BEGINNING A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Program Target: To help each young person think about either starting his or her relationship with God, or moving that relationship to a higher level.

What to do:
Give the "Character Sketches" below to four members of your youth group ahead of time and ask them to prepare to give that person's "testimony" at your meeting, and be ready to answer questions.

Character sketch: Thief on the Cross
He was only fighting for what he believed was right. In a society where the oppressive foreign government reduced many of the people to homeless poverty, the only way to fight back was to live outside the law. Stealing from the rich, keeping it for the poor–himself. He joined a band of rebel bandits and learned not only theft but violence. But what's wrong with violence when you're living under military rule and you have no rights? Eventually his lifestyle led where that kind of lifestyle always ended up–brutal torture and a painful, humiliating public execution. But in the moments before he died, he caught a glimpse of a Man who lived a different kind of life: someone who fought evil with the power of love instead of violence. He wanted to be part of this Man's kingdom, and with his dying words he asked for mercy–and got it. He didn't have time to change his life or clean up his act–just to ask for help.

Character sketch: Mary Magdalene
She was possessed by seven demons–maybe all at once, or maybe one after another. Some Bible students also believe she was a woman who lived a life of loose morals–perhaps as a prostitute. We know for sure that by the time she met Jesus, she was outcast and desperate. She had reached the end of her rope. All she could do was throw herself on His mercy–but it was good enough. He cast out her demons. She responded by becoming one of His followers, giving up her old life to go wherever He led.

Character sketch: Peter
He wasn't a bad guy. Maybe not too religious, but he lived a good life and went to the synagogue regularly. When this travelling preacher named Jesus burst onto the scene, Peter was curious. Intrigued. He was drawn by Jesus' powerful personality and, in his impulsive way, Peter committed himself to following Jesus all the way, even though it meant giving up his business and leaving his family with no means of support. He wasn't perfect. He kept messing up, making mistakes, misunderstanding Jesus. But he was growing. Then, suddenly, everything shattered around him. His faith was put to the test, and he flunked. He denied he even knew Jesus–a slap in the fact to his Lord on the worst night of Jesus' life. Peter was torn apart by his own failure–but when Jesus came back from the dead, he took Peter aside and let him know he was forgiven, and gave him a special mission.

Character sketch: Thomas
We don't know where or how he met Jesus. But somehow he got drawn into Jesus' inner circle–the disciples who went with Him everywhere, worked with Him, knew Him best. It was a strange life–following a travelling preacher around from town to town–strange for a man who

usually didn't commit himself too deeply to anything. Thomas was cautious. Thomas thought things threw. He held back. Even as he followed Jesus around, his naturally pessimistic nature made him wonder when it was all going to come crashing down. On the day Jesus was crucified, it seemed Thomas' worst fears had been realized, and his caution had been justified. When Jesus appeared to them again, it was only natural for Thomas to think his eyes were playing tricks on him. How could a man rise from the dead? Thomas asked for hard evidence–and Jesus gave it to him.

****

Set up your meeting as a testimony meeting, with plenty of singing and perhaps some Bible readings. Have your four characters sitting in the audience, but perhaps wearing a token Bible-times costume item (e.g. a headdress or something similar) to indicate that they are playing a role and not speaking as themselves. When you invite people to share what God has done in their lives, have each of the characters stand up in turn and tell his/her story. If others in your group follow with genuine testimonies of their own, that's great! After all four characters have told their stories, lead the group in a discussion of how each of these people came to Jesus, what kinds of Christians in modern life they might resemble, and how their experiences can apply to us today.

Preparation Time:

Give the character sketches to your four actors well ahead of time, a week or two in advance, and encourage them to also look up relevant Bible passages about that character. Choose people who can speak well in public and have some acting ability so they can really bring the character to life.

Bible Texts:

Thief on the cross: Luke 23:39-43
Mary Magdalene: Luke 8:1-3; John 20:1-18
Peter: Luke 5:1-11; Matthew 26:69-75; Acts 2:36-41
Thomas: John 20:24-29

Song Service:

"I Have Decided to Follow Jesus"

Vesper or Closing Thought:

Wrap up tonight's meeting with an appeal, along these lines: "Each of these Bible characters came from different backgrounds, had different needs and different problems. Yet each of them came to a point where they admitted they needed Jesus and wanted to follow Him. The story was different for each one, but they all followed Jesus. It's the same for us. We have different backgrounds, different needs, different problems. But every one of us needs Jesus, and every one of us can have a relationship with Him. All we need to do is what these people did–admit we need Him, and let Him into our lives. We'll still have problems. We'll still have doubts. But everything will change. If you've never taken that step to let Jesus into your life, now's the time to do it. And if you have a relationship with Jesus but you know that He's calling you to go farther, to take a new step in following and serving Him, maybe it's the time to do that too. Let's pray."