

## 'JESUS' NAIL SALE

By **WILLIAM NEUMAN**

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*February 19, 2004* -- Replicas of the nails used to hang Jesus on the cross have become the red-hot official merchandise linked to Mel Gibson's controversial new movie, "The Passion of the Christ."

Pendants made from the pewter, 2 1/2-inch nails - selling for \$16.99 - all but flew out of the Christian Publications Bookstore on West 43rd Street as soon as they were put on display.

Hundreds of stores across the country will be selling licensed items tied to the movie, a graphically violent depiction of the last 12 hours of Christ's life, which opens next week on Ash Wednesday.

The souvenirs include a book, pins, key chains, coffee mugs and T-shirts.

But the most unusual collectibles are the nails, each of which hangs on a leather cord.

Its side bears the inscription "Isaiah 53:5," referring to a Bible verse that begins, "He was pierced for our transgressions . . ."

The Family Christian Store in Newark, Del., received a large shipment of merchandise to sell at a preview screening of the film on Monday.

"The response so far has been overwhelming . . . They want to buy this product," the store's manager, Tina Weldon, said of the nail pendants.

"It's very symbolic for a lot of people."

A California company is manufacturing the pendants and other merchandise under a licensing agreement with Gibson. Neither Gibson nor the manufacturer returned calls yesterday.

"The cross has become such a benign jewelry item . . . The shock of its original form . . . is lost to modern people," said Charles Houser, publications manager at the American Bible Society's Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

"Choosing the detail of the spike would be to reinvigorate the image. They're really trying to capture that this was that day's form of execution."

But the Rev. Forrest Church, of All Souls Unitarian Church on the Upper East Side, called the pendants "macabre."

"I expect the prominence of the nail reflects the prominence of the gore in the movie itself," he said.

"That becomes the icon for identification."

The film itself has sparked controversy, too. Jewish leaders fear it could foster anti-Semitism, but Gibson says the film is not anti-Jewish.