

God,
forgive
them,
for
they
do
not
know
what
they
are
doing.

SEVEN LAST WORDS

• DEVOTIONAL GUIDE •



illustrated
CHILDREN'S MINISTRY



Seven Last Words Devotional Guide

The seven last words of Jesus from the cross, also known as the sayings of Jesus on the cross, are commonly used in churches around the world during Lent, specifically on Good Friday. Perhaps you've attended a Tenebrae service on Good Friday that focused on the seven last words of Jesus. Or maybe the seven last words aren't focused on much in your tradition, and these are new to you. Either way, we think you're going to love our Seven Last Words products, including this Devotional Guide, and our Seven Last Words Coloring Posters and Coloring Pages.

This *Seven Last Words Devotional Guide*, written by Erika Marksbury, is best when used together with our Seven Last Words Coloring Posters and Coloring Pages. The illustrations and weekly reflections focus on one word we chose from each of the seven sayings. Each reflection is thoughtfully written to engage readers and listeners of *all ages* by connecting Jesus' life-giving words from the cross to our daily lives today.

When we shared this theme with a group of our customers, some expressed some initial concern about the topic of the crucifixion, and how children would receive it. Illustrated Children's Ministry serves communities from over 60+ denominations, and we wanted to create a way to reflect on these seven last words that would be visually appropriate for all ages and people from different theological backgrounds.

We have spent a lot of time discussing this as a team, and we are excited about the poster designs and the content of this accompanying devotional guide. We think that the coloring posters and devotional guide are age-appropriate for young children, and will appeal to all of our customers.

One-word Focus

Aware that there was so much to focus on with the sayings of Jesus on the cross, we decided to reflect on one specific word from each of the seven sayings. That word then informed the direction of our illustrations and the content for the devotional guide.

Below you can see the scripture and our focus word for each of the poster illustrations and devotions:

- Poster One: **KNOW** - God, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing. (Luke 23:34)
- Poster Two: **TRUTH** - Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise. (Luke 23:43)
- Poster Three: **HERE** - Here is your son. Here is your mother. (John 19:26-27)

- Poster Four: **FORSAKEN** – My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46)
- Poster Five: **THIRSTY** – I am thirsty. (John 19:28)
- Poster Six: **FINISHED** – It is finished. (John 19:30)
- Poster Seven: **COMMEND** – God, into your hands I commend my spirit. (Luke 23:46)
- Poster Eight: **BELIEVE** – (with a focus on Luke 24:10-11)

You can purchase the Seven Last Words Coloring Posters or the Seven Last Words Coloring Pages from the Illustrated Children's Ministry's store: store.illustratedchildrensministry.com

We hope that the *Seven Last Words Devotional Guide* is a meaningful addition for you this year. And as always, please let us know what you like or what you think could be improved upon for next year. We love your feedback because it helps us create even better products in the future. You can send us an email at icm@illustratedchildrensministry.com with your comments or suggestions.

Peace,



Adam Walker Cleaveland

Founder of Illustrated Children's Ministry, LLC.



About Jesus' Seven Last Words

Dear Reader,

Jesus had a lot to say during his life - about who God is, about what justice looks like, about how we are to love ourselves, and our neighbors, and all the world. And, tradition has it, he kept teaching even in the very last moments of his life.

The Seven Last Words are the sayings of Jesus from the cross as recorded in the Gospel narratives.

Some of them pull from his ancestors' prayers and songs, reminding us of his deep rootedness in Jewish tradition.

Some of them echo themes he taught throughout his ministry – like connection and compassion – their recurrence here seemingly giving them extra emphasis.

Some of them remind us just how very human he was.

And many of them are words we might hear from the mouths of people in our world today, innocents who still suffer unjustly.

As you read and color and discuss, our prayer is that your experience of Lent is enriched, and your connection to the One whose words we remember is deepened, through this engagement.

POSTER ONE: KNOW

SCRIPTURE

Luke 23:34: "God, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

REFLECTION

Know: *understand, see, recognize*

What don't you know?

I've sometimes been asked to play a role in a larger project I don't totally understand. Or I've asked other people to participate in a project I don't fully explain. It always seems harmless enough: I ask my kids to hold our place in the grocery store line and say I'll be right back, but I don't tell them where I'm going. I ask a friend to loan me five dollars and promise to repay her the next day, but don't say what I'm going to spend it on. Someone else asks me to read a paragraph out loud on cue, even though I haven't heard the larger story, and don't know how it all fits together.

My kids say yes, my friend hands me the cash, I agree to read aloud, partly because those are trusted relationships. Partly because those are easy things to do. Partly because it might seem like more trouble than it's worth to challenge or say no to what's being asked.

Sometimes we say yes when we ought to challenge, or learn more about, what's being asked of us. Sometimes we do things we wouldn't if we understood more. Some things we'd never be a part of if we recognized the hurt they would cause.

It's like when my sons wrestle each other, always playing, laughing... at the beginning. These scenes often end with one of them hurt - not because one means to hurt the other, but because they get carried away, and don't notice when the play becomes rough. If they knew that game would end in tears, they probably wouldn't start it. But it's hard to see that far ahead.

Or like when someone tosses a piece of trash on the ground. It's hard to see how something so small makes a difference. But then the wind picks up that trash, carries it far from where it was tossed, into the woods, or out to the ocean, where a curious creature crawls up to it or swims near it - and gets tangled up in it. The creature loses its ability to crawl or swim. The person who tossed the trash never intended for that to happen. But rarely can we know all that might unfold from our actions.

We just don't understand, see, recognize. At times that's because we don't try very hard. At other times, it's because we can't fully know those consequences ahead of time. And sometimes, it's because we're just plain wrong about what we're doing.

And Jesus knew this. He knew this even about the people who were part of his last moments, moments filled with pain, sorrow, and hurt. He knew they didn't really understand what they were doing - that they were caught up in lies they didn't recognize they'd been told, that they didn't fully understand their actions. He also knew that if they challenged those instructions, they could be punished. They could lose their jobs. They could be outcast from their community. They were trapped like he was - and they might not have even known it.

And this wasn't a moment where Jesus could teach like he often did when people were confused or didn't understand. That wasn't an option here. So he did the only other thing he could.

Jesus showed grace.

He offered mercy.

He spoke forgiveness.

Jesus knew that not even the choices people made in these moments could separate them from God's love. He used some of his last words to tell them so. Perhaps Jesus suspected they would understand this moment differently, later. Don't we, too, see things differently - sometimes more clearly - once they're over rather than while they're happening?

It may even be that as soon as they heard him speak these words - about how much they didn't understand - they began to understand a bit more.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- Who has spoken words of grace, or forgiveness, to you?
- What are some of the kindest words you know?

GOING DEEPER

- Can you share a story about a time you didn't fully understand what you were doing - and it turned out well?
- Can you share a story about a time you didn't fully understand what you were doing - and it *didn't* turn out well?
- Imagine you're talking with someone who has upset or angered or saddened you. If you think, 'maybe they don't know...,' instead of 'how could they have?...,' what possibilities open up?

POSTER TWO: TRUTH

SCRIPTURE

Luke 23:43: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

REFLECTION

Truth: *reality, honesty, certainty*

How do you know what's true?

It can be hard to know what's true when we're in pain. Remember the last time you were really hurt? Maybe you fell and skinned your knee, or maybe you fell farther and harder and broke your arm, or maybe your heart hurt because a friend was mean to you.

When we're hurt or sad, those feelings can be really big - they can take up all the space in our mind - and it can be hard to remember that more is true than just what we feel at that moment. It can be easy to focus on just those feelings, and hard to remember the good things that surround us, the people who care for us, the big and small ways we are loved every day. All of that can be overshadowed when we're in pain, but that doesn't make it any less true.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that two others were also with Jesus, hung on crosses on either side of him. And one of them asked of Jesus, "remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus replied with words that seem unbelievable: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Maybe Jesus knew those words would sound unbelievable. Maybe that's why he added "truly I tell you" to the beginning of his promise. He had to say something to convince the man at his side that what was around them at that moment - their own pain and suffering, the sadness of those around them, the cruelty of their situation - was not all that was real. It was surely intense and overwhelming, maybe even all-consuming. It would be understandable if Jesus and the men next to him felt like their pain was the only certainty, the only thing that was real in that moment. It would've been understandable if they had trouble seeing anything past the horror of the situation they were in.

But the man who asked Jesus to remember him must've had some hope to begin with when he spoke that request. He must've known something about Jesus, must've heard stories of how Jesus made seemingly impossible things real - fed the hungry multitudes, healed those who had been sick for ages.

Maybe the man thought, 'if Jesus can turn those hopeless situations around, maybe he can do something for me, here and now.' And Jesus helped the man to trust that he had good reason to hope when he told him this "truth" - that they would be together in something better, something beyond where they currently were.

When the man makes this request of Jesus, and when Jesus responds, the two are together in a terrible moment. Have you ever shared a moment of sadness or fear or pain with someone? Seeing another person struggle can deepen our own struggle - maybe that's why we sometimes look away when those around us are hurting.

But seeing another person struggle can also help us: it can reassure us that we are not alone in our pain. It can connect us to each other in important ways. Instead of increasing our hurt, it can lessen it. An old saying suggests that sharing our sorrow halves it, and sharing our joy doubles it. The promise here is that though, Jesus and this other man share their struggle in this scene, they will also be together in paradise - that is, in a place of joy and delight. The promise is this: some sort of transformation is coming.

We don't know much about what Jesus thought would happen after death. We know differing branches of Judaism of his time had different ideas about what life after death might be. We do know that he prayed - and taught his disciples to pray - that God's will, and God's power, and God's love, would be made real "on earth, as it is in heaven." And maybe, by offering that promise of peace and paradise to the man at his side, Jesus was helping to make it real right where he was.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- Who makes you feel better when you're sad? How do they do that?
- How do you think the man felt when he heard Jesus' promise that they would be together in paradise?

GOING DEEPER

- When pain feels like all that's "true," how do you remember God's promises?
- What are some truths you speak to other people when they're struggling?
- How do you imagine paradise?

POSTER THREE: HERE

SCRIPTURE

John 19:26-27: "Here is your son. Here is your mother."

REFLECTION

Here: *relevant, present, now*

Where is your family?

With these words, Jesus continues some of the most important work he did in his life, even as he's dying.

He turns people toward each other.

He offers them to each other.

It's what he did when he called disciples, taught and trained them, and sent them out together to teach and to heal. It's what he did when his relatives came looking for him when he was attracting a lot of attention, drawing a crowd. When people said, "your mother and brothers are outside looking for you," Jesus expanded the notion of family, widened that idea beyond those to whom he was related, to include all of the people he was with, saying, "This is my family! All who do the will of God are my family." And from the cross, Jesus sees perhaps the two people who love him most, his mother and his dear friend, both in pain. And with some of his very last words, he gives them to each other.

I experienced how important this kind of giving is at one of the saddest times in my life. After a person from my group of college friends was killed, the rest of us were shocked. We came to her funeral numb. We left in silence. We couldn't believe it, and we didn't know what to do.

A year later, on the anniversary of her death, another friend called and suggested we all meet at a restaurant to remember her. I thought this was a terrible idea. I could only imagine our sadness deepening, our anger intensifying, when we got together. But I went.

We didn't say much at first. We picked at our food, swirled our drinks. We shared updates about jobs, apartments, other friends who weren't there. Finally, someone said, "Do you remember when...?" and began to tell a story about our friend. And we did remember. And that first story sparked another,

and then another until we were all laughing and hugging and ordering more food and drinks and staying late into the night. The gathering to remember our friend became a tradition.

She was not with us, of course. But our shared love for her had brought us together. And because of that, not only would we always remember her, but we would come to love her, and each other, in new ways.

Jesus knows his mom and his dear friend are entering into deep sadness, real anger, and lots of questions that don't have answers. He knows surviving this loss may be the hardest thing they've ever done. Like any grief, theirs will be complicated, and it will remain with them for a long time. They will hear his voice and look for him, forgetting that he's not there. They will prepare his favorite dinner and be overwhelmed with sadness that he can't enjoy it. They will see people he taught carry on his work, and wish he could see it, and they will see people he taught ignore his work, and wish they could make everyone respect who he had been. Memories of him will consume them some days. Others, they'll be distracted, and feel guilty for only thinking of him once in a while.

That's why he gives them to each other. He knows they need each other. He knows that when one of them is sad or angry or stuck in questions, the other might say, "Do you remember when...?" and tell a story about him. And he knows that won't make everything alright, but it will remind them that they share a love for him, and it might help them grow to love each other, too. Love can help us remember and honor what was, and it can reassure us that what we've cherished will, in some way, always be with us. And that love might be just what they need to see each other through this loss, and into a new day.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- Who has cared for you when you've been sad or struggling? How have they done that?
- What is one way you've shown care for someone else?

GOING DEEPER

- Has anyone been "given" to you, like how Jesus gives these two to each other? What does that mean for your relationship with that person?
- When Jesus asks his mother and his friend to look toward each other, he's instructing them, "this is where your attention should go." If he were with us today, where do you think he might turn our attention?

POSTER FOUR: FORSAKEN

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 27:46: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

REFLECTION

Forsaken: *left all alone, tossed aside, rejected*

My God, why?

This fourth word is among the hardest to hear. Jesus - the one who so closely communed with God that people knew God through him, felt God's love and grace and healing just by being near him - cries out here in pain. He knows God is always with him, but he can't feel that in this moment. He knows God loves him and yet this struggle makes him feel alone, makes him feel like God isn't paying attention. He seems to be asking: is there any sense in his suffering - or, for that matter, in any suffering?

These words are hard to hear, but they say more than they might appear. These words are a code, or a cue, for anyone who might have been near the cross, listening; or for anyone who might be hearing or reading the story, years later. Jesus uses these words from the beginning of Psalm 22. The Psalms are the songbook, and the prayerbook, of Jesus' community. And this Psalm is a dialogue between two voices - one desperate, persecuted, nearly hopeless; the other confident in the memory that God has always been with him and his people, and promises to always be with them. Here's the beginning of the conversation:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

and by night, but find no rest.

Yet you are holy,

enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted;

they trusted, and you delivered them.

To you they cried, and were saved;

in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

But I am a worm, and not human;

scorned by others, and despised by the people.

*All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
"Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!"
**Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.***

Because the Psalms were Israel's songbook and prayerbook, anyone who heard Jesus cry out from the cross would've heard not just the words he said aloud but, after that, this whole conversation. If someone sings, "Jesus loves me, this I know..." and trails off, maybe your mind continues with the next line, "for the Bible tells me so..." That's what we can imagine happening here. Jesus cries out, and his words give voice to his sorrow, his loneliness, his pain. They also hint that all is not lost, that God, who has journeyed with God's people through all of history, is still by their side now, even in the depths of despair.

That truth doesn't make the pain Jesus speaks from any less; it doesn't erase it or take it away. But it does let us know that the pain and agony are one part of a larger, longer, unfolding story. It is a reminder that as far as Jesus felt from God - at this moment - this is not all that is. It doesn't answer his question of "why?" - or any of the other myriad of questions that are asked - but maybe it answers a different question. Maybe sometimes there are no answers to his - or our - questions of "why."

What this Psalm answers, instead, is the question of "where?" - where is God? Where is our hope? Where is the love that every single one of us was born into, that promised to hold us forever? And the answer, even when all else is unknown, is always, "here."

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- What are some songs or scriptures you know by heart like Jesus and his community knew the Psalms?
- How would you describe the two voices in the Psalm?

GOING DEEPER

- Can you share a story of a time you've known God's nearness?
- Can you share a story of a time you've felt God to be far away?
- Do you ever struggle with the distance between what you know is true from your faith and what feels true in your circumstances? How do you manage that difference?

POSTER FIVE: THIRSTY

SCRIPTURE

John 19:28: "I am thirsty."

REFLECTION

Thirsty: *desiring, craving, yearning*

What do you thirst for?

In the summer, I thirst for water. After a long run, or following an afternoon swimming in a lake, nothing feels better than pouring a tall glass of water and gulping it down. When the seasons change and the leaves turn color, I love a cup of warm apple cider. The slight spice is so comforting, like a hug to take away the chill. And in the winter, there's nothing cozier than sipping a mug of hot chocolate - bonus points if it's near a fireplace.

When we thirst, often it's our body's way of telling us that we need something, that we lack something. Sometimes it's a cup of liquid we crave. And sometimes it's something more than that: sometimes our spirit is telling us that there's something missing, there's something not quite right, there's something more that could be. Sometimes what we crave is an answer to satisfy our curiosity, or a friend to feel connected to, or a new understanding to make sense of the world around us.

Jesus uses some of his last words to say he's thirsty.

Does that surprise you?

I wonder if the people around Jesus were surprised to hear him say he was thirsty. I wonder if they expected something more profound when he began his sentence. Earlier in this same story, the Gospel of John, he's been heard saying, "I am the bread of life" and "I am the light of the world" and "I am the good shepherd" and "I am the way, the truth, and the life" and "I am the true vine."

I wonder if, here, he said, "I am..." and people around him leaned in, thinking they might hear one more revelation, one more metaphor, one more saying, that would shed light on just who Jesus was. I wonder how they felt when they heard him finish that sentence with "...thirsty."

Maybe they felt relieved - here finally was an "I am" statement they could understand! They knew what it meant to be thirsty.

Maybe they felt frustrated - here was something they might have been able to help with, if only they had a jug of water, if only they had a way of reaching Jesus.

Maybe they felt saddened - here Jesus was, having been mocked and tormented by people who thought he was a threat, having been left alone by those closest to him, and instead of saying he's heartbroken or distraught or in pain, he just says he's...thirsty.

And in this story, someone wet a sponge in a jar of sour wine and held the sponge to Jesus' lips. They heard his statement as a request, for liquid, and they met it.

But I wonder if, even after that gesture, was Jesus still thirsty?

I wonder if he was thirsty for justice and for righteousness - that is, for a world in which everyone has what they need, and no one suffers at the hands of another - like the prophet Amos prays will flow like water, like an ever-flowing stream. I wonder if he was thirsty for living water like he'd offered the woman at the well when he told her who he was. I wonder if he was thinking about the way water dedicates people to God, like in baptism, or the way water helps people serve each other, like in foot-washing. I wonder if he was remembering his own baptism, with his friend John, with the voice from God calling him beloved... I wonder if he was, in these most difficult and lonely moments, yearning for some kind of connection like that, and so he said, "I am thirsty." And I wonder how we can help answer those people in our world today who are thirsty - for water, for connection, for justice.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- Have you ever participated in a ritual with water or juice or wine - like baptism, or foot-washing, or communion? What was that like?
- Do you think it was hard for Jesus to say, "I am thirsty"? Is it ever hard for you to say when you need something?

GOING DEEPER

- Surely Jesus felt lots of things, felt lots of needs, on the cross. Why do you suppose he chose "thirsty" as the one to communicate?
- Describe a time when you were really thirsty. What did you need? How did you know what you needed? How was your need met?
- Who speaks words like these today?

POSTER SIX: FINISHED

SCRIPTURE

John 19:30: "It is finished."

REFLECTION

Finished: *ended, destroyed, completed*

What is finished?

This sixth phrase seems clear enough, until we ask the obvious question: "What is finished?" What is it, exactly, that ends here at the cross?

It's not Jesus' ministry - he's trained disciples to carry that on.

And it's not his teachings - for thousands of years now, people have been retelling the stories he told.

And it's not his presence - he'd promised that whenever two or more people got together and remembered him, he'd be there among them.

And it's not his love - we're assured that not life or death or anything in the world can separate us from his love.

So what is finished here?

The question becomes more complicated when we think about what can be meant by "finished." Is this a good thing - like when someone who's been sewing a quilt or writing an essay can announce proudly that the work is done? Or is it a thing to be mourned - like when friends decide to go their separate ways, or when a neighborhood store closes its doors for the last time?

Maybe Jesus means that the experiment is over - this incredible moment of God on earth with people, as one of us - maybe that's what finishes here. In Jesus, God was born like any one of us, lived and learned and ate and drank and danced and cried like any one of us, and here, he died like so many of his time died. Maybe the crucifixion is the finishing of God's experiment in a human body.

If that's what it is, maybe this ending is both a good thing and a thing to be mourned...

...We can celebrate that it was. We can celebrate that it happened, that God journeyed alongside people like us, prayed with them and joked with them and cared for them, and let them take care of

him, too. We can celebrate that God made friends with us, that God understands what it is to be one of us, in a body, in the world. We can celebrate that people kept and told and collected the stories, so that even though we're in a very different time and space, we can know something of what it was like.

...And we can mourn that it ended the way it did, that people didn't understand the miracle right in front of them. We can mourn that those in power were so scared of the challenge Jesus spoke that they let their fear win out over their hope - for a moment - and ordered his crucifixion instead of considering his call to live a new way. We can mourn that in too many ways and in too many places still today, fear wins out over hope: when we turn our backs, or close our doors, to those in need; when we don't speak up against the cruelty we see and hear around us; when we refuse to listen to the prophets around us today who speak, challenge, and point to a better way.

Maybe, thinking back to this moment, we can find the strength to say "we are finished" with letting fear win in our own hearts, minds, lives, and communities. Maybe, like Jesus' first followers, we can find ways for hope, and justice, and the life-changing message of his love to carry on. We say "we are finished" with letting fear win every time we welcome a stranger, or offer kindness to someone in need, or stand up for what's right, or listen to, and believe, those who tell the stories of their pain and point us to a new way.

And we can remember that since God is alive in each one of us, and everyone we meet, the story of God-with-us, God-among-us, might change - might lose some characters along the way, and introduce some new ones - but it will never really be finished.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- Can you share a story of a time you've celebrated an ending?
- Can you share a story of a time when an ending has been sad?

GOING DEEPER

- What do you think was finished, or ended, at the crucifixion?
- What are some ways you've seen the work Jesus did during his life continue, in your home or church or community? What are some ways you, or those around you, try to make sure that the story and love of Jesus aren't "finished"?
- What do these words call you to today?

POSTER SEVEN: COMMEND

SCRIPTURE

Luke 23:46: "God, into your hands I commend my spirit."

REFLECTION

Commend: *give, place, entrust*

Where does your spirit go? Who holds it?

The language of this last word, like the language of the fourth, is coded. It says what it says and so much more. It's a hint at a much bigger story.

"Into your hands I commend my spirit."

Jesus isn't the first to speak these words. He didn't compose this line as he drew his final breaths. This statement is a prayer of his people. It is taken from the thirty-first Psalm.

*In You, O Lord, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame.
Incline your ear to me.
Rescue me quickly...
Take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.
Into your hands, I commend my spirit;
You have redeemed me, Faithful God.*

These last words are not a giving up. Jesus does not speak them and hang his head. They are fighting words. He uses his very last breath to make sure they are heard.

And with these words, Jesus says to the powers that surround him - to the empire, that used weapons and threats to rule over people, and to the religious leaders that were too afraid to defy that empire: "I do not belong to you. I do not belong to your violence, and I do not belong to your fear." Jesus said it, but he wasn't the first to say it. He wasn't the last, either. People all over the world continue to speak these words - inspired, defiant - whenever they trust that God's promises are stronger than whatever terrible circumstances they face. People say these words whenever they create hope for those around them that what currently is, does not always have to be.

It's what the artists said when they came together on the Ivory Coast, to film a music video in the place where a terrorist attack has been committed just weeks before. They wrote a new song,

celebrating life and denouncing hatred. They danced and clapped and in a show of solidarity they held hands and sang “you cannot make us hide.”

Just as Jesus spoke to God through prayer, they sang and danced, saying: violence cannot claim our spirits and fear does not work here.

It’s what the restaurant owner in New York City said when the attacks of September 11, 2001 had destroyed so much. He knew people would need to gather and to feel safe. When every other place had boarded up their doors, he threw his open, and made giant plates of pasta, and found a chair for anyone who could come and played music that would be good for their souls. He hugged each person that arrived. When people called, because they heard the restaurant was open, they said, “Do we need a reservation?” and to everyone, the owner said, “Just come.”

Just as Jesus spoke to God through prayer, their open invitation was a clear message: violence does not own us and fear will not hold us.

The crucifixion - this part of Jesus’ story - is horrible, like any murder is horrible.

And it is unjust, like any execution is unjust.

And it is heart-breaking, like every loss is heart-breaking.

And this horror, this injustice, this heartbreak - it is part of this old story, and it is still very much a part of our stories today.

So where does your spirit go? Who holds it?

The one we mourn on Good Friday said to the one who was with him always: “Into your hands, I commend my spirit.” The words are offering, and reunion. They are remembrance - these are the words his people have spoken for generations. And they are reverence - these are the words with which he acknowledges that he is not his own. And they are resistance - these are the last words from the cross, and with them, Jesus says, “This is not the last word.”

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- When things around you are hard, or sad, what helps you get through?
- What words give you strength, or hope, or peace?

GOING DEEPER

- Can you tell a story of a time you’ve experienced someone pushing back against violence, fear, or heartbreak?
- How might Jesus’ words from the cross - difficult as they are - also give us hope?
- Why do you think Jesus keeps going back to the Psalms - keeps using words that aren’t his own - from the cross? Or, why does his community remember and tell the story this way?

POSTER EIGHT: BELIEVE

SCRIPTURE

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

REFLECTION

Believe: *consider, accept, trust*

What difference does it make when we believe each other?

At a small school a few years ago - the kind where everybody knows each other - some students of color came to the teachers and administrators to say they were being harassed and bullied. White students had mocked them, spat on them, made signs that made them feel unwelcome, and threatened violence against them. The students of color were frightened, and they were heartbroken. And when they told their stories, the leadership of the school said, "We don't think that kind of thing happens here." The students' stories seemed to the leaders an idle tale, and they did not believe them. And the leaders' disbelief became one more cause of pain for the students.

In this story, the same thing happens, for an opposite reason - the apostles say, "We don't think that kind of thing happens here," but they say it because the women's story is not too terrible to believe but too good to be true. They're just beginning to come to terms with the grief, just settling in to the reality of Jesus being gone, and now they hear this...

But what difference does it make when we believe each other? And what kind of harm do we do when we discount each other's stories?

People experience the world differently. Some of that difference is understandable, and fair. But some of it is rooted in injustice: people with privilege and positions of power, sometimes don't see or understand the realities experienced by people without privilege and power. People with stories that are hard to hear, hard to believe - those students of color, these women at the resurrection - often risk a lot just to tell them.

And, if anyone should've believed these women, it was these guys, the apostles. Because they knew these women. They'd traveled together; they'd been doing this work all together. They'd been with Jesus in his last days. The men had every reason to trust these women. But when these women tell their stories, their words seemed to the men an idle tale.

“Idle tale” is a mild translation of the original Greek here. What the male apostles thought they were hearing was “garbage, drivel, nonsense, crap.” It’s not that they didn’t want to believe this good news. It’s just that this story violated and destroyed everything they knew.

Imagine being one of those apostles – grieving, mourning the loss of your friend – probably also mourning the life you gave up to follow him – maybe afraid for your own life, now, too. Forget that you’ve heard this story before. Forget that you’re part of a community that embraces this story. What if you were hearing it for the first time? Imagine being in that state of mind, when in come these others, to tell you that somehow, all that has been solid in the world – like, the one thing you know for sure, that death is an ending, and the dead stay that way – these others come to tell you ... maybe not.

What would you believe?

When we say, “I believe”, we tend to mean something different than when the early Christian church talked about belief. We tend to mean you have to believe certain statements or facts, but for the early church, to say “I believe” was to say “I give my heart to...”

And that changes things.

It doesn’t mean we know all the facts. It doesn’t mean we understand all the mysteries. It doesn’t mean any of it makes sense. It means we choose, anyway, in spite of all of that, to step into a story that defies what we know but affirms what we hope.

So to say, “I believe in the resurrection” – that could mean, “I give my heart to the hope that the goodness and love the world knew in Jesus did not die with him. I give my heart to the promise that nothing in all of creation – not life and not death, not any principality or power – can separate us from the love of God. I give my heart to the possibility that there is more to life – and more to death – than I know.” It could even just be a way for the apostles who hadn’t seen yet to say to the ones who had seen, “Because I know you, because I trust you...I believe you. I give my heart to you, and to this story you’re telling me now.”

And what difference does it make when we give our hearts to each other?

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- Can you name a story you find hard to believe?
- Have you ever told a story that other people found hard to believe? What was that like?

GOING DEEPER

- How can believing other people’s stories be an act of mercy, or faithfulness, or justice?
- What do you give your heart to?

SEVEN LAST WORDS

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