



PASSION WEEK 2026 / 5

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PASSION WEEK 2026

As we ascend into Resurrection Sunday, each day this week you are invited to pause for just a few moments, engage the presence of God and think about the final week of Jesus' ministry. Below are eight short devotionals to aid you in this journey (Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday). Joining with many millions of Jesus followers around the globe, this week, you will retrace the steps He took, rehear the words He spoke, and rehearse the horrible beauty of what He accomplished on the cross and empty tomb.

The central event for Christianity and all Christians is the resurrection of Jesus. Even Paul says that "if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith also is in vain... for, if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins." So yes, the death of Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world is crucial. Absolutely essential in every way. But the resurrection is even more so, as it validates all He did and said, proving His victory over death itself. If the tomb is not empty, everything falls apart.

The devotional readings below are more narrative than teaching. More story telling than lesson learning. We hope you experience the story of Jesus' passion week by exploring the characters, events, and glories preserved in the four inspired Gospel accounts. Finally, we pray you encounter Jesus personally as you read, pray and worship.

Each day is grounded in the biblical narrative as it comes to us in four inspired Gospel accounts. I am indebted to the decades of work done by Johnston Cheney and Stanley Ellison in *Jesus Christ: The Greatest Life Ever Lived*, a powerful comprehensive blending of the four gospels into one seamless, unified story.



They also embrace a biblically anchored imagination when filling in some of the details of the story. All these details are based on a deep study of the Old and New Testament, Jerusalem, the Passover, feast days, and the culture of the Jews at the time of Jesus. We pray they enhance your experience of this amazing story. More than that, we pray you find yourself in the story, for the story is true. It really happened, and God had you in mind when it did.

Each day's offering includes a curated piece of art for you to consider. Paintings of Jesus' last week have a way of bringing the story to new life for many. We hope they add life for you.

Concluding each vignette will be a few Scripture passages to engage. These will deepen your experience of the week and prepare your heart for the beauty of Jesus' resurrection.

Blessings church.

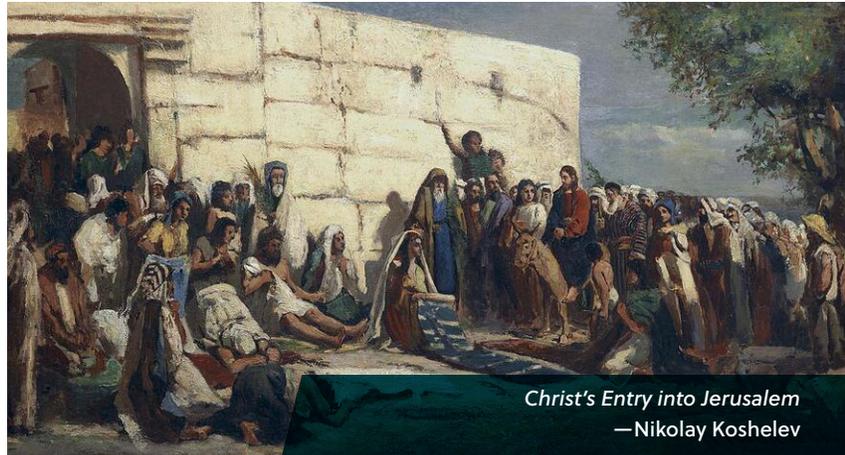
Scot Pollok



SUNDAY

The King enters Jerusalem

It was a mix of donkey and perfume. Strange and beautiful. Those closest to Jesus caught alternating whiffs of glory then sweat, the confusing collision of majesty and beast. No donkey had ever been so anointed. The disciples focused on wrangling the sidekick colt and managing the swelling crowd. They felt the growing gravity of the moment, yet did not know what the moment meant exactly. The confusion was written on their faces, and for different reasons. At least a few knew the potential danger that lurked ahead, in the Jerusalem temple.



Mary's sabbath anointing of Jesus' feet still lingered in the air on this day, Sunday. Not ten hours before, the extravagant gift was lauded and defended by Jesus, confusingly cast in terms of burial. But instead of at a quiet, candlelit, table feast, Jesus now sat astride a donkey, and a borrowed one no less.

The village of Bethany wasn't far from the top of the Mount of Olives. In the early dawn hours, Jesus instructed two of his followers to the mysterious donkey, but with details and specifics that demanded prescient power. They obeyed and found all, just as he spoke, in the faded density of streets and stables to the west.

The foot traffic that morning was beginning to pick up. Travelers and pilgrims from all over Israel were in the Holy City for Passover, and they all had many preparations to make. From all directions, the roads leading to the temple courts were like tributaries pouring into a river. The people were the water. The temple the sea.

Jesus rocked and swayed in his smelly boat on that river, to that sea, head and shoulders above the crowds, atop the prophesied, borrowed donkey. His face was uniquely stern. In his eyes one could see purpose, focus. This donkey-rider was not just another pilgrim. Strained necks, whispers and pointed fingers rose like a tide in

this sea - all with Jesus as their focus. Was he crying? His eyes were bloodshot and red, the deep scarlet burning into his clenched cheeks.

"Hosanna!" shouted an anonymous voice from a huddle beside the path. The call spiked above the dull, polite, travel murmur of the morning so suddenly that many jerked and looked in vain for its author. The ancient Hebrew phrase was from a hallel psalm: *"Save us, we beseech you."*

"Hosanna!" again, just a breath later, this time two or three overlapped shouts from a different part of the traveling river. *"Hosanna to the Son of David!"* was added. Then again. The people recognized Him. There was no doubt that Jesus was the target of these ancient prayers and attributions. With a humble glimmer of his eye, all at once, He received them with gratitude, even confirmed them in resolute authority, yet without any adjustment to His gaze.

The din of shouts slowly grew in breadth and depth as the donkey leaned heavily on its front legs, now heading steeply down the well trodden path through rich olive groves, gardens, olive presses and workers huts. With just a blink and a glance, Jesus took in the garden, just off to the right, that He and His friends frequented in prayer. He longed to be there now in silence and peace with His friends. More would happen there very soon.

Added to the swelling clamor were obscure quotations of Hebrew prophets, then branches waved in the air, tunics and rugs thrown down, pointed fingers, and hushed theories. *"We've heard of this rabbi, haven't we?" "Is this the one who raised Lazarus of Bethany?" "Look is that Lazarus behind him?" "Some think He is the Messiah!" "I heard he is the miracle worker." "This clearly is the Expected One!" "Could this be the prophet like Moses?" "Could he be more?"*

At the eastern gate of the massive temple wall, Jesus slid off his humble coach and proceeded up through the steps and shadows into the temple courts. Here, in the sea of pilgrims, the temperature of the crowds was already beginning to rise as Passover neared. Keen eyes would notice the ominous pockets of stoic Jewish leaders. They stood like immovable gray boulders in the roaring river of people. Pharisees wrapped in leather and linen, chief priests wearing their scrutinizing scowls, all strangely still, peering only at Jesus, the rebellion-maker. They had clearly been waiting for Him. But what was their plan?

Stopping on the steps of Solomon's portico to the south, Jesus silently turned and looked around into the eyes and hearts of those waiting for His voice. He had not spoken a word until now. What was expected, was not what was said.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.”

“Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name.”

Then a voice came out of heaven: “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.”

So the crowd of people who stood by and heard it were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, “An angel has spoken to Him.”

Jesus answered and said, “This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes. Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.”

But this would be no extended monologue. Individuals interrupted and asked questions, to which Jesus responded in prophetic image and parable. Although even then and there, many were putting their faith in Jesus, including many of the religious rulers, the fear of the priests and Pharisees kept them silent and secret. But just before leaving the Temple and returning to Bethany, Jesus said:

“He who believes in Me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me. He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me. I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness.”

Take some time and enter the story yourself. Read Jesus’ profound words and deeds in **Mark 11:1-11** and **John 12:1-36**.

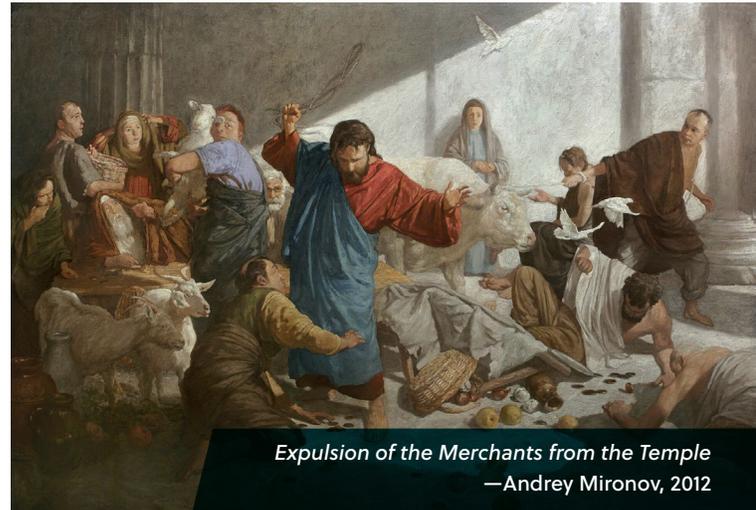
MONDAY

A House of Prayer

Fig trees produce figs. That's what they do. That's what God designed them to do. Figs. Not pomegranates or roses. Figs.

For Jews, figs are much more than just a tasty fruit. They had symbolic, even national, weight and significance. The fig tree appeared on some Jewish coins. It stood for blessing, for authority, indeed, even as one of the national symbols of Israel. A simple, common fig tree. It was part of the culture all Jews knew inherently. Jesus' disciples knew it too.

It was an earlier night, last night, than most with Jesus. After returning from the temple to the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha in Bethany, Jesus said little. The others made up the lack. After Rabbi retired early, several of the disciples and some of the women discussed the occurrences of the previous day late into the night - especially the constant haunting presence of the semi-powerful Jewish religious leaders. So when the Master was ready to return to the Temple quite early the next morning, the lack of sleep weighed heavily for some.



Expulsion of the Merchants from the Temple
—Andrey Mironov, 2012

Perhaps it was the early departure, but Martha's breakfast meal wasn't quite ready. She masked her disappointment in feeding her Lord another time with a coy smile. Thus the small band of men and women spilled out into the cool morning and made the short trek over the Mount of Olives, down the Kidron Valley, then back up into the temple complex. Along the path, descending the olive grove, stood a fig tree. It stood out among the olives, yet so common, most overlooked it. That is, until Jesus unexpectedly stopped in its young shade. He was hungry.

Was it the wrong season? Perhaps hungry travelers picked it clean? Or was it the marriage of an object lesson and a prophecy? The fig tree had no figs. No fruit. At that moment in time, the tree was not doing what it was created to do. A fig-less fig. An oxymoron. After a moment of observation, almost examination, Jesus spoke in a hushed tone. It was sad. Private. Heavy.

"May you bear no fruit from this time onward... may no one eat your fruit ever again."

The disciples heard Him and looked at each other, conversing only by expression and questioning with silent frowns. Then the journey continued as fast as it was paused. Temple. The Jewish temple was given for worship. It was designed for prayer, for fellowship with God, for sacrifice, for humility. To make Israel distinct among all the nations of the world. It was created to establish need and hope for Messiah. But there was none of the fruit that should be.

So, in righteous frustration, tables are turned over. Doves are set free. Money changers and merchants are herded from their stalls. A full scene is properly made. And Jesus is at the center of the zealous controversy once again. Even His disciples watched with wide eyes.

This "cleansing" did not happen quickly. It started with a bang and clatter as wood hit stone and coins splattered like spilt wine. But then it progressed in fits and starts, slowly, then quickly, then slowly again as Jesus moved from stall to stall. People began shouting and raising fists, the cumulative commotion growing with every moment. They hurled cutting words and sharp names and pointed questions at Jesus like stones. *What are you doing? Why do that? Who are you? What authority do you have?*

Jesus was looking for the figs of worship, of honor, of humility, of holiness and prayer. But there were none on the branches. A prayer-less house of prayer. A fig-less fig.

The disciples were concerned. They had walked with Jesus long enough to know His passion always had a purpose and plan, but they were very concerned. The tension was high. The priests and leaders were always watching. In the beginning of His public ministry, the disciples wanted Jesus to gain attention. Today, it was a complication. More than that, a liability.

They expected the ever-present Pharisees and Chief Priests to swoop in with the temple guards, but nothing happened. In fact, the crowd drew strangely still, looking to Jesus for explanation. Their introspective response seemed to surprise everyone except Him.

And He *began* to teach and say to them, **"Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a robbers' den."**

The chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching.

Then, to the arrogant and insecure leaders themselves:

“Did you never read in the Scriptures, ‘The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone...Therefore, I say to you [chief priest and elders], the kingdom will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it.’”

A house of prayer. *Figs*. Worship and humility. *Fruit*.

The flurry of commotion had widened the circle of attention, and soon Jesus was surrounded by the sick, lame, blind and possessed. Many recognized the famous miracle worker. Yet without frustration or hurry, but with compassion and care, one-by-one, like a Shepherd speaking to His sheep, He healed them and set them free. It was a long day - they didn't even have time to eat - but a day filled with story after story of grace.

Returning to Bethany for one of Martha's infamous meals, Jesus and his friends retraced the same path from that morning. This time their favorite garden would be on their left, and the fig tree which Jesus spoke to on their right. As they passed it, several disciples noted that the tree had dramatically aged, to the point of death. The roots were withered and the leaves looked like burnt parchment. It clearly would not bear fruit ever again short of a miraculous resurrection.

All twelve men, and the women, sensed there was a profound warning here. A larger, more personal and important sign. A picture of bigger things yet to be fully revealed. Take some time and enter the story for yourself. Read Jesus' words and actions in **Matthew 21:12-22** and **Mark 11:12-19**.

TUESDAY

The Authorities Interrupt

Since Moses and the Judges, teachers were some of the most important pillars of Jewish society. These teachers, officially called *rabbis*, passed on their wisdom to disciples. In an ancient fashion, their instruction was always based on some greater and earlier authority. Authority was a big thing.

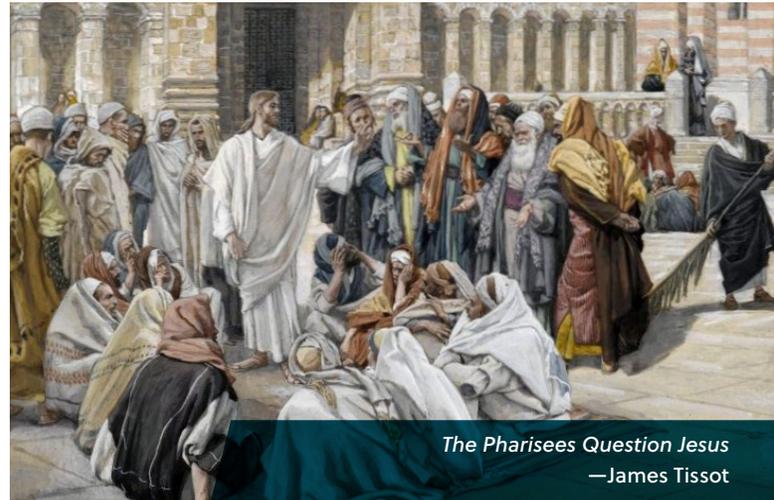
So these rabbis would typically begin their teaching by quoting an older, more famous, often long since dead, rabbi. Their relative authority was based on the objective authority of others before them. The greater the referenced power, the greater the power of the current speaker. "*Rabbi Shammai has said...*" Or "*Rabbi Akiva has taught us...*" They would then add their own application, raising the bar of legalistic interpretation, illustrating it within a certain sector of life, or connecting it to Moses in some way. Moses was always the ultimate authority.

This day, within this decisive week, for Jesus, would become a showdown of authority.

When Jesus' eyes first opened in the early morning hours, He smiled at the warmth and comfort of the bed in his host's home. He had rarely slept in a bed. The subtle crackle of the small kitchen fire could be heard, the faint whisper of smoke tasted. Martha would apparently not be surprised again by an early departure.

Jesus quietly stood and then knelt in the corner of the small room. He bowed His head and gently spoke to His Father in His own words, then some of David's words, then some of Moses'. He dipped his hands in a small bowl of water, gently wet his face, then wiped both face and hands with the linen cloth placed there for that purpose. He took everything in intentionally, slowly, with a soft smile that betrayed deep satisfaction and clarity of purpose.

The rhythm of meals and sleep in Bethany with daily trips to the Temple was by now ingrained in the whole group. No one had any questions. They simply readied and followed. Words were few. Those spoken had no jest. On the path, while Jesus'



The Pharisees Question Jesus
—James Tissot

attention went again to His favorite garden, the disciples examined the wasted fig tree without slowing their gait. Silent remarks were again exchanged. Then the comments were given voice. Instead of asking about the miracle, they simply pointed it out to Jesus. No reply was offered. He didn't even stop.

Their thighs were warm as they descended the Mount of Olives, heavy steps with their weight on their toes. They leveled off in the Kidron valley for just a few moments, crossing a small stone bridge. With the next step their heels were now off the ground and their calves began to burn. They were going back up, ascending, the ancient but small slope of Mount Moriah. The eastern wall of the temple loomed above them.

Then He spoke, still walking, His voice sturdy and strong.

“Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it will happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.”

Once again in the temple, the booths, tables and bird cages upended on Sunday were resurrected. Business was restored as before. Traffic was even thicker. Exchange rates higher.

The boulders were already waiting for Him. They likely had tiny, young, hungry spies all around exchanging intelligence for coins. Once the ragged runners completed their mission, the leaders were in place on the steps in Solomon's portico to the south before Jesus even arrived. He began talking to the crowds again about the Kingdom of God. Many gathered round in seconds. His words fell on their hearts like the first rain after a long summer. Then the gray boulders - Pharisees, scribes and other experts in the Mosaic law - spoke up, boldly interrupting Jesus mid-sentence.

“By what authority are You doing these things, or who gave You this authority to do these things?”

And Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question, and you answer Me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men? Answer Me.”

They began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ But shall we say, ‘From men?’”— they were afraid of the people, for everyone considered John to have been a real prophet. Answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.”

And Jesus said to them, **“Nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”**

The blind are often stunned by their blind spots. Cowards fall into the traps of their own fear. Manipulators are cut by their own blade. The maddening issue for these self-appointed religious police was that Jesus didn't claim anyone else's authority. He never referenced their human heroes. He only referenced “His Father,” which in itself was dancing on the edge of blasphemy - making Himself equal to God. Jesus continued, this time turning his body full to the prayer-robed policemen.

“But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in the vineyard.’ And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he regretted it and went. The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, ‘I will, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?”

They said, **“The first.”**

Their answer hung in the air as Jesus paused with his gaze intent on the bold and blind rulers. He slowly passed His eye back to the gathered crowd, scores of humble men and women hungry for truth and words that gave life. He then looked down and smirked to Himself sadly and ironically. *“Hmmm...”* he hummed softly.

After more pointed parables and prophetic pictures, the gray boulders finally perceived that Jesus was actually talking about them. His words cut deep, not with conviction, but in a way that inflamed their pride. Their faces flushed and their weight subtly shifted toward Him. But their fear was so great, it also included fear of the crowds. They paused. Looked around. Masking it all, they cowered and fled, awaiting a more opportune moment to strike back.

Take some time to enter the story yourself and engage the rest of Jesus' profound words. Read **Matthew 21:20-46** and **Mark 11:27-12:12**.

WEDNESDAY

Tests, Woes and the Future

A home typically doesn't become a prison overnight. In the sad cases that it happens, it progresses in small steps, usually with good intentions or blind eyes. Slowly the heart is confused. Vision is clouded.

Windows designed to let in the beauty of light are covered and locked. Footpaths well trod in the simple joys of streams and climbing trees are overgrown and lost. Fear takes more and more ground. Shadows lengthen and freedoms wane. Picture walls slowly become prison walls. This can happen to a family, and to a nation. As it did with Israel, and her leaders.



Flevit Super Illam (He wept over it)
—Enrique Simonet Lombardo

Simplicity has its pros and cons. It can illustrate aptly but abbreviate too heavily. Simply put, Israel's journey with God, from ancient times, cycled from *desperation* to *grace* to *rejection* to *discipline* back to *desperation*. God's powerful displays of mercy were sadly lost on hearts given to idolatry, then came the disciplinary consequences of a Good Father. This eventually led to various brands of repentance, then mercy, for God is abounding in lovingkindness.

But the Pharisees thought they had cracked the code. For almost two centuries before Jesus' birth, these devout men had determined, rather than discovered, the linchpin: harshly strict adherence to the smallest details of the Mosaic Law. Their reasoning was more firm commitment than it was biblical wisdom: demand and maintain a high level of holiness and obedience in the common people, and God will keep Israel from oppression, exile, slavery and worse. It was in this way that the Law of Moses became heated to dangerous temperatures. What was meant to lead Israel to Messiah became an end itself, a solution. Moses' Law was surrounded by another built out of tradition and fear. The house was becoming a prison. Joy around table and hearth became fear of lash and stone.

Enter Jesus. The Pharisees sharpened their brightest minds, wielded their wittiest arguments, and strung their sturdiest traps - all with designs on Jesus, the dangerous

and blasphemous rebel-rouser. Again in the temple, they spoke words dripping with false flattery and irony.

“Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?”

But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, **“Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax.”** And they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, **“Whose likeness and inscription is this?”** They said to Him, **“Caesar’s.”**

Then He ***said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.”**

Strike one. Trap evaded. But wait, the eager Pharisees branched out to rivals. The enemy of my enemy and all that. Sadducees, deeply connected to the priesthood, did not believe in any resurrection. But setting that aside they came with another famously twisty question about seven brothers and their one wife in the resurrection. They had to swallow their giggles to even ask it, they felt so confident in their subterfuge. Without a moments hesitation or pause:

“You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

Strike two. This was harder than they expected - and He confirmed the truth of resurrection. Their plots and ploys always had proxies before. But now they were dealing with the Lion himself. Strike three was a question about the greatest commandment. It wasn’t well formed. Jesus resolved it in two seconds with two passages of Moses. Game over. But wait... plot twist. Jesus now asked a question to the kerfuffled college of Pharisees.

“What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” They said to Him, **“The son of David.”** He said to them, **“Then how does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying,**

‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, Until I put Your enemies beneath Your feet”’?

If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?”

Time slowed. Minds raced. Eyes danced. Tongues froze. Not a single man was able to form an answer. In fact, no one even tried. No mumbling, no delay tactics. It was simply over, as if Jesus' question triggered a slow-motion evacuation, the Pharisees and their lackeys dispersed.

Turning again to the crowds, Jesus began to speak with added volume and gusto, this time directly concerning the retreating police. The kernel of their intentions might have been good, but the rest of stalk was rotten with hypocrisy and pride.

"The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger..."

Jesus ended the monologue by increasing His decisive judgement of the Jewish leaders. He rolled through a complete list of warning woes, scathing evaluations of the misfired connections between heart and action in the national leadership of Israel. It was an exposé.

Then, surprisingly and with significant haste, Jesus herded his disciples toward the eastern gate and left the temple. Descend then ascend yet again. But instead of trekking eastward to Bethany, Jesus paused under a large olive tree atop the larger Mount of Olives, looking back to the west and down on the still busy temple complex. He clearly wanted a moment with His friends. The mood was profoundly somber. While still staring westward, he spoke low and long. No one stirred as He spoke. All eyes gazed westward with Him. His words were about the future and they were shocking. Struck speechless, the disciples worked to hold fast to each work, phrase and promise. They were hard to believe yet filled with hope.

Enter the story yourself. Read the whole of Jesus' words in **Matthew 22:15—25:46**.

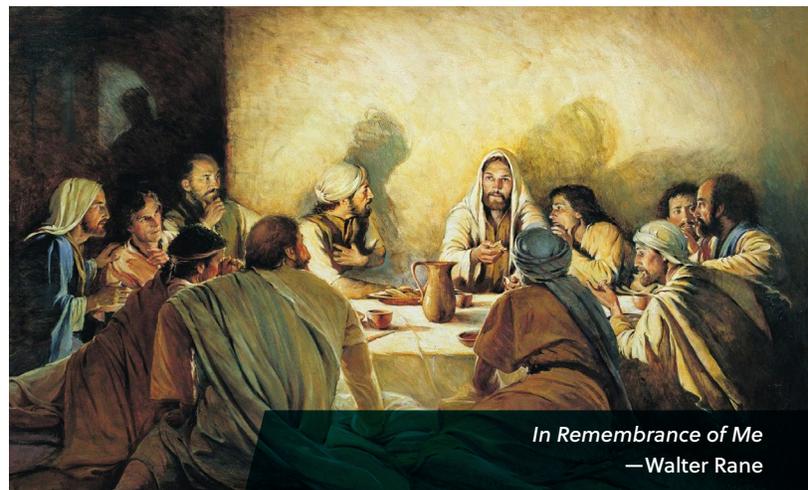
THURSDAY

The Passover Redefined

Individual silk strands, long devised and woven, were now intersecting into a tight web of deceit, intrigue, and strategy. Jesus was almost caught.

The Passover made things more complicated. It was almost time for the lambs to be slain in the Temple court. Tens of thousands of pilgrims were busy with last minute preparations. No telling how many of them were supportive of the rebel Jesus of Nazareth. What must be done, must be done with minimal risk of riot. Control is lost in riot. A mere thirty pieces of silver to an unexpected player promised minimal witnesses and a favorable location.

Normally good Jews spent days preparing their home for *Pesach*, or *Passover*. The fine-tuned removal of all leaven was the first step. It could take days. But Jesus asked his disciples to prepare a place with less time. Graciously, Martha did not mind the fact that Jesus chose a different home than hers. She was learning to sit and receive like her sister. This Passover meal would be south of the Temple, on Mount Zion, in the upper room of a mysterious stranger. Martha would be there, with her brother and sister, Jesus' mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, several other women and all of the Twelve. It was going to be a Passover none would forget.



In Remembrance of Me
—Walter Rane

The joyful hubbub of the gathering hushed as the time drew near to recline at the table together. Jesus laid at the head, John beside him, Judas on the other side, in the place of honor. Jesus said the Hebrew blessing to begin the meal and then blessed the lighting of the candle. From this moment on the meal was both recognizable and brand new. Even Mary, Jesus' mother, who had taught Him these things from his youth, was surprised by several departures from the traditional Passover script. Yet something from her past, from the angel's visitation, woke up again in sadness and hope. Jesus rehearsed the ancient story of freedom from slavery in Egypt, but consistently positioned His actions now - right now - on top of the story as the deeper truth. Like the old story was the shadow, He was the substance.

Water. After everyone ceremonially washed their hands, a traditional part of the meal, Jesus broke protocol once again. With a satisfying smile, he stood and began to remove his tunic and belt, then grabbed a large cotton cloth that no one had remembered seeing before, and wrapped it around his waist. Pouring water into a basin he knelt behind each disciple, both man and woman, cupped water over their extended feet as they reclined, prayed a traditional Hebrew blessing, and wiped them with the cotton towel. The first protested for a moment, but Jesus kept smiling and praying. The rest learned by observation to receive in silent wonder at the audacious spectacle of a rabbi performing the duties of a servant. Peter had a stronger objection but Jesus insisted. The bold example of their Rabbi would become seared on each.

Bread. Matzah, simple unleavened bread, grilled and pierced to ensure its "sinless" condition without yeast, was so common none of Jesus' friends had thought much about it before. It was as simple as water, wine and wheat. Like the front door of your home, you don't notice it. But when Jesus lifted it up, described it, quoted Isaiah, then connected it to His body - those gathered stopped breathing. They saw something brand new, but hiding in plain sight. When He broke it, everyone felt something break inside of them.

Wine. Exodus records the magnificent conversations between Moses and Yahweh God. While still in Egypt, God revealed His plan of freedom with four promises of His action. Since then, for nearly 1500 years, these statements were attached to four small cups of red wine spread throughout the evening meal: the cup of sanctification, the cup of deliverance, the cup of redemption and the cup of glory. It was the third cup, the one celebrated after dinner, that Jesus spoke to - identifying it with His own blood. Eyes squinted in both wonder and worry. *What did that mean?* None dared to ask. As her heart caught up to the moment, Mary, Jesus' mother, darted her head to the closed door of the upper room in which they met, recalling the lamb's blood on lintel and post just outside. She gasped imperceptibly as she looked back at her son. Her own blood fled from her cheeks.

Hearts were now as full of wonder as their bellies were full of lamb, vegetables, dips and desserts. Judas had apparently left early on a treasurer's errand. Few noticed. The six bold *hallel* or "praise" psalms were sung by the remainder, from memory, with passion. A few of the men were off key. After the formal ending of the Passover meal, Jesus continued with a short teaching, which led to questions, which led to answers. But the answers were more vulnerable than before, less opaque. The Master of feast was now less rabbi, more friend. No more parables. He spoke plainly and with a felt sense of urgency. Then Jesus rose, thanked his hosts downstairs, and led his gaggle out into the lonely night streets of lower Jerusalem.

Instead of bypassing the Temple courts, now nearly barren because of the thousands of homefeasts, Jesus took his group into them once again. The empty acres of stone felt strange, like a fig tree with no fruit. Pointing to the golden vine on the facade of the Temple, the meal conversation continued as Jesus spoke of fruit, branches, pruning and abiding. He spoke about the Holy Spirit, the world, love and melancholy reports of departure. It felt hopeful and lonely, but somehow more hope than loss.

Descending once more to the valley and then ascending the Mount of Olives, they paused at their frequent place of respite. A simple garden tucked in a larger olive grove. The long meal, casual walk and cool night air weighed heavily on all. The women, along with Lazarus, continued to Bethany, the final destination of the night, while the eleven disciples stayed with Jesus. His smile had long since gone. He seemed more burdened, more oppressed, than any of them could remember seeing Him before. Eight of them plopped down and rested their heavy heads on olive trunks. Three followed Jesus further in. Jesus went even further. The only lights were moon and stars. The only sounds were rustling leaves, insects, gentle snoring and Jesus praying. Moments became minutes. Minutes accumulated into hours. Hours dissolved into the shadow.

Anxiety is but a frail cousin to what Jesus felt. Stress is only a sliver of the truth. No human language owned words that fit this moment. Yet this wasn't a moment of decision. He was unwaveringly resolute in His purpose. The next steps were clear. The path chosen. It was pain that caused this pain. The pain of looming separation from His Father was inconceivable for the Eternal Son. It was wholly alien. But even He had to surrender. Microscopic capillaries burst their precious cargo in his forehead, blood mixing with an already steady flow of sweat.

This was the human-divine reality of griefs borne, sorrows carried. The good shepherd smitten and afflicted. Next would come the lash of scourging, the hammer and spike of crushing, the spear of redemption, the agonizing weight of atoning. The gaze of Father broken. The serpent would strike at heel and hit his mark. *As it is written*. With open hands, Jesus stood in silence.

He slowly and resolutely breathed out the name of His Father. *Life. Peace. Healing*. The eternal way back to a better Eden was being cut. It was happening now.

Peter, in a way familiar to most, awoke with a start, knowing he had slept when he shouldn't. *What's happening? Where's Jesus? What time is it? Where's Judas? Are those... torches?*

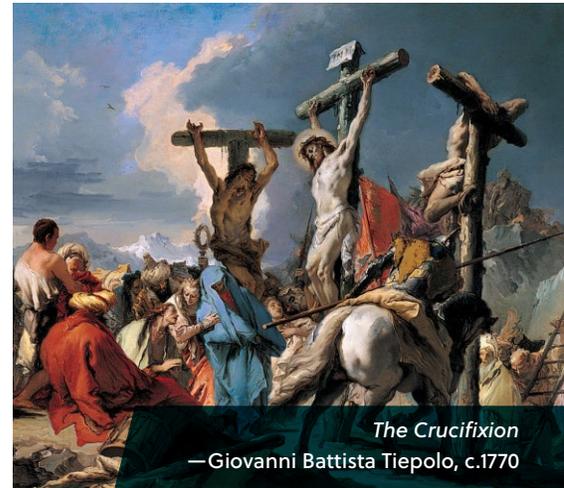
Enter the story yourself and linger with all of Jesus' words and actions. Read **Matthew 26:20-75** and **John 13:1- 18:27**.

FRIDAY

The Place of the Skull

Earth itself, its very crust and mantle, pitched and yawed with almost human emotion. Can rock and soil lament? How do mountains genuflect? Can air hold its breath?

Intimidation has been honed in warfare for millennia. And the Romans were sharp artists. This morning, their brutal craft was on full display in a trio of offenders. Just a few inches off the ground, they hung, splayed on rustic wooden crosses beside a major travel path northwest of the temple. Festival pilgrims were the intended audience of this horrific spectacle. Keep the masses in fear. The crosses were secured in the remains of an old stone quarry. The stones from this site built the temple. Now, just a few hundred yards from this temple, three condemned men, a detachment of low-level Roman soldiers and a mob of onlookers occupied this dusty bowl of death.



The Crucifixion
—Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, c.1770

Low cloud cover seemed to cocoon the scene in still, shadow and holy fear. Soldiers games and their misplaced laughter cracked intermittently. The two outer criminals, with visibly less trauma than the grotesque figure between them, had few words. A few muffled sounds of sobbing and sniffing rustled from the crowd. In sharp contrast was the loud cascade of insults, jeers, demands and accusations. Jesus offered no response. After an hour, without a jousting partner, the sneers died of starvation. There was an eerie quiet. Almost blasphemously, an unseemly reverence hung in the air. The earth too seemed to wait in ache.

Jesus, hanging but a few feet above His mother, was barely recognizable. Since the previous nights arrest and the first of many kangaroo courts, He had been brutalized, mocked and drug from one hollow authority to the next. The chief priests and Pharisees played the crowd and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, like a game board. Paranoia reduced his options. Although he pronounced him innocent, wisdom became the puppet of fear and Pilate sent Jesus to be scourged - another nightmarish Roman war art. Shockingly, the half-dead figure that emerged did not satisfy. Crucifixion was demanded. Fear won again.

After a barrage of caustic ridicule and derision, Jesus, crowned in thorns and robed in mocking purple, met his cross, then carried it to the Place of the Skull. Here

intimidation met strategic deterrent. Three warnings, inscribed on the Roman "titulus," were affixed to three crosses. The titulus specified the crimes, and the criminals are so punished. Free onlookers beware. Intimidation tactics are usually simple, aimed at the wise and fearful. The middle cross was strange, though. The crime, written in three different languages on the notice, was *kingship*.

He appeared to be the King of affliction. Nails pierced muscle and tendon, flesh and heel bone. Shock. *Body*. Anguish. *Blood*. Sharp stinging agony. Deep throbbing ache. The awful distance of His Father's face and voice. Each breath smaller than the one before. Yet despite it all, in moments of light spread out over hours of torment, Jesus managed stunning grace. To those responsible for false testimony, rogue courts, the sentence of death and its executioners.

"Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

To the eventually repentant and desperate thief on the next cross.

"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

To His heartbroken mother on the very edge of her maternal sanity, and a disciple He loved.

"Woman, here is your son."

To fulfill ancient prophecy.

"I am thirsty."

To reference a Davidic psalm of loyal worship from inside dire suffering - a cry of faith.

"My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"

To His Father, in love and faith - declaring victory over death, curse, sin and accuser.

"Father into Your hands I commit My Spirit."

"It is finished."

The earth pitched and yawed in a fever spike. How does this spherical creature respond to the death of its eternal and immortal Creator? Tectonic plates retracted. Mountains shuffled. Seas quivered. Day turned to night. Ancient tombs cracked

open as the entire orb trembled and quaked in mournful rebellion. Can rock and soil lament? Can air hold its breath?

But these tremors were more than natural. Deeper than simple physics and geology. They were ripples of the cataclysmic ruin of *separation*. The unalterable destruction of the gulf between a sinful people and a holy God. The very death of death. The un-cursing of the curse. The King of affliction, through His affliction, became the King of peace. God and His prodigals. *Shalom*.

As Joseph, Nicodemus and others laid down the barely recognizable body of Jesus their Lord, they did not yet realize even the spark of what He had accomplished. While they gently, quickly wrapped his clotted back and swollen face in clean linen - golden cherubim, guardians of the presence of God, embroidered on purple linen, finally retreated from their guard post in the holy of holies.

Enter the story yourself and reflect on all Jesus said and did. Read **Matthew 27:1-66** and **John 18:28—19:42**.

SATURDAY

Trapped in a Day of Rest

After the six days of God's creative genius, He ceased and rested, His perfect work complete. Later, through Moses, God commanded and gifted His people with the sabbath, a weekly reminder of His grace. An invitation to join Him in rest. For the Romans, the day began at midnight. Not for Hebrews. When the first three stars appear in the sky on Friday evening, Saturday begins for the Jews. Sabbath.

Mary, a woman disciple of Jesus from Migdal on the Sea of Galilee, couldn't sleep. Her mind replayed and rehearsed the already blurry horror of Friday, completed by the hasty rush to bury Jesus, seal the tomb and return to Bethany before the first three stars revealed their immemorial presence. Several of the disciples were still missing and had not returned to the home of Lazarus. The night was passed with only brief and shallow sleep. Mary's eyes took in the full spectrum of blue and yellow as the sun rose on that Saturday, slowly bringing her small room alive with light.

It seemed another life or a thousand years ago, but Mary's first memorable taste of rest was bright in her mind. She didn't carry a legion of evil spirits, but seven demons was plenty for a diminutive young woman. Oppression and torment were then her daily reality. But now those memories and visions were recolored in dull gray. They had lost all their venom and edge. They now only survived as a monument, a mental *ebenezer*, to the grace and authority of Jesus, her savior.

He simply spoke, and it was done. The very moment of the demons' banishment was like a rebirth. Her freedom hit like a glorious fatigue, head and hands almost too heavy to lift, she slumped to the ground. But it was not the collapse of forfeit, but of rest. Her fight was over. It was the first full sabbath of her short, tumultuous life. She was free. *Beloved*. Her travail had ceased. She smiled deeply. Her smile was rarely absent since.

But this sabbath felt like a war. How could one rest now? Mary's smile straightened. He was taken from the men so suddenly in the night. News reached Mary, Lazarus



The Entombment of Christ
—Sisto Badalocchio

and the sisters later. They had only seen Jesus for seconds, small windows of fear and questions, until they saw Him with his cross. Her mind recreated the scene at the Skull. They didn't even have time to properly anoint Jesus' body. She quickly shook her head and turned, trying to dislodge the picture. How could one rest after that?

She walked down a small set of stairs into the common area of Lazarus' home. Martha was standing at her post in an empty kitchen, lost without the soothing act of cooking and hosting. She was silently weeping. Her brother was seated, staring at the ground, unblinking. Peter had been frightfully inconsolable since Passover night, humbled when fear momentarily outweighed his faith. John and the others were still on their cots, restless. No one had seen Judas. Fear of Temple guards coming for Jesus' followers next was the silent, unspoken partnership of the home. Mary paused at the bottom of the stairs, unsure of what to do next. She felt both numb and like a raw nerve.

Normally the weekly festival of shabbat was joyful, filled with story, laughter, food, family and free napping. But not this sabbath. It was supposed to remind God's people that He loved them beyond their usefulness. He did not create them as servants, as if He had any need. He created them out of love, on day six of creation. Their first full day was not labor, it was rest. Simply being with God. Enjoying Him and His good creation.

But to Mary, on this sabbath morning, all of that registered as philosophical nonsense. She wanted to do something. To do something for Jesus. But He was gone. Buried. Hastily. She wanted to be near Him again. Ceasing would not do. She couldn't rest. It felt misplaced. Blasphemous. Wrong.

Choosing instead to recline in a corner by a window that was usually open, she sat down, wrapping her shawl tighter against a draft. In a kind of half-life wakefulness, Mary's mind began to replay words she treasured from Jesus. Words expressed over years. As if some divine helper was at work, she felt confident of perfect recall. She recalled her own story, and His.

"If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. How can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? Then he will plunder his house."

She replayed those words several times before her mind recalled more.

"I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or drink, nor for your body, as to what you will wear. Look at the birds... Your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? ...Father knows that

you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Worry. She was wading in a rising tide of worry and sadness and anger. How could she not?

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

Rest. Gentle. Humble. She gently juggled these words with her mind, then her soul. More.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. ...Do not think that I came to abolish the Law and Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.”

Fulfill. She lingered over that word. How? Fulfill how? Then she recalled words more recent.

“Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful. You heard that I said to you, ‘I go away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. Now I have told you before it happens, so that when it happens, you may believe.”

More and more came flooding into her mind, years worth of words and deeds newly stitched together with greater color, deeper roots, wider meaning. *Was she bound up in the strong man’s house when Jesus found her? Was her worry misplaced?* Oh, how she longed to be comforted. Then an epiphany. They always come with a glad surprise.

What if resting today is the most appropriate thing to do? What if He actually did fulfill... and that work accomplished a new rest, a deeper rest, an eternal rest? What if everything is different? What is sabbath is somehow... and joyfully... forever now?

It is finished. His final words from the cross echoed the longest and loudest in her heart. As she pondered, repeated, and rethought, slowly, over hours, Mary’s smile began to curl. Gently. Cautiously. She felt a revived spark of that first glorious freedom with Jesus so many years before. The moment of her redemption. The spark ignited a small flame. A comforting warmth filled her. She still had many questions and fears and unfinished thoughts, but she intentionally released her heart, sensing its longing to take a step away from striving and fearful earning, into rest. A brand new kind of rest.

Enter the sabbath silence yourself. Consider prayers of confession, repentance and gratitude. Slowly and prayerfully read **Psalm 27** and **Psalm 34** and **Psalm 57**.

SUNDAY

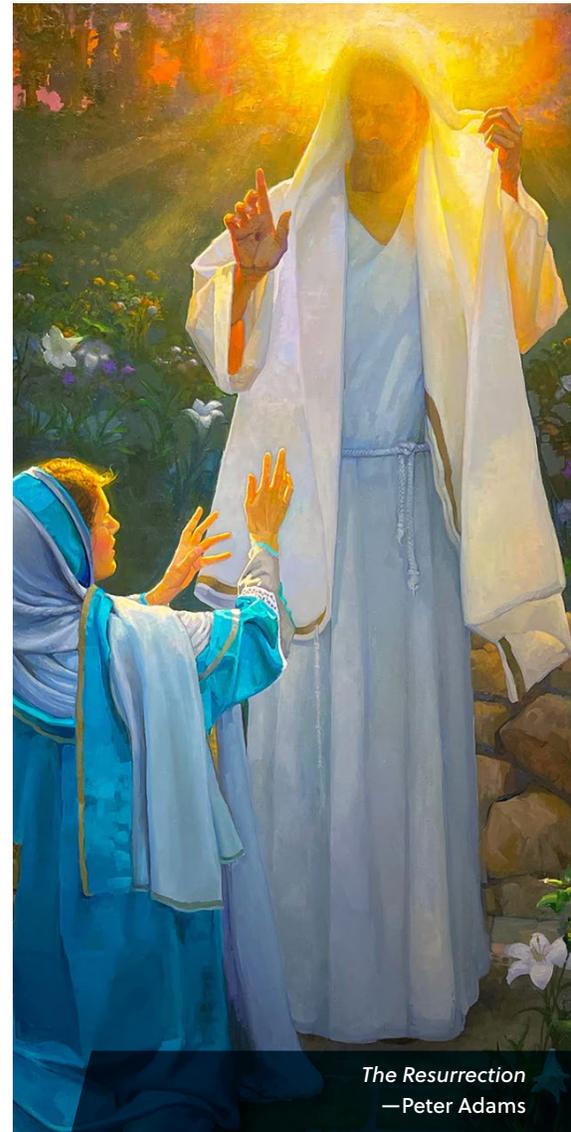
Why do you look for the Living among the dead?

Barley was sown in winter. In the spring, the first sheaf was harvested and brought into the Temple. It was a portion representative of the whole harvest, a down payment and promise of the rest. God told Moses, in the Torah, the specifics about a feast day that would commemorate and celebrate this event, The Feast of Firstfruits, or the Counting of the Sheaf.

Passages in Leviticus locate this feast day within the weeklong Feast of Unleavened Bread, which occurred after Passover for the following seven days. Firstfruits was on the first day of the week, after the sabbath, after Passover. That was Sunday—*Firstfruits*. Pilgrims and priests would be waving their barley sheaf in the Temple later that same morning. An act of worship, gratitude, hope and faith for the future harvest.

At some point in the small hours of the pre-dawn on that Sunday morning, the Roman detachment that guarded and sealed Jesus' tomb with a special wedge in the stone, were awakened and stunned in a ineffable display of power. Earth groaned and stretched once again. Rocks shifted. The seal broke and fell. The circular cover stone on the tomb was rolled away. Not with the five pairs of hands and strong backs that placed it there—but as with a gentle breeze. Indeed, it did not roll back to let Jesus out. It did so to allow the world to see in. To take in its meaningful emptiness.

They scattered like bugs after their rock shelter is lifted. These shaken soldiers were later bribed to rumor that Jesus' disciples had overpowered them and stolen the body. But soldiers that failed in that duty would have been summarily executed. So, many wondered at the curious illogic of living, employed, soldiers that were formerly bested by a dozen skinny Jews while on an official mission. The math didn't math.



The Resurrection
—Peter Adams

Back in their lodging in Bethany, most were still asleep or half-asleep when Mary, the one called Magdalene, began to quietly collect her thick shawl and sandals. Perhaps it was the same shaking of the earth that imperceptibly woke her from her own shallow sleep. The sabbath rest was over and she had a mission. Outside the sky was waxing darker, just before the graying light of dawn. She left alone. It wasn't more than half an hour's walk. She knew the way.

Salome, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, more than an hour later, left the same lodging with the same journey in mind. They had been with Mary Magdalene and Mary, Jesus' mother, at the cross. They had watched Jesus' body buried. They knew the place. It was burned into their heart. They moved slowly as they carried the heavy ointments and spices which they lovingly prepared. In their planning, the day would be filled with the somber work of cleaning and anointing the shattered shell of their Lord. But who would roll away the stone?

Mary skirted the temple mount to the north and arrived at the garden just outside the northwest walls of Jerusalem near the Joppa gate. The glowing horizon had joined her like a welcomed companion on her solo journey, providing ample light to notice the Roman guard she expected to meet was gone.

Their absence momentarily distracted her from the disordered state of the tomb entrance. With a few more curious paces forward she finally noticed the removed stone and the small dark opening. Her emotions fired all at once. She felt none of them distinctly, but all crowded together. Fear and anger quickly trampled out wonder and hope. She turned and ran.

Arriving back in Bethany breathless and sweating, the others arose to meet her in a shock. "He's gone! He's gone!" was all she managed for a few seconds. Catching a small breath she expanded. "They've taken away the Lord and we don't know to where." Peter and John bolted back out into the street at top speed, momentarily losing all fear of being hunted themselves. After a few moments of rest and filling in the others, Mary returned and followed them back the garden with haste, but not at a full run.

John's stride was longer than Peter's. After holding back for a few minutes, John's mind simply forgot about the smaller Peter and he ran faster. Arriving at the tomb first, John hesitated outside, frozen. Peter arrived moments later and barreled inside. Without any words, they stood, glancing around, taking in the scene like investigators. With nothing more to see they returned to Bethany in silent wonder, not noticing Mary Magdalene headed back to the tomb.

Upon her arrival Mary felt almost blind. Her tears welled up uncontrollably, clung to her lashes and blurred her vision. So when she first saw the angels inside the otherwise empty tomb she briefly thought it was a trick of tears and stretching sunlight. Perhaps guards or garden workers. She stepped back with a startle upon understanding. Almost gleefully, they asked why she was crying. She muttered nearly the same thing she said to the others in Bethany. Overcome, she turned and stepped away, nearly running into the risen Jesus.

Jesus said to her, **“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”**
Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.”

Jesus said to her, “Mary!”

She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means, Teacher).

Jesus said to her, **“Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’”**

Mary Magdalene came back, announcing to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,”

Mary. It was *His* voice saying her name. Does anything feel more like home than the voice of God pronouncing your very name?

The least expected thing in a day filled with the unexpected, was the great difficulty of voluntarily leaving Jesus yet again, accepting His command to go back to the disciples. Mary shook her head no. She would never let Him go again. But the rest of her body responded in obedience. She stood up, let go and walked backward for a long while, smiling but still weeping somehow. But her tears had changed from sour to sweet.

Unaware to Mary, at that very moment, the priest in the Temple was waving the sheaf at the feast of Firstfruits. The promise of more. But her heart was filled to overflowing with joy. The wonderful fullness of the present left no room for deeper connections. Not yet.

By that evening, in Lazarus' home once again, story after story had been collected, told and retold of appearances of the resurrected Jesus, some first-hand, some second. Even Salome and Mary, the mother of James, and Joanna saw the same angels as Mary Magdalene after she did. Most marveled and believed. Several had reluctant doubts.

They finally reclined, after the sun had set, at Martha's table. It was spread with fresh bread, broiled fish, and more. The fears of some had returned so the doors were locked and the windows shuttered. Peter had just said the blessing, thanking God for the grace of bread and wine. He quoted Jesus' words learned from many prayers. They all opened their eyes and... *He* was there. Gasps filled the air. It was Him. *Jesus*. In the room. *Jesus*. Not a scratch was on his face. A few wounds - the nail marks - remained visible. But they were healed. Present, real, even somehow still open. But unnaturally healed. *Super-naturally*. He was pierced, whole and perfect. *Jesus*. He was very much alive. *Jesus*. Standing with a huge, powerful smile. He stretched out His once-wounded hands in a loving embrace, and said,

"Peace be to you."

Enter the story yourself and experience all of the marvelous happenings of this day. Read **Luke 24:1-49** and **John 20:1-29** and **1 Corinthians 15:20**.

