

What Jesus is dying to show you

A FAMILY GUIDE TO HOLY WEEK

His story has been called the Greatest Story Ever Told.

Its poetry is immortalized in *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, its power in *Jesus of Montreal* and *The Passion of the Christ*. Holy Week's big finish begins simply enough—friends around a table for a meal—but the significance, to quote *Wisdom from a Pastor's Heart* (Jossey-Bass), is something else: “Of all the things in the Lord’s Supper, this ought to come home to us with tremendous force: God thought we were worth dying for. It is a very humbling thing and a staggering thing that, knowing ourselves for what we are, God should think we are worth so much.”

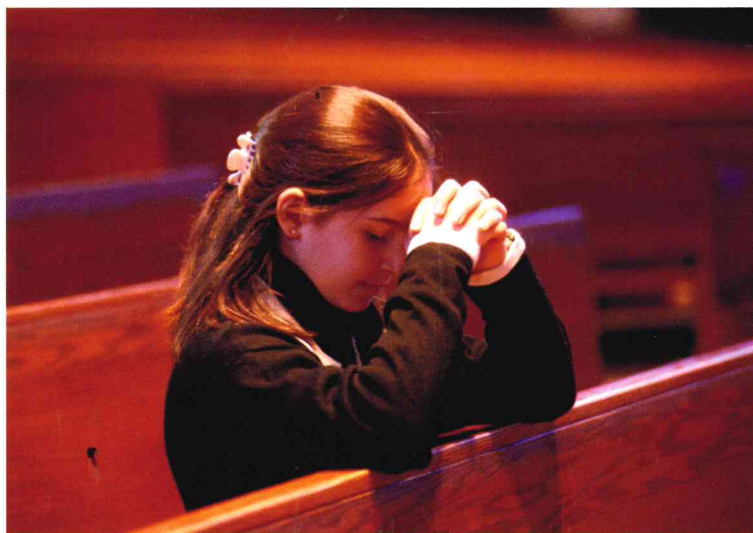
Here is Holy Week’s dramatic conclusion, then, retold in three acts:

Holy Thursday

Because we need each other.

As darkness falls on Jerusalem, Jesus contends with the dark knowledge gathering in his heart: he’s a condemned man whose days are numbered. His enemies are finally catching up with him. Sensing this could be their last night together, Jesus wants to make the evening Passover meal one they wouldn’t forget.

Before supper Jesus makes an unexpected move. He wraps a towel around his waist and washes the feet of his disciples to remind them to be servants. Later he passes around a loaf of bread and the Passover cup, making them the lesson of his life and eventually his death: that he has poured out his spirit and sac-



Wittman

rificed his body for the building of God’s kingdom. They are to stick together and continue the work he’s taught them, Jesus says, finding sustenance by celebrating a meal such as this together, where Jesus will always be with them.

Family lessons from Holy Thursday:

Jesus and his disciples are like any family that huddles together to find reassurance and support. Sharing food reminds us that we find sustenance in each other. Gathering around a meal is also a way we celebrate our faith—not just at the Eucharist, but at Christmas dinner, the Thanksgiving feast, or the potluck that follows funerals. As we eat together, we feed the bonds of hope and memory that we share as believers.

Celebrating Holy Thursday: During the Last Supper, Jesus gave us the words and rituals of the Eucharist, saying, “Do this in memory of me.” The Eucharist is center stage during the Holy Thursday liturgy, situated between the rituals of washing one another’s feet and adoring the Blessed Sacrament. As Catholics we attend Holy Thursday liturgy not only because Jesus has asked us to remember him in the Eucharist, but because Communion means “we do not come to Christ alone but with and through

one another,” as John Rempel writes in *Communion As a Gathered Body*.

Make it a priority to attend Holy Thursday church services together—recalling that we also belong to a parish family. Leave time afterward for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament either at your own parish or after Mass by making a pilgrimage to surrounding parishes to join each of them on their watch.

As a family, place special

emphasis on the one meal you can all share at home on Holy Thursday. Begin it with prayer and consider passing around a single loaf of bread to represent the sustenance of unity and love. And just as Jesus urged remembrance, make this a night of remembering at your house. Maybe it’s sharing memories of family trials and togetherness. Maybe it’s remembering the dearly departed, especially if we were with them on the eve of their own death.

Good Friday

Because we must learn forgiveness and mercy.

The cross Jesus bears is both a tool of torture and a scandal. It’s the electric chair of his day, reserved by the Romans for lowlifes and criminals who would die slowly and publicly as an example to others. Jesus is “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, like a sheep that is dumb before its shearers,” we hear on Good Friday.

At Golgotha the soldiers strip and crucify him. Before breathing his last, Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” and, according to the version from John’s gospel, “It is accomplished.”

Family lessons from Good Friday:

Odd as it seems, Christians call this Friday “good” because we believe Jesus’ sacrifice saved us. When we as a congregation recite the words of Jerusalem’s bystanders, “Take him away! Crucify him!” we acknowledge we too are capable of lashing out at innocent people. We are cruel when we could be kind.

But Jesus accomplished two kinds of forgiveness upon the cross: As he forgave the debt for our sins, he also gave us a lasting example of how to respond to others on a daily basis: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” We who live in families probably recognize the need for forgiveness more than others. After all, it’s hard to live in one house harmoniously. A tired spouse snaps at another and begins a chain reaction of hurtful retorts. One sibling gets impatient with another and chooses to hurl a favorite CD. Too often we “know not what we do.”

Forgiveness is the only way out—asking for it, granting it even when offenders aren’t contrite or even aware. This is what

If kids are in school or seem too young for an afternoon Good Friday liturgy, look for an opportunity to walk the Stations of the Cross together. It’s also appropriate to engage in acts of service today. At home, match the day’s solemnity by refraining from most TV or telephone chatter. Make it a quiet day for reading or reflection instead, or relive the Passion by listening to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Godspell*, or meditative music.

Easter

Because all things are possible with God.

Modern-day followers of Jesus turn to the Easter story already knowing how it will turn out. We can honestly say, “We wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ,” to borrow the words of a eucharistic prayer. Not so the first followers. Easter dawns with an empty tomb—followed by fleeing, fearfulness, disbelief, or the inability to recognize the risen Lord.

The Easter Vigil gives us some sense of what we believe happened on this night

before Jesus rose triumphant from the grave. Accompanied by a roaring flame—the Easter fire that lights the new year’s paschal candle—we huddle together in a dark church to thrill to the stirring

refrains of the ancient *Exsultet*, sung only on this night: “Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing choirs of angels! Exult, all creation around God’s throne!” till we get to the heart of the ancient chant: “This is the night, when the pillar of fire destroyed the darkness of sin.... This is the night, when Jesus broke the chains of death and rose triumphant from the grave.” This is the night, according to the Apostles’ Creed, we believe Jesus “descended into hell” to break the bonds of death and win us everlasting life.

Family lessons from Easter: At the most basic level, Easter means that sin and death don’t have the final word. It’s God’s deep and everlasting wish that love triumph over evil. The Resurrection also reassures us that no sacrifice made for our family, done out of love, is wasted. Our flawed attempts to do the right thing are redeemed; our sinful lapses into impatience, pettiness, or pride can be forgiven if we but recognize them for what they are and repent.

God never gives up on anyone—and neither should we as we slog through the trials of raising teenagers, mending marriages, and sorting out family feuds. Finally, Easter is all about surprise. God turns the tables on all we know—sorrow turns to joy, suffering becomes victory, the sting of death is transformed into the promise of new life—if we simply do what Jesus did: surrender ourselves to God’s love and providence.

Celebrating Easter: The Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday is considered the crown jewel in the church’s liturgical year. Its richness, tradition, and poetry are good medicine. We hear many readings from the Old Testament that trace the winding path of God’s faithfulness and mercy through the ages. We welcome converts into the church as they celebrate the sacraments of initiation. We renew our baptismal vows and get doused with a fresh supply of holy water. We sing triumphant Alleluias.

The Easter Sunday liturgy is equally beautiful in its simplicity. Outside of church, keep your family’s focus on the real meaning behind baskets of candy and colored eggs: God loves us so much that he gave us the promise of new life (thus the eggs), something we’d be foolish not to celebrate (thus the candy).

As part of your family celebration, share stories of the wonders God has done for you—those times when you felt as though you’d burst with joy—like the day you discovered you were pregnant, the day you met your best friend, what it was like to fall in love, ride a bike for the first time, or catch your first glimpse of the Grand Canyon. Include times when victory emerged out of expected defeat. Encourage your kids to do the same.

As your family’s Easter observance draws to a close and you pack away the Easter grass and baskets, remember the surprise they bring to kids each spring. Reflect upon these words from Lawrence Wood in *One Hundred Tons of Ice* (Westminster John Knox): “Easter is about surprise. [Jesus] didn’t come back as an angel. He didn’t come back with wings. He didn’t come back as an eagle, or a dove, or a lion, or a god 20 feet high. He came back as himself—as an ordinary, obscure man—because that was the point of the Incarnation in the first place.”

Easter means that sin and death don’t have the final word. It’s God’s deep and everlasting wish that love triumph over evil.

mercy is. Without it, sinfulness can grow to tragic proportions within a family. Siblings can disown each other. Ancient resentments against our parents can poison our own parenting.

Celebrating Good Friday: Everything about Good Friday suggests somberness and simplicity, to show proper respect for the death of our Lord and Savior. The church asks that all adults over the age of 18 make it a day of fasting. The ache of hunger we feel is supposed to remind us of the suffering Jesus endured on our behalf and to help us focus on the day’s significance.

The Good Friday liturgy, too, is simple and somber. The centerpiece of the service is the reading of the Passion followed by veneration of the cross, where young and old are invited to come forward and show some sign—a bow, a kiss, a tender touch—of reverence for the cross. We do not celebrate Mass, but Communion is distributed from a bare altar.