

**STORIES**  
**for**  
**LENT**



**Reflections ~ 2021**

**Gungahlin Uniting Church**

## STORIES FOR LENT

The Christian Community refers to the forty days before Easter as the period of Lent. It begins with the Transfiguration of Jesus and his time alone in the wilderness where he faces and overcomes temptations. The Reflections retell five events that climax in Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus. Texts from the Gospels take the reader from **The Temptations of Jesus, The Death of Lazarus, Mary of Bethany, Gethsemane, and Mary Magdalene's meeting with the Risen Christ.**

The Gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John record these events. No one Gospel tells the full story of the events that occurred. However the differences in the texts do not in any way affect the validity of the stories. The different insights present the same story from different viewpoints. The Contemporary English Version of the Bible is used as the text. The creative style for retelling episodes read into the silences that surround the people and the events that occurred. The stories go beyond the written text, to ask questions, and most importantly to let God speak through the words and the silences.

Readers are invited to take time to pause, to ponder and ask their own questions. To create a space to be still. Perhaps in the quietness the reader may wish to enter into each story as one who was present as the events unfolded,

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May the journey through the events that led Jesus to death by crucifixion and to Mary Magdalene's words "He is risen!" be as real today as it was 2000 years ago.

Peace!

*Ranjini*

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## WEEK 1

### THE TEMPTATIONS OF JESUS

**Texts: Mark 1: 12-13; Matthew 4: 1-11; Luke 4: 1-13.**

#### **The Setting**

Following Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist the Gospels record Jesus preparing for his ministry by taking himself away into a wilderness. A lonely and desolate place where he gives himself the space and the time to consider his calling and the nature of his ministry. The Gospel records describe the forty days he was in the wilderness as a time of testing. A Tempter (also named Satan or the Devil) attempts to entice Jesus with promises of power as dominance and authority, power within religious structures and institutions, and power as a test to Jesus' loyalty and trust in God. The Israelites were waiting for a Messiah who would be their leader. Four significant expectations of the Messiah were:

He would be a Political figure, a king in the line of King David.

He would be a Priestly leader in the Temple.

He would be a Prophet in the line of Moses who would challenge authority and lead his people.

Jesus uses verses from the Book of Deuteronomy found in the Hebrew Scriptures, (also known as the Old Testament) to withstand the temptations. Deuteronomy is one of the books that records the laws and commandments that Moses passed on to the Israelites. Jesus shielded himself against temptation invoking the authority of Scripture.

The Gospel of Mark has two verses that provide a short summary of the events that took place in the wilderness. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke have a more detailed account of the temptations. The Gospel of John does not contain a record of the temptations. The three temptations appear in a slightly different sequence in these two Gospels. Despite the difference in the order of the conversation between Jesus and the Tempter, it was his preparation for his ministry as the Son of God that was at the centre of Jesus' search for identity. The temptations placed before him by the Tempter presented a choice between different aspects of human power. Jesus' trusting relationship with God triumphed over the power of the Tempter.

#### **The Temptations**

**Personal Power:** *The Tempter said: "If you are the Son of God command these stones to become loaves of bread."*

*Jesus answered: "It is written, 'One shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'"*

Jesus had fasted for forty days. Prolonging his hunger could lead to physical and mental health issues. It could certainly lead to his death. Jesus needed to make a decision and act. He was at a very low point and vulnerable. Did he wonder if he had the power as God's Son to miraculously turn the vegetation around him into food? He was being referred to as a miracle worker by people. However rather than resorting to miraculous powers to satisfy his hunger, Jesus put his trust in God to meet his needs. His faith in God overtook the Tempter's challenge to use personal power to turn stones into bread.

**Religious Power:** *The Tempter took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and said: “If you are the son of God throw yourself down, for it is written ‘He will command his angels concerning you and they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone’”*

*Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”*

The Tempter uses Scripture to test Jesus’ role in the Temple. He would have been known as a Priest in the Temple where he sometimes taught. Jesus is shown all the countries in the known world from a pinnacle on the Temple. If Jesus were to jump from the pinnacle, the Tempter declared that God would send angels to rescue him. After all he was the Son of God who would be rescued by angels! This was both a test of Jesus’ faith in God, as well as a test of God. Would God miraculously save God’s Son? Once again with words from ancient Hebrew Scripture Jesus resists this temptation.

**Political Power:** *Showing Jesus the kingdoms of the world the Tempter said: “All these I will give you if you will fall down and worship me.”*

*Jesus said to him. “Away with you Satan for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’”*

The Jews were expecting a Messiah for centuries. The Scriptures emphasised God’s promise to send a king to liberate Israel. The temptation to fulfil such a prophecy was offered by the Tempter. Jesus recognised the temptation to choose power and authority.

By rejecting this temptation Jesus rejected manipulative and destructive power. In Jesus powerlessness was not weakness. He did not need the authority of power to prove his identity. The power of God alone was a constant presence throughout his life. Jesus countered the temptation with the words of the Great Commandment that called on all people to worship the one true God and serve only him.

### ***Pause and Ponder***

We are faced with a variety of temptations today. We often confront choices with a subtle use of power that can be rationalised as a just means for doing something ‘good’ for others.

As Christians there are temptations that are sometimes labelled as “choices” which challenge our values, or tempt us to use the Bible as a book of rules rather than as a book that is the story of a Living God whose Son Jesus was human and who faced his own temptations.

**What strategies do we use today for facing and overcoming temptations?**

**What would you consider to be ‘temptations’ of today?**

## WEEK 2

### MARTHA, MARY AND THE DEATH OF LAZARUS

**Text:** John 11: 1-44

#### **The Setting**

The home of Martha, Mary & Lazarus was located in Bethany, a town situated beyond Jordan. Jesus visited the home in Bethany twice. Luke and John are the only Gospels that record these two visits. It is probable that the family were known in the community since Martha was the owner of the house and not Lazarus, which would have been unusual during this period in history. In John's Gospel the death of Lazarus is central to the story. Martha is the dominant figure in this episode.

**Martha reflects:** Not long after that visit from Jesus tragedy struck in our home. Our dear brother Lazarus took ill. For days we tended to him. Friends brought us healing herbs and oils. Nothing seemed to work. Mary and I were desperate. We sent Jesus a message hoping that he would come to heal Lazarus. Jesus never came. A few days later Lazarus died. We wrapped his body in burial cloths and laid him in a cave with a large stone at the opening.

A few days later Jesus arrived with his disciples. I faced him angrily. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to me "Your brother will rise again". My impatience with him must have shown when I said that I knew that my brother would rise again on the last day. His next words made me ashamed. He said: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this". I knelt down before him and said "Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

I got up and ran to get my sister.

**Mary reflects:** I was in the house crying and mourning the death of my brother when Martha burst in saying that the Teacher was here and was asking for me. Jesus was still outside our village as I ran to him. Some of the women who were mourning with me ran by my side. As I met him I fell to my knees and cried 'Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died'. As I continued to weep I saw the tears in Jesus' eyes as he too wept for his friend Lazarus. I led him to the cave where we had placed Lazarus. "Take away the stone" he said. Martha reminded him that Lazarus had been dead for days and that the smell of death would be unbearable. Jesus reminded us that if we believed in him we would see God's glory. Someone moved the stone from the entrance to the cave. Jesus then prayed thanking God for hearing his prayer that would make all those present believe that God had sent him. He then called Lazarus to come out. Our brother walked out of the cave, still wrapped in his burial cloths. "Unbind him and let him go" commanded Jesus. Our family was restored, Jesus walked away to a town named Ephram and stayed there with his disciples

### ***Pause and Ponder***

Martha and Mary not only believed in Jesus they had faith in him as the Son of God – the Messiah. This ancient story of the family in Bethany and their relationship with Jesus transcends centuries of re-telling to speak to us today. It draws us into understanding spirituality as a combination of faith and belief. It can be a combination that replaces doubt with certainty.

As science, technology and knowledge expand in our time how does it affect our faith?

As medical research continues to push the boundaries between life and death is our faith challenged?

**“I am the resurrection and the life.”**

How do we understand these words when we think about the dying of someone we love?

### **WEEK 3**

#### **MARY OF BETHANY**

**Texts:** Matthew 26: 6 –13; Mark 14: 3-9; Luke 7: 36-50; John 12: 1- 8

#### **The Setting:**

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John record the anointing of Jesus by a woman. There are some differences in the manner in which each writer records the event. Matthew and Mark don't give the woman a name. Luke identifies her as a sinful woman. John identifies her as Mary of Bethany. All four writers record the anointing of Jesus as taking place in Bethany.

**Mary reflects:** There was much chatter in Bethany about our friend Jesus. It was six days before our Passover when I heard that Jesus was visiting in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Something prompted me to act. I bought a very expensive alabaster jar filled with fragrant oil and ran to Simon's house. Without a thought I rushed in and stood behind Jesus who was seated at a table. With no hesitation I broke open the alabaster jar and poured the oil on Jesus' head. Then I knelt at his feet and let my tears wash over his feet. I had no towel to dry his feet so I used my long hair to dry them. All I could think of was that I wanted to anoint him before he was arrested and maybe killed.

As I rose there was a stunned silence in the room. Then I was accused of being extravagant and thoughtless in wasting such expensive oil. Someone said angrily that it would have been better for me to have sold the alabaster jar and given the money to the poor. Another said I was a sinful woman and had no right to use my hair to wipe Jesus' feet. Only prostitutes carried out such acts on men. I looked into Jesus' eyes. There was no anger or condemnation in them. He spoke to the men at the table. He told them a story about two debtors who could not pay their debts. But the creditor cancelled their debt. Jesus asked **"Which of them will like him more?."** Simon replied that it would have been the man who had the greater debt cancelled. Jesus said **"You always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me."** Jesus then looked at me and said to Simon: **"Have you noticed this woman? When I came into your home you didn't give me any water so I could wash my feet. But she has washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You didn't greet me with a kiss but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You didn't even pour oil on my head but she has poured expensive perfume on my feet. So I tell you that all her sins are forgiven and that is why she has shown great love."** Jesus then said to me **"Your sins are forgiven."**

The men started questioning Jesus' words. But Jesus turned to them and said: **"You may be sure that wherever the good news is told all over the world, people will remember what she has done. And they will tell others."** I needed to get home. As I hurried away I wondered what Jesus meant when he said that what I had done would be remembered in memory of me.

**Pause and Ponder:** How would this story be recalled or understood today? An economist may write about sharing resources and the distribution of wealth. Social media may sensationalise the event as a gender issue.

**Do you remember Mary of Bethany?**



## WEEK 4

### GETHSEMANE

**Texts:** Mark: 14: 32-41; Luke: 22: 39-46; Matthew\_26: 36-46;  
John: 18: 1-3.

The Setting: Jesus's public ministry was coming to an end. His identity as the Son of God, Prophet, Messiah, miracle worker and Teacher had grown. His ministry had taken him across Galilee and Judea and finally to Jerusalem where the Jewish Temple was located. His weeping over Jerusalem and his cleansing of the Temple and prediction of its destruction added to the growing anger against him from religious leaders. Simultaneously political figures were plotting to arrest him as he was considered to be a threat to the peace of the city.

Finally Jesus and his disciples sit together for a last meal. He says farewell to them and predicts his betrayal by one of them. After the meal Jesus invites his disciples to accompany him to the Mount of Olives to spend time in prayer.

All four Gospels record events that occurred in what is referred to as the Garden of Gethsemane. The word 'Gethsemane' was derived from the Aramaic word for an olive press. The garden was located east of the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem on the slopes of the Mount of Olives where there was a large grove of olive trees.

The Gospels indicate that this was where Jesus retired to from time to time to pray, to talk with his disciples and to find moments of rest. The Temple in Jerusalem would have been visible from this location. Was it possible that the sight of the Temple in the distance and the condemnation he received from its leaders added to Jesus' agony as he prayed? Did he recall his forty days spent in the wilderness at the commencement of his ministry when the Tempter used the Temple to test his faith and loyalty to God?

The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus going to a 'place called Gethsemane' with his disciples. He says to them: *"Sit here while I go over there and pray."*

He asks Peter, John and James – sons of Zebedee- to come with him. He is agitated and grieving as he says to them: *"I am deeply grieved, even unto death, remain here and stay with me"*

He walked further, threw himself on the ground and prayed: *"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want."*

He returns to his disciples who are asleep. He says to Peter: *"So could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak."*

Jesus walks away again and prays: *"My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."*

He returns to his disciples who are asleep again. He leaves them, walks away and prays. He returns and says to them: *"Are you sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is*



at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

### *The thoughts of an imagined observer*

My regular evening walk in the Mount of Olives is a special time for me to relax, to think, to listen to the sounds of the dying day. Sometimes I meet others walking past. Sometimes I would see a man with a few friends walking slowly by as he talks with them. Tonight I see him kneeling by a rock and praying. Most times it looks as if he is looking towards our Temple. I wonder if he is a priest from the Temple.

Something feels different about the surroundings tonight. I can see his silhouette as he prays. Further away I see a small group of his friends asleep. I lean against a tree and watch them. I can see that the kneeling man is very troubled. Then he rises and walks to his friends who are still sleep. He wakes them and talks with them. He turns round and goes back to kneel at the rock and pray. He looks as if he is pleading with someone. He looks greatly stressed. He is wiping his face with his shawl. I am not sure if its sweat or tears that are running down his face. Once again he returns to his sleeping friends. He talks to them for a third time and returns to pray. His face seems less tortured now. He begins to look calmer. I wish I could talk with him. Perhaps find out why he is so troubled.

I walk away and leave the man and his friends. The sound of angry voices approaching makes me stop. A mob of men with swords and clubs head towards the man and his friends. I hear them shouting the name “Jesus”. A man steps forward and kisses Jesus on a cheek. One of his friends try to protect him by pulling out a sword and cutting off the ear of one of the attackers. I hear Jesus saying “**Put your sword away. Anyone who lives by fighting will die by fighting.**” Jesus then challenges the attackers. He asks why they didn’t arrest him when he was at the Temple every day. Why did they come with weapons now? The men from the Temple didn’t answer him. They led him away. Jesus’s friends then left him and fled into the night.

I walked away wondering what fate awaited the man they called Jesus.

### *Pause and Ponder*

Place yourself in the Garden of Gethsemane and watch. What thoughts come to mind?

Was Jesus being unfaithful by asking God to spare his suffering?

How have you viewed suffering in your own life? Or someone elses?

How does suffering affect your faith?

## **WEEK 5**

### **MARY MAGDALENE**

**Texts: Mark:** 15: 40,47; 16:1-8;16:9. **Matthew:** 27: 56; 61; 28: 1-10.  
**John:** 19: 25-27; 20:1- 18.

#### **The Setting**

Mary Magdalene lived in Magdala which was known to be a notorious village that was destroyed in about 75 CE. The name 'Magdalene' is believed to be derived from 'Magdala'.

In Luke's Gospel she is referred to as a woman from whom seven demons had come out. She is mentioned by all four writers of the Gospels as one of the women who were present at the crucifixion of Jesus. She was also the first at the tomb where he had been buried and which was empty. She was the first to meet and talk with the risen Jesus.

**Mary reflects:** The Passover meal with Jesus was over. He left with some of the disciples to pray in the garden of Gethsemane. There was an air of restlessness among us as we remembered Jesus' words that he was going to be betrayed soon. Then the news came that Judas had come with Roman soldiers to arrest Jesus. As the night wore on we got news that Pilate had condemned Jesus to be crucified. We felt helpless. Our tears flowed as we clung to each other. As Jesus was brought out carrying the cross on to which he would be nailed we wailed and called out to him so he knew that we were there. I will never forget the pain and the love I saw in his eyes as he looked at us.

We walked with him and finally stood and watched the soldiers nail him to the cross. His cry to his Father as he suffered the violence that was inflicted on him by the soldiers was agonizing. Finally it was over. Jesus died. We walked away as his body was brought down from the cross. There was nothing we could do. I asked myself: Where was God? Why didn't God save him? Would a loving Father let a Son die in such agony? In silence we returned to the room where the disciples had gathered. No one spoke. We felt abandoned and alone. We wondered if this was really the end of our journey with our Master.

I couldn't sleep that night. As the dawn light crept into our room I slipped out quietly and made my way to the tomb where I knew Jesus had been buried. As I drew closer I could see that the stone at the entrance to the tomb had been moved. I wondered if someone had stolen his body. I looked around but there was no one to be seen. So I ran back to the house where Simon Peter and the others were still gathered. Breathlessly I cried "They have taken our Lord out of the tomb and I don't know where they have laid him." Peter and another disciple ran ahead as we went back to the tomb. They looked into the tomb and found the linen wrappings folded and lying there. Not knowing what to do next the disciples returned to the city

I couldn't go back. It was too painful for me not knowing what had happened to Jesus' body. As I sat by the empty tomb and wept, I saw two angels close by. They asked me why I was weeping. I replied that someone had taken away my Lord. Then I saw a man standing before me. I thought it was the gardener and asked him to tell me where he had taken the body of my Lord. I waited breathlessly for his answer. Instead I heard a familiar voice say "**Mary!**" I held my breath. All I could say was "Rabboni!" and reached out to touch him. He stopped me and said "**Do not hold on to me because I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and say to them I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.**"

I ran back to the disciples with my heart overflowing with joy. I burst into the room and shouted "I have seen the Lord!" They looked at me with disbelief as if they didn't believe me. But I knew that I had seen my Lord. That he was alive!

***Pause and Ponder:*** Mary Magdalene came to the tomb to mourn the dead. She left as the first person to witness the risen Christ. Her name has disappeared from the rest of the New Testament. Her voice was silenced and she continued to be known as a sinner. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century Pope Gregory the Great declared her to be a Saint for repentant sinners. In later years she was portrayed by great painters and in recent years memorialised in films and musicals.

Was Mary Magdalene a sinner, a disciple or an apostle?  
What does her story and witness say to us beyond Easter?  
"He is risen!" What do these words mean to you?

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#### **Sheoak Cross on Fossil Leaf**

The wonder of fossil leaf, sitting silently in the earth for millions of years.  
The wonder and awe of Jesus who walked on Earth some 2000 years ago.  
The mystery of our lives today.

Ancient ∞ Stillness ∞ Silence  
Nature ∞ Beauty ∞ Colours  
Pondering the Cross ∞ Death ∞ Spirit ∞ Life