

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

Introduction

As Marcus Borg puts it, the death and resurrection of Jesus are utterly central to Christianity. This has been so from the first century to the present. But for many in the scientific age, the biblical accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection raise as many questions as they answer.

This six-part series is intended to help groups explore the historical events behind Good Friday and Easter, as well as the meanings that Christians have seen in these events.

Marcus Borg, eminent Jesus scholar, especially known for his best-selling book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, brings the insights of recent biblical scholarship to bear on both the historical events and their meaning for us.

The Leader

Marcus Borg, described by the *New York Times* as “a leading figure among the new generation of Jesus scholars,” is Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture in the philosophy department at Oregon State University. His doctorate is from Oxford University in England. A fellow of the Jesus Seminar, he is in great demand as a lecturer national and internationally. Seen by many as a spokesperson for contemporary Jesus scholars, he has appeared extensively on television (NBC’s “Today,” ABC’s “Prime Time,” PBS’s “Newshour”) and on NPR’s “Fresh Air.”

He is the author of 10 books, including the best-selling *Jesus, a New Vision* (1987) and *The God We Never Knew*, named “one of the 10 best books in religion in 1997” by *Publisher’s Weekly*. His work is recognized throughout the world, having been translated into seven languages. Borg’s *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* is co-authored with Thomas Wright, a well-known British conservative New Testament scholar. The book presents two visions of Jesus and the difference each makes for Christian understanding. It won the award for “best general interest book of 1999” from the Association of Theological Booksellers.

The DVDs

The series consists of six programs. The first two programs treat the historical questions about what happened or “What can we know of what happened?” The last four programs explore the five primary meanings the earliest Christians saw in the events of Good Friday and Easter.

Each program is organized in this way: Professor Borg presents a concept or teaching point; the program is made up of a number of these teaching points. Each of them is followed by a question and answer segment intended to clarify, raise issues or stimulate thinking. The programs are all in the 20-25 minute range to allow time for discussion, even in a class or group with a one-hour time limit.

The Guide

This guide is organized to provide help for groups in discussing the programs. You may want to copy parts of it for handouts.

For advance preparation

1. A biographical sketch of Marcus Borg (page 1). Those not familiar with Professor Borg and his work might like to have some information in advance of viewing the DVDs.
2. An overview of the six programs (pages 4-5). Each overview contains:
 - a. The reference for any Bible passages mentioned in the program, so that viewers can read and reflect on them in advance.
 - b. A list of possible discussion points to watch for while viewing the DVD. Viewers may want to have these during viewing so they can mark the ones they'd like to come back to during discussion.

Note: You may want to make extra copies in case not everyone remembers to bring them back.

For handing out before viewing each program

The overviews mentioned above.

For the leader

To help during discussion and beginning on page 7; a summary of each program, consisting of:

- Marcus' teaching points
- A brief summary of the question-and-answer session that follows each teaching point to help viewers recall what was said and by whom.

The Bible

It would be easy (and true) to say that the whole of the New Testament is valuable background reading for this series but, to be a bit more specific (and practical), viewers might find it helpful to read, as preparation for viewing, the passion story in any or all of the four Gospels. (For those who can take the time to read the accounts in all four Gospels, it might be interesting to read them in the order in which scholars generally agree they were written: Mark, Matthew, Luke, John.) In addition, specific passages are mentioned in the programs and those references appear in the overview of the programs on pages 4-5 so that viewers can look them up and read them before viewing.

Using the DVDs

If you are using these DVDs with a group, the following suggestions may be helpful.

Suggested procedures for the sessions

Option One: View a program all the way through. Discuss. The outlines will help viewers remember Marcus' teaching points and who said what in the Question and Answer section.

Option Two: Stop the tape after each Q and A segment. Discuss Marcus' teaching point and the subsequent questions and answers before viewing further. This will probably take more time than option one but the urge to discuss may make it attractive to extend the sessions or the number of sessions. The outlines will help here, too, but recalling will probably be easier since you'll be discussing each teaching point/Question and Answer immediately after viewing.

Option Three: If you have time, view the program once all the way through and then view a second time, stopping after each Question and Answer for discussion. This option may provide the richest experience, but will also require the most time, probably a minimum of 90 minutes.

Suggestions to help discussion

Encourage the group to view actively. It is strongly recommended that before viewing each program, you hand out the copies of the program overview (pp. 4-5). Suggest that viewers use them as a way of listening for the main points. And, as suggested, viewers can mark the discussion points they'd like to come back to.

Marcus has a clear way of putting things but some will find his ideas new and challenging. He packs a lot of information in a short statement. Using the outlines may help viewers process these ideas.

During the discussion you need not be alarmed if there are occasional pauses in the discussion. Wait a few seconds before moving on to the next question or otherwise saying something to stimulate discussion.

Look for ways to include less talkative members but remember that everyone should be allowed to participate at a level comfortable for them.

Preparation and Equipment

Preview each program before showing.

Remember to make copies of any handouts you plan to use.

Make sure the DVD player and TV are set up in advance and are in working order.

Cue up the DVD ahead of time so that the program you want to view appears when you press "play."

Overview of the Programs

As homework, you may want to read the passion story in one or more of the Gospels. These references mark the beginning of the story: Mark 10:32, Matthew 20:17, Luke 18:31, John 12:12.

1. What Happened on Good Friday?

These passages are mentioned in the program in this order. You may want to read them before viewing.

Psalms 22

Matthew 27:25

Discussion Points: Here are some possible discussion points to watch for. Some appear as captions in the video. Mark any you want to talk about.

- History and metaphor.
- The authors of the gospels interpret the story.
- Something utterly decisive is happening.
- The spirit continues to speak through these documents.
- Followers seek to see a saving purpose.
- Shifting blame for the death of Jesus.
- Texts of terror for the Jewish people.
- The only major religious tradition whose founder was executed.
- Showing us what a God-filled life looks like.

2. What Happened at Easter?

Luke 24

John 20

1 Corinthians 15

Discussion Points:

- The continuing experience of Jesus as a living reality
- Resuscitation – comes back to life again.
- Resurrection – entering into a different kind of existence.
- What happens to a corpse becomes irrelevant.
- Jesus becomes one with God.
- Events you could have photographed.
- The risen Christ journeys with us whether we know it or not.
- You won't find Jesus in the land of the dead.
- Jesus is fully human, flesh of our flesh.
- The metaphorical is what really matters.

3. Jesus is Lord

Genesis 45

Mark 8:27-31

Mark 9:30-32, 10:32-34

Discussion Points

- All these interpretations are post Easter.
- All historical judgments are probability judgments.
- Strange notion to imagine in the head of a human being.
- The domination system got Jesus.
- Jesus is Lord; the domination system is not.
- Jesus stands against all domination systems, ancient and modern.
- Christianity once again can be an alternative culture.
- A powerful political meaning as well as a personal meaning.
- Whatever your heart clings to is your Lord.
- Some kind of designator for Jesus that catches “standing against”.

4. Jesus Is the Way

Galatians 2:20-21

Romans 6:1-23

Mark 8:27-10:45

John 14:6-11

Acts 4:1-12

Romans 10:1-20

Ephesians 2:14-23

Discussion Points

- Good Friday and Easter, a metaphor for the path.
- An internal psychological/spiritual transformation.
- Lent, when we journey with Jesus.
- Means the wounds of existence are being overcome.
- Born again: dying to an old identity/centered in the risen Christ
- The heart, an image for the self at its deepest level.
- Jesus is the embodiment of the path.
- Fact fundamentalists.

5. Jesus As Sacrifice

Hebrews 10:5-14

Discussion Points

- Immediacy of access to God apart from convention, tradition, institution.
- Metaphorical proclamation of unconditional grace.
- God has taken care of whatever separates you from God.
- Christianity began to claim a monopoly.
- Believing Jesus is the sacrifice becomes the new requirement.
- Tradition is how spirituality gets traction.
- You’re not supposed to believe in the finger.

6. Jesus, God's Love Revealed

John 3:16

Isaiah 43:3-7

Discussion Points

- The cross as sign of God as divine lover.
- “God is besotted with us.”
- God as lover participates in our suffering.
- God is in love with all of us.
- Leads to a passion for social justice.
- Also leads to an ecological ethic.
- Evangelism the invitation to the fullness of our lives.
- Different interpretations, not doctrinal statements to be believed.
- Very rich to have multiple ways of seeing the meaning.
 1. Death as denomination system's “no”/resurrection as God's “yes”
 2. Lordship of God disclosed in Jesus
 3. Embodiment of that internal path
 4. Sacrifice for sin
 5. Depth of God's love
- Believing in God with your heart

Session 1: What Happened on Good Friday?

A. Teaching Points

1. The Gospels are a developing tradition. Mark was written about 70 AD, Matthew and Luke in the 80s and John in the 90s.
2. They are a combination of history and metaphor. The Gospels are not just historical fact; they interpret the story of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Question and Answer

Brandon: Does the use of metaphor change the authority of the Bible?

Marcus: I don't think it changes the importance of the Bible at all. Some Christians see the Bible as divine product and therefore infallible. I see the Bible as a human product of the ancient Christian community in response to their experience of God and Christ.

Brandon: What's the difference between something I might write about my experience with Jesus and the Gospels?

Marcus: Gospels are products of the early Christian community, close in time to the events. The Bible is not the words of God in origin but is the Word of God in status and function.

B. Teaching Point

Two factors shape the way the gospels tell passion story: (a) Early Christian community was trying to see meaning in Jesus' unexpected death. (b) Authors progressively shift responsibility for Jesus' death from Roman authority to Jewish authority and then to "the Jews." This was to counter perceptions that the Christian movement was subversive. "The Romans didn't want to execute him. Our own leaders put them up to it."

Question and Answer

Brandon: Are the Gospels anti-Semitic?

Marcus: Don't think so. Gospel writers and first Christians were Jewish. As Christianity became a Gentile religion, the way the passion stories were heard has contributed to anti-Semitism.

C. Teaching Points

1. Two ways to think about Jesus' death: (a) vocational—his purpose was to die to save the world. (b) his death was consequence of what he was doing.
2. Jesus didn't just die; he was killed because he, (like Martin Luther King and Gandhi) was a radical critic of the domination system, of which both Rome and the Temple were prime examples.
3. Christianity is the only major religion whose founder was executed by established authority. So it has a political edge.

Question and Answer

Brandon: Are we just bringing Jesus down to a human level?

Marcus: The church has always said that Jesus was fully human. On a popular level, Christians have often thought that Jesus was different in kind from us (Docetism). Instead, think of Jesus as one so open to God as to show us what a life full of God looks like.

Brandon: Second most remarkable religious figure?

Marcus: Don't care. Just don't like to get into the "our guy is best" mode. To speak to him as utterly unique tends to make him not one of us. Buddha is second remarkable figure.

Session 2: What Happened at Easter?

A. Teaching Points

1. The truth of Easter is not what happened to the corpse of Jesus. Resurrection is very different from resuscitation.
2. Truth of Easter is in the continuing experience of Jesus as a living reality after his death.

Question and Answer

Chiarina: ...more about resurrection vs. resuscitation?

Marcus: Resuscitation involves a corpse coming back to life. Resurrection involves entry into a different kind of existence. In New Testament it is said Jesus was raised to God's right hand, obviously a metaphor meaning Jesus is at one with God.

B. Teaching Point

Easter stories in the New Testament don't sound like they could have been videotaped. The truth of the Emmaus road story is that the risen Christ journeys with us whether we know it or not.

Question and Answer

Chiarina: What form was Jesus in when Mary touched him at the tomb and when Thomas touched the wounds?

Marcus: Two possibilities: (1) a visionary experience; (2) a purely metaphorical narrative to express a truth. If you yearn for your own experience of Jesus, it may be granted as it has for many; and if not, blessed are those who believe without having seen.

Chiarina: Are there data to support the idea that a story is metaphorical vs. an actual occurrence?

Marcus: Paul says the risen Christ does not have a physical body (1 Cor. 15). The important learning is "You won't find Jesus in the land of the dead."

C. Teaching Point

Second most important meaning of Easter: Jesus is Lord.

Question and Answer

Chiarina: How does that differ from saying Jesus is God?

Marcus: Not at all if we're talking about the post-Easter Jesus, the risen Christ. I would never say the historical Jesus of Nazareth is God because that makes him no longer one of us.

Chiarina: Is that based on fact or study?

Marcus: Fact, history and orthodox Christian theology that has always held Jesus in flesh of our flesh. The New Testament never says directly that Jesus of Nazareth was God.

Chiarina: How do you determine history vs. metaphor?

Marcus: Recognize echoes of Old Testament in New Testament story. More important is to recognize that metaphor expresses truth.

Chiarina: ... metaphor as opposed to fact?

Marcus: The meaning is not in hearing the story as once upon a time, but as something that can and does happen again and again.

Session 3: Jesus Is Lord

A. Teaching Points

1. In the New Testament are five different interpretations of Jesus' death and resurrection (See Teaching Point C below).
2. All five are post-Easter interpretations. Later, the Christian community looks back on this horrible event to find some purpose in it. It is somewhat like Joseph's interpretation of his brothers selling him into slavery as having to do with God's providence.

Question and Answer

Brandon: How do you know they are post Easter?

Marcus: It's a probability judgment. Details of Jesus' three passion predictions suggest that they are creations of the Gospel writer.

Brandon: According to Gospels, Jesus seemed to know he was going to die. What about that?

Marcus: Easier to imagine as the providential interpretations of the early Christian community than as the notion in Jesus' mind that he was chosen to die to save the world.

Brandon: ...psychosis if Jesus really said it, but not if whole community says it?

Marcus: I don't find it psychotic in retrospect from a community whose members have experienced the risen Christ.

B. Teaching Points

1. Earliest interpretation of Jesus' death and resurrection is simplest: No/Yes pattern in which his death is the authorities' rejection of Jesus and his resurrection is God's vindication. The domination system got him crucified but the resurrection was God's NO to the domination system and God's YES to Jesus.
2. Second interpretation is similar: "Defeat of the Powers," the spiritual forces that become embodied in earthly institutions. Both interpretations suggest that Jesus is Lord. The domination system and the powers are not.

Question and Answer

Brandon: What does that mean for the Christian in politics today?

Marcus: Jesus stands against all domination systems, ancient and modern. There is a central tension throughout the Bible between the Lordship of God and the domination systems of this world, from Pharaoh in Egypt to the monarchy in Israel to the Roman Empire.

C. Teaching Points

1. Affirmation that Jesus is Lord is most widespread claim made about him in the New Testament.
2. This claim is political: Caesar is not Lord.
3. It is also personal: those things we cling to are not Lord.

Question and Answer

Brandon: The term "Lord" is a problem—hierarchical and sexist.

Marcus: Another term would have to convey the difference in kind between God and us and would have to recognize the subversive element in Jesus' Lordship.

The five interpretations

1. Death as domination system's "no" to Jesus; Resurrection as God's "yes" to Jesus
2. Lordship of God revealed in Jesus
3. Sacrifice for Sin
4. Jesus as the Way
5. Disclosure of God's love for the world

Session 4: Jesus Is the Way

A. Teaching Point

Another interpretation of Jesus' death and resurrection in the New Testament is a disclosure of the path of spiritual transformation—the Way (Gal. 2:20; Romans 6; Mark 8:27-10:52).

Question and Answer

Chiarina: How does that speak to us in contemporary society?

Marcus: Death and rebirth is a very powerful symbol. Can mean dying to a prideful and arrogant self or dying to a sense of worthlessness.

Chiarina: Is the term salvation synonymous with this spiritual transformation?

Marcus: Over centuries salvation has been equated with going to heaven. The word means to become whole. For me, salvation occurs in the midst of life and is the same.

Chiarina: Are we saved by works and not by faith?

Marcus: Dying is the ultimate letting go. Rather than being something we do, it is the cessation of doing.

B. Teaching Point

The path of transformation really means being born again, dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being. This is at the center of the Christian life.

Question and Answer

Chiarina: What part of the person is born again?

Marcus: To use a biblical metaphor, the heart—the self at its deepest level. In life our heart becomes more and more concerned with self. In being born again, the heart is transformed from being centered in the self to being centered in God. The experience can be instantaneous or gradual.

Chiarina: How is being born again initiated?

Marcus: If gradual, can feel like you're doing it yourself, but I'm convinced it's the work of the spirit.

C. Teaching Point

Understanding Jesus' death and resurrection as disclosure of the path of transformation is the meaning of the famous "one way" passage in John 14:6. I think that verse means Jesus is the incarnation of that path.

Question and Answer

Chiarina: I believe Jesus is the way.

Marcus: Simply can't believe the creator of the whole universe has chosen to be known in only one religious tradition that happens to be ours.

Chiarina: Is it a religious tradition or was Jesus, as it says in Ephesians, God's means to bring unity and not division to the world?

Marcus: I can't believe that only if people have heard about and believe in Jesus can they be in right relationship to God.

Chiarina: That would not consider other scripture in Romans that says if you haven't heard, you're not gonna be judged.

Marcus: Even a Buddhist who has heard about Jesus but whose spiritual needs are met by Buddhism, I wouldn't think was in danger of hell.

Chiarina: There could be truth outside of what you believe.

Marcus: All any of us can do is say what makes sense to us.

Chiarina: Stereotype is that liberal theology is more fact-based than literalists.

Marcus: Both literalists and liberals often are fact fundamentalists. That's what I reject. I think metaphor can be profoundly true.

Session 5: Jesus As Sacrifice

A. Teaching Points

1. Most familiar interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' death is that it was a sacrifice for our sins.
2. This is a post-Easter interpretation. The early Christian community used the language of sacrifice to talk about the meaning of Jesus' death.
3. Timing (Passover) and location (Jerusalem).
4. Temple claimed a monopoly on forgiveness of sins and on access to God.
5. To say "Jesus is the sacrifice" is to say you don't need the Temple; so it's a radical and subversive interpretation.

Question and Answer

Brandon: So what happens to Christian faith if Jesus didn't die for our sins?

Marcus: It's a post-Easter interpretation, a powerful metaphor expressing God's love for us and on that level profoundly true. But to take it as literal, historical fact leads to very odd understandings of Jesus and God.

Brandon: We don't live in that society. So doesn't the language become almost divine child abuse?

Marcus: Yes, but I think it is helpful to know what this language originally meant.

Brandon: What about certain scripture or hymns like "There is a Fountain Filled With Blood"?

Marcus: Can be used to teach this subversive understanding, but it is an obstacle for some.

B. Teaching Points

1. A second meaning is that it is a metaphor for the proclamation of unconditional grace.
2. To say that God has provided the sacrifice is to say that God has already taken care of whatever separates us from God.
3. The idea of unconditional grace has always been difficult. We think we have to earn God's acceptance.
4. So this notion that Jesus is a sacrifice for sin is really a metaphor of God's grace.

Question and Answer

Brandon: Do I have to believe in God to receive this grace?

Marcus: I don't think believing is the way we get grace. It's about seeing.

Brandon: Does seeing require Christian lenses?

Marcus: No. The idea of God as a reality all around us is in all the religious traditions.

C. Teaching Points

1. One of the ironies in Christian history is the way in which "Jesus died for our sins" has come to be understood.
2. Initially, it denied the Temple's claim to a monopoly on access to God.
3. Within 400 years, Christianity began to claim a monopoly on access to God.
4. Believing that Jesus died for our sins becomes a new requirement.
5. It's a betrayal of the Good News to turn it into a requirement.

Question and Answer

Brandon: Without the institutional church, wouldn't we have lost the lens through which we see God?

Marcus: We should realize lens is indispensable for seeing but it is not the object of belief.

Brandon: Some would say if you're not using the lens, it's idolatry. Others would say, if you value the lens too highly, that's idolatry.

Marcus: Buddhist tradition says religions are fingers pointing to the moon. We need to value the point but not confuse it with the moon.

Session 6: Jesus, God's Love Revealed

A. Teaching Points

1. Final (and fifth) interpretation of Jesus' death and resurrection is a way of seeing Good Friday and Easter as a revelation of the depth of God's love.
2. Perhaps most familiar is John 3:16.
3. For this to work, we must have the completed story of Jesus.
4. God loves us so much God is willing to give up that which is most precious. God as lover also knows our suffering first hand.

Question and Answer

Chiarina: I have a concern about whether God gave something so precious if Jesus was simply a social political figure.

Marcus: I agree. We do have to be thinking of Jesus as the only begotten Son of God.

Chiarina: How do you define "son" and "begotten?"

Marcus: I'm not thinking of them as literal statements about the historical Jesus. Within the story, it has to be the only begotten son.

B. Teaching Points

1. A danger to the image of God as lover is that we might sentimentalize the statement when we emphasize "me" or "us" when it doesn't mean all of creation. (Coffee shop story).
2. If God loves all creation this leads to a passion for social justice.
3. We are then called to love as God loves.

Question and Answer

Chiarina: Did you feel compelled to share God's love with the coffee shop people?

Marcus: Didn't tell them God loves them. Did see them differently. I do think the awareness that God loves us is the impulse for evangelism.

Chiarina: How do you carry out your impulse?

Marcus: I'm fortunate. My job is primary means of doing that. My niche is talking to people for whom an older way of looking at Christianity no longer works.

C. Teaching Points

1. I am sometimes asked which of the five interpretations should we believe? Which is the most important?
2. A lot of people in the modern world think that the Christian life is about believing certain things to be true.
3. Believing is relatively powerless.
4. Having five interpretations calls attention to all the dimensions of the Christian life.

Question and Answer

Chiarina: I agree that belief alone is only the first part of faith; the second part is acting on it

Marcus: For many, belief is what we turn to when knowledge runs out. In the pre-scientific age, the world mean beloved. Believe. So what? Unless it has the transformative power of a relationship with God that centers one deeply.