

HW013 Beyond All Joy

Four Roman soldiers made their way to Jerusalem, but they were not marching – they were running and they had a major problem. They had deserted their post, something unthinkable for a Roman soldier and something punishable by death. They were supposed to report to their commander when they finished their assignment but reporting to him at this moment meant certain death. They had only one choice, they must go to the priests of Israel and tell them what happened. It was because of them that they were given the assignment anyway – the assignment of guarding the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth.

It seemed like such an easy task, until the appearance of those strange shining men with superhuman strength. They seemed like gods from the old stories they had heard as children. The Roman centurion would never understand. But maybe the Jewish leaders would understand and would shelter them until the third day expired and then they could report to their commander.

They arrived at the temple gates and tried to appear as normal as possible. They entered the court of the Gentiles and the Jewish people who were bringing their animals into the courts for sacrifice on the altar looked upon them with suspicion. Finally, they found a priest and said, “Sir, we must see Caiaphas. Can you lead us to him?”

“Why should I lead you four soldiers to our high priest?”

“We are the ones who were assigned to watch the tomb of Jesus. We must give him an urgent report!”

The priest looked at them suspiciously and then delivered the message to Caiaphas who said, “The Roman guard? Here? Now? Why aren’t they at the tomb?” And he immediately rose and went out to the courts to speak to them.

“What are you doing here? Why are you not at the tomb guarding it?”

“Lord Caiaphas, something dreadful has happened at the tomb.” And the soldiers reported all that occurred that morning. When they finished, Caiaphas narrowed his eyes, hardened his face and said, “It cannot be. No, it cannot be. He is not the one. He is not the one. I refuse to believe it.” And then he turned back to the soldiers and said, “Follow me,” and he took them to a place where no one could see them and said, “Wait here.”

Caiaphas gathered many of his fellow priests together. They talked about the report of the Roman soldiers. They brought the soldiers in and questioned them. And then Caiaphas said to the priests, “There is only one thing we can do ... we must ... pay off the soldiers, give them a large sum of money and persuade them to say that Jesus’ disciples stole his body during the night while they slept.”

“But Lord Caiaphas, we know that is not what happened, what if Jesus ...”

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“No, I will not hear it! He was a deceiver. He is a deceiver. We cannot let this news get out. We must stop this rumor. It is only a rumor. It is a lie. We will pay off the soldiers. This will all go away.”

They went to the treasury and gathered much money that had been devoted to the Lord’s temple. They took it to the soldiers and said, “I think this will solve your problem,” and he showed them coins that were worth many times more than their yearly wage.

“If anyone questions you, you are to say that the disciples stole his body while you slept.”

“But Lord Caiaphas,” one of the soldiers said, “That story will get us killed. You know that sleeping on the watch is punishable by death and you know this matter was extremely important, and we weren’t sleeping. These things really happened.”

“You need not fear,” Caiaphas answered. “Remain here with me today. At the end of the day report to your commander that you have fulfilled your duty. If anyone starts asking too many questions and if the report gets to Pilate, we will intercede for you and keep you from being killed.” And the soldiers took the money and did as Caiaphas said.

Peter and John left Mary Magdalene at the tomb. They had seen the empty tomb. They had seen the burial shroud of Jesus. They had seen the stone rolled away from the tomb’s entrance, but they still did not fully understand what had happened. As they walked Peter said, “John, you go back into the city and tell the others what you have seen. I need some time alone. I want to think about it all.”

Peter walked on the outskirts of Jerusalem. He was deeply troubled. No man could have moved the stone to where it was. If robbers came to the tomb why would they bother moving it so far away from the tomb entrance? Why would people rob the tomb? The priests would not do it and they would not move the body. They wanted the Romans to guard the tomb. The Romans would not do it. They wanted to end the whole affair. The other disciples did not do it. They were with me the whole time and were in despair and hiding. There is no explanation for what had happened unless ... unless ... he did rise.

“Rise from the dead?” Peter thought. “Jesus did say that many times but what could that mean? We did not want him to go to Jerusalem where he told us repeatedly that he would die. I tried to stop him from going to Jerusalem and he rebuked me for trying to stop him. He called me Satan. He told me to get away from him. I don’t think I ever saw him so upset. He was so determined that he must go to Jerusalem and die and would allow nothing to get in his way.

Peter hung his head. “I was so foolish. I made so many mistakes. I was so loud with my words of loyalty and faith in him. And it all meant nothing. Even if he did rise from the dead what good would that be to me? I denied him. He would never forgive me.”

As Peter said these words he fell to his knees and began to weep for his failure, “Oh God, help me. Oh God, help me.” Then, he felt a hand on his head, gently brushing back his hair and a voice said to him, “I will help you” and Peter looked up and there was Jesus looking upon him, smiling, his face full of compassion.” And Peter fell to his face and said, “Oh my Lord.”

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“Rise up Peter. Rise my friend and brother,” and Jesus lifted Peter from the ground and said, “It is finished, Peter. Your sins are forgiven. The evil one sifted you like wheat on that terrible night and that sad morning. But it is all over. It is finished. I have prayed for you. I told you I would. Find strength in me and go back to our brothers and tell them that I am alive. Tell them that I have risen,” and Peter with his heart filled beyond all joy watched as Jesus walked away toward the city and then disappeared. Then, Peter went to find his brothers.

Jesus had others to whom he must show himself. He approached two men on the road leading to a small village called Emmaus, just a few miles from Jerusalem. The men were deep in conversation as Jesus walked up to them. They hardly noticed him as he asked, “What are you men discussing? You seem so sad. Has something terrible happened to you? Has something tragic happened in Jerusalem? I have been here for over a week and you are acting like the worst thing in the world has happened!”

One of them whose name was Cleopas shook his head in disbelief and said, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem and you don’t know what has happened these past few days?”

And Jesus smiled and said, “What things? What happened? Tell me about it.”

“The things about Jesus of Nazareth. He was a prophet of God. He was mighty in spirit, mighty in the works of God and in his word. But the chief priests and our rulers arrested him and delivered him over to the Romans who crucified him. We thought he was the one. We thought he was the Messiah and our deliverer.

“This is the third day since it all happened but this morning our sisters, his disciples, women who have followed him went to the tomb and said they saw a vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive. Some of our own have gone to the tomb. It is empty. It was just as the women said, but none of us saw any angels. None of us saw Jesus. We only saw an empty tomb.

Jesus listened patiently as they all walked. The two men on the road side by side with and Jesus slightly behind them listening. They still had not looked fully upon his face and Jesus said to them,

“O foolish men! You are slow of heart! You are slow to believe in what the prophets have said. Over and over they showed that suffering always precedes glory. It was that way with Joseph – his suffering in prison preceded his exaltation as ruler in Egypt, the suffering of our people in Egypt preceded the glory of the promised land, the suffering of David when he was chased by King Saul preceded his being crowned as king over the nation. Why would it not be that way with the Messiah? It was necessary that the Messiah walk this path also to suffer these things before he entered his glorious reign.

The men listened with wonder as Jesus spoke these words. Their hearts burned within them as he spoke. They had never heard their scriptures and stories explained with such clarity. They arrived in Emmaus and Jesus said, “I see that you are home. Thank you for your company but now I must move on.”

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But the two said, “No, please, the hour is late. Stay with us. We would like to hear more,” and the two insisted that this man stay with them and he went with them into their home. He kept his face shrouded and they were so busy with their thoughts and all that he had said that they hardly noticed him. They prepared a quick meal and set it before him and said, “Sir, you have taught God’s word to us with such wisdom. Would you do us the honor of giving thanks and leading us as we break this bread?”

After Jesus gave thanks to the creator for his provision, he broke the bread in front of them and the sleeves on his robe fell to his elbows. The scars in his hands were revealed and the men gasped. Jesus pull his robe away from his head and with a smile on his risen face he said, “Shalom! Peace be with you!” He set the bread down on their plates, and he vanished from their sight. The men’s mouths dropped open and they stared at the place where Jesus had sat and then stared at each other.

“It is true! Jesus has risen from the dead. No wonder our hearts were burning within us as spoke to us along the road. Yes! It all makes sense now! Suffering before glory. Just as it was with our people so it was with the Messiah. He suffered at the hands of the rulers. Now he is risen in glory and is the Lord!” And with their hearts filled beyond all joy they got up and hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples that Jesus was alive.

They could not get to Jerusalem fast enough, and when they finally arrived they burst into the house where all of them had been staying and as they did they heard Peter’s voice, “Yes, he is alive. I have seen him. He has appeared to me. He has forgiven me. He will do the same with you!”

The two men said, “And he has appeared to us!” And they told them the story of their journey to Emmaus and their conversation with Jesus. Just when they got to the place where Jesus broke the bread and blessed them with peace they all heard a voice from the corner of the room.

“Peace be with you all” and there was Jesus standing in the room with them. Some who had not yet seen him were startled and frightened. It was their first time to see the resurrected Jesus and they weren’t completely sure how this could be and so Jesus said to them, “Why are you troubled? Why do some of you doubt? Look at my hands. Look at my feet.” And he showed them his scars and said, “It is I. I have returned from death. I am alive. I am not a spirit. I am not a ghost. I am real.” Everyone stood completely amazed, astonished beyond all joy and not knowing what to say.

And so, Jesus, to show them further that he was real and not a spirit and that they were not having a vision or a hallucination said, “Do you have anything to eat?” And someone gave him a piece of fish and he ate it before them.

Jesus looked around the room and said, “I see only ten of my original disciples. I know about Judas, but where is Thomas?” And the disciples said, “We, we do not know Master. We come and go and he is not here now.”

Jesus said, “It would be good for him to know that I have risen. But until he comes may the peace of God be with you all. The Father sent me into the world. Very soon I will be sending you.” And Jesus came to each of the ten disciples and breathed on them and said, “Receive my Spirit. Be at peace.

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Your mission will start soon to bring forgiveness to the world.” But first, you must get Thomas and Jesus vanished from their sight.

A little while later Thomas entered the room. He could hear people talking loudly, many were laughing, some were dancing and singing. “Have you lost your minds? Everyone can hear you outside. I thought we were hiding from the authorities.”

“Thomas,” Peter said, “Jesus has risen from the dead. Beyond all hope, beyond all joy he has come to us. He is alive. Not even death could stop him. He has conquered all.” But Thomas said, “Risen? Do you really believe this? What has happened to you all? Are you really going to believe these women and their tales about the tomb?”

“He has appeared to me, Thomas,” Peter said. “He has appeared to Cleopas and his brother. He appeared to Mary and the sisters. And just a while ago he appeared to all of us. He was right here in the room with us.”

Thomas looked upon them and said, “I don’t know what to say to you. I trusted you. We have been together these years. Our hearts were broken. I know what I saw. I saw Jesus arrested in the garden. I saw them lead him away. I saw him nailed to a cross. That is what I have seen. That is what I know. Unless I see in his hands the imprint of the nails and put my finger in those holes, unless I put my hand into that side that was pierced with the sword, I will not believe.” And Thomas turned and walked out.

A week later, Thomas was with the other apostles. They were talking again about their experiences. No one had seen Jesus for many days and Thomas said, “My demands remain. You know what I have said. I must see him too. I must see the wounds on his hands and side for myself or I will not believe.”

And then they heard a familiar voice from the corner of the room. It was the voice of Jesus who said, “Peace be with you,” and then he said, “Thomas, come here. Reach your hands to me. Put them in the place of my wounds.” But Thomas would not move. He only stared at the person speaking with him. Jesus continued, “Thomas, reach your hand and put it into my side. Thomas, do not be unbelieving. But believe.”

Thomas stood for a moment staring at Jesus. He looked at the hands, he looked at the side and he then knelt to the floor and said, “My Lord and my God! Forgive me!”

“Thomas because you have seen me, have you believed? How blessed are the ones who did not see and yet have believed.”

Jesus then performed many miracles before Thomas and all the apostles. He proved to them that he was alive, that he had come back from the grave and that he was the Lord of all. These miracles are not recorded for us in Scripture. We don’t know what he did, but we do know that he appeared to them all and that he had truly risen from the dead and what has been written in Scripture was written so that all of us may know without a doubt that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the king of all and that believing in him we might have life in his name.

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Over a week had now passed since Jesus rose from the dead. He had appeared to Mary, to the other women, to Peter, to the two on the road to Emmaus. He had appeared to the disciples without Thomas and to the disciples with Thomas. He had eaten in front of them. He had shown them his nail-scarred hands and feet and side. Jesus had risen from the grave.

But what does it all mean? What does it mean for You? What does it mean for me? In a previous story, I shared with you two things about the meaning of the resurrection – first, it means that Jesus told the truth about his identity. He really is the promised Savior of all mankind. He is the light of the world who gives us light. He is the Good Shepherd who leads us. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus is all these things and more. He is the true Lord of the world and our Savior, if we will have him.

Second, it proves that his death on the cross was not an uncontrolled tragedy, not an unfortunate event that cut his promising life short. It was the plan of God to make the payment for the sins of the world. We can know for sure that our sins are forgiven. We can know for sure that we can have a relationship with God without guilt and without condemnation. We can be reconciled to God. And we can know these things because Jesus rose from the dead and his suffering for the sins of the world is finished.

But the resurrection of Jesus means other things as well. Let me share another with you today. It means that the Creator of the world is concerned about his creation. It means that the Creator is concerned about all the injustices and tragedies that are in our world.

Since the beginning of history when our first parents sinned, the world has been filled with sin, with wickedness and with injustice. Sorrow, suffering, sighing, tears, tragedies, turmoil, trouble – our world has been filled with evil. No greater evil, no greater injustice ever happened than that which happened on that terrible night and day when Jesus, the sinless Savior of the world was arrested, tried, sentenced to death, and crucified on a Roman cross. No man suffered like he suffered. No man sorrowed like he sorrowed. No man died like he died. It was the greatest injustice in the history of the world, but in that death, he paid for the sins of the world. Then, on the third day, just as he said, God raised him from the dead bringing an end to all his suffering and in that resurrection, he gave the world a promise – just as he raised Christ and brought an end to his suffering, so he would one day bring an end to all the suffering in the world through Jesus Christ. He would bring an end to every injustice, he would right all wrongs, and make all things new.

Beyond all hope and beyond all joy, Jesus rose from the dead into an immortal body. He lives now. His promise to his disciples then is the same promise he makes to us. He will make all things new. Have you received his promise? Have you received him? Are you living in this hope and in this joy beyond all joy?