

Never before had they known such hope.

They lived in a world ruled by violence and oppression, yet this man spoke of peace and freedom. Into shattered lives he brought compassion and healing and the deepest joy. To people who felt like outcasts and aliens, he showed the way home. And then, in one devastating night, all their hopes collapsed.

The first disciples of Jesus were ordinary men and women struggling to reorient their way in the world after meeting Jesus. They were uncertain, doubting and fearful of this new way to understand God. Jesus changed everything.

Through the eyes of 5 of these first disciples we will journey through lent together examining how we too struggle with the meaning and message of Jesus.

This series, compiled and written by the Rev. Bob Brown, is designed to help us engage one another in conversation about the humanity of the first disciples. For some of the disciples, you will find a passage, for others, a selection of passages, chosen to help us develop a fuller perspective of their biblical portrayals. **This booklet is not meant as an academic exploration of their historical natures!** Instead, it is crafted to help us understand them as complex and multifaceted individuals, as portrayed in the gospels. Hopefully it will help us discover how, even today, we can identify with the frailty, courage, doubt, faith, and hope of these early followers.

What might they have to teach us about following Jesus – not just 2000 years ago, but today? What might we have to teach *each other*?

You may use this booklet as you see fit – both personally, and within your group. Some of the descriptions and questions may “strike” you, others might “turn you off”. I would encourage you to pay attention to these feelings. Why do some things resonate? What is it about others that is off-putting? Is it the language used? The description of the person themselves?

Probe and examine – there is much to be learned from our reactions– but *don't get stuck there*. Remember that faith and discipleship are born, primarily, from a place of awe, from a place of encounter. It is about listening deeply as much as it is speaking, as much about perceiving as it is accomplishing.

Discipleship is as much about being found as it is about seeking.

So enjoy this journey in a free-form discussion with your group. Find a way into the stories of these early followers. May you seek what you need, and in so doing, be found. Not simply by Jesus. But also, perhaps, by yourself.

How-to:

1. Find **five times to meet** with your group between February 21 and Easter. Groups should be no fewer than 2 and no more than 10 people.
2. Each week, use this material as the starting point for your group discussion. **Do not feel limited to this.** Feel free to bring your own material or questions to your group.
3. **Resist the urge** to focus on “what you will get” from this small group. Instead, ask yourself how you can contribute to this group, and what God is going to do through you because of this new community.
4. **Keep in mind** that healthy small groups will develop with an **investment** of time and a collection of shared experiences, and will flourish where there is trust and grace. Earn each other's trust by keeping **confidential** the personal details people share. Extend grace and respect to one another when you disagree on theology or on another topic. It will happen, and that's okay. As business leadership author Stephen R. Covey wrote, “Strength lies in differences, not in similarities.”
5. **Pray.** Open with a check-in (a high/low from the week and/or an experience of God), so you bring all of yourselves to the meeting. Close with prayer requests for the week, that you might hold one another in prayer

FIRST CHURCH BURLINGTON SMALL GROUP

Follow Me: 5 conversations
about living a life of **faith & hope**

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|------|---|---------------------|----------------------------|----|
| week | one | week of February 21 | the disciple Peter | 3 |
| | <p>He was called the Rock of the Church, yet he denied Jesus three times. He was impulsive, hot-tempered, and fearful, but also he was insightful, hard working and compassionate.</p> | | | |
| week | two | week of February 28 | Mary of Nazareth | 6 |
| | <p>Among them all, perhaps Mary felt even more betrayed by God than the others as she wept helplessly at the cross, yet somehow she overcame her grief and discovered that God could redeem even death. Her heart knew the deepest sorrow yet Mary held tightly to the hope of resurrection.</p> | | | |
| week | three | week of March 7 | the disciple Thomas | 11 |
| | <p>The disciple who demanded certainty and undisputable fact also followed Jesus faithfully and his skeptical inquiring mind in fact was what led him to realize that trust and faith were paradoxical ingredients in acquiring spiritual truth.</p> | | | |
| week | four | week of March 14 | Mary of Magdala | 14 |
| | <p>Mary Magdalene is always mentioned first among Jesus' female disciples. She followed and served him from the beginning of his ministry through his death, thought to be the first to discover the empty tomb, and the first person the risen Jesus appeared to. There is no evidence that suggests she was a prostitute or even promiscuous. In fact, apart from a skewed misguided, and false reputation, Mary of Magdala could be thought of as the strongest, most faithful of the disciples.</p> | | | |
| week | five | week of March 21 | Judas Iscariot | 19 |
| | <p>Often thought of only as "the betrayer", yet Judas followed Jesus passionately. He was the respected and trusted treasurer of the group. No one would ever have picked him as a traitor. Judas desperately wanted Jesus' message to take root. He believed completely that Jesus was the long expected Messiah. But his passion led him to think he knew what was best, so he acted on his own understanding rather than waiting on God's wisdom.</p> | | | |

profile: Peter

Peter was surely foremost among Jesus' disciples and a follower of remarkable contrasts. Big, bold, impulsive, rash, adventuresome, dynamic, confident, and committed are but a few of the terms to describe this impetuous hero. Yes, indeed, he was a man of action. While others in his group of friends were pondering and prognosticating, Peter was always doing something, be it ridiculous or sublime.

Known variously as Simon, Simon Peter, Cephas ("rock" or "a stone"), and Simeon bar Jona (Simon, son of Jona), Peter was a fisherman by trade when his brother, Andrew, introduced him to Jesus at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Peter was married and lived in Capernaum. He partnered with James and John. He was first a disciple of John the Baptist when he was called by Jesus to be a "fisher of people," at which point Peter left everything, including the family fishing business, to follow Jesus. Peter's prominence is suggested by the fact that "his name is mentioned in the Gospels more than any other name except Jesus. No one speaks as often as Peter, no one is spoken to by Jesus as often as Peter, and no disciple ever rebukes Jesus except Peter (Matthew 16:22). No one else confessed Jesus as Messiah more boldly; yet no other disciple ever verbally denied Christ as forcefully or publicly as Peter did. No one is praised and blessed by Jesus the way Peter was; yet Peter was also the only one Jesus ever addressed as Satan. Jesus had harsher things to say to Peter than he ever said to any of the others!

It is clear that Peter was a complex and curious study in contrasts. He showed himself to be impulsive (Matthew 14:28), yet cowardly (Matthew 14:30; 26:69-74), hot tempered (John 18:10), yet tenderhearted (Matthew 26:75), and insightful (Matthew 16:16), yet dense (Matthew 16:21-23). His powerful personality and transformative relationship with Jesus are detailed in profound ways as when Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, and Jesus named him Peter ("rock") and said, "Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:16-19). Or when Peter and others witnessed Jesus' Transfiguration where Jesus' divinity was revealed (Mark 9:2-8). Or when Peter was sent to prepare the upper room for the Last Supper (Luke 22:8). Or when Jesus predicted that Peter would deny knowing Him three times (Luke 22:31-34). Or when Peter was with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46).

The Biblical testimony suggests that Peter was not always right, but his life was bathed in holy love, and he worked tirelessly to carry on Jesus' ministry. Jesus instructed Peter after His resurrection (John 21:15-19). Peter boldly and courageously preached, healed, and ministered to Jews and Gentiles alike after Pentecost (Acts 2-12). He became one of the pillars of the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9), and is considered the first Pope. He was imprisoned by Herod for preaching and rescued by an angel of the Lord (Acts 12:13-19).

Bible study: Peter Denies Jesus

Luke 22:31-34,54-62

³¹“Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, ³²but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” ³³And he said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!” ³⁴Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.”

⁵⁴Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest’s house. But Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, “This man also was with him.” ⁵⁷But he denied it, saying, “Woman, I do not know him.” ⁵⁸A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, “You also are one of them.” But Peter said, “Man, I am not!” ⁵⁹Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, “Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.” ⁶⁰But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about!” At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. ⁶¹The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.” ⁶²And he went out and wept bitterly.

Focus Questions For The Gospel Passages

1. What words or phrases strike you or stick out to you in this passage?
2. Who is Peter in this particular encounter with Jesus? How would you describe him?
3. Based on the above story, what words might you choose to characterize Peter and why?
4. Might any of the following words apply and, if so, how: loyal, faithful, weak-kneed, strong, cowardly, over-confident, courageous, betrayer, sensitive, sinful, loving, good-hearted, dependable, uncertain, unthinking, ill-prepared, naive, etc.
5. Are there ways in which Peter might have been positively transformed as a result of the encounter portrayed in Luke?
6. How does the above account help you understand the nature of faith and the challenges of following Jesus?
7. If you, as Jesus' closest confidant and most dependable disciple, were challenged by the questioners in the garden, how would you have responded? Why?
8. What does this story tell you about the potential costs and joys of discipleship? Was it worth it for Peter? For you?

Group Discussion Questions:

1. What strikes you about this passage?
2. Where do you most resonate with Peter in your own life? When are you most like Peter or least like him?
3. What is to be most admired, respected, and emulated from Peter's life?
4. What does Peter have to teach us about the costs and benefits of being people of action?
5. How can we, as people of faith, be people of action in today's church and the larger society? What actions seem most compelling, currently, for people of faith to take on behalf of a needy and broken world? What is the first step?
6. Some of the character qualities that Peter learned over a lifetime were submission, restraint, humility, love, compassion, and courage. How and in what ways or to what degree have you discovered any of the above in your life?
7. Peter's raw personality consisted of his inquisitiveness, initiative, and involvement. How do these play out with respect to following Jesus?
8. Using Peter's life as an example, what contributed most to his personal and spiritual growth? How have you personally grown spiritually and as a follower of Jesus?
9. If you were to meet Peter today, the one thing you would want to tell him or ask him is..... Why?
10. What does Peter have to teach us about discipleship?

profile: **Mary of Nazareth** – mother of Jesus

It has been said that behind every successful man is a woman. Well, it turns out that this is most certainly true in the life of Jesus. Mary of Nazareth was the extraordinary mother of Jesus, who exquisitely modeled discipleship: she acted with an unwavering faith. She thought deeply and prayerfully about what was happening to her, which fueled a fearless and demanding journey with God. She held back nothing as she organized her entire life around trusting God's plans for her - more than following the religious expectations of her culture. But this first century woman was not some mythological archetype.

She was also most certainly a very human figure, who, like any mother, deeply felt anguish, distress, pride, and joy as she courageously poured out everything she had into her child.

The Gospels and Acts give us a vivid picture of Mary of Nazareth. We first discover her as a young girl engaged to a carpenter named Joseph. The drama unfolds quickly as the angel Gabriel appears explaining that young Mary is about to become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Messiah. During this angelic visitation, known as the Annunciation, Mary tells Gabriel that she is a "handmaid", "bondservant" or "slave woman" of the Lord. (Luke 1:26-38)

The Greek root of this word indicates economic disadvantage. It places Mary directly among the most underprivileged or deprived class of women. This is very important to understand. God chose a woman born into abject poverty to give birth to the Savior of the world. Her lowly status and poverty inform everything about her worldview, imagination, and hope.

But no matter what social standing one has, being an unmarried mother in first century Judea was beyond shameful, it was dangerous. In Mary's world, every action of each individual reflected on the entire group. Pregnancy out of wedlock shamed the entire community. Mary's family must have found it difficult to believe that Mary spoke with an angel, or was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. Her pregnancy certainly brought great dishonor to all of them. Fortunately, good ol' Joseph was also visited by an angel in a dream and was persuaded to keep his vow to marry her. (Mat 1:20-21)

Perhaps to avoid communal shame and outrage, Mary went to visit her older cousin Elizabeth. Their meeting, as written by Luke, was thick with emotion as young Mary speaks an amazing psalm-like, lyrical prayer. The famous song is called the Magnificat, from the Latin phrase, "my soul magnifies the Lord." It is an astounding, dangerous vision of complete and total social reversal. Mary's faith, hope, and courage is clearly demonstrated as this poverty stricken pregnant girl prays these provocative and subversive words:

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53)*

According to Matthew's Gospel, after the long, grueling trip to Bethlehem, and Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph flee with their newborn son to Egypt. We also learn that Mary and her family were conservative Jews who took their religious duties very seriously. Luke writes

about the couple following the strict customs of their faith including circumcision and presentation at the Temple. Eventually the family returns to Nazareth, where we can deduce that Mary lived the normal life of a Galilean peasant woman.

As such, she had the responsibility of raising her children and giving them a basic education. We can easily surmise that she brought Jesus up in the full richness of their Jewish tradition.

In John's Gospel, we get further insight into Mary's character as a wise, perceptive and even assertive woman. At a wedding in Cana, Mary notices that the wine is running out before the party is over. This would have been a severe embarrassment to any host and his family in Middle Eastern society. We can only suppose that she also knew what her very special son was capable of. She decides that it is a good opportunity to jump-start Jesus' ministry with a maternal nudge, saying to her son, "They have no wine left." Jesus knows what she is implying he do, and objects at first, but then quietly complies by performing his first miracle, turning water into wine. Mary must have been quite proud! This miracle was a momentous event and Mary was behind the whole thing. From this story, we learn that Mary perceptively seized an opportunity. She knew when to speak and when to sit back. Even after Jesus shies away, she turns to the servants and confidently says, "Whatever he tells you, do it." (John 2:1-11)

For the three years of Jesus' ministry, Mary watched her son as he traveled around the country teaching a new and unorthodox understanding of God. She most certainly knew that the authorities viewed his actions and words with mounting suspicion and apprehension. Jesus threatened the power structure and tenuous equilibrium of a tense but manageable status quo. As the number of followers of Jesus increased, so did the offense of the Roman authorities and Jewish leaders.

As the situation became progressively tense, Mary must have seen the danger coming, yet there was nothing she could do to intervene and protect her son. Eventually, Mary's first-born, remarkable, nonviolent son was arrested, given a swift mockery of a trial, and executed in the hideous manner reserved for the vilest criminals. This is how the Gospel of John records Mary witnessing the execution.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother "Woman, here is your son." The he said to the disciple "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (John 19:25-27)

Mary saw her son tortured and killed. Jesus had been her extraordinary baby, the boy she nurtured and raised up to be the young man she was so proud of. Now, as she sees him painfully tormented and executed by brutal soldiers, she must have wondered if she had done the right thing. She must have questioned if she had done all that she could have done. She must have even doubted the God she clearly devoted her life to.

Following her son's execution we read about Mary once more. In the book of Acts (1:13-14) She is shown as a mature woman who devotes herself to prayer within the early Christian community.

We can surmise that Mary of Nazareth lived out the Jewish ideal of holiness, a holiness found in active participation in the life of the community, sharing both joys and sorrows with family and friends. It seems Mary found comfort and a restored sense of God's presence through fellowship and service to others.

The stories contained in the four Gospels involving Mary reveal a woman who seemed to be very sure of herself, and confident about her place in the community. She was deeply rooted in her orthodox Jewish faith even as it led her down a most unusual and unenviable path, challenging social norms and defying religious expectations.

Throughout history, some traditions have come to elevate Mary of Nazareth to near God-like status. She is often held up as the prime example of compliant submissiveness. After all, she simply believed the angel Gabriel's message and seemingly accepted her terrifying fate unquestioningly and obediently. But even though Mary has been idolized as the model for quiet and subservient womanhood, as we see in both iconography and religious teaching, a careful analysis suggests that she was also uncommonly courageous and determined, wise and perceptive.

Her unique moral imagination and unyielding faith allowed her to see beyond her oppressive and demanding circumstances to a day she was absolutely sure would someday come. A day when God would "fill the hungry with good things and leave the rich empty handed." Mary's prophetic confidence lifted her far beyond a vapid submissiveness to the ridged patriarchal social values sternly imposed in her day. It was her deep, active, conservative faith that liberated this extraordinary woman and carried her through doubt, sorrow, pain and grief.

Bible study: References To Mary Of Nazareth

Matthew

- 1:18-25 The Birth Of Mary's Son Jesus
- 2:13-21 Mary, Joseph And Jesus Flee To Egypt
- 12:46-50 The Family Of Jesus Visit Him During His Ministry
- 13:53-58 Jesus Is Rejected At Nazareth

Luke

- 1:26-38 The Annunciation
- 1:39-56 Mary Visits Her Cousin Elizabeth
- 2:1-7 The Birth Of Mary's Son Jesus
- 2:21-38 Mary Takes Jesus To The Temple
- 2:41-52 Mary & Joseph Lose Jesus In Jerusalem
- 4:16-30 Jesus Is Rejected At Nazareth
- 8:19-21 Jesus' Family Visit Him During His Ministry

Mark

- 3:31-35 Jesus' Family Visits
- 6:1-6 Jesus is Rejected in Nazareth

John

- 2:1-11 Mary & Jesus Attend a Wedding in Cana
- 19:25-27 Mary Witnesses the Crucifixion

Acts of the Apostles

- 1:13-14 Mary in Early Christian Community

NARRATIVE SELECTIONS

Mary's Song of Praise – The Magnificat

46 And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

⁵⁶And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home. (Luke 1:39-56)

Mary Takes Jesus to the Temple

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. ²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' (Luke 2:21-35)

Mary Witnesses the Crucifixion of Her Son

So they took Jesus; ¹⁷and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. ¹⁸There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. ¹⁹Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.' ²⁰Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews", but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews."' ²²Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.' [...]

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (John 19:16-27)

Focus Questions For The Passages:

1. What words or phrases strike you or stick out to you in this passage?
2. Who is Mary in these passages? How would you describe her?
3. How is Mary's story relevant to modern life, especially your own?
4. Have unexpected events occurred in your life that reshaped your future?
5. Have you lived through unexpected events that seem horrible but somehow turn out to be blessings?
6. How does Mary guide Jesus during his life? How do you guide your children or children you know well? How have they guided you?
7. Mary followed the Jewish religious rituals. (Luke 2:21-38) What spiritual rituals do you follow? Which ones have particular meaning?
8. The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) points to divine justice and social reversal. Would you agree that is a dangerous thing for Mary to say out loud? Why?
9. Even in the poverty and oppression of harsh Roman occupation Mary articulates a vastly different world where God will bring down the powerful, and lift up the lowly. She speaks of it as if the coming day is as inevitable as sunrise. What is the role of envisioning a hopeful future even in the desperation of any particular moment? What would envision now?
10. The narrators/editors chose to tell some things and leave other things out. What has been left out of the story that you would like to know about Mary?!

Group Discussion Questions:

1. What are the most interesting moments in Mary's story to you?
2. What image of Mary do you receive from these stories in the Gospels? What are her qualities? Which of Mary's qualities have you tried to imitate in your own life?
3. Mary "pondered in her heart" what was happening to her. What do you think the role of quiet reflection is in the life of a Christian?
4. Do you think Mary had blind faith or was her faith informed in some way?
5. Mary must have doubted God's intentions as she watched her son dying. What is the role of doubt in the spiritual life?
6. Can faith and doubt exist at the same time?
7. God chose a poor woman to give birth to Jesus. Why?
9. What does Mary have to teach us about discipleship?

profile: Thomas

If Jesus could ever overcome doubts and lead believers to faithfulness, surely Thomas is one of the best biblical examples. Known as Didymus (Twin), Judas Thomas, and, of course, "Doubting Thomas," Thomas has long been identified with a skeptical relationship to truth; in fact, some might claim he is the victim of "bad press." Truth be told, many a person of faith has struggled with belief at one time or another. Thus, one might consider whether Thomas was first and foremost a doubter or was he a truth seeker?

The gospel writer John reveals much of the character of Thomas as inquisitive (14:5), doubtful (20:24-25), courageous (11:16), and faithful (20:24-29). While other disciples may have privately wondered what Jesus really meant to them and the world, Thomas was authentic and honest enough to admit his ignorance and be truthful and humble enough to ask. In fact, the example of Thomas might well give credence to the notion that doubt is necessary to lead us to knowledge and provide understanding. Frederick Buechner once wrote, "If you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or you're sound-asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."

Now, Thomas was not simply a man slow to believe, moody, gloomy, and sensing too much the difficulties of faith; he had an honest mind and heroic heart as well. Yes, Thomas doubted Jesus' resurrection, saying he would have to touch His wounds in order to believe (John 20:28), and he asked Jesus how to know where Jesus was going (John 14:5). But, perhaps, even more importantly, Thomas courageously encouraged the disciples to go to Bethany (John 11:16), affirmed that Jesus was Lord (John 20:28), and witnessed the miraculous catch of fish and ate breakfast with Jesus after His resurrection (John 21: 2-7).

While many of the other disciples were fishermen, it is suggested that Thomas was a carpenter and a member of Jesus' immediate family. Like the disciple, John, Thomas was extremely devoted to Christ and, quite frankly, had no desire to live without Him. If Jesus were going to die, Thomas was prepared to die with Him. In essence, Thomas says, "Guys, suck it up; let's go and die. Better to die and be with Christ than to be left behind." Thomas' courage and faith trumped his pessimism.

While Jesus was fair with Thomas, many of us have not been so charitable. Jesus saw his strengths; we see his weaknesses. Jesus saw an honest, inquiring mind and seeking spirit; we see his doubts and hesitation. But, then again, are Thomas' perceived weaknesses meant to be viewed as sins?

Thomas had one of the most active ministries of any of the Twelve. A couple examples of note included evangelizing the nation of Osroene (in what is now eastern Turkey) and traveling to India where he would found the Christian church. Truly, at the end of the day, Thomas should be remembered for his faith and zeal.

Ruffin notes that "according to most Indian traditions, Thomas died of stab wounds on July 3, A.D. 72. The Brahmin priests of Mylapore feared that Christianity would eclipse Hinduism. Several of their number found Thomas praying in a cave near his home and wounded him

with a spear. The apostle dragged himself out of the cave, struggled some distance to a nearby chapel and, in the presence of several of His disciples, grasped a stone cross. According to an account noted by Marco Polo, Thomas prayed, "Lord, I thank Thee for all Thy mercies. Into thy hands I commend my spirit," and entered into rest.

Bible study: John 20:9-31

⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Focus Questions For The Passage:

1. What words or phrases strike you or stick out to you in this passage?
2. Who is Thomas in this particular encounter with Jesus? How would you describe him?
3. How does this story of Thomas exemplify the notion resident in the faith community that people need the company of the faithful to bear one another's griefs, cares, and burdens and to rejoice and be strengthened by one another's faith?
4. What inspires hope in an aching heart?
5. How have you found faith and reason to be in dialogue in your life? Are they at odds or do they work together?
6. How much "evidence" is required for a person to believe, and what constitutes "evidence"? What evidence do you need?
7. When have you felt most like Thomas?

Group Discussion Questions:

1. What do you most respect and admire about Thomas?
2. What surprises you most about Thomas?
3. How are you like Thomas?
4. What is the role of doubt in the life of faith?
5. How do you handle doubts and your need for evidence and facts?
6. How do you acquire faith and belief?
7. How was Thomas a "check" on personalities of the Twelve such as Peter and Judas?
8. Thomas may have seemed cautious. At one point, however, he was the first of the disciples to suggest that they go with Jesus to Bethany (John 11:16), even though it meant walking into enemy territory. What might this suggest about faith in Christ?
9. What does Thomas have to teach us about the costs and joys of discipleship?

profile: Mary of Magdala

What comes to mind when you think of Mary Magdalene? A prostitute? An adulteress? The wife of Jesus? An ancient goddess? What does she look like? Julia Roberts in a biblical version of *Pretty Woman*? A mangy, disheveled, demon-possessed lunatic? Maybe she is the matriarch of a highly secret religious conspiracy. Sometimes historical speculation goes unchallenged. Sometimes, fabrications built on assumptions are passed down from generation to generation and eventually become indisputable truths as authoritative physical laws. One very notable example is the character of the disciple of Jesus named Mary Magdalene. The truth about Mary is that this amazing woman who befriended Jesus of Nazareth and showed him great devotion has been maligned and slandered with great effectiveness through the dark misogynistic corridors of history.

There is nothing in scripture or historical evidence that points to Mary of Magdala's sexuality or promiscuity what-so-ever. Perhaps the confusion starts with her first name. After all, there are quite a few Marys named in the Gospels. We all know Mary the mother of Jesus, but also there is Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus. The mother of James and Joseph is Mary, and then Mary the wife of Clopas. Also, there are three other unnamed women who are specifically identified as sexual sinners. There is a woman with a "bad name" who wipes Jesus' feet with ointment to show her devotion, the promiscuous Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets at a well, and an adulteress caught in the act and hauled before Jesus by the Pharisees to see if he will condemn her.

Untangling the cast of characters, we find Mary Magdalene or Mary of Magdala specifically mentioned by name fourteen times in the gospels. More than any other woman except for Mary, the mother of Jesus. Also, when women are listed, Mary Magdalene is the first name 8 out of 9 times. This is important because in New Testament times, the order in which people are listed carried a certain prominence. Any list of names also implied a social ranking. Because people were ordered by importance, and Mary Magdalene was often first on the list means that she must have had some kind of prominence among the other women. It is highly doubtful that a prostitute would carry that kind of standing. Today's historical, critical bible scholars often characterize Mary Magdalene as articulate, educated, and generous, a woman of ability, courage, and faith. She most certainly was not prostitute or even a promiscuous woman.

Further misunderstanding sometimes occurs even before we are introduced to Mary Magdalene. Just at the end of the seventh chapter of Luke, we read a beautiful story:

One of the Pharisees invited [Jesus] to a meal. When he arrived at the Pharisee's house and took his place at table, a woman came in, who had a bad name in the town. She had heard he was dining with the Pharisee and had brought with her an alabaster jar of ointment. She waited behind him at his feet, weeping, and her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them away with her hair; then she covered his feet with kisses and anointed them with the ointment.

This story of the woman with the bad name and the alabaster jar is often erroneously and

dramatically linked to Mary Magdalene. There are even great paintings depicting this scene with Mary Magdalene at the center. But the next event at the beginning of chapter eight suggests nothing to indicate that the two stories are the same women. Bible scholars can find no evidence that the alabaster jar sinner was Mary of Magdala.

Now after this [Jesus] made his way through towns and villages preaching, and proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom of God. With him went the Twelve, as well as certain women who had been cured of evil spirits and ailments: Mary surnamed the Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Joanna the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, Susanna, and several others who provided for them out of their own resources.

Three interesting insights do emerge from this passage however. First, these women “provided for” Jesus and the Twelve That’s a big deal because it means that these women were well to do, controlled their disposable income, and as such, were respectable figures. Second, they all had been cured of something. Mary Magdalene was freed of “seven demons”. And third, Mary’s hometown was Magdala. Magdala was a thriving center of the fishing industry, a village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, producing smoked fish in large quantities. It’s most likely that her family made money in seafood and Mary financially benefited from that.

Although we have no idea of her age, at some point in her life, Mary met the itinerant miracle worker called Jesus, and he cured her. Mary is the only demoniac in the Gospel that is specifically named. Demons always indicate a serious illness – just what Mary’s affliction was is unknown.

However, it was commonly believed that evil spirits entering the body caused disorders such as schizophrenia or epilepsy. No matter how we think of “demons” today, or by what name we would call it, it’s certain that even *one* can ruin a life and shatter families. Mary is named as having *seven*. Clearly she was a profoundly disturbed woman when she first encountered Jesus. She was victimized and helpless, when suddenly Jesus healed her of this brutal torment. It is very important to note that demons and sin are never linked in scripture. Jesus never once rebuked or spoke harshly to any of the victims of demonic possession. He never said, “your sins are forgiven” to any of them, so it follows that this was also the case with Mary. What we can easily deduce is that after she met Jesus she was a healed woman, totally changed, and completely restored. Imagine her overwhelming gratitude toward Jesus.

Knowing the severity of Mary’s difficulties prior to being healed by Jesus, it is not at all surprising that Mary became a faithful follower and supporter of Jesus and his ministry. What may be surprising is that it seems she was the leader of an entire group of women who supported the Jesus movement financially and travelled with him, most likely preparing meals, drawing water, washing and mending.

These women who followed Jesus and his disciples around the land severely risked their reputations. We can just imagine how some people gossiped because of how taboo it was to have single women out on their own with these men. Yet, even as Jewish mothers warned their daughters about these women, Jesus included them in his teaching and even used women as protagonists in his parables.

It seems evident that Jesus valued women as equals to men. He could have taken money from these wealthy women and insisted that they remained at home. However, he included the women as equal disciples to the twelve men. Jesus never treated women as was considered normative in that culture. He valued their dignity and worth. They were able to sit at his feet and listen to him teach. Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna and the other women also became keepers of the truths Jesus taught them and undoubtedly carried these teachings to other women after his death and resurrection. When Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden she called him, "Teacher."

This radical inclusiveness jeopardized Jesus reputation as well as Mary's to the extent that even today Jesus and Mary Magdalene are frequently postulated as lovers if not husband and wife. All too often Mary is wrongly associated as the sexually sinful woman. Films often combine her character with the woman at the well, the adulteress nearly stoned, and the sinner with the ointment. This false degradation of Mary's character serves a false theology that discredits sexuality in general and disempowers women in particular.

Despite the social judgments, Mary Magdalene was fiercely faithful to Jesus. As things began to go badly at Passover time in Jerusalem, she stood by Jesus. If she was close to him during his life, she would be close to him when he faced death. The male disciples fled fearing for their own lives. But Mary fearlessly stood as near to the cross as she could, witnessing every terrible brutality the Romans inflicted. When he was finally dead and the soldiers took him down from the cross, Mary led the charge of preparing his body for the funeral. Because the Sabbath was about to begin, the ointments and spices needed could not be bought. Mary was so anxious to tend the body of Jesus that she travelled to the tomb in the dark even before the Sabbath was over.

After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene first. This formerly broken, demonically crazed, madwoman, who he had healed of seven demons just three years earlier, was the one who he entrusted with the critical message of his resurrection. It could be because she is the one who knew more than the others what it is like to be spiritually dead in the clutches of horror. She also knew what it was like to be completely restored spiritually through encountering Jesus. Isn't there a way that it seems so right for Mary to be the messenger because she is the one person who could understand who this risen Jesus is – given that she has already, in some way, risen herself?

It's clear that Jesus saw Mary as a unique person in whom the life and power of God flowed with the same degree of intensity as it did Peter or any of the others.

The gospels tell of a woman disciple with a fierce devotion that was motivated into action by the enormous gratitude. She had been freed from a life of severe bondage and continual terror. While other disciples were called, Mary chose to follow, even though it cost her everything, money, prestige, family, and social standing. She was energetic, caring, fearless, persevering, and loyal to the end. Mary was a leader to the women, cared for the disciples and feared no one – not Roman soldiers or mysterious angels, not the male disciples, not even the risen Christ. Mary's devotion was from the center of her heart and would not be moved. She had a profound and pure affection for Jesus that molded her into an exceptional model of discipleship that everyone can aspire to.

Bible study: Gospel references to Mary Magdalene

Matthew

- 27:55-61
- 28:1-10

Mark

- 15:40-41
- 16:1-11

Luke

- 8:1-3
- 23:44-49
- 23:54-56
- 24:1-11

John

- 19:25
- 20:1-18

NARRATIVE SELECTIONS

The First Easter

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come; see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” (Matthew 28:1-6)

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” (John 20:11-17)

He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. (Mark 16:9)

And Then What Happened?

¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. (Luke 24:10-11)

Focus Questions For The Gospel Passages:

1. What words or phrases strike you or stick out to you in these passages?
2. Who is Mary in the final encounter with Jesus? How would you describe her?
3. How is the story relevant to modern life, especially your own?
4. Compare characters and elements in the story with your experience of the modern world. Mary is a central witness of the Resurrection, yet is not at first believed. The women followers of Jesus are given very little space in the gospel accounts. Do women in our community experience the same side-lining?
5. Why do you think Mary disappeared from Scripture after seeing Jesus on Easter?
6. Where do we get our ideas and thoughts about the disciples and other characters in the Bible? How does that inform how we think of God?
7. How/do you think God heals?
8. The narrators/editors chose to tell some things and leave other things out. What has been left out of the story that you would like to know?

Group Discussion Questions:

1. What was your idea of Mary Magdalene before reading this material?
2. What do you think the Bible tells us of Mary Magdalene's character? What kind of woman was she?
3. What does Mary have to teach us about the costs and joys of discipleship?
4. Why do you think Jesus chose to appear to Mary first?
5. How might the story of Mary Magdalene been different if Mary Magdalene had been Mark Magdalene?
6. Do you think it's easier to find God when, like Mary, you have been given a second chance? Why or why not? Has this been your experience?
7. What "demons" have you been set free from or overcome or conquered? Depression, cancer, nightmares, rage, self-injurious behavior, violent behavior, deep anguish, torment? Have you been set free? How?
8. How/do you think God heals?

profile: Judas

In the popular imagination, there is something almost sinister about Judas Iscariot, the consummate biblical traitor. Ironically, before Judas's treachery, "Judas" was a favorite name that meant "praise to God." In fact, Judas's name was a form of Judah, meaning "Jehovah leads."

Surely, his parents must have had great hopes for him to be led by God. Curiously, we have come to think that no one among the Twelve was more clearly led by *Satan* than Judas was, in his demonstration of human frailty.

Judas, a Judean, was the only one of the Twelve not a Galilean; in short, Judas was an "outsider." In fact, the meaning of "Iscariot" identified that Judas and his father, Simon Iscariot, came from Kerioth. The truth is that it is extremely difficult to find objective facts about Judas because the only records we have of him were written after his betrayal led to the death of Jesus.

He was the only one appointed to the office of treasurer (subsequently to disgrace it). Given that responsibility, Judas must have been considered capable, trustworthy, and honest during the time he was treasurer. Plus, who would question his loyalty? What was going on within Judas during the three years he spent with Jesus that would cause his heart to grow hard and hateful? Did it?

Some scholars suggest that Judas was a member of the Zealot sect known as the Sicarii, who were 'dagger-bearing assassins' intent on defeating the Romans. When Judas heard about Jesus, he must have become persuaded that this was the true Messiah, the hoped-for Christ who would overthrow the foreign oppressors and restore the kingdom to Israel. Judas could see that Jesus had powers like no other human. To Judas, Jesus was surely an attractive figure.

What motivated Judas? A desire for selfish gain? Did Judas choose monetary gain over friendship? Or was it power or worldly ambition? Could it have been avarice or greed? Or was it some high or noble purpose or cause, embodied in Jesus Himself, that drew Judas into a select group of Jesus' friends?

What we know of Jesus tells us that he would not have chosen Judas as a disciple if he did not believe that Judas was brimming with great promise and strong potential. Did Jesus misjudge Judas? Or did Jesus know more than anyone else regarding the precise, pre-determined role that Judas would have to play in history?

The late John Claypool raised a couple interesting scenarios about Judas's betrayal. Could it be that Judas "panicked when he saw how quickly the tide turned after the crowd's adulation of Jesus on Palm Sunday, and he realized the grim determination of the authorities to put him away? He could have seen he was clearly on the losing side and jumped ship to keep from being harmed along with Jesus." Or, could it be that, on the evening of the first Palm Sunday, Judas was extremely distraught that Jesus would not lift a

finger for a military revolution? Thus, Judas "caused Jesus to be handed over to the Romans with full confidence that he would be compelled to use his charisma and influence...to resist the powers of Roman conquerors." Alternately, some have depicted Judas as the only one amongst the disciples to understand what Jesus meant when he said "my hour has come." Did he, perhaps, sacrifice himself, that Jesus might sacrifice *himself*?

The amount of money Judas received for the information on Jesus' whereabouts was a pittance. And as soon as he realized what was happening, he found himself in a hell of his own making. Afflicted with unbearable misery and deeply remorseful, Judas committed suicide.

Judas's life, riddled with mixed motives, and perhaps hypocrisy, reminds us that not all who claim to follow Jesus are faithful to him, God's goals, or even God's Realm. Indeed, is it possible to be near Jesus and connect with Him on one level while harboring less-than-Christlike virtues and values on another?

In some respects, Judas is a tragic example of lost opportunity if not the epitome of wasted privilege as one of the Twelve. He exemplifies the ugliness and danger of spiritual betrayal and the cost to be born of selling one's "soul to the devil." But the real question is: who is the devil in our world?

Bible study: **Matthew 26:14-16, 20-25, 47-50; 27:3-5**

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him. ²⁰When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; ²¹and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." ²²And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?" ²³He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." ²⁵Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He replied, "You have said so."

⁴⁷While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him." ⁴⁹At once he came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. ⁵⁰Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. ³When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." ⁵Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.

Focus Questions For The Gospel Passage:

1. What words or phrases strike you or stick out to you in this passage?
2. Who is Judas in this particular encounter? How would you describe him?
3. What factors may have caused Judas to betray Jesus?
4. Do you feel any sympathy for Judas? Why or why not?
5. What were Judas's strengths? His weaknesses?
6. What, if anything, does Judas remind us about yourself?
7. What does Judas have to teach us about the costs and joys of discipleship?
8. Was Judas a divine catalyst essential to the divine plan? Why or why not?
9. Was Judas helpless to resist evil? Is anyone helpless to resist evil? What is evil?
10. Was there a way Judas could "make things right" after the betrayal?

Group Discussion Questions:

1. In considering the whole person, what are the admirable qualities of Judas?
2. Where/did Judas "go wrong?"
3. What contributes most to Judas's hypocrisy? And to our own?
4. What do you think motivated Judas most --- greed, ambition, pride or wicked desire?
5. What motivates our own lives of faith and practice?
6. What does Judas have to teach us about the costs and joys of discipleship?
7. What do we understand about divine love/favor based upon the relationship of Jesus and Judas?
8. What does it mean to "abide in Christ" and how does one go about doing that?
9. Why is there evil in the world? What is it?
10. Is it human nature to say things and do things with mixed motives? Do we ever do things with utterly pure motives? Why or why not?