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# Introduction

Although Easter is the most important festival of the year for the Christian Church, it can be a confusing and difficult series of events to share with children. In many cases, commercialism has reduced the story to hot cross buns, chocolate eggs and fluffy bunnies—all of which make the reality of the historical events hard to relate to the present day. Death is a subject that is rarely discussed in the home and school nowadays. Although many children have experience of ‘virtual’ violent death on computer and TV screens, the topic is often thought to be best avoided.

The miraculous events of the first Easter are profound and amazing to Christians who themselves struggle to understand the mystery of Christ’s victory over death and his work of forgiveness on the cross. Over the centuries, artists, authors, musicians and actors have tried to portray elements of the Holy Week story in paintings, choral works, plays, films and musical theatre. The story is considered so central to the Christian faith that all the Gospel writers devote proportionately more of their writing to the last few days of Jesus’ life than to the years of his earlier ministry. The apostle Peter tells the dramatic story over and over again in Acts. If the resurrection had not happened, it is doubtful whether Christianity would have survived even the first century. Because it did, there is a tremendous story to tell and a hope that has enabled Christians to keep sharing their faith in the face of unimaginable difficulties and circumstances. The events of Holy Week have given rise to significant church traditions, celebration and sacrament, all of which make this festival a very important part of the school curriculum as well as the life of the local church.

The Easter journey in this book is not original and is little different from many other excellent resources available, which portray the same story. The presentation set out here is offered to schools and

the local community as an experience so that those taking part in the story may enter into the wonder and mystery of the events. *The Easter Journey* travels with Jesus during the last few days of his life and leaves the participants to think about God's rescue plan for the world. The hope is that, having entered into this experience, both children and adults will understand the significance of the Easter story and the pivotal part that it plays in the whole Christian journey today.

This book is designed as a toolkit to enable churches to run their own presentation and is supported by the *Easter Journey* website, [www.easterjourney.org.uk](http://www.easterjourney.org.uk), where additional information can be accessed. The website provides photographs, plans and downloads for use in the presentation.

The book is divided into three sections. The first part provides the background and practical planning needed before the experience. There are hints about team training, enthusing the church family, publicity and links with schools. The second part gives a practical outline of the components of the event. There are lists of props, scenery and characters, together with scripts and suggestions for lighting and audio-visuals. The third section develops ideas for follow-up activities once schools have visited the presentation, to help to keep the experience alive and to promote discussion. There are ideas for all-age worship, assemblies and class lessons as well as further resources to complement the visit.

## **The outline**

When visiting *The Easter Journey*, children and adults are led around key elements of some of the events of Holy Week in a thought-provoking way by leaders trained to help the participants respond at their own level of understanding. *The Easter Journey* is multi-sensory, lasts about an hour and can be adapted for different buildings and spaces. Essentially there are six storytelling areas,

which relate to different parts of the Easter story. Each space develops part of the story. The group is led on a journey beginning with a warm-up, leading to a role-play about Palm Sunday and the clearing of the temple. The group then hears the story of the tenants in the vineyard. They move to a re-enactment of the last supper, creep out to hide behind bushes in the garden of Gethsemane, see an audiovisual portrayal of the crucifixion and hear powerful testimony from two of the characters who witnessed the death of Jesus. From here they enter the low point of the darkness of the next day before coming out into the brilliant light of the garden tomb and resurrection, where they are told the amazing news of Jesus' resurrection. Finally, they move back to the first area for a group discussion and are asked to reflect on the experience and think about the ongoing story today.

The presentation is designed primarily for Year 5 children so that schools may be invited annually. Year 5 was chosen to be the focus because of the nature of the events of Holy Week. At this age, children are developing thinking skills and opinions and are trying to make sense of the bigger questions of life. They are able to think in a more abstract way, relating stories to their own experience, and to link events in a historical timeline. The expectation is that the experience will build on the work already done on *The Christmas Journey*, which children may have experienced in Year 2. *The Christmas Journey* is a separate but similar event designed for younger children (see pages 122 and 123 for details of the website and book).

Although *The Easter Journey* is designed primarily for children, in its original setting in the Cheshire town of Frodsham it is open to the general public for an evening session, enabling children to return with families and other adults to visit. Linking this opening with invitations to special all-age Easter services and events can provide a useful tool for reaching out into the community.

Much of the content of the book is based on the experience of running *The Easter Journey* in a small church in Frodsham. Anyone reading the book and wanting to run the event themselves will

no doubt approach the project from different situations and with different opportunities. However, it may be useful and encouraging to hear how the story in Frodsham began and how God led us on a faith journey, both as individuals and as a team, from small beginnings.

## **The journey begins**

We had been running *The Christmas Journey* for a few years when the inevitable question was raised on several occasions, ‘When are you going to put on an Easter journey?’ We had felt that we should look into presenting something along similar lines for older children, so it didn’t take much encouragement for us to look into the possibilities.

Strangely enough, it had been through seeing a presentation of an Easter journey at a church in Crewe that we had originally been inspired to put together our own Christmas journey. Although we as a church are not part of a recognised denomination, we have links in our area with many different churches. Through our local Anglican diocese’s regular bulletin of events that could interest others, we had read of an Easter journey that was to take place in Crewe a few weeks later. We had arranged to go and have a look and were amazed to discover a happy atmosphere of primary school children alongside keen and willing volunteers portraying the story of that first Easter in a variety of different ways, including drama, language and singing.

We had decided that we would start by exploring a Christmas journey. We felt that Christmas was more readily recognised by schools as something they might be interested in. The previous year, our town had held a Christmas festival. This was a civic-run event involving the whole town in a variety of activities, none of which, though fun to be part of, had any direct link with the events of the first Christmas. We realised that a Christmas journey could be the churches’ way of offering something to the festival. You can

read how our Christmas journey came together in our book, *The Christmas Journey* (see page 123 for details).

## **Exploring the idea**

We knew that an Easter journey would be more appropriate for older children than the Year 2 children who come along to our Christmas journey presentations each year. The events of the first Easter require a more mature mind. We felt it was important to present the journey in such a way that the children would leave feeling that they had been part of the experience. It wasn't enough to tell them facts; rather, we wanted to involve them in the emotions of the events. We knew that Year 6 children would, by this stage, in their final year at primary school, have a lot of other activities and distractions going on, so we settled on Year 5 as our target group.

### **The first steps**

We made a list of the events that we thought important for the children to experience and decided that we had to involve participatory drama, as well as storytelling. We were aware that portraying the crucifixion would present difficulties from the point of view of how much detail to go into, and wondered whether technology could provide a solution.

The way we used the space would need to be different from *The Christmas Journey*, for which we used six very similar-sized rooms. Apart from anything else, the children would all be going round the journey together in one big group, and 30 or so Year 5 children take up a lot more room than 15 Year 2s.

## **The team**

Having a ready-made team who had all been used to helping us on *The Christmas Journey*, it was time to find out how many would be willing to give up more time for *The Easter Journey*. Once again, many of the helpers would be from other churches in the town, since we have a strong history of working together with other churches. We knew that the help needed for *The Easter Journey* would be less role-specific but still it was important for everyone to feel valued.

## **God confirms the plans**

During the development of the initial plans for our Christmas journey, a Bible verse was repeatedly coming to the fore. In Matthew 13, Jesus tells the parable of the farmer, in which some of his seed falls along the road and is eaten by birds. Other seed falls on thin, rocky ground and quickly wilts because the soil isn't very deep. More seeds fall where thorn bushes grow up and choke the plants. But a few seeds fall on good ground where the plants produce 30, 60 or 100 times as much as was scattered. As we reflected on this and read on, we felt that God was saying, 'This next bit applies to you and what I am asking you to do with *The Christmas Journey*.' Matthew 13:35 says, 'I will use stories to speak my message and to explain things that have been hidden since the creation of the world.' This seemed to be saying that here was an ideal opportunity to spread God's word (the seed) through the retelling of the great story of his plan for humankind. We subsequently used this verse on the *Christmas Journey* prayer cards and decided to use Psalm 78:3–4 on the *Easter Journey* prayer cards: 'These are things we learnt from our ancestors, and we will tell them to the next generation. We won't keep secret the glorious deeds and the mighty miracles of the Lord.' (See page 37 for further information about the *Easter Journey* prayer card, and page 45 for a sample).

## Moving on

Feeling that we had reached the point of no return and that we just had to get on and plan *The Easter Journey*, we arranged to meet a friend who is very experienced in working with children in schools and churches. We wanted to talk over the possibilities and ideas we already had, and to see if he had any further suggestions that would inspire us.

This involved a train journey to a mutually convenient halfway point, where we spent the entire day in the first café we came across, initially with coffee, progressing to lunch and finishing with tea and cake before catching our respective trains back home. We found the time beneficial and later discovered that the café was a Christian centre, supported by the churches of the town, which offered prayer as part of its ministry. We certainly felt God's guidance during our meeting, so in some ways our discovery was hardly surprising!

Among other things, we particularly wanted to explore the possibility of finding a small 'take-home' gift for the children—something to remind them of their Easter journey—just as we had with *The Christmas Journey*. Despite visiting local Christian bookshops, asking other contacts and trawling websites, we were still having trouble addressing this issue. That day, during our marathon visit to the café, between the three of us we devised an idea that developed into a good-quality booklet (visit [www.easterjourney.org.uk](http://www.easterjourney.org.uk) for details).

## The final touches

After returning from our three-way meeting, our Easter journey really began to take shape. We had a training day to which we invited everyone who was interested in being on the team. There was an opportunity for the team, in smaller groups, to work on ideas for the scripts for Mary's and Peter's speeches in the crucifixion scene.

## Introduction

There was still just one more vital element. Without schools to attend, all our work would be in vain. We were fortunate to have an established relationship with the local primary schools, which had improved even further since we had been running *The Christmas Journey*. If you have not yet established a relationship with your local primary schools, see page 38 for some suggestions on how to do so. Schools nowadays are expected to be part of a cluster, working with other schools in many areas, and head teachers will readily recommend something good to other heads. As soon as schools heard about *The Easter Journey*, they quickly signed up to come.

There were many other affirming moments from God in the devising of our Easter journey, but the support of the churches, the team, the faces of the children and the response of the adult visitors made this a very special event in the life of our church and community. Our tentative small steps have been richly blessed.



## Introductory warm-up

As previously mentioned, it is important that there is a smooth transition from scene to scene so that the whole experience runs seamlessly. Encourage group leaders to keep in role at all times to enable the children and helpers to take part in a thoughtful and focused way.

On arrival, the children are welcomed to the presentation and are told that they are going on a very special journey. They are invited into the first space and are greeted by the storyteller, who introduces him- or herself. The storyteller asks the children to join him or her on a very special journey at this special time of year.

### Handy hint

Throughout the presentation, it is important to remember that children are used to drama and role-play as part of their everyday curriculum. A firm but friendly manner and high expectation of behaviour helps to establish boundaries with lively Year 5s. Teachers are there to supervise if needed, but it is also helpful if they are encouraged to join in the experience.

### Aim

To introduce the children to the storyteller and other team members; to introduce the story of Easter and the *Easter Journey* presentation, and to help children settle into the environment.

### Setting the scene

The warm-up helps the children to understand that Jerusalem, at this point in history, was a place full of contradictions. It was ruled by the Romans and security was high because of the approaching

Passover festival. Many travellers had come to the city to take part in the festival and the streets were crowded. Jesus entered this busy scene riding on a donkey—not at all what would be expected of a king. His reputation as a teacher, healer and worker of miracles had gone before him and there was much excitement and anticipation at his arrival. The children are asked to imagine how they would have felt, being part of that crowd.

### **Character(s)**

- Storyteller

### **Costume**

- None

### **Scenery**

No scenery is necessary, just a space large enough for the children to move around. No special lighting is needed other than a feeling of daylight.

### **Props**

- None

<b>Handy hint</b>
If space allows, rather than miming on the spot, invite the children to wander about and capture in freeze-poses the moods of that week—such as excitement, surprise, suspicion, fear, sadness, puzzlement, disbelief, shock and so on.

## **Script: Introductory warm-up**

Storyteller: We are about to set out on a journey. We are going to travel through the days that led up to what we now know as Easter Day. They are dramatic days. There will be lots to see and do and touch and taste and feel. We want to try to work out for ourselves what we think this journey means for us today. The Easter story has meant a great deal to people down the ages and has even changed their lives. However, it has to be a story we work out for ourselves. I wonder what this Easter journey will mean for you today.

To go on our Easter journey, we need to step into a story. In fact, we are following in the footsteps of Jesus and his friends in the most dramatic week of Jesus' life. Let's get ourselves ready to step into the story of Jesus' Easter journey.

During this week we will experience many different moods. Some people have walked for miles to be in Jerusalem for the great festival of Passover (*start miming walking on the spot, and encourage the children to join in*).

It was a week that began with processions and people running to join the crowds (*mime running and jostling, but don't allow the children to push each other*).

Introductory warm-up

But in the narrow streets of Jerusalem you could not move quickly (*mime people shuffling along*).

And with such large crowds there were security fears, so there were soldiers about (*mime marching on the spot*).

It was a week full of highs and lows, hopes and fears. Sometimes in the story people thought it best just to creep quietly around in the dark (*mime creeping quietly*).

It was a week that ended in a most unexpected way. People began running about again because they discovered something that changes everything (*mime running in excitement*).

What they heard and what they saw stunned people and left many rooted to the spot (*mime standing stock still*).

So are you ready? Let's step into the story of the Easter journey!

*Staying in the same room or area, the storyteller leads the children straight into the next story.*