

After the Cross

An Easter Bible Study for Connect Groups

Introduction:

Jesus has risen! After the cross what's next? This month we use the story of the two disciples walking to Emmaus in Luke 24 to explore four different ways of responding to the cross. We can: **flinch**, **shrug**, **kneel**, and **leap**.

This introduction could be read aloud by the group leader at the first session to give an overview of the study.

Week one — Flinch. We turn away from the cross like the two disciples leaving Jerusalem. It's too much, too sad, too painful. This is a valid response to the grief of the crucifixion, indeed we might not be able to grasp the significance of the resurrection if we don't confront the cruelty of it. If we keep it always at arm's length the cross becomes a picturesque postcard — not a brutal reality.

Week two — Shrug. It's a lot to take in. The cross can feel very far away and long ago. Like the two disciples we can shrug it off. 'What's it to me? Can I buy it? Can I take it seriously?' Once again, this is a reasonable response to the questions the cross asks of us. If you have never shrugged, scratched your head, and been frustrated by the cross — is it actually the cross you are looking at? Or just a convenient logo?

Week three — Kneel. When the power of the cross hits us it can bring us to our knees in wonder, in fear, in awe, in gratitude, just like the two disciples inviting Jesus to spend the night. If we don't take the time to bow the cross can become a distant historical artefact.

Week four — Leap. Our final response is to take the leap, to bound on to our feet, to follow after Jesus and set out on the adventure of living out the gospel! Just like when the two disciples suddenly recognise Jesus when he breaks the bread. When the heart of the cross grips our lives it can change everything as we leap into the Kingdom!

For many of us our reactions to the cross will be a mix of **sorrow**, **scepticism**, **awe** and **hope** — just like it was for the first disciples. Indeed, each response is intertwined. They are also all **wordless**. We are operating on the *gut level* here! These are physical reactions not intellectual statements. They are not mere metaphors to describe what we 'think' about the cross — they are actual physical responses our bodies make. The death and resurrection of Jesus was a deeply physical event and our responses to it are deeply physical too.

Each week, with the help of insights from theologians Martin Luther, Karl Barth, Donald Baillie and John Zizioulas, we will explore what it means to flinch, shrug, kneel and leap After the Cross...



The group leader reads *The Context* to set up this week's discussion.

Context:

This week we will be exploring our first possible response to the cross: flinch. Understandably the cruelty of the cross can make us flinch. To truly see the cross is to see pain, horror, and torment. There is no resurrection without death, no Easter without Calvary. To embrace Easter involves facing the cross. The resurrection does not 'undo' the cross — Jesus still bears the wounds afterwards.

Some people flinch from the cross and never return for a closer look. It's too much. Perhaps they drift away from the cross entirely or instead they keep it always at arm's length — this is the cross as a picturesque postcard — not a brutal reality.

But seeing the cross and flinching from it is a natural human response to the suffering — indeed to truly face the cross might require us to flinch, to understand what it really means. Not to dwell morbidly on the details, but to honour the sacrifice. If the cross never makes us flinch — is it the cross we're looking at? Or just an empty symbol...? **Discuss!**

The group leader leads a quick discussion on any initial thoughts and reactions to these ideas before moving on to the next section: *Introducing the Readings*

Introducing the readings:

Each week of our study we will read a section of 'The Walk to Emmaus' that the two disciples make in Luke 24: 13-35. We begin with Cleopas and his unnamed friend, leaving Jerusalem disheartened after the death and burial of Jesus. It has been a traumatic and tumultuous week and they are now literally walking away from it all. On the way they meet Jesus, but like Mary at the tomb, they don't recognise him at first. Some **key themes** in this reading are **loss, dejection** and **the uncanny** (how come Jesus is unrecognisable to them?) After the Luke reading we turn to Isaiah 53 and contemplate the humility of the suffering servant. **Key themes** in this reading are **isolation, suffering, and rejection**.

A volunteer reads these Bible texts and then the group leader reads the following words from the *Response* to initiate a discussion on the readings and theme.

Read Luke 24: 13-17 and Isaiah 53

Response:

When we 'flinch' at the cross today — feeling overwhelmed by its sorrow or the unfairness of innocent suffering — are we, like the disciples in verse 17? Standing still, eyes downcast, grieving the loss of a God we need to be all powerful? It takes courage to look at the cross and see Jesus as weak, vulnerable, suffering in our place. The cross shows us a God that is willing to endure great shame and suffering. This is a path not around pain and loss, but *through* pain and loss.



At the cross Jesus takes on the weight of the world — all the pain, hurt, sin and rejection we can throw at him. Like a father stepping forward to take the hit for their children Jesus bears the brunt of it all. No wonder it makes us flinch.

But after the flinch, take a second look. God knows that justice and love aren't free, that they always require sacrifice, and he pays all costs himself, out of love. It is counterintuitive that in God's vulnerability and fragility we glimpse God's power and authority.

Martin Luther, the 16th century German theologian argued that God is most truly found 'hidden in sufferings' rather than in things that seem traditionally powerful and omnipotent. In the sometimes counterintuitive domain of grace: out of death comes life, from suffering comes power, and from shame and failure comes glory and victory. In the cross we encounter a love that knows no bounds and no limits. Even enormous suffering can't break this love.

The 'Q:' sections are questions that are thrown out to the group to initiate discussion on the passage and themes. Pause after these to discuss the ideas.

Q: Go through **Isaiah 53** and explore the hiddenness of God in the description of the suffering servant. What are your reactions to the reading? What words stand out to you? How does it make you feel?

Q: Luther wrote of the 'Hiddenness of God' and could it be that a Christ found in the midst of pain and confusion and disappointment of the cross is more meaningful to us because of it? What does it mean for our pain and sorrow to know that Christ has experienced deep pain and sorrow too? What does it mean to come face to face with a God who is not only strong for us, but is also willing to be weak for us? A God that not only wins for us but is willing to lose everything, including his life for us?

Q: In our Luke reading, Jesus intentionally meets the disciples in their confusion and disappointment. We read that this is the *same day* the women discovered the empty tomb. Jesus isn't running around on a grand tour or a victory lap — he's taking the time to walk alongside two ordinary disheartened Christians. Is it vital for our faith that we are willing to come face to face with the cross again and again and to flinch once more? To discover God's power hiding in the midst of all too earthly pain and suffering? What questions do we have for a God who doesn't bypass, avoid or transcend weakness, but is hidden there, waiting for us?



Week 2: Shrug

Context:

Many shrug at the cross — it's too good to be true, a fairytale, a metaphor, a bizarre historical footnote. It is understandable that the cross frustrates and stretches us. It is a puzzle, a mystery, a step into wonder, an event that cuts across the grain of history.

For some the shrug will lead to rejecting the faith, dismissing the cross, and for others it will be the question that draws them deeper, that makes them linger there.

Really confronting the cross means confronting the strange reality of it. If the cross hasn't ever made us shrug, scratch our heads, or sigh in frustration are we really looking at the cross? Or just an empty logo...? **Discuss!**

The group leader reads *The Context* to set up this week's discussion.

The group leader leads a quick discussion on any initial thoughts and reactions to these ideas before moving on to the next section: *Introducing the Reading*

Introducing the readings:

This week we rejoin Cleopas and his friend as they strike up a conversation with the mysterious stranger. They can't believe he doesn't know all that has happened (Has he been living under a rock? No but he has just rolled one aside...). The two disciples are weary, spent, sad — and now this stranger is inviting them to relive the last week! All they can do is shrug. They had hoped for more, they have heard rumours, but it was all too good to be true. Once more, shrugging is a reasonable response to the cross. The cross invites a critical sincere faith, like that of Thomas in John 20. Doubting the cross — being frustrated by it — is not a barrier to faith, it's *part* of faith. **Key themes** in these readings are **ambivalence**, **scepticism** and **doubt**.

Read: Luke 24: 18-26 and John 20: 24-31

Response:

Returning to Emmaus we uncover the shrug — the feeling of disappointment. "We had hoped that he would be the Messiah" (verse 21). This forlorn feeling is echoed in John 20: 24-31 with the shrug of Thomas's shoulders. Yet Thomas's scepticism is transformed by the invitation from Jesus to touch his wounds.

Q: Discuss Thomas's change of perspective when he grasps the revelation

A volunteer reads these Bible texts and then the group leader reads the following words from the *Response* to initiate a discussion on the readings and theme.

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that God is the God who carries our scars. Do you identify with Thomas, do you find his story relatable?

Q: Reflect: How do the Flinch, the Shrug and the Touch all describe our human spiritual journey? In our lives could touching Jesus be interpreted as an act of compassion toward those who suffer? When did you last reach to touch a suffering friend or even a stranger?

This week we look to another theologian to help us get insight into the cross. **Donald Baillie** was a Scottish Theologian whose book, 'God was in Christ' encourages us to look beyond the factual to the place of encounter. For Baillie, the cross isn't just a historical event we "flinch" at; it is a place where our own will and God's grace meet in a "paradoxical" embrace.

Baillie was very concerned with how we talk about "God in Christ." The Flinch and the Shrug are what happens when we see Jesus as only a man. The Faith (the burning heart) happens when, through the "Touch," we realise — as Thomas did — that this man is also "My Lord and my God."

Q: Discuss: What is it about touching the wounds of Christ — in prayer and in confronting the suffering of the world — that transforms the cross from a distant far off event in history to becoming a personal encounter with the living God, who understands our own hidden pains and sorrows, and releases us from our guilt? **Psalm 16** speaks of being secure in the grace and love of God. How could the touch — reaching out to Christ and others — bring that about?



Week 3: Kneel

Context:

The group leader reads *The Context* to set up this week's discussion.

For some of us coming face to face with the cross will make us kneel. It is a physical and often wordless emotional response. The cross has enormous power. It is a huge event that resounds throughout history. It happened once, but — like sound waves reverberating outwards — the cross continues to happen, ringing through the centuries. For the cross is at once deeply universal and deeply personal. To acknowledge the sacrifice, the love, can bring us to our knees, in awe, fear, gratitude and wonder.

Kneeling (literally or figuratively) before the cross, before Jesus, stops the cross becoming a mere historical artefact and roots it in our lives... **Discuss!**

The group leader leads a quick discussion on any initial thoughts and reactions to these ideas before moving on to the next section: *Introducing the Reading*

Introducing the readings:

This week we continue to reflect upon the story of the road to Emmaus, looking at the revelation that brings about the desire to kneel. In our Luke reading, Jesus — still not recognised by the disciples — reveals the ongoing story through scripture that led to this moment. Cleopas and his friend are so moved they invite him to stay the night. They have caught a glimpse of the bigger picture and they want to know more. They kneel together at the table. Then, just as he did at the last supper, he breaks the bread and gives thanks and in that moment they recognise him as Christ. **Key themes** in this reading are:

continuity, hospitality and revelation.

The Philippians reading also plays on this dual identity of Jesus: fully divine and fully human. Key themes in this reading are:

divinity, humility and incarnation.

A volunteer reads these Bible texts and then the group leader reads the following words from the *Response* to initiate a discussion on the readings and theme.

Read Luke 24: 27-32 and Philippians 2: 5-11

Response:

Last week we allowed the insight of Donald Baillie to encourage us to see the cross as a place of encounter with Christ where *the shrug* is transformed by *the touch*. This week we introduce to you **John Zizioulas** the eminent Orthodox theologian. Zizioulas saw the cross as the ultimate act of love that teaches what it means to be alive. For him kneeling in gratitude is the first act of entering into what he calls the 'Eucharistic' way of life itself. For Zizioulas the act of Communion is not just a memory, it is even more than an encounter with Jesus' presence, rather it is an encounter that reconfigures our whole identity. For Zizioulas the revelation that comes through Communion doesn't just *change* who we are

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— it *makes* us who we are. It may be that we see the cross most clearly during Communion.

Kneeling before the cross is like the 'heart burning' in Luke 24: 32. It is the moment where our understanding turns into adoration and worship and we become, in Zizioulas's words, 'ecclesial persons' born again members of Christ's body.

The 'Q:' sections are questions that are thrown out to the group to initiate discussion on the passage and themes. Pause after each to discuss the ideas.

Q: The disciples on the road were mourning a 'failed' Messiah. Yet, in the breaking of the bread, they encountered the Exalted Lord. In your own life, what is the difference between 'thinking' about the Cross, (which might lead to a shrug) and 'kneeling' before the Crucified One? How does the act of Communion help move us from the head to the knees?

Q: The disciples remarked that their hearts 'burned within them' even before they knew it was Jesus they were speaking to. Zizioulas reminds us that the Eucharist involves our whole being — bread, wine, body, and soul. If the Flinch and the Shrug are ways we keep the Cross at arm's length, how does Kneeling signify a final 'surrender' to the mystery of God's presence?

Q: Reflecting on the Philippians reading, how does the humility of Christ on the cross get under our skin and affect our own behaviour and how we treat one another?



Context:

The group leader reads *The Context* to set up this week's discussion.

Sometimes coming face to face with the cross leads to people leaping into life following Jesus. It's the start of an adventure that physically moves people, motivating them to catch up with where Jesus is working in the world. The cross is life-changing not because it draws us to stay there, but because it turns us to face back out to the world, to where Jesus is now, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is no longer on the cross, no longer in the tomb; while returning to the cross inspires and shapes our faith — we are not meant to spend our lives here — we have to look to where Jesus is calling us now...

The group leader leads a quick discussion on any initial thoughts and reactions to these ideas before moving on to the next section: *Introducing the Reading*

Discuss!

Introducing the readings:

We conclude our journey with the two disciples in Luke 24 as they leap up and return to Jerusalem! We are told, despite the day's walking that they immediately turn back. There's no time to delay! Then we read an extract from Paul's letter to the Ephesians as he urges them to grasp the enormous power of the hope that God is calling them to. **Key themes** in these readings are: **enthusiasm, understanding** and **revelation**.

Read Luke 24: 30-35 and Ephesians 1:18-23

A volunteer reads these Bible texts and then the group leader reads the following words from the *Response* to initiate a discussion on the readings and theme.

Response:

In the Emmaus story the disciples go from kneeling in adoration to leaping into action because a new adventure has been brought before them. Similarly as disciples today, we leap when the ground shifts beneath our feet. The old world order has gone. 'It is finished' is the cry of the cross — something new has come about! This was true 2,000 years ago and it's true for each of us today as we come face to face with the cross.

Q: What is your response to the conclusion of the Emmaus story? What struck you about these final verses? Is there a particular phrase or moment that inspires you? What questions are you taking away from it?

Karl Barth the great 20th century theologian saw the cross and the resurrection as one great cosmic event. He called it a 'cataclysmic interruption'. For Barth the change was that

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in the Cross and Resurrection, the world itself has changed. The "adventure" isn't about simply finding yourself and a new identity; it's about being caught up in a new cosmic reality. You "leap" because the ground you were standing on (the old world of sin and death) has literally disappeared. We now live as citizens of a new creation. We are now modelling the Kingdom to come!

Q: What does Paul mean when he talks about using the eyes of our heart? What are the eyes of our heart? And do they change how we see the cross?

Q: Discuss the following quote. In Church Dogmatics IV/1, Barth uses a powerful metaphor: "The Church is not a museum of the past, but a school of the future." For Barth, the Resurrection isn't just a past event we look back on. It is the future breaking into the present. The Church is the "school" where we learn how to live in that future right now. What does it mean to live in 'a school for the future'? To practice for eternity? You may also want to read **Romans 13: 8- 14** and **2 Corinthians 5: 16-22**.