



THE WEEK THAT CH

“HE WAS CRUCIFIED FOR US UNDER PONTIUS PILATE; HE SUFFERED AND WAS BURIED. THE THIR D DAY HE ROSE AGAIN, ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURE.”

—NICENE CREED, A.D. 325

JESUS' PASSION DON'T MISS IT!

BY GREG ALBRECHT

For almost 2,000 years men and women have been confronted with the cross and the empty tomb. Hiding behind the skirts of religion, humans have skillfully discovered many ways to deny, revise and shift the focus when confronted

with the Passion of our Lord. Traditional religion blamed the Jews for Jesus' crucifixion. For generations Christians have said, “We weren't there—we didn't do it.”

The soldiers who crucified him threw dice for Jesus' robe, while the disciples with whom Jesus lived and traveled for three years ran away, unable to bear the reality of Jesus' crucifixion.

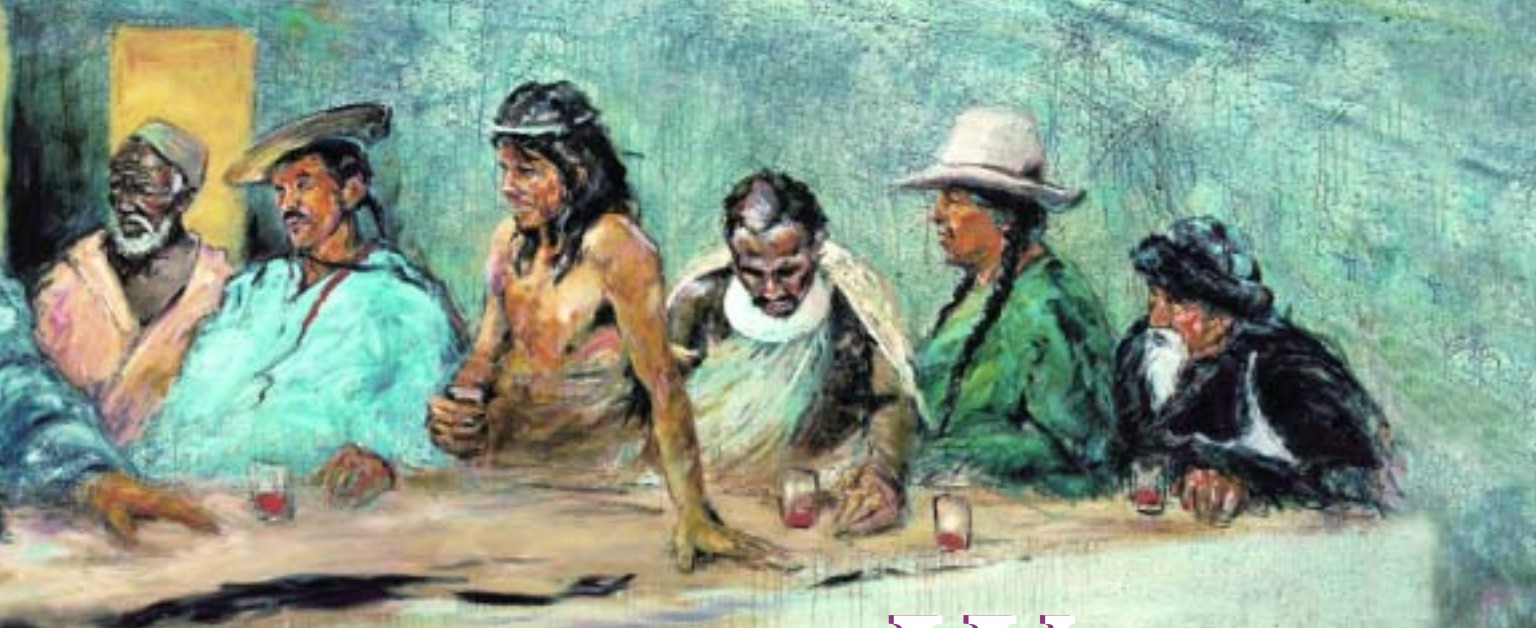
Human nature has not changed in the almost 2,000 years that have transpired since the Passion of Jesus Christ. We humans still look for diversion from the reality of the cross and empty tomb. We hide from Jesus, diverting our attention to the Easter bunny and chocolate eggs. We still run the other way when confronted with Jesus' claim to be the Lord of our lives.

We may be like the soldiers who crucified the Son of God, diverting

our attention by entertaining ourselves at the foot of the cross (John 19:23-24)—or we may be like his disciples who run away from the brutal reality of the penalty of sin (Matthew 26:56)—or we may emulate Peter in denying and disowning Christ as he pays the ultimate penalty on our behalf (Matthew 26:69-75). God's children—missing the eternal, transfixed by the temporal. Truth is often hard to face, so we run away.

Avoiding the Truth of the Cross

As Jesus gives himself voluntarily as the Lamb of God, atoning for our sins on the cross, we humans are often preoccupied with our games, our squabbles, finger-pointing and fault-finding. As he pays the ultimate ransom—paying a debt he did not owe because we owed a debt we could not pay—we search for escape. A diversion, an explanation or a justification.



CHANGED THE WORLD

In our quest to divert our attention away from the truth of the cross, throughout history we have been obliged and enabled by scholars, theologians, authors, writers and, within the relatively short history of film, movie producers and directors. Many have blazed trails to help us revise the discomfort of the cross, by redacting and editing the Bible and devaluing Jesus. Many have attempted to re-create a real or historical Jesus, in our image, after our likeness, so that we humans will be more comfortable.

Religion, as distinct from authentic, biblically-based Christianity, has helped us run from and deny the cross by taking us on long, legalistic detours that have nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Passion About *The Passion*

As we go to press with the March/April issue of *The Plain Truth*, Mel Gibson's movie about the last 12 hours of Jesus' human life, *The Passion*, is being prepared for general release. Passion about *The Passion* has been growing for almost a year—some cynics believe because of a well-orchestrated public relations campaign that pushed all of the right buttons among key religious constituencies.

about the painting

The Last Supper with Twelve Tribes was painted by artist Hyatt Moore to commemorate the new covenant, the inclusion of all peoples under God. It is 20 feet wide by 4.5 feet high, oil on canvas.

People groups depicted (from left) are: Crow of Montana, Berber of North Africa, Masai of Kenya, Chinese, Ecuadorian, Afghan, Jesus, Ethiopian, Tzeltal of Mexico, Canela of Brazil, Papua New Guinean, Salish of British Columbia, Mongolian.

To purchase prints, for more information about the painting or artist Hyatt Moore, please visit www.hyattmoore.com.

Religious concerns about *The Passion* include:

- Some Jewish leaders believe that a movie that is faithful to the New Testament accounts will further incite anti-Semitic rhetoric and behavior. It is true, of course, that Jesus was a Jew, the founder and hero of the story of Christianity. It is also true that religious Jews engineered his death because he represented a threat to their religion. Many Jews are concerned that the biblical statement quoting religious Jews of Jesus' day as saying "Let his blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27:25), will be revived and used as a basis for more anti-Semitism, as it has been in the past. History records that some Christians did brand Jews as Christ-killers to justify centuries of anti-Semitism.

- Many in Hollywood march to the beat of their own anti-Christian religion, believing that Jesus and

Christianity should not be promoted, but attacked and minimized. There are enormous implications if Jesus is and was who he said he was.

- Those of religious persuasions who dislike and even hate either Jews or Christians, or both, and see *The Passion* as an opportunity to drive a wedge between Jews and Christians.

We are fighting at the foot of the cross. We are so distracted with finger-pointing and finding blame (and in the process attempting to justify ourselves) that we are missing the point. Every spring the Passion of Jesus, the events leading up to his voluntary sacrifice in our stead, as well as the crucifixion and the resurrection that followed helps return our attention to the bedrock truth of Christianity. The focus is not upon who was to blame for Jesus' death, but upon why he did what



Scenes from *The Passion of the Christ*, by Mel Gibson. From top, Jesus sits with the disciples at the last supper; Mary, played by Maia Morgenstern; Jesus, played by Jim Caviezel; Simon of Cyrene (Jarreth Merz) helps Jesus carry his cross.

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he did, and what it means for us.

Passionate Reviews

David Horowitz, whose own views and perspectives have matured during his long history in political debate, writes after previewing *The Passion*, "It is an awesome artifact, an overpowering work. I can't remember being so affected by a film before. It is extremely painful to watch and yet the violence is never gratuitous... It is as close to a religious experience as art can get."

Columnist and author David Limbaugh writes, "After having had the privilege of attending a private screening [of *The Passion*] I am even more convinced of its value. The movie, which depicts the final 12 hours in the life of Jesus Christ, was so deeply moving and profound one cannot do justice to it by attempting to describe it in words. No punches are pulled here, no emotions are spared, no sensitivities are coddled. It is a depiction of suffering, agony, passion and raw uncensored violence visited on one man (and God) who volunteered for the indescribable torment out of his sheer love for mankind."

Limbaugh continues, "The movie ...is not about judgmentalism, blame and finger pointing, but love and redemption. It does not convey a message of selective condemnation, but universal hope. After all, as sinners, we are all culpable in Christ's death, as Gibson points out, careful to confess his own responsibility."

Deal W. Hudson writes in the British magazine, *The Spectator*; "Gibson's film of the *Passion* follows the Gospel account in depicting a story of forgiveness, not retribution...One thing is clear: *The Passion* will not inspire hatred towards the Jews, among some viewers at least it will inspire faith in Jesus Christ. That is, I think, in the end what most of Gibson's enemies fear: The restoration of tradi-

tional Christianity and its faith in the God/Man."

Mel Gibson's Mission

Mel Gibson seems to have followed Jesus' teaching by storing up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:20) as he has spared no expense, much of it personal, in bringing *The Passion*, his heart and passion for almost ten years, to the big screen. Major studios refused to touch this movie about Jesus, based solely upon the biblical gospel accounts, spoken in the original language of Aramaic in which the dialogue was originally uttered. A movie about Jesus in a dead language?

One of the most powerful men in the entertainment business, Gibson persisted with his ten-year labor of love. He explains, "When I was growing up, the whole story of the *Passion* was very sanitized and distant, it seemed to me very much like a fairy tale. Then from about the age of 15 to age 35, I kind of did my own thing as it were, not that I didn't believe in God, I just didn't practice faith or give it much consideration. I went through that period in my life where you put a lot of other things first. So coming back 20 years later it seemed so distant, you know? I had to reconsider and say to myself, now hang on a minute, this isn't a fairy tale and this actually happened. This is real."

Gibson portrays Jesus as our Savior, who gave himself that we might live. One of the brief glimpses of Gibson in the movie is of his hand placing the palm of Jesus on the cross—a clear statement of Gibson's own willingness to accept his own guilt, along with all mankind, for the death of Jesus Christ.

This spring Mel Gibson brings *The Passion* to our movie theaters, the temple where some North Americans worship, with a story that could change hearts and minds. Whether you see *The Passion* or not, by all means let the cross of Christ and his empty tomb renew your life, and come to Jesus, who is the "resurrection and the life" (John 11:25) and "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). □

The Blood That Was Spilled

BY ELI KNAPP

Communion Sunday was shaping up to be like every other communion Sunday. The opening hymn, the preacher's Calvary-slanted sermon, the giving of tithes and offerings and of course—the passing of the Lord's sacraments. In the background, an elderly woman sang the “Old Rugged Cross” into a microphone fixed too high on the stand. Despite standing on her toes, the “Old Rugged Cross” did not become much more than a whisper.

The two ushers, slightly out of sync, made their way down the aisle with trays of red grape juice. One was a heavysset, middle-aged man in jeans with suspenders that sank into his wrinkled white button-up. The other usher was older, rail thin, in a black suit about as ancient as he was.

Communion Is Messy

A dazzling young lady with long legs, complementary high heels, sculpted eyebrows and perfect skin was staring into the lap of her flowery white dress. She was stained. Hopelessly. Tissues and handkerchiefs were replayed down the row. At first she dabbed at the blotch, then rubbed. Then scrubbed. My rehearsed prayers of repentance faded as I watched transfixed. The whisper of the “Old Rugged Cross” continued.

Others in the row tactfully returned to bowed heads, but glances of the accident scene were still stolen. Children, though, were openly captivated as was everyone in my row. For us, it was easy to watch without risk of being labeled rude and inappropriate. I couldn't help myself.

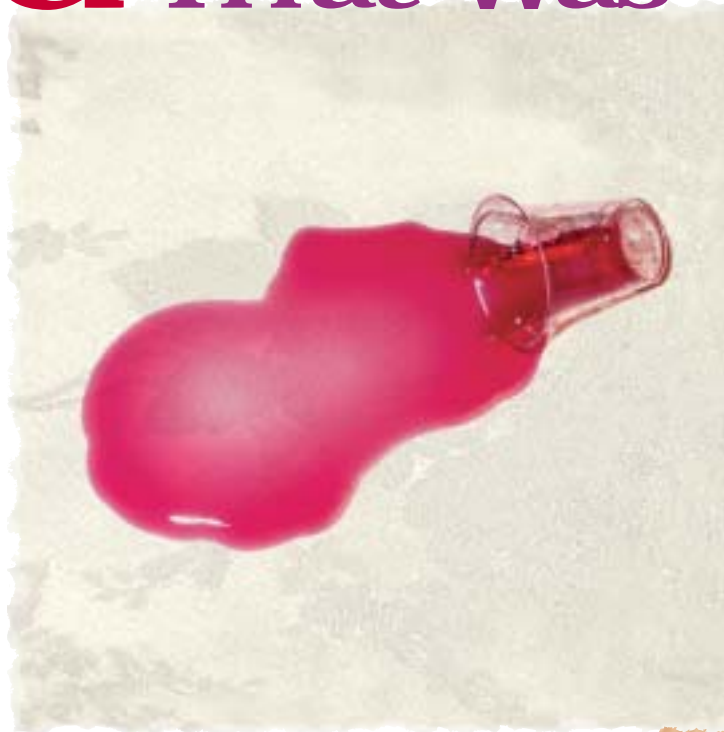
After over two decades of communion Sundays, I had at last personally witnessed Jesus' spilled blood in a most poignant way. And I could witness the witnesses. I was able to see how the young woman and onlookers responded to the spilled blood of Christ.

The woman's emotions ran full circle, from a flushed appearance to deep embarrassment mingled with anger, as she scrubbed at the darkened blotch with tissue after tissue without success. Eventually, she stopped and simply sat. Her communion was done.

I, too, sat dazed. Jesus' blood was messy. His punishment and crucifixion had been downright awful. And it had left a stain—on everybody. I rarely think of what punishment and agony Jesus Christ went through for us—for me. I don't like to. It's gross. But I realize now more than ever that I need to. Jesus spilled blood on me, too, on me personally. To fully appreciate this in my comfortable nation in my comfortable house in my comfortable clothes in my comfortable body—I must make myself wholly *uncomfortable*.

Jesus' Suffering On the Cross

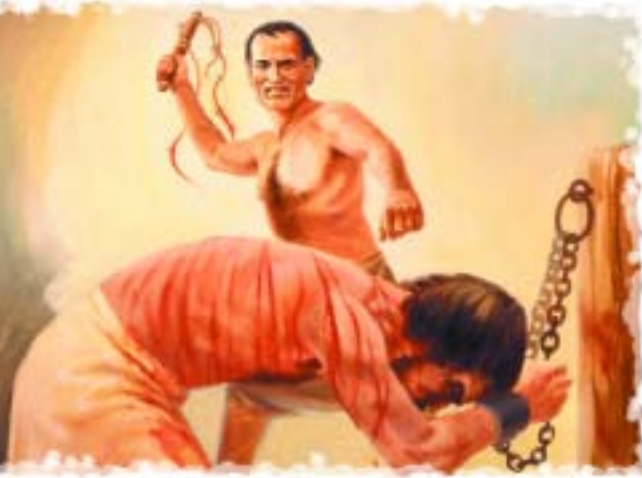
I begin thinking about the flogging Jesus endured just before his crucifixion. Roman floggings consisted of thirty-nine lashes of a whip on the victim. The whip



would be made of braided leather thongs with metal balls and pieces of sharp bone woven into them. Deep bruises and contusions would develop where the whip would strike the flesh. With continued blows, these bruises broke open, and Jesus' blood began to spill. More and more flowed as the pieces of sharp bone in the whip tore and ripped Jesus' exposed flesh. The cuts went so deep that often the victim's spine emerged from the shredded back.

The blows of the whip were not limited to the back. The shoulders, buttocks and back of the legs were also struck. The third century historian Eusebius described a flogging when he wrote, “The sufferer's veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.” Roman floggings were so brutal that ensuing crucifixions were sometimes unnecessary. The victim would already be dead. Unfortunately, Jesus managed to survive.

MONTE WOLVERTON—PTM



A routine communion Sunday is a horrible oxymoron. There is nothing routine about it. The Savior of the world was stretched out on a cross. I am shaken. The blood keeps flowing.

Dr. Alexander Metherell, a medical doctor and a consultant to the National Institute of Health of Bethesda, Maryland, asserts that Jesus most likely entered hypovolemic shock after being flogged. Hypovolemic shock kicks in after an individual has lost a large quantity of blood. Metherell explains, "This does four things. First, the heart races to try to pump blood that isn't there; second, the blood pressure drops, causing collapse or fainting; third, the kidneys stop producing urine to maintain what volume is left; and fourth, the person becomes very thirsty as the body craves fluids to replace the lost blood volume." The gospel accounts record this as Jesus car-



ried the horizontal beam of his cross. Soon, he collapsed and a Roman soldier ordered another to carry the cross for him. And then, Jesus exclaimed, "I thirst," at which point a sponge of vinegar was thrust in his face.

I am repulsed and horrified by the thought of a Roman flogging. My world is so different. I complain about paper cuts. Jesus had the horror of anticipating each and every blow upon his body. It was a river of blood.

At the site of the Crucifixion, Jesus laid down in an outstretched position and his hands were nailed with six-inch nails into the crossbeam. The nails were driven through the median nerve in the wrists, the largest nerve that extends to the hands. The nerve would have been completely crushed by the nail.

Dr. Metherell explains the pain Jesus endured by comparing it to when you hit your funny bone by banging your elbow. This is the ulna nerve. "Picture taking a pair of pliers and squeezing and crushing that nerve. That would be similar to what Jesus experienced." At this point, the crossbar onto which Jesus was nailed was raised and attached to the vertical stake that was already in the ground. The feet were then nailed and Jesus underwent more nerve breaking.

A Routine Communion?

All of my communion Sundays pound their way back into my head. "My body broken for you..." A routine communion Sunday

is a horrible oxymoron. There is nothing routine about it. The Savior of the world was stretched out on a cross. I am shaken. The blood keeps flowing.

But there's more. Those victims unlucky enough to survive the flogging and nails were subjugated to a slow death by asphyxiation. The stresses on the muscles and the diaphragm leave the chest in an inhaled position. To exhale,



Jesus had to push up on his feet so the tension on the feet would be momentarily eased. This caused the nail to tear through the foot as it came to an eventual lock with the tarsal bones. Once Jesus exhaled, he relaxed down to let in another breath. And so on. With each tension and release, Jesus would scrape his mangled back against the rough wood of the cross. Before long, he hit exhaustion as his heart beat erratically. Cardiac arrest ended the torment. It is finished.

But the spilled blood remains.

It is messy. It is uncomfortable. It is grace. And therefore, it is necessary.

Jesus commanded us to take the sacraments "in remembrance of me." And we must remember it all, even the distasteful. The dazzling young woman had her flowery white dress destroyed. The God of the universe had himself destroyed. All so we don't have to be. The elderly lady is no longer whispering the "Old Rugged Cross." She's belting it out. □

Eli Knapp lives in New York.

ILLUSTRATIONS ON THIS PAGE BY KEN TUNELL—PTM

It Isn't Over Until ...

BY Kenneth Gible

There they crucified him..." With those four short words from John's gospel (John 19:18, CEV), we have reached the climax of the story of salvation. It's the story of love so amazing, so divine, that, although two millennia of Good Fridays have come and gone, we are no nearer to understanding it, grasping it, than were the believers who have gone before us.

"There they crucified him..."

With those four short words, the Christian faith makes a radical departure from every other world religion. For Christianity alone dares to proclaim a crucified God. No other religion proclaims a Savior who died a criminal's death on a gallows.

"There they crucified him..."

And that, they thought, was that!

When they saw him hanging on that cross, saw him nailed there, stretched out between the earth and the sky, they thought it was over. Done.

What Pilate Thought

Pilate thought so. Pilate, the Roman governor, who had ordered and witnessed crucifixions aplenty. Did he ever feel sorry for his victims, I wonder? Did he give any thought to the physical agony of the ones he crucified? Maybe,



maybe not. But whether he did or not, whether or not he even thought of it as a nasty business, Pilate knew somebody had to do it, and he was that somebody. And in the case of this man called Jesus, Pilate added a touch of humor to the event.

Humor? Yes, but not the kind that brings happy laughter. Instead, it was dark humor; gallows humor, we sometimes call it. It was the same kind of sadistic humor that the Nazis forced upon on those they herded into shower rooms before turning on the deadly gas. It was humor that mocks the ones who are about to die, shames them and so compounds the horror.

Pilate, the would-be humorist, had an inscription written and put on the cross. The inscription read: "Jesus of Nazareth, The King of the Jews" (John 19:19). It's a joke. A sick joke, to be sure, but a joke nonetheless.

Get it? This pathetic, beaten, bruised human creature hanging on the cross is, of all things, a king. Isn't that wild? Look

at him; he's the king of the Jews. Do you get the joke? You beaten-down, pathetic people who have been conquered by Caesar's armies, here is your king. Look at him! This is what happens to anyone who forgets who the *real* king is around here.

This is Caesar's joke. And to make sure everybody got the punch line, Pilate took the trouble to have it written in Hebrew and Greek and Latin.

Not surprisingly, the religious leaders didn't appreciate the joke. They got it, all right, but they were offended. They urged Pilate to do some editing and have the inscription read: "This man *said*, 'I am King of the Jews.'"

No way. That's not a joke at all.

It may be the truth, but it isn't clever, it isn't funny. Pilate's answer was terse, authoritative: "What I have written, I have written."

The truth is, Pilate, that your attempt at humor backfired. You were wrong. Just as all the so-called powerful ones in history have done, you thought you would have the last word. You'll show this "king" who is really in charge.

You see, Pilate, the one you condemned to death was indeed a king, a king who once said, "But I, when



PHOTODISC

I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). And how he is indeed lifted up. His throne is a most unlikely one—two rough pieces of wood planted in the ground.

But this dying Jesus is a most unlikely king. His kingdom is an eternal one. This king makes all the kings, all the Caesars, who ever lived, look like silly little boys playing silly childhood games. What you thought was over, Pilate, has just begun.

What Mary Thought

Hanging on the cross, Jesus looks down and sees his mother standing next to a disciple he loves. He says to his mother, “Dear woman, here is your son” (John 19:26). And he says to the disciple, “Here is your mother” (John 19:27). Both Jesus’ mother and the disciple he loved also thought it was over.

The fourth gospel records only two appearances of Jesus’ mother in his account. She is there at the beginning for the first miracle Jesus performs, at the wedding at Cana. And she is there at the end, when another kind of miracle altogether is unfolding.

What had Mary been thinking and feeling as she watched Jesus go about his ministry of healing and teaching? Had she been apprehensive? Had she worried that he was getting in over his head? Had she heard the rumors that his enemies were out to get him?

Yes, surely. And now she must stand and watch as the child she once nursed, once rocked to sleep, the child whose boyhood bumps and bruises she kissed to make

them all better, this child, her son, is soon to draw his last breath. The agony of Jesus on the cross is hard to imagine. It is equally hard to imagine the agony of his mother who sees the suffering of her son, who thinks that all her prayers and tears on his behalf have come to this—a cruel ending to her son’s life.

What she doesn’t realize is that her dying son is offering her the gift of consolation. By entrusting her to the care of one he loves, Jesus is giving his mother a prelude to resurrection, just as every act of solace and comfort to grieving ones becomes, by God’s grace, a priceless gift, a step forward to a new reality. “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-26).

What the Disciples Thought

And the disciple Jesus loved—in fact, all his disciples? All their hopes, their dreams of glory, are shattered. Never again will they see him reach out and touch a blind man’s eyes and give him sight,

break a few simple loaves into a meal for a multitude or calm an angry sea.

For Peter, especially, such an ending is nearly impossible to bear.



He who had promised to stand shoulder to shoulder with Jesus when the testing time came, he whom Jesus had called “rock,” is devastated by his failure, his denial. Like the other disciples, he had turned tail and run away. Now that Jesus is dead, there is no possibility to ever ask his forgiveness.

As he contemplates what the cross means, Peter simply cannot imagine that it isn’t over. He cannot conceive the possibility of resurrection. Peter is anyone—even you and I—who face the kind of desolation that is not able to see beyond the immediacy of pain. Our sin, our guilt, our grief, can become so intense, so all-consuming, that it



ILLUSTRATIONS ON THIS PAGE BY KEN TUNELL—PTM

What’s over is fear that immobilizes our wills, guilt that cripples our relationship with God and with others and self-hatred that blocks us from becoming the liberated, joyous people God longs for us to be.



takes over completely. We may get to the point of feeling dead inside.

Like everyone who was present on the day Jesus was crucified, you and I may think it is indeed over.

What is my response? Your response? Is it tears?

Perhaps. Tears for his agony. Tears for our complicity in his suffering. Tears for all the sorrows that assail us in this often grief-stricken existence of ours.

Tears are understandable. Tears are appropriate. But tears are not enough. And tears are not the last word.

It Isn't Over Until...

Resurrection is the last word. The tears of Good Friday lead to the gladness of Easter morning. Something is over, all right. For people of the resurrection, what's over is the long night of despair. What's over is *fear* that immobilizes our wills, *guilt* that cripples our relationship with God and with others and *self-hatred* that blocks us from becoming the liberated, joyous people God longs for us to be.

Resurrection means that all the ills that plague us, even death itself, are swallowed up in the ending God makes possible: Eternal life.

Resurrection also means that we are set free to give our lives in service to the world that God so loves. Resurrection people know their lives have meaning, have purpose.

"Feed my sheep" (John 21:17), the risen Jesus said to Peter, who had wept bitter, bitter tears.

And he says it still. The Risen One says to you, to me: *As you look at the cross, are you weeping for me, are you weeping for yourselves? I understand. But then, after the weeping, dry your tears. And go, feed my sheep.*

And maybe, in response, we will answer as the hymn writer did:

But drops of grief can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe. Here, Lord, I give myself away; 'tis all that I can do. □

Kenneth Gibble is a freelance writer whose writing credits include articles, interviews, essays and eight books. He is a church pastor and currently lives in Pennsylvania.

Everything You've Always Wanted to Know About Easter

BY Victor Parachin

The 40 days leading up to Easter are the most important ones of the church year. While many practices and services are familiar to most people, some Easter customs, the language of Lent (such as Maundy Thursday) and even the dating of Easter are confusing to many people. Here is an Easter and Lenten fact sheet.

Easter Lily. At Easter, Christian churches commonly fill their altars and surround their crosses with masses of Easter lilies to commemorate the Resurrection of Jesus and the hope of life everlasting. The lily is associated with Christ because of two Old Testament passages. One is in the Song of Songs 2:1 "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys." Christians have interpreted this verse as a reference to Christ who is their "lily of the valley." The

other reference is found in Hosea through whom God promises a resurrection to Israel if the nation repents. "I will heal their waywardness and love them freely ...he (Israel) will blossom like a lily" (Hosea 14:4-5).

Shrove Tuesday (or Fat Tuesday) is simply the day before Lent begins. No one is certain of the origin of the term *shrove* but some linguists believe it is derived from the old English word *shrive* meaning "to confess." During the early middle ages, Christians were required to attend confession in the week immediately before Lent. Since the Lenten season was

one of fasting, Christians came to do much feasting right before fasting. This took place on Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday. On Tuesday Christians came together to eat and celebrate in ways which were prohibited during Lent. Many of the foods eaten on Tuesday were sweets, thus the



term *Fat Tuesday*. Even today many churches have an annual pancake dinner on Shrove Tuesday.

Lent officially begins 40 days before Easter. Traditionally, it is a period of fasting, cutting back on the amount of food eaten and reducing consumption of meat. It is also a time when Christians reflect on the life of Christ as well as their own spiritual lives. Lent is a time to correct personal faults and shortcomings by confessing those in prayer, asking God's forgiveness and seeking God's help to live a more authentic Christian life.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. The earliest observation

dates back to the sixth century. In Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican churches a special service is held. At that service the priest or minister applies an ash cross on the forehead of worshippers. The ashes are made from the previous year's Palm Sunday—the palm leaves that were used are burned and crushed into ashes.

Palm Sunday was a high point in Jesus' life and ministry. (See Matthew 21:8-9). Just as an American president is greeted by crowds waving American flags, Jesus was greeted by enormous crowds waving palms cut down from nearby palm trees. The crowd in Jerusalem welcoming him was our equivalent of a ticker tape parade for a victorious hero. The crowds

treated Jesus as a great dignitary on Palm Sunday. However, fame is fleeting. In less than a week, Jesus was abandoned by everyone, including his own disciples.

Maundy Thursday comes from the Latin word *mandatum* meaning mandate or commandment. It was on Thursday that Jesus gave us a new commandment: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all will know you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34).



Good Friday is a misnomer because it was really a "bad" Friday—the crucifixion day of Jesus. The day was called *God's Friday* originally, but became lengthened into Good Friday somehow. Some, however, hold to the view that Good Friday

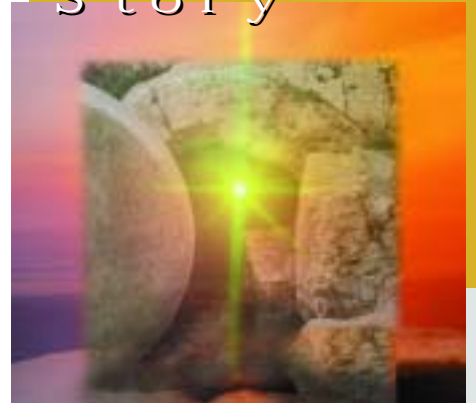
refers to the good gift of salvation accomplished by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Many churches still hold a three-hour service on Friday representing the three hours Jesus hung on a cross. Such services often revolve around Christ's seven statements made from the cross.

Holy Saturday evolved in the church after the fourth century. Prior to that time, only Easter was recognized as a holy or special day. However, during the fourth century all the days of the week prior to Easter were established as holy days. Some churches reserve Holy Saturday as a traditional time for baptism.

Easter Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection, is the most important day of the church year. The date varies from year to year because the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) determined that Easter would be celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox. (There are two times during the year when the length of day and night are equal: The vernal equinox and the autumnal equinox.) Some believe the word *Easter* is derived from the name of an Anglo-Saxon goddess, while others believe the word is derived from an old Norse word for the spring season. Many congregations hold an annual Easter sunrise service. This comes from the fact that "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary" first learned of Christ's resurrection "at dawn on the first day of the week" (Matthew 28:1). □

Victor Parachin is a freelance writer in Oklahoma.

The Greatest Story



What do John F. Kennedy and Jesus Christ have in common? Kennedy was greeted in Dallas with flag-waving and cheers, but later that day he was shot to death. Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem to the waving of palms and shouts of praise, but days later he was crucified and buried. Yet the similarity ends there. Unlike mortal human leaders, Jesus is alive! Greg Albrecht tells the Easter story in this powerful and inspiring program.



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