

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Twenty-Four – Mark 14, 15

Every year, here at Zion, we have a “Stations of the Cross” service on Good Friday – for many, along with the Maundy Thursday Communion, the most important service of the year. In that Good Friday service, we journey through the Scriptures, following the path the Gospels trace, the path leading from the Arrest of Jesus to his place of Crucifixion and entombment.

The Via Dolorosa

From the earliest days of the church, Christians in Jerusalem and those on pilgrimage to the Holy City have followed the path of Christ from the Gethsemane to Golgotha – from the place of the arrest of Jesus to the place of the crucifixion. Stopping at various places along the way, the Scriptures would be read and prayers prayed, remembering that night and day of long ago.

While this route approximates the most likely path from the Antonia Fortress (on the north-west corner of the Temple Mount) to the Holy Sepulchre (built over the area of the Crucifixion and Resurrection), the actual streets which Jesus walked are well below street level – between 3-5 metres down. Jerusalem, as well as its streets and walls, had been destroyed and rebuilt numerous times since the time of Jesus. Every conquest and rebuilding – beginning with the Roman conquests and destruction of 70 and 135 AD - put 1st Century street level lower and lower, until the original layout was completely buried. That being said, the location of the Antonia Fortress (most likely starting point of Jesus’ walk to the execution ground) is certain, as is the location of the Crucifixion and Resurrection (now preserved within the vast Holy Sepulchre church). The current Via Dolorosa is the most straightforward path between those points. As well, the location given to the events marked by the path have a geographic logic.

Given the changes in Jerusalem over the centuries, it is best to understand the Via Dolorosa as a blend of physical and spiritual geography. It is with that understanding that today, in Jerusalem, the Stations of the Cross continue, with thousands walking the Via Dolorosa, both spiritually and physically retracing the path of Christ.

But not all of us can be in Jerusalem on Good Friday. So, from the time of the Middle Ages, many Christians throughout the world have observed the Stations of the Cross within their own churches. The Scripture story is retold, with each station representing an event of the “Passion of Christ,” where God’s love came into direct conflict with the sin and brutality of our world.

The Fourteen Stations

The present Via Dolorosa developed out of a circuit of the holy places in Jerusalem that the Franciscans developed for pilgrims in the 14th century. A Roman Catholic religious order founded by St. Francis of Assisi in 1209, the Franciscans were made custodians of the Holy

Land in 1335, and they served as guides to the holy places. In the 14th century pilgrims usually spent between 10 and 14 days in Jerusalem. In order to guarantee that they saw everything systematically, the Franciscans over the years developed a careful routine, following a devotional path from the place of judgement to the place of the crucifixion itself.

The experience of the Via Dolorosa left an indelible mark on visitors to Jerusalem. A number were so profoundly moved that when they returned to Europe they tried to replicate the conditions of the Way of the Cross, so that those who had not made the pilgrimage could reap the same spiritual benefits.

“Stations” in Church

In the 1600s, ‘Stations’ began to be placed on church walls. These ‘Stations’ or ‘gathering places,’ were centered around wooden crosses, with a scene from the last journey of the Passion placed beneath them. Over the years there have been as few as five, or over 30 ‘Stations.’ In 1731 the number was fixed by Pope Clement XII at fourteen. Nine of these commemorated events in the Gospels and five were taken from early tradition.

The Traditional Stations

- (1) Christ is condemned to death by Pontius Pilate (Mark 15:6–20).
- (2) The cross is laid upon Jesus (John 19:17).
- (3) Jesus falls for the first time.
- (4) Jesus meets his mother, who collapses in shock.
- (5) Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry the cross (Mark 15:21).
- (6) Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.
- (7) Jesus falls for the second time.
- (8) Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem (Luke 23:27–31).
- (9) Jesus falls for the third time.
- (10) Jesus is stripped of his garments (Mark 15:24).
- (11) Jesus is nailed to the cross (Mark 15:24).
- (12) Jesus dies (Mark 15:37).
- (13) The body of Jesus is taken down from the cross (Mark 15:46).
- (14) The body is laid in the tomb (Mark 15:46).

Stations 3,4,6,7, and 9 do not have a Scripture reading attached; instead, they are there to aid devotion and contemplation. There is, however, a logic to why they are placed just where they are on the route. Station 4 brings Jesus’ mother Mary into the procession itself, rather than just at the cross itself (where Scripture first mentions her presence); station 6, which recalls Veronica, is an old tradition within the Christian community, incorporated into the Stations for at least a millennium.

This morning, as we enter Holy Week, as we continue our preparations for our own Easter journey, I would like to put some of that geography under your feet, to once again orient you to the story, as together we criss-cross the Holy City on that most important of nights, to make that journey with you one last time.

Mark 14:12-15 On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

The night begins, appropriately enough, at Zion, Mount Zion, the place of the Room of the Last Supper. Located in the section of Jerusalem known in Jesus' day as the Essene Quarter, this second-story walk-up was the gathering point for the faithful before, immediately following, and seven weeks after the Crucifixion of Jesus, when the Holy Spirit brought the church to life at Pentecost.

While the original building is long gone, the new one – “new” meaning in this case only 1000 years old – the new building is built right on the foundations of the original place, the place where first were heard the words, “This is my body, given for you.” That’s where it all began, so that’s where we, too, will begin. But we won’t linger.

Mark 14:26 When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives

As they were going into hiding, they would have left the city as quickly as possible, past the oldest part of Jerusalem known as David’s City, and then through the groves of olive trees to their place of concealed rest, the Gethsemane.

Don’t think “Garden;” Gethsemane means “Olive Press,” and is large cave with a small entrance situated in the midst of the groves of olive trees lining the mountain. Separated from the City by the Kidron Valley, but with a view of the Temple Mount, the Mount of Olives was far too visible and exposed a spot for a man and his friends in trouble with the authorities. Besides, it was too cold for a night out in the damp.

But the Gethsemane was perfect – unused at this time of year other than for storage, the cave provided shelter, warmth and concealment. In the fall and at harvest it would be filled to overflowing with basket upon basket of olives, jar upon jar of oil, all stacked around the massive beams of the industrial press, watchmen guarding the valuable oil.

But now in the spring, it was just a crowded but warm cave, the empty baskets making satisfactory pillows, and the stone benches which lined the walls keeping sleepers off the damp floors.

Placing Peter, James and John on watch at the door, and leaving the drowsy others in the warmth and quiet of the cave, Jesus went out a short distance to a garden nearby. While those within and those without allowed sleep to overwhelm them, he prayed. Returning to find his friends asleep, it was another friend who soon came into view.

Leading the soldiers to the door of the cave, where Jesus had just awakened his most trusted of friends, the least trustworthy approached, accompanied by the swords and torches of soldiers. Judas only half-surprised Jesus with a greeting, and with the betrayer's kiss, all hell broke loose. With shouts ringing the air, the disciples came streaming out of the cave.

Mark 14:48-51 "Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled." Then everyone deserted him and fled.

Today, the cave is still there, called now the Grotto of Gethsemane; the nearby Church of All Nations marking the place where Christians come to remember the Prayer of Jesus on that night of long ago.

Mark 14:53 They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law came together. Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire

Back the way they came, across the Kidron Valley, entering this time through the Valley Gate, through the old section of the City of David, back to Zion Hill, and up the long, stone steps to the House of Caiaphas, the High Priest. It is the dungeon for Jesus, while those upstairs try to figure out what to do, and while Peter, who was following at a distance, now warms his hands in the courtyard, a fire softening the night's chill.

But Peter feels a new chill as he is asked once, twice, three times, "Aren't you with that Jesus?" "No," he says, "No," again, and a third time "No," before the rooster calls out the hour. And it is for Peter and that rooster, that the building occupying that place today is known as "Petrus Gallicantu," Peter-of-the-Cockcrow, built adjacent to those same steps up which the soldiers frog-marched the Messiah, and smack-dab overtop of the foundations of the house of the High Priest, and the dungeon far below.

Mark 15:1-2 Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. “Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate.

Here we break a bit with common tradition, and we bring Jesus to Pilate not clear across the city to the traditional Antonia Fortress, but instead a ten minute walk to the vast palace built along the city walls by the Jaffa Gate, known as Herod’s Palace.

When in Israel, Pilate stayed in comfortable Caesarea Maritima, enjoying the luxuries of Herod the Great’s city by the sea, the theatre, the hippodrome, the freshwater swimming pool, the gentle breezes off the Med.

But when in Jerusalem for occasions such as Passover, Pilate transferred himself and his retinue to the palace Herod the Great built in the Holy City, with its three massive towers, with its gardens, with its baths. Luxuries fit for a procurator, especially one grumpy at the best of times.

Luke 23:1-7 Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, “We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king.” So Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” “You have said so,” Jesus replied.

Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, “I find no basis for a charge against this man.” But they insisted, “He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.” On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he learned that Jesus was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.

Normally Herod would have stayed in the palace built by his father, but with Pilate taking up the nice rooms, Herod Antipas stayed in “The Hasmonian Palace,” his down-town pied a terre, in the Upper City as it was known, where the richies lived, like, for instance, the clergy.

Ten or fifteen minutes at a good Roman marching pace, and they were there, where Jesus failed to amuse Herod, and was subject to abuse at the hands of the petulant tyrant, who was secretly afraid that this Jesus might just be John the Baptist, come back from the dead to condemn him again. Herod donated a robe to the proceedings, the better to mock Jesus with, and, sending him back to Pilate, washed his hands, as it were, of the whole affair.

With the morning in full swing and the focus of the city turning to the Temple for the Passover events, Pilate had made his way to the Antonia Fortress, on the Temple’s north-west corner.

Now in full command of the Temple Mount and of the troops of his garrison, hopeful of keeping the peace in the pilgrim-packed city, Pilate was again greeted by the unwelcome sight of Jesus being dragged along the street toward the Fortress, accompanied by the same group of angry priests and aldermen, who by now had managed to amass a mob of onlookers. Onlookers who had been instructed as to just what to do or say, if they really wanted to give the hated Pilate a bad time.

Mark 15:6-15 Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. “

Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

Barabbas was easily to hand, having been imprisoned in the Antonia. Demanding his release would be a way for the crowd to really put one over on Pilate, to really put a finger in the Roman’s eye. So Pilate, grinding his teeth, instructed the soldiers to set Barabbas free. No one was more surprised than Barabbas to be released. No one who knew Jesus would have been surprised if Jesus, too, would have voted for the release of Barabbas over himself.

Mark 15:16-20 The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, “Hail, king of the Jews!” Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

And it is from the Antonia Fortress, at the northwest corner of the Temple Mount, that the path of the cross finds its beginnings. The path is known today as the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrows, and then, as now, it leads you through busy, sometimes steep, sometimes winding, always crowded streets; right through the centre of town, past the food stalls and the merchant shops and the spice sellers and the money changers and the clothing stores and the souvenir hawkers.

Romans always liked to make a public example – a very public example – of those who ran afoul of their law, so it was through the busiest of markets they made Jesus stumble with his cross, station by station. The stations are a mix of the biblical and the traditional today – the judgement, the scourging, the stumble, the encounter with Mary, yet another stumble, and then, one that is more familiar to us. The station of the Cyrene.

Mark 15:21 A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

Can you imagine? A passer-by? With nothing to do with this whole sorry business, but somehow singled out for the dubious honour of shouldering a condemned man's instrument of execution?

Up, up the hills they went, out the Gennath Gate, outside the city walls to a one-time quarry, now a garden, a garden of flowers and of tombs, newly cut into the soft limestone. There was a large spur of cracked stone which marked the top of the place, and which in the right light had the eerie eyes of a staring skull; and so it was named Golgotha, or in the Latin, Calvary.

Mark 15:25-27 It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left

It is located today not outside of but within the city walls, which had been expanded a dozen years after the Crucifixion to extend the defensive ramparts of the city northward, the area most vulnerable to attack.

The rock spur of Golgotha itself remains, enclosed now within the massive Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a building in its 1700th year, a constructed, destructed, rebuilt, destroyed, remodelled, decaying accumulation of 17 centuries of veneration and memory.

The marks of the old quarry are still there to be seen. The remnants of tombs are still nearby. The spur of fractured limestone still rises into the sky, protected from the pious by glass, ornamented by an altar of silver and gold.

Mark 15:42-47 It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, 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. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died.

When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

It is now no longer the footsteps of Jesus we follow, but the footsteps of those who lower him from the cross, who do what they can in the darkening day to wash from his body the signs of the abuse, the humiliation, the scorn. There simply wasn't time to do more, or go far, before

the setting sun would mark the end of this seemingly unholy day, and the start of the holiest day of the Jewish calendar year, Passover. Fortunately, there was a solution nearby.

Mark 15:41 At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

So it was right there, nearby, this tomb in which Jesus was laid, a handful of metres from the Golgotha rock. The sad parade of Joseph of Arimathea, of Nicodemus, of the Marys and the others, had but a few footsteps to make before they said their last goodbyes, paid their last respects, shed their far from final tears. With the stone rolled and pushed into the small doorway of the inner tomb, there was no more they could do but make whatever haste they could back home.

It is hard today, in the place where this all happened, to make anything approximating haste. You come down a winding staircase from the top of Golgotha, you make your way past the Stone of Unction, which marks the remembrance of the preparation of Jesus' body, careful not to jostle the faithful who anoint the great marble slab with oils, with perfumes, with tears.

You come around the corner and are now under the great Dome of the Anastasis, which shelters the Edicule, or Little House, in which is contained what remains of the Tomb of Jesus, the place where his body once – albeit briefly - lay.

Following negotiations beginning in 2000, scientists, engineers and archaeologists had been working hard to renovate and restore the Edicule. Five years ago, for the first time in 500 years, the marble cladding protecting the carved bedrock interior of the tomb was removed, and the stone bedrock bench upon which the body of Jesus lay was revealed, right where the witness of centuries said it was.

Some had doubted. But the evidence was there for all to see. I was at the tomb together with my son Jacob the very Sunday it was reopened. Now, let's you and me visit it together.

If you are patient enough to wait in line, to take your turn, you too can crouch under the inner doorway, and spend a moment in the very place where Joseph and Nicodemus did the best they could, arranging Jesus' body with as much respect as time and circumstance allowed.

Everything is now again covered in marble, in tapestry, in icons and other signs of veneration foreign to our Western eyes, but I like to close my eyes, and see through it all to the plain rock shelf which still rests underneath, and for whatever brief moment I am given, say Thank You. Thank you for walking these steps on my behalf. Walk this path with me this Holy Week – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday - and say Thank You all over again. .