

BIBLE CHALLENGE

A 5 week study of *The Gospels and the Birth of Jesus*

The story so far: As we prepare to enter the New Testament it has been about 400 years since the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem following the return of the exiles from Babylon. During those 400 years following the rise of the Persian Empire the balance of global power shifted to the west. Alexander the Great came from Greece as the next conqueror. He sought to impose Greek language and culture on the world as a way of unifying his far-flung kingdom. His success can be seen even within the Bible in the change between the Old Testament which was originally written in Hebrew and the New Testament written in Greek, a language that came to function in the ancient world much as English functions in our modern world.

Following Alexander's death at a young age his empire was split into three parts controlled by his generals, two of whom over time established dynasties. These dynasties battled repeatedly to control Jerusalem and the Holy Land because of their strategic importance. One of the regional kings who came to power, Antiochus Epiphanes, declared that sacrifices should be offered to the Greek gods in every Judean town and village, including the building of a pagan altar in the temple at Jerusalem. That sparked a revolt, which led to a full scale war in which the Jews, led by a family named Maccabeus, threw off their foreign rulers and established once again for the first time in four hundred years their own independent Jewish kingdom. That kingdom lasted about 80 years at which time a new power from the west, Rome, established its authority in 63 BC. The area that had once been Israel and Judah became a province of the Roman Empire and yet again the people had to live under foreign occupation of the land in which God had promised to establish his kingdom.

Much of this inter-testamental story is found in books that are referred to as the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha were books (15 different books or parts of books) that were not included in the Hebrew list of books that make up what we call the Old Testament, as they were considered questionable or of secondary status. But Greek speaking Jews living in Egypt had a different version of what we call the Old Testament which included these books. They were accepted as biblical by the early church in the years following Jesus' death and resurrection. When Martin Luther translated the Old Testament into German during the time of the Reformation, he used the Hebrew collection of books which did not include the Apocrypha. Since there had always been some dispute over the inclusion of the Apocrypha in the list of books of the Old Testament it became standard practice during the Reformation to exclude them. In translating the Bible Luther collected the Apocrypha as an appendix and said of them that they "are not held equal to sacred scripture, and yet are useful and good for reading". The Bible used by Roman Catholics continues to use the list of Old Testament books used by Greek speaking Jews, which included the Apocrypha. That's why today, if you look at a Bible used by a Roman Catholic you will often find "extra" books.

As we begin the New Testament story the power of Rome dominates the world. After having been scattered across the world and having endured the brutal rule of a

succession of foreign empires, without their own king and their own kingdom, God's people desperately look toward the day when they will witness God's promise fulfilled that he will reign over all the nations. They long for a messiah who will restore their fortunes and return them to the glory days of King David. It is into this situation that Jesus is born.

Monday:

Read: Malachi 4:5-6; Luke 1:1-25

What to look for:

- Yes, we are beginning the New Testament today, but we start by looking at the last two verses of the Old Testament. The final words of Malachi, and of the Old Testament, are to wait for the coming of Elijah (recall from Week 22 that the great prophet Elijah did not die but was taken up into heaven in a chariot (2 Kings 2).) And so people expected that Elijah would return someday as a precursor to the coming of the Messiah. In the announcement of the coming birth of John (the Baptist) Luke establishes a clear link between his Gospel and the Old Testament. In John, a type of Elijah has returned (Luke 1:16-17) fulfilling the promise made in the final verses of Malachi.
- Note for whom Luke is writing his Gospel (1:4). It is a Greek name meaning that Luke is directing his gospel to the gentiles (non-Jews). Compare this to Matthew 1:21-23 in which Matthew notes that "all this took place to fulfill..." Matthew uses this phrase numerous times throughout his gospel indicating that it is written to Jews to show that Jesus is the Messiah since Jesus fulfills all the Old Testament promises.
- King Herod is a puppet king installed by Rome.

Tuesday:

Read: Luke 1:26-56

What to look for:

- Note vs. 32-33. In foretelling the birth of Jesus the angel Gabriel echoes the promise that had been made to David, that David's kingdom and throne would be established forever (2 Samuel 7:6-13). Jesus is the one who will inherit the throne of David.
- Remember last week in the book of Daniel how we noted the theme in which wave after wave of human kingdoms would rise and fall but God's kingdom would endure forever. The promise is fulfilled in 1:33.
- Mary's song of praise in vs. 46-56 echoes Hannah's song of praise at the birth of Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Note the radical themes of Mary's song: God will scatter the proud, bring down the rulers, lift up the humble, fill the hungry, and send the rich away empty. God intends to turn everything upside down and inside out. Mary's song is like looking at a mirror image in which everything familiar is reversed.

Wednesday:

Read: Luke 2

What to look for:

- Note the ways in which God confirms Jesus' identity in this chapter: Angels announce it to shepherds, two old prophets – Simeon and Anna – recognize who he is, and the teachers in the temple are amazed by him. Based on Mary's song yesterday is it any surprise that the first to receive the announcement of the birth were not the rich or the powerful but those at the bottom of the social order, namely shepherds?
- The title that Jesus is given in vs.11 is important. *Savior* is the title that the emperor, Augustus, would use for himself. It is a political title from the Greek and Roman world, the savior of the world. The title *Christ* is the Greek word for a Jewish title meaning *Messiah*, the anointed one, with which Old Testament kings of Israel would assume the throne. Put them together and in Jesus we have God's anointed one whose salvation extends to the whole world.
- Anna and Simeon recognize in Jesus that God's promised deliverance for his people has finally arrived.

Thursday:

Read: Mark 1:1-11

What to look for:

- Each of the four Gospels, though they tell the same story, presents that story from a different perspective. As an example of this you might note that, having read the Christmas story in Luke the last two days, now we turn to Mark and find that he begins his gospel with no Christmas story but instead begins straight away with the beginning of Jesus' public ministry at his baptism. While Luke has shepherds and no wise men in his birth narrative, Matthew is just the opposite, and John skips the Christmas story and begins with creation.
- Note that John is baptizing in the Jordan River. See Joshua 3 – Just as God's people went through the Jordan to enter the Promised Land, now they are going through the waters of the Jordan in a baptism of repentance for forgiveness to once again make a new start.
- In being baptized, Jesus makes no distinction between himself and the rest of the people. He is a part of Israel and identifies with the people, with us, in our sin.
- Once again we get confirmation of who Jesus is by way of a voice from heaven.

Friday:

Read: Luke 4:1-13

What to look for:

- Following his baptism the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness for a time of testing. Matthew and Mark both share versions of this story. Note how throughout this story Jesus repeatedly quotes the Old Testament. Jesus relies on the same weapon in the face of temptation that we also have – the scriptures.
- Remember how long the Israelites wandered in the wilderness following their escape from Egypt? Forty years. Note how long Jesus' time of temptation is in the wilderness. Forty days. The lessons the people learned in the wilderness are repeated here by Jesus in his wilderness.
- In response to the devil's suggestion that Jesus turn stone to bread to feed his hunger Jesus replies with a quote from Deuteronomy 8:13 that echoes the lesson the Israelites learned about Manna from heaven. Since they were not allowed to hoard the Manna it taught them to live, not by bread but by faith.
- In the second temptation, vs. 5-7, the devil tries to convince Jesus that the world is ultimately under the devil's control. Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6:13, a lesson that the Israelites needed to learn and relearn in the desert, that there was no God to serve but the God of Israel.
- In vs. 9-11 the devil takes to quoting scripture himself, from Psalm 91. The devil's invitation here is for Jesus to respond to God's promises, not with faith, but with demands that God fulfill those promises on Jesus' terms. Jesus counters with Deuteronomy 6:16 which summarize what Israel had learned in the desert so many years before as a result of their own habit of testing God.

The Public Ministry of Jesus

The story so far: Last week, as we began exploring the Gospel accounts of Jesus and his ministry, we noted how each of the four gospels presents a picture of him from their particular perspective for their specific audience. Luke is written for gentiles (non-Jewish people) and presents Jesus as having come for all people; Matthew's audience is Jews whom he seeks to convince that the Old Testament covenant has been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah who is presented primarily as a teacher; Mark presents Jesus as a wonder worker of action and deeds; while John seeks to have us know Jesus as the divine savior.

As we move further into the gospel stories we will run into two main groups of people who oppose Jesus. One is the Pharisees. They believe that a strict obedience on the part of God's people to even the tiniest portion of the Law will hasten the day when God will come and reestablish his kingdom. Therefore, they sought to ensure the careful observance of the Law in all its detail, and were particularly disturbed when they perceived Jesus as breaking the Law and encouraging his followers to do so.

The second group was known as the Sadducees and priests. These people took care of the temple and believed that, though the kingdom of God would eventually come, in the meantime they ought to collaborate with their Roman occupiers to try to keep the peace and maintain the right of the people to worship in the temple.

We will continue this week to read from each of the four Gospels as we trace Jesus' story.

Monday:

Read: Mark 2

What to look for:

- Jesus encounters criticism from the very beginning of his ministry, for he does not conform to what the religious leaders expected of him. Note the things in this passage that are already infuriating them: Jesus claims to forgive sins (vs. 5,7) which was something only God could do; he interacted with and sought out personal relationships with those who were considered unclean, unwanted, and undesirable (vs 15-16); he did not require his disciples to observe the old covenant Law.
- Note Mark's style of writing. This chapter is typical of Mark in that it is fast-paced, with a series of disconnected episodes. Mark focuses on the big picture and fills his Gospel with action and crowds.

Tuesday:

Read: John 3

What to look for:

- Note the contrast to Mark's style of writing from yesterday's reading. John is slower paced and presents a more intimate portrait. A typical way that John presents his material is found in this passage. Jesus makes a statement – "You must be born again" (vs.3) – which is misunderstood (vs.4), giving rise to a deeper, more detailed and complete teaching from Jesus (vs 5-21). This pattern is repeated again and again throughout John's Gospel.
- John's understanding of his own ministry (vs 30) is important for every follower of Jesus to remember. Our ministry and our lives are always about allowing Jesus to become greater as we and our desires become less important.
- Note the verb tense that Jesus uses in vs. 36 in reference to eternal life. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life..." (emphasis added). In John, eternal life is always presented as something people of faith already have and are already living, not something we wait for in the future.

Wednesday:

Read: Luke 4:14-31

What to look for:

- In this passage Jesus returns to Nazareth, his home town, and preaches his first sermon. In his sermon Jesus identifies the direction that his ministry will take. This is Jesus' purpose statement. Note what Jesus says his mission is all about in vs. 18 and 19. What does this suggest about the purpose of our own lives as Jesus' followers, and of the priorities of the church?
- Vs. 21 – the salvation God has promised his people has arrived in the person of Jesus. God has been faithful to Israel in bringing their deliverance.
- The people's reaction in vs. 22 is that they don't see anything. Jesus seems too ordinary. Jesus' response is that they are unable to see because they are expecting something different. In addition, in vs. 23, Jesus recalls an episode from the story of Elijah, reminding his listeners that time and again the people of Israel rejected the prophets God sent, and so salvation was sent to those outside Israel. Once again, in Jesus, God is raising up salvation from inside the people of Israel, but it will be for people outside of Israel.

Thursday:

Read Mark 4

What to look for:

- The theme we noted yesterday, that people did not recognize who Jesus was because they were expecting something else, is a consistent one throughout the Gospels. It is illustrated in these parables in Mark 4.
- Why does Jesus teach in parables, according to vs. 10-13? So that things would be unclear! Jesus doesn't use parables to explain things to people's satisfaction, he uses them, so that people will come to see how little they understand. In Jesus' use of parables, at least as presented in Mark, his main point seems to be that if you try to understand God's kingdom on your own terms – especially if you try to understand it without reference to the cross – you will misunderstand, and the sooner you know that the sooner you will be open to backwards, upside down message that Jesus has come to bring.
- Vs. 26-29 – Jesus is proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has arrived and is breaking in right here and now. Note where the emphasis falls in this parable – on the inactivity of the farmer. Jesus is comparing the Kingdom to a seed that carries within all the power it needs right from the start in a way that seems small and insignificant. But note the contrast between the insignificant beginnings and the final outcome (vs. 28).
- The parable maintains: kingdom is at hand, planted here, and is at work in the world, whether you recognize it or not. The Kingdom of God is something other than we would expect, and yet here it is breaking in like a seed. So don't be fooled by the way things look: It may seem small and tiny, but the fact that the kingdom will bear

fruit is inevitable. Nothing can stop its growth, and even though Jesus' own ministry will seem to end in defeat, like a tree that can split pavement by the power of its growth, the kingdom will thrive and grow and fulfill its purpose.

Friday:

Read: Matthew 4:18-5:16

What to look for:

- Matthew arranges Jesus' teaching into large blocks of material, such as this one which includes the Sermon on the Mount.
- Once again, Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom God intends to usher in is radically different from the expectations of the rest of the people. When they think "kingdom" they have visions of King David and King Solomon and their days of glory when Israel was a powerful and wealthy nation. But the upside down version of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims is characterized by the poor who inherit the kingdom, the meek who inherit the earth, the peacemakers and the persecuted. How does that square with 21st century American values?

The Public Ministry of Jesus, continued

The story so far: We have worked our way through the early days of Jesus' public ministry, following his baptism. This week we continue looking at some of the key passages from Jesus' life.

Monday:

Read: John 6

What to look for:

- Note the flow of this passage. At the beginning of John 6, Jesus is teaching to such enormous crowds that they number in the thousands and he worries that they won't have enough to eat. By the end of the chapter (vs. 66) as these people come to grips with what Jesus is saying about himself, most of the crowd desert him, to the point that he even asks the twelve disciples if they are about to leave him as well. And all of this despite the fact that Jesus performed a miracle in their midst. What does that suggest about the connection between miracles and faith, between our desire for a sign or proof from God and the depth of our faith?
- The story of the feeding of the five thousand is one of few events included in all four Gospels.
- Jesus identifies what the people are after in vs. 26. Having participated in the multiplication of bread and fish the crowd did not react with faith, but with a desire for another miracle. In the Gospels miracles do not necessarily produce faith of themselves.

They serve more as sign posts pointing the way for those who are looking in the right direction.

Tuesday:

Read: John 8:12-18, 28-30, 48-59

What to look for:

- In the Gospel of John Jesus speaks quite often about who he is, many times beginning with the words, "I am..." (vs. 12.) Other instances include, "I am the Bread of Life" (6:35), "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (11:25), and "I am the Good Shepherd" (10:11). The Pharisees want to know who Jesus is (they ask him outright in vs 25), but become incensed by his response (vs. 59) The key to understanding their anger is in realizing that whenever Jesus speaks of himself in terms of "I am..." statements, he is using the name that God gives himself. Way back in Exodus, when Moses encountered God in the burning bush and was asked by him to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, Moses asked "who should I say sent me?" God's reply? "Tell them I AM has sent you." When the Pharisees ask Jesus who he is, Jesus answers by applying God's name to himself.
- Jesus himself gives us no wiggle room. We can't get away with simply calling Jesus a great teacher or a shining moral example without also acknowledging his claims for himself. Jesus claims divinity, he claims to be God. As C.S.Lewis pointed out, either Jesus was who he said he was, or he was crazy because only disturbed people claim to be God.

Wednesday:

Read: Mark 8

What to look for:

- We get another feeding miracle (a different event than the feeding of the 5000 that we read about on Monday) in this passage, followed by a discussion about the Pharisees, a two-part healing of a blind man, Peter's confession of Jesus, and then Jesus' prediction of his death. People won't clearly see who Jesus is until they see him on the cross.
- Note the Disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus in vs. 14-21. This is typical in Mark and present in the other Gospels though less pronounced. The disciples are repeatedly given the opportunity to witness Jesus' miracles, to hear his teaching, to get "inside information" to which the crowds do not have access, and yet consistently the disciples fail to understand who Jesus is or what he is about. You can almost hear Jesus' exasperation in vs. 21. This will culminate in the Passion story when it is the disciples who will flee when Jesus is arrested and Peter who will deny him, while at the same time it will be his enemies that will, unintentionally, proclaim who Jesus truly is.

- Peter does get it right in vs. 27-30, but immediately fails again when he objects to Jesus' prediction of his Passion. Jesus is only understandable as the Messiah, the Savior, in the context of his suffering and death.

Thursday:

Read Luke 9:28-36, 46-62

What to look for:

- This is a pivotal point in the Gospels, a major turning point. God had promised that he would send another prophet like Moses, he'd promised that he would send another Elijah, and here they are talking to Jesus. Jesus has become the centerpiece of these promises.
- The word *departure* in vs. 31 literally in Greek means *exodus*. Moses has been through an exodus, Elijah had an exodus of his own in a fiery chariot, and now Jesus is going to have an exodus, too. Like Moses' exodus in which he led others out of slavery in Egypt, Jesus in his suffering and death will set people free open up the way to eternal life.
- True to form the disciples, though they had just heard Jesus' command to take up their cross and be willing to lose their lives (Mark 8:31-34 from yesterday's reading), now fall to squabbling about who among them is the greatest (vs. 36-38).

Friday:

Read: Luke 9:51, 10:1-24

What to look for:

- From this point on (9:51) everything that takes place in Jesus' ministry takes place on the way to Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus' ministry is fast approaching a climax.
- In sending out the seventy-two Jesus is commissioning them to do what he does, to be his hands and voice in the world. Jesus' own mission will be carried out by those he sends in his name. Their marching orders place them in a situation of dependence upon God for their well-being.
- What does this story suggest for our mission and ministry as a congregation, and for your sense of Calling in your individual life?

The Public Ministry of Jesus, continued

The story so far: Opposition to Jesus is increasing. Those who feel threatened by Jesus continue to be offended by his message of grace, forgiveness, and inclusion. They are scandalized by his habit of mingling with those considered unclean and unacceptable and cannot understand his less than strict adherence to the Law. Jesus is alluding more and more now to his coming suffering and death as he continues to make his way to Jerusalem for the final show-down.

We begin this week to look at the final week of Jesus' life – what is often referred to as Holy Week. It begins with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (also called Passion Sunday) and concludes with the resurrection on Easter. One-third of John's Gospel deals with the final twenty-four hours of Jesus' life. Mark, whose style of writing is fast-paced and leaves out many details, suddenly slows down and devotes twenty-five percent of his Gospel to Holy Week, filling it with many details. This suggests that for the Gospel writers, Jesus' cross was key to understanding his whole ministry and message. There is no getting a hold on Jesus without getting a hold on his suffering and death; he can only be understood in the context of his passion.

Monday:

Read: John 11

What to look for:

- The raising of Lazarus stands as the gateway to the passion story. It is the last and greatest miracle of Jesus, one which finally hardens the opposition against him into a decision to do away with him.
- Note how this story is a foreshadowing of what is about to happen. Faced with Jesus' raising of Lazarus, the Pharisees must act quickly for fear that the people will believe in Jesus, leaving Rome feeling threatened. The irony is that in vs. 50 Caiaphas, without realizing what he is saying, states the ultimate truth of what will happen on the cross – the death of one man, Jesus, will be for the sake of all people that they will not perish. The raising of Lazarus is a foretaste of what awaits on Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Tuesday:

Read: Mark 11:1-12:17

What to look for:

- The first part of Jesus' statement as he cleanses the temple in 11:17 is a quote from Isaiah 56:7. His statement, "You have made it a den of robbers", quotes Jeremiah's indictment of the people in his day who believed that as long as they worshipped God in the temple, they could cheat and act with impunity toward the poor.
- Note the questions with which people are challenging Jesus: The first question (11:28) has to do with the source of Jesus' authority to do and say the things he does; the second question is political in nature (12:13-15). They are looking to trip up Jesus by getting him to declare his lack of allegiance to the emperor. Jesus' answer is that while Caesar has his rightful claim on monetary matters, what belongs to God? Everything.
- Sandwiched into this account is the incident with the fig tree and a parable. The fig tree earned Jesus' ire for its lack of fruit, not unlike the withered nature of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and religious leaders. The parable tells of God's final attempt in Jesus to break through his peoples' stubborn rejection, which will result in Jesus' death just as their ancestors had mocked and killed the prophets.

Wednesday:

Read: Luke 22:1-65

What to look for:

- In week 35, the reading for Friday included the story of the wilderness temptation, which concluded in verse 13 with, “When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him (Jesus) until an opportune time.” That time has arrived (vs. 3-6).
- Recall the story of the Passover from Exodus 11 and 12 (week 8). The people of Israel had been eating unleavened bread at Passover since the days of the Exodus as a reminder of how, on that night so long ago, they had to leave quickly for God was freeing them. When they ate the unleavened Passover bread it was to remember that God brought about deliverance and release. It was that bread, the bread of haste, the bread of deliverance, of which Jesus said, “this bread is my body” (vs. 19).
- At Passover the wine was a reminder of blood, specifically the blood of the spotless lamb that served as protection for the Hebrew people. Those who took the blood of the lamb and marked it on their homes were identified as the people of God, those whom the angel of death would pass over and deliver. When Jesus says (vs 20) that this cup is the new covenant in his blood he is recalling the way in which the destroyer passed over those who were marked with the blood of the lamb. In addition, Jesus says that this wine is the blood of the new covenant, which echoes Jeremiah’s (Jeremiah 31:31 – week 29) prophecy. When Jesus says “This is my blood of the new covenant”, he claims the prophecy of Jeremiah and says that God is keeping his promise through the blood Jesus will shed for them.
- Note the three prophecies Jesus makes in this passage: In vs 21-23 he prophesies betrayal, in vs. 31-34 he prophesies denial, and in vs. 35-37 he says he will be considered a law-breaker. In short order the prophecies are fulfilled: he is betrayed (vs.47-51), he is counted among the lawless (vs. 52-53), and Peter denies him (vs. 54-62). Having noted how quickly Jesus’ prophecies come to pass, note the irony with which this passage ends (vs. 63-65).

Thursday:

Read: Luke 22:66-23:25

What to look for:

- In vs. 66-71 Jesus’ hearing is before the Jewish leaders and the charge raised will be religious in nature, “Are you the Son of God?” When he stands before Pilate the charge will be political (23:3), “Are you after the throne?”
- Jesus’ answer to the religious leaders (vs. 69-70) echoes Daniel 9 and sounds blasphemous – claiming to be the son of man seated in heaven – and therefore deserving of condemnation.

- Note 23:1-2: they accuse Jesus of opposition to paying taxes, which, as we saw on Tuesday, is a lie.
- Since Pilate did not have jurisdiction over the area from which Jesus came, he attempts to pass responsibility for him to Herod (this is a different Herod than the one who was king at Jesus' birth).

Friday:

Read Luke 23:26-56

What to look for:

- Vs. 32-37 – Jesus will save others precisely by *not* saving himself.
- Here is where the story of sin is reversed. Recall the story of Adam and Eve who were kicked out of Eden (paradise) for their crime. In this passage Jesus is crucified between two criminals, two descendants of Adam and Eve, and he invites the repentant one to enter into paradise through him. The thief's prayer (vs. 42) is our prayer as well as we await the fulfillment of Jesus' promise for us, that we too will enter the gates of paradise which, having been off limits since the days of Adam and Eve's first sin, are now opened to us through the sacrifice and death of Jesus.

The Public Ministry of Jesus, continued

The story so far: For those who have been following Jesus, all seems lost. His prediction of suffering, death, and resurrection notwithstanding, his mission has come to look like a failure. His followers have deserted him at the hour he needed them most. His own people have turned him over to the Roman authorities for execution. All that is left for him now is to breathe his last. The forces arrayed against him have won, as they always do. Or so it seems.

Monday:

Read: Mark 16:1-8

What to look for:

- Mark's version of the resurrection is the tersest. Note how most scholars believe he ends the story, and his Gospel, at verse 8 with the women bewildered and not saying anything to anyone. It has the feeling of an incomplete story without an ending (which is why most scholars believe the following verses from 9 through 20 were a much later addition, and because those verses do not show up in any of the oldest manuscripts). Perhaps Mark means for us to understand that the story to continue in our lives, and we must decide what our own reaction to the reports of resurrection will be.
- Note how the angel names Peter specifically to receive the news that the risen Jesus will meet them in Galilee. It was Peter in particular who denied Jesus, now it is Peter in particular who is being invited back into the fold.

- Seeing an empty tomb does not necessarily guarantee a resurrection faith. Seeing an empty tomb produced in these women an initial response of confusion and hesitation. Something more than an empty tomb will be needed to produce an Easter faith.

Tuesday:

Read: John 20:1-18

What to look for:

- In comparing the Easter accounts, for instance reading yesterday's passage from Mark and then reading today's from John, it is clear that there are discrepancies in the Easter reports making it difficult to blend them into a single version. Contrary to being a problem in vouching for the authenticity of the Easter event, the one thing they share in common is the skepticism of those who first experience Easter. After having been told by Jesus on numerous occasions what to expect, and with it in their own best interest to develop a resurrection story to gain popular support for their cause, it is the people who are closest to Jesus who are consistently portrayed in the first hours of Easter as being the most bewildered, uncertain, and incredulous.
- In this Easter story, Mary only recognizes Jesus when he speaks her name. Easter is a quiet victory – no marching bands or pomp. It is something that requires faith.

Wednesday:

Read: Luke 24:13-35

What to look for:

- Note that once again *seeing* the risen Jesus does not guarantee believing, just as seeing an empty tomb apart from the words and promises of Jesus does not guarantee faith. Even having the right information does not guarantee faith (vs. 18-21). What must happen? Note how vs. 28-31a is written in the passive voice: they didn't open their eyes, their eyes were opened. It took an act of the risen Christ himself to put into perspective all they had heard and seen. It takes an act of Christ within us to stir up faith.
- The gospel is already moving outward to the rest of the world, as these disciples head out of Jerusalem. The arc of the story is moving from Jerusalem to the rest of the world, a progression that will be continued in the book of Acts. (See the reading and notes for Wed., Nov. 17 – week 36 – from Luke 4:14-31. This reflects a continuing theme in Luke's Gospel.)

Thursday:

Read: John 21

What to look for:

- Clearly the resurrection is a promise that involves more than simply a disembodied spirit. Jesus has been raised both in body and spirit, as a whole person, as evidenced by the fact that he eats with his disciples.
- The disciples appear to still be confused about Easter. They've returned to their former livelihood which they practiced in the days before they first met Jesus. It is in this same spot, in much the same manner as when Jesus first called them that once again he reveals himself (see Luke 5:1-11).
- Note that Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves him. How many times had Peter denied him?

Friday:

Read: Luke 24:36-53

What to look for:

- This closing passage of Luke underscores what the next part of Jesus' mission will be and sets up the next portion of the story which will take place in Acts. Salvation has come through Israel, as had been God's promise since way back in Genesis when he first made his covenant with Abraham ("I will bless you and through you all the peoples of the earth will be blessed" – Genesis 12:2-3), and it is for the whole world, as forgiveness is to be proclaimed to all nations in Jesus' name.