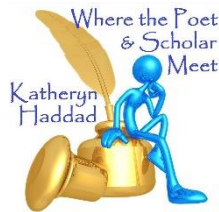


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In the Series
THEY MET JESUS



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DEDICATED TO

Everyone Who Has Ever Doubted

INSERT YOURSELF INTO THE STORY

Although the events take place shortly before and during the first century AD, this story is written to help you in our modern world identify with the characters who lived then. While true to the life of Christ in every known aspect, conversations often take a modern flavor as though the characters were speaking today. After all, did they not speak what was “modern vocabulary” in their day, even in the Aramaic language?

You will see places in the story where you are invited to participate either as an encourager or discourager of a character, as though you were there with them. This is your chance to become their friend. You will easily spot those places in the story. Instead of wondering who is talking, remember, it is you.

A COMMENTARY IN NARRATIVE FORM



1 – TEN APOSTLES *Whispering Hope*

Sunday, about April 17, AD 30
Jerusalem, Province of Judea, Palestine

The morning of gloom and hopelessness has been filled

with perplexities that swirl in and out of their heads. Jesus' aides sway in a relentless whirlwind between what is real and what is not. Bent one way, then another. Ravaged by death and what it has stolen from them.

The eleven—what is left of Jesus' original twelve—sit in their nothingness and try to understand what cannot be understood. Comprehend what cannot be comprehended. Hide from that which follows them wherever their mind descends.

Oh, Jesus, why did you have to leave us? Why did you have to die? Jesus, we need you. We are lost without you. What is there left to live for?

The morning of gloom and hopelessness shattered, first, by Mary Magdalene. How could she have interrupted the sleeplessness of their night at break of day to tell them Jesus is not really dead? The only thing that had happened at the break of this day was for their hearts to splinter into smaller and smaller pieces until there is no heart left at all.

How could Mary Magdalene have smiled at them while claiming Jesus had come back to life? Everyone knew his

beautiful life had been shattered and whisked away from them in a torrent of unbearable pain they were helpless to take away from him.

How could Mary have expected joy and faith and conviction when they were being torn apart with grief and hopelessness and weakness?

Then mid-morning it had happened again. This time, it had been Joanna, Salome, Mary Levi, and Susanna. How dare they rush in and tell everyone he isn't really dead? Allege he has come back to life as Joanna had done. Claim they had seen him for themselves as Susanna had done. Maintain he had actually talked to them as Mary Levi had done.

Don't they yet realize they will never see Jesus again? Never hear his voice? Never speak to him again? No one will. Not his closest friends, his aides. Not his relatives. Not the women. Not anyone in this whole wide world.

How dare they insist the men leave their hideout and travel all the way up to Galilee and expect to see him there? Are they out of their minds? The minute they step foot out their gate, they'll be nabbed. Arrested. Then crucified. How dare the women claim Jesus had told them to put their lives in danger and go back home. How dare the women stop crying, and smile instead. And laugh. And try to convince everyone else to act like them.

Now Peter. Not Peter. Peter is the last one any expected to start hallucinating. Even his own brother, Andrew, doesn't believe him. Couldn't he have at least kept his mouth shut? Always rubbing people the wrong way. Always pushing his ideas on other people. Always having to be different, like the time he walked on water. What a show-off.

Now this. This claiming what is impossible, even for Jesus. Claiming everyone else should be happy just because he is.

So, okay, Peter had felt even more guilty than anyone else. But, if he hadn't gone to the high priest's palace in the first place, he wouldn't have set himself up to deny he knew Jesus. Now he wants to drag us into his guilt by claiming the whole thing never happened; or it did happen and then had reversed itself. Sometimes Peter just doesn't think. Now he's trying to pull everyone else in so we can go down with him. Everyone feels bad

enough for deserting him, but it isn't going to take the pain away by claiming Jesus is not dead anymore.

Peter, Peter. Where is your common sense? Where are your brains? The dead don't become undead. Certainly not Jesus. Especially not Jesus.

All morning, interruptions. All morning, colliding with their sorrow. All morning, claiming they should laugh and not cry.

Oh, Jesus. We don't know what to do. We can't keep hiding forever. But, even if we were not being hunted and were free to go and do whatever we wanted, what could that be? We are lost without you, Jesus. Lost and sinking.

Sitting in corners. Sliding down walls. Lying prostrate on the paving stones. Sitting with chins in chests. Pacing. Standing and staring into a sky that should not have any sunshine. Wishing it were night again so their mourning would be respected by strangers out on the street celebrating.

"Ha, ha! We got him!"

"He's dead and buried."

"That Jesus will never bother anyone ever again."

"Now we can go back to normal."

"Good riddance Jesus. How we hated you."

Instead, wishing the noise away. Instead, climbing deep inside themselves and hiding from what they do not want to remember. Instead, silently screaming at God to make the awful hypocritical announcements of Jesus rising again turn to dust.

Tears. Fists. Shoulders shaking with emotions that will not let go. Kicking. Kneeling. Pacing. Willing the pain to go away. Oh, how it hurts.

12:30 PM

"Lunch, anyone?"

One by one, the men stand and wander into the room where a low table and sufficient cushions are set. Some look at the food, then turn around and go back to wherever they had been. Their place of mourning. How can they eat after what he went through?

Some stay out of politeness to the women who have worked hard to prepare a big meal. They take some of the food onto their

plates and pick at it. As though the food is only a shadow of the real thing. Like their take-over plans with Jesus had been. Just a shadow. Nothing of substance. Nothing real.

Others pile their plates with twice as much food as they could possibly eat. Then do everything in their power to eat it all. Like the pain that consumes their very souls. Maybe they can bury their pain this way. They hurt so much.

They hear the women out in the kitchen area under the goat-hair canopy. They are not showing respect. Laughing like nothing is wrong and has never been wrong. Their stomachs turn. They give up. One by one, the men leave the table and go back to where they had left off in the courtyard.

The women have no choice but to collect the plates, both used and unused, and return to the kitchen area. They wash the deserted table and fluff the cushions for next time

1:00 PM

Back to the mourning.

The mourning that hangs on like a spider's web unexpectedly encountered and retreated from but sadistically sticking to you like glue.

Mourning that's like a leech attaching itself to you while trudging through swamps where you don't want to be. Hanging on and not letting go and sucking the life blood out of you.

Mourning that's like a shark with its teeth sunk deep into you, shaking you amid the waters of death, then eating you alive.

Everything like slow motion amid shadows of death. The shutters all closed in order to hide. They can hide from the outside. But deep down inside? They cannot hide from the fact that their fearless leader has been executed. Nor can they hide from the pain that's eating away at them savagely and unremittingly.

Sometimes someone stands, opens a shutter on a high window just a crack, and sneaks a forbidden look at the outside world. He squints. It is too bright out there. Too much sun and happiness. The world should be in agony over what it has done to

its Deliverer. He turns and sags down in place until he is once again sitting on the floor.

Slow motion in a world standing still and submitting to a yawning, awful void.

Sometimes someone stands and wanders over to stare at a small tapestry on a wall, a tapestry he does not really see, for he is blind. Blind to all but his personal torment. He struggles in his own inner darkness. And searches for a Jesus he can no longer see and shall never, ever see again.

Shadows altering and mutating and shifting meaninglessly in a world falling into nothingness.

2:00 PM

Peter and John, now convinced, once more wander out to the kitchen where the women are. The believers.

“If they would only try,” Joanna says.

“They can't,” John replies.

“Their hopes were built up once. Built up in all of us. We all quit our jobs, left behind our families, and headed out on a dream. He was our dream maker.”

“Now he has become their dream breaker,” Susanna adds.

“I'm sure he'll show up,” Mary Magdalene reassures.

“Maybe he's waiting until they go back to Galilee as he had told to them to do,” says Joanna.

“Well, they won't be seeing him anytime soon,” Peter says. “They're not budging. They're scared of being detected.”

“Do you fellows realize what we were doing a week ago today?” Andrew asks broodingly.

James shakes his head. “We dared to believe he could pull it off.”

“The whole city was bowing to him that day,” Simon recalls. “All he had to do is say the word, the people would have mobbed the palace, executed Governor Pilate, and made Jesus our king.”

“They wouldn't have had to,” Thaddeus interjects. “He

could have willed the governor out of existence. You know he could have.”

“Thousands of them!” Philip continues.” They were ready to make him king then and there. Why didn't he let them?” He stands and looks up into the heavens. “Jesus, why didn't you let them do it? You were our Deliverer.” He sits back down, and mumbles, “Now you are dead.”

“Jesus, you betrayed us!” shouts Matthew. “You betrayed us! Jesus! Why? Why? why...”

The outpouring of anger and frustration and mourning. Once more it is silent. Silent except for the brooding and mulling, the sighing and moaning, the tears of love and grief that intermingle in utter hopelessness...

Oh, Jesus. Why did you have to die?

3:00 PM

Andrew remembers back. Back to all the times as a teenager with Philip they had traced prophecies of the country's Deliverer. They had been so proud of their list and how they had checked out new leaders against their list. None of their friends had such a list. Their parents and aunts and uncles didn't have such a list, nor grandparents. Even the Rabbi didn't have such a list. He claimed to, but it wasn't as comprehensive as Andrew's and Philip's.

What does it matter now? Jesus had fulfilled all the prophecies and built up their hopes. For what? So he could die and leave him and Philip wondering what difference it made after all? So he could soar with him, then be dropped?

Andrew thinks back. Sitting on a cushion and fumbling with a piece of clay he always has on a cord around his waist. His list. What had they put on the list? Had they seen the wrong clues? Maybe they should have heeded their parents who claimed such a list was not possible. Maybe they should have heeded the rabbi who had explained to them they were not educated enough by the great theologians in Jerusalem to make such a list.

Oh, Jesus, what went wrong? What had Philip and I missed? It had to be you, Jesus. It had to be you. Oh, Jesus. Where

are you? Why did you have to die? Come back, Jesus. I miss you so much.

At the same time, Philip is thinking back. He is next to Andrew, his legs crossed sometimes. His knees up with his chin on it sometimes. He remembers the trip he and Andrew had made to the other end of the country to hear John the Baptizer for themselves. He had been growing in popularity. They had to know if John fit their criteria. They'd been lucky. Once in the province of Judea, they had only had to look for John two days before finding him. There he was by the Jordan River where everyone had said he would be.

He had denied being the promised Deliverer but knew who he was. John had said he would point out the Deliverer to them when he showed up. In the meantime, John had let him and Andrew follow him around and control the growing crowds. They'd learned a lot from John, but they'd been restless for John to point out the Deliverer instead of just talking about him.

Then the day had come. There he was: Jesus. They were able to pull Jesus aside to go through their list with him. He had passed the test. He was the one prophesied centuries earlier. Jesus had been the one. Or was he? They had been so excited at the time that they had found him. They had been so sure. Had their excitement gotten control of them? Was someone else the Deliverer? Had they quit searching too soon? Had they settled for second best?

Oh, Jesus. It had to be you. It could not have been someone else. How could you have allowed yourself to become so weak that they would capture and kill you?

Jesus killed? Yes, killed and buried. Three full days and nights buried. Forever buried. The end of hope. The end of dreams. The end of the list. Tears. Only empty, lonely tears.

Nathaniel paces around two columns. In his reverie, he remembers back. Back to when he had moved from Cana in Galilee to Jerusalem in Judea. He had read over and over how the Deliverer, according to the old prophet Isaiah, would be called God-With-Us. What an amazing concept. Over and over he had repeated it: God-With-Us, God-With-Us. Who was this person called God-With-Us?

He had not been able to shake it. He had slept with it. Eaten with it. Worked with it. Every evening out in the olive orchard under his fig tree, searching through the writings of ancient prophets. God-With-Us. There had been a fire in his heart. He had determined to find this one called God-With-Us

Then it had happened. Near his home, his friend, Philip, visiting in Jerusalem at the time, had taken him to meet Jesus. He had looked at Jesus with curiosity. There had been something different about Jesus. What was it?

Jesus had spoken the words he had longed to hear. "I saw you under the fig tree yesterday." Jesus had seen him! Not heard about him or been told about him, but actually seen him. It was Nathaniel's hiding place. No one ever knew where he had always slipped away after work each day. Jesus had known anyway. It was a miracle.

Then Nathaniel had known. At that moment he had known. In an instant. No one else had. He was the only one. Nathaniel, though having just met Jesus knew he was indeed the God-With-Us. He was indeed the Son of God.

So, what could have gone wrong? The Son of God cannot be killed. How could I have been so wrong? Oh, Jesus. I know I was right. But now you have disappeared. Was the Son of God with us such a brief time that his work could not be finished? Was the Son of God with us such a brief time that he could not reveal himself completely? Oh, Jesus, where are you? Come back. I know Peter and the women and the other two fellows said they saw you. But can I not see you too? You who saw me under the fig tree so long ago? Do you see me now? Do you remember me? Do you need me to go back to my fig tree? Jesus, come back.

Simon the Revolutionary is in his corner. His back is against two walls. He has been trained. Don't ever let the enemy sneak up behind you. Guard the enemy. Watch the enemy relentlessly. Never let the enemy out of your sight. Attack the enemy when it is necessary. Bury the enemy in its own carelessness and vulnerability. That's what zealot commander Judas had always said.

Jesus, where were your enemies. Didn't he know they were lurking? Didn't he know they were ready to pounce and destroy

him? He was stronger than them. How could he have let it happen?

If he was right that we are supposed to love our enemies, why didn't they love him back? It didn't work. They kept hating him. Why? And why did he let them kill him? Jesus had greater weapons than any of them could ever hope to have. He wounded their egos, then built them back up. Why couldn't they have treated him with kindness in return?

Jesus, I tried to watch your back for you. I always had my dagger with me. I swore no one would ever hurt you. Then I went against my own code: Never leave a comrade behind. That night, I left you behind. I turned coward. I forgot everything I had ever been taught and ran in the face of the enemy.

Oh, Jesus. I'm so sorry. It's all my fault. If I had just stood up to them, using the battle maneuvers I'd been trained for, I could have at least bought you a little time to escape. They would have killed me, but it would have been worth it. But I turned coward. Now I have lost you. You were my commander, my king, my all. Oh, Jesus, come back to us. We miss you so. Let me try again.

James is sitting across from a column wondering what is going on out in the streets of Jerusalem. In the temple. The country. Up around the Lake of Galilee where he had grown up with Jesus. His mother and Jesus' mother are sisters. He had always known there was something different about Jesus, even as a kid. He had always been smarter than everyone else. Even after he'd become a preacher, he was smarter than everyone else.

Fishers of men. That's what Jesus had said he was going to make him and his brother, John. Use the hook of miracles. The net of kindness. Haul people into a boat that sails through the universe up to heaven. That's was Jesus' kind of fishing. It seemed to be working.

With Jesus' brand of fishing for men, he had been bound to take over the country. Who would dare resist him? He was the Great Fisherman, just like Philip had called him the Great Herder and he had called himself the Great Shepherd. Everything Jesus had ever done was larger than everything else.

So, what had gone wrong? Jesus had the world running after him, begging to be in his net. So close he had come. Close to

taking over people's hearts, the whole country, the entire world.

It could have all been yours. Jesus. Where did you take a wrong turn? Where did your hook become your cross?

If we could just start over. Like things were at the beginning. Like things were when you were just starting out. Maybe we could do things differently. Jesus, come back. Let's do it together, the right way. I was always there for you—until now. I deserted you this time, but I never will again. Jesus, give me another chance. Please, Jesus.

Matthew is sitting at a table reading through a scripture scroll. Trying to find answers. Reading. Reading. Were there some prophecies they had missed? Were there some things they were supposed to do and didn't?

Sure, lots of people had loved Jesus. He accepted everyone, even those hated by most of the people. He had a capacity for love Matthew had never seen before. But there had been the others. The others who loved to hate. How they hated Jesus for loving sinners. They wanted to be superior to other people, and sinners were their best bet to show their superiority over. If it weren't for sinners, where would the self-righteous be?

Matthew closes his scroll and puts his head down on the table, still clenching the scroll in one hand. What had gone wrong? He thinks but cannot find any answers. He prays. *God, what did we miss? I keep looking for your messages. I see many. But there aren't enough. There aren't enough to tell us what to do if Jesus is destroyed. God, how could you let this happen?*

He opens the scroll again. He works his way through the great prophet Isaiah. *What am I missing? Was it a lack of money? I could have raised more money. No, of course, that wasn't the problem. Was it more influence over Herod? Perhaps I could have arranged a meeting. What am I thinking? Jesus hadn't needed them. He hadn't needed anyone. Oh, Jesus. You were so strong. What happened? Why did you let them kill you? Oh, Jesus, come back. Come back to us. We are so lost without you.*

Little James is lying flat on the cobbles of the courtyard. It is spring and the cobbles are cold, but he does not notice or care. His face is in his big muscular arms. Sometimes his broad shoulders shake. Sometimes he raises his head, looks around at

the nothingness around him, and puts his head back down again.

In one hand is a horsehair bandanna he has taken off. In the other hand is a rope, a rope he has taken off from around his waist. Sometimes he sits up and slashes the rope on the pavement next to him or his crossed legs. Then he lies back down, his head once again in his outstretched arms.

Sometimes his head rocks back and forth as though saying no, no, no. Again his shoulders shake. Again his head raises and everyone can see the tears crisscrossing his dirty face and beard. His eyes are swelled and he more and more has a hard time seeing through them.

The world has become a mist. Jesus is in that mist somewhere, but where? No longer is there Jesus. Gone. Forever gone. Like a flicker in the wind.

Oh, Jesus, where are you? I would give anything to go back and take your place. It should have been me. I was always stronger than you. I could have handled the beating better than you. I was the biggest of your aides and should have at least protected you better. Why didn't I? Jesus, let me try again. Give me another chance. Jesus, where are you?

Thaddeus has leaned against a wall. Sometimes he slides down the wall and sits with his chin in his chest, and sometimes with his head on his up-bended knees. He stays seated awhile, then stands, turns his back on the others, and slams his fist on the wall. How it hurts. His fist. His heart. Bleeding. Both bleeding. Bleeding like they deserve.

A reserved man, he had always been able to read other men. He had seen real heart in Jesus. Heart like none other he had seen. Jesus had been a man of action, something Thaddeus had lacked, but which Jesus had always reassured him would come at the right time.

Well, it hadn't come. When they had come to arrest Jesus, what had I done? I had slithered away, at first in the shadows, then into the trees to hide like the failure I was. Me, the man who never speaks up. The man who listens more than I speak. What had happened that night? Hadn't I heard Jesus say he was going to Jerusalem to be killed? Hadn't I watched in amazement as Jesus had led the way from Galilee up north to Jerusalem and his

death?

Why couldn't I have had that kind of conviction? But no. Instead, I had turned my back on Jesus. Turned my back and betrayed his heart. Oh, Jesus. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to save you, but I didn't know how. Jesus, can you ever forgive me?

Thaddeus slams his fist once more onto the wall and weeps again. Will the tears ever go away? Away, like Jesus has gone away? And his heart. Is his heart gone now too? *Jesus, come back. My heart loves your heart.*

4:00 PM

“We have got to move, everyone. It's too dangerous to stay in one place too long. We've had too many people come in and out during the day, especially this morning. The neighbors might have heard. We can't stay here any longer. Any ideas?” It is James.

John Mark speaks up. “We can go to my mother's house. It's plenty big.”

“Are you sure?” Matthew asks, glad for the diversion, and tucking his scroll in his belt.

“Well, you may not all be able to spend the night there, but, well... On second thought, you're all so dirty from sitting around this courtyard all day, you could sleep in my mother's courtyard. Do you have bedrolls with you? The women could sleep in the bedrooms.

“I think a change of scenery would do us good,” Nathaniel says.

“Well, would it be too dangerous to leave?” Thaddeus asks.

“He's got a point. We may be safer taking our chances here than going out in the streets and being spotted.

“I'm with James,” Peter says.

“Me too,” James' brother, John, says.

“You all go on,” Mary Levi says. “I'll stay here. My Alphaeus and Matthias will be coming back soon and they won't know where everyone went.”

“Okay,” James announces. “A couple of you go out the front

gate and head south. We'll wait a few moments, then a couple more can go out and head north. And so on. It might be more normal looking if some of you men pair up with a woman. Maybe three of you can go together, and a couple of you go alone."

"There are some baskets and pots here," Mary Magdalene says. Some of you can carry them as though you have business in town. Mary Levi can tell the owner of the house that we'll return them in a day or two."

"I know the owner," Joanna says. Actually, Chuza is the one who arranged the rental. I'll leave a note for Mary Levi to give him."

"Okay, everyone, take something to carry if you want. Grab your robes. The sun will be down soon and it will be cool out there. Does everyone have a shawl to put over your head?" James asks. If you don't, maybe someone has an extra."

Philip walks over to Susanna. "You can go with me if that's all right with you."

Mary Levi stands by the gate and opens it slightly each time someone is ready to leave. By twos and threes, the house is gradually emptied. Jesus' aides and the others head out into the sunshine. They do not like it. It is not fair to have a bright day like this amid such blackness.

5:00 PM

"After your message, I ran to the market for some extra food. We should be able to eat in an hour or so." It is Mary, John Mark's mother.

"Thanks, Mother. I knew you'd want to help."

"I just wish I could do more."

John Mark looks around. "Everyone seems to be here but Thomas. Does anyone know what happened to Thomas?"

"He thought we would need some extra food, and didn't want the women exposed to the public in case they were recognized," Matthew explains. "I gave him some money. I think he was going to pick up some food outside of town where he didn't think he'd be recognized."

“Is the gate bolted? Are the windows all shuttered?” John Mark double checks all the rooms.

“Well, everyone,” John Mark announces, “just make yourselves at home. I know you don't want to do anything.”

Once more the sitting and staring and wandering aimlessly. The thinking and brooding. The sinking deeper and deeper into the mire of despair.

Melancholy slowly drifts and swirls aimlessly around Mary's locked house and courtyard in a foggy vapor until everyone is obscured in agony. Thoughts hazy, blurry. Nebulous contemplation with no meaning, no sense, no anticipation of anything beyond the moment's entombment.

Oh, Jesus, we miss you so. This wasn't supposed to happen. Jesus, we can't live without you.

The women sit together trying not to disturb the mourners. How they want to. Peter and John sit with them. Though John has not actually seen Jesus, he knows. He had seen the evidence at the cemetery. John knows. Just as surely as Peter and the women know.

They try not to smile too much, though they want to. They try not to celebrate, though they want to. Sometimes they pray, “Jesus, appear to them too. Like you did us. Jesus, they need you. And could you appear to us again too? How we all miss you, Jesus.”

6:00 PM

“Time to eat,” Mary announces. “Sorry, it took a little longer than I expected. Anyone hungry? We're having fish.”

Reality takes over once again. Reality means acknowledging the ache in the pit of their stomachs that food cannot heal. Reality means washing hands that will never become clean again. Reality means sitting up when all anyone wants to do is crawl into a hole and forever hide.

“Come on, now. You need to eat. It will be good for you.”

John is the first to stand. “Sounds good. How about you, Peter?”

“I could eat a camel. Come on, everyone, before I kick each one of you in there. The women worked hard. At least show your gratitude.”

One by one the others file into the dining area.

The eleven aides sit together at one table. Peter and John sit next to each other. The other nine peer over at them with expressions that say, “Don’t mess with us.”

Someone thanks God for their food.

“Hey, Andrew, if you're not going to eat, at least hand the fish over to your big brother,” Peter says playfully.

“Have you tasted the yogurt dip, Thaddeus?” John chimes in. “The women really outdid themselves.”

“Wait till you see what's for desert,” Salome adds. “I fixed Jesus' favorite.”

Eight of Jesus’ aides look over at her with anger in their swollen eyes.

“Why did you have to say that?” Philip asks.

“She really knows how to rub salt into a wound, doesn't she?” It’s Nathaniel.

Salome doesn't back down. “Now eat. Jesus would be proud of you.”

“Hey, what if Jesus showed up and they were so thin he couldn't find them?” Susanna tells the other women.

“Okay,” Joanna adds. “You've ruined most of the day for us with all your bleakness. Is it our fault you won't believe us? No! And we're not going to let you keep pulling us down.”

“Furthermore, everyone at this table is going to eat,” Mary Magdalene announces firmly, “even if we have to pry your mouths open and force some food down you. Is that clear? Now, start passing around the olives, Thaddeus.”

6:30 PM

Someone bangs on the gate.

“Who's that? Someone take a quick check!” Peter warns.

“Simon is the first to the peek hole in the gate.”

“It's Mary Levi with Alphaeus and Matthias. They found

us.”

“Let us in!” they hear out on the street. “It’s us. Let us in. He’s alive!”

Little James opens the door for his parents and Matthias.

“The women were right. John was right. Jesus came back to life,” Alphaeus says. “We saw him with our own eyes. We talked to him. He’s alive!”

“Not you, too, Father,” Little James responds. “We’d like to believe you. But it’s not possible. A person can’t raise himself from the dead. Father, have you been having dizzy spells again?”

“But it’s true,” Matthias interjects, his eyes sparkling. “It’s true. And he’s even appeared to Peter. Is Peter here? “You saw him, didn’t you, Peter?”

“Yes, I’ve been trying to convince them. It’s been like talking to a stone wall. Okay, fellows. Did you hear that?” Peter says. “I have witnesses. The women saw him, I saw him, and these men have seen him too. You’ve got to believe me. Jesus is back. And more powerful than ever.”

Everyone goes back to where their plates and food are waiting for them. Alphaeus Levi and Matthias follow them.

“Just sit down and eat, Peter. We don’t want to hear any more of this. Just shut up.” It’s Simon.

“But you must believe us. His work is not done,” says Alphaeus Levi. “This was a demonstration that he’ll do the same for us someday.”

“It’s all hypothetical,” says Nathaniel.

“Didn’t he raise other people back to life?” Matthias asks.

“That was different.”

“Stop arguing and eat,” John urges. “You’re not going to waste all the food these women have prepared. Would you join us, Alphaeus and Matthias?”

“No. We already ate. With Jesus.”

Once more the air is morose and moody and pensive. Putting a little food onto a plate and aimlessly pushing it around. Dipping a piece of bread in a sauce and not eating it. Lifting a goblet of new wine, then putting it back down as full as it had been. Tears raining salt down on uneaten food. Drifting from reality to a greater unreality.

Oh, Jesus, why did you have to die and leave us? We miss you so, Jesus. Come back to us. Without you, we too are dead.

7:00 PM

“Good evening, everyone!”

Andrew looks up, jumps on his cushion in a kneeling position, crawls backward, knocks his drink over, and stares.

“Andrew? What's wrong?”

Philip looks in the direction that Andrew is staring. He, too, jumps to a kneeling position, pushing his cushion into the man next to him, and stares.

“What?”

Thaddeus drops his bread in his plate, the dip on it. His mouth open. He cannot move.

Simon grabs his own cushion and raises it over his head. “Get away from here! I mean it! Leave! Go back to where you came from!” He's in a standoff.

James, having just taken a drink but not swallowed it, spits it out in a jet spray across the table and hits Nathaniel in the face. He drops his goblet and puts both hands on the table as though he is going to push away from it, then freezes in place.

Matthew, whose back is to whatever everyone is staring at, turns around, takes hold of the table, and in the process pushes his cushion out from under him. He kneels in place and trembles.

Nathaniel, too, turns around, and in his panicked rush pushes the table into some of the others. Half sitting and half standing, he cannot move farther.

Little James, too, turns around, stands, backs up, then gets the nerve to speak.

“Hey, wait a minute. What are you? What's going on here? You're a ghost! Get out of here. Get out of here!”

“I said good evening.”

“Thanks for coming, Jesus,” Alphaeus says. “We'd run out of ideas on how to explain that you were back.”

“No one's back. It's not him. I'm hallucinating,” Philip objects.

“Me too.” It's Thaddeus. “Everyone’s hallucinating.”

Militant Simon follows through on his threat and throws his cushion at the hallucination. Jesus catches the cushion instead and sets it on the floor.

The women anxiously walk around the table with smiles and tears of joy, and kneel at his feet.

“Hey, what are you women doing? Get away from it!” Matthew shouts.

Peter does not say anything. Is the forgiveness still good? Are they still friends? Jesus smiles at him. Yes.

“Better back up, Peter. You don't know what those things are capable of,” Nathaniel warns.

John walks up to Jesus and looks in his eyes. “Welcome back,” he says. His voice is barely audible to the others. “Can I... Can I...”

Jesus opens up his arms and the two embrace. Then John backs up. There are others who need a chance to welcome Jesus back.

“Stay away from him, John,” warns brother James. “What if he grabs your soul and leaves with it?”

Jesus looks around at the others. “Don't be afraid. It's just me.”

“No, it's not you. It can't be you,” Little James responds.

“Then, who are you talking to?” Peter asks big Little James. “Your imagination?”

“You're a ghost. Please go away. Leave us in peace.” It's Andrew.

“But I've come to bring peace to you. Don't be so upset. Why are you doubting like this? Didn't I tell you over and over as we headed for Jerusalem that I would be executed, then come back to life in three days? It's been three days.”

“But that was figurative,” Nathaniel says, trying to explain away what he cannot. “You weren't talking literally. What am I saying? I'm talking to a ghost.”

“Relax. Be happy for me. Be happy for yourselves. I came back to life. God can do the same for you now.”

“But it's not possible,” Philip objects.

“Come here. All of you. Touch me. Go ahead. Just reach out

and touch me. I'm not going anywhere. And look here.”

Jesus holds out his hands.

Dead silence. Silence and staring and wanting to believe but not being able to.

Still, the bottom of his hands! They have holes in them. The size of spikes. No, this cannot be.

Jesus takes off his sandals.

“And down here. The place where the spike went through my feet.”

Andrew steps nearer and looks closer at Jesus. Slowly, not sure that he should be doing it, he reaches out and touches Jesus' wrists. The holes are deep and broad. And real.

“Don't stop there, Andrew. Touch my arms and legs, my head and chest. I'm full of things—muscles, bones, stomach, lungs—just like you. You can't touch ghosts. You can me. Come on, Andrew. Shake hands with me. Give me a big hug.”

“But... But we all deserted you. You were killed. We saw them take you away. During the darkness, we sneaked back and saw you hanging on that cross,” explains Thaddeus.

“Cowards! That's all we turned out to be.”

“Hey, come over here, Simon. I want to shake hands with my old friend.”

“But, it can't be! It just can't be! You can't raise yourself from the dead!” It's James.

It's always been the Spirit's power. He is the source of life. The Spirit creates life. He did when you were born and he will when you are re-born into heaven.”

“All this is too hard to believe,” Matthew objects. “They mutilated you too much. It's too hard.”

“Jesus, help us. We want to believe it's really you. Give us more proof. Can you, Jesus?” Little James asks. “We need more proof.”

“Okay. Set me a place at your table. We'll eat together. Just like we used to.”

John Mark rushes to the kitchen to fetch a clean plate. His mother has just put a small fish on it. He sets it in front of Jesus as he sits on a cushion. Jesus tears a piece off then holds it up between two fingers for all to see.

Grinning, he announces, “Here it is,” puts the bite in his mouth, chews it, swallows it, drinks a gulp of someone's drink, then opens his mouth, “now it’s gone.”

“Do that again,” Nathaniel asks playfully, but cautiously.

So everyone watches while Jesus goes on trial once more to prove he is the Son of God. Only this time, his eyes twinkle and he is grinning.

One of the women giggles. “See that, fellows.”

Jesus stands again and holds out his arms in welcome.

Little James pokes Alphaeus in the side. “Hey, Father, you might be right after all.”

A few laugh under their breath.

“Look at that,” announces Matthew. “Hasn't eaten in three days. He must be starved.”

Several laugh together nervously.

“Never saw him devour a piece of fish as fast as that,” James adds.

Laughter escaping through portals of doubt.

“Hey,” Thaddeus remembers, “didn't Salome say she fixed his favorite dessert?”

More laughter.

“It's really him!” announces Simon. “You're alive!”

Free and uncontrolled laughter. Laughter that bursts like sunshine into the house of gloom. Laughter that shatters the doubts and qualms and fears with which Satan had hoped to keep them forever chained. Laughter that darts and dashes from wall to floor to ceiling, then rises echoing through the heavens to the throne of God.

The stars laugh.

The angels laugh.

God laughs.

At last, they believe. They believe.

In an instant, everyone in the room converges on Jesus, reaching and straining and stretching in order to touch and embrace their friend and leader, the one they know without a doubt is from God. Is God.

Jesus reseats himself and instructs everyone to sit back down. He finishes his dinner and tells the others to do the same.

“Haven’t eaten in four days, you know,” he says. The others pick up their sopping bread but do not look at their food. Instead, they stare at their Deliverer. Their Deliverer who once was dead and now is alive again and forever.

“We have a lot of things to talk about. I’ll explain some of them now, and some later. But I want all of you to read and re-read the old books of scripture, the first five written by Moses, those written by David in the Psalms, and those written by the old prophets. Look for me in them. I’m there. You will recognize me.”

The women come in and remove the food from the table. Jesus’ aides are not hungry but for a different reason now. Jesus, their bread of life, has returned to them.

“Look, for instance, in the very first book of the Bible. Moses explained that, after Adam and Eve sinned, God said mankind would always fight Satan, one of their descendants would be seriously wounded in the heel by Satan, but that descendant would seriously wound Satan in the head.

“The spikes. They entered my heels and eventually killed me. But I wounded Satan even greater because I overcame death. Do you see that?”

John Mark, his mother Mary, Matthew’s parents Mary and Alphaeus, his friend Matthias, and the five women bring cushions and quietly place them behind Jesus’ ten aides.

“Then there are David’s Psalms,” Jesus continues. “Look at the sixteenth one. It’s talking about me when it says God will not allow the one he loves to rot in the grave.

“Look in the twenty-second Psalm where it says they would gamble away my clothes. That happened while I was on the cross.

“And there in David’s sixty-ninth psalm, he predicted they’d give me vinegar to drink at my death, then it would turn dark, and they would look on the one they pierced.”

Emotions continue to run high, especially as Jesus reminds them of his horrible, hideous death. Many weep anew, though they do not want to. Isn’t he back and sitting right there in front of them? Isn’t he talking to him the way he used to do? The guilt of deserting him remains. Oh, how Satan wants them all to follow

Judas' example and kill themselves.

Jesus continues to explain what they had read a hundred times before with confusion, and brings them to the light of eternal understanding. The forgiver of their souls.

“Then there's Jeremiah who prophesied so long ago that I, the descendant of David, would be raised from the dead to rule.

“Remember those two thieves who were executed with me? That was predicted too. It's right there in black and white.

“Now look at what Zechariah said. He predicted the exact amount of money my enemies would pay for my betrayal. Further, he said my betrayer would throw the money back into the temple, and they'd use the money to buy a burial field. That's where they buried Judas.”

They stare at Jesus, soaking in his every word. Things are back to normal. Except they are not. He's back explaining everything to them as he always had. But they have a feeling it will not be for very long.

Jesus looks around at ten of his original twelve emissaries. Judas is dead. Thomas is accidentally not there. That is okay. He will be back. But Jesus cannot wait until then. He needs to give them something to think about until he returns.

With a deep breath, Jesus explains, “I am now going to impart to you my own driving force. That which makes my soul alive and keeps my soul alive, that which is my very breath. It will be to you also.

He stands. His ten stand too.

“I now bestow onto you my Holy Spirit. You know what my standards are. You know what my will is. Therefore, anytime I forgive someone's sins, you will know it, agree, and tell the person I have forgiven them. Tell the world.”

The ten stand before Jesus. They do not look different. They do not act any different. But they know they are different. Deep within their being, they know God has materialized and is now there with them.

He is talking in finalized terms now. He had never done that before. It's like he's handing the reins over to them. What can they ask they haven't asked before? What can they say they haven't said before? A thousand things. Time is so short.

He is giving them their assignment. The whole world? It's too big, Jesus. We're only human.

LIFE APPLICATION

1. Some wish they had been able to see Jesus for themselves, both before and after his death. That, indeed, would be proof that he came back to life. But there are other proofs. Look again at the fulfillment of centuries-old prophecies that came true at just his death. The Old Testament was copied and recopied many times. Non-Jewish historians even refer to it. The Old Testament scriptures were completed five centuries before Jesus. Which of the fulfillments of prophecy in this chapter could not have been faked by his believers?

2. Jesus was always patient with people who did not believe in him right away. He does not want a naive, shallow belief. His own apostles did not believe his returning-to-life story although he had been telling them about it for about a year. What are some things you have trouble believing about Jesus? Do you believe Jesus will love you through all your doubts?

3. Jesus did a down-to-earth thing with his apostles to prove he was alive again; he ate with them. What are some down-to-earth things churches could do to help prove to people their belief in Jesus?

CITATIONS IN THIS CHAPTER (In Order of Appearance)

NEW TESTAMENT OF THE BIBLE: Matthew 28:78; Matthew 9-10; Mark 16:7-11; Luke 6:12-16; Mathew 26:69-75; Mark 2:14-15; Mark 3:18; Mark 15:47; John 19:25; Luke 24:18; John 20:19; Acts 1:26; Luke 19:37-40; Acts 12:12; John 20:24; John 20:19; Luke 24:32-37; Matthew 16:21; Luke 24:38-40; Luke 24:42-45; Matthew 27:34—35, 45; Matthew 27:38; Matthew 26:14-15; John 20:22

OLD TESTAMENT OF THE BIBLE: Genesis 3:15; Psalm 16:10; Psalm 22:18; Psalm 69:21, 23, 26; Jeremiah 30:9; Isaiah 53:12;

Zechariah 11:13

**REFERENCES TO OTHER BOOKS IN THIS SERIES
made in this chapter in order of appearance**

Book 7, *Shadow of Death*, “Torch Flight”
Book 2, *Dream Maker*, “Odyssey of Truth”
Book 2, *Dream Maker*, “God Eyes”
Book 3, *Hearts Afire*, “Cloud Burst”
Book 3, *Hearts Afire*, “The Traitor”
Book 5, *Flood Gates*, “Thunder Road”
Book 7, *Promise Keeper*, “Desert of Sighs”

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