

# CENTURION



**THE EASTER EVENT FROM  
A ROMAN'S PERSPECTIVE**

**SEAN GLADDING**



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# Preface

**W**hile Easter may be the most important season in the church calendar, when it comes to revisiting the events that took place in Jerusalem two millennia ago, for many of us it is all too familiar. We come to the story as insiders. We know what happens, and we know how the story ends. Chances are we even miss the crucifixion in corporate worship – jumping straight from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday.

The apostle Paul wrote these words to the church in Corinth: “We preach Christ and him crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to gentiles foolishness.” Two thousand years later, Paul might write to us, “We preach Christ and him on a cross: to some, a piece of jewelry, to others just another sad story.” As insiders, it is easy to forget that what is so familiar to us is unknown to so many. Even when we try and tell the story as it first unfolded, we still hear it from

an insider's perspective, whether that of Judas, the betrayer; or Peter, the denier; or Mary, the faithful witness to the resurrection. Rarely do we hear the story from an outsider's perspective, someone unfamiliar with the story, someone confused by another culture: someone living out of a very different story.

This series of daily readings for Holy Week is offered as a way to hear the story of Easter once more, yet this time from the perspective of an outsider: a Roman centurion. What was it like to have been in Jerusalem for Passover as part of an occupying foreign army? To have a vague sense of the faith of the people around you, but not really understand it? What was it like to live unquestioning of your own cultural narrative until one dying man on a cross turned everything you believed on its head?

Welcome to Holy Week.

# The Beginning

I'm a career soldier. Left the family farm when I was 12 – ran away to join the Legion. That was a great disappointment to my father, let me tell you. But I wasn't too upset about that. I'd spent my childhood being a disappointment to that man. And he liked to take out his disappointment on my flesh. So, I figured if I was going to get a beating, I might as well get paid for it – and see the world while I was at it. So the army it was.

I'll admit I'm not the brightest star in the sky – if my mother had one saying for my lack of smarts, she must have had a hundred. “One sandwich short of a picnic” was her favorite. So, I knew I wasn't going to rise through the ranks by impressing my commanding officers with my ‘sparkling wit’. But there's one thing I'm really good at – obeying orders. That was about the only thing my father gave me, besides the bruises. So, when an officer said “Jump!” I said, “How high?”



Don't ask questions, just do it. I know how to take orders. And that does get you noticed eventually. So it's taken twenty years, but now I'm a centurion – a hundred men under my command. And I'm the one giving the beatings these days.

I've served the Emperor faithfully. I've shed blood all over the Empire: mostly theirs, but some of my own. We've brought peace to thousands – whether they wanted it or not. And after every successful campaign we marched back to Rome and entered the city to the cheers of the crowd, banners waving proudly, our general at the head of the column, riding his finest horse. And there we presented Caesar with his victory, and once more pledged allegiance to him, the Savior of Rome, our Lord, the Son of God. Glory days indeed!

But then they sent me to Judaea – to Jerusalem. And I've spent the last five years in the worst post of my career. These people are crazy. They just don't get it. They refuse to accept that they are a conquered people. So I'm still shedding blood. Although it's no longer at the point of a sword on the battlefield. Now it's hammering spikes through their wrists and ankles on a cross, and then hoisting them up so everyone can see the price of refusing to accept Caesar as Lord.

Usually it only takes a week or so of crucifixions for people to get the point – no pun intended. But these Judaeans – I’ve been doing it for five years, and we still can’t make crosses fast enough. Especially during their Holy Days. Like this past week. We always have plenty of crosses ready made for Passover. Because that’s when the messiahs show up.

Seems these people have a myth about some prophesied leader who’s going to set them free from ‘the tyranny of Rome’. And every year, some wannabe shows up with a handful of followers, tries to knife a few of my men, and thinks that’s going to start the revolution. Sometimes they’re just religious nuts – I almost feel bad stringing them up. Almost. Other times they’re bandits, trying to up the stakes a bit. Every time, they end up on one of our crosses.

So this ‘messiah’ goes by other names too. Like, “Son of Man”. Or, “Son of David.” Even “King of the Jews” – which, let me tell you, does not sit too well with old Herod. But the name Rome has the problem with is “Son of God.” Because there’s only one of them – and that’s the Emperor. And Caesar does not do competition. So I’ve strung up plenty of messiahs in the five years I’ve been here.

Why I am telling you all this? Because it happened again this year. Another Passover week in Jerusalem. Another messiah. Only this time it was different. I've crucified hundreds of men. But none like that one. And for someone who never asks questions, believe me: I've got a bunch of questions now.

# Palm Sunday

## Luke 19:28-44

*After He had said these things, He was going on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When He approached Bethphage and Bethany, near the mount that is called Olivet, He sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you; there, as you enter, you will find a colt tied on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say, 'The Lord has need of it.'"*

*So those who were sent went away and found it just as He had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?"*

*They said, "The Lord has need of it."*

*They brought it to Jesus, and they threw their coats on the colt and put Jesus on it. As He was going, they were spreading their coats on the road.*

*As soon as He was approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the [d]miracles which they had seen, shouting:*

*"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord;  
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"*

*Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, “Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.”*

*But Jesus answered, “I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!”*

*When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.”*

**I** hate Passover. Talk about a threat to national security. All those people packed into Jerusalem – you can hardly move. The air is thick with resentment and the heat is stifling. Then there’s the smell. Not just of sweat. Blood. All those countless animals being slaughtered in their temple. I hate it. If I had my way we’d make them all stay home. Bar the gates to Jerusalem and be done with it. But I’m just a centurion. What do I know? So we bring in all the garrisons – soldiers on every corner, just to remind them who’s in charge. My troops are stationed at the eastern gates. I like to get up in the watch tower so I can

see when trouble's brewing.

It had been a slow morning, but I knew things would start getting noisy in the afternoon. Up they come from the villages, singing their endless songs, and glaring at us as they enter the city. I was keeping an eye on the gate, when one of my men grabbed my arm and pointed outside the city. When I saw what he was pointing at, I thought to myself, "Trouble." So I quickly put a squad together and left the city to meet it head on.

As we marched down the road, I got a better look at what my man had noticed. There was a large crowd bunched together in the middle of the long line of pilgrims, and there was a lot of movement – I couldn't figure out what was going on. We got closer and then I saw what it was. Some of them had cut down palm branches and were waving them as they walked. These people! They know they're not allowed to display any national symbols. We'll supply the symbols: Roman symbols. I ordered my squad to double time it, and as the crowds parted in front of us I got an even clearer view. They weren't just waving branches: they were also laying them down in front of a mounted figure. Some people were taking off their cloaks and laying them in the road as well. I

had a flashback to all those victory parades in Rome, which threw me for a moment.

Shaking my head to clear it, I steadied my men, and prepared to break a few heads to remind these peasants of the rules. Then I saw the center of all the fuss and almost laughed. Some scrawny guy sitting on an ass. And the crowds were acting like he was nobility or something. But I didn't see any weapons. No one was glaring at us. So I relaxed a little. Just a little.

I was about to order my men forward to break up their little parade when they stopped anyway. All eyes were on the guy on the donkey. So I looked at him too – and he was weeping. He said something I couldn't quite catch, and then the party was over. People started dropping their palm branches, picked up their cloaks, and followed him into the city. They didn't look like much of a threat anymore. They looked confused more than anything. They certainly weren't singing. So I ordered my men to stand down, and we marched back in behind them. I looked at the man on the donkey. Nothing about him really struck me as being different from the others.

Who was he?

# Monday: A Stir in the Temple

## Matthew 21:12-17

*And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a robbers’ den.”*

*And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became indignant and said to Him, “Do You hear what these children are saying?”*

*And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies You have prepared praise for Yourself’?” And He left them and*



*went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.*

**M**onday night I was in the barracks, drinking away the stress of another day of ‘keeping the Pax Romana.’ A friend of mine, another centurion, was talking about something he’d witnessed in the temple. Now, we’re not allowed in the temple, but we have the Antonia Fortress right next door so we can look down and keep an eye on what’s going on. That doesn’t go down too well with the temple leaders, let me tell you! Anyway, seems there was quite the disturbance in the moneychangers’ area today.

You see, all these pilgrims come in from the villages and bring animals to sacrifice. Or they bring money to buy an animal – or birds if they’re really hard up. And of course, where there’s money involved, everyone wants their cut. So these peasants bring in the best of their flocks, but they’re not always up to “temple standard”. They look white enough to me, but then again, I’m not a priest. So they have to buy one of the officially licensed lambs. And, since it is the holy days, there’s always a little bit of price-gouging. If you bring money to buy an

animal, you have to exchange it for the temple-sanctioned currency. Apparently the Denarius – coin of the empire, mind you – is no good in their temple. So there are all these booths where you can change your money. With interest, needless to say. I sometimes wonder if I'm in the wrong business.

Well someone took offense to the marketplace today and created quite the stir. And wouldn't you know who it was? That guy on the donkey. He may be scrawny, but apparently that didn't stop him from throwing their tables around, and sending them scrambling for their coins. Or trying to catch the doves he was letting loose, while he yelled at the merchants. Very entertaining I'm sure! My centurion friend decided it wasn't Rome's problem, so he just watched. Some of the chief priests came to investigate, but by the time they got there, things had settled down and the scrawny guy was sitting on some steps, surrounded by kids and cripples. My friend said the chief priests looked none too pleased. I'm sure they didn't! When he finished describing the action, I asked him if he thought the man was a threat. He laughed. "What, him? No." Then he said, "But you can't be too careful at Passover. So I've got one of my little urchins keeping an eye on him – he

can go where we can't. He's going to let me know what this guy is up to." One of my men asked him, "Do we know who this man is?" and I heard his name for the first time.

"Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth."

# Tuesday: Making Powerful Enemies

## Luke 20:1-26

*On one of the days while He was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders confronted Him, and they spoke, saying to Him, “Tell us by what authority You are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority?”*

*Jesus answered and said to them, “I will also ask you a question, and you tell Me: Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?”*

*They reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men,’ all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.”*

*So they answered that they did not know where it came from. And Jesus said to them, “Nor will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”*

*And He began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard and rented it out to vine-growers, and went on a journey for a long time. At the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, so that they would give him some of the produce of the vineyard; but the vine-growers beat him and sent him*

*away empty-handed. And he proceeded to send another slave; and they beat him also and treated him shamefully and sent him away empty-handed. And he proceeded to send a third; and this one also they wounded and cast out.*

*The owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.'*

*But when the vine-growers saw him, they reasoned with one another, saying, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance will be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*

*What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy these vine-growers and will give the vineyard to others."*

*When they heard it, they said, "May it never be!"*

*Jesus looked at them and said, "What then is this that is written: 'The stone which the builders rejected, This became the chief corner stone'?*

*Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust."*

*The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on Him that very hour, and they feared the people; for they understood that He spoke this parable against them.*

*So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, in order that they might catch Him in some statement, so that they could deliver Him to the rule and the authority of the governor. They questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, we know that You speak and teach correctly, and You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"*

*But He detected their trickery and said to them, “Show Me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?”*

*They said, “Caesar’s.”*

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

*And they were unable to catch Him in a saying in the presence of the people; and being amazed at His answer, they became silent.*

**W**hen we got back to the barracks Tuesday night, I sought out the centurion who had put the tail on the scrawny guy. “Any more excitement in the temple today?”

He looked thoughtful, and rubbed his stubbly chin. “Not really. But it was an interesting day, nonetheless.”

“Go on then,” I encouraged him, which he did.

“My little spy came and told me that Jesus fellow was heading back to the temple. I sent him back to follow him and to listen to what he was saying – with instructions to come and find me if he heard even a hint of any revolutionary nonsense.”

“I took my post and looked down, waiting for him to arrive. The chief priests had stationed some of the temple guard in the big courtyard, and when Jesus entered they moved towards him. He just strode right

past them, with a dozen or so of his followers. The guard tailed him as he crossed the courtyard and I lost sight of him as he made his way into the inner courts.”

“It all seemed quiet enough and the boy didn’t come back until later that afternoon. After listening to his report, I kind of wish I could have been there myself. You know I’ve got no time for these chief priests – keeping us out of the temple, looking down their nose at us as they parade through the streets. I think Pilate’s a fool to let them dictate what we can and can’t do – are they part of the Empire or not? And as for the Herodeans, well, they’re just a bunch of slimy sycophants. Anyway, sounds like Jesus got the better of them all today – showed them up for the hypocrites they are. And him from a backwater area like Galilee. He didn’t win any friends today, I can tell you.”

“So? What happened?”

“Apparently he was teaching the people, when the temple elite showed up to confront him about his behavior yesterday. They wanted to know who gave him the authority to act as he did – because, of course, only they have authority in the temple. He asked them some question, they conferred for a minute,

and then came back to say they couldn't give him an answer. So he said he didn't have an answer for them either. Then he told a story that the boy said he didn't really understand, but obviously the chief priests did, because he said they looked daggers at Jesus when it was done. He thought the temple guard were going to arrest Jesus on the spot, but the crowd made it clear they wouldn't let that happen, so with a sweep of their robes they all left. Ha! I wish I could have seen it."

"Was that it then?"

"No. The subject of taxes came up. Which usually does not bode well, as you know. Some of the Herodeans came with a question of their own. They asked him whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not." He slammed his hand down on the bench. "This is exactly why we should be able to enter the inner courts – so they don't have a safe place for their seditious talk."

It was my turn to be thoughtful. "Tough question. If he says 'no', then they can march him out and turn him over to us for sedition – then we take care of him for them. If he says 'yes', well, he'd sound like a Herodean, and I imagine that wouldn't go down too well with the crowd. So, what did he say?"



“First, he called them on what they were doing – he could see through their little game. Then he said, ‘Give me a denarius.’ Genius! The guy’s a genius.” I looked at him blankly. “Don’t you know nothing about these people? They only have one god. And a prohibition against idols – which they consider to be false gods. The ignorant fools.” I still didn’t get it. He shook his head. “You got a denarius on you? Pull it out. Whose picture is on it?”

“Caesar’s, of course.”

“What’s inscribed on the coin?”

I looked down and read, “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus.” Then I realized just how clever an answer Jesus had given. “The image of the divine emperor.”

My friend smiled. “Exactly. What they would consider to be an idol. Which begs the question: what are they doing with one in their holiest place, eh?”

“They tried all kinds of other questions, but it sounds like he answered them all. And then he left, and my little urchin came and gave his report.” He took a big gulp of wine, rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth and said, “You know, I kind of like this guy.” But then his face hardened. “But he’s attracting a lot

of attention, and that could mean trouble. And I'm not having any trouble during Passover.”

As I turned in for the night, I thought to myself, “This Jesus is making some very powerful enemies. He'd better watch his back.”

# Wednesday: An Anointing for a Coming Burial

## Mark 14:1-9

*Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth and kill Him; for they were saying, "Not during the festival, otherwise there might be a riot of the people."*

*While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; and she broke the vial and poured it over His head.*

*But some were indignantly remarking to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted? For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they were scolding her.*

*But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me. She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."*

I was so tired when I got back to the barracks that it took real effort not to just throw my armor on the ground by my bed. But I hung it on its stand and then sat on the edge of the bed to clean the dried blood off my gladius and make sure the edge was still sharp. I'd taken a squad of troops to patrol the streets around the temple – we like to maintain a heavy presence where the crowds are largest. Some fools had set up a crude ambush – tried to separate my men and pick one of us off. As if we haven't seen it all before. People can be so stupid. They led us on a merry chase but we finally cornered them. I had planned to make the usual example of them and crucify them, but a crowd gathered and started yelling at us. Crucifixion is a pretty effective deterrent, but sometimes there's nothing better than sheathing your sword in an insurgent's body to shut the crowd up. So I dispatched the six of them there and then. As the blood splattered on the faces of the onlookers, most of them turned and ran, which was no more than I expected. I sent two of my men to find a cart and then we loaded the bodies up and took them out to the city dump. Then we headed back to the temple – I wanted to stamp out any residual revolutionary thinking. Because it's always simmering just

below the surface in this city.

My friend shoved a mug of wine into my hand and said, “You look like you need that.” I told him about the events of the day, and he shrugged. “Just another Passover.”

I laughed. “I guess so. How about you? What’s the word on your Jesus of Nazareth?”

“Well, he didn’t come into Jerusalem today. Probably trying to steer clear of the chief priests. My little spy tells me he’s staying in Bethany. Sounds like he’s laying low – dinner with some friends was about the sum of his day. And he’s got some very generous friends apparently.” I raised an eyebrow, and he gave what was becoming a daily report.

“During the dinner a woman broke open a jar of perfume – pure nard by all accounts, and proceeded to pour it over his head. The whole jar. That’s more than our soldiers make in a year.”

I shook my head. “That’s some gift. Although I think I’d have preferred to have been given the jar! Why would someone do that?”

“My thoughts exactly. In fact, several of his followers expressed the same sentiment. Although they said they would have sold the perfume and given the money to the poor.”

I laughed, “Sure they would.”

He leaned forward, intent. “But Jesus’ response was really...strange. He defended her actions, and then seemed to explain why she did it. My boy reported him word for word. He said, ‘She has anointed my body beforehand for the burial.’ What do you make of that?”

I thought for a moment. “Well, I’m sure there are plenty of folk who’d be happy to see him dead. Maybe he’s got a death wish.”

“Maybe. One thing’s for sure, he’s going to smell that perfume for a long time to come.”

Two days later I would remember his words, when I smelt that aromatic oil, mixed with the scent of his blood and sweat, as I stood at the foot of the cross I had nailed him to.

# Thursday: The Calm before the Storm

## Mark 14:12-17

*On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, “Where do You want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?”*

*And He sent two of His disciples and said to them, “Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him; and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher says, “Where is My guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?”’ And he himself will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; prepare for us there.”*

*The disciples went out and came to the city, and found it just as He had told them; and they prepared the Passover.*

*When it was evening He came with the twelve.*

**T**he Day of Passover had finally arrived and none too soon as far as I was concerned. Although the streets are at their most crowded, it's with people taking their lambs to the temple to be slaughtered, or buying last minute things they need for the feast. No one has time to make trou-

ble, so we don't have much to do. Mostly making sure the flow of traffic is unimpeded, because all that excited anticipation can turn to frustration pretty quickly when people can't get where they want to go. But the smell. It's the worst day of all. The stench of blood around the temple is almost overwhelming. It almost obscures the smell of thousands of sweaty bodies navigating the narrow streets of Jerusalem. Almost.

We had something to look forward to this year though, as the day after Passover was their Sabbath, so we'd hopefully have a couple of days of relative quiet. Then again, you never know what's going to happen when a people are waiting for a mythical figure to appear and drive us out of their homeland. So I didn't let my guard down too much.

By sundown all I had to do was get a couple of overturned carts moved and settle a couple of disputes over livestock ownership, which doesn't take long when you've got a sword. When we got back to the barracks, I stripped off my armor, grabbed a skin of wine, and went in search of my friend. I found him playing dice with some of his men.

“So, what's the word on Jesus of Nazareth today?”



Not looking up from the bones, he said, “Nothing to report. He stayed in Bethany all day. Sent some of his followers into the city to make arrangements for the Passover, and then came into the city at dusk. My little spy came and told me all this, but he had to get back to his family, so that’s all I know. Looks like he’s just another rabbi with a few followers. He’ll probably head back to Galilee after the Sabbath, and that will be that.”

We would discover just how wrong that assumption was a few hours later.

# Friday: The King Crucified

## **John 19:1-16; Luke 23:32-46; Matthew 27:45-54**

*Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; and they began to come up to Him and say, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and to give Him slaps in the face.*

*Pilate came out again and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him." Jesus then came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold, the Man!"*

*So when the chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out saying, "Crucify, crucify!"*

*Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him."*

*The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God."*

*Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid; and he entered into the Praetorium again and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to Him, "You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?"*

*Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."*

*As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, "If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar."*

*Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour.*

*And he said to the Jews, "Behold, your King!"*

*So they cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!"*

*Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?"*

*The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar."*

*So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified.*

*[Luke 23:32-46]*

*Two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him. When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, "Father,*

*forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.*

*And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.”*

*The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, “If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!”*

*Now there was also an inscription above Him, “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”*

*One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!”*

*But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”*

*And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!”*

*And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”*

*It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, because the sun was obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.” Having said this, He breathed His last.*

*[Matthew 27:45-54]*

*Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a*

*loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”*

*And some of those who were standing there, when they heard it, began saying, “This man is calling for Elijah.”*

*Immediately one of them ran, and taking a sponge, he filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink. But the rest of them said, “Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him.” And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.*

*And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”*

**E**arly Friday morning – in the middle of a particularly pleasant dream – one of my men shook me awake, and told me we were needed at the Governor’s palace. I quickly threw on my armor, and headed over.

What was this about?

I could hear the raised voices before I got there. People yelling angrily – not something I was used to hearing at the governor’s palace, especially this early in the day. As I turned the corner, I ran into a small mob of people outside. I’d arrived in the middle of an argument – and I was amazed to see Pilate himself standing at the top of the steps, arguing with some of the temple leaders. There were several of his personal guard with him – I supposed we were back-up, just in case. And then two soldiers brought someone out. He looked vaguely familiar, but his face was pretty badly beaten, and he was dressed in a purple robe, with what looked like a wreath made out of thorns on his head.

Pilate gestured towards him and said, “Behold, the man.” And at that moment, I realized who it was. The guy on the donkey. Jesus. What on earth had he done to get himself in this fix? When they saw him, the chief priests started yelling out, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Now, that was quite a shock, let me tell you. A bunch of Judaeans yelling for one of their own to be crucified. I figured they’d set this poor guy up somehow. I looked at Pilate, and I could see the distaste on his face – something was up here for sure. He turned to the crowd and told them he was going

to release Jesus. They yelled back, “If you release this man, you’re no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar.” Another shock – the religious leaders quoting Roman law to the Governor they hate.

I saw a flash of anger cross Pilate’s face, and he sat down on the judgment seat – he was about to announce whatever decision he had made. Everything got quiet. And with a look of contempt, he said, “Behold your king.” Well that just set them off again. “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Pilate yelled over them all, “Shall I crucify your king?” And if I hadn’t heard it myself, I would never have believed it. The chief priests yelled back, “We have no king but Caesar.” And then it got real quiet. Everyone looking at them in disbelief – Pilate included. But they just crossed their arms and stood their ground, like they hadn’t just said something that had never crossed the lips of a Judaeen since we first conquered them.

Pilate caught my eye and beckoned me up. He told me to take Jesus and crucify him with the others slated for death that day. Then he turned to the crowd, and with one last contemptuous look at the religious leaders, washed his hands of the whole affair, and went inside. And so I marched Jesus through the

streets of Jerusalem, out to the city dump, and did what I've done so many times before – nailed his wrists and ankles to the cross and hoisted him up to die.

I strung up a couple of 'freedom fighters' next to him – at least that's what they call themselves. We call them terrorists. Normally that would be that. We'd come back a month later and take down their carcasses. But there was an unusually large crowd for this crucifixion, so I ordered my men to stand guard – I did not want any more trouble. And I took time to look at this man, this Jesus, this so-called "King of the Jews." Pilate had issued one more order to me – I had to write those words on a board and hang it over his head. His last dig at the temple elite and the Herodians. I watched him die, like I have hundreds of others. But none like him. No screaming, no pleading, no cursing. One of the terrorists said, 'if you are the messiah – save yourself...and us.' The other one told him to shut up, then looked at Jesus and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." What in hades did that mean? He was going to die on that cross – what kingdom was he possibly going to have? Jesus looked at him, smiled – actually smiled – and said, "I promise you,



today, you will be with me in paradise.” What kind of self-delusion was that?! Later on, the other terrorist cursed me. I never bother wasting breath replying. I looked up at Jesus instead, and he looked back at me, and said this, “Father, forgive them...they don’t know what they’re doing.” Another first for me – I had definitely never heard that from anyone I was crucifying before. I found from that point on I could hardly take my eyes off this man.

The sky began to get dark, as storm clouds rolled in. People began to leave, to take shelter. The wind picked up, and big, fat raindrops began to fall. I pulled my cloak tighter around me – I suppose I could have taken shelter too, but something kept me at the foot of the center cross. As the lightning flashed I looked into Jesus’ face one more time, and heard him say, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” And then he died. No doubt about it. He chose that moment to die. And then the earth quaked under my feet, and I grabbed the cross to keep my balance. And I looked up into the beaten and bloodied face of this man, and the words just fell out of me, “Truly this man was the Son of God.”

Maybe he is a King. Maybe even this messiah they believe in. But why did the title of the Emperor come

out of my mouth? Perhaps because in the moment of his death I saw power in him beyond any power I'd ever known. And I saw it in a man dying on a cross. What kind of foolishness is that?

Saturday: A Stolen or  
Resurrected Body?  
**Saturday of Holy Week**  
**Mark 15:42-46;**  
**Matthew 27:62-66**

*When evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.*

*[Matthew 27:62-66]*

*Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.' Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the*

*people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first."*

*Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how." And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone.*

**B**y the time the storm had blown itself out, the only ones left at the crucifixion site were a few women. My men and I were soaked to the skin, cold and irritable. I can't say I was displeased when the replacement troop of soldiers arrived. With a last look at Jesus, and with the curses of one of the terrorists still ringing in our ears, I marched my men back to the barracks to dry off and warm up at the fire.

I had barely put a dry tunic on, when a messenger from the Governor's office arrived. He seemed put out that we were in the barracks and not at the crucifixion. I shrugged and asked him what he wanted. "The Governor wants to know if Jesus of Nazareth is dead."

"Didn't you look when you went to Golgotha?" I asked.

"Two of the men were still moaning, and it's not my place to determine if the other man's silence is

proof of his death. That's your work, centurion. The Governor wants a report. And he wants it now." I hastily threw on my armor and followed the man to Pilate's palace.

When I got there, a rather nervous-looking man was standing before Pilate. Judging by the quality of his clothes, he was probably a wealthy and important member of Jerusalem's ruling class, but I didn't think I had seen him there the night before. I approached Pilate, and he said, "Ah, centurion. This man claims Jesus of Nazareth is already dead, and is asking me to release his body for burial." He paused as if weighing the merits of this most unusual claim. After all, we don't bury insurgents – we leave them up as an example to others. Making his decision, he said, "I am inclined to grant his request. However, it seems far too short a time for this man to have already died. Can you confirm that he is, in fact, dead?"

"Yes sir, he is dead. We drove a spear into his side – the fluids had already separated."

He looked at the man, and then said, "Very well Joseph, you may have the body of your rabbi." Turning to me he said, "Centurion, accompany this man, take down the cross and give him the body of Jesus of Nazareth." I took him to Golgotha and had

the soldiers remove the body from the cross. As the man wrapped Jesus' corpse in a linen cloth, I took one last look at this seemingly insignificant person who had nonetheless drawn some very significant people together – in life and in death. But this was the end of all that.

My friend told me the following night that the chief priests had gone to Pilate that morning, concerned that Jesus' followers would steal his body away. Seems these Judaeans believe in bodily resurrection, and if Jesus really had made claims that he would not only die, but also rise again, then I suppose it makes sense to prevent his followers from stealing his corpse and spreading just such a rumor. Pilate gave them a small guard from among my friend's soldiers and they made the grave secure. If Jesus' followers had made such plans I was sure the guard would dissuade them.

But once again, little prepared me for what actually happened.

# Sunday: A Risen Messiah Changes Everything

## **Matthew 28:1-15**

*Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men.*

*The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you."*

*And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus \*said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me."*

*Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, and said, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble." And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day.*

**I** took my post in the watch tower at the Eastern Gate, but this time it was to watch the pilgrims begin to depart for their villages. They're always more subdued as they leave – back to their farms and vineyards, to their fishing nets and potters' wheels. Back to the endless grind of survival; for most of them, they're always just one bad harvest, one serious injury, one disease or one shipwreck away from disaster. I can see why they have their stories about this messiah who's going to deliver them from all this – and from us. As I watched the endless stream of people trudging along, my mind went to Jesus, this one who some of them had thought was their messiah. This man I had nailed to a cross. Whose death had drawn such a strange exclamation from



my lips. This nobody from Nazareth who had made such powerful enemies. But who suffered the fate the rest of us will – food for the worms.

I returned to the barracks that night anticipating the usual carousing that accompanies the end of one of their festivals, when we can relax after a stressful week of enforcing the Pax Romana. I hung my armor on its stand, realizing as I did so that I needed to clean off the dust and blood that always accumulates during Passover. I said a silent prayer to the gods that it would be my last one in this miserable city, then went in search of my friend. I heard him long before I saw him.

Following the sound of his voice, I pulled a curtain aside, and stepped into a room to find him tearing a strip or two off four of his soldiers. They stood erect, their shoulders back, with faces white as a Governor's bed linen. He paused for breath, and when he saw their eyes flicker towards me, turned and saw me for the first time. His face was red; he was shaking with barely suppressed fury. He turned back to the men, and practically spat out, "Go on then. Get out of here." He held up a sack that had the jingle of coins about it, and said, "And we'll talk more about this in the morning." With obvious relief

they practically ran past me. My friend collapsed into his old campaign chair and pulled the plug out of a wineskin, and took a long draught before handing it to me. As I took a long pull myself, he visibly calmed down and grabbed another skin.

“Unbelievable. What in hades am I supposed to do about this?” He tossed the bag to me, and I felt the weight of a considerable amount of money. “Where did that come from?” I asked. He nodded towards the doorway and said, “Those fools came back with it from what I assumed was the simple assignment of guarding a dead man’s body. Of course, there’s never anything simple about soldiering in this country.”

I took a guess, “They were the guard Pilate ordered you to place at the tomb where they laid Jesus’ body. Obviously something happened.”

“You could say that. At least they did. What a pack of lies!” He drained half the wineskin before continuing. “So they report back to the barracks with this story. Apparently one of them stood guard in front of the tomb, while the others decided to catch up on their sleep. Somehow he managed to fall asleep as well, and when the light of dawn woke them up, what do you know, that big rock had been rolled away – by some of Jesus’ followers, they claimed – and the

body taken. Just like the chief priests feared. Who they then proceeded to report this to, instead of to me. When they did come back to barracks, that's the tale I got out of them."

"But that's ridiculous! To admit to sleeping at your post – that's a capital offense. If I was going to make up a story, that's hardly what I'd come up with."

He leaned forward. "Exactly. And that's what I told them – that they'd swing for this." He pointed at the bag of money. "That's when they pulled that out, and handed it to me before telling me the real story. At least what they claim is the real story. Although it's just about as ridiculous as the first one."

"Seems that the earth quaked for a second time this week – but only in the garden where they were guarding the tomb. It knocked them to the ground, and when it was over, they maintain that one of the gods had descended in a blinding flash of light and they passed out in terror. When they came round, the stone was rolled back and the body was gone. That's the story they reported to the chief priests: the one they gave me was the one the chief priests concocted. So, I've got two equally unlikely stories to explain a missing corpse, a sack of money, and a report to make to the Governor first thing in the

morning.” He drained the rest of the wineskin, and looked me square in the eye. “What am I going to do?”

I tossed the sack back to him, and he hefted it in his hand. His face sagged, and he suddenly looked very tired. “This is a lot of money. Enough to buy my way out of the Legion. I could go back home, tend my vines, make my own wine. Forget all about Judaea.” His speech began to sound a little slurred. “I could take those four fools with me – I’ll need some field hands – then if the body does ever show up we’ll be long gone.”

We sat in silence for a while. Then I said, “So what do you think really happened?” He looked blankly at me. I continued, “Well if his disciples didn’t steal his body, where is it?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care.”

“You don’t think he could have actually...” My voice trailed off.

He snorted. “What, rose from the dead?” Gesturing towards the doorway he said, “No. I don’t think he’s out there walking around somewhere. If he was, don’t you think we’d have heard about it by now?”

“I suppose so. But just suppose he...he was alive. What then?”

He leaned forward and poked me in the chest. “I’ll tell you what then. You’d be coming with me to my farm.” It was my turn to look at him blankly. He laughed. “Don’t you see? The threat of death is the heart of Rome’s conquering power. Challenge the Emperor – die on a cross. But if this ‘messiah’ truly was back from the dead, then where would that leave us? Powerless, that’s where.” Shaking his head, he lay back on his bunk and stared up at the ceiling. I got up, bid my friend a good night, and headed to my own bed.

Knowing that thoughts of Jesus of Nazareth were probably going to keep me awake all night.



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