

# PREFACE

In August 2016, I found myself in California on the UCLA campus for a gathering that brought together more than two thousand teens from across the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. It was my final event at the end of a long summer of traveling. Over the prior two months, I'd led service camps in Virginia, spoken at conferences in Toronto and Missouri, filmed a couple of shows at EWTN in Alabama, and spent a week at a summer camp in the wide-open cornfields of Iowa. It had been a fruitful, busy, exhausting few months on and off planes and in and out of hotel rooms. Los Angeles was my last stop, and I had just one keynote to go. Forty-five minutes with a few stories, some funny pictures, a couple of well-made theological points about striving for holiness and a relationship with Jesus, and then I was headed back to Louisiana to end my summer and begin my fifth year of teaching. Little did I know that those forty-five minutes in Los Angeles would completely change my ministry and my life.

The keynote went well: the crowd laughed when I hit the punch lines, they were moved during my more dramatic stories, and they nodded their heads when I made my key points. My measure of a talk is how still the audience sits. Granted, that may sometimes be an indicator that the group is bored and has fallen asleep, but more often stillness means that an audience is captivated and listening closely. The theater full of Californians was quite still that particular day.

Pleased with myself and proud of my work, I left the stage and headed toward the speaker hospitality room to grab a Diet Coke when a young man rounded the corner and marched right up to me.

“Hey! Can I talk to you?” he called out. I prepared myself for the usual posttalk chitchat and commentary, all the while thinking about how thirsty I was and how badly I wanted to sit down.

“Sure,” I said, prepared to hear something like “You’re so funny” or “Thanks for your honesty” or “I liked your stories.”

“So, you were talking about Jesus up there.”

Thinking he was being sarcastic, I dished the sarcasm right back. “Yeah . . . that’s what I was talking about,” I hastily said.

“Well, I just need to ask you, then: Who is Jesus? Like, really?” His voice was eager, curiosity covering his face.

Taken aback, I stood in shock for a moment. Wasn’t this exactly what I had just given my entire forty-five-minute keynote about?

The young man quickly continued, “And how can I get to know him? Like, for myself? How can I get to know him for real?”

His question was so pure, so genuine, so honest, that I just stood there in complete confusion. I was positive I had just talked about those very topics for nearly an hour! The audience had been still; they seemed to be listening. Yet here stood this young man with genuine curiosity and what I could see was a heartfelt plea for answers to these two simple questions.

I stuttered out a quick answer, trying to briefly summarize what I’d just said on stage, but I could tell I wasn’t satisfying him. I was being vague, speaking in generalities, making references to all the points I’d just made that had clearly prompted him to have these two questions in the first place.

As the awkwardness grew, and frustration with myself and my lack of articulate answers to what seemed like simple questions, we heard, “Hey, come on, man . . . it’s time to go. It’s our turn to eat dinner!”

Thank God for punctual chaperones, I thought to myself.

The young man nodded at the adult and turned back to me and said, “I just want to know who he is. No offense or nothing. Your talk was funny and all, I just don’t think I know Jesus yet and you sounded like you do, so I was just wondering what I could do to get to know him too, ya know?”

As he walked away, I stood there in stunned silence. He did think my talk was funny after all. Apparently, that's all it had been for him.

That brief exchange was easily one of the most challenging conversations I've ever had with a teenager. His questions stopped me cold. I wasn't really offended that I had just spoken on the exact topic of his questions or that he hadn't heard what I thought I had just told him. I was disappointed in myself, thrown off by the fact that I clearly hadn't articulated things properly or given a straightforward message to help him on his own journey of faith. In the moment, I had been caught off guard, just stuttering through a shoddy synopsis of the very same talk he'd just heard me give.

In the aftermath, as I kept replaying the conversation over and over in my head, I became frustrated: Why did this kid come to me in the first place? I was just a speaker he'd only seen one time—just minutes before we spoke. Why was I to be trusted with the task of telling him how to get to know Jesus and encounter him in an authentic way? Didn't he have a youth minister? Didn't he have parents? My frustration quickly turned to fear. What if I had said the wrong thing when I did try to answer him? What if my incomplete, short answers weren't enough? What if all I had done was confuse this poor kid even more, making it harder for him to ever have a relationship with Jesus at all?

My encounter with this young man left me shaken. I was challenged as a teacher, writer, and Catholic speaker to come up with some sort of well-articulated, straightforward answers to what seemed like easy questions

But I couldn't. I froze. For some reason, I didn't have answers to those two fundamental questions on which so much of what I believe and do in life depend. I couldn't figure out why I didn't have answers, and that's when I grew angry. Why couldn't I just lay it out there, saying exactly who Jesus is and how I got to the point where I could say I knew him? How hard could it possibly be to just go through the step-by-step process of meeting and falling in love with the Savior of the World? Clearly I'd gone through those steps at some

point (or at least this kid thought I had), so why was it so hard to just explain that now?

Over the next several weeks, I slowly came to accept that there isn't a simple way to uncover the identity of Christ Jesus. It's not just a one-and-done task: read a book, earn a badge, get the certificate, and wear the T-shirt that declares "I know Jesus." Getting to know Jesus is ultimately about setting out on a journey of biblical proportions. It's about meeting, coming to know, falling in love with, and growing an authentic relationship with this Middle Eastern carpenter-turned-rabbi who lived more than two thousand years ago. Following this man who changed everything, shaped the course of human history, and literally saved the world with what he said and did is a wonderful, crazy, beautiful adventure, and I want to help you experience precisely that.

That young man in Los Angeles asked questions to which I gave no satisfying answers, and that forced me to begin unpacking and rethinking everything I thought I already knew about Jesus. I couldn't ignore his queries and just walk away from his genuine curiosity. I needed to figure out, even if just for myself, exactly how someone meets Jesus and gets to know him in an authentic, life-altering way. How did I know Jesus beyond the textbooks in the classroom or the talks given from a stage? When did I meet him for myself? What did I do to meet him in the first place? I needed to be able to articulate all of that in such a way that it wasn't confusing, didn't come off as condescending, and wasn't just some rote repetition of everything else we've all heard before.

It wasn't until I began looking at my own life and started to really examine the watershed moments when I've encountered Jesus that I began to find those answers. I had to identify the times when I've seen Jesus, grown to know him personally, and experienced his infinite love. This process then led me to begin to identify and name the practical steps I'd taken to let him into my life in the first place and remain in relationship with him.

This book is about those moments—the days I've been filled with laughter and great joy, and also those when I was fraught with

confusion and even moved to tears. These are the stories of events that have scared me straight and shaken me up. They're stories of sacrifice, patience, peace, excitement, insecurity, and assurance. These are moments when I've stood at the foot of the Cross, weeping, and moments when I've been surprised in the garden of Resurrection. They're stories both surprising and familiar, and while they're drawn from my own life, I think they'll shine at least a little light on your own desire to know Jesus. I hope my experience will be the inspiration for you to begin taking steps to meet him, get to know him, and follow where he will lead.

Think of *Follow* as a field guide, showing you a path covered with further inquiries and heartfelt answers to the questions, "Who is Jesus?" and "How can I get to know him?" If you're ready to meet Jesus and follow him with your whole heart, living in relationship with him day by day, then there are some practical, simple steps you can take and repeat that will get you closer to the one who knows you perfectly, loves you abundantly, and desires your well-being and perfection. You won't just meet Jesus once. You'll meet him again and again and be newly surprised and amazed each time by who he is, who you are, and how intense and complete his love is for you. You'll meet Jesus, get to know him, and want to follow him with your whole heart.

Meeting Jesus and being in relationship with him sets you out on a lifelong adventure, taken step by step, leaving you changed at the end of each day and for eternity. You become a pilgrim on a journey filled with twists and turns, ups and downs. Your journey in pursuit of relationship with him—the very life for which you are made—will lead you deeper and deeper into the heart of the one who sees, knows, and loves you for all that you are. Meeting him, and really getting to know him, will be the greatest experience of your life: loving and being loved by Jesus Christ. Nothing is better. Nothing is more satisfying. Nothing will bring you more joy than this lifelong adventure of following him.

Every journey has to start somewhere—so let's begin this one!



1.

# LIFT YOUR HEART



The task at hand seems simple enough: get to know Jesus. It's the follow-up question that's a bit more difficult: How do we get to know him? On the surface, getting to know Jesus *should* be as simple as making friends in kindergarten.

“Hi, my name is Katie. What’s yours?” was a simple enough formula in childhood, resulting in numerous friendships, some which have endured into my adulthood. But somehow, looking up at the sky and using the “Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. What’s yours?” approach doesn’t seem useful when attempting to meet the Son of God. Maybe we should go tend sheep on a random hillside and hope a burning bush starts talking. It worked for Moses.

On the one hand, the steps on our journey to meeting Jesus in a personal, authentic way seem remarkably challenging. At the start of what looks like an endless, uphill climb, it may seem like we’re trying to scale Mount Everest with nothing more than a light jacket and a pair of sneakers. On the other hand, we’re reminded that there’s always a first step to climbing even the tallest mountain. On the journey of coming to know Jesus, step one is to simply communicate

with him the same way you would chat with a classmate, email a teacher, text a friend, yell at your parents, cry to your sister, vent to your boyfriend or girlfriend, or laugh with your teammates.

To get to know Jesus and understand who he is and why he loves you (and ultimately why you should love him back), you have to talk to him. You have to lift your heart in an authentic, heartfelt way. Let's not overcomplicate things, though. Those words still seem intimidating and this task seems huge, so let's call this what it is: lifting your heart is prayer, plain and simple. It's the first step you have to take in the epic, life-changing journey of following Jesus.

## JUST NOT READY

In the spring of 2014, I dated a few guys, all in the name of good fun and searching for “the one.” Nothing was very serious, but there was one standout guy I really did care a lot about and knew that for me, at least, it could become more serious. Things were going well—visits back and forth to see one another, phone calls every night, staffing a retreat together, fun and exciting dates. But after a few weeks, he ended things abruptly with a text: “I think we need to end this. You're making your way into areas of my life I'm just not ready to have anyone in yet.”

There's only one place you go when your heart gets broken like that—home. I went to my mom, knowing the only place I'd feel better was with her and a tub of ice cream on the couch. A few hours of tears, *Days of Our Lives* reruns, and pints of strawberry ice cream later, I felt a little better, but I was still feeling sorry for myself.

Knowing how upset I was, but also recognizing that a motherly reality check might be in order, my mom dished out her signature brand of tough love.

“Katie, you're really upset about this, aren't you?” she asked.

“Yeah, Mom. I thought this guy was special,” I mumbled through sniffling tears.

“Well, then, I just need to ask, have you prayed about this as much as you've cried about it?”



The last thing I wanted in the midst of my heartbreak was a sermon from my mom on the importance of prayer. But she had a point: If I was this distraught and tormented, why hadn't I prayed? Why hadn't I turned to the Lord in this time of hurt, distress, and trouble? In fact, if I was being honest, I couldn't really tell my mom the last time I'd prayed at all. Other than Sunday Mass and quick prayers at the start of classes each day, I hadn't spent any significant time in prayer since . . . well, probably since I'd started dating guy after guy, including the one I thought had great marriage potential. My mom was right (as she often is): I'd been crying, but I hadn't been praying. Not at all.

## JESUS, I TRUST IN YOU

The pointed question my mom asked me on the couch that afternoon echoed through my head all evening, so on my way home I made a detour to Our Lady Queen of Heaven Catholic Church, the parish I'd grown up attending and deeply loved.

"Better late than never, right?" I thought to myself as I walked into the adoration chapel, finally prepared to pray more than cry. The tiny chapel was a familiar place. Twenty-four hours a day, faithful men and women come in and out of this small chapel, day after day, to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. The chapel was crammed with chairs and kneelers all placed in front of a four-foot-high stone pedestal with a monstrance resting on top. The monstrance is a sacred vessel used for exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. It is a beautiful sight and a wonderful place to sit or kneel and pray in adoration of Our Lord. I'd been inside hundreds of times in my life, but I hadn't darkened its doorstep in months. I still knew right where to sit, though, and slowly settled into my long-forgotten seat. The usual cast of characters was there: a slight, elderly lady thumbing rosary beads; a middle-aged dad in a baggy suit and loosened tie; a frazzled college student holding a notebook; and now the puffy-eyed, brokenhearted theology teacher.

It was immediately evident to me that I hadn't prayed in a long time. My heart had been closed to the Lord, and I sat there struggling

to know even where to begin talking to Jesus. Despite my discomfort and confusion, I knew that this was exactly where I needed to be. I knelt down, looked up at the Blessed Sacrament, and began to cry. But this time, the tears were accompanied with prayer.

I have no idea how long I knelt there crying, but it was long enough for the elderly woman to leave and be replaced by another. Time seemed to stop as I knelt there, pouring my heart out in confusion, frustration, and pointed pleading. When I stood up, eyes still puffy and nose still stuffy, I felt better. A switch had flipped in the midst of those tears, and my restless heart had settled just a little bit. As I left the chapel, a pamphlet on top of a small table by the bathroom caught my eye. It was a small, red booklet with a black-and-white image of Jesus printed on the front under the words “The Divine Mercy.” I’d certainly seen it before, but never really paid much mind to it. It was so vibrant, this image of Jesus with two rays of light bursting from his chest. The words by his feet were striking, something I obviously needed to see and believe: “Jesus, I trust in you.”

“Easier said than done,” I mumbled to myself. I grabbed the pamphlet, threw it on the front seat of my car, and drove home.

The sting of the abrupt text message began to dull over the next few weeks. I slowly began to forget about the guy. But there was still an ache in my heart, a void of sorts. I was lonely. I felt abandoned, broken, cast aside. Sure, he may not have turned out to be the man of my dreams, but he had been someone to talk to, lean on, and have fun with. He’d at least been there, in my life, and I missed that. I wanted someone in my life.

As my much-needed spring break from school finally arrived, I spent Good Friday morning cleaning out my car. There on the front seat, underneath piles of papers and books, was the Divine Mercy pamphlet I’d picked up just a few weeks earlier. Avoiding further spring cleaning, I opened the pamphlet and read the short history of the profound and powerful Divine Mercy chaplet. It was so simple: quick prayers said on rosary beads. But it was profound in its simplicity, so I decided I was going to pray the chaplet right there in

my garage. As I settled into the passenger seat, I read the words that would change my life forever:

The Divine Mercy chaplet is traditionally said in novena form for nine days, beginning on Good Friday and ending the Sunday after Easter, known as Divine Mercy Sunday. Each day of the novena has a specific intention that appeals to the merciful heart of Jesus. You can add your own intentions as well, asking the Lord for his abundant and perfect mercy.

Sold!

With a stack of trash piled at my feet, I resolved to pray the Divine Mercy Novena for something very specific: trust. I knew I needed to trust Jesus with my heart and my vocation. I needed to trust that Jesus had a better plan for me than I could come up with for myself. First and foremost, I knew I needed to trust in his love and let him fill the void and ache of my loneliness. My relationship with Jesus needed renewal, and this was the perfect chance to seek that out. For the next nine days, I went to the adoration chapel at my parish and prayed the chaplet. My intention became simpler and more refined each day: Help me love you, Lord. Help me believe in your plan. Jesus, help me trust in you.

Each day of the novena showed me how desperately I needed to trust Jesus with the anxiety and loneliness crippling my heart. Begging the Lord to give me a sense of trust and patience in his plan, I began to surrender my need to know everything all at once. I slowly let go of my desire to control and manage all the tiny aspects of my life. I asked for his will to be done in leading me to a companion who could help bring me closer to Jesus. I began to realize that I needed to love Jesus first so that I could love others better. More importantly, I needed to let Jesus love me, as only he could, so that I could be open to the love of others and aware of how precious I was in his eyes.

As I finished praying the chaplet on Divine Mercy Sunday that year, April 27, 2014, I heard a voice deep within me, clear as a bell: “Trust me, because I am here.”