

Conversations that Unbind Us



This week's readings remind us that conversations with the Holy unbind us from our limitations. Ezekiel receives words from God to call dry bones back to life. The psalmist hopes their cries will be heard from the depths. The letter to the Romans assures people that the Spirit will restore them to life. In the gospel, Jesus speaks, and Lazarus is restored to life. Our relationship with God is not a monologue or a lecture; it's a conversation, one where the answers change as we try to respond to one another. Likewise, this conversation is not a private one; we experience the holy in the context of our community. These four passages each present different ways that sacred conversations both challenge us and set us free.

Focus scripture: John 11:1–45

After he is summoned by his friends, Jesus commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb and instructs the onlookers to unbind him so he can be restored to the land of the living. The passage is full of conversations: Mary's and Martha's frustration with Jesus, Jesus' explanation to the disciples of what they are called to do, Jesus' words to a dead man and the people who just buried him. This scene with his friends in Bethany is the only place in the gospels where we see Jesus cry, suggesting that some words can be answered only with tears. What does Jesus have to say to death? And why does it take him so long to say those words? How is Jesus changed by his conversation with Mary and Martha? And how do we imagine Lazarus is changed by being the first person to answer Jesus' call from beyond the grave?

In **Ezekiel 37:1–14**, the prophet calls a heap of dry bones back to life, but only after beseeching God to give him the words. The prophet is able to call forth all the parts of the body except for the breath (or the Spirit), for which he needs extra assistance from God to make what was dead come back to life. Words have the power not only to bring people back to life but also to bring them back together as one people.

In **Psalm 130**, the psalmist cries to God out of the depths, hoping and trusting that they will again hear God's steadfast love. The psalmist waits and hopes for God, and urges the people of Israel to do the same, trusting in God's steadfast love, even when it seems far away. The psalmist waits for God as one waits for the morning; the wait can seem long and gloomy, but there is hope in the coming of the light.

In **Romans 8:6–11**, the community is assured the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead will restore them to life. This part of Paul's writings is a different sort of conversation, less of a dialogue between the Divine and the human and more of an attempt to persuade a beloved faith community through logical discourse. Paul puts flesh and spirit in conversation with one another in the context of the resurrection. How does the Spirit give life to our bodies, both in this life and in the next?



Holy conversations can produce anxiety since you can never be totally sure how they are going to turn out. But these scriptures remind us that when God speaks, it is to set people free, restoring light, and bringing life back to long-dead places. When you listen for God's voice speaking into your life, what is it that you most long to hear?

Focus scripture

John 11:1–45

Additional scriptures

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6–11

Holy One, we are listening for a word from you. Speak to the dry and brittle places of our hearts. Help us to come alive again. Fill us with your breath, that we might proclaim the power of your Spirit with our words and with our lives. Amen.

Lection Connection

links current events with this week's scriptures. Go to www.seasonsonline.ca and click on the link.

The Focus for Ages 5–12

Children in this age range are open to experiences of the unusual, the mysterious, and the fantastic. They enjoy stories and movies based on fantasy themes which engage their imaginations and sense of adventure. As they explore the story of the raising of Lazarus, they will probably be intrigued, puzzled, and, perhaps even slightly scared by the thought of a dead person coming back to life. They may have heard of this before, but likely within the context of fantasy or horror movies.

Be prepared for the children’s comments and questions about Lazarus’s death and resurrection. Help the children to recognize that God will be with us in difficult times, as Jesus shared the sadness of Mary and Martha. Pray for each child, that they may be reassured by the knowledge of God’s constant presence in their lives, whatever the circumstances.

Note: The sessions for the next two weeks are designed for all ages to meet together to hear the stories of Holy Week and Easter Day.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week’s focus scripture, John 11:1–45, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 35).
- ❑ Set a worship space with purple cloth, candle, and Bible with bookmark placed in focus passage.
- ❑ Bring [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 6) and *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 6), and CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- ❑ Bring purple construction paper.
- ❑ Bring, if possible, song “Behold, I Make All Things New” (p. 10 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 6; #4 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 6).

Engage

- ❑ Bring resource sheet “[Jesus’ Friends](#)”; recruit a storyteller to come in costume and tell the story.
- ❑ **Research group:** print the following scripture references on three pieces of card stock: **John 12:1–8**, **John 11:1–6** and **17**, and **Luke 10:38–42**; print one of the following names on each card: Lazarus, Mary, or Martha.
- ❑ **Drama group:** no additional materials needed.

Respond

Choose one or more of the following activities and bring materials to set up the chosen zones.

- ❑ **Lent zone:** copies of resource sheet “[Lenten Story Booklet](#),” sheets of construction paper (cut in half lengthways)
- ❑ **Discussion zone:** statement of faith from your congregation or denomination
- ❑ **Game zone:** make two sets of cards by printing each word from the following sentence on two pieces of card stock (include the capital “T” and the period at the end of “live.”): The / one / who / believes / in / me / will / live.
- ❑ **Outreach zone:** pieces of card stock (18 x 28 cm/7 x 11 in), craft supplies (stickers, sequins, ribbons), tissues
- ❑ **Quiet zone:** copies of resource sheet “[Prayer Book](#),” file folders, notebook paper (eight sheets per child), ribbon or yarn

Bless

- ❑ Bring, if possible, song “As We Go Now” (pp. 6–7 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 6; #28 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 6).



Conversations that Unbind Us

Scripture

John 11:1–45

FOCUS To explore Jesus' comforting love for his friends

Gather

Welcome the children and remind them that we are almost at the end of the Season of Lent. Invite newcomers to trace around one of their feet on purple construction paper, cut out their footprints, and print their names in the middle of these. As they work, explain that Lent has been a time to learn more about what it means to follow in God's ways.

Opening ritual

Gather in the worship space and remind children that purple is a colour that reminds people in the church to be sorry when they forget to follow in God's ways and to keep trying to follow Jesus' example. Light the candle. Invite the children to

place their footprints around the worship space as a sign of the journey with Jesus through Lent.

Sing or listen to, if possible, the song "Behold, I Make All Things New" (p. 10 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 6; #4 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 6).

Pray (*Invite children to repeat each line after you.*)

Loving God,
thank you for this special Season of Lent.
We are glad that you are always with us.
Help us to grow strong in your love. Amen.

Receive the offering. Extinguish the candle to signal that the opening ritual has ended.

Connecting with the focus

Invite the children to think of times when they have been really sad and unhappy. Then ask:

■ Who or what made you feel better?

After they have discussed this, explain that the story today is about two women, friends of Jesus, who were very sad, and how Jesus comforted them and helped them to feel better.

Engage

Preparing for the story

Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship area and use the bookmark to open it to the gospel of John. Recall that there are four gospels in the New Testament, each one telling the story of Jesus in a different way. Review the stories heard from the gospel of John the past three weeks: Nicodemus' visit to Jesus (**John 3:1–17**), Jesus meeting the woman at the well (**John 4:5–42**), and Jesus healing a man who was blind (**John 9:1–41**).

The Bible story

Use the resource sheet "[Jesus' Friends](#)" to tell the story based on **John 11:1–45**.

Wondering questions Use some or all of the following questions to wonder together:

- **Why were Martha, Mary, and their guests so sad when Jesus and the disciples arrived?**
- **What important thing did Mary and Martha know about Jesus?**
- **What emotions did Jesus have?**
- **What questions do you have about this story?**

Exploring the story further

(To enable the children to explore the scripture reading further, according to their interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.)

Research group This group will have the opportunity to learn more about the main characters in this story. Invite children to form three groups and distribute the pieces of card stock with scripture references and names of the characters (see Prepare). Have them do some detective work by finding clues about their characters in the scripture verses, writing some notes on their cards.

Drama group The story of Jesus raising Lazarus to life is an unusual and dramatic one. The children may enjoy using their imaginations to retell it. Choose someone to be Lazarus and wrap him or her up in the cloth. Choose other children to

be Jesus, Mary, and Martha. Everyone else can be part of the crowd that gathered around the tomb. Encourage the children to take turns retelling the story several times in their own words, switching roles as desired.

Reporting Invite the research group to introduce their characters to the rest of the group and invite the drama group to share a few scenes from their dramatization.

The Bible story and us

Compassion means to feel another's pain as if it was our own pain and to do something to try to ease that pain. Ask:

- **How did Jesus show care and compassion in this story?**
- **What are some ways that we can show care and compassion and comfort one another?**

Respond

Invite the children to select a zone and work with the materials there.

- ❑ **Lent zone: Story booklet** *(for younger children)*
Invite children to create booklets as a reminder of the stories that they have heard during Lent. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Lenten Story Booklet](#)" and encourage children to colour and decorate the pictures. Show them how to stack the pictures together in order and place a folded piece of construction paper around the stack, stapling along the left edge to form a booklet. Invite them to decorate the covers also.
- ❑ **Discussion zone: Statements of faith** *(for older children)* Martha said something very important about Jesus. Read in unison **John 11:27**. Then read the statement of faith from your church or denomination and discuss together. Talk about the different things that we know about Jesus, and about what he did and taught. Then invite children to write their own "I believe..." statements about Jesus, about God, and about what they can do as followers of Jesus. Share these together if desired.
- ❑ **Game zone: Memory game** *(for younger children)*
Invite children to play a memory game, based



on **John 11:25**, to help them remember that new life is for us, too. Arrange the printed cards face down on a flat surface. Encourage children to take turns choosing two cards at a time to turn over, looking for a match. If a match is found, that pair of cards is set aside. If no match is found, the cards are turned face down again and play continues. After all the word pairs are matched, invite children to form two groups and give each a set of cards to place in order to make the sentence: The one who believes in me will live.

- ❑ **Outreach zone: Tissue holders** *(for younger children)* Sometimes when we are sad we cry. Invite children to make holders for tissues as a reminder that God is with us in those sad times. Distribute pieces of card stock and show them how to fold these in half, placing the fold at the bottom and taping the sides together to make a pocket with an opening at the top. Help children to print the words "God is with me when I'm sad" on one side of the pocket and use the craft materials to decorate their pockets as desired. Provide tissues for them to tuck into the pockets.

❑ **Quiet zone: Prayer books** (*for older children*) Jesus prayed before calling Lazarus out of his tomb. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Prayer Book](#)" and invite children to create their own prayer books, with one page for this week and one page to fill in each day of Holy Week next week. For this week's page, invite the children to think of a time when they were

sad about something (a death, loss of a friendship, or a friend who moved away) and who helped them in that sad time. Have them write a prayer of thanks for that person and decorate the page with teardrops and smiles or other symbols represented by their prayers. Have them take their prayer books home to write in next week.

Bless

Gather around the worship area, light the candle again, and invite children to spend a few moments in silence looking at the flame.

Sing if possible, the song "As We Go Now" (pp. 6–7 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 6; #28 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 6).

Pray this prayer or one of your own:

O God, we thank you
for this journey together through Lent.
Help us to share your love
and comfort with others. Amen.

Blessing Offer the following blessing: "May God's love and comfort be with you always."

Reflect

What questions did the children have about the events of this story? How will you help them explore these questions further? How might you support and encourage any children in your group who are experiencing sadness?



Jesus' Friends

(based on John 11:1-45)

To prepare to tell a story, read it several times to get the story in mind.

Two sisters and a brother – Martha, Mary, and Lazarus – live in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem. They are close friends of Jesus. When Jesus comes to Bethany, he always visits them, and sometimes stays at their home.

Now Lazarus became ill, very ill. Martha and Mary sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was ill. They felt sure Jesus would want to know, probably even come to see Lazarus. They waited and waited. No sign or word from Jesus. Lazarus got sicker and died. Martha and Mary were so sad.

Four days after Lazarus had been buried, Jesus showed up. Martha went out to greet him, but Mary stayed in the house where many guests had come to comfort them. Martha hurried to Jesus and said, "Why didn't you come right away when you got our message? You could have healed Lazarus. But I know that God will still do whatever you ask."

"Your brother will rise again," said Jesus.

"Yes," answered Martha, "I know that Lazarus will rise when all are raised on the last day."

"I am the resurrection and the life," said Jesus. "People who believe in me will have life. Do you believe this, Martha?"

"Yes," said Martha, "you are the Messiah, the one God sent into the world."

Then Jesus went into the house to see Mary, because he wanted to comfort her too. She said, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." She cried and all the people with her cried. Then Jesus cried too. Everyone saw how much Jesus loved Lazarus.

Then Mary, Martha, their guests, Jesus, and the disciples went to the tomb where Lazarus was buried. The tomb was a big cave with a heavy stone in front of the opening. "Take away the stone," said Jesus.

"Oh, Jesus," said Martha, "Lazarus has been dead for four days."

The stone was moved. Jesus prayed to God. Then he called, loudly, "Lazarus, come out!"

Everyone was astounded when Lazarus appeared in the doorway of the cave. He was still wrapped in the grave clothes, even his face.

"Remove the strips of cloth," said Jesus.

When the people saw that Lazarus was alive, they shouted with joy. Many of the people now knew what Mary and Martha already knew. Jesus was the one sent from God – the Messiah!

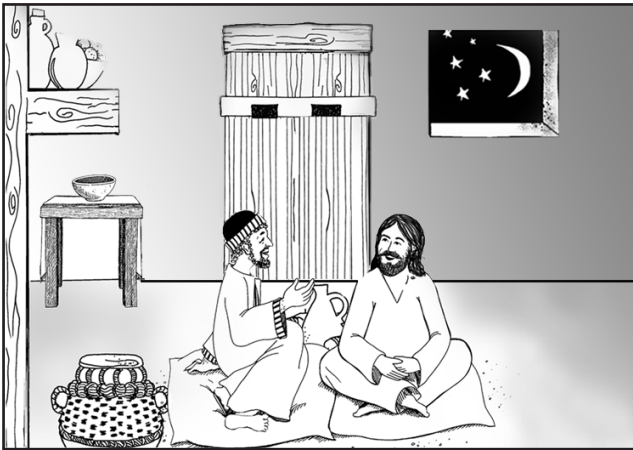


Lenten Story Booklet

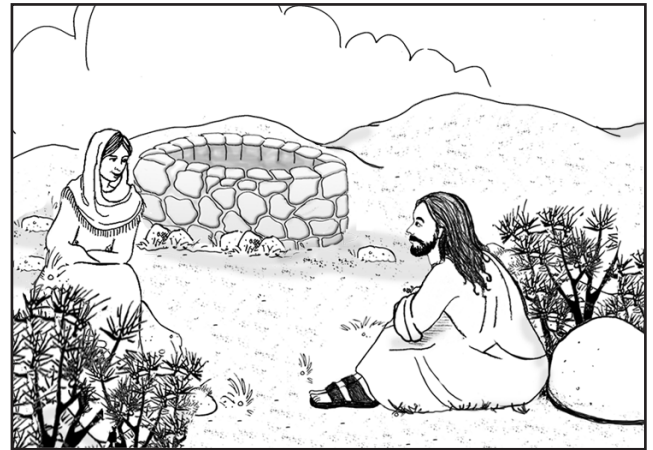
My Stories about Jesus



#1 (Jesus in the wilderness)



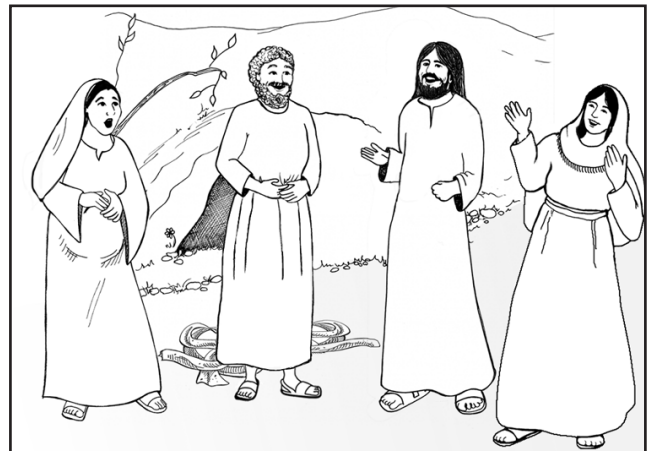
#2 (Jesus and Nicodemus)



#3 (at the well)



#4 (blind man)



#5 (Lazarus)



Prayer Book

Materials

- file folders or sturdy paper
- eight sheets of punched notebook paper per child
- hole punch
- ribbon or yarn

Directions

1. Stack eight pages of paper for the prayer book.
2. Mark the covers (file folder or sturdy paper) where you want to punch holes. Use one page as a guide. Punch the holes in the covers.
3. Decorate the front cover. You can also create an inside title page for your prayer book.
4. Stack up the cover, the pages, then the back cover. Thread a length of ribbon or yarn through each hole. Tie each one securely.
5. Bend the front cover back carefully. Ask an adult for help to put a crease in it at the binding side so you can open it easily.

