

## Might There Be More to Easter?

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# Contents

Preface	5
Suppose...	7
What Kind of Story?	8
So What?	12
Final Week	15
Last Supper	18
Game Over?	20
Easter Morning	26
What Happened on Good Friday?	37
More to Easter?	40
For Further Reading	44
Map	45

# Preface

As you consider reading this booklet, let me try to explain in a few words what it is about.

In essence, we'll be asking the question whether there might be more to Easter than a long weekend of family visits and sugar rush.

Alongside Christmas, Easter is the highlight of the Church year: Christians remember that Jesus Christ died and came back to life. The thing is, nowadays, topics like church, Jesus or biblical miracles tend to be conversation stoppers. Rarely will someone go: 'I'm so glad you raised the subject!'

Well, here we are raising it anyway.

In doing so, this booklet will start off with a summary of the events that make up the Easter story: what, are we told, happened in the final week of Jesus' life?

Next, we'll consider whether these accounts could be history, rather than fiction.

And finally, we'll be looking at ways in which the Easter message might still matter in our day and age – might matter to you and me.

I hope you'll join me on this brief journey of discovery; and by all means, feel free to nibble at your chocolate egg while you're reading.

Michael Pfundner

# Suppose...

Suppose a deprived schoolboy discovered he was a wizard? Suppose an ex-marine in a wheelchair led an army into battle? Suppose a penniless orphan were to marry the future king? Harry Potter, Avatar and Cinderella hinge on the same word, 'suppose'. All good stories do.

The story called the greatest ever told is no different: suppose a baby in a feeding trough ended up saving the world?

A rather unusual premise; but is it enough to make the story of Jesus stand out among bestselling fiction, blockbuster movies and classic fairy tales?

People normally curl up with a paperback or settle in a cinema seat in order to be entertained, perhaps even gripped or moved – for a while. What they don't tend to expect, let alone desire, is to be shaken to a point where they realise their life has to change.

The thing about the Jesus story is that it can have precisely that effect. In fact, it has been doing so for the past 2,000 years and a million times over.

What is it, then, about this ancient narrative that, to this day, stops people in their tracks, makes them see everything in a different light, and causes them to review their priorities, evaluate their relationships, dare to dream, drop everything, and venture into the unknown?

# What Kind of Story?

The story of Jesus is not like any other biography. It speaks of a unique person with a unique message. It hovers between history and theology. It spans the natural and the supernatural, time and eternity, heaven and earth.

This makes the story compelling to some and hard to swallow for others. People are divided, especially, over the final chapter: Easter. The hero dies and comes back to life.

Provided there is an all-powerful God who chooses to intervene in human affairs, events that we would describe as miraculous should be well within the realm of possibility. Ultimately, therefore, the Jesus story is rooted in questions like 'Is there a God?' and 'If so, can God be known?' These, in my humble opinion, are among the most important questions a human being could ask.

Over the next hour or so (depending on how often you decide to pause and ponder over the Bible passages that will guide us on the way), we're going to have a closer look at the Easter story and examine whether it makes sense. By 'sense' I mean two things.

Firstly, is the story open to enquiry? Or are we expected to have blind faith, suspend all thinking and just believe? More specifically, since Christianity is rooted in history (its founder lived roughly 2,000 years ago in what is now northern Israel), can we test its claims by examining the historical record?

Secondly, supposing we were able to find evidence for Jesus' remarkable life and even for him returning from the dead, how would something that occurred so long ago and so far away be relevant to you and me?

Making sense of the Jesus story, then, involves two things: finding out what happened, and finding out what it means.

Imagine for a moment, if you will, some people trying to describe a lark singing in mid-flight.

Someone with the appropriate equipment and know-how might go about measuring sound waves or calculating a bird's thrust to body-weight ratio.

Someone else could decide to use, not numbers, but words to refer to the same thing: 'He rises and begins to round, he drops the silver chain of sound.' (From a poem by George Meredith).

And a third person might come along and turn that lyrical phrase into one of England's most sublime pieces of music.

The first person's numbers and charts will give us factual information. They say nothing about the beauty and magic of the lark's flight and song; Meredith's poem and Vaughan Williams' music do.

The scientist gives us helpful data. Equally, the poet and the composer help us to understand what is going on, albeit at a different level. Both levels are important. Both levels are real. Both levels are true.

There is both science and art to life; and I reckon the same is true of faith. As for our subject, the Easter story, we shall be asking some 'scientific' questions, such as: what evidence have we for an historical figure named Jesus of Nazareth? How can we be certain that it isn't all legend and myth? And concerning our specific subject, the message of Easter: is there a sensible way for a 21st century person to understand the cross on which he died and the grave from which he is said to have returned?

On the 'poetic' level, we'll be looking at the deeper meaning of the Easter story: suppose it really happened – well, so what?

Just before we kick off, then, let me run you through a few technical terms, in case this is your first foray into the world of the Easter story.

- What we call ‘the Bible’ is really more of a library than a book: a collection of roughly 2,000 –3,000 year-old, Middle Eastern texts that span several centuries and a multitude of authors.
- The Old Testament: the first part of the Bible consists of ancient Jewish Scriptures, written mostly in Hebrew, that are sacred to both Jews and Christians.
- The New Testament: the second part of the Bible, written in the first century AD in colloquial Greek. This was the trade language of the Roman Empire, which at the time incorporated the eastern Mediterranean territory inhabited by the Jewish people.
- The New Testament contains the story of Jesus, i.e. four documents called Gospels, whose authors are named Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Next in the New Testament we have an account of the early days of the Church, theological and pastoral letters penned by its founding fathers and finally a prophetic text called ‘The Apocalypse’ or ‘Revelation’.
- Chapter and verse: each text in the Bible, commonly referred to as a ‘book’, is divided into chapters and verses. Matthew 5.3, for example, means the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, verse 3. 1 Corinthians 15.3–4 refers to the First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 3 to 4. The original texts weren’t structured that way, but it’s certainly proven to be a nifty way of making Bible reading and study easier.
- And finally a word on the historic setting. Since first-century Jews were under Roman occupation, their hopes of freedom and independence were linked to the arrival of the Messiah, a

spiritual and political leader who would bring about God's rule on earth. The Greek word for Messiah is 'Christ', so the familiar term, Jesus Christ, includes both his name and messianic title.