

Teaching The Easter Story

Education leaders from around the country recognize the importance of students learning about the Bible. For example, California’s sixth grade academic standards expect that students will learn about “the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as described in the New Testament” (Standard 6.7.6)

In Massachusetts, seventh graders are to “describe the origins of Christianity and its central features: A. monotheism; B. the belief in Jesus as the Messiah and God’s son who redeemed humans from sin; C. the concept of salvation; D. belief in the Old and New Testament; E. the lives and teachings of Jesus and Saint Paul.” (Standard 7.41)

In Florida, students are to “Identify key figures and the basic beliefs of early Christianity,” and in Texas, students are expected to “explain the significance of religious holidays and observances such as Christmas, Easter...”

Objectivity

It is important when teaching students about a religion that you remain objective. The best way to achieve this is by attribution. For example, when introducing this lesson on Easter, explain to students that it is from Luke’s account of the life of Jesus. Use phrases such as, “Luke wrote that...,” or “The Bible says...”.

When referring to beliefs about the story, use phrases such as “Christians believe...,” or “John Newton believed...”

Your goal should be to introduce students to the story and help them understand the influence it has had on history, literature, art, and music. The lesson is not designed to prove the story is true, nor question whether the story is accurate.

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s guidelines on students’ religious liberties (www.ed.gov), your students have the right to freely express themselves regarding their personal beliefs. However, as moderator of a class discussion on this topic, you

should emphasize that every student be respectful regarding their classmates’ comments. No student should be made to feel excluded for expressing belief or disbelief in the story.

As a teacher, you can be confident in addressing this topic. This story has had significant influence in world history and should be understood as such. You are not teaching Sunday school; you are teaching history, literature, art, music, and language arts.

You may find page six helpful in alleviating concerns that some parents or administrators may have about the appropriateness of this lesson.

The Lesson

1. Make copies of pages one through five for the students. You may want to include page six if the students are going to take the lesson home.
2. Introduce the lesson by explaining that because the Christian holiday of Easter is approaching, as a current event, it is a timely opportunity to learn about its influence in history, art, music, and literature.
3. Read the story aloud to the class, or have students take turns reading it aloud.
4. Ask different students to read the special insets about history, language arts, music, and art.
5. Have students individually or in groups write answers to the review questions.
6. Discuss their answers, the story, and cultural connections with the whole class.



The Easter Story

A paraphrase—with explanation—adapted from the Bible’s book of Luke, chapters 22 through 24.

READ TO DISCOVER...

- the biblical story of Jesus’ death and resurrection.
- some of the influences of this story in literature, art, and history.

TERMS TO LEARN

(Used in literature and conversation)

<i>A Judas</i>	<i>Kiss of death</i>
<i>Cross to bear</i>	<i>Washing my hands of this</i>
<i>To be crucified</i>	<i>A Doubting Thomas</i>

Art History



Leonardo de Vinci painted his idea of The Last Supper in 1498 on the wall of The Church and Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, Italy.

The term “Holy Grail” refers to a myth that the cup or plate used by Jesus during the Last Supper holds magical powers. The term was part of the stories of King Arthur.



It was almost time for the Jewish Passover feast. The leaders of Jesus’ time who hated him were looking for a chance to put him to death because they didn’t like what he taught. However, they were afraid of causing a riot among the people because Jesus was so popular.

Meanwhile, Satan took control of Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve main followers of Jesus (followers like this are called disciples). He went to the leaders who hated Jesus and talked to them about giving him up to them. They gave him money—thirty pieces of silver coins—as a reward for betraying him.

The Last Supper

When it came time for the Passover dinner, Jesus told his disciples, “I have had a great desire to keep this Passover with you before I die.” He took a loaf of bread, broke it, and gave it to them saying, “This is my body, which is given for you: do this in memory of me.” After the meal, he took the cup, and said, “This cup is the new testament (or new agreement), made with my blood which is given for you.” (This scene was famously depicted in Leonardo de Vinci’s painting called The Last Supper.)

A little while later Jesus said to Peter, “Satan has made a request to have you, so that he may put you to the test. But I have prayed for you, that you won’t lose faith; and when you have returned to following me again, strengthen your friends.”

Peter responded, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and even die for you!” Jesus said, “Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will tell people three times that you don’t even know me.”

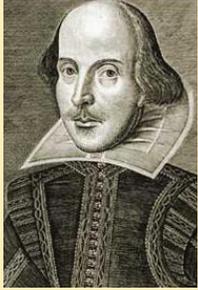
The Arrest of Jesus

They all left the dinner and went to a park called the Mount of Olives. Jesus said to them, “Start praying.” He went a little ways away, got on his knees, and prayed, “Father, if there is any way else, please don’t make me go through with what’s ahead of me just a



Language Arts

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) assumed that those who attended his plays knew the stories in the Bible. He made hundreds of references to the Bible. For example, in his play *King Richard the Second*, the king says:

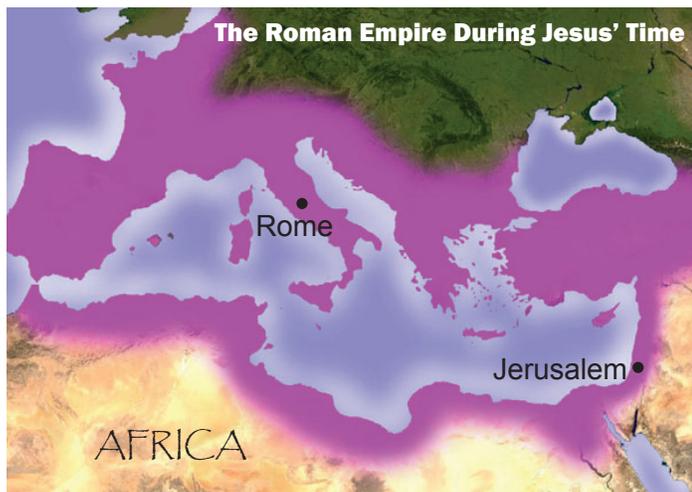


“So Judas did to Christ: but he, in twelve, found truth in all but one; I, in twelve thousand, none. God save the king! Will no man say, amen?”

few hours away. But, I’ll do what you want instead of what I want.” After his prayer, he walked back to the disciples, and saw that they had fallen asleep. Jesus said, “Why are you sleeping? Get up, and start praying so you will be able to withstand the test that’s coming.”

While he was saying this, a big group of armed soldiers led by none other than Judas showed up. He walked up to Jesus and greeted him with a customary kiss on the cheek. Jesus said to him, “Judas, will you turn me over to the enemy with a kiss?”

You might have heard the phrase “the kiss of death.” This is where that phrase originates. Saying that something is “the kiss of death” means it is an action that brings ruin to someone or someone’s plans. The term “to be a Judas” now refers to someone who delivers another person into the hands of an enemy.



Peter Denies Knowing Jesus

All the disciples ran away, but Peter followed Jesus and the soldiers at a distance. They got to the place where some leaders who hated Jesus were going to put him on trial. There was a fire pit outside the building and people were warming themselves by it. A woman saw Peter by the fire and said, “This man was with him.” But Peter said, “That’s not true; I don’t know him.” A little while later, someone else said, “You are one of them.” Peter said, “I am not.” About an hour later, someone else said, “I’m sure this man was with him.” Then Peter got mad and said, “Man, I don’t know what you are talking about!” And, while he was saying this, a nearby rooster started crowing. Jesus wasn’t too far away from all this and he turned and looked at Peter. Then, Peter remembered what Jesus had said about telling people he wasn’t a follower of Jesus. He felt so bad he started to cry terribly.

Jesus’ First Trial

After that, the guards began to beat Jesus up and make fun of him. Then they took him to another group of the religious leaders who hated him called the Sanhedrin. Those leaders asked him, “If you are the Christ, say so.” They wanted to trap him with his words because, at that time, it was illegal for a person to claim he was God’s chosen Savior or Messiah—meaning Chosen One (the Greek word for Messiah is *Christ*).

They asked him, “Are you the Son of God (meaning the Messiah)?” and he said, “You say that I am.” That’s all they needed to hear. “We don’t need to hear anymore,” they shouted. “He broke the law with his mouth!”

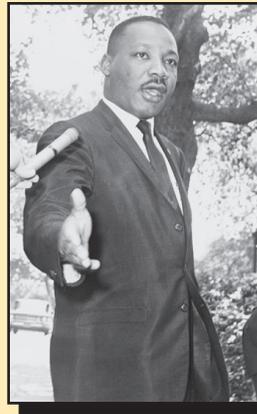
The Second Trial

They wanted to have him put to death, but they needed the Roman governor to carry out the sentence. They took him to be questioned by the governor. His name was Pilate. They told Pilate, “This man has been teaching people to do wrong things like not to pay taxes to the Roman government. He even says that he is Christ, a king.”

Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus responded, “You say so.” Pilate said to the religious leaders, “In my opinion he hasn’t done anything wrong.” They got very upset and said, “He is a trouble maker, teaching through all Judaea from



This is a painting by popular Italian artist, **Giovanni Battista Tiepolo**. It is his idea of what the scene might have looked like when Jesus carried his cross to Calvary Hill. He painted “Christ Carrying the Cross” in 1737 and 1738.



In 1963, the **Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.** was jailed for his civil rights actions. Some people called him an extremist—being too bold and going too far in his activities. He wrote a response, entitled “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” He used the Bible to explain the importance of being extreme for goodness. He used the death of Jesus as an example:

“In that dramatic scene on Calvary’s hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.”

Galilee to here.” When Pilate heard that Jesus was from Galilee, he figured he was under the authority of Herod—the Jewish king. Herod happened to be in Jerusalem at that time, so Pilate sent Jesus to him.

The Third Trial

Herod was delighted to meet Jesus because he had heard about his miracles and was hoping he would perform a few for him. Herod asked him lots of questions, but Jesus didn’t respond at all. Herod, with the men of his army, made fun of him and insulted him. Dressing him in fancy robes, he sent him back to Pilate.

Sentenced to Die

Pilate told the religious leaders that both he and Herod didn’t find Jesus guilty of anything worthy of death. It was customary during the Passover for the Roman government to let one person go free from jail. Pilate gave the people a choice to free Jesus or Barabbas—a murderer. The angry crowd chose to have Barabbas set free and Jesus killed.

Pilate was afraid the people would go to Roman officials above him and complain, so he decided to grant them their wish. He wasn’t happy about it so he

ordered a bowl of water to be brought to him. In front of everyone he washed his hands as a way of saying “I wash myself of this dirty thing you want done. Don’t blame me for it.” We use that phrase today when we don’t want to be associated with some act or decision.

The Roman soldiers made Jesus carry his cross through town to a spot outside the city. The cross was heavy and caused him to stumble several times.

Today, we use a phrase that comes from this story. “Your cross to bear,” is a way of saying a person has a difficult problem or responsibility to endure.

They went to a place outside the city called Golgatha—which means *the place of the skull*. Today, many people refer to it using the Latin name for “skull,” which is *Calvary*. They called it Calvary Hill.

Two criminals were put to death with Jesus—one on each side of him. That is why artwork of this scene often shows three crosses.

Crucifying someone was a common way for the Romans to give people the death penalty. The Romans were cruel and killed many Jewish people using crucifixion during the time they ruled over them.

When Jesus was nailed to the cross he prayed out loud, “Father, forgive them because they don’t know

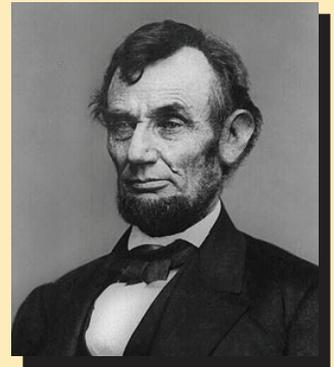


American History

During the Civil War (1861-1865), a popular song was entitled “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” It is still well known across the country today. You may recognize its stirring chorus, “Glory, glory, hallelujah! His truth is marching on.” It reflects a spiritually-motivated desire to end slavery and references the sacrifice of Jesus as an example to live by. For example, one verse reads:

“In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me: As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free, While God is marching on.”

A later version changed the words to “let us live to make men free.”



This is an 1864 photograph of President Abraham Lincoln taken during the Civil War.

what they are doing.”

The people who hated Jesus made fun of him while he was dying. The Roman soldiers made fun of him, too. At one point, Jesus said he was thirsty so they put a sponge soaked in vinegar on a stick and put it up to his mouth.

After several hours, Jesus shouted, “Father, into your hands I give my spirit;” and then he died. Lots of his followers were there and went away crying and very sad.

Putting Jesus in a Tomb

A wealthy man named Joseph went to Pilate and got permission to bury Jesus. He took Jesus’ body down, wrapped it in cloth, and put it in his own family’s tomb. It was like a small cave with a large stone rolled in front of it.

Jesus Rises from the Tomb

On Sunday, as the sun was coming up, some women who followed Jesus went to the tomb with spices. It was customary to put spices on the body of a dead person. They saw that the stone had been rolled away. They entered the tomb, but the body of Jesus was gone!

While they stood there wondering what had happened they saw two men in shining clothes—angels! One angel said, “Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!” The women went to tell the disciples. The disciples didn’t believe them. But Peter ran to the tomb to see for himself.

The next day, Jesus appeared in the room where the disciples were gathered and said, “Peace be with you!” Everyone was afraid. They thought he was a ghost.



Language Arts



Tolkien in 1962

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973), was an English author who wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. He was a Christian and used biblical allusions in his writing—in other words, his stories sometimes reminded readers of stories in the Bible. For example, Gandolf’s dramatic fight against the giant demonic figure Balrog of Moria illustrates the battle between good and evil. Gandolf sacrifices himself to save his friends, but later is “resurrected” in robes of white and appears to Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas in a forest.

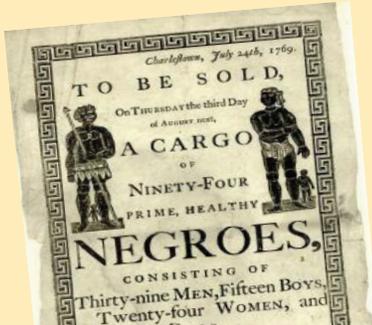
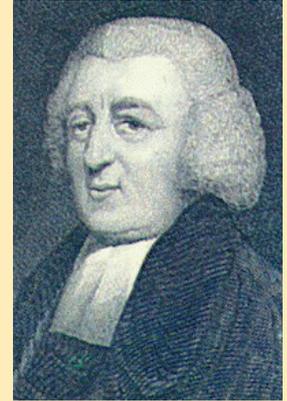
Doubting Thomas

One of the disciples who wasn’t there was a man named Thomas. When the others told him what happened, he doubted what they said was true. “Unless I see and touch the holes in his hands and side, I am not going to believe you.” A few days later, Jesus appeared to the disciples again. This time, Thomas was with them. Jesus said to him, “Touch the wounds in my hands and my side and believe that it’s really me.”

Thomas replied, “My Lord and my God!”

Photo Credit: Copyright © John Wyatt

John Newton (1724-1801) was a slave trader who became a Christian. He later wrote the most well-known hymn of all time called *Amazing Grace*. The first two verses refer to Newton trusting in the message of Jesus' death and resurrection and finding God's favor (grace):



“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.”

“’Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear,
And Grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that Grace appear,
The hour I first believed!”

Today, we use the term Doubting Thomas to describe someone who only believes what they see for themselves.

Jesus began to teach them, “This is what I told you before: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and in the Psalms. They wrote that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. Because of this, tell everyone they can experience God’s favor in their lives if they turn away from a self-centered, sinful life, and turn to me so God will forgive their sins.”

This teaching of Jesus has had a powerful influence on billions of people around the world. One example is John Newton, an English slave trader, who lived many years later. He became a follower of Jesus. He turned from his sinful life selling slaves, and trusted in what Jesus said about himself (see Musical History above).

Jesus appeared to his disciples for forty days and then took them to a hill a little ways away from Jerusalem. He lifted up his hands and gave them a blessing—a prayer for God’s goodness toward them. While he was doing this, he rose up into heaven. The disciples began praising God and went back to Jerusalem happy. ■

This story is adapted from Luke’s account of the life of Jesus.

Fun Fact



Because the Bible states that Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week, early Christians began meeting together on Sunday to celebrate his resurrection. It was often referred to as “The Lord’s Day.” In A.D. 538, the church Council of Orleans (France) ordered that all Christians take the day off to attend church services. In A.D. 789, Charlemagne the Great outlawed all labor on Sunday. To this day, people use the day for rest, recreation, and church attendance.

(How Christianity Changed the World; Alvin J. Schmidt, Zondervan, 2004)

Review Questions

1. What does the term “your cross to bear” mean?
2. What message did Jesus want his disciples to tell everyone?
3. How did this story impact John Newton?
4. How did the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. find inspiration from this story in the Bible?

Research sources:
www.usingenglish.com; www.wikipedia.org;
www.wga.hu; www.shakespeare-literature.com;

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For Parents & Educators

Education leaders from around the country recognize the importance of students learning about the Bible. For example, a coalition of seventeen major educational and religious organizations issued this joint statement:

“Because religion plays a significant role in history and society, study about religion is essential to understanding both the nation and the world. The omission of facts about religion can give students the false impression that the religious life of humankind is insignificant or unimportant. Failure to understand even the basic symbols, practices, and concepts of the various religions makes much of history, literature, art, and contemporary life unintelligible.”

Quoted from “Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers,” issued by a coalition of seventeen major educational and religious organizations—including the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the American Association of School Administrators, the American Jewish Congress, the Christian Legal Society, the Islamic Society of North America, the National Council for the Social Studies, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and the National School Boards Association.

(For more information, visit www.firstamendmentcenter.org.)

In the Supreme Court case of *Abington School District v. Schempp*, Justice Clark, writing the majority opinion stated:

“...the state may not establish a ‘religion of secularism’ in the sense of affirmatively opposing or showing hostility to religion, thus preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do believe....it might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities.”

What is the distinction between *teaching about* religion and *instruction in*, or the *teaching of*, religion? The California Department of Education offers this distinction that is instructive for educators everywhere:

“To teach about religion is not to instruct in religion. Teaching about religion embraces the study of various religions; appreciation of the nature and variety of religious experience historically and currently; information on past and present sources, views, and behavior of religious persons or groups; and the influence of religion on cultures and civilizations. Instruction in religion, by contrast, is to seek acceptance of and commitment to a particular religion, including a non-religion, such as secularism.”

Teaching About Religion

Study of
Appreciation of
Information on
Influence of

Instruction In Religion

Seeking acceptance of
Seeking commitment to

California Sixth Grade Academic Standard

“Note the origins of Christianity in the Jewish Messianic prophecies, the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as described in the New Testament, and the contribution of St. Paul the Apostle to the definition and spread of Christian beliefs (e.g., belief in the Trinity, resurrection, salvation).” Standard 6.7.6

Massachusetts Seventh Grade Academic Standard

“Describe the origins of Christianity and its central features. A. monotheism; B. the belief in Jesus as the Messiah and God’s son who redeemed humans from sin; C. the concept of salvation; D. belief in the Old and New Testament; E. the lives and teachings of Jesus and Saint Paul.” Standard 7.41

Spectrum of views

There are three ways that people can look at the issue of religion and public schools. They are reflected in the boxes below. The middle box focuses on education without violating legal guidelines.

Evangelization

“My faith compels me to try to convince others to adopt my beliefs.”

In class it leads to...

Teachers violating the law

Is allowed...

In student free speech
In student homework
In after-school clubs
In conversations between willing adults

Integration

“An educated person needs to have an academic appreciation for Judeo-Christian history, thought, and values.”

In class it leads to...

Freedom of expression
Well-rounded education
Cultural literacy

Is allowed...

In the classroom
In music, art, and drama

Separation

“Separation of Church and state requires us to shield our schools from religion.”

In class it leads to...

Censorship
Civil liberties violations
Incomplete education

Is allowed...

In the privacy of one’s own home



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