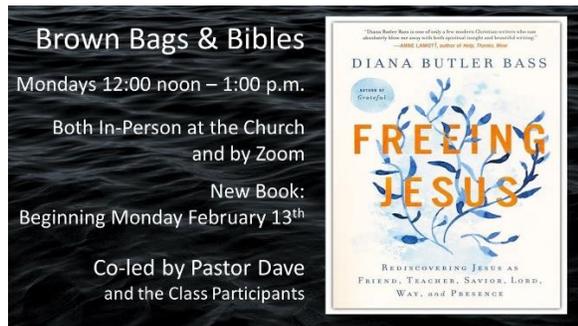


## Brown Bags and Bibles: Monday February 13<sup>th</sup> 2023 12:00 noon – 1:00 p.m.



First class of the new book:

***Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way & Presence***  
by Diana Butler Bass

Participate: In-Person (in the Conference Room of the Church Office Building)

Or by Zoom: ID: 854 8908 4214 Passcode: 745214

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85489084214?pwd=cXZVaS8wQIR5UEI2QkxXRjBDM2NqQT09>

## Class Sheet: Monday February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023

### Introduction: Liberate Jesus

Diana Butler Bass was kneeling at the marble altar of the National Cathedral in Washington DC. She wanted to hear from God, and so she prayed. Yet all she received was: silence. Yet there was a desperation within her so she again quietly offered up a second plea: “God?”

“Get me out of here,” a voice replied.

Diana thought to herself: Was someone speaking to me? She then looked behind and around for a person speaking, but no one was there.

“Get me out of here,” the voice said again.

She stared up at the iconic image of Jesus on the altar, and prayerfully asked: “Jesus? Is that you?”

“Get me out of here,” she heard again, now more insistent.

“But Lord . . .” yet she realized she didn’t know what to think. Should she tell the priest who was wandering the aisle of the National Cathedral that Jesus wanted out. She thought to herself (quite literally) should she try to smuggle the Jesus on altar out of the building. No that was not going to happen.

Instead, Diana got up and nearly bolted out, all the while envisioning how she might rescue Jesus from the cathedral. She felt bad leaving Jesus behind.

Diana writes: Jesus spoke to me almost a decade earlier. It was not unusual to hear him in sacred prayer, walking on the beach, in the wind, or while meditating. Having God or the universe or my own inner voice speak to me in such ways is really no big deal. Until that day at the cathedral, however, I had never heard an out-loud clear God-voice arising from something other than my own spiritual intuitions, especially one issuing a completely unexpected directive like ‘Get me out of here’.

My husband still laughs about “that time Jesus asked you to spring him from the slammer,” I rarely share the story because, well, you just never know how people will respond to a voice from heaven—or a talking image – requesting parole from the church. Truthfully, I did not know how to respond.

It makes a bit more sense now, however. During the intervening years, millions of Americans have left church behind, probably many more have left emotionally, and countless others are wondering if they should. One of the most consistent things I hear from those who have left, those doubting their faith, and those just hanging on is that the church or Christianity has failed them, wounded them, betrayed them, or maybe just bored them—and they do not want to have much to do with it any longer. They are not unlike novelist Anne Rice, who in 2010 declared, “I quit being a Christian. I’m out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being ‘Christian’ or to being part of Christianity.”

She was not the first to make this negative confession, nor was she the last. It is a common refrain in these times: “I don’t consider myself Christian anymore, but I love Jesus, and I still want to follow him” or “I’m not a church person: I follow Jesus.”

The theologically trained and professional religious types roll their eyes at comments like these. One of the main tenets of faith is that the church is the body of Christ and that Jesus cannot really be known (at least fully) outside of the life and the church. Ecclesiastically approved theology will not let you separate Jesus and the church. But the millions of these who have done so beg to differ. They are more than content to have fled institutional Christianity, deconstructing their faith and disrupting conventional notions of church. Even while exiting the building, however, some of those religious refugees seem to have heard the same voice I did at the altar, “Get me out of here,” and are trying to free Jesus that he might roam in the world with them.

There are, of course, those who stay within church and hear Jesus pleading for release from the constraints often placed on him. During a recent Christmas season, a Methodist ministry actually put the baby Jesus in a case on her church's front lawn. This congregation's point was political: by identifying Jesus with refugee children being held at the border, they were attempting to pressure authorities to release them. It was a dramatic illustration equating the captive Jesus with the poor, the weak, the voiceless, all those held in bondage.

Those Methodists wanted to free Jesus too, as both a political and theological point. The story made national news. Many people came to the display, leaving notes, ribbons, and signs of support: "Set the prisoners free!" But the church and the pastor also received death threats saying it was irreverent, even blasphemous, to imprison Jesus. I commented to my husband, "It is odd that the physical fence bothers them. If only they noticed the invisible fencing they've already placed around him."

What does it mean to free Jesus?

### **The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith**

As the 1990's unfolded, Jesus topped the religion book charts, including several blockbusters that landed on the New York Times bestsellers list. This was the heyday of the Jesus Seminary, a group of scholars who were dedicated to uncovering the historical Jesus and whose work was communicated to millions through television, radio, national magazines and newspapers; and a vast network of churches and conferences. They looked at Jesus in new ways: as a rabbi, prophet, teacher, miracle worker, itinerant mystic, political rebel, and rabble-rousing Jesus peasant – nothing like the Jesus surrounded by angels at the altar in the Washington National Cathedral. "Who is Jesus, really?" proved a powerful question as Western society moved toward 2000, his biggest birthday celebration of all time.

Of course not everyone liked the Jesus of the 1990's the one stripped of glory and rediscovered in the dust of ancient Israel. Those opposing the historical Jesus wrote lots of books too. Lots of them reasserted the miraculous God-Jesus, emphasizing his divinity, making sure Jesus Christ stayed on his throne in heaven—or, at the very least, remained the One to whom all praise songs were directed. For them what mattered was neither Roman political history, nor Jesus' cultural background, but the theology of the church as the infallible guide to knowing Jesus the Christ. Those books made it to the bestseller lists too. If nothing else, the 1990s could well be described as the battle for Jesus.

Since my friend posed the question, “Who is Jesus, really?” much has changed. Instead of the earlier generation of leavers who returned to the church and did not understand the Jesus they encountered there, those who are leaving the church today want to take Jesus out into the world with them. But whether coming in or going out, the question remains, “Who was Jesus, really?” When I bolted for the exit at the Washington National Cathedral, I think I heard both voices: “Who was Jesus really?” and “Get me out of here” simultaneously, almost like a polyphonic monastic chant.

Understanding the Jesus of history has proved helpful (and even life-giving) for me; and I appreciate the theological traditions surrounding the Christ of faith. Yet neither historical scholarship nor conventional doctrine quite captures who Jesus is for me—the skepticism bred by one and the submissiveness inculcated by the other do not fully tell the story of the Jesus I know: **the Jesus of experience**. Well before I studied Jesus the Jewish peasant or worshipped Christ the King, I knew Jesus. Even as a small child, I knew his name. I had a sense of his companionship. I knew he was the heart of the Christian faith. Although I now understand both history and theology, neither intellectual arguments nor ecclesial authority elucidates the Jesus I have known.

Jesus has always been there, a memory, a presence and a person. We grew up together, Jesus and me.

I hesitated to write a book about Jesus . . . Yet, I love sharing stories; and I love listening to other’s stories. There is a way—maybe even the way—we can live together in this diverse and divided world—learning from each other’s stores. Even stories of Jesus. My story can never be your story (that is called colonization—something I hope we are leaving behind). But my story might inform yours, or be like yours, or maybe even add depth or another dimension to yours. If nothing else, sharing our stories might lead to greater understanding, tolerance, appreciation, and perhaps even celebration of our differences.

To my fellow Jesus followers in particular – I invite you into your own memory and experience, where I trust Jesus can be found.