. We'll imagine conversations among a few of the people Jesus bumped into during his last few days on Earth—the time we call Holy Week.

The two crucified beside Jesus.

The men who took him off the cross.

Those who hosted Jesus in their homes to honor him just days before his death.

If you happen to catch a glimpse of yourself in these lesser-known people, be encouraged. You will discover there are no insignificant assignments, no ministry too small, no job too messy that Christ will not accept it as a gift of love from you to him.

May you find your Risen Savior more majestic this year and love him more because of it.

DAY 1

Relinquishing Wild Things: Owner of the Colt

SCRIPTURE: [Matthew 21:1-11](#)

He glanced at the mare and her colt, then back at the two strangers as he worked the leather knot.

"The colt is weaned, but he hasn't been ridden."

He grabbed the halter from where it hung on the post, fitted it over the colt's ears, and held out the lead rope.

"Thank you," said the younger stranger. "The Lord will send it back here shortly."

"Fine." He smoothed the colt's hide as it brushed by him.

They led him down the road and, in the warmth of midday, threw their cloaks over his back. As they merged into the current of Passover pilgrims, they stopped to pick up a rider.

To his astonishment, the colt did not buckle or buck. The stubborn animal, who had brayed for the safety of his mother and reared up for the strangers, now carried his passenger through the raucous celebration straight toward Jerusalem.

On the back of an unbroken colt, Jesus was headed to the cross to initiate The Great Exchange--our sin for his perfection. But he wouldn't stop there.

The exchange offered in Christ's work on the cross was just the beginning of every other exchange he offers to initiate in our lives.

He doesn't *need* anything from us, but he accepts whatever we are willing to relinquish, even if all we have to give him seems wild and unruly.

We often believe we must give Jesus something impressive and shiny. Surely something nicer than an untamed donkey. A tight-rope-walking kind of faith or a super-sacrifice seems more fitting. Didn't Noah build an ark? And Moses crossed a sea.

Is Jesus disappointed when we offer him our wild worry, the niggling anxiety that steals sleep and interrupts concentration? Does he shake his head and wish he'd chosen a different disciple?

No. He has offered to accept them from your trembling hands. When we look to Jesus and accept the gift of his righteousness, he can quiet an anxious heart. Wild worries are broken and tamed under his control.

He will exchange worry for relief because he knows what we *need* before we ask (Matthew 6:8).

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

When we relinquish our wild things to Jesus, we can rest beneath his smile. Only then do we glimpse what he meant by an easy yoke and a light burden.

The result will be unbridled worship for The One who initiated the exchange.

PRAYER: *Lord, thank you for giving rest and peace in exchange for all the untamed anxieties we conjure up. When you ask us to let go, remind us that it is for our benefit and your glory. We are thankful, and You are magnified. Help us relinquish whatever you ask.*

DAY 2

Inadequate Worship: Simon, the Former Leper

SCRIPTURE: [Mark 14:3](#), [John 12:1-2](#)

Shaking his head, he laid every dish he owned on the table: two cups and one-and-a-half plates.

What am I thinking? I know nothing about hosting a dinner!

He stacked the plates to put them back in the box and forget the whole idea. As he lifted them in, the top half-plate slid onto the floor and shattered.

Down to one plate. He gathered the pieces. *I'm meant to eat alone.*

Simon's years in and out of the town because of his unclean skin condition had left him anxious with people. He was out of practice and feared conversations. And up until a few months ago, his entire diet had been foraged or begged. *This is a bad idea*, he warned himself.

But the cloud of self-pity was quickly blown away by the fact that his hands were whole again. His skin was clean. He was living in his house and not a cave. And his desire to host a dinner for Jesus was reignited.

For a moment, his own inexperience embarrassed him. But Jesus had seen him in a far worse place, in far worse condition. And if Jesus was not put off then, Simon knew Jesus would enjoy the dinner even if it was served on broken or borrowed plates.

Simon didn't know Jesus had only a few days left on Earth.

But Simon knew Jesus was worthy of honor. Jesus had changed Simon's situation, healed his body, and restored him to his family and community. In doing so, Jesus demonstrated his divine power to restore life, and Simon was compelled to honor him.

At the cross, Jesus demonstrated his love for us, too, in that while we were still wallowing in sin, he changed our situation before God. He administered healing and restored us to life.

Knowing we have been rescued, and loving Jesus because of it, is the root of true worship. He gladly accepts even feeble attempts to honor him, no matter how weak or flawed our worship might seem to us. That kind of acceptance frees us to worship him without reserve.

We might be embarrassed by our own attempts at worship. Maybe your kindness was misunderstood as condescending. Maybe you missed a note as you led others in worship. Maybe your encouraging words didn't come out right.

No matter how ashamed you feel about what you have to offer, Jesus is not grading your performance. He is accepting your love.

PRAYER: *Lord, sometimes I'm embarrassed by the ways I worship you. It seems menial compared to the glory you deserve. But you do not cringe when I give you my childlike gratitude. If you are not embarrassed by my gifts, help me not to be either. Thank you for all the reasons and ways I have to honor you.*

DAY 3

Holy Forgetfulness: Martha of Bethany

SCRIPTURE: [John 12:1-3](#), [Matthew 26:6-7](#), [Mark 14:3](#)

The guests had arrived, and they were hungry.

Being awkward and eager to honor, Simon had already urged them to recline along both sides of the table though the food was not ready. Jesus gave thanks anyway. The guests looked to their host, and Simon looked to Martha as if to say, *What now?*

Martha handed Mary a jar of wine to pour and went to get the food.

She grabbed a basket, tossed in the bread, and shook the heat off her fingertips as she reached for a plate of cheese. Balancing both dishes on her arm, she seasoned the roasting meat with her free hand. It smelled delicious. As she came to the table, a different aroma filled the air.

To her horror, she began to cough. She juggled the plates and basket and hurried to set the food on the table.

Through watering eyes and fits of coughing, she noticed the wine jar, still full and sitting on the table.

Then she saw Mary.

The only jar she had emptied was a pint of perfume, and the air was thick with it. An uncorked jar lay on the floor where Mary knelt, washing Jesus' feet with fragrance.

Martha caught her breath, recovered, and poured the wine herself.

Mary was never one to suppress a generous impulse, and as Martha stepped around her sister to serve the wine, she wondered at Mary's holy forgetfulness.

She had forgotten the wine. Forgotten the other guests. She had forgotten herself.

What once would have seemed like a mess to clean up now served as a memorial to the One they meant to honor. And Martha had forgotten to be upset about it.

Jesus had thoroughly transformed Martha and her family. Lazarus had been liberated from the grave. Mary had been liberated to worship and love Jesus without reserve. Martha had been liberated from a prison of pride in her productivity.

Martha still worked and planned, but her service was no longer a means to prove her usefulness. Because of Jesus, service became her delight.

The dinner would be eaten, the guests would leave, but honoring Jesus was the only thing that was needed, and it could not be taken away from her.

Sometimes Jesus miraculously changes circumstances, as he did for Simon and Lazarus. Sometimes he miraculously changed hearts and minds, as he did for Martha. Either way, the result is honor. We worship Christ for helping us remember who we are because of him.

PRAYER: *Lord, whether you heal a body or change a mind, we are hard-pressed to say which is more miraculous. We are stubborn creatures, and only you can give us the mind of Christ in every area of our thinking. Help us yield to the change you long to bring, to forget what used to bind us, and to continually remember why we worship you.*

DAY 4

Dependent Beggar: The Crucified Thief

SCRIPTURE: [Luke 23:32-43](#), [John 19:32](#)

NOTE: {Scripture does not name the thief on the cross, but for the sake of clarity, I have named him Dismas, as he has been called in some Christian traditions.}

Dismas looked down at the crowd packed in close and scattered down the face of the hill. This was the mob that had fed and clothed him, unwillingly though it may have been. With the skill of a master craftsman, he had made his living leeching off the rich.

It was an exhilarating risk that had been rewarded over and over. The last payment was his punishment. He had earned this excruciating cross.

"Jesus!" he called. There was no response. Jesus' hair was matted with blood from a thorny wreath they had pressed into his head. His eyes were swollen shut. Maybe he was already gone. Then Jesus turned. Dismas forced out his plea before one or both of them died, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Women wept below him. Centurions laughed and barked orders to one another. Dismas strained to see if Jesus would answer. Thunder rolled toward Jerusalem.

Then faintly, he heard him. "I tell you the truth," Jesus raised himself with great trouble to speak the rest, "today you will be with me in paradise."

The sights and sounds of his own execution faded to silent black. For a moment, Dismas slept. With a great gasp, his body cramped, straightened him up, and he drew in another breath. When he opened his eyes, a centurion stood below him, studying his face. Dismas caught a glimpse of a swinging club and felt in his legs an explosion of pain.

Would it be too audacious to say the repentant thief on the cross may have been the most remarkable example of true faith in the gospels? He necessarily believed that salvation came by faith through grace, not because of anything he had done or failed to do.

He had nothing to offer Jesus as a reason to save him. His life, career, and choice had been to steal.

He could not say, "Jesus, remember the good things I did?" Instead, he begs Jesus, "Remember me."

Remember, I have nothing to offer you.

Remember, I have no days left to "make it up to you."

Remember me, and take me with you.

This man, perhaps more than any of us, understood that spending eternity with God comes by believing Jesus and accepting undeserved favor. He had no other choice.

That kind of unabashed dependence on Jesus is the essence of faith—the link that binds our desperate need with his unlimited grace.

Dependence on Christ is our only option. It is also the greatest gift.

PRAYER: *Lord, thank you for mercifully offering eternal life to those who've nearly run out of time. Thank you for including this man's story in your Word. Without it, I might be inclined to believe I must earn eternal life. But I see you give it as a gift to people who admit their sin and cling to you as their only hope. You are the way.*

DAY 5

The Secret Disciple: Joseph of Arimathea

SCRIPTURE: [John 19:38-42](#), [Matthew 27:57-61](#)

The cross leaned.

Together the soldiers hoisted it clear out and let it fall to the ground with a thud. One grabbed a purple robe while the other whisked up a linen garment. Celebrating their good fortune, they sauntered away, examining the treasures of the dead.

Joseph of Arimathea looked at Nicodemus then at their task. They were defiling themselves. According to rules they'd followed their whole lives, they would be unclean for the biggest religious festival of the year.

But it was a job no one else would do.

Joseph pried a metal spike from Jesus' feet. Nicodemus worked at the hands and cut the ropes cinched around Jesus' raw arms.

"What's your plan after this?" Nicodemus asked as Joseph. Alternating turns, they lifted Jesus' body to wrap it in linen according to their burial custom.

"Some time ago, I bought a tomb for my family in that garden," he pointed down the hill. "We haven't used it yet, but it's nearby, and we don't have much time before sunset."

Nicodemus nodded.

They finished, lifted the wrapped body, and Joseph led the way to his own grave.

Joseph of Arimathea had so many credentials with the wrong people and so few with the right ones. He was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he was afraid of the religious leaders and afraid of what public loyalty to Jesus would cost him.

Joseph was a fearful believer.

So far, he had managed his secret discipleship. So, what would cause an educated man of high standing to forego every privilege afforded him by his position?

Only that he was utterly convinced that Pilate's charge against Jesus was true. Jesus was the Messiah. He believed.

When the twelve disciples fled and deserted Jesus, Joseph finally had reason to make his allegiance known.

Unwavering confidence in Jesus propels private disciples to public confession.

The cost may seem high, but after three days, Joseph, along with the not-so-secret disciples, would discover the glory God meant to reveal in his son.

And what is that glory? Jesus Christ lived a holy life. He perfectly obeyed his Father even to the point of being crucified. Jesus lived and died in order to suffer in our place and give away his perfect record.

On Good Friday, we remember the shocking truth that Jesus did what we couldn't do for ourselves. He lived the life you and I could not live. He suffered the punishment we had earned and laid in a tomb that should have been ours.

On Easter, we get to celebrate because Christ's obedience to the Father made all the riches of his inheritance available to unremarkable people. People like you and me.

PRAYER: *Lord, give me the courage to follow you, even if I'm afraid. Help me to comprehend the gift that is mine through Jesus. The gift of a perfect life is credited to my account. Not because I lived well, but because Jesus lived perfectly, and at the cross, he gave his righteous life to me. For such an indescribable gift, I can only say, "thank you." Thank you for saving someone like me.*

Have you ever imagine seeing Jesus after he was raised?

Receive a devotional for Easter Sunday by visiting <http://shaunaletellier.com/holyweek/>

CONCLUSION

I Am Not What I Was

In my earliest Sunday school memory, I am sitting on a thin, hard carpet square in an echoing church classroom. The industrial carpet is a brilliant turquoise and smells of antique church basement.

Other children wriggle in close as my mom tells the Bible story of a little boy who gave his five barley loaves and two fish to Jesus. With them, he fed a meadow full of people. She distributes a colorful postcard with a vivid image that transports me to that hillside.

I have always known about Jesus, but I have not always loved him.

Over time, the Christian life had become a burdensome currency for me—a means to get what I wanted from God. I had adopted a mindset that every life outcome was solely dependent on me. Perfect behavior begets a perfect outcome. Imperfect behavior begets punishing circumstances.

But 25 years after those early Sunday school memories, through a combination of gospel conversations, rereading Scripture, life circumstances, and the Lord's direct intervention, I came to understand, more fully, the gospel of grace.

When Jesus died for my sin, he did not merely erase the chalkboard scribbled with my sins and leave it blank for me to fill again. I discovered the truth of 2 Corinthians 5:21, which declares, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Christ didn't just take away my sin. He also gave me his righteousness to claim as my own. I discovered why Martin Luther termed it "The Great Exchange," and the gospel of Jesus Christ became exceedingly good news to me.

That chalkboard enumerating my sin has been erased, but it has also been written on again. But this time, the writing enumerates the glories of Christ's perfect life as though they were mine. It sounds like a scandal, but it's actually a gift! What a relief. How can we help but love him?

As you look toward Easter, I pray you will be freshly enamored with the scandalous grace of God lavished upon you through the completed work of our Savior and Friend, Jesus. If you'd like one additional reading for Sunday, please visit me at my [website](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Shauna Letellier weaves strands of history, theology, and fictional detail into a fresh retelling of familiar Bible stories on her blog and in her books. With her husband Kurt, she has the wild and hilarious privilege of raising three boys along the banks of the Missouri River, where they fish, swim, and rush off to ball games.

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