

Note: In *Those Women* Jesus is identified by a Hebrew form of his name, Yehoshua. The more familiar form is used in the following notes.

#### Chapter One

- Even as Hadas confidently tells her friend Zizel of her healing, she recalls one negative statement and is beset by guilt. How do the doubters in your life affect your confidence in God and in yourself? Do you sometimes question another person's description of their own experience? To what effect?
- Hadas is deeply moved by Jesus' addressing her as a 'daughter of Israel'. How do we consciously and unconsciously include and exclude people?
- Just when Hadas surrenders her struggle and accepts her situation, her life begins to turn around. Have you experienced situations where acceptance has led to a breakthrough?

#### Chapter Two

- Zizel defends her husband Shimon and credits him with inviting Jesus into their home and making her mother's healing possible. Hadas had doubts. Are there people in your life of whom you expect no (or little) good?
- The building of the synagogue in Capernaum was financed by a Roman centurion. Archeological study reveals it to have been a handsome structure nonetheless many Jewish residents were dispossessed of their homes in the process. What examples of development raise similar issues today. How might Christians most faithfully respond?

#### Chapter Three

- From brushing our teeth to going to church, to saying nightly prayers or walking with a friend the rituals that we regularly observe play a significant role not only in our lifestyle but also in developing character and self-understanding. What rituals (religious and secular) do you observe? Do they make a difference in your life? Are there rituals you would like to add to your life?
- With advances in medicine, travel and knowledge many attitudes have changed in the past twenty centuries. What changes do you personally applaud? What, if any values or practices do you regret losing? Is there room for both in your life?

#### Chapter Four

- In Capernaum most people were either Jewish or Roman. The differences and boundaries were distinct and defined. In today's multi-cultural societies our diversity is increasingly recognized as a gift and we may meet a variety of people from different social and ethnic backgrounds regularly.
  - What differences are you most aware of?
  - How do you express your own faith in this culture?
  - How do you expand your understanding of other cultures and peoples?
  - How do you celebrate our human diversity?

#### Chapter Five

- Simon Peter was what we might call a 'risk taker'. He believed that with Jesus miracles would happen. Do you believe in miracles? What is a miracle? What in your life has happened that you can only explain as a miracle?

- As a scholar and teacher, Nadiv's response to Jesus was more studied and reserved than Simon Peter's. How do you make decisions? How do we appreciate and honour our diverse struggles and expressions of faith?

#### Chapter Six

- Jesus said, 'You are the light of the world.' Recall some of the people in your life who light up a room simply by their presence. What is it about them that makes such a difference?
- Mary of Magdala said, 'We all have demons.' Do you struggle with weaknesses or tendencies, obsessions or compulsions? Does your faith help you to overcome your 'demons'?

#### Chapter Seven

- Customs and traditions were vitally important to the families of Hadas and Zizel. What family and religious traditions and customs do you remember? Which ones do you still observe and, if not, have you replaced them?
- The ritual of becoming bar mitzvah (bat mitzvah for girls) is a rite of passage from childhood to the responsible life of an adult. How do you define 'adult'? Do you observe similar rites of passage (from birth to death) in your life?
- When Avashai began to sing, reverence replaced revelry. What takes you into reverence?

#### Chapter Eight

- Jesus had a practice of rising early and seeking a place of solitude for prayer. How do you fit time for prayer into your busy schedule? How much of your prayer is 'asking for' (intercession) and how much is 'listening to' (contemplation)?
- When Jesus and the men went out for a day the women told stories illustrating the exceptional way that Jesus treated women, including women outside their cultural norm.
  - They talked about the Syrophenician woman – Have you ever like the Syrophenician woman, felt like an outsider?
  - the widow whose son had died – When in your life have you felt the most hopeless? Who came alongside to help you through that time?
  - the prostitute who anointed Jesus' feet with costly ointment – Have you ever given or received an extravagant gift? How did it feel?

#### Chapter Nine

- Zizel and Raananah were sisters-in-law, not best friends, but when they wakened in the night to a raging storm they were bonded by concern for their husbands Simon Peter and Andrew who had not returned home from the sea the night before. Have there been times when you have been thankful that someone whose support you hadn't expected was exactly the right person to be there for you. Have there been times when you've been there for someone else?
- At sea, during the storm Simon Peter challenged Jesus to call him and, in response to Jesus' call he stepped out of the boat and walked on the water. He only began to sink when he took his eyes off Jesus and became concerned about his circumstances. When in your life have you witnessed or done the impossible by faith alone? How does Jesus call you to get out of the boat of your security and walk on water?

#### Chapter Ten

- Accounts of Jesus' birth, like all history, is refracted through the various lenses of those who report it also those who hear it. Often unconsciously, we judge our sources and choose what we will believe and how we will pass it on. As you listen with *Those Women* to Mary's account of the events surrounding Jesus first miracle and his birth; consider how you listen to reports of unusual and hard-to-believe events. Are you perhaps too credulous or too sceptical?

- The birth of Jesus led to Mary and Joseph's flight into Egypt, the land from which their ancestors had fled from slavery into freedom. In today's war-torn Middle East, refugees and squalid holding camps are commonplace. How might the Gospel account inform our attitude towards the plight of refugees?

#### Chapter Eleven

- Individuals and communities often find themselves struggling with financial concerns. What have we compromised and what are we willing to compromise to meet our financial goals?
- When Jesus asks the disciples, 'Who do others say that I am?' several of them are quick to answer him. When he asks, 'Who do you say that I am?'" only Simon Peter responded, 'You are the Christ.' Who do you say that Jesus is? What do you believe?

#### Chapter Twelve

- What did Jesus mean when he said that we are to be like a child? Where do you observe what it means? Where in your life are you child-like?
- When the disciples tell the man who was casting out demons in Jesus' name to stop because he is not 'one of them', Jesus tells his disciples not to prevent the man doing good in his name. How do we regard people who are not 'one of us' and whose Christian expression differs from our own?

#### Chapter Thirteen

- Jesus is prepared to meet with and meet the needs of people as disparate as Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, and Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. What can we say about the company we keep?
- The people in the crowd around Bartimaeus don't want a disturbance and they try to silence him. Do our good manners and orderly ways sometimes prevent us, or cause us to prevent others, from seeking Jesus' healing and help?

#### Chapter Fourteen

- When Jesus entered Jerusalem the roadways were lined with people waving palm branches. The palm was a symbol of victory in pre-Christian times and was adopted by the early Christians as a symbol of victory of the spirit over the flesh. What symbols or icons do you find most evocative of your Christian faith?
- When Jesus entered Jerusalem he knew that he was entering into the ultimate challenge of his lifetime. How do you equip yourself for challenges? How do you decide to keep on walking or turn back? How are you nurtured in the midst of a challenge/

#### Chapter Fifteen

- Jesus repeatedly shattered social norms and customs. When he instructed the disciples to look for a man carrying a jar of water, they questioned him. What changes have you experienced in long-held practices? What good has obtained from changes?
- When Jesus took the basin and towel and began to wash the disciples' feet after the Last Supper, they were non-plussed. Even in a culture where a good host would provide a slave and a basin for washing the dusty, stinky feet of his sandaled guests, when Jesus came to Peter, Peter flatly refused until Jesus convinced him otherwise. In what situations do you feel most vulnerable?

If you are part of a reading/study group you might take this opportunity to experience not only the humility but the blessing of washing each other's feet, rubbing them sensitively and drying them thoroughly. It has the power to wash away fear and give new meaning to servant-hood.

## Chapter Sixteen

- The tradition of walking the Way of the Cross began in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century and has become part of the widely accepted understanding of Jesus' passion. The fourteen stations include incidents that are plausible although not recorded in the Gospels. Reflections along the way have been illustrated by artists as diverse as El Greco and Barnett Newman; written by voices as diverse as St. Francis of Assisi and the Rev. Sebastian L. Muccilli, U.S.A. Armed Forces Chaplain who dedicated his reflections to the victims of war. A downloadable PDF of Chaplain Muccilli's reflections with photo-journalist images is available at [www.paxchristiusa.org/StationsoftheCross.pdf](http://www.paxchristiusa.org/StationsoftheCross.pdf). You and your group may consider a study of the traditional stations as they reflect, in the suffering of Jesus, suffering in the world of your consciousness today.
- Mary of Magdala said, 'We have all done the best we could do.' Where do we find the grace to forgive others and ourselves when things go awry?

## Chapter Seventeen

- We often struggle and sometimes are made to feel guilty, about having too little faith. Consider the way in which Jesus assured his disciples that he was resurrected by appearing to Mary Magdalene outside the tomb, the disciples and especially Thomas in the upper room. Have you ever asked for and received a sign? A confirmation? An assurance?
- Tradition required that the faithful extend hospitality to strangers and those in need, so it was that at the end of a stressful and tiring journey on the road to Emmaeus, Cleopas and his wife invited the stranger who had walked with them in for the evening meal. When have you been surprisingly blessed by doing (willingly or reluctantly) what was required?

## Chapter Eighteen

- The disciples remained in the Upper Room in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost (Shavuot) the Jewish festival that marks the conclusion of the weeks following the Passover and commemorates the giving of the Ten Commandments (The Law) on Mount Sinai. They make the point that what was given must always be accepted. Consider the ways in which you intentionally accept and use the gifts of the Law and the Holy Spirit that God has given.
- Scottish commentator William Barclay told a story of an ex-serviceman who described his experiences of war as having been dead in killing and corruption and his coming to faith in Jesus as true as resurrection. Have you experienced moments of new life? What was the key to your change? How do you sustain your life in the spirit?

## Chapter Nineteen

- Following the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples are freed from fear and burst out onto the streets to tell everyone what has happened. What accounts for Simon Peter's newfound eloquence? What accounts for the disciples' words being understood by people from other countries and languages?
- How does the Holy Spirit gift you to share your faith with other people?
- Consider the people gathered in your reading circle and others whom you know. What gifts do they have? How can you encourage each other in using your gifts?

## Chapter Twenty

- As the disciples journey homeward, they are deeply aware of the land that informed Jesus' parables and stories, and shaped their own lives and faith. Consider how we are shaped by our earliest experiences. Where is 'home' for you? How has 'home' informed and influenced your beliefs and lifestyle? When you long for home, what is it you are longing for?

- At that place where Peter is most ‘at home’ – his fish boat on the Sea of Galilee – Jesus appears to him and the other disciples who have gone out to get back to life as they had known it. Following that encounter, Peter admits to his denial of Jesus. Forgiven and freed from guilt, he sees his way forward. Are there any unresolved issues, lack of forgiveness or guilt, holding you back?

#### Chapter Twenty-One

- Recall a memory (or two or more) that is significant to your sense of self as well as the community and the family that you are part of.

#### Chapter Twenty-Two

- The story does not end with the deaths of Zizel and Hadas, *Those Women* like the men who left for the mission fields, have passed their faith on as it will go and grow from generation to generation. Discuss your own faith journey and the people who were a significant part of it. What does it mean to you? What difference does it make in your life?
- How do you pass your faith on to others?

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*Esther*