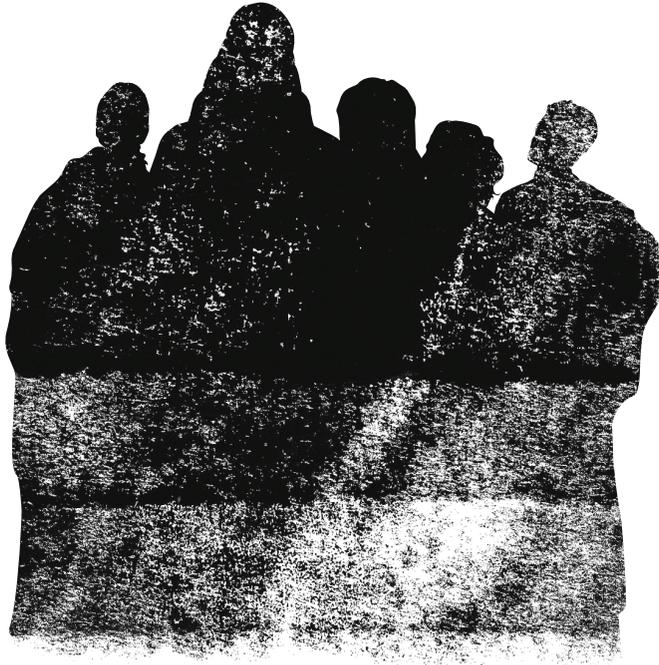


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THE FOLLOWERS

A WORKBOOK FOR INDIVIDUALS AND SMALL GROUPS

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HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS STUDY

In this workbook you will find six narrative stories about some of the followers of Jesus in the Early Church. They were brave in their faith in him, relentless in their pursuit of sharing the gospel with others, and at peace in their trust in his divine will for their lives. We have much in common with these people of the Early Church, but we also have much to learn from them.

The narratives are written to help you think about how these individuals might have been feeling or what they might have been thinking during their story. Each week before you get together with your group, you might want to read the scriptures that the narrative is based on so that you have a full picture of the story. As you work through the reading and journaling in this book, continue to think about the pieces of the stories that find themselves in your life. What can you learn from these stories and apply in your own life?



WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN EACH CHAPTER

CONTEXT

This section will give readers an understanding of what was going on around the person at the time of the story. Historical, societal, and religious background are given to help readers put themselves in the shoes of those whose stories they are about to read.

STORY

The narratives told in this study attempt to get inside the heads of those whose stories we may have heard hundreds of times before. The writers of these pieces have, through research and reflection, given us a brief glimpse into what these people might have been thinking and how they might have felt. As you read or listen to the story each week, look for places where you can relate to the story—God's story.

PLACE IN GOD'S STORY

This section will give you a short description of how God's story found its place in this individual.

THE STORY FINDS ITS PLACE IN ME

These questions are designed to help you reflect on what you've read in order to find yourself in God's narrative. There is plenty of space available for journaling.



HER STORY

The early sun was coming up behind her. It was heavy and covered in cloud and the light everywhere seemed filled with smoke. Her shadow fell very faint and translucent in front of her and through her crying she could see nothing clearly. She trailed her fingers back and forth across the dust beside her where she knelt on the ground. Overripe olives had dropped to the ground all around her. The skins split open and the sour smell of their decomposing filled the garden. She was on her own. The men who had been with her left as suddenly as they had arrived and the chaos of the morning was dissipating with them.

* * *

The life she had known these past years seemed to be evaporating away out of her skin. Safety. Peace. Beauty. It all seemed to be getting carried away on some dark wind. It was like waking up from a dream. She looked around her. Everything down to its color had changed. Her hands shook and she thought of the walk she had made in the dark to the tomb that morning. It had been cold as she stood in doorways looking left and right. She was covered in layers of scarves and a wool mantle over her shoulders. She hid her face behind them as she stepped out into the pre-dawn streets. She tried to move quickly from dark doorway to dark doorway. Men on corners were throwing coins at her feet and shouting, “Woman! Woman! How much for an hour? Where is your prophet now?”

It already felt as if that had been days ago. The sun was warming reluctantly and she pulled the shawl from her shoulders and lay it on the ground. The dead fruit left stains across the fabric. Morning was blowing in from the Dead Sea. The past few days had changed everything she felt about mornings. She tried to think of something else. She pushed and pulled her thoughts to and away from where





they wanted to go. The twisted faces of women crying and their tears falling onto dark and soggy ground. The sound of metal on metal and the shouting and the crowds crying out in hate and fear. Children screaming. The groans of slow death. Storm clouds had come in so quickly that the hillside had gone cold in an instant and her joints pained as the air changed drastically. Even now she shivered and she tried not to remember. How long ago was that? She counted the three days out on her fingers.

Here at the tomb the earth had settled into stillness. There was no breeze and no rustle in the leaves. Somewhere in the distance a morning bird braved one call and then was quiet. She pressed her fingers into her ears against the silence and she shut her eyes tight and tried to force out the coming headache. She lifted her face up to the sky and felt dull warmth on her eyelids. Tears had dried across her cheeks and lips and she pressed her palms to her face to wipe away the grime. An ache in her belly swelled and pressed against her ribs. There was some pain or fear that she had not known in so long that she was afraid to identify it. She heard footsteps along the outer wall and the voices of men. She scrambled out of the light up against the wall of the tomb and tucked her knees to her chin. She shaded her eyes with her hands. After a moment the noise passed and she cried a little while.

By now the morning was up over the horizon. She had been there for hours and felt almost like she was waiting for something. She looked around the garden and saw nothing. Fresh tears pooled in her eyes and she was gripped with fear. What was there to wait for? She simply had nowhere to go. She had no day ahead of her. And she knew now what she recognized deep inside her. She was alone. Maybe she had known it her whole life. It felt like being a non-person. What she did each day did not matter. Her presence had no effect on the world around her. A branch she broke with her hands. A cry she called out in the middle of a crowded street. It was as if, when she turned back again, the branch was never

broken at all. There was no evidence of her. The cry made in the street called no one's attention. Her feet may as well not leave prints in the dust.

She thought about this invisible life and also thought about an invisible death. How long could she stay here and not be missed? Starting now, everything would be what it had been before she met him. She was unknown and would move through life like smoke. She had always feared it and now believed it. She looked over her shoulder into the grave. It was empty. Maybe she had not met him at all. Maybe she had made up in her head what had saved her life. She tried to remember him. The color of his eyes or his smell. Nothing.

She was overcome and wished she could sleep. It turned out that the tortured nothing she had been all her life was now the woman she would always be. She moved away from the tomb on her knees and in her despair looked for somewhere to lie down. She heard some sound from inside the grave. She looked up, startled, and brushed away tears. Two men sat very still at the head and foot of the stone slab inside. She could only just make them out. They wore simple linen robes and she wondered how they had come so quietly. She started to rise to her feet and one of the men turned his face to her.

“Woman, why are you crying?”

She covered her head with her scarf and spoke to him as steadily as she could manage.

“Sir. If you are the one who took him, just tell me where he is.”

The man who had not spoken started to slowly get up from where he sat. He stood a moment and then moved toward the mouth of the cave. The shadow from inside fell away as he reached the door. The woman backed away and felt something rising in her. Half in shade and half in light, his eyes stirred something in her



“ In the moment that came next, the careful glass fortress against loneliness that she had been building around her heart and her mind shattered into splinters all around and she felt exposed like a freshly healed wound. ”

and she thought she was afraid. He studied her face a long moment before he spoke.

“Who are you looking for?”

She let out a sigh and could not answer this. The exhaustion in her bones seemed to overwhelm her. She only hung her head. From the garden a bird sang out suddenly. In the moment that came next, the careful glass fortress against loneliness that she had been building around her heart and her mind shattered into splinters all around and she felt exposed like a freshly healed wound. The real dream was ending and she woke with a shock. He only had to speak.

Mary.—AC

HER PLACE IN GOD'S STORY

Mary Magdalene is a powerful example of how we cannot allow our past to keep us from following Christ. Jesus is a God of unconditional love and Mary's response to unconditional love was unconditional love in return. She knew that her whole self was a sinner. But her whole self was healed and she devoted her whole self to Jesus. And yet we need to grasp that our whole self is fully known by this same Jesus. How humbling it is to realize that we are known and seen and still loved in spite of ourselves. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. What we are told of Mary's story should be part of our own story as well. She was known through and through by Jesus, God with her, and was loved unconditionally just the same.



