

# Bearing Witness to God

If we pay attention to the news, even on a semi-regular basis, it can be easy enough for us to live as though every day were Good Friday. Living our call as Christians to be an Easter people can seem foolish, if not impossible. Today's readings remind us, however, that we are not the first generation to face this hurdle, and that we can learn (as so many before us) to see the presence of the living God right before us.

## Focus scripture: John 20:1–18

From ancient times, human nature doesn't seem to have changed much. We are a curious species, trying to understand the world in which we live. Often, though, we try to fit our understandings into the framework of our human senses and collective memories. The scriptures call us to broader views; setting our human experience into the larger relationship of the people with God.

Death and life are deeply intertwined; resurrection is with us each day if we can learn to see it. It is this learning to see that forms such a crucial component of John's Easter narrative in John 20:1–18. As Karoline Lewis notes in her commentary on this gospel (Lewis, Karoline: *John*. Fortress Press 2014), John does not tell us about God's grace but invites us to use all of our senses to experience it. In John, grace tastes like the best wine; smells like a broad expanse of a grassy field when Jesus fed 5000, or like the very-dead stench of Lazarus giving way to the pound of perfume poured upon Jesus by Mary. Here, at the beginning of the 20th chapter, grace is the scent of a springtime garden at dawn, the sound of a beloved voice speaking our name, the leaping, uncontainable joy that propels Mary back into town, crying out that she has seen the Lord!

It is important to note here that Mary alone stays until the morning light breaks. In John's gospel, light is a symbol of belief and understanding. So while Peter and the beloved disciple see the empty tomb and the discarded cloths, they remain in the dark of human perception and understanding. Mary's stillness, her willingness to remain present in a space of grief, allows the light to shine around her. Like the light of dawn, her understanding and her vision grow until she is able to experience the fullness of the resurrection; until it is the joy of God's presence rather than the fear of God's

absence that compels her to proclaim what she has experienced: grace upon grace.

**Jeremiah 31:1–6** recounts the Israelites' return from exile in Babylon in terms that those who participated in the journey would not have experienced. These are not people who remember the times of peace and joy and growth in Israel; their lives have, for generations, included political machinations, occupation, and deportation. They experienced death: of their homeland, practices of faith, and identity. And all humans know that death is final.

Or do we? Aren't we continually surrounded with endings that are beginnings? In our quest for learning, the evidence we have the hardest time seeing is that which tells us that our own senses are not always sources. As the writer of **Psalms 118:1–2, 14–24** reminds us, the evidence points to us being pounded down, but we are lifted up. The stone that humans would discard is the one that God considers most crucial. For this, we should rejoice: that the meaning we make of events in this world is not the only meaning. God is bigger, more creative, more grace-filled than we are. Death is not final.

For we can live in death, as Paul reminds us in **Colossians 3:1–4**. In choosing to live by faith, we have destroyed certain possibilities for our lives. However positive such a choice might be, major choices and changes in our lives will necessarily involve grief. Death and life are deeply intertwined; resurrection is with us each day if we can learn to see it.

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The scripture passages for this Easter day pull us out of narrow human viewpoints to remind us of the boundary-breaking presence of the living God. The task then is to not merely read the words, but to experience these stories in our lives – for if we can taste and see God's grace, how do we not cry out in joy that we have seen our God?



## Focus scripture

**John 20:1–18**

## Additional scriptures

**Acts 10: 34–43**

*or* **Jeremiah 31:1–6**

**Colossians 3:1–4**

*or* **Acts 10:34–43**

**Matthew 28:1–10**

(alternate gospel)

**God of grace,  
open our eyes to  
see you. Open our  
hearts to let our  
vision change our  
lives. Amen.**

## Lection Connection

links current events with this week's scriptures. Go to [www.seasonsonline.ca](http://www.seasonsonline.ca) and click on the link.

## The Focus for All Ages



This session is designed for all ages to come together for approximately one hour. Gather a group of leaders to plan and lead the sessions for this week and last. Invite youth or adult participants to be the storytellers for the engagement with the focus passage. Choose a variety of Respond activity zones to meet the needs of the age range of the group.

The story of the Resurrection is the foundational story of our faith. Recognize that the youngest members of the group may not have heard the Easter story before, while older children, youth, and adults will probably know a composite version from the various gospel accounts. In the account in John's gospel, Mary Magdalene plays an extraordinary role and the session offers an

opportunity to highlight her courage and witness. Younger participants will enjoy the joy of this day, while older participants may have questions about what really happened. Try to provide space for the exploration of this story on different levels. Pray that the participants will experience both the wonder and mystery of this sacred story.

## Prepare

### Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's scriptures, Matthew 28:1–10; John 20:1–18; Acts 10:34–43 or Jeremiah 31:1–6; Colossians 3:1–4, and [biblical background material](#) (p. 51).
- ❑ Bring [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Growing Faith (SGF) Songbook*, *Seasons Growing Faith (SGF) Music CD*, *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](http://www.seasonsonline.ca).
- ❑ Prepare a worship space with gold or white fabric, Bible with bookmark in focus passage, candle, matches, and offering basket.

### Gather

- ❑ Bring self-adhesive name tags.
- ❑ Bring, if possible, song "Sing It! Hosanna!" (p. 34 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 6; #2 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 6).
- ❑ Prepare a gift box with small Easter gifts (such as stickers, chocolate eggs).

### Engage

- ❑ Bring last week's resource sheet "[Holy Week Stations](#)" (p. 48) and symbols.
- ❑ Bring resource sheet "[Mary's Story](#)"; option: invite a young woman from the congregation to tell the story as a first-person account.

### Respond

Choose from the following activities and bring materials to set up the chosen zones.

- ❑ **Art zone:** mural paper, fingerpaints or tempera paints, paintbrushes, paint smocks
- ❑ **Craft zone:** re-sealable medium-sized plastic bags, construction paper scraps, shiny confetti scraps, pipe cleaners, clothespins/clothes pegs, magnetic strips; make a sample.
- ❑ **Easter zone:** copies of resource sheet "[Flying Butterfly](#)," construction paper, different colours of tissue paper (cut into small squares), clothes pegs/pins
- ❑ **Outreach zone:** copies of resource sheet "[Easter Messages](#)," wooden chopsticks, heavy cardboard, coloured poster board, craft materials (crepe paper, Easter stickers), variety of coloured markers, crayons, pastels, pencil crayons
- ❑ **Discussion zone:** copies of [biblical background material](#) (p. 51)

### Bless

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



# Bearing Witness to God

## Scripture

John 20:1–18

**FOCUS** To celebrate the good news of Jesus' resurrection

## Gather

**Welcome** participants as they arrive, introducing guests and newcomers. Distribute name tags and invite group members to print their first names and decorate their tags. Help younger children as needed.

### Opening ritual

**Call to gather** Invite participants to gather in the worship space. Point out the gold or white fabric and explain that this colour marks this as a special day, Easter Sunday. Ask a volunteer to light the candle and receive an offering.

**Sing or listen to**, if possible, the song "Sing It! Hosanna!" (p. 34 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 6; #2 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 6).

**Pray** O God, we ask you to be with us  
as we celebrate the joy  
of this Easter day. Amen.

Extinguish the candle to signify the end of the gathering worship.

### Connecting with the focus

Show the group the gift box and invite them to guess what might be inside the box. After several guesses invite a child to open the box and distribute the gifts. Encourage the group to talk about times when someone has surprised them with a gift or they have been surprised by something. Discuss these surprises together. Then invite participants to think about times when they have surprised someone with a gift or action. Discuss the following questions together:

- **What makes something a surprise?**
- **How do surprises make you feel?**

Explain that in this week's story we will hear about a surprising thing that helped Jesus' friends move from feeling very sad to feeling great happiness.

## Engage

### Preparing for the story

**Holy Week stories review** Invite participants to review the events of Holy Week, from Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to his death and burial, using the symbols from last week's session. Invite volunteers to take turns holding the symbols as you relate each part of the story, using last week's resource sheet "[Holy Week Stations](#)" to help recall the events.

### The Bible story

Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship space and use the bookmark to open it to the gospel of John. Explain that this week's story takes place the morning after Jesus was buried.

Use the resource sheet "[Mary's Story](#)" to tell the story based on **John 20:1–18**, or invite your guest to share a first-person-type story with the group. Share initial responses to the story as a whole group. If some participants remember details from another gospel account of the Resurrection explain that each gospel writer included different details about the story.

- **What surprises did you hear in this story?**
- **What is the good news in this story?**
- **What helped Mary to know that it was Jesus?**
- **Do you think it was easy or hard for the disciples to believe Mary's message? Why?**

To enter into some of the emotions of the story, invite a group of participants to mime the experiences within the story: Mary going to the tomb, Mary running back to tell Simon Peter and the others; Simon Peter and the other disciple running to the cave tomb and looking in; Mary crying; Mary recognizing Jesus; Mary telling the rest of the disciples about her experience.

### The Bible story and us

Explain that the cross is a symbol that reminds us of the sadness of Jesus' death. The empty cross is a reminder that Jesus was and is no longer dead. Explain that we use the word "Resurrection" to talk about Jesus being alive *in a new way*. In this sense, resurrection is an immediate possibility for all of us, because we can always choose to live in new ways.

### ■ What dreams and hopes might inspire new or renewed ways of living for you this Easter day?

**Easter greeting** On Easter Sunday, Christians in churches everywhere greet each other with words that have been used for hundreds of years. Invite participants to repeat the Easter greeting: "Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!"

### ■ What do you think it means that Jesus was alive in a new way?

Invite participants to name some symbols that we use at Easter to describe new life (such as an egg that can hold a baby bird, bulbs that can become flowers, caterpillars that can become butterflies).

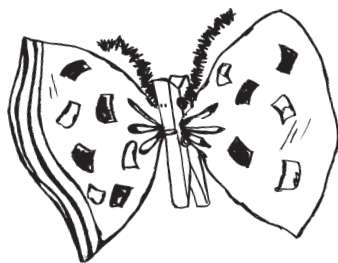
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## Respond

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Review the choices of activities and invite the group to choose one or more zones in which to participate. Encourage older group members to help younger group members in each zone.

- ❑ **Art zone: Painting joy** Invite participants to celebrate the joy of Easter by using the art supplies and working together to create a large group mural. If desired, add a title such as "Jesus is alive!" by printing one on a strip of paper and stapling onto the mural. Consider displaying the mural in the sanctuary or hall during the Easter season.
- ❑ **Craft zone: Bag butterflies** (*for younger participants*) A butterfly is a reminder of the joy of Easter. Distribute supplies and help participants add colourful paper and confetti scraps to their bags and seal them. Gather the bags together at the centre and slide them onto clothespins/clothes pegs. Insert pipe cleaners as antennae and add a magnetic strip to one side.
- ❑ **Easter zone:** (*for younger participants*) Invite participants to make "flying butterfly" shapes to share the good news of Easter. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Flying Butterfly](#)" and review the instructions for making the butterflies. Help children use the pattern to trace, cut out, and print messages on their butterfly shapes. Invite participants to practice making the butterflies "fly" together as they move around the room. Encourage them to make extra butterflies to share with family members and friends.
- ❑ **Outreach zone: Easter messages** Many families and congregations take Easter plants to share with others at this time. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Easter Messages](#)" and invite participants to follow the instructions for making Easter symbol planter decorations. Older participants can help younger children trace, cut out, and print messages on their shapes. If desired, make arrangements for distribution with the pastoral care team.



❑ **Discussion zone: Exploring beliefs** *(for older participants)* This zone is particularly for older youth and adults who would like to explore all the lections for this day. Distribute Bibles and copies of the [biblical background](#) material. Invite a volunteer to read the commentary on the focus passage. Discuss: What new thoughts come to you? What is surprising in this commentary? Read together **Matthew 28:1–10**, the alternate



gospel reading for this day, and discuss the different perspectives in this account of the Resurrection. Then invite other volunteers to take turns reading the rest of the lections for this day: **Jeremiah 31:1–6**, **Acts 10:34–43**, **Colossians 3:1–4** and the commentary for each passage. Discuss: What themes are present in these passages which connect with the good news of Jesus’ resurrection? Explore together what the story of the Resurrection means for each participant.

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## Bless

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**Gather** again in the worship space and light the candle. Explain that the light of the candle reminds us that Jesus the Christ is with us in a new way after the Resurrection.

**Pray** a prayer of your own or invite a volunteer to read the prayer on the [biblical background](#) page.

**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).

**Send** participants out with the following blessing: “Be full of joy as you go out into this week! Christ has risen! Alleluia!”

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## Reflect

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What were the joyous moments in this session? What questions were raised? Consider how the joy of Easter might be extended throughout the next fifty days of the Easter season.





# MARY'S STORY

(based on John 20:1-18)

**M**ary of Magdala, one of Jesus' disciples for a long time, was so sad about Jesus' death. She got up early, so early it was still dark, on the first day of the week after Jesus died. She woke up early, thinking about Jesus, and decided to go to the tomb where Jesus was buried.

The moon gave some light to the path and when she got to the tomb, she was surprised. The huge stone that sealed the tomb had been rolled to the side. Tomb stones were really big and they were not easy to move.

Mary of Magdala hurried to tell Simon Peter and the others what she had seen. "They have taken Jesus from the tomb. I don't know where his body is."

Immediately Simon Peter and another disciple, who is not named in John, ran to the tomb. The other disciple got there first. He looked inside, but all he saw were the cloths that had been wrapped around Jesus' body. When Simon Peter got to the tomb, he went inside. But all he saw were the cloths too. Knowing of nothing else to do, the two disciples went home.

Mary of Magdala had followed Simon Peter and the other disciple. However, she did not leave the tomb when they did. She stood near it weeping. Then something caught her attention. She looked inside the tomb. Two men in white clothes were sitting where Jesus' body had been.

"Woman, why are you weeping?" they asked.

"Someone has taken Jesus. I don't know where," said Mary.

Behind her, someone who looked like a gardener, said, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?"

"Oh, please, if you know where they have taken his body, please, please tell me," said Mary, tears running down her face.

"Mary," said the man. At the sound of her name, Mary recognized that this was Jesus. Her eyes opened wide with surprise.

"Teacher!" she said joyously.

"Tell everyone that I am going to be with God, my God and your God."

Excited, Mary of Magdala ran off to find the disciples. When she found them, she said, "I have seen Jesus! Jesus is alive and is going to be with God."

The disciples looked at Mary, amazed at her words.

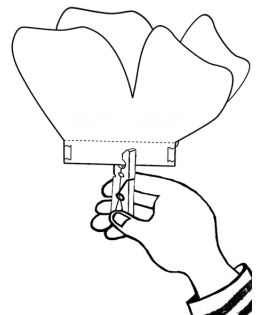


# Flying Butterfly

Place along fold of construction paper.

## Instructions

1. Trace butterfly pattern onto construction paper and cut out.
2. Print a message (such as "Happy Easter") on the top side of the butterfly shape.
3. Decorate both sides with markers or crayons.
4. Crumple small squares of tissue paper and glue onto both sides for added decoration.
5. Fold back wings; clip a clothespin/clothes peg to the fold (as in the illustration) and move up and down to make the butterfly "fly."





# Easter Messages

## Directions

1. Make a copy of the shapes on this page, enlarging if possible.
2. Cut out and trace around the shapes on heavy cardboard stock to create template patterns.
3. Invite participants to use the templates to trace shapes from different colours of poster board. (Pre-cut shapes for younger children.)
4. Write Easter messages (such as "Jesus Is Alive!" or "Happy Easter!") on the shapes and decorate with stickers, lengths of crepe paper, and markers.
5. Tape shapes onto chopsticks.
6. Take the Easter messages home to place in a potted plant or bouquet of flowers, or give messages to pastoral care team to deliver on their visits.

