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**HOW STORIES OF THE CROSS  
ARE CHANGING THE WORLD**

**DR. JIM DENISON**

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# *Ash Wednesday*

## **Will you seek to be transformed?**

Dr. S. M. Lockridge was one of the most profound orators of his day. Consider his description of our risen Lord:

He is enduringly strong; he is entirely sincere. He is eternally steadfast; he is immortally gracious. He is imperially powerful; he is impartially merciful. He is the greatest phenomenon that has ever crossed the horizons of the globe. He is God's Son; he is the sinner's Savior. He is the captive's Ransom; he is the breath of life. He is the centerpiece of civilization; he stands in the solitude of himself. He is august and he is unique; he is unparalleled and he is unprecedented. He is undisputed and he is undefiled; he is unsurpassed and he is unshakeable. He is the loftiest idea in philosophy; he is the highest personality in psychology. He is the supreme subject in literature; he is the fundamental doctrine of theology. He is the Cornerstone and the Capstone. He is the miracle of the ages.

Not everyone who met Jesus thought him so. His story is filled with men and women who found him their Messiah and King, and who served him sacrificially and faithfully. But it is also the story of men who rejected his claims to be Messiah and sought his death as a heretic, of rulers who capitulated to public pressure and executed a man they knew to be innocent, of a man who followed him and fell into ignominious betrayal, of others who followed, fell away, and returned to their Lord.

Their stories are our story. They are each in God's word, not for their sake but for ours. Their failures and brave successes teach us how to confront our own faults and find in Jesus our own victory. Those who were transformed by the cross point the way to our own transformation today.

This Lenten season, let's journey with those who first journeyed to Easter. After four days of preparation, we'll begin six weeks of pilgrimage. The first week we'll meet Judas, the man who betrayed his Lord. The second week, we'll walk with Peter, leader of the apostles and reclaimed hero of the faith. The third week, we'll watch Jesus' Jewish trials unfold and meet the men most responsible for arranging his death.

The fourth week, we'll watch Jesus' Roman trials begin with Pilate and culminate in the long walk to Calvary. The fifth week, we'll walk with three who proved faithful to their Lord—John, "doubting" Thomas and Mary Magdalene. Finally, for Holy Week we'll explore the historical events that led to the death and resurrection of God's Son.

*For reflection:*

God intends these stories of transformation to lead us to the One who still changes lives today. The risen Christ is ready to forgive every sin you'll confess to him, lead you through every dark valley, and meet your every need according to his riches in glory (Philippians 4:19). He wants you to be able to say with one of his transformed followers, "I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13).

But you must want what he offers. You must seek the change he alone can produce. In a culture that desperately needs our salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16), we must be what we ask others to become. So as you begin this Lenten journey, I invite you to stop now and offer this simple prayer: "Lord, transform me."

# *Day 2*

## **Why should you value Lent?**

I became a Christian in a Baptist church when I was 15 years old. I attended a Baptist college after high school, and a Baptist seminary after college. I was a Baptist youth minister in two churches, a college preacher and a short-term missionary. I became a Baptist pastor while teaching at the seminary where I was completing doctoral studies, then was called to pastor a large Baptist church in West Texas. All those years, I never once participated in Lent. Nor did anyone I knew.

Then God led our family to pastor a Baptist church in Atlanta, Georgia. Like many in the South, our church was more connected to the liturgical traditions of the larger Christian world. For the first time, I conducted a wedding and worship service while wearing a ministerial robe. Our church organized its Christmas programs around the themes of Advent. We shared Easter and Thanksgiving services with churches spanning the denominational spectrum. And for the first time, I was introduced to Lent.

I knew that the term translates the Anglo-Saxon word for spring (*lencten*). I knew that Catholics and some other traditions “give up something for Lent,” choosing to abstain from some type of food for the weeks preceding Easter. But I had no idea that Lent has such long historic roots, or such practical relevance today.

Upon investigation, I learned that Christians by the second century were setting aside time to fast and pray before Easter. By A.D.

325, 40 days of Lent were recognized officially in the church. Why 40 days? To reflect the 40 days Jesus fasted in the wilderness and prepared for his earthly ministry, as well as the 40 hours he lay in the tomb, the 40 years the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness, and the 40 days of flooding in Noah's time. The seven Sundays that occur during Lent were not counted in the 40 days, as they were to be weekly celebrations of Jesus' resurrection.

In early centuries, only one meal a day was permitted during Lent. Restrictions lessened over time. In 1966, the Roman Catholic Church restricted the obligation of fasting to the first day of Lent and Good Friday. In the Eastern Church, however, abstinence from meat, fish, eggs and milk products for the entire period of Lent is still widely practiced.

To me, observing Lent is relevant for all Christians, whether they worship in a liturgical tradition or not. It may be that God wants you to give up something during the season, so as to participate even in a small degree in the sufferings of Christ. (Fasting from food is common, though fasting from technology, even if for a short while each day, may be even more relevant today.) It may be that he wants you to add something during the season, perhaps time each day for solitude and contemplation. Perhaps he wants you to attend a worship service outside your usual tradition.

*For reflection:*

I believe our Father wants to use these days of preparation for Easter to help you experience your Savior's death and resurrection more powerfully than ever before. The Spirit who makes us a "new creation" at salvation (2 Corinthians 5:17) wants to keep recreating us into the image of Jesus (Romans 8:29). As we become more like Jesus, others in our culture will want the Christ they see in us.

Will you ask the Spirit to use Lent to transform you, to the glory of God?

# *Day 3*

## **How can you meet with God?**

We were made for personal intimacy with God. From the Garden of Eden to today, our Creator longs to commune with us. Whatever our spiritual tradition, we can use the days of Lent to draw closer to the One who will then draw closer to us (James 4:8).

What are some practical ways to meet with God?

Bible study and prayer are the most obvious spiritual disciplines. However, both can be perfunctory rather than transforming. When we read the Bible as “love letters from home” (St. Augustine), the truth of Scripture comes to life. To experience the Bible more powerfully, imagine yourself in the text.

For instance, read the story of Peter walking on the water to Jesus (Matthew 14:22-33) and put yourself on the Sea of Galilee beside him. Hear the wind roar. Feel the waves crash into you and the rain sting your face. Hear Peter shouting over the storm to Jesus as the fisherman begins to drown. Watch Jesus come instantly to his floundering follower, rescuing him from certain death. And know that Jesus will do the same for you, whatever your storms today may be.

As you pray, encounter God with all your senses. Open your hands to him so as to receive his presence. Envision yourself before his throne, surrounded by the saints of the ages and the angels of all eternity. Imagine your words being heard in heaven’s halls, your praise joining the angelic chorus, your intercession being shared by

Jesus as he sits at the right hand of the Father (Romans 8:34). Ask the Spirit to pray through you as you commune with God. And know that you are experiencing the very real presence of the very real God.

A third obvious way to meet with God is through worship. You can do this in public and in person. For years I have followed the ACTS model—adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. To use this approach, begin your time with God by praising him. Read a psalm or sing a hymn or chorus that exalts his glory. Spend time reflecting to him his attributes and magnificence.

Next, ask the Spirit to show you anything in your life that displeases God, and confess all that comes to your thoughts. Do so specifically and honestly, then claim your Father’s forgiving grace (1 John 1:9). Now take time for specific thanksgiving, expressing your gratitude for all the ways God has blessed you. Finally, offer supplication for your needs and those of others. These steps are not a formula but an approach to the God who is as close as your knees.

*For reflection:*

The Jews typically set aside three times a day to meet with God (Psalm 55:17). Even under severe duress, Daniel “got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God” (Daniel 6:10).

During this Lenten season, perhaps you would like to follow their example. Why not begin today?

# *Day 4*

## **How can you hear from God?**

Theologian Francis Schaeffer reminded us that “God is there and he is not silent.” Mother Teresa said that when she began her religious life, she spent 90 percent of her prayer time talking to God. By the end of her life, she spent 90 percent of her prayer time listening to him.

How can we hear his voice today?

First, consider the Bible to be “God preaching” (J. I. Packer), and know that every time you listen to its words with an open heart, you are hearing from their Author.

Second, remember that our Creator still speaks through his creation. David, the shepherd King who spent many a night listening to God speak from the wonders of nature, testified:

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words,  
whose voice is not heard.  
Their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world (Psalm 19:1-4).

Take a moment to consider something created by God—a leaf, a sunset, a lake. Examine it in detail. Consider its intricate design.

Learn from the art to recognize the Artist. And identify a truth that is relevant to your life today.

Third, make time for solitude. As Jesus needed to be alone with his Father early in the morning (Mark 1:35) and late at night (Luke 6:12), so we need time to be alone with God, free from distractions. During this Lenten season, consider setting aside an hour a week just to listen to your Father's voice. Ask his Spirit to speak to you, and know that he will.

Fourth, consider fasting. Whether from food, technology, or other activities, take time from the physical to focus on the spiritual. Be careful not to impress others with your commitment (Matthew 6:16-18), but seek only to commune with your Father.

*For reflection:*

Spiritual disciplines do not earn God's favor. Rather, they position us to receive what his grace intends to give. Through Scripture, creation, and solitude, the Spirit is able to speak directly to us, transforming us by his power for God's glory.

What steps will you take to experience God more powerfully this Lenten season?

## *Day 5*

### **Why is Judas the most despised name in history?**

Today we begin our six weeks of character studies, learning from those who were transformed by the cross. Since the plot that led to Calvary began with Judas' betrayal, we'll start with him.

"Judas" is Greek for "Judah," one of the most significant names in Jewish history. It means "Yahweh leads," and was given to one of the sons of Jacob. His descendants became the largest tribe in southern Israel. After Assyria destroyed the ten northern tribes, Judah became the name of the surviving Jewish nation. To be named Judah or Judas would be like being named "America" today.

As a result, Judas was a popular and honored name for centuries. Judas Maccabeus was the famous and venerated leader of the Jewish rebellion which led to a century of Hebrew independence (166-63 B.C.; cf. 1 Maccabees 2:4). One of Jesus' half-brothers was named Judas (Matthew 13:55); the biblical book of Jude was written by him. Another of Jesus' 12 disciples was named Judas as well (John 14:22; this disciple is called Thaddeus in Mark 3:18). Judas was like "George," the first name of our nation's founding leader.

However, everything we associate with this name changed one night in a garden on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Today, who names their son Judas?

How did one of Jesus' 12 apostles become the most despised person in Scripture and Christian history? Without Judas Iscariot, Easter as we know it would not have happened. How is his story our story?

Judas Iscariot is mentioned 22 times in the New Testament. His name is a transliteration of the Greek *Ioudas Iskariotes*. *Iskariotes* can mean “man of Kerioth.” We’re not sure where Kerioth was located, though it was probably south of Judea and may be identified with the ruins of el-Kujreitein, located about 10 miles south of the city of Hebron, some 25-30 miles southeast of Jerusalem.

Two other explanations have been suggested as well. One is that the term is a nickname, a word which can be translated as “red-headed” or “ruddy-haired.” This approach may explain Judas’ depiction in early religious art as red-haired. Another suggestion accepted by many scholars is that the word should be connected to the *sicarii* or cloak-hidden daggers used by the Zealots in their insurgency against Rome. If this is the correct explanation, Judas would have been a Zealot, as was “Simon the Zealot” (Luke 6:15), the disciple whose name he always follows in the biblical lists of apostles. I find this a likely possibility.

Judas is not mentioned in the Gospels prior to his selection as an apostle (Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:19; Luke 6:16). *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles* (an early second-century document) says that he became a disciple at the same time as Peter, Andrew, James and John (Matthew 4:18-22). The Gospels tell us nothing else about Judas Iscariot except facts related directly to his betrayal of Jesus.

*For reflection:*

Today a follower of Jesus is called a “Christian” (Acts 11:26), a name that means “little Christ” or “Christ imitator.” How could you make the name more true of you today?

# *Day 6*

## **How did Judas betray Jesus?**

The Gospels describe Judas as a man of greed and sin. John 12 notes that “he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it” (v. 6).

For reasons we’ll explore in a moment, he chose to betray Jesus to the Jewish authorities seeking his death: “He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray him to them. And they were glad, and agreed to give him money. So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of a crowd” (Luke 22:4-6). His payment would be 30 pieces of silver, the price of a slave (Zechariah 11:12) or a servant gored by an ox (Exodus 21:32).

Judas’ betrayal was known by Jesus well before it occurred: “Then Jesus replied, ‘Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.’ (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him)” (John 6:70-71).

On Maundy Thursday, Jesus took his Last Supper with his disciples. They reclined on the floor next to low tables, resting on the left elbow while using the right hand to eat and drink. There may have been one horseshoe-shaped table for all 12, or four tables serving three men each.

John was on Jesus’ right, for he was “reclining next to him” (John 13:23). The other favored position was at the host’s left. Apparently Judas was in this place, for Jesus gave the bread directly to him

(v. 26). Jesus placed some of the bitter herbs of the Passover meal between two pieces of unleavened bread, dipped it in the *charosheth* paste (made of apples, dates, and nuts), and gave it to his betrayer.

After Judas took the bread from Jesus, “Satan entered into him” and Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly” (John 13:27). Some of the disciples thought Jesus was sending Judas for food or to give money to the poor. After receiving the bread, Judas “immediately went out. And it was night” (v. 30).

Given Jesus’ popularity after Palm Sunday, the authorities needed to arrest him without the crowds knowing and revolting. Judas knew the location of the private garden where Jesus often went with his disciples. Jesus knew that Judas knew its location, and chose to go there precisely so he could be found by the authorities.

Judas led the soldiers to him, then identified Jesus with a kiss. Passover always occurs at full moon, so that the soldiers would have been able to see Jesus well. However, Judas arranged this sign in case the soldiers confused Jesus for his disciples. Without it, Jesus could easily have escaped. “Kissed” means to kiss repeatedly and fondly (Matthew 26:49).

After Jesus’ arrest, Judas “changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood’” (Matthew 27:3-4). He threw the pieces of silver into the temple and “went and hanged himself” (v. 5). Later his corpse fell headlong, “burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1:18). So ended the story of the man who betrayed the Son of God.

But did it?

*For reflection:*

Tomorrow we’ll begin considering reasons why Judas betrayed Jesus. For today, what was the last time you disobeyed or dishonored your Lord? Why did you do it? Have you confessed your sin and asked for God’s cleansing forgiveness yet today?

# *Day 7*

## **Why did Judas betray Jesus?**

Judas' story is in the New Testament, not for those who experienced the first Easter but for us. The Gospels give us details that are unnecessary to the plot itself, but vital to the relevance of Judas' story for our lives today. So let's discover how his story is our story by asking the question, why did Judas betray Jesus?

**One:** Jesus enlisted Judas to betray him.

One of the absurd suggestions made over the centuries is that Jesus intended to die as a martyr and asked Judas to help make the arrangements. Proponents of this view claim that Jesus wanted to die so that he could liberate his soul from its physical prison. This is the thesis of the *Gospel of Judas* which caused a stir a few years ago, and represents the ancient heresy of Gnosticism. However, Jesus' repeated warnings to Judas, and his description of him as a "devil" (John 6:70), make clear the animosity he saw in Judas' motives.

**Two:** Judas was a coward.

Perhaps Judas acted purely to save himself. He joined Jesus' movement when it was growing in popularity, and betrayed his Lord when his own life became threatened. Since he was from the Judean region, he needed legal and political protection from the authorities if he wished to return to his home. The Galilean disciples could flee to their homes in Capernaum and elsewhere without much danger, but he could not.

However, Judas had many opportunities to leave Jesus before he came into Jerusalem and faced the authorities. He had done nothing illegal himself. He risked much by staying with the disciples while arranging to betray Jesus; if Peter and the others had discovered his plot, they would have done what was necessary to stop him. And it is hard to reconcile personal safety with Judas' later remorse (Matthew 27:4) and suicide (v. 5).

**Three:** Judas acted out of greed.

Perhaps Judas joined Jesus' band for financial motive, and he betrayed him for the same reason. The argument runs as follows:

Judas became the treasurer of the disciples and embezzled from them: "he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it" (John 12:6). It is surprising that he would have this function, given Matthew's obvious expertise as a tax-collector and financial manager. Perhaps Judas joined Jesus' movement out of financial motive and volunteered for this role. Since it would have been difficult to hide personal wealth from the other disciples, he may have given the money he stole to the Zealots, his family, or some other cause.

He likely shared the disciples' early belief that Jesus would be a political Messiah and that they would inherit thrones of reward with him (cf. Acts 1:6). When Judas came to understand that Jesus would not fulfill this role, he had no further financial motive for following him. So he went to the authorities to make what profit he could. He later came to regret his action, returning the money and committing suicide (Matthew 27:3-5).

However, I am unconvinced. If Judas was following Jesus merely for money, he could easily have left the disciples' band when he became disillusioned with his refusal to become a military Messiah. He would not have been the first: "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (John 6:66). Judas risked much by staying with Peter and the other disciples while looking for a way to betray Jesus. The money he made was insignificant. Profit could not have been his only motive.

And he could have bargained with the authorities for more payment than he received. His role in betraying Jesus to the authorities was critical. They had been seeking a way to arrest Jesus without stirring the crowds (Luke 22:2), and Judas gave them just such an opportunity. If money were his motive, it seems likely that he would have been able to negotiate a much larger ransom than 30 pieces of silver, and unlikely that he would have returned it in remorse.

*For reflection:*

How could cowardice or greed motivate a Christian in today's culture to betray Jesus? Have you faced such temptations recently?

# *Day 8*

## Was Judas a patriot?

So far we've considered three suggestions regarding Judas' perplexing betrayal of Jesus. The first—that Jesus enlisted Judas for this role—is clearly implausible. The others are that Judas was motivated by cowardice and greed.

Here's proposal number **four**: Judas acted out of patriotism.

It is possible to see Judas as a patriot who sought the liberation of his people from Rome. He viewed Jesus as a political Messiah who would overthrow the cursed Empire. He may have been a Zealot, as we noted earlier. And so he took part in Jesus' movement in order to free his people.

This is a possible, even likely explanation for Judas' decision to join Jesus' band of disciples. Perhaps this motive played a part in his later decision to betray Jesus. If so, we can think of four ways it would explain his actions.

First: he became disillusioned with Jesus and gave up on him. He came finally to understand that Jesus would not act as a political Messiah, so he betrayed him to the authorities in anger and frustration. But Jesus called him a “devil” early in their time together (John 6:70), well before it became apparent that Jesus would not act as a political Messiah. And how would betraying Jesus further Judas' political motive? Why would he take such a personal risk? And why would he later feel such remorse that he committed suicide?

Second: he betrayed Jesus to force his hand, believing that now he would have to demonstrate his power and overthrow the authorities. But why would he later admit that he had betrayed “innocent blood” (Matthew 27:4)?

Third: he came to agree with the authorities’ assessment of Jesus as a threat to the nation, so he collaborated with them to end Jesus’ movement. In this view, Judas became repulsed by Jesus’ claim to be Messiah and even more by his assertion that he was the Son of God. He saw him as a danger to the nation, especially given Jesus’ predictions that the Temple would be destroyed (Mark 13:1-2).

So, as the only non-Galilean among the Twelve, he worked with the Jerusalem Sanhedrin as a secret agent and infiltrator. Jesus had already been proclaimed a blasphemer and false prophet, so that “the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him” (John 11:57). Now Judas acted in obedience to their authority. But what would cause him later to see Jesus as “innocent”? Nothing about him had changed from Judas’ betrayal to Jesus’ legal sentence.

Fourth: he betrayed Jesus to the Jewish authorities in order to protect him from the Romans so he could continue his work, waiting for the day when he was ready to liberate the people from the Empire. Of course, Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin had sought Jesus’ death since the raising of Lazarus (John 11:53: “from that day on they plotted to take his life”). And Jesus warned the disciples repeatedly that he would die in Jerusalem. So Judas should not have been surprised when Caiaphas turned Jesus over to be executed.

While Judas may have joined Jesus’ movement to help liberate Israel from Rome, it is hard to see his betrayal of his Master as furthering this objective. And it is unlikely that he would have risked himself simply out of revenge and disillusionment.

*For reflection:*

Are there ways a Christian could betray Jesus today out of allegiance to another cause or purpose? Could you?

# *Day 9*

## **Was Judas used by Satan?**

So far we've considered four suggestions regarding Judas' perplexing betrayal of Jesus:

- Jesus enlisted Judas (clearly implausible)
- Judas was motivated by cowardice
- Judas was moved by greed
- Judas acted out of patriotism

Here's option **five**: Judas was used by Satan.

It is a clear fact of the Gospels that Judas was a tool of Satan in betraying and executing Jesus. He was a "devil" (John 6:70) early in his time with Jesus. Satanic influence led directly to his decision to cooperate with the authorities:

Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people. *Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present (Luke 22:1-6, emphasis added).*

As a result, at their Passover meal together, “The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus” (John 13:2). Later, “as soon as Judas took the bread [from Jesus], Satan entered into him” (v. 27) and he left to betray his Master. Thus Judas became one “doomed to destruction” (John 17:12); the phrase is used in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 for the “man of lawlessness” to come. In this way he fulfilled Jesus’ description of him as a “devil” (John 6:70).

While there is no question that Satan used Judas, this fact alone may not be sufficient to explain Judas’ motives in betraying Jesus. This is not the place for a discussion of satanic possession, but most theologians believe that the enemy can possess only what is first yielded to him.

We can view Judas in the same way we see the Gadarene demoniac, a man who was forced by demons to act against his own will and self-interest (Mark 5:1-5). But Judas’ remorse after betraying Jesus (Matt. 27:3) indicates his own involvement in Jesus’ condemnation, even though his decisions were clearly used by the enemy as well.

The satanic element is not enough to explain fully his motives. But it does illumine them, as I will suggest shortly.

*For reflection:*

Satan cannot possess a Christian, but he can oppress and tempt one. How has the enemy been using our culture to attack you lately? Have you sought the protection and power of God against the evil one today?

# *Day 10*

## **Did Judas betray Jesus out of pride?**

We've been considering reasons why Judas betrayed Jesus. First, let's review the other options so far and their problems:

- I do not believe that Judas betrayed Jesus out of cowardice, as he could much more easily have left the disciples' band rather than risk their retribution or his arrest by the authorities.
- He did not act out of greed, as the 30 pieces of silver he received were not sufficient to warrant the risks he took.
- He did not act out of patriotism to force Jesus' Messianic hand, as the Lord had made clear his intention to die in Jerusalem.
- He did not act in agreement with the authorities' rejection of Jesus; he later admitted that he had betrayed "innocent blood" (Matt. 27:4) though nothing about Jesus' legal status had changed from his arrest to his condemnation.
- He did not act out of disillusionment, as the risks to himself would be too great and nothing in the text indicates such a spirit or motive.
- He was certainly used by Satan, but he cooperated in Jesus' betrayal, as his later remorse indicates.

- He obviously fulfilled Scripture with his actions, but did not act for this purpose.

We'll close with option **six**: Judas betrayed Jesus out of pride.

It seems to me that if an answer is to be found in Scripture, it is connected to the role of Satan in Judas' actions. The devil obviously used Judas as his tool, and in fact "entered" him for this specific purpose: "Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus" (Luke 22:3-4). But what human event precipitated his decision to go to the authorities? What factor opened to the door to Satan's entry into Judas' life?

Judas made his decision after being rebuked by Jesus over the anointing in Bethany. When Judas objected to this extravagance, Jesus replied sternly and publicly: "Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial" (John 12:7). With this immediate result: "Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, 'What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?' So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over" (Matthew 26:14-16).

Seeing Judas as motivated by pride makes sense of his recorded activities within Jesus' band of disciples. He would have joined Jesus' movement to gain a prominent role in the Messianic Kingdom he expected the Lord to inaugurate. He would have found a way to take over the significant office of treasurer, the only functional office in Jesus' group of followers. He would have felt justified in taking from that money as he saw fit. He would have felt justified in rebuking both Jesus and the woman who anointed him at Bethany.

And pride is one of the most disastrous ways we open ourselves to satanic influence. Pride motivated the Fall in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:5). Pride was the chief strategy used by Satan against Jesus in the wilderness, as he tempted him to display his miraculous

powers for his own benefit and to seek the glory of the world. Pride was the motive in Peter's heart when he rebuked Jesus under satanic influence (Matt. 16:22-23). It is still true that "pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18).

*For reflection:*

How does our culture motivate you to the sin of pride? How will you refuse such temptation today?

# *Day 11*

## **How is Judas relevant today?**

As we have seen, “Judas” is a form of Judah, which means “Yahweh leads.” But Judas seldom lived up to his name. At the end, he was its opposite.

After Judas witnessed firsthand the results of his prideful betrayal of his Lord, he fell into deep remorse and committed suicide. Given the Jewish rejection of suicide as an infringement on God’s rights, it is extremely unlikely that Judas thought his action would placate God or lead to his forgiveness. His suicide should be judged the final act of a man crushed by remorse for his failed life.

Appropriately, Judas appears last in every list of apostles. Every time we find his name, we are reminded that he was a traitor. If I am right in understanding his motives, he was moved to betray Jesus by the same pride which tempts us all. It is easy for any disciple to serve Jesus for our sake rather than his—to teach to impress people rather than to serve them, to write to impress readers rather than to inform them, to preach to impress listeners rather than to persuade them. Such pride will also betray Jesus for its sake. If this could happen to Judas, it can happen to you and me.

God is calling us to be culture-changing Christians, men and women who use our influence to advance his Kingdom. Pride is the mortal enemy of such service. Self-sufficiency prevents the Holy Spirit from using us to save souls and transform lives. Self-sufficiency makes God a means to our end and puts us on the throne of our hearts. Pride ultimately will cause us to betray our Lord.

*For reflection:*

There is room for only one on the throne of your heart. Because you're a fallen person, your "default" position is to be on your own throne. If you have not consciously dethroned yourself and elevated Jesus today, you are ruling your own life.

It's been said that in every life there is a crown and a cross. If you're wearing the crown, Jesus is wearing the cross. For him to wear the crown, you must wear the cross. Are you serving Jesus out of pride or humility? For your sake or his? Are you seeking to impress our culture with Jesus or with you?

Here's the good news: Jesus, knowing all that Judas would soon do, still washed his feet in the Upper Room. Now he waits to wash ours. When last did you let him?

# Day 12

## How did “Sandy” become “Rocky”?

In the Garden of Gethsemane we find two extremes within Jesus’ band of disciples. At one end was Judas Iscariot, always named last in every list of the apostles and always identified as the man who betrayed his Lord. At the other end was Simon Peter, always named first in every list of the apostles and typically identified as the leader of their band.

In Gethsemane, both acted as we would expect. Judas betrayed Jesus, while Peter took up a sword to defend him. But what happened next must have shocked everyone who knew Peter—the Galilean fisherman abandoned Jesus and denied three times he even knew him.

Why? And what does his failure say to us today?

Let’s begin with his name. Jesus’ leading apostle was originally called Symeon, or “Simon,” and carried this name among those who knew him well (see Acts 15:14, where James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church, calls him “Simon”). The name can be translated “sand” or “sandy.”

In Mark 3:16, Jesus gave him the added descriptive “Peter”: “These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter).” Mark calls him Simon before this text, Peter thereafter. The name in Aramaic is *kepha*, transliterated into Greek as *Kephas* or *Cephas*. It means “stone” or “rock,” and was meant to signify a change in character.

Note Jesus' description of Simon at Caesarea Philippi:

“Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:15-18).

The word translated “Peter” is *petros*, meaning “small stone” or “pebble.” Jesus called himself the “rock” on which he would build his church, using the Greek *petra*, meaning “bedrock.” (While the Aramaic language spoken by Jesus does not enable these distinctions, Matthew recorded his meaning in Greek, thus highlighting their difference.)

Simon clearly lived up to Jesus' name from him after the resurrection:

- He was a pillar apostle—“James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me” (Galatians 2:9a).
- He was the preacher of Pentecost (Acts 2:14ff) and earliest leader of the Christian movement (cf. John 21:15: “Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs’”).
- He was an apostle to the Jews: “I [Paul] had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. . . . They [Peter, James, and John] agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews” (Galatians 2:7, 9b).

*For reflection:*

Jesus clearly saw a potential in Peter that would not be fully realized for years to come. He sees the same in you. God knows you better than you know yourself, and has a “good, pleasing and perfect will” for your life (Romans 12:2). Have you sought and submitted to his culture-changing purpose for your life today?

# *Day 13*

## **How did Peter follow his Lord?**

Simon Peter was originally from Bethsaida in Galilee (John 1:44), a fishing village east of Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. By the time he became one of Jesus' disciples, however, he had moved to Capernaum, the fishing and industrial capital of Galilee (Mark 1:21, 29). He later moved to Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection and Pentecost (Acts 4:32; 5:2). At the end of his life, he was probably living and pastoring in Rome (1 Peter 5:13).

What else do we know about Jesus' lead apostle?

### *His family*

Peter's father's name was Jonah: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah" (Matthew 16:17). His brother was Andrew, who along with John was a disciple of John the Baptist (John 1:35, 40). Andrew in turn led Peter to Jesus: after making a commitment to our Lord, "the first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, 'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus" (John 1:41).

He was married, for "Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever" (Mark 1:30). At some point his wife became a Christian: "Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?" (1 Corinthians 9:5). The historian Eusebius (who died in AD 202) records that "Peter and Philip begat children" (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.30.2). A young man named John Mark became his adopted son in the faith, so that Peter could call him "my son Mark" (1 Peter 5:13).

### *His vocation*

Peter was a fisherman: “As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen” (Mark 1:16). He and Andrew worked in business partnership with James and John (Luke 5:7, 10).

This partnership was so successful that they had employees (Mark 1:20). Peter owned his own home in Capernaum, the largest yet discovered in the most significant industrial town in Galilee. He was able to return to his fishing profession after Jesus’ death (John 21:3), indicating that it had been maintained in his absence. And he was able to provide financially for his wife and her mother during the years he left his work to follow Jesus.

It was from this vocation of fishing that Jesus called Peter to “fish for men,” his life mission to the end of his days (Matthew 4:19).

### *His education*

Peter and John were called “unschooled, ordinary men” (Acts 4:13) by the religious authorities. This did not mean that they were ignorant or uneducated, but that they were not trained in the rabbinic schools. In other words, they did not have “seminary degrees.”

However, Peter was able to quote extensively from the Old Testament in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14-40) and in both of his letters. He spoke Aramaic, but was able to write in Greek (as 2 Peter proves, since he wrote it without a secretary). And reliable tradition indicates that Mark wrote his Gospel, including its Old Testament references and details regarding the life and teachings of Jesus, from the memories and testimony of Peter. Irenaeus (who died in A.D. 202) notes, “Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter” (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1).

### *For reflection:*

Peter had no idea that his experiences and education were fitting him so perfectly for his role in Jesus’ Kingdom advance, but they

were. In what ways have your life experiences equipped you for your current service to our Lord? How can you see his providence in your preparations?

# *Day 14*

## **How did Peter fail his Lord?**

After following his brother to Jesus, Peter quickly became the leader of their band. He was in the first group called by Jesus to full-time discipleship (Mark 1:16), and was soon chosen to be part of the twelve disciples (Mark 3:13).

He was later included in Jesus' inner circle along with James and John. The three were with Jesus for the healing of the synagogue ruler's daughter (Mark 5:37), the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:2), a private time of instruction on the Mount of Olives (Mark 13:3), and in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33). Peter is named first every time the Twelve are listed. Most significantly, he uttered the Great Confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16).

Yet the Galilean was often weak and immature as well. Early in Jesus' ministry, Peter tried to make him into a popular teacher (Mark 1:35-37). He tried to prevent him from going to the cross (Mark 8:33). He was rebuked by the Lord for his foolish statement at the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:5-7).

Years later, Paul records that Peter catered to the circumcision party in Antioch: "When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group" (Galatians 2:11-12).

Perhaps the paradox that is Peter is nowhere better pictured than in his experience on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14). He was the first to step out of the boat and onto the water (v. 29). But “when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’” (v. 30). With this response: “Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’” (v. 31).

*For reflection:*

Peter was a man of great strengths and great flaws. What would God say are your greatest strengths? Your greatest flaws? How are you using both for his glory today?

# *Day 15*

## **Why did Peter deny his Lord?**

Before his death, Jesus said to Peter: “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you [plural, signifying all the disciples] as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31-32).

Despite his Lord’s warnings, Peter boasted during the Last Supper, “Even if all fall away, I will not” (Mark 14:29). Turning to Jesus, he “insisted emphatically, ‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you’” (v. 31). And so he was warned by Jesus that he would deny him that very night (v. 30).

As Jesus prayed in travail in Gethsemane, Peter fell asleep and was rebuked by his Lord (Mark 14:37). After Jesus’ arrest, Peter denied knowing him three times (Mark 14:66-72). The last time, “he began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know this man you’re talking about’” (v. 72).

Clearly, Peter’s self-sufficient courage failed him when he needed courage most.

However, after his resurrection, Jesus brought Peter to repentance and restoration. At the tomb the angel said to the women, “Go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you’” (Mark 16:7). At the Sea of Galilee, Jesus gave Peter three opportunities to reaffirm his love for his Master, and three times commissioned him to “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-19).

No one is beyond the redemption and forgiveness of Jesus.

*For reflection:*

Note that Peter's failures are all documented in Mark's Gospel, and recall that Peter was most likely the source for Mark's record. Clearly, the apostle did not hide his faults. To the contrary, he wanted us to know about them so we can admit ours as well and claim the transforming grace Peter received. Why do you need such grace today?

# *Day 16*

## **How did Peter serve his Lord?**

After Jesus' ascension, Peter quickly became the leader of God's Kingdom movement. He led in choosing Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:15ff). He preached the Pentecost sermon (2:14ff), and worked with John as instruments for God's healing of the crippled beggar (3:1ff). He then preached the gospel to those who responded to this miracle (3:12ff).

Peter represented the church before the Sanhedrin (4:8ff), rebuked Ananias and Sapphira (5:3ff), represented the church again before the authorities (5:29ff), and represented the Christian movement in Samaria after Philip's ministry there (8:14-25). He then served as a missionary and emissary for the Lord and his church:

- He was used to heal Aeneas in Lydda (9:32-35) and Dorcas in Joppa (9:39-43).
- He led Cornelius to Christ at Caesarea (ch. 10), then defended this Gentile conversion before the Jerusalem church (ch. 11).
- He traveled to Antioch to observe the Christian movement there (Galatians 2:11ff).
- He may have traveled to Corinth: "One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ'" (1 Corinthians 1:12). Note Irenaeus's record regarding Peter and Paul:

“Both of them planted and likewise taught us in our Corinth” (recorded by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.8).

- He may have traveled through the region of Pontus-Bithynia: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1). Eusebius likewise notes that “Peter appears to have preached in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia to the Jews of the dispersion” (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.1.2).

He eventually arrived in Rome, where he wrote 1 Peter (1 Peter 5:13). Irenaeus describes Peter and Paul as the founders of the church at Rome: “Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church” (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1).

*For reflection:*

Jesus clearly chose his lead apostle well. Peter’s business experience, personal courage, and love for his Lord combined to make him one of history’s most effective leaders. In the same way, God knew what he was doing when he called you to your present Kingdom assignment. Are you fulfilling his call today?

# *Day 17*

## **How did Peter die for his Lord?**

It's been said that Jesus made two promises to his followers: we would always be in trouble, but we would always have all we need. He made these twin promises clear in John 16:33: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

Such trouble and triumph were on display the day Jesus told Peter how his apostle would die: "I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" (John 21:18-19).

Jesus' prediction came true. A first-century letter written from Rome, tells us that the first pastor of that church was martyred for his faith: "Peter, who because of unrighteous jealousy suffered not one or two but many trials, and having thus given his testimony went to the glorious place which was his due" (*1 Clement* 5.4).

Peter's execution most likely occurred after the fire of Rome. Tacitus, the greatest ancient Roman historian, recorded Nero's persecution of Christians in his attempt to transfer blame for the conflagration which consumed much of the city (*Annals* 15.44). During this spate of executions, Peter was made to watch his wife's death first: "When the blessed Peter saw his own wife led out to die, he rejoiced because of her summons and her return home, and

called to her very encouragingly and comfortingly, addressing her by name, and saying, ‘O thou, remember the Lord.’ Such was the marriage of the blessed, and their perfect disposition toward those dearest to them” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.30.2).

His own execution followed: “He was crucified head-downwards; for he had requested that he might suffer in this way” (Eusebius, 3.1.2). An early source describes his death:

Peter, having come to the cross, said: Since my Lord Jesus Christ, who came down from the heaven upon the earth, was raised upon the cross upright, and He has deigned to call to heaven me, who am of the earth, my cross ought to be fixed downmost, so as to direct my feet towards heaven; for I am not worthy to be crucified like my Lord. Then, having reversed the cross, they nailed his feet up (*Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul*, Ante-Nicene Fathers 8.484).

In this way, Jesus’ prediction regarding the manner of Peter’s death was fulfilled literally.

Early sources even give us the date of Peter’s death: “the consummation of the holy glorious Apostles Peter and Paul was on the 29<sup>th</sup> of the month of June—in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and strength” (ibid, 485). This would most likely be in the year AD 65.

Eusebius tells us that Peter’s remains were buried within the Vatican, while Paul’s were located on the Ostian way: “if you will go to the Vatican or to the Ostian way, you will find the trophies of those who laid the foundations of this church” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.7). Some ancient manuscripts related to the apocryphal *Acts of Peter and Paul* state: “the body of St. Peter was put into the Vatican, near the place of the sea-fights, and that of St. Paul into the Vostesian (or Ostesian) Way, two miles from the city; and in these places, through their prayers, many good deeds are wrought to the faithful in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Acts of Peter and Paul*, 485).

The Roman Catholic Church believes that it discovered Peter's actual remains beneath a burial monument discovered during archaeological investigations in 1941. During a private tour of the catacombs beneath the Vatican, I was allowed within a few feet of this venerated site.

*For reflection:*

Like Peter, you have a limited number of years to serve your Lord. Only your Father knows the date and manner of your death (assuming Jesus delays his return that long). Today could be your last day before you meet God. If it were, would he find you faithful?

# *Day 18*

## **How is Peter's story ours?**

The resurrection transformed Simon Peter from a horrific failure who cowered before servants to a towering hero who preached before the highest authorities on earth and died courageously for his Lord. Before Easter, Peter had returned to his fishing vocation. After Easter, he would fish for men without ceasing.

How is his story your story?

Consider that remarkable miracle by which Peter walked on the water to Jesus. As we noted last Tuesday, few events describe his paradoxical life better than the one recorded in Matthew 14. Let's close our week with Peter by returning to this event, recorded not for his sake (he would never forget it) but for ours.

It was late, around 3:00 in the morning. Jesus had sent his disciples in a boat across the Sea of Galilee so he could climb one of the nearby hills to pray. Suddenly, a catastrophic storm struck. Weather fronts in that part of the world typically move from west to east. Northwest of the Sea of Galilee stands a deep valley which serves as a natural wind tunnel, amplifying storms into life-threatening gales.

This one came upon them without warning. Their small fishing boat was "buffeted by the waves" (v. 24)—the Greek word means that it was "tortured." Water was stinging their faces and drenching their bodies. The wind was howling in their ears. They were fighting for their lives.

Just then they saw Jesus walking on the water to them. Rather than taking heart, they thought he was a ghost and were terrified. (Their sailors' superstition said that when someone was about to die on the water, the ghosts of those who died at that place before them would appear to lead them to the afterlife.) But Peter somehow knew better. He believed Jesus' assurance that this was their Lord. He asked Jesus to beckon him out of the boat and onto the storm-tossed seas.

Envision the scene. A man who spent his life fishing these waters now walked on them. Imagine a pilot flying without his plane, a deep-sea diver without his apparatus, an astronaut without his space suit. So Peter walked to Jesus.

Until he saw the wind and the waves. Taking his eyes off his Lord in fear, he began to sink. He would drown. He was going to die. Then came his prayer, one of the greatest and most profound recorded in all of literature. A prayer we must all learn to pray every day. It is the shortest prayer in the Bible: "Lord, save me!" (v. 30). In the Greek, it's just "Lord, save!" And Jesus did.

*For reflection:*

The risen Christ is ready to answer Peter's prayer every time he hears it. If you are willing to serve Jesus in our fallen culture, you will face storms of opposition. When I was in high school, my youth minister used to tell us that if you're not running into Satan, you're probably running with him.

Do you need Jesus' omnipotence today?

## *Day 19*

### **Why did the authorities oppose Jesus?**

A friend recently sent me an essay on the fascinating life of Benjamin Franklin. At the age of 25, Franklin founded America's first library. At 36, he designed a heating stove still in use today. At 40, he helped to harness electricity. At 43, he started the first fire department. At 45, he founded the University of Pennsylvania. At 79, he invented bifocals. His genius was instrumental in the founding of America, and his legacy lives on today.

By comparison, Jesus Christ wrote not a single book, but more books have been written about him than any other figure in history. He began not a single institution, but more institutions have been started in his name than in any other. He held not a single office, but his life and teachings have influenced more people than any other person in human history. All this despite his death at the young age of 33. Actually, because of it.

So far this Lenten season we've studied the lives of Judas, the man who betrayed Jesus, and Peter, the man who denied him. Now we'll turn to the man who sought his arrest and death. The high priest who convicted Jesus was named Joseph Caiaphas. He was a son-in-law of Annas, the high priest who had been deposed in AD 15. Caiaphas ruled the nation from AD 18-36, when he was deposed by the same ruler who had removed his father-in-law.

Caiaphas was one of the first to propose that the authorities seek Jesus' death:

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life (John 11:49-53).

In his strategy, Jesus’ death would unify the nation against the threat of Rome. The people had always looked to the time when the nation would gather together in their homeland under the Messiah (cf. Psalm 106:47; 107:3; Isaiah 43:5-6; 49:5-6; Jeremiah 23:3; 31:8-11; Ezekiel 34:12-13; 37:21-22). Now their high priest predicted that the growing popularity of Jesus would bring people from all over the world to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. And he was right.

But of course, Caiaphas could not countenance the notion that Jesus might actually be qualified to be the Messiah (John 7:45-52). To him, this upstart provided the opportunity to bring the nation together and unify their power against their Roman oppressors. If the Sanhedrin could turn the crowds against Jesus, they would then demonstrate their own power over the nation and against the Empire.

*For reflection:*

What personal or political motives cause Christians in our culture to betray Jesus?

## *Day 20*

### **How did the authorities conspire against Jesus?**

Jesus' ministry can be divided into the year of preparation, the year of popularity, and the year of hostility. As his movement continued to gain momentum and favor with the crowds, the Jewish authorities became increasingly concerned and threatened.

Their opposition to Jesus was motivated by pride and position. They were jealous of his popularity with the people, so that even Pilate could tell that "it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him" (Mark 15:10). And they were intensely motivated to protect their position. If Jesus' movement became a threat to the Roman authorities, the Empire would hold them responsible. They would be seen as weak and ineffective in controlling their nation, and might be removed and even executed. If a police chief loses control of his officers, the mayor will replace him.

So the leaders of the Sanhedrin (the legal body which ruled Israel under the authority of Rome) finally resolved to deal with Jesus. Six months earlier, they had sent temple guards to arrest him while he was teaching in the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles, but the soldiers were so impressed with his teaching that they did not carry out their orders (John 7:32-49).

Then Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, raising the fervor of the crowds with him, so that the authorities knew they must end this threat (John 11:45-53). But Jesus withdrew from their jurisdiction, so their efforts were frustrated: "Therefore Jesus no longer moved

about publicly among the Jews. Instead he withdrew to a region near the desert, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples” (v. 54).

All they could do was to wait in hopes that he would return to Jerusalem, perhaps for the Passover. If he did, “the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him” (John 11:57). When he made his Triumphal Entry into the Holy City, he returned to die.

The authorities wanted to arrest and execute him on the spot, but they feared his popularity with the crowds: “the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people” (Luke 22:2). They tried to trap him in his own words (Matthew 22:15), asking their now-famous questions about paying taxes to Caesar and marriage in the resurrection. If they could have shown him to be a heretic or rebel, the crowds would reject him or the Romans would arrest him. Either way, their problem would have been solved.

But Jesus confounded and embarrassed them, making their crisis even worse. And he stayed each night in Bethany, out of the city, so that they could not arrest him under cover of darkness and away from the crowds.

As we have seen, Judas’ willingness to betray Jesus gave the officials their opportunity. They seized him in the privacy of the Garden of Gethsemane. But now they had to move quickly to justify their arrest before the crowds learned of their action. It was imperative that they be able to convict him of a capital crime so that the crowds would turn against him and the Romans would execute him.

*For reflection:*

More Christians died for their faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in the previous 19 centuries combined. More Christians suffer persecution today than followers of all other religions combined. Why do you think Jesus and his followers have faced

such opposition, from his day to ours? When last did you pay a significant price to follow your Lord?

# *Day 21*

## **Who arrested Jesus?**

Jesus' trials on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday occurred in four phases. The first was preparation to arrest our Lord.

As we have seen, the authorities contracted with Judas to betray Jesus to them. After agreeing to their terms, the traitor "sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of a crowd" (Luke 22:6). Knowing his popularity, the rulers feared a revolt on the part of the people. And they knew that their actions were illegal and would not stand scrutiny. So they had to arrest Jesus quietly, then search quickly for justification to hold and eventually execute him.

Knowing these obstacles to his atoning death, Jesus solved the authorities' problem for them. He went to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he knew Judas would find him: "Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples" (John 18:2). This was a private, secluded garden located on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem's walls and away from the crowds.

However, the Jewish officials remembered the failure of their earlier attempt to arrest Jesus using only their Temple guards (John 7:32-49). So they appealed to Pilate, the Roman governor, for his help.

In turn, Pilate gave them a "detachment of soldiers" (John 18:3a). "Detachment" translates *speira*, a military cohort of 400 to 600

men. These men had been headquartered at the Antonia Fortress near the temple area. The size of the detachment is demonstrated by the fact that they were led by a “commander” (v. 12). This was a “chief commander,” not the “centurion” who would have led the group if they had been 100 or less in number. So we know that between 400 to 600 men came with Judas into the Garden that night, along with “some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees” (v. 3b).

The soldiers brought “torches, lanterns and weapons” (v. 3c) even though it is always a full moon at Passover and Jesus had just a small band of peasant followers. Clearly the authorities did not underestimate the threat he posed.

We often picture our Lord as “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” Those who knew him best saw him differently. They witnessed his physical strength and anger in throwing moneychangers out of the temple. They knew his stamina in praying through the night and hiking the length and breadth of the country, his courage in confronting lepers who terrified the populace, his valor in standing up to the most powerful men in Jewish society.

It should not surprise you that Pilate sent a *speira* of soldiers to arrest this Galilean carpenter. As Jesus would prove in just four days, Rome’s greatest military might was no match for his omnipotence.

*For reflection:*

How does our culture view Jesus today? How is his power and authority relevant to your Kingdom service?

## *Day 22*

### **How did the soldiers arrest Jesus?**

The Garden of Gethsemane was located on the western slopes of the Mount of Olives, with a clear view of Jerusalem's eastern walls and gates. As the soldiers were marching out single file under the light of their torches, Jesus could clearly mark their progression. He had perhaps 30 to 45 minutes from the time they first exited the city to the time they would find him.

During this interlude, he had abundant opportunity to flee into the forest. If he then retreated to his Galilean homeland, he would likely have escaped their wrath. So long as he posed no threat to the authorities' status, they would have ignored him. Rather than dying on a cruel cross, he could have lived a natural life.

Each time I take a study group to Israel, we pause in this Garden to reflect on our Lord's decision. We imagine him watching the soldiers in their march, knowing the torture that lay ahead. He knew as well the sins that would be laid on his sinless soul, the separation from his holy Father that he would suffer. And yet he waited for them to come to the only place where they could find and arrest him.

And so they came. Judas kissed him, as was the pre-arranged signal for the soldiers to identify and arrest Jesus. Temple soldiers accompanied Judas forward, as this was a religious rather than civil arrest. But Jesus' words and response to the crisis so impressed these Jewish soldiers that they fell to the ground in awe (John 18:6).

Undoubtedly they had heard him teaching in the temple precincts that week and on Jesus' earlier trips to Jerusalem.

So Jesus again surrendered to them, all the while seeking to prevent his disciples' arrest: "If you are looking for me, then let these men go" (John 18:8). When the temple guards rallied and began to arrest Jesus, Peter cut off the ear of the high priest's servant (vs. 10-11). At this point Jesus and his followers could probably have run away in the confusion. But Jesus refused to defend himself, and actually healed the ear of the stricken servant (Luke 22:51).

Note the illegality of the religious authorities' actions. They were present and actually participating in Jesus' arrest, though they would soon serve as his (supposedly) impartial judges. The high priest was so close to Jesus that his servant was injured in the melee. This was just the first of many illegal actions which led to Jesus' death.

Responding to the violence of Peter, the Roman soldiers then stepped into the fray: "Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus" (John 18:12a). When the Roman soldiers became involved, Jesus' disciples all fled into the night while the soldiers "bound" Jesus (v. 12b). This was the second illegality, as Jewish law did not allow authorities to bind the prisoner unless he was attempting to flee the scene. Jesus' actions indicated just the opposite motive.

*For reflection:*

The next time you fear that your sins have cost you Jesus' love, remember Gethsemane. Know that he chose there to die for you, to pay the debt you owed and purchase your salvation. He would do it all again today, just for you. Never again wonder if he loves you.

# *Day 23*

## **Who was Annas?**

Jesus' arrest had been made under the authority of the religious officials, as the prisoner would be tried under their jurisdiction. The Empire allowed the Sanhedrin autonomy and authority to try cases and prescribe punishments except for capital offenses (where Rome must agree and carry out the execution).

Jesus was brought first to the home of Annas, the former high priest and father-in-law of Caiaphas, the ruling high priest (John 18:13). Annas had led the nation from AD 7 to 15, when he was deposed by the Roman procurator Valerius Gratus and replaced by his son-in-law. He wielded the greatest influence in the Sanhedrin, so his work in deposing the prisoner was intended to speed up the process of prosecution.

Accordingly, the "high priest" (a title still conferred on Annas by the Jews; cf. Acts 4:6) began his personal interrogation (John 18:19-23). But Jesus would not incriminate himself, standing on the statements he had made publicly during the week. One of Annas' associates then struck Jesus in the face.

To appreciate what Jesus endured here and in the events which followed, it may be helpful to understand how the Jewish legal process was supposed to be conducted:

- A person could not be convicted of even a minor crime on the basis of only one witness (Deuteronomy 19:15).

- A trial must begin in the daytime; if it was not completed that day, it must be adjourned and resumed the next day.
- No person could be deposed in private, as all proceedings were to be conducted in public before the entire assembled court.
- A person could be acquitted on the first day of trial, but could not be convicted on the same day his trial began.
- No person could be convicted on the basis of his own evidence or testimony. Meanwhile the judges must preside objectively.

And so we see that five more illegalities were committed during Annas' examination of Jesus.

*For reflection:*

Jesus knew the mockery and illegality he would face when he turned himself over to be arrested. He also knows every sin you have committed in the past, and every sin you don't know you'll commit in the future. Yet "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Have you thanked him for such grace today?

## *Day 24*

### **Why was Jesus convicted by Caiaphas?**

Annas' interrogation allowed Caiaphas the time needed to assemble the quorum for a Sanhedrin meeting. The Roman soldiers returned to their castle barracks, leaving Jesus under control of the temple guards. Jesus then appeared before the Sanhedrin, the ruling court of Israel. What followed was one of the greatest travesties of justice and legal proceedings in history.

Jesus was brought to the palace of Caiaphas by night. Some of the officials had already betrayed their objectivity by arranging for Jesus' arrest and participating in it. Now they collected witnesses and coached them to give false testimony against the accused (Matthew 26:59), not only violating their impartiality but obviously compromising the integrity of the proceedings.

However, even their arranged witnesses did not agree with each other (Mark 14:56). The court could not find two witnesses in agreement with each other, the minimum required by their law (Deuteronomy 19:15). Now the entire strategy of Caiaphas and his cronies was in danger. If the crowds learned that they had arranged for Jesus' arrest and mistreated him in custody, only to find no basis for a conviction, his popular standing would only increase while theirs would be destroyed.

So the desperate high priest pleaded with Jesus to betray himself: "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (Matthew 26:63). Since no person could

be made to testify against himself, if Jesus had remained silent he would have been acquitted.

Instead, he pronounced the very words which he knew would incur the wrath of the court: “‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied. ‘But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven’” (v. 64). Even then Jesus could not be convicted on his testimony alone. Nonetheless, Caiaphas and the court pronounced him guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death (vs. 65-66).

Of course, all of this had been conducted illegally under cover of darkness. In fact, every step and detail of Jesus’ Jewish trial violated the laws of his nation. Caiaphas then reconvened the court in daytime to ratify their decision (vs. 67-68). However, their court had no right to impose the death penalty. Annas had been deposed as high priest by the Romans in AD 15 for executing a prisoner without the consent of the procurator, and would not risk such retribution again. So the court took their convict to Pilate. And Good Friday continued.

*For reflection:*

Imagine yourself as Caiaphas. What desperation would fuel such sacrilege? What motives would lead him to commit acts he had to know were illegal? Then consider the last willful, intentional sin you committed. Why did you disobey your Lord? How will you respond to his atoning love now?

# *Day 25*

## **How is Caiaphas relevant today?**

In actuality, Jesus did not stand trial before Caiaphas—Caiaphas stood trial before Jesus. If the high priest had admitted his egotistical ambition and sacrilege, he could have been forgiven and granted eternal life. As it is, his name is known to history for his scheming, tyrannical persecution of the sinless Son of God.

In November 1990, Caiaphas' family tomb was discovered by archaeologists. His ossuary (burial box) contained the bones of a man of about 60 years old, a woman, two children and two infants. When research was finished, the bones were reburied. I've seen the actual ossuary on display in Jerusalem's Israel Museum.

Today there is no shortage of men and women like Caiaphas. Atheist Richard Dawkins claims that religion is “the root of all evil” and calls it a virus in the software of humanity that must be expunged. Fellow atheist Sam Harris is confident that science will destroy religion. Like Caiaphas, they and others who are so convinced that Jesus is not God will one day learn that their ego-driven rejection of the Lord has not affected his actual existence one iota.

While anyone can visit the remains of Caiaphas, the tomb of the one he convicted is empty, now and forever. Because of Easter, the man treated as a criminal by the Jewish authorities will return as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16), and every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the

glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11). Including those who reject him today.

Caiaphas shows that our beliefs regarding Jesus do not change his reality. The high priest was certain that the Galilean carpenter's claims to divinity were heresy. Rather than investigate these claims for objective evidence and biblical truth, he dismissed them based solely on his opinion. He was like the man who recently told me, "I don't believe in hell," as though his opinion has anything to do with hell's reality.

Tragically, many in our culture share Caiaphas's belief that their beliefs are relevant to God's existence and glory.

*For reflection:*

I've been many times to Cuba. During my first trip to visit these remarkable people, I was told that half of those living in the interior of the island have never seen the ocean—the trip is too far and too impractical for them. Imagine that they chose therefore to reject the ocean's existence. What would you say to convince them otherwise?

You could show them pictures, but they could claim that they were faked. You could tell them of your numerous visits to the ocean, but they could say you were lying. You could bring them sea water, but they could say it was fabricated. The easiest way to convince them that the ocean exists is the most obvious—take them to see it.

Who is your Caiaphas today?

# *Day 26*

## **Who was the man who killed God's Son?**

I was born in 1958. In that year, VISA and American Express cards were introduced. The Ford Edsel made its first appearance. The U.S. launched its first satellite, called Explorer I, into space. Elvis Presley was inducted into the Army. The first Pizza Hut opened in Kansas City. And the hula hoop was introduced; over 100 million were sold.

Average yearly income was \$4,650. A house cost \$30,000. Tuition at Harvard was \$1,250 per year. A Ford cost \$1,967 to \$3,929. A gallon of gas was 24 cents. A gallon of milk was \$1.01. A loaf of bread was 19 cents. And postage stamps went up to four cents.

Everything has its price, no matter what year we buy it. Nothing is free. Even our salvation, given to us by God's grace, cost him the death of his Son. So far we've learned why Judas betrayed him, how Peter denied him, and why Caiaphas condemned him. Now we'll turn to the one man who had the power to execute him, and learn why he did. Along the way, we'll learn why we are tempted to be Pilate today.

Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea from AD 27-37, coming to his post only two years before Jesus' arrest. It had been a tumultuous time.

When he and his soldiers first entered Jerusalem, he required them to carry their ensigns with the image of the emperor, though earlier Roman rulers had removed these images in deference to the Jewish

horror of idolatry. The Jews protested his action for five days. On the sixth day he admitted them into his presence, surrounded them with soldiers, and threatened to kill them if they did not drop the issue. They bared their necks to the soldiers' swords, and Pilate backed down. It was a bad beginning.

Not long thereafter, Pilate set about expanding the aqueducts which brought water into Jerusalem, but he took money from the temple treasury to pay for the project. A riot ensued which was put down only by armed aggression on the part of his soldiers.

On another occasion the governor dedicated some shields in the palace of Herod in honor of Caesar. The Jews asked him to remove the shields, as they were inscribed with the names of donors and thus seemed idolatrous to them. Pilate refused, so the Jews appealed to Emperor Tiberias. Caesar sided with the Jews, ordering Pilate to remove the shields.

Still more recent was this incident reported to Jesus: "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices" (Luke 13:1). Apparently some Jews from Galilee had come to Jerusalem to make their sacrifices, perhaps for Passover, and had been killed by Pilate. We have no other record of this event, but it further demonstrates the governor's deteriorating relations with his subjects.

Clearly, Pilate was on thin ice with his Jewish subjects. This fact will be crucial as the events of Good Friday unfold.

*For reflection:*

Why do you think Pilate was so antagonistic to his Jewish subjects? Why are many antagonistic to Christianity today? What can we learn from the Jewish response to Pilate's aggression?

# *Day 27*

## **Why did Pilate try to release Jesus?**

It was now the day we call Good Friday. Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin had condemned Jesus as a blasphemer, a capital crime. But Rome had taken from them the ability to execute criminals, so they must bring Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the region.

They knew that Pilate would ignore their theological charges, so they changed the allegation: “We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king” (Luke 23:2).

Pilate easily knew the first two charges to be false. If Jesus had been “subverting the nation” or opposing payment of taxes, he would have been notified by his own soldiers before now. In fact, Jesus had taught just the opposite on the previous Tuesday: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21).

But the third charge was extremely serious. Sedition was the unpardonable sin against Rome. To claim to be a “king” in opposition to Caesar was a crime against which Pilate must act or face the wrath of Rome.

So the governor returned to his palace where he asked the prisoner: “Are you the king of the Jews?” (John 18:33). If Jesus had accepted this title, he would have been guilty of insurrection against Rome. Jesus wisely replied, “Is that your own idea, or did others talk to you about me?” (v. 34). Pilate admitted that “it was

your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me” (v. 35). So Jesus explained: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place” (v. 36). In other words, he was no threat to Pilate or Rome, as his disciples’ pacifistic actions showed.

Pilate became convinced that Jesus was no claimant to political power (v. 37), so “he went out again to the Jews and said, ‘I find no basis for a charge against him’” (v. 38). With this announcement, Jesus’ trials should have been over, as he had been found not guilty by the highest legal authority in the nation.

Jesus’ enemies were now in the worst possible position. They had conducted an illegal trial against Jesus, pronouncing publicly their finding of blasphemy. Then they illegally changed their accusation to gain a trial by Pilate, only to hear him declare the prisoner not guilty. Any moment, the crowds would turn against them and cause precisely the kind of uprising they were trying so desperately to avoid.

So they insisted that Jesus “stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here” (Luke 23:5). In other words, they alleged that Jesus had been preaching insurrection in regions distant from Pilate, explaining why he has heard no such reports before this day. But their strategy backfired: when Pilate learned that Jesus had come from Galilee, the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, he immediately transferred the prisoner to his custody, as Herod was in Jerusalem for the Passover (vs. 6-7). He and Pilate had been enemies (v. 12), so the governor was happy to pass his problem to his adversary.

At first this strategy seemed to work, as Herod “had been wanting to see Jesus” for a long while, hoping to witness a miracle for himself (v. 8). But Jesus refused to answer the many questions with which Herod and Jesus’ enemies plied him (vs. 9-10).

So Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked Jesus. They dressed in him a royal robe, apparently in response to the

authorities' continued allegation that Jesus claimed to be a king and insurrectionist. Then they sent him back to Pilate, as they could find no basis to condemn the prisoner.

Once again Jesus' innocence was established, this time by a second Roman official. Once more he should have been released. But his enemies were not yet ready to abandon their attack against him.

*For reflection:*

Peer pressure caused Pilate to keep a prisoner both he and Herod knew to be innocent. How does peer pressure tempt you to reject Jesus today?

## *Day 28*

### **Who was Barabbas?**

Pilate was desperate. The religious authorities would not accept his finding of innocence, and Herod would not intervene. At the same time, his wife had warned him, “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him” (Matthew 27:19). So he offered to release Jesus or Barabbas to the crowd, but the people chose Barabbas (John 18:39-40). This is one of the most interesting facets of Jesus’ trials.

Barabbas became the first person for whom Jesus died. Ironically, his first name was probably “Jesus.” This was a very common given name in that day. Some ancient manuscripts call him Jesus Barabbas, and most scholars think this is the correct reading. So on that fateful day, the crowds chose between Jesus Christ and Jesus Barabbas.

His last name comes from two words. “Bar” means “son of” in Hebrew, and “abbas” means “father” (from “abba,” daddy). Or it could be “rabbas” or rabbi. Either was significant socially. No family had the name “abbas” or “rabbi”—they were titles of respect, “the father” or “the rabbi.” And Matthew 27:16 adds that Barabbas was “notorious” to the crowd—the word means to be notable or well-known. He was the son of someone famous, either a father of the land or a rabbi, and a celebrity in his own right.

Mark and Luke call him an “insurrectionist” who committed murder (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19). John adds that he had “taken part in a rebellion” (John 18:40) against the Empire. However,

the Greek word translated “insurrectionist” can also mean “one who causes strife” (cf. Acts 15:2). And the word for “rebellion” can mean “robber,” as the NASB and KJV translate it (John 18:40; cf. Luke 10:30, 2 Corinthians 11:26). He may have been a rebel, or he may have been a robber. The latter is more likely.

Many people wonder why Pilate would release a man known to be a rebel, when he was trying to avoid the accusation that he was doing this very thing with Jesus. The answer is that “social bandits” were common in first-century Palestine. Like ancient Robin Hoods, they would steal from the wealthy supporters of the Empire and give to those oppressed by Rome. They were extremely popular with the people. And the Greek words used of Barabbas are exactly the words used for them. It would appear that social theft and murder were Barabbas’ crimes, and his fame.

No wonder the crowd chose Jesus Barabbas over Jesus Christ. They were incited by their leaders to do so, of course (Matthew 27:20; Mark 15:11). But this man was one of their heroes, someone who defied the cursed pagans and stole from the wealthy to give to them. This man would stand up to Rome. He would meet their needs and solve their problems in a way their rabbis and priests would not.

The crowd had thought Jesus would do even more for them. When he rode into Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday, they hailed him as their military Messiah, their royal conqueror, the one who would overthrow the Romans and establish their nation. The palm branches they threw in his way were meant for a conqueror, a hero. They were “rolling out the red carpet,” greeting him in the same way concentration camp survivors greeted the Allied soldiers who came to liberate them.

But now Jesus had failed. He hadn’t defeated Pilate—Pilate had defeated him, and he stood in Roman chains. Barabbas did more to Rome than this “Christ” even tried to do. He wasn’t the Messiah they wanted him to be. So they called for Pilate to release Jesus Barabbas, and crucify Jesus Christ. But the irony wasn’t finished.

The word describing Barabbas as a “robber” was the same term used for the two “thieves” who were crucified with Jesus that day (Matthew 27:38). All three were guilty of the same crimes, sentenced to die in the same way and on the same day. That’s why Barabbas was present in Jerusalem and available to Pilate. There was a third cross already prepared, most likely for him. It would seem that he was scheduled for execution along with the other two thieves that day.

And so Jesus died in Barabbas’ place, on the very day he was sentenced to be executed, bearing the very cross on which he would have died. With this result: Barabbas was set free. He could never be accused of those crimes again. He could never be tried and sentenced for them again. The debt was paid, the penalty completed, the law’s requirements fulfilled.

*For reflection:*

Jesus died for Barabbas before Barabbas could ask him to. He paid the criminal’s debt, though the criminal had no idea why. In the same way, Jesus has paid for every sin you’ve ever committed and every sin you’ll ever commit. He is ready to forgive every sin you confess to him. Why, in our work-based culture, do Christians so often live with guilt rather than grace? Why do you?

## *Day 29*

### **What did the soldiers do to Jesus?**

After the crowds chose Barabbas, Pilate again “tried to set Jesus free” (John 19:12a). Now the authorities played their trump card: “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar” (v. 12b). In other words, if Pilate released Jesus the Jews would report his action to the Emperor. For the governor to release an accused insurrectionist could lead to his own removal and even execution.

Pilate washed his hands publicly of Jesus’ blood (Matthew 27:24-25), but the crowds insisted that the prisoner be executed. So Pilate collapsed beneath their pressure and finally condemned Jesus to be crucified (John 19:16). The charge posted at his execution was the very accusation of insurrection which caused Pilate to accede to Jesus’ death: “The King of the Jews,” written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek (John 19:19-22). Under its words, Jesus would soon die.

However, before sentencing him to crucifixion, Pilate had Jesus “flogged” (John 19:1). “Flogged” translates the Latin *flagellare*, “to whip.” Knotted cords or strips of leather were imbedded with pieces of bone or metal. The victim was stripped to the waist or completely naked, his hands tied to a pillar in a bent posture, his back laid bare. Then the soldier whipped the prisoner the prescribed number of times.

The Jews would not allow more than 39 (2 Corinthians 11:24) or 40 lashes (Deuteronomy 25:3). But the Romans were not bound

by such constraints, so we have no idea how severe Jesus' flogging might have been. Some victims were beaten until their entrails or bones were visible. The fact that Simon of Cyrene was required to carry his crossbeam to Calvary may indicate that Jesus had been beaten too severely to stand the strain.

After his beating, Jesus was led into the Praetorium where "the whole company of soldiers" was assembled (Mark 15:16). The entire regiment was stationed there, numbering 400 to 600, many of whom had participated in Jesus' arrest the night before. They put a "purple" robe on him (v. 17a), covering the wounds of his flogging and mocking him with royal garb. Matthew 27:28 calls this a "scarlet robe" (*chlamuda kokkine*), not "royal purple" but a cheaper, faded red. It may be that this robe was a soldier's red military cloak which had faded.

And they "twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him" (Mark 15:17b). Tiberius Caesar was depicted on coins as wearing a radiant circle around his head. This imitation was intended to mock Jesus. The *nebk* shrub is common in Palestine; it grows flexible branches and sharp prickly thorns. It was likely to be found in the garden near the Praetorium. Its thorns would have lacerated Jesus' scalp and perhaps penetrated all the way to his skull.

Matthew adds that they forced a staff in his right hand (Matthew 27:49), further mocking him. These Roman soldiers had no idea that Jesus one day "will rule them with an iron scepter" (Psalm 2:9).

Then "they began to call out to him, 'Hail, king of the Jews!'" (Mark 15:18). One day their mocking will be replaced with genuine awe and reverence, when "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11).

Their abuse continued: "Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him" (Mark 15:19). The verbs in this gruesome sentence are all in the imperfect tense, indicating repeated and continuing

action. This abuse went on for a long while, as they used the rod they had given him earlier to mock his rule.

Finally “they took off the purple robe,” tearing open Jesus’ wounds again (v. 20a). Then they “put his own clothes on him”; they included his undergarment (*chiton*), the seamless clothing which they would later gamble to own (John 19:23-24), and the rest of his clothing. And “they led him out to crucify him” (v. 20).

*For reflection:*

Why do you think the Roman soldiers were so cruel to Jesus? Why are many in our culture so antagonistic to him today?

## *Day 30*

### **Who was Simon of Cyrene?**

Jesus had been up all night and day. He had been marched in chains from Gethsemane to Annas and then to Caiaphas, and then to Pilate. He had been led to Herod and back to the governor. He had been flogged and then beaten by the soldiers. His exhaustion and blood loss must already have been severe. Now he was made to carry the *patibulum* or crossbeam on which he would be crucified. It weighed 30 or 40 pounds and was strapped to the victim's shoulders.

In his emaciated condition, Jesus was unable to carry this heavy wooden beam. So “a certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross” (Mark 15:21). With this unlikely event, yet another person enters the narrative.

Cyrene was located in northern Africa, where Tripoli, Libya is today. No doubt Simon had traveled from that far off land for Passover, saving for years in order to make the pilgrimage. This would be the highlight of his year, perhaps his life. He brought his sons with him for this once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Then he was impressed into Roman service. Palestine was an occupied country, so any Roman soldier could tap any man on the shoulder with the flat of his sword or spear and make him do whatever the soldier wanted. What was it that Rome asked of this unwilling participant?

Jesus had been condemned to die by crucifixion. The convict was placed in a hollow square of four soldiers. In front marched the soldier with a board stating the man's crime. They took the longest possible way, so that as many as possible would see and take warning. Then the man was crucified on the crossbeam he carried to his execution.

But Jesus could carry the cross no further. The convict began the procession carrying it himself (John 19:17), but had now collapsed under its weight. So Simon was forced into his place. He witnessed Jesus' scourged and flogged body. He saw his tortured agony and bore his blood on his own clothes. What became of him?

Mark names him "the father of Alexander and Rufus" (Mark 15:21). He tells us nothing more about them, indicating that his readers were so familiar with their stories that their names alone were sufficient to identify them.

Now the plot thickens. Mark's Gospel was written first for the church at Rome. In Paul's letter to the same congregation in Rome he asks, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too" (Romans 16:13). Early tradition held that this was Simon's son, a man who went on to be of remarkable significance to the church. And that Simon's wife became Paul's "mother," giving him personal assistance and support in his ministry.

Here's still more of the story: Acts 13:1 later lists prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch. Among them were "Simeon called Niger" and "Lucius of Cyrene." Simeon is another spelling of Simon; "Niger" means a man of swarthy skin from Africa. Early tradition identified this man as Simon of Cyrene, here with Lucius (also from Cyrene), one of the leaders of the most significant missionary church in Christian world.

All of this started on the day Simon bore Jesus' cross. On it, our Lord would die for him and for us all.

*For reflection:*

Simon was introduced to Jesus through the most brutal of circumstances, but he likely became a child of God as a result. How has God redeemed pain and suffering in your life for his glory and your good?

# *Day 31*

## **What is the Via Dolorosa?**

The “Via Dolorosa” (the “Way of Suffering”) is traced each Good Friday by the Catholic tradition. Its “Fourteen Stations of the Cross” are found in Catholic and many other liturgical churches around the world. The Stations:

1. Jesus is condemned to die (inside Pontius Pilate’s judgment hall)
2. He is made to carry his cross (the spot is marked today by the Monastery of the Flagellation)
3. He falls for the first time
4. He meets his mother (an event not recorded in Scripture)
5. Simon of Cyrene carries his cross (the V on the wall marking the station is clear; the stone pilgrims touch is said to be the place Jesus put his hand when he fell under the cross)
6. Veronica wipes his face (an event not recorded in Scripture)
7. He falls the second time
8. He speaks to the women of Jerusalem
9. He falls the third time.

Note that these stations are along the road as it makes its way to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The last five stations are found within the church:

10. His clothes are stripped from his body
11. He is nailed to the cross
12. He dies
13. His body is removed
14. His body is buried.

The Gospels clearly describe the death of Jesus Christ by Roman crucifixion, and his burial by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. However, they do not tell us the precise location of his execution and burial. Muslims visit and venerate the burial place of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina; followers of Confucius visit his grave; but we cannot be sure where Jesus of Nazareth died and was buried. Why not?

One answer is historical. As we will see, two sites are proposed. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is believed by the vast majority of scholars to stand over the place of Jesus' death and burial. Gordon's Calvary and the Garden Tomb are believed by others to be the place where he was crucified and entombed. Still others believe that neither site is accurate.

The other answer is theological: since Jesus rose from the grave, his tomb is empty. Early Christians did not venerate it, since his body was not there. Unlike the tombs of other religious leaders, Jesus' grave contains no remains to visit. What matters most to us is not where he died, but the fact that he rose from the dead and is alive today.

*For reflection:*

Take a moment to consider the pain Jesus endured leading to the cross. Few understood at the time why he would choose such

suffering. Are many in our culture similarly ignorant of the real reasons behind Calvary? How can Christians help explain the cross today? How will you?

## *Day 32*

### **Why is Pilate relevant today?**

A few years after Jesus' death and resurrection, another conflict with the Jewish authorities led to Pilate's downfall. A would-be Messiah assembled a large group of Samaritans at Mt. Gerizim, where they were attacked by Pilate's cavalry. The Samaritans sent an envoy to the Vitellius, the legate of Syria, to accuse Pilate of murder. Vitellius deposed Pilate and ordered him to Rome to stand charges. But Emperor Tiberius died before Pilate reached Rome, allowing Pilate to escape and fade into history.

Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.7) says that Pilate eventually committed suicide. Legend has it that his body was thrown into the Tiber, but the waters were so disturbed by evil spirits that it was removed and sunk in the Rhone; a monument called Pilate's Tomb is still to be seen there. However, the waters of the Rhone are also said to have rejected the body, so it was sunk in the lake at Lausanne and finally buried atop a mountain called Pilatus today.

More positive traditions claim that Pilate accepted Jesus as his Lord and was martyred by the emperor Tiberius. His wife, who warned him of Jesus' innocence (Matthew 27:19), has been called Procla or Claudia Procula and represented as a follower of Jesus.

Pilate found Jesus innocent twice; Herod found him innocent; Pilate's wife considered him innocent. Why, then, did the Roman governor crucify him? To save himself. Why do we deny Jesus? To save ourselves. Why do we fail him? To benefit ourselves. Why

do we lie and gossip and slander? To help ourselves. Why do we submit to private sin? To please ourselves. Why do we commit public sin? To advance ourselves.

There is no sin we cannot commit. What tempted Pilate, still tempts us.

*For reflection:*

It is easy to condemn Pilate for condemning Jesus, but you and I face his dilemma every time we must choose between Christ and ourselves. When we choose ourselves, our culture finds nothing different about us. When we choose Jesus, our culture sees the transforming difference the risen Christ can make still today.

Choose wisely.

# *Day 33*

## **Who was John?**

This week we'll pick up the story of Easter, not through the eyes of those who executed Jesus but those who were his faithful followers. We'll begin the week with the man who was Jesus' best friend on earth. While the other disciples fled their Lord the night he was arrested, the apostle John would stay at his side, care for his mother, and witness his death and resurrected divinity. This week we'll learn why.

John was the son of a fisherman named Zebedee, and the brother of James. Their fishing business was so prosperous that they employed servants (Mark 1:20). He and his brother were mending their fishing nets with their father beside the Sea of Galilee when Jesus called them: "Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him" (Matthew 4:21-22; cf. Mark 1:19).

He was a close friend of Simon Peter. They were in business together: Peter "and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners" (Luke 5:9-10). He went to Peter's house in Capernaum after the Sabbath service: "As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew" (Mark 1:29).

And Jesus sent the two to prepare the last Passover feast: “Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, ‘Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover’” (Luke 22:7-8).

Before following Jesus, John had been a disciple of John the Baptist. Two men were following John when he pointed out Jesus as the Lamb of God; one was Andrew (Peter’s brother and John’s business partner as well), while the other was presumably John (John 1:35-40).

In addition, there is evidence that John was related to Jesus by birth. There are three lists of the women present at Jesus’ crucifixion:

- Mark’s Gospel: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome (Mk 15:40).
- John’s Gospel: Jesus’ mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene (John 19:25).
- Matthew’s Gospel: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s children (Matthew 27:56).

Scholars identify Mary the mother of James and Joses with Mary the wife of Cleopas. And so the remaining person is Salome, who must be the sister of Jesus’ mother and the mother of Zebedee’s sons. If this is so, James and John were Jesus’ cousins.

He and his family were known to the High Priest and his court. He went with Peter to the courtyard of the High Priest’s house after Jesus arrest: “Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in” (John 18:15-16).

Polycrates (bishop of Ephesus, AD 190) describes John as the man “that rested on the bosom of our Lord, who was a priest that bore the sacerdotal plate, and martyr and teacher, he, also, rests at Ephesus” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.31). If this is true, John was part of the priesthood.

There is a Franciscan tradition that Zebedee maintained a branch office in Jerusalem and a house in the city. Stones and arches of that house are still standing, and were used by an early Christian church. Zebedee’s business supplied fish to the family of the High Priest, another indication of its prosperity (cf. Mark 1:20).

So we have in John the Apostle a man who was one of Jesus’ first followers, a fisherman who may have been a priest and was clearly known to the High Priest. As we will see, his background would be essential to his ministry.

*For reflection:*

When did you begin following Jesus? Who led you to him? What experiences have prepared you to serve him in your culture today?

## ***Day 34***

### **How did a “son of thunder” become the “beloved disciple”?**

Jesus named John and James *Boanerges*, “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). The nickname was well deserved.

They were men of ambition, requesting chief places in his coming Kingdom and incurring the wrath of the other disciples (Mark 10:35-45). And they were men given to anger and violent temper:

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village (Luke 9:51-56).

John appears to have been an intolerant person as well:

“Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward” (Mark 9:38-41).

Remarkably, his years with Jesus changed this angry, ambitious, intolerant person into the man known to Christian history as the “apostle of love.” Here’s what we know about the unnamed Beloved Disciple of the Fourth Gospel.

At the Last Supper, he reclined against Jesus’ breast, so that he was seated at the Lord’s right hand (John 13:21-25). This was a position of the greatest honor, usually reserved for the host’s closest friend.

Jesus entrusted the care of his mother to the Beloved Disciple:

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Dear woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home (John 19:25-27).

The Beloved Disciple arrived first at the tomb on Easter Sunday morning:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead) (John 20:1-9).

The Beloved Disciple was also present at the lakeside when the risen Christ appeared to his followers (John 21). Soon we will watch him serve the one he loved in ways that would change human history.

*For reflection:*

Nearly all scholars think the Beloved Disciple in John's Gospel is its author. Why do you think John never names himself? What could his decision say to our witness today?

# *Day 35*

## **How did John change the world?**

After Jesus' resurrection, John became one of the most significant figures in Christian history. He was present when the lame man was healed beside the Gate Beautiful (Acts 3) and was imprisoned with Peter (Acts 4:1-22). He went with Peter to Samaria to see the results of Philip's preaching there (Acts 8:14). And Paul named him one of the great leaders of the Christian church: "James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews" (Galatians 2:9).

Tradition indicates that he pastored in Ephesus, where he cared for Mary until she died. He then journeyed to Rome, where tradition says he was cast into a cauldron of burning oil but emerged unharmed:

How happy is its church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood! where Peter endures a passion like his Lord's! where Paul wins his crown in a death like John's! where the Apostle John was first plunged, unhurt, into boiling oil, and thence remitted to his island-exile! (Tertullian, *De Praescriptione* 36).

Perhaps in response to his growing stature, he was banished to the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9): "the apostle and evangelist John, who was yet living, in consequence of his testimony to the divine

word, was condemned to dwell on the island of Patmos” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.18; cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.30.3; Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 9). After Patmos he returned to Ephesus, where he ministered until his death. Several stories are told about this last chapter of his ministry.

Clement of Alexandria says that John singled out a young man in a particular congregation and entrusted him to the bishop as a future leader in the church. But the young man fell in with robbers and became their leader. Clement describes him as “the most violent, the most blood-thirsty, the most cruel.”

Some years later, John revisited the church and asked about the young man. Told what had happened to him, John went after him. He found the robber leader; the man turned in shame and fled from his presence. John chased him down: “Why, my son, dost thou flee from me, thy father, unarmed, old? Son, pity me. Fear not; thou hast still hope of life. I will give account to Christ for thee. If need be, I will willingly endure thy death, as the Lord did death for us. For thee I will surrender my life. Stand, believe; Christ hath sent me.”

The young man threw away his weapons in repentance, and returned to the church. At the end he became bishop of the congregation (Clement of Alexandria, *Who Is The Rich Man that Shall Be Saved?* 42).

Jerome (died A.D. 420) adds this remarkable story from the very end of John’s earthly life:

When John tarried in Ephesus to extreme old age, and could only with difficulty be carried to the church in the arms of his disciples, and was unable to give utterance to many words, he used to say no more at their several meetings than this: “Little children, love one another.” At length the disciples and fathers who were there, wearied with always hearing the same words, said: “Master, why dost thou always say this?” “It is the Lord’s command,” was his reply, “and, if this alone be done, it is enough” (*Commentary on Galatians*).

John used the Greek word for “truth” 25 times in his Gospel, and 20 times in his epistles. He used the word for “witness” nearly 70 times. But he used the word for “love” more than 80 times. His life message may be summarized best by his exhortation:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us (1 John 4:7-12).

*For reflection:*

The risen Christ transformed a “son of thunder” into the “apostle of love.” The first “fruit of the Spirit” is love (Galatians 5:22). How has the Spirit manifested this fruit in your life today?

## Day 36

### Who was “Courageous” Thomas?

From John, the man who would not desert his Lord, we turn to Thomas, the man known best for doubting him. But there is far more to this man’s story.

First, Thomas was a *man of courage*. He first appears in the Lazarus story (John 11:1-16). Jesus had resolved to visit his friend at Bethany, very close to Jerusalem. By this time the authorities were already looking for him; twice earlier he had nearly been stoned to death (John 8:59; 10:31).

To go to Bethany seemed suicidal. Lazarus had already died, making their trip even more useless. Then Thomas spoke for the first time in Scripture: “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16). Not because he expected a good ending, but precisely because he did not. He did not want his Lord to die alone.

Second, he was a *rationalist*, as he demonstrated in the Upper Room. Here Jesus was teaching his disciples, instructing them about his impending death and what lay beyond. He assured them, “if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going” (John 14:3-4).

Thomas may have spoken for them all or just for himself: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (v. 5). The result was one of the most significant statements in all of literature: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one

comes to the Father except through me” (v. 6). Jesus redeemed his question with immortal truth.

Third, Thomas was perhaps an *introvert*. When Jesus had been raised on Easter Sunday, he appeared to his disciples through locked doors. But Thomas was not there: “Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord’” (John 20:24-25a).

Much has been made of his absence from church. Countless sermons have exhorted people not to miss worship, lest we miss seeing Jesus. This may be what happened—Thomas simply did not go to church, or was sick, or had to tend to an ill parent, or had something he had to do. His absence was apparently not a complete departure from the faith, for he and the disciples talked soon thereafter. Nothing in the text indicates that they had to go find him and bring him back; their conversation seems natural and normal. He simply wasn’t there on Easter Sunday. We don’t know why. But it is a fact that most rationalists are somewhat introverted by nature.

*For reflection:*

How are courage and reason essential to effective Kingdom service in our culture today?

## *Day 37*

### **How did he become “Doubting” Thomas?**

While the record shows that Thomas was a man of courage and reason, he is known to history for his doubts. Here’s why.

When the disciples told him of Jesus’ resurrection, he responded with the statement which has earned him forever the nickname “Doubting Thomas”: “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (John 20:25b).

Not for Thomas the group opinion. He had to see and experience the evidence personally. The faith of others was not his unless he had their experience. He insisted on primary faith, not secondary trust.

This is a position worth emulating today. Paul criticized the Corinthians for having “milk” rather than “meat” in their faith: “I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?” (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). Milk is digested meat. Their faith was second-hand and immature. Thomas was not willing to settle for such.

Note that Jesus honored his request: “Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors

were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe’” (John 20:26-27).

With this response: “Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (v. 28). John does not say that Thomas did in fact touch Jesus’ resurrected body, though he could have; Jesus earlier told Mary, “Do not cling to me,” translated literally “Stop clinging to me” (John 19:17).

Jesus was not offended by Thomas’s request, as though it was sinful in some way. To the contrary, he calls us to love him with all our minds (Matthew 22:37). His Father invites us to “reason together” (Isaiah 1:18). God wants us to know him individually and personally.

As a result, we find Thomas with the disciples: “Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together” (John 21:2).

*For reflection:*

What doubts about Jesus have you encountered recently? How has God used doubts in the past to increase your faith and ministry to our culture?

## *Day 38*

### **What became of Thomas?**

Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.1) says that after Jesus returned to the Father, Thomas was assigned Parthia for his ministry. At the time, this was an independent kingdom stretching from the Indus to the Tigris and from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea. Parthians were known even to the Romans for their stubborn ways; to them, the determined Thomas was sent. His remains may be buried there; one tradition says he was stabbed to death with a sword (an appropriate death for one who wanted to see the spear wound in Jesus' side).

Jerome's *Lives of Illustrious Men* says that Thomas preached "to the Parthians, Medes, Persians, Carmanians, Hyrcanians, Bactrians and Magians and died at Calamina in India." During this period, "India" could mean even countries south of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

However, to this day in South India there is a church which calls itself "the Christians of St. Thomas." It traces its descent and origin directly to Thomas himself. Its own account: Thomas landed at Malankara, an island of the lagoon near Crangamore, where he preached to the natives and baptized many converts. He ordained seven priests and founded two churches.

Then he moved to Mailapore (Myalapur), now a suburb of Madras and there won the king and all the people to Christ. Then he moved to China, with equal success. He then returned to

Mailapore, where the Brahmins grew jealous of his success. They caused the people to rise up against him and stone him; he was finally killed with a lance.

When Vasco da Gama and his Portugese explorers arrived in India around AD 1500 they found these traditions intact. They discovered a Christian chapel, and digging under it unearthed human bones so dazzlingly white that they concluded they must be those of Thomas himself.

On St. Thomas' Mount at Mailapore a stone cross was discovered. In the Pahlavi language it has this inscription: "In punishment by the Cross was the suffering of this One; he who is the true Christ, the God alone, the Guide ever pure." The cross is dated to the eighth century; a similar cross was found in Travancore, dating to the tenth century.

*The Universal Christian Topography* was written by Cosmas Indicopleustes, who in the early sixth century made a voyage to India. He says that he found Christians there, and a church "in Malabar, the land where the pepper grows," and in Caliana, south of Bombay. This is proof that Christianity was in India before AD 500.

The apocryphal book *Acts of Thomas* tells how the apostle was sent to India, and how he worked there. The apostles divided up the world for their ministries, deciding by lot where each would go. The work in India fell to Thomas, but he would not go. The Lord Jesus appeared to him in a vision that night, calling him to India, but still he refused. So Jesus appeared in human form to a man sent from India to Jerusalem in search of a carpenter. Jesus sold Thomas to him as his slave.

The king of the land gave Thomas money to build a great palace. Thomas gave the money to the poor instead. When the enraged king demanded to see his palace, Thomas told him, "You cannot see it now, but when you depart this life, you will see it." The king then threw him into prison under sentence of death.

The king's brother was even more angry, and made the king pledge to flay Thomas and kill him. But the brother died first, and was

shown the king's mansion. He was then given permission to return to the king to tell him what Thomas had built for him in heaven. And so the king released Thomas, and was baptized by him into the Christian faith.

Historians believe that the Thomas who had so much to do with the founding of the church in India was more likely a Nestorian missionary and not the apostle. But no one can be sure. Whether Thomas went to India or not, his faith still inspires ours today.

*For reflection:*

You cannot measure the eternal significance of present faithfulness. How is Jesus calling you to bear witness to him today?

## *Day 39*

### **Who was the first evangelist of Easter?**

From the men who followed Jesus, we turn now to the women whose story was also indispensable to Easter. History knows her as Mary Magdalene. Her given name was “Mary”; she was from the village of Magdala on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Her only appearance in the Gospels before Holy Week is this reference by Luke: “The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out” (Luke 8:1-2).

However, Mary figured prominently in Jesus’ death and resurrection. She followed him to the cross, watched where he was buried, and was with the first group to go to his tomb. She is mentioned 14 times in the Gospels; in eight she heads the list of names where she is referenced; a ninth places her after Mary the mother of Jesus; and the remaining five list her alone.

Mary’s Easter story begins: “When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body” (Mark 16:1). The Sabbath extended from 6 PM Friday to 6 PM Saturday; this occurred on Saturday evening, as we measure time.

Then, “Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb” (v. 2). John says it was “still

dark” when they set out (John 20:1); Matthew adds that it was “dawn on the first day of the week” (Matthew 28:1; Luke 24:1).

The three found the “very large” stone rolled away and the tomb unguarded (v. 4). Matthew explains: “There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men” (28:2-4). That stone was but a pebble compared to the Rock of Ages inside.

They “saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed” (v. 5). Luke adds that his clothes “gleamed like lightning” (Luke 24:4). Understandably, “they were alarmed” (Mark 16:5). So the angel told them, “Don’t be alarmed” (v. 6). Matthew quotes him: “Do not be afraid” (28:5). Literally, “fear not” or “stop being afraid.” Why?

“He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you’” (vs. 6-7). Nonetheless they responded: “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid” (v. 8).

The other Gospels tell us that Mary Magdalene and the other women eventually told the apostles about their experience at the empty tomb (Matthew 28:8; Luke 24:10). Peter and John then ran to the tomb and looked inside (John 20:3-10; cf. Luke 24:12). Mary Magdalene followed them and was left weeping outside (v. 11; cf. Luke 24:12). To this point she had not met the risen Christ. She had heard from angels, but his body was missing and she was bewildered and upset.

Meanwhile, Jesus met the other women. They worshiped him, claspng his feet, and were sent to his disciples again (Matthew 28:9-10). Mary Magdalene then met “two angels in white” (John 20:11-13), and encountered the risen Christ for herself (vs. 14-17).

She then told the disciples about the One she met (v. 18). And she became the first evangelist of Easter.

*For reflection:*

Of all Jesus' first followers, who would have expected Mary Magdalene to be the first to bear witness to his resurrection? Would some be surprised at Jesus' call on your life? Have you thanked him today for such grace?

# ***Palm Sunday***

## **Who was the Messiah?**

This Holy Week, we will focus on the historical facts regarding Jesus' death and resurrection. We begin with Palm Sunday and the crowd's acclaim of Jesus as their Messiah. Why did they view him in this way?

All their religious observances and legalistic zeal could not change the fact that the Jews lived in an occupied country. They had exchanged Babylonians for Persians, then Greeks for Romans. But pagan Gentiles still dominated their lives. Roman soldiers standing at every significant street corner were constant reminders that the Jews were subjects of the Empire. Jesus' admonishment to carry a soldier's pack not just one mile but two (Matthew 5:41) was born from the real-life frustration of living under the sandaled heel of Rome.

How was it possible that the nation chosen by God among all the peoples on earth could have come to such subjugation? How could a nation with no military and no independent resources throw off their yoke of oppression? The answer lay in a single word: Messiah.

God's promise to Abraham made clear that his descendants were to have a global purpose and achieve eternal significance (Genesis 12:1-3). This global dominance of the Jewish people was soon tied to one who would rule Israel and the world: "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations

is his” (Genesis 49:10). This ruler would “crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth,” and all the other enemies of Israel (Numbers 24:17).

He would be a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15). As a ruler even greater than David, “he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne” (Zechariah 6:13). In that glorious day, “ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you’” (Zechariah 8:23).

Some saw this great redeemer as the Lord himself, others as the nation Israel. But many saw this figure as an individual, the “anointed” (“Messiah” in the Hebrew, “Mesiha” in the Aramaic, “Christos” or “Christ” in the Greek).

Some believed that the Messiah would function primarily as a prophet (cf. Malachi 3:1). Others thought he would be a priest. Still others expected a miracle-worker (cf. John 7:31). But most expected their Messiah to be a military conqueror, a warrior who would destroy Rome and lead their nation into global dominance. God had promised David, “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16). The Scriptures later promised the restoration of David’s line as the ruler of the nation (Psalm 89:35-37; Isaiah 9:7; Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5-6).

As David had been their military hero, the one who defeated the Philistines and established their nation in peace and security, so the Messiah coming from his line would be a military conqueror. This was the role that the crowds hoped Jesus would fulfill for them, overthrowing the cursed Romans and reestablishing their nation.

Of course, these expectations were unfulfilled by a Messiah who died on a Roman cross (cf. Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13). But the Messiah as military conqueror was not God’s plan for his Son’s first advent on earth. Jesus was “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). The Father had always planned for his Son to die on the cross to pay for our sins.

The Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah made clear this purpose for the Messiah (cf. Isaiah 42:1-9; Is 49:1-9; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). While the Jewish people have usually applied these statements to the nation of Israel and her sufferings through the centuries, the New Testament consistently applies these predictions to Jesus (cf. Matthew 8:17; 12:18-21; 26:67; John 12:41). When Jesus returns at his Second Coming, he most assuredly will come as the long-awaited military Messiah, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16).

*For reflection:*

It was the job of Jesus' first followers to explain his first coming to the world, so people would be prepared for his second coming. That responsibility falls to you and me today. Will you pray for God to use you this Holy Week to help many be transformed by his grace?

# *Day 41*

## **Where was Calvary?**

There is no historical doubt that Jesus lived and was executed by the Romans. Historical sources outside the Scriptures confirm the biblical record. But historians still debate the actual location where he was killed. Here is what Scripture tells us about the place of Jesus' death and burial:

- He was executed at “the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha” (John 19:17; cf. Matt. 27:33; Mark 15:22; Luke 23:33).
- This place was outside the walls of Jerusalem: “Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood” (Hebrews 13:12). Jews typically buried outside the city walls.
- Yet it was “near the city” (John 19:20).
- This place seems to have been on level ground, so that “standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene” (John 19:25). The belief that “on a hill faraway, stood an old rugged cross” comes from hymnology and tradition, not Scripture.
- His tomb was “close at hand” to the place of his death (John 19:42).

- It was inside a garden: “in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid” (John 19:41).
- This tomb was owned by “a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus” (Matt. 27:57). He took Jesus’ body and “laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock” (v. 60a; cf. Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53).
- Joseph “rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb” (Matt. 27:60b).

So, the site of Jesus’ burial must have been outside the walls of first-century Jerusalem, at a place that could be described as “The Place of a Skull,” on level ground, near a garden in which a new tomb could be cut in the rock.

The first candidate for Calvary is known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The second-oldest church in Christendom (after the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem), its history is fascinating.

In the eighth or seventh century B.C., the area was a large limestone quarry. It was used for this purpose until the first century B.C., at which time it was filled and covered with a layer of reddish-brown soil mixed with stone flakes. The quarry then became a garden or orchard, where cereals, fig trees, carob trees, and olive trees grew. It also became a cemetery; at least four tombs dating from this period have been discovered.

One of them is an *arcosolium*, a shallow, rock-hewn tomb cut lengthwise in the side of a burial cave. This is the tomb believed to be that of Jesus, together with its antechamber. Centuries of pilgrims have completely deformed it by chipping away pieces of rock. It is also covered with later masonry.

No church buildings were constructed at this time, as such structures would not become legal until Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in A.D. 313. Rather, the site would next

become a pagan shrine. After the Second Jewish Revolt of A.D. 132, Emperor Hadrian banned Jews from Jerusalem and sought to rebuild the city as Roman. On the site where the Holy Sepulchre Church would later be built, he constructed a gigantic raised platform on which he built a shrine to the worship of Venus. This platform filled in the quarry and garden below.

In A.D. 325, at the Council of Nicea, the bishop of Jerusalem petitioned Constantine to demolish Hadrian's temple and uncover the tomb of Christ below it. This site was shown to Constantine's mother, Queen Helena, on her visit to Jerusalem in A.D. 326. After her visit, the Christian community removed the Hadrianic temple, platform, and fill dirt beneath it.

Constantine then built a rotunda around Jesus' tomb and a long basilica that enclosed Calvary. The rotunda's design may have been inspired by the circular pagan temple constructed earlier by Hadrian. Two original columns of Constantine's rotunda have been preserved.

In A.D. 614, the Persians invaded Jerusalem. They damaged the church by fire, but did not destroy it. However, in A.D. 1009, on the order of the Muslim Caliph of Cairo, the entire church was demolished, including the tomb. The rotunda, however, was preserved to a height of five feet.

Between 1042 and 1048, the Byzantine emperor Constantine IX Monomachus restored the rotunda and built three chapels adjacent to it. The Crusaders, who ruled Jerusalem from 1099 to 1187, then rebuilt the church in 1149, essentially in its current form. For the first time, the traditional rock of Golgotha was included in the church. The church underwent an extensive renovation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

A fire in 1808 and an earthquake in 1927 damaged the structure extensively. In 1852, the Catholics, Greeks, Armenians, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox agreed to the "Status Quo of the Holy Places," which guarantees rights and privileges of these communities.

*For reflection:*

Why do you think God did not make clear the place where his Son was executed and buried? How is your answer relevant to ministry today?

## ***Day 42***

### **Is this the place?**

Visitors to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre begin with doors on the southern wall of the structure. Above the door they note an example of the “status quo”: the “immovable ladder.” It was placed on an upper floor, below a window belonging to the Armenians, sometime before 1839 (when it is shown in an engraving). No one is sure when or by whom. As a result, no one is willing to move it, lest they antagonize other groups.

Once inside the front doors, visitors see a staircase to the right. It leads up to Calvary, where Stations of the Cross 10-12 are located. At Station 10, his clothes are stripped from him; at Station 11, he is crucified; at Station 12, he dies. The rock under glass at the altar is said to be Calvary. The room on the ground floor beneath the rock is the Chapel of Adam, commemorating the tradition that Jesus was crucified over the place where Adam’s skull was buried. A window on the altar wall opens to Calvary, with a crack said to have been caused by the earthquake that occurred when Jesus died (Matthew 27:51).

Back down the stairs to the main floor, visitors see a long rock laid on the ground with incense lanterns suspended over it. This is the “Stone of Anointing,” commemorating Joseph of Arimathea’s preparation of Jesus’ body for burial. (However, this stone was actually placed here in the 1810 reconstruction.)

Continuing past the Stone of Anointing, visitors turn to the right and enter the rotunda. In its center is the Edicule, a small chapel

containing the Holy Sepulchre. Its first room holds the Angel's Stone, thought to be part of the stone that sealed Jesus' tomb. The second room is the tomb itself. To the rear of the Rotunda is a rough chapel with a rock-cut chamber thought by some to be the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

On the northeast side of the complex is the Prison of Christ, where Franciscans believe Jesus was held by the Romans. An Armenian chapel to the east of the Tomb leads to the Chapel of the Invention of the Holy Cross, where the cross of Christ is said to have been discovered. A chapel north of the Tomb indicates the place where Mary Magdalene met Jesus; another chapel commemorates Jesus' meeting with his mother after the resurrection.

There are numerous arguments in favor of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as the place of Jesus' death and burial. Christians were never dispersed from Jerusalem, and preserved the memory that Jesus was executed and buried at this location. No other site was proposed prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Excavations prove that the area had been an ancient cemetery. The site was near the city (John 19:20), whose walls stood 500 feet to the south and 350 feet to the east. Yet it apparently stood outside the city walls of Jesus' day.

However, not all historians are convinced. There are no remains from the first century to prove that this was the place of Jesus' death and burial, since they were destroyed by Muslims in 1009. Jesus' crucifixion apparently occurred at a level place, whereas the execution site within the Church stands atop a hill. The present-day hill of "Calvary" would not be large enough for three people to be crucified there. (However, the Muslim destruction of 1009 may have modified the hill.)

Jewish execution sites were considered to be unclean; it is perhaps unlikely that Jesus' crucifixion (while "near the city," John 19:20), would have occurred this close to the city walls and gates of the day. Helena, the ruler who chose this site, is known to have located Christian buildings and sites where they would be most available to pilgrims, whether they marked the actual event they

commemorated or not. Early Christians did not venerate the place of Jesus' death and burial, making the later designation of the Holy Sepulchre site questionable.

This site was west of first-century Jerusalem, but Jewish leaders of the day condemned burial on the western side of a city (*Baba Batra* 2.9 in the Babylonian Talmud). The location of known Jewish graves corroborates this tradition. Eusebius describes "Golgotha" as "north of Mount Zion." The Church is north of the hill known as "Mount Zion" today. However, in Eusebius' day, "Mount Zion" referred to the Temple Mount itself, which is east of the Church, not south.

*For reflection:*

Six different Christian traditions hold services in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre today. Millions of visitors come to see its ancient rooms and remember the death and burial of Jesus. How is the Church helping to answer Jesus' prayer that his followers would be one (John 17:22-23)? How can you this week?

## *Day 43*

### **What is Gordon's Calvary?**

The other location proposed as the site of Jesus' death and burial is known as "Gordon's Calvary" and its adjacent "Garden Tomb." Its history is equally interesting.

In 1842, a German theologian named Otto Thenius proposed that a rock outcropping known as "Skull Hill" could be the site of Jesus' crucifixion. Other scholars soon endorsed this proposal.

In 1883, Major-General Charles "Chinese" Gordon was staying at the American Colony in Jerusalem, just inside the northern city wall and east of Damascus Gate. One day he noticed this prominent rocky outcropping a few hundred feet away, appearing to him to resemble a skull. In 1869, a number of ancient tombs had been discovered nearby; Gordon determined that one could be the tomb of Christ. He thought the site should be preserved for pilgrims to visit. Gordon's prominence in English society led others to join this cause. The Garden Tomb Society was organized in 1893 for this purpose and purchased the property the next year.

At least five arguments can be made for this hillside as the place of Jesus' execution.

The first is *geological*. The small hill known to us as "Gordon's Calvary" is geologically the northernmost part of the biblical Mt. Moriah. This was the mount where Abraham offered Isaac (Genesis 22), later purchased by David and used by Solomon for his temple. The temple stood midway on the north-south line of

the hill. Sacrificial animals were slain to the north of the altar (Leviticus 1:11). Jesus' death fulfilled the sacrificial system as "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8, NIV). It would be symbolically significant if he died north of the temple, on its mountain.

The second is *historical*. The skull-like facing evident today was created by a quarry which excavated stone from this area. This area has long been known as "Solomon's Quarries," based on the tradition that stone from the area was used to build his temple. It has also been called "Zedekiah's Cave," from a tradition that the Jewish king Zedekiah hid here when the Babylonians invaded in 587 B.C. In addition, rock-cut tombs have been discovered west of the skull face, very close to the Garden Tomb. They date to the Israelite period, as much as eight or seven centuries before Christ.

A third argument is *archaeological*. Kathleen Kenyon excavated Damascus Gate in the early 1960s, finding evidence of Herodian stonework and a Herodian gateway and towers. These discoveries support the thesis that the walls of Jesus' day extended far enough north of Jerusalem for Jesus' death at Gordon's Calvary to be "near the city" (John 19:20).

A fourth argument is *logical*. The Jewish method of stoning required that the condemned prisoner be thrown from a cliff with a minimum height of 12 feet: "The place of stoning was twice the height of a man." (Remember Luke 4:29, where the residents of Nazareth "brought [Jesus] to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff.") The hillside of Gordon's Calvary, with its sheer face created by quarrying, would have worked for this purpose.

Remember that when Stephen preached to the Sanhedrin, "they cast him out of the city and stoned him" (Acts 7:58). St. Stephen's Church of the fifth century A.D. was situated adjacent to Gordon's Calvary, on top of the cliff immediately north of the Garden Tomb. Beginning as early as the fifth century A.D. the nearby Damascus Gate was also known as "St. Stephen's Gate." No 12-

foot cliff has been located near the present-day “Stephen’s Gate” (so identified in the 18th century) on the northeast side of Old Jerusalem.

A fifth argument is *biblical*. Jesus’ death occurred “near the city” (John 19:20) but “outside the gate” (Hebrews 13:12). While the site within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre meets both requirements, as does Gordon’s Calvary, the former was perhaps too close to the city to be plausible (given the corrupting nature of execution sites in Judaism). The latter meets both biblical requirements, but stands far enough away from the city to be less contaminating to its residents.

Despite these strong arguments for the authenticity of Gordon’s Calvary as the site of Jesus’ execution, most scholars are not convinced. The topographical resemblance of the hill to a skull is not required by Scripture. Jesus was executed at “The Place of a Skull” (John 19:17), but the site received its name because of the executions staged there, not because of its physical characteristics. The connection between the name and its appearance dates only to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition, many scholars claim that the hill did not look like a skull in the first century. They believe that a quarry or mine in recent centuries produced the caves that give the cliff its appearance. If Skull Hill had looked like a skull in ancient times, it is likely that it would have been suggested as the place of Jesus’ death. Yet no ancient or medieval tradition makes such a connection.

*For reflection:*

There is a bus station whose parking lot runs immediately in front of Skull Hill today, and a very busy street that runs beside it. How is the public nature of Gordon’s Calvary appropriate as a site for Jesus’ death? How is this fact a metaphor for ministry today?

# *Maundy Thursday*

## **What is the Garden Tomb?**

In 1869, several ancient Jewish tombs were discovered in the area of Gordon's Calvary. In 1874, a Swiss archaeologist named Conrad Schick did the first detailed investigation of the one now called the "Garden Tomb."

In 1924, an ancient winepress was discovered, evidence that the area was once the garden of a wealthy person. Three cisterns were also discovered, one with a capacity of 200,000 gallons. Plaster around the tomb and the large cistern was determined to be from the Roman period, though the cistern itself was repaired during Byzantine times.

The Garden Tomb is oriented toward the Temple Mount. The outer "weeping chamber" leads to an inner chamber with burial niches for the dead, consistent with tombs of Jesus' day. The chiseling on the face of the cliff outside the tomb, and inside as well, resembles that found in the "family tomb of Herod" and tombs in the Kidron and Hinnom valleys, all dating between the second century B.C. and the first century A.D.

The tomb was cut into solid bedrock, with a *nephesh* ("soul") window through which, according to Jewish tradition, the soul departed the body after the third day in the tomb. The current doorway is so tall that it would require a larger rolling stone than any known from other tombs of the period. However, the original height was one-third the present doorway.

A Byzantine church was built at the site, which explains the expanded door, changed front wall, and holes for ceiling beams above the tomb entrance. Long grooves in the bedrock floor in front of the tomb may have supported a low screen, also typical of Byzantine churches. The priest would have officiated behind the screen, with the tomb at his back and the congregation on the other side of the screen.

There is a rectangular depression in the bedrock floor to the left of the tomb entrance. It could have been used for a reliquary (a box containing bones or other relics from early saints). The masonry that fills in much of the front wall is from modern times, and would have restored the tomb from its Byzantine function as a shrine.

Byzantine crosses are painted in the interior of the tomb, further evidence that it was used as a worship site. A cross is inscribed on the outer wall of the tomb, above and to the left of the doorway. It was originally an anchor, and was later extended and changed into a cross. The anchor was a very early Christian symbol and may indicate a first-century veneration of the tomb.

Other arguments for the Garden Tomb:

- The tomb was cut into solid bedrock, “a tomb cut into stone” (Luke 23:53)
- Only one of the three burial niches was finished, indicating that it was a “new” tomb (Matthew 27:60).
- The only finished niche is the one in the northeast corner, which would be visible from the door. Light from the *nephesh* would allow them to see inside, and would especially illuminate this section of the tomb (see John 20:5, “and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there”).
- The original height was a two-thirds lower than the present door, matching the biblical statements that John (John 20:5) and Mary (v. 11) had to “stoop” to look inside.

- The completed niche was enlarged in the area of the head (to the east), perhaps because the person buried there was taller than the owner. Scripture says that Jesus was buried in a borrowed tomb “in which no one had yet been laid” (John 19:41).
- The trough in front of the tomb is consistent with other Jewish tombs of Jesus’ day.
- Why was a Byzantine church built by this tomb if it was not significant to early Christians?

However, scholars also note these arguments against the Garden Tomb as the burial place of Jesus: chisel marks in the trough seem to be Crusader in origin, perhaps indicating that it was used to feed animals. (However, they may have adapted the first-century trough rather than building the trough as it now exists.) The trough would not hold the stone slab, as its outside edge is diagonal rather than vertical. However, this could be the result of Crusader modifications as well.

Some historians claim that the tomb’s architecture indicates it predated Jesus’ death by seven or eight centuries and thus could not be “new” (John 19:41). However, others dispute their claim. And “new” (*kainos*) can be translated “previously unknown” or “unused,” which could mean that the tomb was new to Joseph and had not been used, not that it was newly created.

We will never know for certain whether Gordon’s Calvary and the Garden Tomb were the place of Jesus’ execution and burial. However, for more than a century they have served as a place of meditation and worship for pilgrims. This is my favorite site in Jerusalem; the volunteer guides who lead groups always share the gospel, using the grounds to advance the Kingdom around the world.

*For reflection:*

As a Roman Catholic priest has said, “If the Garden Tomb is not the right place, it should be.” This is my favorite place in all of Israel. And it points to the most important event in all of history, the means by which God purchased our eternal salvation. When the empty tomb is closed to visitors, its door has a sign which reads: “He is not here—for he is risen.”

How will you share this good news today?

# *Good Friday*

## **How did Jesus die?**

The story of Jesus' crucifixion begins: "They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull)" (Mark 15:22; cf. Matthew 27:33, Mark 15:22, Luke 23:33, and John 19:17). The Greek is *Golgotha*, meaning "a skull." The King James Version translation for Luke 23:33 renders the word "Calvary" (from the Latin for "skull").

Before nailing Jesus to the cross, the soldiers "offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it" (Mark 15:23). This was a kind of anesthetic intended to dull the pain of Jesus' suffering. He refused it, choosing to be in possession of all his senses. This wine is not to be confused with the harmless wine vinegar later offered to Jesus (Matthew 27:48-49; John 19:28-29).

So "they crucified him" (v. 24). With this short phrase, Mark recorded the greatest tragedy in history. He did not need to describe the event in detail, for his readers were very familiar with it. Crucifixion was used by the Romans to punish rebellious slaves and hardened criminals. Roman citizens could not be crucified, due to the horrible nature of such a death. A typical Roman had seen many people on crosses in his lifetime.

Romans used at least four different kinds of crosses. The *crux immissa* utilized a longer upright beam projected above a shorter crosspiece; this is most likely the kind upon which Jesus died, as an inscription was nailed above his head. The *crux commissa* had the

shape of the capital letter T; the Greek cross used pieces of equal length; and the *crux decussate* was shaped like the letter X.

Sometimes the Romans tied their victims to the cross and left them to die of exposure and starvation. When they wanted them to die more rapidly, they nailed them through the palm into the wood and then tied their arms with rope, as the palms could not support the weight of the body and the nails would pull out. When they wanted criminals to die more quickly still, they nailed them through the wrist and feet to the cross. This was most likely the manner in which Jesus was executed.

The legionnaire felt for the depression at the front of our Lord's wrist. He then drove a heavy, square iron nail through the wrist deep into the wood, and repeated the action with the other wrist. The left foot was pressed over the right, with the toes extended down, and a nail was driven through both arches into the wood.

After crucifying Jesus, the soldiers did what they always did: "Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get" (Mark 15:24b). The soldiers who crucified criminals were typically given their clothing as payment. These actions fulfilled Psalm 22:16-18: "they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."

Jesus was crucified, the charge nailed over his head and two thieves nailed to their crosses at his side (vs. 25-27). They joined the officials and the crowd in mocking him (vs. 28-32). After darkness came on the whole land (v. 33), Jesus cried out in tortured agony as he took on the sins of the world and was forsaken by his Father (v. 34). He had not long to live.

As Jesus sagged with his weight on the nails in his wrists, excruciating pain shot up his arms as the nails pressed on his median nerves. He pushed upward with his legs and felt the agony of the nails through his feet. In time his arms began to cramp, and carbon dioxide built up in his lungs and blood stream. Eventually the pericardial sac around his heart filled with serum and began to

compress his heart. He had to push his body upward to fill his lungs and fight suffocation.

At this point, to hasten death the Romans often broke the victims' legs, a practice known as *crurifragium*. This was done to the two thieves crucified with Jesus (John 19:32). But Jesus chose to die first, as he cried, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). He "gave up his spirit" (John 19:30), "breathed his last" (Mark 15:37) and died.

*For reflection:*

In the moment of Jesus' death, the Roman centurion supervising his execution exclaimed, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54). While this is all Scripture tells us about the centurion, tradition has named him Longinus and states that he later stood watch at Jesus' grave. After Easter, he refused to lie about Jesus' resurrection. He was baptized as a believer, left military service, and returned to his native Cappadocia (modern-day Turkey) as a missionary. There he was martyred for his faith, or so the tradition says.

We have no idea what happened to the Roman centurion. But all of eternity will testify that he was right about Jesus. How will you make the same declaration today?

# ***Holy Saturday***

## **How was Jesus buried?**

Jesus was crucified and died on Good Friday. Scripture says that his tomb was owned by “a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus” (Matthew 27:57). He took Jesus’ body and “laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock” (v. 60a; cf. Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53). Joseph then “rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb” (Matthew 27:60b).

However, the work of burying our Lord was not yet finished.

On the Sabbath, our Holy Saturday, the religious authorities came to Pilate once again. For them to do this work on the Sabbath was extraordinary and unprecedented, demonstrating the urgency of the situation. They asked Pilate to “order” that Jesus’ tomb be secured, since the governor alone had authority to command Roman soldiers (Matthew 27:64).

He did as they asked, giving them “a guard of soldiers.” He allowed them to use the guard as they wished to “make it as secure as you can.” So they posted a guard and “sealed” the stone. They took a cord covered with clay or wax on which the official Roman insignia had been impressed, and attached it to the stone and to the wall of the grave. It could not be broken without incurring the wrath of the Empire.

These preparations accomplished the purposes of God beyond anything the men knew. Their actions made it impossible for Jesus’ body to be stolen by his followers, authenticating his resurrection.

And so it was that Saturday ended with Jesus in the grave, his tomb sealed and his corpse guarded by the power of imperial Rome.

Tomorrow, those preparations would be for naught, for “an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it” (Matthew 28:2). What did the battle-hardened soldiers of Rome do? “For fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men” (v. 4). The women who came to finish burying Jesus’ corpse would meet his resurrected glory. They would tell the disciples. And the world would never be the same.

But that’s for tomorrow, resurrection Sunday. Today, Jesus’ body is in its grave, his power enshrouded, his glory entombed.

*For reflection:*

Holy Saturday is a historical event, but it is also a spiritual metaphor. If we do not encounter the risen Christ for ourselves, today, it is as though he never rose. If we do not meet him this day, we miss all he wants to do in our lives this day—his transforming power, his omniscient direction, his amazing grace and miraculous mercy.

When last were you changed by the power of God?

# *Easter Sunday*

## **Are you awed by God?**

Do you know the two words God speaks to humans more often in Scripture than any others? Two words: “Fear not.” His angel spoke them to those who came to the tomb of Jesus on this Easter Sunday morning (Matthew 27:5). But they were not the first.

God spoke them to Abram when he first called him (Genesis 15:1). He said them to Hagar in the desert (Genesis 21:17). He said them to Isaac: “Fear not, for I am with you” (Genesis 26:24). He said them to Jacob: “Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there” (Genesis 46:3).

He said them to Moses when he was afraid of his enemy (Numbers 21:34). Gabriel said them to Zacharias in announcing the coming of John the Baptist (Luke 1:13); he said them to Mary in announcing the coming of the Messiah (Luke 1:30); the angels said them to the shepherds in announcing the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:10). Jesus said them to his disciples when he called them to fish for men (Luke 5:10). God said them to Paul before his shipwreck (Acts 27:24). The exalted Christ said it to John on Patmos: “Fear not” (Revelation 1:17).

Why must God so constantly tell people to “fear not” when they meet him? Because when people see God as he really is, they are awed by him.

When Isaiah saw the Lord he cried out, “Woe to me! I am ruined!” (Isaiah 6:5). When Jeremiah heard his call he responded, “Ah,

Sovereign Lord! I do not know how to speak—I am only a child” (Jeremiah 1:6). When Ezekiel saw the Lord he fell facedown (Ezekiel 1:28). When Daniel received the vision of God, he says that his face “turned pale” (Daniel 7:28).

When Jesus first demonstrated his miraculous power to Peter, the burly fisherman pled with him, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8). When Paul encountered the risen Christ he was thrown from his horse and blinded for three days (Acts 9:1-19). When John saw the glorified Jesus he “fell at his feet as though dead” (Revelation 1:17).

Do you see the pattern? Every time someone sees the living God as he truly is, that person responds in awe, fear, and reverence. Does God want us to do the same on this Easter Sunday?

If I could show you God as he truly is—if I could pull back the curtain separating us from him, time from eternity, this fallen planet from his glorious paradise—we would all fall on our knees before him in awe.

If I could show you the horrors of hell, the eternal damnation from which his Son saved you, you would be awed by God. If I could reveal his angelic beings all around us right now, this moment, we would be awed by God. If I could show you all that God has done for you and all he will do for you, his providence and protection and grace, you would be awed by God.

But my words cannot do him justice. So I’d like you to hear from another preacher, one far more eloquent than me. We began this year’s Lenten guide with the words of Dr. S. M. Lockridge, one of the greatest preachers in Christian history. His sermons continue to move hearts all over the earth. Let’s close with his description of the God who seeks to transform us by his omnipotent mercy today:

God is greater than all the superlative statements of supremacy ever shared. No far-reaching telescope can bring into focus the shoreline of his unlimited supply. No deep-digging dredge can discover the depth of his determination

to deliver you. He stands alone on the solitary pinnacle of his omnipotence. He is unparalleled and unprecedented, unique and inescapable. He is the cornerstone of all civilization. He is God's Son, our Savior.

He can meet all your needs, and he can do it simultaneously. He gives you hope when you're hopeless, help when you're helpless, peace when you're in pain, strength when you struggle, rest when you're restless and courage when you cry. He sees and sympathizes. He guards and he guides. He heals the sick, cleanses the leper, sets the captive free and forgives sinners.

He is the key to knowledge, the wellspring of wisdom, the doorway of deliverance, and the pathway to peace. He's the roadway to righteousness, the highway to holiness, and the gateway to glory. He is the master of masters, the captain of the conquerors, the head of the heroes, and the leader of the legislators. He is the Governor of governors, the Prince of Peace, the Prince of princes. He is the Lord of all lords, the King of all kings.

I wish I could describe him to you. He is indescribable, irresistible, irreplaceable, indisputable, invincible. His word is all you need. He is love, and it never ends. His grace is sufficient, and his mercy never fails. His yoke is easy; his burden is light.

I tell you, you can't outlive him, and you can't live without him. Pilate couldn't stop him, Herod couldn't kill him, death couldn't handle him, and praise God, the grave couldn't hold him.

*For reflection:*

Are you awed by God?

As we have walked through Lent with those who were transformed by the crucified and risen Christ, now it's our turn. I encourage you

to make time on this Easter Sunday to be transformed by God—time to worship him, to listen to his Spirit, to meet him in his word, to see him in his creation. Stay in his presence until you know you have met him, and you cannot be the same.

Mother Teresa told her students that if they would spend time each morning praising Jesus, they would have all the power they needed for the day. Easter is not intended to be an event but a lifestyle.

When last were you awed by God? Will you be transformed today?