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**True Stories for Teens**

**Life**  
**Works**  
**&**  
**Faith**  
**Fits**

**Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart**

# **Life Works and Faith Fits**



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**Saint Mary's Press®**



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*To Robert T. Massa  
1957–1994*

*We learned so much together:*

*the art of the word*

*the power of story*

*the leverage of analogy*

*the humor and humility of self-reflection.*

*We found God in the simple and the significant.*

*We kept discovering how life works and how faith fits.*

*And we celebrated every discovery.*

Thank you, Mom (Connie Calderone), for all the joy and fun you bring me! You are so eager to hear about every new story that happens! Your love and laughter and attitude are a model for my life.

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High school friendships leave an indelible mark.

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## Introduction

I hope you like stories. Because this book is full of them. Some are funny, some are more serious. Some of them are embarrassing (such as the time I asked nine boys to a dance during my sophomore year, and they all said no), but there are some that I am proud of (such as the time I passed my water tests to become a lifeguard and swimming instructor).

Some of the stories involve my friends, some involve my family, and some even involve strangers. Some are stories from my own teen years, some are from my years in college, and some are from when I was a young adult, out of college and on my own. Some stories involve other teenagers I know. But I promise you this: the stories are all true.

Now, I must admit that in some of these stories, I've changed the names of some of the characters (to protect the innocent), and in one or two of them, I've simplified the details—*just a tiny bit*—to make the story less complicated and easier to tell. But very little has been changed—nothing that would really affect the plot or the point. Why am I telling you all this? Because the funny thing is that all my stories seem to be related in some way to the stories of the Bible. Isn't that a strange coincidence? Not really. Believe me, when I was a teenager, I did not study the Bible every day and then ask myself, "Hmm . . . what happened to me today that has scriptural significance?" It was only after I had grown up and had become more active in church ministry that I actually began to take a closer look at the Bible. And as I read the stories and learned about the people in the Bible, I started to say to myself, "This sounds like my life."

Okay, I have never witnessed angels singing and playing harps or offered a burnt animal sacrifice. But even so, the struggles of the people in the Bible are similar to the struggles of people today. We live in a different culture from the days of Abraham and Sarah, and of Joseph and Mary, but we still wonder, "Are things going to turn out okay?" and "What do my friends think about

me?” and “Why is this happening to me?” The people in the Bible had the same concerns that we have. Even though the details are different, the basics are similar. In the Bible, teenagers are falling in love, people have fears and worries about the unknown, they have dirty feet, and they have silly arguments. My story is part of the Bible story, and so is yours.

You might be thinking: “Not me. My story isn’t in the Bible story. Faith doesn’t really fit. Life doesn’t really work. Not for me, not like that. I’m not very religious.”

Well, you don’t have to be “religious” in order to be spiritual. And I’ll bet you are more spiritual than you think.

Have you ever looked up at the stars and wondered where they end? That’s spiritual, that’s meditating on God’s magnificent creation.

Have you ever felt trapped in a difficult situation and wondered what you ought to do? That’s spiritual, that’s moral decision making.

Have you ever become angry watching someone take unfair advantage of another person? That’s spiritual, that’s developing your sense of Christian justice.

Do you still think that you’re not spiritual? Still doubt that life works? Still doubt that faith fits? That’s okay. Just read some of the stories in this book—in any order. Just flip through the book and pick a spot.

It’s all in the bicycles, the toenails, and the tomato sauce.

Read it. You’ll see.

Life works and faith fits.

## Look into the Heart

It was the perfect summer day.

For the first time ever, my mom was going to make tomato sauce from fresh tomatoes. And not with just any tomatoes. She was going to use the tomatoes grown from my dad's own garden. We could see it from the kitchen window.

What a perfect project. Our family loves Italian food. We are Italian. I sometimes tell people that we are so Italian that if you prick our skin, it bleeds spaghetti sauce. And now my mom was going to make the perfect sauce.

Well, making tomato sauce from scratch is hard work—a lot of cutting and straining and bubbling and more straining, and making messes and cleaning them up. But my mother was performing a labor of love.

To be honest, I don't recall why I wasn't there by her side, learning the trade of my ancestors. Perhaps I was working that day at my summer-camp job. Perhaps I was having one of my teenage moods, and I didn't want any mother-daughter bonding. Perhaps I wasn't in a tomato frame of mind.

But whatever the reason, when I walked into the house early that evening, I was immediately struck with the results. The smell of tomato sauce reached all the way to the hallway. I could see how much work it had taken, and I felt bad that my mom had done it all by herself. I did want to help out somehow, so I began to wash and dry and put away the dishes and pots that were on the counter, and some glasses and silverware as well.

I don't know how it happened, but one minute I had a glass in my hand, and the next minute I didn't. There was a crash, and glass flew all over the counter, all over the floor, all over the kitchen. I held my breath. I thought my mom was going to become unglued. I thought she was going to yell her head off at me.

But she didn't. She just sighed. And she said, "Well, so much for the tomato sauce." Then she started to pick up pieces of the glass.

At first, I didn't realize what she meant. But when I took a closer look, I saw glass all around the precious tomato sauce, and floating on top of the sauce as well. It was ruined. Even if we tried to take out the pieces we could see, we wouldn't be sure that we had gotten it all. Tiny pieces could be hiding there. I didn't want to ask what it would be like to swallow a sharp piece of hidden glass.

I could tell that my mother was heartbroken. But somehow she wasn't angry with me. What a terrible thing I had done! And yet she still wasn't angry with me. How could that be? I meekly asked her, "Aren't you mad at me?" She quietly replied: "You didn't do it on purpose. You were trying to help. Your heart was in the right place."

It was the only time my mother ever made home-made tomato sauce from garden-fresh tomatoes.

## Scripture

Faith  
Fits

Jesus was criticized for not following some of the religious rituals of his day—rituals like washing your arms up to the elbow before eating, sprinkling food from the market with water before eating it, only eating certain types of foods in certain dishes or bowls, and things like that. According to the religious law of the time, violations like these caused a person to be unclean.

Jesus told them, "Don't you see that whatever enters us from outside cannot make us impure? . . . It is what comes out of us that makes us unclean. For it is from within—from our hearts—that evil intentions emerge" (Mark 7:18–21, INT).

Jesus is like my mother. He understands the importance of looking into the heart.

## Reflections

Did you ever get in trouble for doing something wrong when your intentions were perfectly innocent, when your heart was in the right place? What was it like?

Did you ever get caught doing something wrong when your intentions were not innocent? Did you then try to talk your way out of it, trying to convince the person in authority that you were perfectly innocent, that your heart was in the right place? What happened? How did you feel afterward?

Did anyone ever do “a terrible thing” to you by mistake? How did you handle it?

## Go Back and Make Peace

Life  
Works

I was visiting some friends one weekend. My brother David was there, my best friend David from college, and another friend named Ron. One of the days we decided to have dessert at a pastry shop, but it was very crowded, and, as it turned out, we never got to sit down and eat.

As we fought the crowd, my brother noticed this cute figurine on the counter. It was a little baker holding two trays of pastries, one in each hand. In fact, it was a mechanical baker whose head bobbed back and forth and whose arms alternated up and down.

I said, “Oh! Look at the ceramic pastries on his little trays! Aren’t they realistic? You could almost eat one!”

My brother corrected me. “Lisa, those are foam. They are like sponges. They aren’t ceramic.”

“No, I am sure they are ceramic,” I insisted.

Well, we took a poll. It was dead even. Two voted for ceramic, and two voted for foam. The problem was that we were too far away to tell. So we pushed through the crowd to get a closer look. We thought that if we could touch them, we would know if they were ceramic or foam.

Now, I don’t remember the details of what happened next. I only know that at least one of us got close enough to touch them; at least one of us knocked the whole thing over. And then all of us ran out of that shop in a flash—arguing over who had touched it, who had knocked it over, whose fault it was, and, by the way, did anyone figure out if they were foam or ceramic?

We had fun the rest of the evening, but the pastry mishap weighed heavily on us. We didn’t sleep well that night. The next morning my friend David insisted that we go back and confess. I agreed. We needed to apologize and pay for the damages. Ron and my brother had already gone to do something else, so David and I were left to face the consequences.

When we got back to the shop, we couldn’t believe what we saw. There was the little baker, still smiling, still bobbing his head back and forth, and still moving his two

trays up and down. But now the pastries were firmly wired on so they wouldn't fall off! Our damage had been minimal, but the effects were visible.

We went up to the counter to tell our story and accept the blame. I told the man at the cash register how we had been there the night before, and how it was crowded, and how we were admiring the little baker, and how one of us had knocked it over. We assumed that it had broken, and we were wrong in leaving, but we had come back to apologize and to pay for the damages. The man smiled. He seemed genuinely entertained. "You say you knocked it over?"

"Yes," we repeated.

"Which time?" he asked.

"I really don't know what time it was," I said. "Some time in the evening . . ." I started to calculate: before ten? after eight-thirty?

"No, I mean which time did you think you knocked him over: the first time? the second time? the third time? the fourth time?"

I was a little confused. I didn't know what he was talking about.

"He gets knocked over all the time," he said. "It's really not a good place for him. People are always bumping the counter. But when I move him back on the shelf, the customers ask for him. They like him. So I keep him up front. You can't really break him. He's made of metal. He gets bent out of shape, but we just bend him back."

"So he didn't really break?"

"Nah! But it was nice of you to come back anyway. Real nice. Thanks for trying to make it right."

David wanted a clarification before we left. "So the little baker is made out of metal, right?" He was smiling at me. We never considered metal. Ron and I were locked on ceramic, and the Davids were sure it was foam. We never thought of metal!

"Yeah. Metal. Except for the pastries on the tray. They're some kind of foam."

David smiled. Foam pastries. The Davids were right all along.



But did he rub it in? Not at all. We celebrated our friendship with cappuccino and some real Italian pastries.

## Scripture

Faith  
Fits

Matthew tells us that Jesus spoke these words to a crowd:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

(5:23–24, NRSV)

## Reflections

It's so important to right your wrongs. It's so important to reconcile.

What we did in the pastry shop wasn't as bad as we thought it was. But it was something we should have owned up to immediately. Instead, we chose to leave without doing so. That was wrong. But with every wrong, you always have another chance to do right.

So even when we mess up and do the wrong thing, we can still admit we were wrong, and then right the wrong. No use in doing wrong twice! or three times! or more!

Besides, there's nothing like being guilty to make you feel bad. And there's nothing like righting a wrong to make you feel good—except maybe an Italian pastry.

Did you ever do something wrong and then run away and not own up to it? How did that feel? Did you eventually right that wrong?

If you finally did right it, how long did it take? What was that like?

If you never did, why not? Is it really too late? Can you tell or apologize to anyone?

Has anyone ever done anything wrong to you and not apologized for it? If so, how do you feel about that person? Are you still friends? Have you had trouble with that relationship ever since?

What could right that wrong? What could heal your friendship? If your friend won't make the first move, can you?

## Who Lost That Basketball Game?

Life  
Works

I was watching a junior high basketball game one afternoon. The teams seemed to be evenly matched, and the score was close.

Behind me several girls were talking about their friends, trying on each other's lipstick, paging through fashion magazines, and complaining about classes. They appeared to be paying little attention to the game, but they didn't seem to miss a play. Every time someone made a shot, they would praise the boy who made it. Every time they disagreed with the referee, they would express their disappointment. But they took it all very lightly. After all, this was just a game, right?

On the court it was serious basketball. An interesting dynamic was developing; the home team wasn't performing up to its potential. Three guys in particular seemed more determined to be stars than to be members of a team. They were throwing the ball away, attempting shots they couldn't make, and hogging the ball when other capable players were in position and open.

On the other hand, Eric was doing what good ball-players do. He passed the ball when someone else was open, and he made most of the shots he attempted. It was clear he was a team player.

The score stayed close, and the girls continued to chat. At the end of the game, the home team was down by one point, but Eric was fouled. He would have to attempt two foul shots, knowing that his two points could win the game. Talk about pressure!

Eric was a good player, but he was shaking. He missed both shots, and the game was over. The three show-offs immediately began to criticize him and complain about how he lost the game and let the team down. I could tell he was devastated.

At the time, Eric didn't have the insight to realize that the other boys were the ones who had let the team

down. By not being team players and by trying to act like superstars, they wasted many opportunities for the team to score. If they had played the way Eric played, his foul shots wouldn't have made any difference, because they would have already won the game.

How did the girls react? In my opinion they were the only ones who saw the truth. As they were collecting their things, one of them said, "Oh, well. Eric had a good day." Another commented casually, "Yeah, too bad those three jerks had to lose the game for us."

## Scripture

Faith  
Fits

The Gospels tell us about a time when a great argument broke out among the disciples about which one of them was the greatest. Jesus heard the loud talking, and he asked them what they were arguing about, but they didn't want to tell him. They were probably embarrassed.

Jesus already knew the topic of their conversation. He sat down with them to teach them an important lesson. He said that whoever wants to be the greatest has to learn to be the servant of others. The one who becomes the lowliest is the one who actually is the greatest. (This short story has different variations in three of the Gospels. You can find it in Matthew 18:1–4, Mark 9:33–35, and Luke 9:46–48.)

The three show-offs were each trying to be the greatest, looking out only for themselves. They ended up looking like jerks.

Eric was trying to be the servant. He tried to help every team member perform well. That's why he was the greatest.

The girls watching the game could see the difference clearly. It's a shame the boys didn't have the same insight.

## Reflections

Have you ever tried to be “the greatest”? Did it work?  
What happened?

Were people impressed with who you were, or did they just notice how you were impressed with yourself?

Have you ever tried to be the servant? How did that work? Were you appreciated? Did you end up feeling lowly, or did you actually feel great?

## The Lost Ring

I should have listened to Father Bryan.

I travel a lot. One hot day in September, I did a workshop in Alliance, Nebraska. It had been in the nineties, but by evening it was becoming cooler and more windy. In fact, Father Bryan said it would snow.

Snow in September? Tonight? After the hot temperatures we endured this afternoon? Ridiculous!

I didn't believe him. I didn't even close my window or remove my things from the windowsill. Why should I? The bedroom still hadn't cooled off. I didn't even need a blanket yet.

But the next morning, I awoke shivering. Snow covered the ground outside, and my things were almost frozen. I could hardly squeeze out my toothpaste, and my shampoo was as thick as molasses. When I saw him at breakfast, Father Bryan was already grinning. "I told you so," he smirked.

Later that day I was typing on my laptop computer when I glanced down at my hand and noticed my wedding ring was missing! I went running upstairs to tell everyone. We shook out the sheets and towels, retraced every possible step, and combed every inch of the carpet, but we could find nothing.

Somehow Father Bryan never gave up hope. "I know you will find your ring," he insisted. "Trust me. Remember the snow? You didn't believe me, but I was right, wasn't I? You see, I have a sense about these things." He grinned again.

I grinned back. But I was sure it was lost forever. I said the traditional Saint Anthony prayer (Tony, Tony, come on down. Something's lost and can't be found!), but I expected no miracles. I thought it must have gone down the drain while I was taking my shower. I called my husband, Ralph, and he consoled me over the phone.

Well, my travel week went on. Every day I visited a different parish in western Nebraska. My toothpaste ran out in Bridgeport, my skin lotion ran out in Scottsbluff, and my shampoo ran out in Sidney. In fact, in Sidney I

threw out the empty shampoo bottle. But then I went back to retrieve it. I always tell my two sons not to throw away those little shampoo bottles—they are very handy, and you can always refill them.

By the time I was in North Platte, I had lost all hope. And to make matters worse, I had forgotten to buy new shampoo. Remembering the bottle I had rescued from the trash, I opened it up to see if I had enough left for just one more shower. As I looked inside, I couldn't believe what I saw! *My wedding ring was in it!*

Suddenly, it all made sense! It was so cold that morning in Alliance that my shampoo wouldn't come out of the bottle. I had to stick my ring finger into it to dig out some of that stubborn, thick mass the shampoo had hardened into. Evidently, the neck of the bottle had surrounded my wedding ring, and when I pulled my finger out, the ring slipped off, and I never felt a thing. The ring had been inside that shampoo bottle all along. I had actually thrown it out when I was in Sidney! If I hadn't gone back for the bottle, I never would have known what had happened to it.

I was so excited, I called up every person I had spent time with all week and shrieked with joy: "I found it! I found my ring!" Even people who didn't know I had lost my ring were getting phone calls from me. I still can't believe it happened.

A person could learn a lot from all this. Never shower with rings on. Always pray to Saint Anthony when you lose something. Don't throw away those little shampoo bottles. What did I learn? Listen to Father Bryan.

## Scripture

Faith  
Fits

Jesus tells a story about a woman who has ten silver coins, but she loses one of them. She lights a lamp and sweeps her whole house, frantically searching everywhere until she finds that missing coin. And when she finally finds it,