

Walking the Via Dolorosa – Session 4 – Stations 12-14

Station 12 - Jesus dies on the cross

(Mark 15:33-39 NIV) At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. {34} And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"-- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" {35} When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah." {36} One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said. {37} With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. {38} The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. {39} And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

Side note - THE CURTAIN OF THE TEMPLE - *This curtain separated the most holy place from the holy place (2 Chron. 3:14). Only the high priest was allowed to pass through the veil and then only on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:2). At Jesus' death the Temple veil was ripped from top to bottom, illustrating that in Christ God had abolished the barrier separating humanity from the presence of God. Christians interpret this as the end of the system of animal sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins – Jesus is the final sacrifice.*

The Altar of the Crucifixion

The Greek Orthodox Altar of the Crucifixion is placed at the very top of the Rock of Golgotha. There are, in fact, two clear glass panels on either side of the altar, where the unadorned rock can be seen. Below, one storey down, another series of glass panels shows the lower part of the rock. This area was unquarried due to the fragmented part of the stone, which would not yield proper building stones. It served to mark the place of the crucifixion, even when Hadrian's Temple to the Roman Gods, constructed after 135 AD, attempted to obliterate the site.

In the 320s AD, the Emperor Constantine, sympathetic to Christianity, was determined to restore the ancient Christian shrines. Christians in Jerusalem identified Hadrian's Temple to Aphrodite and Jupiter as covering the site of Golgotha. This must have been considered highly unlikely: it was now located within the city walls; nothing of the original site was visible; and the Pagan temple was considered a haunt of demons. And yet, the Christian community insisted on the veracity of the site. The pagan temple was destroyed; Church historian Eusebius, himself a sceptic of this location, was an eyewitness to what happened next:

The emperor, however, was not satisfied with having proceeded thus far: once more, fired with holy ardor, he directed that the ground itself should be dug up to a considerable depth, and the soil which had been polluted by the foul impurities of demon worship transported to a far distant place. This also was accomplished without delay.

But as soon as the original surface of the ground, beneath the covering of earth, appeared, immediately, and contrary to all expectation, the venerable and hollowed monument of our Saviour's resurrection was discovered. Then indeed did this most holy cave present a faithful

similitude of his return to life, in that, after lying buried in darkness, it again emerged to light, and afforded to all who came to witness the sight, a clear and visible proof of the wonders of which that spot had once been the scene, a testimony to the resurrection of the Saviour clearer than any voice could give.

A large church was built on the site to commemorate the location, and, to isolate the tomb of Jesus more clearly, the rest of the raised area was carved away, and a small house (edicule) built over the now solitary tomb to protect it from the elements (and souvenir seekers).

When the Constantinian church was constructed, Golgotha, with a cross placed atop it, was in an out-of-doors area, between the sanctuary (called the Martyrion – essentially, a big church) and the Rotunda and Dome which protected the Edicule, which itself protected the Tomb. After the destruction of the church in 1009, the new construction enclosed both Golgotha and the Edicule in a single building. The Martyrion was no more, although its foundation and entranceway steps are now contained within the adjacent (Russian) Alexander Nevsky church. Part of the original Golgotha stone is there as well!

The enclosure of Golgotha prevented further deterioration of the stone (largely at the hands of pilgrims!) and the design of the Altar area allows the stone to be viewed. Also, if one kneels at the Altar, there is a space where you can reach down and touch the top of the Rock.

Station 13 - Jesus is taken down from the cross

(John 19:38-40) Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. 39 He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. 40 Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

The Stone of Unction or Stone of Anointing

While Station 13 is actually marked by an icon immediately adjacent to the Altar of the Crucifixion, commemorating Jesus being placed in Mary's arms (a moment made famous in Michelangelo's "Pieta" sculpture), most turn instead to the Stone of Unction, or Stone of Anointing.

After Jesus died on the cross on Calvary, Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, went to Pilate to request permission to take charge of Jesus' body. According to the Gospel of John, Nicodemus, the Pharisee who went to Jesus in the cover of night to ask Jesus questions, went with Joseph of Arimathea. They received permission to take possession of the body of Jesus so that they could prepare Him for burial. Because it was late in the day on the Day of Preparation and because none of the work of tending to a dead body could be done on the Sabbath, Joseph and Nicodemus quickly wrapped Jesus' body in strips of linen and anointed the body with myrrh and aloe, spices used in the burial process. The men carried Jesus' body to

Joseph's own tomb and placed Him there. The Stone of Anointing provides a place of devotion, between Golgotha and the Tomb, to recall where Jesus' body was prepared by the two men for the rushed burial. The plan was for them and others to return after the Sabbath and finish the preparation. (Matthew 27:57-60; Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-53; John 19:38-42.)

Located immediately inside the main door of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (the main door used to be in a very different spot – in the original construction, what is now the main door is in fact a side door) the Stone of Anointing is a slab of reddish stone flanked by candlesticks and overhung by a row of eight lamps. It belongs jointly to the Greek Orthodox, Catholics and Armenian Orthodox.

Dating to 1810 (the Crusader-era stone having been heavily damaged by a fire in 1809), The Stone of Anointing is a flat stone slab that contains a reddish hue throughout its texture. The stone sits about a half meter (foot and a half) off the floor and is surrounded by a stone encasement with decorative orbs sitting atop each corner. The top of the stone is exposed and visitors can touch or kneel at the stone and reflect on the dead body of Jesus laying on the stone and being prepared for His burial. Above the Stone of Anointing hangs eight lamps that span the total length of the stone. Tall candlesticks stand on each end of the stone.

The Stone of Anointing marks an important part of the narrative of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. The fact that Jesus' body needed to be prepared for burial shows that Jesus did in fact physically die. Some have maintained that Jesus merely fainted, or swooned, and never stopped breathing and His heart never stopped beating. Of course, if Jesus merely fainted, His body would have no need for the preparation process for burial. He would have needed medical attention. But, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepared His body for burial because Jesus, in fact, died on the cross. The importance of the Stone is not that it marks exactly where this action took place; but that it did.

Pilgrims from around the world continue to anoint the stone with fragrant oils, and place objects of veneration upon it. Because it is in a more open area than the Golgotha Chapel, and more accessible than the Edicule, for many pilgrims the Stone of Unction represents a place of powerful spiritual reflection and devotion.

Station 14 - Jesus is placed in the tomb

(Matthew 27:57-61 NIV) As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. {58} Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. {59} Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, {60} and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. {61} Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

Joseph of Arimathea is a fellow member of the Sanhedrin with Nicodemus, both of whom appear as exemplary Jews anticipating the arrival of the kingdom of God (Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50 – 51; John 3:1 – 15; 19:38 – 42). These two are examples of persons who apparently did not follow

Jesus around in his earthly ministry, but who were still considered his disciples, even while continuing to serve within the religious establishment of Israel. Although it is dangerous for them to reveal their attachment to Jesus at this time, when their help is needed, they step forward to show their true colors. Luke 23:50 tells us that Joseph did not consent to the actions of the Sanhedrin against Jesus. He not only likely stirred the ire of the other members of the Sanhedrin, but he now is walking into the den of the Roman executioners. As a member of the Sanhedrin, it would not have been easy for him to follow Jesus, but when all the disciples flee, he comes forward to give Jesus a proper burial. There is some urgency; not only is the Sabbath approaching, but Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23 instructs that a person hanged on a tree should be buried the same day so that the land should not be defiled, for that person is under God's curse. If the body of Jesus were not removed immediately, it would have to remain on the cross until the conclusion of Passover.

Joseph had help from Nicodemus, whose name means "innocent of blood." John identifies Nicodemus as a Pharisee, "a ruler of the Jews" (John 3:1), that is, a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, and as "a teacher of Israel" (John 3:10), that is, an authority on the interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures. True to his name, Nicodemus defended Christ before his peers (John 7:51) who were unaware that one of their number might have believed in Him (v. 48). Their response is a twofold rebuke which may be paraphrased "Are you a Galilean peasant?" and "Are you ignorant of the Scriptures?" (v. 52). Nicodemus' contribution to Jesus' entombment was enough aloes and spices to prepare a king for burial.

John 7:45-52 - Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him in?" 46 "No one ever spoke the way this man does," the guards replied. 47 "You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted. 48 "Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? 49 No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them." 50 Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 51 "Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?" 52 They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."

Joseph received permission from Pilate to have the body removed. Mark, who is often short on details, describes the moment:

Mark 15:42-45 - It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, 43 Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. 44 Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. 45 When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph.

After the body was removed from the cross, and wrapped in the linen cloth, Joseph places it in his own new tomb cut out of the rock. During this era burial was generally in cave-like tombs. The tomb was a rectangular underground chamber cut into rock, sometimes in an abandoned quarry. It was accessed through a low entry vault, closed with a stone that could be rolled back and forth, mostly to protect the body from wild animals that fed on carcasses. The dead were laid

out on benches cut parallel into the rock or placed in perpendicular burial slots or recesses cut into the sides of the tomb. The body remained in its niche until the flesh decayed (from one to three years), whereupon the bones were collected and placed in ossuaries (small, carved stone, bone-box receptacles).

After Jesus' body is laid in the tomb, Joseph rolls a large stone in front of the entrance. He and Nicodemus return to the city. Although part of the preparation for burial has been accomplished at this point, because the Sabbath is approaching, they cannot work with the dead and thus must return after the Sabbath to complete the preparations.

The Guard at the Tomb

(Matthew 27:62-66 NIV) The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. {63} "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' {64} So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first." {65} "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." {66} So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

Not satisfied with Jesus' execution and burial, the chief priests and the Pharisees go to Pilate to make certain that the dead man does not rouse more support even after his death. Despite the Sabbath and the other celebrations associated with the Passover, the Jewish officials obtain an audience with Pilate because of the threat of Jesus' followers.

On at least one occasion Jesus specifically predicted to the Pharisees that he would rise in three days (12:40). They have not forgotten. What they understood by Jesus' declaration is unknown, but they assume Jesus' followers will come to their senses and gain courage to continue the movement by perpetuating Jesus' deception. It is interesting that not even the disciples recall this prediction, probably because of their personal fear and grief. But these religious leaders are savvy. They have witnessed Jesus' miraculous powers, and they want to make certain that whatever power is behind Jesus is not liberated. The religious leaders sense that things may get out of control, so they enlist Pilate's aid in keeping the tomb secure.

The religious leaders have no authority to post guards on a criminal executed by the Roman authorities, so they request Pilate to send a contingent of guards. If the people and Jesus' disciples are stirring, the guard must be secured immediately until the third day is past. They offer as an explanation that Jesus' disciples are liable to attempt to perpetuate a grand hoax about Jesus' resurrection. If this kind of rumour gets spread, they know it will be far more difficult to squelch the stories about Jesus' claims. Pilate concurs with the potential threat to the peace in Jerusalem if a hoax about Jesus' resurrection were perpetuated by the disciples after stealing the body, so he orders a guard to be placed.

After a family placed the body of one of its members in a burial recess in the tomb, a stone was placed over the entrance and was often sealed with clay. However, the "seal" here seems to be more of an official security device, so it was more likely an apparatus such as a cord attached to

both the stone that blocked the entrance and to the rock face of the tomb, with wax imprinted with the Roman seal anchoring both ends so that any tampering could be detected. The military contingent standing guard acts as the final security seal.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre – The Edicule Restoration

Excerpt from a news release from the National Geographic, documenters of the Restoration

Mortar sampled from between the original limestone surface of the tomb and a marble slab that covers it has been dated to around A.D. 345. According to historical accounts, the tomb was rediscovered by the Romans and enshrined around 326. These new dating results put the original construction of today's tomb complex securely in the time of Constantine, Rome's first Christian emperor.

During their year-long restoration of the Edicule, the scientists were also able to determine that a significant amount of the burial cave remains enclosed within the walls of the shrine. Mortar samples taken from remains of the southern wall of the cave were dated to 335 and 1570, which provide additional evidence for construction works from the Roman period, as well as a documented 16th-century restoration.

The recent Restoration answers objections to the veracity of the site, confirming this is the location originally identified by the Jerusalem Christians to Constantine's representatives.

The Garden Tomb

A comparatively recent "rival" to the Holy Sepulchre is the so-called Garden Tomb, also known as "Gordon's Calvary." General Charles Gordon, a British military hero, was in 1881 disappointed upon visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as not in his opinion reflective of the Biblical account of the location of the Crucifixion or its "garden" setting. Setting out to find the "actual" site, he was struck by a rock outcropping outside the Damascus gate which, in a certain light, can resemble the eye sockets of a skull. That night, Gordon claimed to have a vision, in which he visualized the city in the shape of a human skeleton. In his imagination, the skull of the skeleton was in the north (Golgotha means "the skull" in Aramaic); the pelvis of the skeleton was at the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount; the legs extended southward on the ridge identified with the City of David; and the feet were at the Pool of Siloam. Since, in Gordon's imagination, the hill north of Damascus Gate formed the skull of the skeleton, Gordon identified the hill as Golgotha. A cave in the area was identified as a tomb, and claimed (although not by Gordon) to be the tomb of Jesus.

Following Gordon's heroic death in Khartoum in 1885, his speculations were published and gained ground among Protestants, who wished to have a site of their own. The land was purchased in 1894 by the Garden Tomb Society, which maintains the area to this day. Later studies undertaken of the tomb identify it as originally hewn sometime in the eighth or seventh century B.C. Despite its lack of historical veracity, the location is for many people more evocative of how they imagined it to be, and is visited by hundreds of thousands annually.

Next Week: Bonus Session: The Resurrection