


JO SWINNEY

The

W H O L E

BRF Lent book

Easter
Story

A large white outline of a circle with a cross inside, set against a dark green background with leaf patterns. The circle is hand-drawn and has a slightly irregular edge. The cross is simple and centered within the circle. The background features faint, stylized leaf patterns in a lighter shade of green.

WHY THE CROSS IS GOOD NEWS
FOR ALL CREATION

‘Jo’s insights, stories and drawings illuminate the connections between God, people and the rest of creation, bringing them all together to demonstrate why looking after the planet is such a key part of the Christian life.’

Dr Ruth Bancewicz, church engagement director, The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion

‘Jo Swinney’s delightful, engaging and provocative Lenten devotional is aptly named. So often we tell a truncated Easter story, but this series of reflections opens us out to the depth, breadth and grandeur of God’s love for his whole creation, including us people. Narrated with honesty, warmth and the insightful perspective of a storyteller, *The Whole Easter Story* helps us see afresh the immense power and wisdom of the cross for the salvation of the whole world. Thoroughly recommended!’

Professor Paul S. Williams, chief executive, Bible Society

‘Do something different this Lent! This is your chance to look at the relationships between God, people and the environment in an entirely new way. Join Jo Swinney of A Rocha as she takes us on a special journey through Lent, accompanied by birds, bugs, mammals, reptiles and, yes, people!’

Martin Hodson, principal tutor of Christian Rural and Environmental Studies

‘Digging into scripture from the starting point of God’s ongoing work of creation and not human sin – this is the Lenten journey the church needs to take for the sake of the world. Honest, accessible, deeply informed by practices of both faith and conservation, this is a book that really could reshape how contemporary Christians see the world and find their place in it.’

Dr Ellen Davis, professor of Bible and Practical Theology, Duke Divinity School

‘*The Whole Easter Story* is both intensely personal and mind-bendingly cosmic, as well as being a really good read!’

The Revd Dr Dave Bookless, head of theology, A Rocha International

'The Whole Easter Story is a series of thoughtful reflections on the story of God's salvation through Israel and, ultimately, in Christ. Yet, at the same time, Jo Swinney delightfully weaves in her musings on the familiar rhythms of our ordinary lives and her pondering on the beauty which we all behold in creation. I warmly commend these Easter reflections to all!'

Dr Lai Pak-Wah, principal, Biblical Graduate School of Theology, Singapore

'It is easy to feel small or powerless in tackling big questions of the environment. That is why this companion to Lent is essential reading for churches: it guides us in thinking through these problems, not only as individuals, but ultimately as communities that care and as people who have a joined-up way of telling the whole Easter story with a heart for the creation God loves. Beautifully timed, this book needs to be read, listened to, discussed, prayed with, carried in a pocket and acted on.'

**The Revd Dr Ivan Khovacs, Canterbury Christ Church University
and St James's Church Piccadilly**

'This is a truly enjoyable devotional book, providing an excellent guide as we journey through our relationship with God, others and God's wider creation, as well as God's own relationship with his creation. It draws deeply from scripture, with insights that will have you wanting to re-read familiar Bible stories. Refreshingly honest, laugh out loud, attentive to all of God's creation – your heart and soul will be fed.'

Jo Herbert-James, head of engagement, A Rocha UK

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Story



WHY THE CROSS IS GOOD NEWS
FOR ALL CREATION



Ministries



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*Dedicated to
Grace Sogbey, Alex Simiyu and Shanitah Nalukenge
and the rest of the A Rocha Comms Collective –
creative and courageous tellers of the whole story.*

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List of illustrations

Alongside each of the 40 reflections I have drawn an illustration of a species supported by A Rocha's work around the world. I hope that these amateur sketches might lead to increased wonder at our creator God's magnificent ingenuity and care in bringing the cosmos into being.

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Introduction

LENT ARRIVES just as we are forced to acknowledge that our New Year's resolutions have been, yet again, empty aspirations. And while we know it is, in principle, A Very Good Thing, Lent can bear with it the same whiff of failure. These six weeks offer us an annual opportunity to reflect and prepare for Easter Sunday, so that when the day arrives, we are primed to experience the impact of the resurrection once again. But like me, you might find most years you start strong on Shrove Tuesday with a pancake or five, then give up chocolate and/or wine for a few days, but soon drift back into the usual patterns before Holy Week sneaks up on you, and you realise you've wasted another Lent.

Perhaps part of the reason we are so disengaged is a sense of over-familiarity with the story. The tension, the intrigue and the key players are too well known to us. We can see around every corner; we could recite the dialogue. I'm so glad you have chosen *The Whole Easter Story* to be your companion this year, and I hope together we will discover a new and more expansive outlook on the trial, death and resurrection of Christ.

Often when considering the Easter story, we think in terms of what it means for our personal relationship with God. We are children of our times and places and – in wealthier societies anyway – we have a current obsession with the self. We are all about our own individual growth, purpose and spirituality. There is no doubt that each of us has our own space in our maker's heart and indeed a place in the Easter story, but what happened on the cross is not just a story of me and Jesus. It is far deeper and wider than that.

Over the 40 days of Lent, we'll be exploring what Easter means for God's relationship not only with us but also with the whole of creation, and how that changes our relationships with each other and our relationship with creation. The death and resurrection of Jesus changes everything.

There are four sections of ten days each, to be read from Mondays to Saturdays between Ash Wednesday and Easter Day. On Sundays we'll rest!

About A Rocha

Throughout this book you will find reference to an organisation called A Rocha, so some context might be useful before we start. To declare my personal stake, my parents were among the founders, and I am now the director of communications for A Rocha International.

A Rocha means 'The Rock' in Portuguese. It began as a field study centre and bird observatory in the Algarve in 1983 from a conviction that, as the 'earth is the Lord's, and everything in it' (Psalm 24:1), worship of the Lord must include caring well for what is his. The late theologian John Stott, a great friend to A Rocha, wrote the following in the foreword to *Under the Bright Wings*, which tells the story of the early days:

Christian people should surely have been in the vanguard of the movement for environmental responsibility, because of our doctrines of creation and stewardship. Did God make the world? Does he sustain it? Has he committed its resources to our care? His personal concern for his own creation should be sufficient to inspire us to be equally concerned.¹

A Rocha is now present in six continents. We are the only global Christian nature conservation charity, although increasing numbers of Christians are engaging in creation care, as evidenced by the more

than 7,000 churches that have signed up to A Rocha UK's Eco Church programme. In Kenya, a boardwalk through the mangroves funds local children's secondary school education, so their families no longer need to fell the trees of Arabuko Sokoke Forest to pay for it. In Lebanon, an area of wasteland where burnt-out tanks once rotted has been restored and is now a public park. In Canada, deprived and disadvantaged communities are supplied with nourishing organic produce from our farm. In Ghana, we have taken the government to court for their intention to allow Atewa Forest to be levelled for bauxite extraction, breaching human rights for clean water and the right of species to existence. In India, we work to make peace between the elephant and human communities around Bannerghatta National Park. In all this, and the very many other ways we protect and care for the places in which we're rooted, we endeavour to do what my father in his book calls 'writing the gospel in the landscape'.

Mary Magdalene's story

As we consider the Easter story in the days and weeks to come, we will be dipping in and out of a wide range of biblical texts. It would be good to look at the core narrative before we set out, which can be found in all four gospels (Matthew 26–28; Mark 15–16; Luke 22–24; John 19–20), and I highly recommend you find the time to revisit all these accounts. What follows is my attempt to see the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus through the eyes of someone Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all record as having been close to these events – Mary Magdalene. We have been given enough colour and detail to have a good sense of what she experienced, although my imagination and a bit of extratextual research has helped to fill out some of what follows.

We have rested through two more sabbaths since Jesus left us for the second time. The first time we believed him dead. We won't make that mistake again. So we are not in grief, though we often talk about what it was like to have him right there, passing the bread, throwing back his head in laughter, messing with the

children's hair. It felt so normal at the time, and now we can see how very far from ordinary those short years with him really were. And the last months, travelling in Galilee – I will be feasting on the memories all the days I have left. He has given his Spirit, but I miss having his body around.

Joanna and I were talking again this morning about what happened at Passover. At first it was hard to find any words for the images, the sounds and smells, the paralysing horror of what they did to him. Never mind that he came through it with only a few scars, we saw what we saw. We had to live through two whole days before the miracle of the third made it right. Now our tongues have loosened, and the words flow like the Jordan after the rains. As you are here, you can be my audience. Be warned, though, it is not easy to tell, and it won't be easy to hear either.

I'll start from when I saw the crowd turn nasty. You could say I should have seen it coming, given Jesus had been saying loud and clear exactly what was going to happen, but I was utterly in denial. I thought justice would prevail and he'd be released. He had done nothing wrong after all. But there was a moment when people all around me started shouting the same thing, one united voice: 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' The wave of sound almost visibly hit Pilate mid-sentence, and in the pit of my stomach I knew: they were going to have their way. I'm sure many there were among those waving palm branches and treating him like royalty only days ago, even among those he'd touched with his kind, healing hands, or those who had trailed behind him as he travelled and taught, hanging on his every word. Now they were a pack of baying dogs scenting raw meat. My skin prickled with fear.

The next time I saw him he was in a crush of soldiers in the Praetorium. They had stripped off his robe and replaced it with a garish purple costume meant to make a mockery of the idea he was any kind of king. His mother and I were close enough to see that his undergarment was soggy with blood. He was barely able to stand.

I've heard how brutal a Roman flogging can be, flaying through skin into muscle and even chipping bone. Lord, have mercy.

To the robe they added a crown. Not one of gold with the finest rubies and precious stones the world has to offer. Even that would have been woefully inadequate. But these brutes found it amusing to crown him with woven thorns. He could have called down battalions of avenging angels; he could have struck them blind with one moment of unveiled glory. Instead, they slapped his face and spat and tried to outdo each other's stupid insults. How could we watch? I honestly don't know. But it felt important to be with him, to witness.

Eventually the hilarity came to an end, and it was down to business. They redressed him in his own cloak, a cloak I had washed myself many times. I knew its texture; I had scrubbed it and handed it back to him clean, smelling as fresh as the Galilean air. How to explain what it was like to see those soldiers throw it over his battered shoulders? Or to stand by helpless as he staggered under the weight of the enormous wooden crossbeam?

In the early morning light, we were on the move, a throng pressing through the wakening city streets and beyond the walls to Golgotha. Jesus was too broken and exhausted to make any progress, so they pulled in a passer-by and transferred the cross to him. Although there were still those who were clearly enjoying every moment, the main sound was the women's weeping. John heard Jesus tell some of them not to cry for him but to save their tears for themselves, especially if they had children. What did he know? I've been trying not to wonder too much about that.

You can't live in the Roman Empire without knowing what a crucifixion involves. I've seen crosses in the distance. I knew it to be one of the most humiliating and painful ways a person could be killed. We came out on to the open hillside, and the crowd spread out. I noticed birdsong and a cluster of delicate white flowers at

my feet. I saw my toe was cut and bleeding and thought it might as well be someone else's foot for all I could feel it.

Three people were to be executed. Jesus was the first. The soldiers pulled every last piece of clothing off him, and pushed him down on to his back, stretching his arms along the crossbar. In the stillness, each strike of the mallet pushing iron into wood through flesh resounded, clear as a bell. One wrist, then the next. Salome retched and stumbled away to empty her stomach in the undergrowth. Mary and I were like one piece of stone, leaning together, fixed in place.

The three men now nailed in place were raised up on their awaiting shafts, Jesus in the middle. There was a sign on his cross, 'King of the Jews' written out three times, in Aramaic, Latin and Greek to make sure everyone caught the joke. The guards were full of bravado. 'Why aren't you saving yourself? Think you're so powerful, then prove it!' And Jesus? He was so dignified, so fully himself, even then, even in more pain than I can imagine. He asked God to forgive them, while they drew lots for his stuff.

Those of us women who had been with Jesus for the last few months, caring for him, following him through the villages and towns of Galilee, I'm proud to say we stayed close for those gruesome six hours when he hung on the edge of life. He could see us from up there. And we watched as he fought for each agonising gulp of air, while he cried out in the desolation of his Father's absence.

And then things became very strange. As the sun hit its highest point it disappeared, and an eerie darkness fell. The spring warmth was gone in an instant. For three hours we huddled together in the gloom. At three o'clock, pandemonium: the voice of Jesus echoed over the hill, 'It is finished,' and then he was dead. The ground shook violently, and the same soldiers so full of themselves all day were sobbing and shaking in fright. One of them

seemed to be experiencing some kind of religious ecstasy. Later we heard the temple curtain had ripped top to bottom, and dead people had burst out of tombs, full of life.

The shock of his death still wakes me like a lightning bolt from deepest sleep. I sit up, my heart racing, my cheeks damp with tears. Mary, I tell myself, this was not the end of the story. All is well.

We continued to sit by the cross for some time, unsure what would happen and unwilling to leave his body just hanging there. The other two men stayed alive until almost sundown, and if it hadn't been for the sabbath who knows how long they would have taken to die. Once their legs had been broken, it was a matter of horrible minutes. I suppose to make sure he really had gone, a soldier plunged his spear into Jesus' side, and a gush of watery blood poured on to the ground.

Kind men we later knew as Nicodemus and Joseph took charge of the body. Mary and I followed them to a garden close by, and watched as they wrapped it in linen strips with myrrh and aloes. There was a newly made tomb dug into the rock. Once the body was inside, they managed to roll an enormous stone over the mouth. A Roman guard sealed it, before pushing his shoulders back and standing to attention.

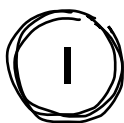
We eventually went back together to my home, where we passed the next day quietly, in observance of the sabbath. If you have lost someone you love, you will know how our sorrow crushed us, how our tears wracked us and brought no relief, how we could barely think for the noisy questions racing around our minds.

Neither of us slept that night, and it was still dark when we gathered burial spices and set off for the tomb. The air was cool and the ground damp with dew. Mary kept circling around the problem of how the two of us would manage to get in, given the size of the stone blocking the way. As it turns out, that wasn't an issue.

I was the first to see the stone was missing and my immediate thought was that dear Jesus' body had been stolen. I couldn't bear it – a desecration too many. I ran ahead, and bending down could see there was no body in there, only the cloth. I might have lost it, but in that instant the most intense, clean light filled the space and an angel in white spoke to me. The angel said, 'Why are you looking for the living among the dead? Jesus has risen, just as he told you he would!' All of a sudden I remembered. He had told us he would die. And he had told us he would come back from the dead.

This is the part of the story I love most. I will never tire of telling it. I will never stop reliving it. The living, resurrected Jesus was there in the garden, and he said my name. I was so overwhelmed I crumpled to the ground, my face literally in the mud at his feet, laughing and crying at the same time. I was clutching his robe in my fists, and he was gently trying to disentangle himself. He said, so full of affection and love, 'Don't hold on to me! You need to go and tell the others that I'm back.' I would have done anything for him, so I let go, got to my feet and left to share the news.

Of course they didn't believe me, but that's what it's like being a woman. And they got to see him for themselves eventually. How about you? Do you believe me?



God and people

LET ME BEGIN by telling you two short stories. Federica was for much of her life, by her own account, a cynical atheist who rarely gave the concept of God a thought. A journalist who had covered everything from human trafficking to the plight of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, to the epicentre of the Covid pandemic in her hometown in Italy, a relationship breakdown and the isolation of lockdown took her to a dark place. Having a sense that being immersed in nature might bring healing, she jumped on a flight to Kenya, and stumbled on the A Rocha field study centre at the coast. Seeing reference to Christianity on the website, Federica pictured nuns coming between her and the sunset beer she hoped to enjoy on the beach, and she was almost deterred from completing her booking. But she was intrigued by the conservation going on and ended up pushing ahead.

She planned to stay for a couple of days. In the end she was there for several weeks, returning a year later to be baptised in the Indian Ocean. From seeing the tender round-the-clock care the A Rocha team gave to an injured bird, to joining times of worship and finding intellectual hurdles could be leapt with mental integrity intact, Federica's mind and heart were won over and she gave her life to Jesus.²

My younger daughter, Charis, showed fierce animosity towards God from when she was a tiny child. Once she had mastered the word 'No', she applied it to invitations to pray at bedtime, to read Bible stories or to go to church. Her older sister, Alexa, would earnestly try to bring her into the fold. On one memorable occasion, I overheard Charis shouting 'Jesus is a sausage' at the top of her lungs. It was all rather

baffling – I haven't ever come across another case of such a young person opposing their parents' faith as strongly.

When she was six, we were at a big Christian camp and she came back from a children's session with a bit of paper that said, 'Charis gave her life to Jesus this morning.' We wondered if they had got the wrong end of the stick; perhaps she had stood up to go to the toilet and been included in an altar call head count? But Charis had indeed become a Christian. She had been all out. She was now all in. As a teenager she continues to challenge and inspire me in my own faith journey and she's one of the most Spirit-filled evangelists I know.

People are made for relationship with God. And yet since our earliest days as a species, we have communally and individually had the tendency to damage and even sever that relationship. In any given train carriage, football stadium or shopping mall around the world, those who would say they knew God personally would be in a small minority.

In these first ten days of Lent, we'll be thinking about God and us: what was the intention at creation; what went wrong and continues to go wrong; how does Jesus' crucifixion allow us to reconcile?

Day 1

Created

**For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.**

PSALM 139:13-16

I have twice had the strange experience of growing a human in my body. At first the only evidence of their existence was a pink line on a plastic stick. After a few weeks they made me feel very sick, and then they grew big enough to give me a bump and a great deal of discomfort. When I look at my teenage daughters, I find it hard to connect these beautiful, fully grown and increasingly independent people with anything that might have gone on inside me. We may have sophisticated scanning equipment now that makes the womb slightly less secret, but I can still relate to the idea that babies develop in 'the depths of the earth', a process shrouded in mystery and deep darkness.

I can also confirm that I was not a consciously active participant in the task of taking Alexa and Charis from being a couple of cells to fully formed babies. It was God who created them, who breathed life

into their beings, who gave them their fingerprints, their temperaments, their quirks and tendencies. As humans we have become very clever in certain regards. We know our bodies are composed of oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, carbon, calcium, phosphorus, sulphur, potassium, sodium, chlorine and magnesium, among other elements. But we have no clue how to combine those elements into a living, breathing, emotional and spiritual being.

As we begin to consider our relationship with God in the context of the Easter story, a good place to start is with the fact he is creator, and we are created. We were created as *Homo sapiens*, a distinct species among many, imprinted with the very image of God (Genesis 1:27), and we were each and every one of us created, seen, significant and loved before one of our days came to be.

I have heard the story told from a different starting point, as I imagine you have. Sometimes it is told like this: people are awful; we are dirty, sinful, horrid things, and we took God right to the end of his tether, so he had to come and die for us.

I found a website giving step-by-step instructions for evangelism, and this is step two (step one was about sin too):

Write the word 'SIN' vertically between the words 'MAN' and 'GOD'. Quote Romans 3:23 – 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' Questions to ask: 'What does the word "all" in this verse mean? Does it include you?' Always use questions after giving a verse so that you may know whether its truth is getting across. Say, 'Since God is holy and man is sinful, sin separates man from God.'³

But the Bible doesn't start with sin; it starts with creation, and that makes all the difference to how we understand our relationship with God. Let's dig into Psalm 139 and you'll see what I mean.

Psalms are songs reflecting the experience of their authors' lives with God and infused with references to early sections of scripture, books of history, prophecy, poetry and apocalypse. They were written long before the life of Jesus, but in the understanding that all too often humankind was failing, corporately and individually, to keep their side of the covenant promises that framed their relationship with God. King David led his people into so many bloody battles that he was forbidden from building a temple. His relationship history would definitely have earned him a well-deserved 'Love Rat' tabloid splash. He worshipped God with all his heart but sometimes cursed him too. In all this complexity, one thing was clear: as a being created by God, he knew his intrinsic worth was never up for debate – 'Your works are wonderful' (v. 14).

David's language in Psalm 139 describes a very hands-on process of making – he uses words like 'knit' and 'woven'. These crafts involve patterns, but patterns which allow for creativity. Each human is like others, and at the same time unique. We are wired with a need for significance, to have a place, to be seen and known as an individual, not just a speck in a blurry crowd of billions, and thankfully we have a God with the capacity to relate to each of us – 'Your eyes saw [me]... all the days ordained for me were written in your book' (v. 16). We can base our self-esteem on everything from an annual appraisal at work, to the number of hearts under our Instagram posts, to how many people show up to our birthday drinks, but why would we? Each of us has been 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (v. 14) by our ever-loving creator God.

For reflection

Think about some of the people who have shaped how you see yourself, from parents to teachers, to friends and spouses, to employers and media figures. How much power have you given their voices? How can you let God's voice speak more loudly, and what would change if you decided to listen only to him when it comes to your worth?

Prayer

Abba, Father, I am yours. You meant me to be here, and you look at me with love and pleasure. Your knowledge of me is deeper than I can fathom. My feelings, motivations and impulses are laid bare before you. I can't deceive you; I can't hide from you. Thank you that your commitment to me is unshakeable. Amen.



Salish sucker *Catostomus sp. cf. catostomus*

A small freshwater fish thought to be locally extinct – until it was identified in the Little Campbell River watershed (British Columbia, Canada) in 2011! The population is now thriving.



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Explore the profound meaning of Easter beyond personal spirituality.

There is no doubt that each of us has a place in the Easter story, but what happened on the cross is not just a story of me and Jesus. It is far deeper and wider than that.

In this Lenten journey, Jo Swinney explores the broader impact of the Easter story on God's relationship with creation. Through Bible readings, reflections and stories from A Rocha's global conservation efforts, discover how the cross transforms not just our own individual connection with Jesus, but also our relationships with each other and our world.

*Delightful, engaging and provocative.
Thoroughly recommended!*

Paul Williams, chief executive, Bible Society



Jo Swinney is a UK-based author, speaker and editor, with an MA in theology from Regent College, Vancouver. She is director of communications for A Rocha International.

Includes a six-week discussion guide for groups



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