

The office supply store Staples has won industry awards for their creative advertising campaign featuring the Easy Button. With just one click of The Easy Button — POOF! — Staples fixes any problem that comes up in the office. They want to make our lives easier, and the Easy Button translates from commercial prop to desktop tool. Business clients can download their own Easy Button — it’s the portal for sending in orders, requesting deliveries, getting tech support, handling rebates, outsourcing print projects, etc. The TV show “The Office” often directs thinly veiled barbs at Staples and their successful approach to making life easier for an ever growing base of customers. But **easy** is what people want. There should be an Easy Button for all of us as we maneuver through life.

Having surgery? Looking for a new job? Have far more bills than income? Dealing with stress and loss? Facing health concerns—your own or those of others? Worried about somebody you love? Staples says, “That was easy.” We know, “This will be difficult.” Clearly there are too many experiences in life that are just never going to be easy.

Today’s Scripture from the Gospel of Luke illustrates Jesus accepting a destiny that would be very, very difficult. All this month we have been looking at different snapshots of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke, from his childhood and youth, to his temptation and ministry, and then some of the people that he loved, and today we come to the tension and conflict surrounding the end of his ministry. In those final days, people started criticizing him more and more, and even publicly attacking him. No matter what he said or did, he caused suspicion and even fury. He tells the disciples that he is soon going to suffer many things, be rejected by the chief priests, elders and scribes, and be killed. They really do not want to hear this, the disciples want to find an Easy Button somewhere. But just as Jesus must take up his cross, he tells them that anyone who would follow him would have to take up a cross, as well. Being his disciple will be difficult. In those dark days Jesus would experience exhaustion, despair, loneliness and abandonment. Judas would betray him with a kiss, Peter would deny ever knowing him. He would be arrested and tried before Pilate, in what was a mockery of his entire ministry. He would spend an agonizing and sleepless night in the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing his violent death was imminent. And while he does cry out to God, asking if he might be given another destiny, if this cup might pass from him, he ultimately does what needs to be done. His composure cracks, of course, but he continues to fulfill his destiny. He is brave and strong, even with a broken heart.

Max Lucado's book *And The Angels were Silent*, describes how Jesus must have felt as the end of his ministry drew near, how he cried out to God to let this cup pass from him and spare him the suffering ahead. In this moving portrait of our vulnerable God, Lucado writes:

“His humanity begged to be delivered from what his divinity could see.

Jesus looks into the pit of suffering and asks, “Can't there be another way?”

He knew the answer before he asked the question. But still, he asked to get out.

There was a moment when, if he could have, he would have turned his back on the whole mess and gone away. But he could not. Why?

Because he saw you. Peering down that long corridor of time,

he saw you. Right there in the middle of a world which would never be fair.

Saw you cast into a river of life that you did not request.

He saw you with a body that would get tired and sick, saw you with a will that would grow weak.

He saw you betrayed by those you trusted and hurt by those you loved.

He saw you staring into the pit of your own failures and broken dreams.

Saw you looking down into your own dark, cold grave.

He saw you even then, and he knew he could not leave you to deal with the sorrows of this life all alone.”

How very different this world would be if Jesus had not made that choice, to fulfill his destiny and die upon that cross. Now I know this is debatable, but I believe that Jesus **did** have a choice, that he was not bound to die a brutal and violent death. His human will could have taken over and he could have avoided the cross and taken the easy way out. People do it all the time, that is what free will allows us to do. We can walk away from one path to pursue another, turning away from God's intentions for our lives. We always have choices.

Jesus could have apologized to the Romans, and returned to Galilee where he could have lived out the rest of his life in relative peace and tranquility. He could have performed a few miracles, done occasional teaching, preaching, written a book. He did not have to be brutally crucified like a common criminal. But he chose to face arrest, a mock trial, sentencing, humiliation, betrayal, abandonment, rejection and his own agonizing torture and death, knowing it would not be easy. But he knew he was doing it not only for himself, but for all humankind. This is a universal truth at the heart of our Christian faith—that suffering serves a higher purpose far beyond our own consciousness. Our struggles and heartaches can be

transformed and used to bless and help others. Just as the cross of Jesus Christ was transformed from an instrument of death into a symbol of new life and hope. Which makes me think of a story, and I don't know if it is true. It was about a woman who went into a nice jewelry store to buy a cross necklace for her daughter's graduation. She told the jeweler she wanted a gold cross on a chain. He replied, "Do you want it plain or with the little man on it?"

So Jesus offered this model of obedience and courage for us when we face those experiences in life that are far from easy. And we will all face such experiences. Current surveys indicate that Americans today feel more loneliness, hopelessness and futility than ever before, and it is not just the economic uncertainty that is troubling people. We all carry wounds to our spirits and souls. And what Jesus offers us is the assurance that God is with us through it all. We do not bear our burdens alone, and this knowledge brings a comfort and a peace this world cannot give. It can sustain us even in the worst of times.

I was shocked when I first read of the heartbreaking correspondence between Mother Teresa and some of her closest confidants. The book, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, quotes her as praying, "Lord, my God, who am I that you should forsake me? I have now become as the most hated one, the one you have thrown away as unwanted, unloved. I call, I cling, — and there is no one to answer, no one on whom I can depend ... The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable. Where is my faith?" This coming from the most saintly and faith filled woman of modern day Christianity. While it was shocking, it was also comforting to know that even a living saint did not feel close to God all the time. She later confided to a friend: "Pray that I may have the courage to keep on smiling at Jesus. I understand a little the tortures of hell without God ... and yet, I would freely pass even eternity in this terrible suffering, if this would give God the love of a single soul." Even the faith journey of a saint is not easy.

Jesus assured us that God is at work in us and around us not in spite of our struggles, but through them. So we really should not long for an easy life, but the faith and courage to deal with whatever difficulties come our way. I have heard a cancer survivor tells me that they would not trade their cancer for the world, because it gave them a new appreciation of life; an alcoholic say that they would not trade the lessons learned from losing everything and starting all over; people who have lost a lot in this challenging economy tell me how good it is to realign their priorities and be reminded of what really matters most in life. The pain we experience today can bring unexpected blessings tomorrow. This is what Jesus demonstrated as the end of his life approached, and what so many of his followers have demonstrated throughout history.

Listen to this entry from the diary of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism:
 Sunday, A.M., May 5 Preached in St. Anne's. Was asked not to come back anymore.

Sunday, P.M., May 5 Preached in St. John's. Deacons said "Get out and stay out."

Sunday, A.M., May 12 Preached in St. Jude's. Can't go back there, either.

Sunday, A.M., May 19 Preached in St. Somebody Else's. Deacons called special meeting and said I couldn't return.

Sunday, P.M., May 19 Preached on street. Kicked off street.

Sunday, A.M., May 26 Preached in meadow. Chased out of meadow as bull was turned loose during service.

Sunday, A.M., June 2 Preached out at the edge of town. Kicked off the highway.

Sunday, P.M., June 2 Afternoon, preached in open pasture. Ten thousand people came out to hear me! God was praised.

Sometimes our negative experiences are just preparing us for something much better to come. But we have to hang in there and keep putting one foot in front of the other. As Maria says in the *Sound of Music*, when God closes a door, somewhere, somehow, God opens a window.

Unfortunately when it comes to life on this earth, we cannot push a button and make difficult things easy. We will have challenges and losses and setbacks all along the way. But God promises to be right there with us, giving us the strength to persevere. Jesus modeled such grace, courage, and compassion as the end of his life drew near. May God also grant us grace, courage and compassion that we might carry our crosses with the same loving spirit Jesus displayed in carrying his.