

Making Lent Work For You

Short Books Series

by Deacon Keith Fournier



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The liturgical seasons of the Catholic Church are not an imposition but an invitation. The pattern of life and the practices of Catholic Christianity can help to inform a vibrant Christian way of living which, in turn, witnesses to the world that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Observing the seasons of the Church year can also help promote piety in an age of profanity. When freely embraced, they can help us to turn away from disordered appetites, unhealthy lifestyle patterns and those wrong choices we often make, which fashion our own chains. They can help us to then turn toward Jesus Christ who has come to set us free.

They can also help us break from the monotony of daily life and participate in something bigger than ourselves, God's eternal loving plan of salvation for the whole world. They can open our eyes, enabling us to rediscover again the eternal perspective. When embraced willingly, the Church seasons can become, what we used to say when I was a child, "occasions of grace."

As I age, I come to appreciate the seasons of the Liturgical year more and more. Unlike my youth when I thought I had it all "figured out", something quite different has occurred as my hair has turned white and increasingly sparse. As I continue on in my journey of faith, I am ever more aware of my inadequacies and need for the Lord's grace. I realize how little I actually do know and how much there is to learn, as a disciple, a student of the Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And, I honestly recognize, by the Lord's grace, how much more conversion I need to get ready for that coming when I will pass from one life to the next. When I was a College student, a priest friend used to say, several weeks before Lent even began, that he "looked forward to Lent". Frankly, I thought that such a longing was odd. I viewed Lent as an imposition. But, no longer.

Like all of the seasons of the Liturgical year, a key to experiencing the grace made available in them is our understanding and full participation. Lent is an invitation of God's grace, which, if we enter into with our entire person, can draw us, especially at its' closure, into a deeper embrace of the power of the Resurrection.

It Works if you work it

One of the fastest growing movements of the last century is called the "recovery movement" for a reason. Utilizing and adapting the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, many people who struggle with addictive propensities find a path to healthier living. Many observers see behind those simple steps, a bare bones presentation of the ancient call of the Christian faith to repentance and reform.

Only, the "higher power" referred to in the twelve steps has been fully revealed for the Christian. He has a name, Jesus Christ the Lord. Therein lies an extraordinarily important distinctive. We need a Savior and the Father has given us One. We need to turn away from sin and toward Him to experience the freedom we long for. We cannot do it on our own – and we do not need to!

In the wake of the popularity of the recovery movement, sayings associated with the movement have made their way into our language. One of those saying, "It works if you work it" is apropos for our Lenten observances. We can make Lent work for us, if we work it.

Lent, with all of its practices and observances will bear the fruit of change and conversion, only if we embrace the grace, which is being offered by a loving God who wants to set us free. That means, not only accepting the invitation to repentance and conversion, which Lent offers in our heads, but in our "hearts". In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "the heart is the seat of moral personality." (CCC #2517)

Every Ash Wednesday, as a member of the Clergy, a Catholic Deacon, I administer the ashes to the faithful who come forward to identify themselves as pilgrims on the 40-day journey of repentance and conversion. Ash Wednesday begins a period of protracted prayer, penance, meditation and ascetical practices (acts befitting our true repentance), which is called "Lent".

The word is derived from the "lengthening" of the hours of the day each year. It falls in the transition time when we move from the barrenness of winter with its long periods of darkness into the verdant new life and longer days of sunshine we call spring. Lent is also called "the Forty days". In fact, that is the older term for this period of time in the Christian calendar. This Season continues for forty days until the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday.

Then, we enter into the Easter "Triduum" (three days), culminating in the Victory Feast of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The tabulation of the number of days in Lent does not include Sunday, the Lord's Day, which is always seen as a little Easter.

Why Forty Days?

Numbers have meaning in the Bible and the Jewish and Christian tradition, because the Jewish people and the early Christian community understood the presence of God in the entirety of human existence and lived an integrated spirituality. Our Baptism calls us to live in a naturally supernatural manner.

The Sacred Scriptures (the "Bible") speak to us on many levels. One level, which we moderns in the West are often not aware of, is its use of numbers as symbolic language. Symbols open us to a deeper truth. For example, it is no accident that a child is usually in the in the womb for forty weeks, the fullness of the term. Forty stands for a time of fulfillment or completion.

There are several forty periods in the history of Salvation found in the Hebrew Scriptures, what Christians call the Old Testament of our Bible. For example, the Forty days Moses was on the Mountain and received the Law (Exodus 24:18). The story of the spies recorded in the Book of Numbers results in their being sentenced for Forty years, (Numbers 13:26, 14:34).

There were Forty days for the great Prophet Elijah in Horeb, (1 Kings 19:8). The prophet Jonah was sent to Ninevah for Forty days. And, of course, the Israelites wandered in the desert for Forty years before they were delivered from the bondage of the Egyptians and passed into the Land of Promise.

Forty is not an arbitrary number. Our forty-day observance of the Holy Season of Lent inserts us into this entire stream of God's action in human history and invites us to participate afresh every year. Each forty-day or forty-year period in the biblical accounts presaged something new. So it can be for our forty days of Lenten observance.

However, the greatest significance of the number forty comes as God's entire plan of salvation was taken up and fulfilled in the mission of Jesus Christ. In Him is revealed the New Israel of the Church and He is the New Lawgiver. He, is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Word Incarnate. The world was created through Him. (John 1) Through His Incarnation, creation begins again. He gives the forty-day Lenten period its penultimate meaning.

This One in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells shows us the very meaning of our lives. He "fully reveals man to himself" in the words of the Council Fathers. (GS #22) He also shows us the great dignity to which we are now called - and actually capacitated by grace, to become, in, through and with Him.

This forty-day calls us to enter into the desert with Him. There, He who knew no sin (2 Cor. 5:21), the One who became a man like us "in all things but sin" enters into the temptations we face and shows us the way to overcome them in our own lives. (Heb. 2 and 4) He was tempted of the Devil for Forty days in the desert (Matthew 4:2). In Him we can now overcome temptation and progress toward the freedom to which we are all called.

After a saving life of selfless love, Jesus mounted the Second Tree of the Cross and opened His arms to embrace the world, which had rejected God. Now, His voluntary sacrifice of Love complete, the Tomb is empty. Death, the final enemy and result of sin, has been defeated and the fruits of the redemption are being borne!

His disciples saw him in His resurrected glory for Forty days. (Acts 1:2) During that time he continued to prepare the New Israel, His Church, which had been birthed from the water and blood which flowed from His wounded side on Calvary. To that Church he entrusted his continuing redemptive mission until His glorious return. To that Church he entrusted His Word, His Spirit and Sacramental grace.

Our Forty-day observance of this Holy Season of Lent inserts us, every year of our life, into this stream of God's action in human history. It invites us anew to participate in the great mystery of living and saving faith in the Savior in order to appropriate it more fully and make it our own.

Being Made New

Each of the forty day or forty year periods mentioned above was preparatory. So it is for us we enter each year into Lent. We can progress in the call to be made new. The Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." (2 Cor. 5:17)

The Church, our Mother and Teacher, invites charity, almsgiving and us to empty ourselves through fasting, abstinence, prayer. We are invited to recommit ourselves to do battle with the disordered appetites and passions, which are a bad fruit of the effects of sin and hold us back.

During Lent we are called to engage in spiritual warfare. (See, 2 Cor. 10:4, Eph 6: 14 - 16) We do battle with the "world", the "flesh" and, yes, the Devil. Satan, the father of lies (John 8:44), is the enemy of Jesus Christ and therefore the enemy of all who seek to attain the fullness of salvation in Him. During these forty days we are invited to say "yes" to every grace offered to us. However, the choice is ours.

Following Jesus Christ

Through responding to God's grace we can make progress in our continuing call to follow Jesus Christ and live a life of ongoing conversion. We can be set free, made new, and filled afresh with God's Divine Life and Love. Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:32)

Where we have succumbed to lies and turned away from God's love, we need to repent and turn back toward the Lord Jesus Christ who is the "leader and perfecter" of our faith. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of the leadership which Jesus provided as an example for us in these words:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith."

"For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God. Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart."

"In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood. You have also forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as sons: "My son, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by him; for whom the Lord loves, he disciplines; he scourges every son he acknowledges." (Hebrews 12: 1-6)

Who Needs Lent? We Do.

The Church uses the symbols of nature to point us toward and help us obtain a supernatural effect through our Lenten observances. These symbols, such as the ashes placed upon our heads of the first day of Lent, Ash Wednesday, need to be viewed with the eyes of living faith. They are both a symbol of our mortality and a symbol of the invitation to continual repentance and reform, to conversion of life.

The Ordo (Order of Service) offers two forms which are to be said by the Priest or the Deacon as the Ashes, made from the burnt Palms from the prior year's Passion/Palm Sunday, are rubbed into the penitent's forehead as a sign of their voluntary penitence; "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel" or, "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return". They both remind us of our utter dependence upon God.

Every Lent is a reminder of our own mortality. As we hear the words, "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return", it is a time for us to pause and reflect. In an age drunk on self-worship, a reminder of the brevity of our days should draw us to our knees in prayer and repentance. From there we can look up at the Cross, which bridges heaven and earth. There at the altar of the New World, Jesus Christ became our Paschal Sacrifice. There we can climb into His wounded side.

After receiving the ashes, we are exhorted to leave the Church as penitents and pilgrims and continue in a Christian way of life. We are invited to allow light of the Holy Spirit to penetrate the dark places in our own lives. We are also exhorted to make a good confession, pray more, genuinely fast, live in God's Word, frequent the Sacraments - and most especially, the Holy Eucharist.

These exhortations are meant for our liberation and happiness. The Church is referred to as a mother in the tradition, for good reason. Every good mother wants her sons and daughters to flourish. Sin makes us sad and robs us of the freedom which is ours through Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul told the

Galatians, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Gal. 5:1)

If we enter into Lent with our entire person, it can draw us, at its' closure, into a deeper embrace of the power of the Resurrection, beginning right now. Liturgy is the "work" (that is what the Greek root word meant) of public worship. Lent can be a powerful liturgical season. However, it only works if you work it, and make it your own.

With its practices of piety, asceticism and extended prayer and worship, it challenges us to "turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel" by engaging in actions which can step those promises into reality. When it is voluntarily embraced, it can open us to a deeper experience of the freedom, which Jesus Christ has obtained for each one of us. Because, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, "it was for freedom that Christ set us free" (Galatians 5:1,2)

Freely Turn away from Sin

We were created in the Image of God. (Gen. 1:27) At the heart of that Image is our capacity to exercise our freedom. Because of sin, which is always a wrong choice, our freedom is, in a sense, fractured. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains:

"Man's freedom is limited and fallible. In fact, man failed. He freely sinned. By refusing God's plan of love, he deceived himself and became a slave to sin. This first alienation engendered a multitude of others. From its outset, human history attests the wretchedness and oppression born of the human heart in consequence of the abuse of freedom." (CCC #1739)

The Cross of Jesus Christ is the splint, which fixes our freedom and restores our capacity to choose anew, empowered by the grace of God. It makes it possible for us to find the only true freedom, by being set free from sin and its power. St Paul reminds us to avoid the slavery of sin. (Romans 6:17) Our struggle against sin is not over. The power of sin, what he called the "law of sin and death" in his letter to the Christians in Rome.

That proclivity toward sin requires calls us to a constant struggle against it. Lent invites us into the field of operation and equips us for the ongoing battle. The Apostle Paul explained, in a candid assessment of his own struggle to the Christians in Rome, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me."

Fortunately, the Apostle did not stop there in his letter of instruction on growing in Christian maturity written to our early Christian brothers and sisters. In the words, which follow, he encourages them – and us, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death". (See, Romans 7 and 8)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church summarizes its excellent treatment of the fall precipitated by our first parents' choice against God's loving plan and the experience of this proclivity in these words, "As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and inclined to sin (this inclination is called concupiscence)." (CCC #418)

Lent is a protracted time in which we take all of the spiritual weapons which the Lord has given to us to do battle with the world, the flesh and the devil. But, it is, even more importantly, a time in which we

are invited to turn more fully toward Him. We need His grace and cannot overcome this struggle without it.

During Lent, we are invited to turn more fully toward Him, because without His grace we will be inclined to making the wrong choices. Again, the Catechism provides a helpful summary as sin as an abuse of freedom and the utter dependency we have on God's grace to overcome it:

"Only the light of divine Revelation clarifies the reality of sin and particularly of the sin committed at mankind's origins. Without the knowledge Revelation gives of God we cannot recognize sin clearly and are tempted to explain it as merely a developmental flaw, a psychological weakness, a mistake, or the necessary consequence of an inadequate social structure, etc. Only in the knowledge of God's plan for man can we grasp that sin is an abuse of the freedom that God gives to created persons so that they are capable of loving him and loving one another." (CCC #387)

Freely Turn Toward the Lord

To an age enamored with false concepts of "choice" the Catholic Church rightly insists that some choices are always and everywhere wrong. She teaches that what is chosen not only affects the world - but changes the "chooser." These words from Saint Gregory of Nyssa, quoted in the Catechism as well as in Saint John Paul II's Encyclical Letter on the Moral Life entitled "The Splendor of Truth", gives us insights concerning our choices:

"Now, human life is always subject to change: it needs to be born ever anew. But here birth does not come about by a foreign intervention, as is the case with bodily beings, it is the result of a free choice. Thus we are in a certain way our own parents, creating ourselves as we will, by our decisions."

In other words, our freedom has consequences - and our choices not only affect the world around us, they change us - make us to become the persons we become. The capacity to make choices is what makes us human persons. It reflects the "Imago Dei," the Image of God, present within every human person.

In the first chapter of this letter, John Paul writes of the Lord's encounter with the rich young man. (Matt. 19:16-21) He uses this powerful encounter to expound a moral theology of choice. It was not the man's possessions that made him choose to say no to the Lord's invitation. It was his disordered relationship to them that impeded his freedom. They possessed him. He went away sad because he made the wrong choice.

As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote in their document on the Mission of the Church in the Modern World, "Authentic freedom is an outstanding manifestation of the divine image within man." (Gaudium et Spes in Latin, which means Joy and Hope, #17). The Catechism of the Catholic Church also addresses the sobering implications of the exercise human freedom when it reminds us that "Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself." (CCC, 1861.) In other words, what we choose truly matters.

Authentic Human Freedom cannot be realized in decisions made against God and against the Natural Law. It must be exercised in reference to the truth concerning the human person, the family, our obligations in solidarity to one another and the common good. That is why the fullness of authentic human freedom is ultimately found in a relationship with the God who is its source and who alone can

set us free. Because of the effects of sin, our freedom has been fractured. Only the splint of the Cross can restore it.

In his encyclical letter on Faith and Reason, Saint John Paul wrote: "It is not just that freedom is part of the act of faith: it is absolutely required. Indeed, it is faith that allows individuals to give consummate expression to their own freedom. Put differently, freedom is not realized in decisions made against God."

"For how could it be an exercise of true freedom to refuse to be open to the very reality which enables our self-realization? Men and women can accomplish no more important act in their lives than the act of faith; it is here that freedom reaches the certainty of truth and chooses to live in that truth." (Fides et Ratio # 13)

Choosing the good is the pathway to the realization of the fullness of authentic human freedom. Again the Catechism of the Catholic Church is helpful "The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to "the slavery of sin." (Cf. Rom 6:17) (CCC 1733)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, "Through the sacraments of Christian initiation, man receives the new life of Christ. Now we carry this life "in earthen vessels," and it remains "hidden with Christ in God." We are still in our "earthly tent," subject to suffering, illness, and death. This new life as a child of God can be weakened and even lost by sin.

"The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members. This is the purpose of the two sacraments of healing: the sacrament of Penance and the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick." (CCC #1420, 1421)

The sections, which follow in the Catechism, provide instruction on the origins, purpose, efficacy and gift of this Sacrament, replete with references to the Bible, the Tradition of the Church and beautiful pastoral insights from the wisdom of the Church.

The sacrament of Penance, also called the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Confession, is a Sacrament of healing because it sets us free from the wounds of sin and makes us new and fresh. It is the continual invitation to begin again in Jesus Christ. It is one of the gifts offered to us during the Forty Days of Lent, but like all of these gifts, we must choose to accept it.

Penance, the Sacrament of New Beginnings

In the last chapter of his Autobiography entitled "The Man with a Golden Key", GK Chesterton wrote: "When people ask me, or indeed anybody else, "Why did you join the Church of Rome?" the first essential answer, if it is partly an elliptical answer, is, "To get rid of my sins."

"For there is no other religious system that does really profess to get rid of people's sins. It is confirmed by the logic - which to many seems startling - by which the Church deduces that sin confessed and adequately repented is actually abolished; and that the sinner does really begin again as if he had never sinned."

"When a Catholic comes from Confession, he does truly, by definition, step out again into that dawn of his own beginning and look with new eyes across the world to a Crystal Palace that is really of crystal. He believes that in that dim corner, and in that brief ritual, God has really remade him in His own image."

"He is now a new experiment of the Creator. He is as much a new experiment as he was when he was really only five years old. He stands, as I said, in the white light at the worthy beginning of the life of a man. The accumulations of time can no longer terrify. He may be grey and gouty; but he is only five minutes old."

How well I understand the insight expressed by this giant of our history as I grow older. Chesterton was a convert to the Catholic Church. I am a revert, a term used to refer to people who returned to the Church into which we were Baptized. For me, this Sacrament of freedom was instrumental in my return to the Church as a young man. It is also a powerful weapon in my ongoing call to follow Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Lent is a gift and an invitation. It can draw us into a deeper experience of the power of the Resurrection by opening us up to the scrutiny and light of the Holy Spirit, exposing within us all that offends God and separates us from His loving plan. This is precisely so that we can be freed from the effects of sin and for continued growth in Christian maturity. It's focus on prayer, practices of piety, asceticism and almsgiving beckon us to "turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel". We are called to continual conversion.

As you received the ashes on Ash Wednesday you were invited to become an expectant penitent and pilgrim on the faith journey which is the Christian Way of Life. Let us freely choose to embrace Lent, and through its practices walk toward the celebration of Easter Triduum, the High Holy days, more fully prepared to receive what they offer. Then we will experience – and be empowered to lead others into – the fullness of the true and eternal freedom found in Jesus Christ. "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:36)

All Catholic Christians should look to their local Bishops conferences for specific instructions as to the application of the norms of penance and abstinence associated with observing the Forty Days called Lent. However, the overriding directives are found in the Code of Canon Law set forth below. The Code of Canon Law for Eastern Catholic Christians offers pastoral guidance in Canon 882.

On Saturday 11 April, 2015, the eve of Mercy Sunday in the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis called for an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy to begin on December 8, 2015, the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council and a day especially dedicated to the role of Mary in the plan of salvation.

He released a Bull of Indiction. Such a Papal Bull is a solemn declaration issued by Popes. It indicates their deep conviction on matters, which they feel, are of extraordinary importance for the Church and the world. It is entitled, in Latin, *Misericordiae vultus*. In English that means The Face of Mercy or the Look or Glance of Mercy. This beautiful reflection begins with these words, "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy". The Apostle Paul told the Christians in Corinth: "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ." (2 Cor. 4:6)

The Face of Jesus now needs to be revealed to the men and women of this age. How can we respond to the invitation of this Jubilee Year of Mercy? By becoming a people who live our lives mercifully. I suggest we take the time to read this papal pronouncement instituting the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Pope Francis has invoked a year of mercy for good reason. The world desperately needs mercy. We all desperately need it. I know that I do! Lent is a season, which invites us to encounter Mercy so that we can become missionaries of Mercy. Lent works if you work it. His Face of Mercy can be revealed through us to a world waiting to be born again and welcomed back home, to the Church, the home of the whole human race.

Pope Francis wrote, "We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness."

As I conclude, I offer several of the provisions in the Code of Canon Law for Latin Rite Catholics which give us a reference to the specific practices into which we are invited during this season of repentance and conversion called Lent. Let us choose to enter into this season of Lent with our whole heart. Its faithful observance will prepare us to fully celebrate the great Easter Feast of the Resurrection of Jesus and help us to be more deeply converted; changed more and more into His image.

Days of Penance

Can. 1249 The divine law binds all the Christian faithful to do penance each in his or her own way. In order for all to be united among themselves by some common observance of penance, however, penitential days are prescribed on which the Christian faithful devote themselves in a special way to prayer, perform works of piety and charity, and deny themselves by fulfilling their own obligations more faithfully and especially by observing fast and abstinence, according to the norm of the following canons.

Can. 1250 The penitential days and times in the universal Church are every Friday of the whole year and the season of Lent.

Can. 1251 Abstinence from meat, or from some other food as determined by the Episcopal Conference, is to be observed on all Fridays, unless a solemnity should fall on a Friday. Abstinence and fasting are to be observed on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Can. 1252 The law of abstinence binds those who have completed their fourteenth year. The law of fasting binds those who have attained their majority, until the beginning of their sixtieth year. Pastors of souls and parents are to ensure that even those who by reason of their age are not bound by the law of fasting and abstinence are taught the true meaning of penance.

Can. 1253 The conference of bishops can determine more precisely the observance of fast and abstinence as well as substitute other forms of penance, especially works of charity and exercises of piety, in whole or in part, for abstinence and fast.

The Stations of The Cross



1. Jesus is condemned to death



2. Jesus takes up his cross



3. Jesus falls the first time



4. Jesus meets his mother



5. Simon helps Jesus carry the cross



6. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus



7. Jesus falls the second time



8. Jesus speaks to the women of Jerusalem



9. Jesus falls the third time



10. Jesus is stripped of His clothing



11. Jesus is nailed to the cross



12. Jesus dies on the cross



13. Jesus is taken down from the cross



14. Jesus is buried in the tomb