

A Retelling of the Easter Story

Session 1

This retelling can be read aloud whilst the pupils re-enact it together. It has been divided into six chunks. To give them sufficient time to act, and ideas to support this, it pulls in some of the background and contextual information to enrich the retelling. Close physical contact (e.g. the kiss of Judas) has been carefully adapted due to COVID.

Group 1: Palm Sunday

Characters: Jesus, several crowd members, a disciple or two.

It was soon to be the festival of Passover and Jews from around the nation were making their way to celebrate together in Jerusalem. What was this news, spreading through the crowd...? Jesus was coming? Jesus who had recently healed Lazarus and brought him back to life after Lazarus had been dead and mourned for three days? This was a man not to be missed. The news spread quickly, passed from one to another amongst the crowds that were already gathered there. Excitedly, they went out to meet him. What might he do next? Was this the man who would lead them in an uprising to overthrow their Roman rulers? Would he perform other miracles?

And now here he was, riding into sight. Alongside him were his disciples. There was Peter, impetuous Peter. Peter who acted first and thought second. And there were John and James, looking around, taking it all in. And the others. And what was Jesus riding? He was close now. Not looking all victorious and powerful on a horse, strutting his authority like the Romans did. Rather, he was coming towards them on a donkey. A strange choice. People in the crowd didn't seem to mind.

They had cut branches off nearby palm trees and were waving them with joy. Smaller children were on their parents' shoulders so they could see. Shorter people on tip toes. Others jumping up and down to catch a glimpse. Jesus serene in the midst. Accepting their praise and worship. Those kind eyes looking out over the crowd, occasionally catching the eye of one of his disciples and sharing the moment with them. Such a powerful feeling of hope and excitement was bubbling up. Now people were calling out, shouting praise. 'Hosanna!' Now someone laid down their cloak for Jesus to ride over. 'Here comes the King of Israel!' Others were copying now. They laid down cloaks and branches. Some knelt as he passed by. The cheering and laughter and joy swelled. More and more people joined the throng, processing with him into Jerusalem.



Group 2: The Last Supper

Characters: Jesus, man in the city, some disciples.

When it was time for the Passover meal, Jesus sent two of his disciples into the city on a bit of a strange mission. By now they had been with Jesus for several years, following him, listening to him, watching the crazy things that seemed to unfold around him. So they didn't worry too much. They knew to go along with whatever Jesus said. They laughed and chatted as they wandered into the city. That evening they would share a very special meal together where they would retell the story of how God had rescued their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. They did this every year at Passover. All the Jewish people did. Around the city rooms were being readied and meals prepared. The disciples' conversation soon turned to other Passovers that they had celebrated — good memories of friends and family gathered together.

And here he was. The man they had been told to look for. The man carrying a water jar. It looked heavy. He was straining under its weight as he carried it. As Jesus had told them to, the two disciples fell in step behind him, following him home. The man with the water jar glanced back every now and again. Were these men following him? He'd spent all morning preparing the room for his master, setting up for the Passover meal. This was the last thing to do – collect some more water so that the guests could wash. He was tired from the work. No energy to worry about why these strangers seemed to be following him or what they might want with him. Soon they reached the house – the master seemed to be expecting them. They were welcomed in and shown to the prepared room. The disciples immediately set about the final arrangements.

That evening, Jesus and the disciples were all together in the room. As they lay on their sides, reclining at the table and eating together, they shared stories of the things they'd done together. This was a time for closeness. Such a special meal with the closest of friends. Suddenly Jesus cut in and said, 'One of you who is here eating with me will betray me.' That cut things dead. The disciples all looked shocked and puzzled, each thinking 'surely it's not me?'

This pronouncement by Jesus unnerved them all. Betrayal? One of them? To whom – the Jewish leaders? The atmosphere of the evening had shifted. No longer the warm closeness of shared memories. Now big questions, sad and scary questions, hung unspoken in the air. Jesus carried on. He took the bread in his hands, said a prayer over it and then broke it and shared chunks of it with each of them. As he did so, he said: 'Take; this is my body.' Without pausing he lifted up the cup of wine. Again he gave thanks for it and gave it to them for them all to drink from. Then he spoke these words, 'This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I will not drink the fruit of the vine again until I drink it in the new kingdom of God.'



Group 3: Garden of Gethsemane

Characters: Jesus, John, Peter, James, Judas, and other disciples, soldiers.

When they had sung a hymn together, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus told them how they would fall away because of what was coming in the night ahead, but that after he was raised up, he would go ahead of them to Galilee. What strange, unfathomable words for the disciples. They furrowed their brows and tried to think through these hard words. Aside from Peter, that is. Always the one to act first and think later. Always the one who wore his heart on his sleeve. He jumped in immediately and promised he would never fall away. But Jesus foretold that before the night was ended and the cock had crowed, Peter would deny him three times. Truly this was turning into a strange and unhappy Passover night. They plodded on as a group, shoulders slumped, the weight of all the things spoken pushing them down.

Then Jesus took them to a place called Gethsemane. He asked the disciples to sit and wait whilst he went on a bit further with James, John and Peter. And he began to be deeply troubled. He was struggling hugely. He seemed restless and pained. His usual calm, reassuring presence had vanished. And now he needed these three special friends to be with him, to support him, to watch through the night with him. As they sat, they found their eyes were heavy. The past few days had been full and long. They were well fed from the Passover meal and tired. Their eyes drooped. Jesus, meanwhile, had stepped on a little further off from them and fallen face down to the ground, beseeching God for it not to be this way. Was there another way through? Please not the shame, the mocking, the cross. And yet, he concluded: 'Not my will, but your will be done.' Returning to his closest friends, to Peter, James and John, he found them asleep. Could they not have stayed awake? Could they not see how deeply he was struggling and how in need of their support and company through the anguish of this night? He woke them and gently chided them. Oh, how badly did they feel. Jesus was obviously in such a dark place, and they had let him down. They would fight to stay awake. Again, Jesus went off a short distance and prayed. Such pain. Such a struggle to lay himself down, to choose to follow the course set before him. Again, the eyes of the three disciples grew heavy, heads nodded, and once again they feel asleep. Jesus returned to them, shrugged and left to pray a third time.

Now there were lights in the distance. Torchlight flickering on metal armour and swords. The sound of a crowd approaching rose to break through the quiet of the garden. Once the crowd was closer the disciples could see that it was a band of soldiers and some officers of the chief priests. They were approaching with such confidence and strength. This didn't look good. The disciples glanced fearfully at each other. The situation was hopeless. What could they do? Hang on... There was Judas in the midst of the crowd? He stepped forward to Jesus, and the gaze of the two men met. Such disappointment and sadness from Jesus. Such guilt and shame from Judas.

Peter, rash and impulsive as ever, drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting his ear clean off! But this was not the way it was to be. Jesus touched the man's ear and it was healed. He submitted to the arrest. Violence was not his way.

Group 4: Before the Jewish Leaders and Pilate

Characters: Jesus, Peter, High Priest, Pilate (and servant girl and soldiers).

Jesus was brought by the band of soldiers to the house of the high priest. Peter, faithful Peter, had followed cautiously at a distance and sat down amongst the rest of the crowd near a fire in the middle of the courtyard to await news of what would unfold inside the house. As he warmed his hands at the fire, one of the servant girls of the high priest looked at him and recognised him as a friend of Jesus'. But Peter shook his head vigorously and denied it. After she went back to her business, Peter moved from the fire, keen not to be noticed. He did not feel comfortable here but did want to know what was happening to Jesus. Inside, the chief priests and whole Jewish Council had come together and were seeking testimony against Jesus so that they could put him to death. Never mind that this was an illegal hearing, for it was being held at night. Never mind that many witnesses gave false testimony meaning that their statements did not match up.



Surely there was a way to have Jesus condemned? Eventually, the high priest stood up, frustrated. Angry. He demanded of Jesus, 'Have you no answer to make to these men who testify against you?' But Jesus remained silent. Outside, Peter had moved closer in to the shadows and was trying his hardest to be inconspicuous. But the servant girl was back out and would not let the matter drop. She began telling others in the crowd that Peter was one of Jesus' friends. But again he shook his head furiously and denied her claims. He needed to get away from her and from the suspicious glances he was receiving. But he didn't want to leave the courtyard, he had to know what was happening... And what was happening? The high priest was getting more wound up by the minute. 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' To which all ears heard Jesus answer, 'I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.' This was it for the High Priest. He tore his clothes and declared that there was no need of further witnesses. It didn't take long for the council to decide he should be condemned to death.

Back outside, the evening continued to get more awkward for Peter. For now someone else claimed to recognize him, pointing out that his accent was not local – he was from Galilee, like Jesus. The vigorous denial that Peter made, lasted a matter of minutes until the cock crowed. Peter heard it and broke down and wept.

As soon as it was morning, Jesus was bound and led to Pilate, the Roman governor in Jerusalem. Naturally, Pilate enquired as to what charges were brought against Jesus. When asked by Pilate whether he was King of the Jews, Jesus merely replied, 'You have said so'. But when he was then accused by the chief priests, Jesus made no answer. Pilate said to him, 'Do you hear how many things they testify against you?' But Jesus made no answer. This amazed Pilate.

Pilate knew it was out of envy that the chief priests had brought Jesus to him, wanting him killed. But he needed to keep the peace and the chief priests and the crowd they had brought with them were a threat to that. What to do? At Passover, it was customary for the Governor to release a prisoner – someone whom the crowd wanted. So he put it to them: Barabbas or Jesus? Who would they like to have released? Again and again, the crowd called for Barabbas. And when asked what they would like him to do with Jesus, the shout came back: 'Crucify. Crucify. Crucify.' Fearing that the angry crowd might soon be turned to riot, Pilate took some water in a bowl and washed his hands before the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood. See to it yourselves.'

Section 5: The Crucifixion

Characters: Jesus, Soldier(s), chief priest, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene.

The soldiers led Jesus away from Pilate and into the palace. There they put a purple robe on him and set a crown of thorns on his head. Sneeringly they bowed down in mock worship before beating him and spitting on him. Eventually the bullying stopped and they put his own clothes on him and led him out to be crucified. By this point, Jesus was so exhausted from the beatings and all that he had endured that he struggled to carry the heavy wooden cross beam. A passing man was forced to carry it out to Golgotha for him, whilst Jesus stumbled along behind. Each step was a painful exertion. Once there, he was offered a drink of wine mixed with myrrh to dull the pain, but Jesus refused to take it. So it was that his hands and feet were nailed to the cross and he was hoisted up high for all to see. Next to him, two other criminals also hung on their crosses. People who passed by hurled insults. The chief priests mocked him. 'He saved others, why doesn't he save himself. Let him come down from the cross and then we'll believe him.' Beneath the cross, the soldiers cast lots for his clothes. They made no attempt to silence those who were insulting him – some even joined in. Mary Magdalene and the other women stood at a distance and watched. It was unbearable to look and yet how could they turn away from Jesus?

At noon time, the middle of the day, a strange darkness came over the land for three hours. Without the sun, it was suddenly extremely cold and with the darkness, it was hard to carry on as normal. People stopped and shivered and wondered what was occurring. Why this strange happening? Then at 3pm Jesus cried out, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' The people standing nearby wondered at this. One ran to fetch a sponge filled with wine vinegar which they put on a long stick and offered up to Jesus so he could drink. With a loud cry Jesus breathed his last breath. At that moment, the ground shook and back inside the city walls, in the heart of the temple, a strange thing happened: the thick curtain that hung in the middle, separating the holy place, suddenly ripped in two. It tore straight down from top to bottom, exposing the holy place at the centre where God dwelt.

Back at the cross, now that Jesus was dead, the crowd began to disperse. The women didn't. They continued to stand at a distance, not really knowing what to do with themselves. Not really wanting to accept that Jesus was dead. One of the soldiers, who had been there throughout and had seen the strange events unfolding, was terrified and exclaimed: 'Surely he was the Son of God!'

The next day was a very special Sabbath so the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses. So Pilate instructed his soldiers to break their legs as this would hasten death. Instead when they reached Jesus, the soldiers found that he was already dead. So instead of breaking his legs, the soldier stuck his spear in Jesus' side and out flowed water and blood – a sure sign that Jesus had died. Joseph of Arimathea was given permission to take down Jesus' body. He wrapped it carefully in linen cloths and took it to a new tomb, freshly cut into the rocks nearby. He rolled a heavy stone across the entrance. The women, who had been at the cross, followed and saw where the body was laid. Then they went home and prepared the spices and perfumes ready to take back after the Sabbath.

Because Jesus had spoken about rising again after three days, the chief priests were worried about the safety of Jesus' body. So the next morning, with Pilate's permission, they went to the tomb with soldiers. They sealed it more carefully and left a guard there to ensure that nothing untoward happened.

Group 6: The Empty Tomb

Characters: Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, Jesus and optional angels.

Due to the Sabbath laws, nothing could be done the day after Jesus died. But first thing the morning after, Mary Magdalene set off with some spices for the tomb. She walked slowly, not really wanting to get there and see the dead body. Not really sure how she was feeling – just numb with grief. What hope was there to live for now? She looked at the ground, lost in her thoughts as she walked. What a shock it was then to look up as she approached and to see no stone in front of the tomb. She must get Peter and the others. Without thinking, she dropped the spices and ran full-pelt back to where they were staying. She was panting hard when she arrived but from the shock and confusion on her face, they guessed at once where she'd been. 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him,' she panted to the men. At this unexpected news, Peter and John set off running for the tomb. John got there first and stopped at the doorway and leaned in, seeing the strips of linen – no sign of the body that had been wrapped in them. Peter, in his usual style, didn't stop to think. When he arrived, panting, he plunged straight inside the tomb. Now John joined him and both men stared. How was this? Who would take a body but go to the trouble of leaving the wrappings!? Could it be...? Jesus' words flooded back to them. Hadn't he talked about being rejected by the religious leaders but that after three days he would rise again? They must tell the others. Grinning now from ear to ear, with heads held high, they turned and headed back to find the other disciples.

Mary had followed them more slowly back to the tomb. Now she stood outside weeping. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and stopped. Her mouth dropped open and she gasped. There were two angels seated where Jesus' body had been. 'Woman, why are you crying?' Having told them, she turned and saw someone, she supposed to be the gardener, standing nearby who repeated the question. 'Sir,' she answered, 'if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him and I will take him away.'

Then the man gently replied, 'Mary...' and in that one word, she realised it was Jesus she was speaking to. She ran to him and fell sobbing at his feet. Gently he waited as her emotions came pouring out and when she was ready, he told her to go tell the disciples.

On the evening of that first day, the disciples were together in a room with the door firmly locked, for they were afraid that the authorities might come for them next. Suddenly Jesus was standing there amongst them. 'Peace be with you,' he began and then showed them his hands and his side. They could see it really was him.

Alive! It was crazy. How could it be, and yet it was? They stood there, smiling, laughing, soaking in the joy and the madness of being together with Jesus again. Wow.

