

Stories of the Master

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HW012 – Early One Morning

The Roman soldier approached Pilate's quarters with fear. He knew that Pilate was deeply agitated over the events of the preceding day. The soldier had witnessed the spectacle of the Jewish leaders handing one of their own to Pilate. He had observed Pilate questioning him, attempting to release him, and finally giving in to the crazed thinking of those people who demanded that the Romans crucify Jesus.

He knew of the death of Jesus and of Joseph of Arimathea's bold and respectful request to take care of the body of Jesus. He knew Pilate wanted to be done with these events and yet here at the governor's palace was yet another delegation of Jewish leaders asking to see Pilate!

"Lord Governor, a delegation of priests and members of a sect called Pharisees are asking to see you. They say the matter is urgent and it is about Jesus of Nazareth."

"Jesus of Nazareth! Will that issue ever go away? What more could they want? I crucified him for them. I have given his body to one of their leaders for burial. What do they want now?" and when Pilate went out to them they said,

"Governor Pilate – the events of the past day have been extraordinary and distressing for us all. We greatly appreciate your assistance in taking care of the problem of Jesus who was deceiving the people and preparing to lead them in an insurrection against you. When he was alive, that deceiver made a prediction. He said that he would die, and then on the third day, he would rise again."

"You don't believe that do you," Pilate scoffed. "Dead people do not come back to life!"

"No, my Lord. We do not believe it for a moment, but our fear is that if we do not protect his burial place with utmost diligence, his fanatical followers will steal his body during the night, hide it, and say that he has risen from the dead. You know how the people can be easily persuaded. You know how they fall prey to superstitions and you know that they were easily deceived by Jesus with his tricks and clever sayings. If they steal the body, hide it, and tell others that Jesus rose from the dead, they will be able to rally the people against us and against you. This deception will be worse than any other deception and this will cause even greater problems in controlling the people and maintaining our authority, not to speak of your authority."

Pilate listened carefully and although he hated these men, he nodded his head and said, "Yes, you are right."

"Petronius, take some of your men and set up a guard for the tomb where Joseph placed him. These men will take you to the place. Take your best soldiers. Have them watch the tomb with extreme vigilance. Seal it with the Roman seal. People will think twice before they tamper with that seal or that stone or the dead body of Jesus in the tomb. Guard it until the three days are finished and then maybe we will be done with this whole affair" and Pilate turned and left the Jewish delegation and his trusted centurion to carry out his commands.

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The delegation of priests and Pharisees left, content at last that they had won over Jesus. They left a few of them to guide the Roman soldiers to the tomb and Petronius gathered his top four men and said, “This is of the highest priority. You four are my best men. You will guard the burial place of Jesus of Nazareth. You know he was crucified earlier today. His body has been placed in a tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea and the leaders of the Jewish people will take you to his burial site. I want you to seal the tomb with this cord and stamp it with the governor’s seal. No one, no one is to approach this tomb until the three days are completed. Then you will be released from your watch.”

“Sir,” one of the soldiers asked. “Why are we to guard the tomb and why only until the third day is completed” and Petronius, the centurion answered. “These people. They say the strangest things. They have the strangest beliefs. Jesus said he would rise from the dead on third day.”

The soldiers laughed, “But that is impossible! No one rises from the dead.”

“Yes, but if some of his followers were to steal the body they could make such a claim and then we would have a real problem on our hands. You are to make sure that does not happen. Our guard will guarantee that there is no funny business going on at the tomb. Guard the tomb with your life – for the glory of Rome! Hail Caesar!”

“Hail Caesar,” they replied.

In a home in Jerusalem, a small band of men and women were gathering. They came in ones and twos and they came as secretly as possible. Fear was in their eyes. Anguish and despair was on the faces of all. The followers of Jesus were gathering together.

The men hung their heads in despair. Some of the women were weeping. John, the youngest of Jesus’ disciples was sitting next to Mary and speaking gently to her, reassuring her that he would watch over her and care for her. Then a knock came on the door and Andrew motioned for all to be quiet and still. They feared that the authorities might come for them and they had to use extreme caution.

“Yes, who is it?” Andrew asked. “It’s your brother, Simon Peter. Please let me in.” And Andrew quickly unbolted the door and Peter entered the room. Everyone stared and Peter looked upon them all and said, “I know. I have let you down. I have failed you all. I failed him. I am so sorry.” And Peter lowered his eyes in shame wondering if he would be received or would be rejected by his brothers and sisters.

But one of the disciples approached Peter and said, “Brother, we all failed him. We all fled from him that night. In his moment of greatest need, we did not stand with him. All these years we argued about who was the greatest. We all proclaimed our loyalty. We all said we would stand with him, but none of us did.”

And then, with a slight smile he said, “At least you had the courage to use the sword, Peter! I thought you were going to chop that guy’s head off in the garden when they came to arrest Jesus!”

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“I never was good with a sword,” Peter said, “but it was foolish. What was I thinking? What were a couple of swords against that band that came against us. Besides, did you see what Jesus did? He healed the man that I hurt. Jesus healed the one who came against him and told me to throw away the sword. And then he gave himself up as if he wanted to go with them. I still don’t understand.”

One by one the disciples came to Peter and embraced him. They comforted him and then they all wept over their failure and over the death of their master.

Late on the Sabbath the women went to their own quarters to rest. When the Sabbath ended, some of the women began to gather spices. Mary Magdalene said, “We saw where Jesus was buried. Joseph of Arimathea placed our master’s body in his tomb and he placed many spices in the folds of Jesus’ burial cloth, but the Sabbath was approaching and he could not finish the job. We must go to the tomb early in the morning and complete the proper burial procedures. Who will go with me?” And Joanna, the wife of the steward of Herod before whom Jesus stood trial and Mary the mother of one of Jesus’ disciples and several other women agreed to go with her early the next morning. They prepared their spices and went to bed, trying to sleep, but finding it difficult to rest because of the grief in their heart. All night long, deep rumblings could be felt from the depths of the earth. The ground would shake for a moment and then be still, as if the earth were trying to say something to them all. And then they slept.

It seemed like they had just shut their eyes for a moment when Mary Magdalene woke from a start and said, “What time is it?” And another said, “I heard voices outside. I believe it is the fourth watch. The sun will be rising soon. Let’s go to the tomb,” and the women gathered their spices and went to the tomb to care for the body of Jesus.”

The Roman soldiers were vigilant in carrying out their task. They wanted to please their centurion. They had risen in the ranks of the soldiers by their courage and discipline and did not want to disappoint. One by one they would take turns standing beside the disc shaped stone that covered the entrance to the tomb. They would check the Roman seal to make sure it was intact although this was unnecessary for they would see anyone approaching the tomb before anyone could do anything to the seal or the stone or the body in the tomb.

Inside the tomb, the dead body of Jesus lay. Since Friday when Joseph placed him in his family tomb, his body had rested, lifeless, bloodless, and without breath. All throughout the Sabbath day, the second day, the body continued to lay in absolute silence and stillness. Darkness wrapped itself around him and held him tight, as if it were trying to prevent something or someone from reaching out to him. And then on the third day, it happened. The darkness in the tomb screamed out as a piercing light shined throughout the burial chambers and the darkness fled for the darkness always flees from the light.

The light was coming from the body of Jesus. It was a beautiful light, a light such as no one on earth had ever seen and the body that had lain lifeless and motionless began to breathe. The chest moved

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up and down as Jesus took in the sweet air of God's new creation and then he stood up! The burial cloths and the headpiece slowly dropped to the slab of stone, showing where they had encased a dead body, but now that body was standing – Jesus was alive.

The scars on his head where they placed the crown of thorns began to fade, but not completely. He looked at the hole in his side where the soldier pierced him. He looked at the scars in his hands and feet where the soldiers had driven their spikes. It was all healed! Beautiful, holy light emanated from the body of Jesus as immortality spread to every cell of his body. He looked up to his Father in heaven and said, "I thank you Father, that you always hear my prayer." And then he smiled and said, "It is beginning! Your new creation has come into the world!" And he walked through the walls of the burial chambers as the sun was rising on the first day of the week and the third day since he had been crucified.

The Roman soldiers had heard the screams of darkness from inside the tomb. It was a scream like they had never heard before, like something from another world, like something of a power that was beyond the power of Rome, yet, like something that was defeated by an even greater power. The four strong, disciplined Roman soldiers came to the entrance. They looked at each other with concern and then the earth shook mightily and one of them said, "Look" and they all turned around and two men were standing before them. They seemed to be filled with light. Their appearance was like the flash of lightning and the soldiers could barely look at them for their brightness.

The men were smiling and staring right into the faces of the Roman soldiers. They held no weapons but their appearance was so majestic and fearful that the soldiers could not hold their swords or spears of shields, their arms seemed to have no strength, their hip joints went slack, their knees began knocking, and puddles of water formed at their feet. The Roman soldiers looked down in shame and embarrassment but there was nothing they could do as they seemed to turn into stone.

Then, one of the shining ones walked to the stone. He reached out to the Roman cord and seal that represented the might of Roman authority and he broke it and casually tossed it aside. Then he looked at the soldiers and smiled again at them as he reached out his right hand, grabbed the stone, lifted it out of its groove before the tomb entrance as if it were no heavier than a feather, and rolled it away from the tomb. He let it fall to the ground with a loud thud and then he sat on it and continued smiling at the Roman soldiers.

The Roman soldiers did not know what to do and then the other shining one walked to them and said, "If I were you, I would run. Run!" And the four, strong, disciplined Roman soldiers ran for their lives back to the city.

When the women arose and gathered their spices, they walked quickly to the tomb. It was very early on the first day of the week. The sun had just risen with enough light so they could make their way through the lingering darkness that seemed to fade with each step they took.

One of them said, "How will we roll away the stone? Even though there are several of us I don't know if we have enough strength to move the stone from the entrance of the tomb. Who can we get

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to help us?” And then they felt the earth move. The women looked at each other with fear. “What is happening, Lord? God of our fathers what is happening?” They continued to walk towards the tomb and one of them said, “Look, Roman soldiers!” And they saw four soldiers with fear in the faces running towards the city. “I have never seen anything like that in my days!” one of the women said as they all rounded the hillside and came to the garden tomb and what they saw astonished them – the stone was rolled away from the entrance of the tomb. It was several feet from the tomb and lying flat on the ground, as if someone were saying it was never to be used again to seal a man in death.

“What has happened here?” Mary Magdalene cried out. “What is going on? Has someone tampered with the tomb. Oh God, no!” And she and the other women walked to the entrance of the tomb but instead of darkness the tomb was filled with light. They trembled with fear and then two men stood before them. The light was coming from them and the women fell to their faces with fear.

“Do not be afraid. I know that you have come looking for Jesus who was crucified. Why are you seeking the living one among the dead? He isn’t here. He is risen, just as said. Look, here is the place where they laid his body.” And the angels led the women to the slab of stone where Jesus’ body had laid since Friday night and the angel said again, “Don’t you remember what he said to you in Galilee? He said he would come to Jerusalem, be handed over to evil men who would crucify him and then on the third day he would rise. It is the third day! He has risen! Go now and tell his disciples. Tell them that he will go before you into Galilee.” And the shining ones disappeared.

The women looked at each other and said, “What have we just seen? What are we seeing now? I don’t understand and they ran out of the tomb and back to the city to tell the disciples about the strange events. Mary Magdalene arrived first. She burst through the doors where the disciples were sleeping and said

“Peter, John, all of you. Awaken! Something has happened at the tomb.

“Whoa! Slow down Mary! What do you mean something has happened at the tomb? What are you talking about?”

“I went to the tomb early this morning with the other women to put more spices on the body. We went to give him his proper burial and when we got there the stone was rolled away. Two men appeared to us and told us that Jesus wasn’t in the tomb anymore. We don’t understand. We don’t know what it means.”

Peter and John looked at each other. They frowned and said, “Are you sure? Are you sure you have not been dreaming. Are you OK, Mary?”

“Dreaming? No. We haven’t been asleep like you. We got up. We went to the tomb. We weren’t hiding in fear in a house. We went to do something about Jesus’ burial and when we got there I tell you the stone was rolled away. Two men, two angels appeared to us. Look here come the other women now they will tell you what I saw. But as the other women were approaching the house, breathless, Peter and John said, “Take us there Mary. Show us what has happened and the three of them ran back to the tomb” just as the other women arrived at the house. They were out of breath

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and when they caught their breath they said to the other disciples who were now all awake. “You won’t believe what has happened!”

Peter and John arrived at the tomb. It was just as Mary Magdalene had said. The stone was rolled away from the tomb entrance, and the Roman seal was broken. John went to the tomb’s entrance and hesitated but Peter walked straight in. He went to the ledge carved out of the side of the mountain and there he and John saw the linen cloth that had been used to bury Jesus. They saw the headpiece that had covered his head. They picked it up and the scent of spices filled the room even as they held the blood stained garment.

Peter and John looked at Mary Magdalene who asked, “What does it mean Peter? What does it mean John? The angel said he had risen, but how? What does that mean?”

“Risen? The resurrection doesn’t happen until the last day on earth. I don’t know what this means” and he held the burial garments to his face and breathed in their spices. And so Peter and John walked back to the city puzzled and bewildered, confused and frightened, and not yet knowing what had happened to the body of Jesus.

But as they walked to the city, Mary stayed at tomb. Fear began to fill her heart. What if it was just a cruel joke? What if the Romans took him to another place? What if the priests took his body somewhere else? What if someone else stole the body during the night? Then, they could not give him a proper burial and prepare him for the resurrection at the last day. And then she burst into tears with renewed grief, shock, and confusion.

As she wept she heard voices in the tomb, and she looked in and the two men she had seen earlier appeared again and they said, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

And she said, “Because someone has taken away his body. Someone has taken away the body of my Lord and I don’t know where they have laid him. Please help me!” And as she began to cry again she noticed someone walking towards her and the person with a strong yet gentle voice said, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”

Mary was filled with anguish and many contradictory thoughts. She forgot about the angels she had seen. She forgot about what they had said. She was confused and troubled by all that had happened and she said, “Sir, please, I am looking for the body of my master that we buried here on Friday. If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take his body away and give him a proper burial place,” and then she heard the voice again, and this time it sounded so familiar and so lovely,

“Mary!”

Mary wiped her eyes, she looked up and focused on the face of the man who stood before her, and then she saw him – it was Jesus!

“Jesus, Master! It is true. You are alive!” She fell at his feet, grabbed his feet and legs and wrapped her arms around them as if she would never let them go and Jesus with a smile and a tender laugh said, “Mary, you don’t have to cling to me. You don’t have to hold on like this. I will never leave you.

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Rise up. Go to my brothers and tell them I will soon go to my Father and their Father, to my God and their God.” Mary let go and from her knees she watched as Jesus and the other two shining ones walked away.

And once again, Mary ran back to Jerusalem. She found Peter and John. She gathered all the disciples and said, “Peter, John, all of you – I know what it all means. Jesus has been raised from the dead. I have seen him and I have talked with him! Jesus is alive!”