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8:30 pm  
Stanford Memorial Church

## **The Walk between Golgotha and the Tomb**

Tonight, I want to take you on a walk back to ancient Jerusalem for the first Easter morning. Try to imagine in your mind's eye, the scene—it's sights, smells, and sounds, as we walk beside the women who retraced their steps to the tomb where Jesus' body was laid three days earlier. In your mind's eye, as you walk beside those women, I hope you feel their greatness. They are possibly, the most noble women who have ever lived.

We know that Mary the mother of the Lord was at the foot of the cross, and her sister was there to comfort her. We know the name of four others who huddled together on that pre-sunrise walk. Mary of Magdala, the wealthy town just north of Tiberius, Joanna, the wife of Chuzza, Solome, the mother of James and John, or sons of thunder, and wife Zebedee. We know there was another Mary who had two boys named James and Josie. We know there were other women in addition to these whose names are recorded. You may not need to imagine, you may need to just remember, because as I presume, we were all there with our premortal angelic view, peering down from the clouds, cheering these women on.

### **Shrouded women:**

Imagine in your mind's eye that it is still dark, as this small group of shrouded women slowly and quietly retrace their steps down the main road. Slow because they are carrying a heavy load under their long robes. Their dark shawls cover them head to foot, not only because it is still chilly in the wee hours of the morning, but also because they're outside of their homes. In Jerusalem, Jewish women were to stay indoors as much as possible. But if they ventured out, they most completely drape themselves head to foot, including the veil over their faces. This little group are on their way to a garden, just off the main road, to visit the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. They feel dark and cold *not* just because the sun has not yet risen—they feel dark and cold because of sorrow. They are in deep mourning.

### **Darkness:**

The darkness inside is almost overwhelming them. They are confused with unmet expectations and with fear of both the Romans and the Jews. The other disciples are all hiding; barricaded in a room, still asleep. But this small band of courageous women had not slept much, and ventured out in hopes that the darkness will be their cover to cross their quarter of Jerusalem and down the main road without being seen.

### **Jerusalem as Passover time:**

This is especially difficult because the city is bursting with pilgrims. A city that usually houses between 20,000 to 25,000 people, explodes during the time of the annual pilgrimage feasts. One Passover, a priest counted well over a million Jews who came to worship. There is simply not enough housing for all the pilgrims. If you are fortunate to have extended family in Jerusalem, you can bunk up with them—most of which were one room homes. You had to squeeze your mat on the floor between their children, like baby birds scrunched up in a nest. If you cannot fit inside, you sleep outside. There are people sleeping on the hillside, on flat rooftops, in courtyards, and public squares. As the women carefully wind their way down the narrow-dark-passageways, they worry about disturbing those sleeping in corners and alleyways. Finally, they reach the city wall—they are half way there.

### **Outside the wall:**

I imagine, they pause and turn around to see the outline of Herod's grand temple in the dim light. His mother may have even remembered finding her little twelve-year-old there. Looking at the temple, brings back memories for all the women being on the temple hill with Jesus. Women could have joined him as he taught in Solomon's Stables, or the court of women. Imagine how their minds may have been flooded with memories of the past few days they just spent with Him—especially on walking up Mount Moriah with throngs of pilgrims cheering for Him, "Hosanna, to the Son of David" as he triumphantly entered Jerusalem. Where were all those people now? I wonder if they heard a rumor that the veil of the temple was rent during the violent storm?

Fearfully they continue to creep along one side of the main road, the famous broad road that runs from Damascus to the Mediterranean Sea. I'm sure it was quiet at that time of day. How different than it was a few days before. Imagine how frightening it must have felt to return to that same road. I imagine that they remembered where they were standing when the Roman soldiers dragged Jesus, bruised-and-bleeding from Pilate's scourging, barely able to walk, down the street. And yet always aware of others, Jesus saw them sobbing and lovingly spoke: "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children." Can you image in your mind's eye the women comforting each other as they stumbled along?

I imagine as they edge their way down the dark street, they still smell the same smells. Over 100,000 lambs were slaughtered on the temple mount three days ago. The stench is horrific. I imagine the women would have covered their faces and quickened their pace to pass that stretch of the road, as their minds bounded from the slaughter of the animals to the soldiers slaughtering the Lamb of God.

### **Approaching Golgotha:**

Can you Image what it was like to approach Golgotha again? In the moonlight, they can barely see across the street. If they lifted their veils, they could have seen dark shapes of the tall wooden poles permanently affixed in the ground for crucifixions. (The Romans keep the tall poles along the main road at all times as a warning for all who travel that road to remember the cost of breaking the Roman laws). Instinctively, their feelings intensify and they stumble. I image that they begin weeping again, but they keep walking. Even though they are silent as they pass the place of the skull— I image their minds replay the awful-brutal-scene over again and can hear the yelling, jeering crowds in their head.

### **Remembering the Cross:**

I image that Jesus' mother, Mary, remembered what He had said from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." And when He told the fellow prisoner on his right, "Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise." Did Mary direct the soldiers to bring liquid when Jesus called out "I thirst?" She must have stood fairly close when He spoke to her with the thoughtful words, "Woman, behold thy son." With all the noise and commotion of the rising storm, I wonder if she heard Him scream, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Did she see the excruciating pain leave his face as He cried out, "It is finished! Into thy hands I commend my spirit."

I imagine that in an attempt to chase away fearful thoughts, one of them begins humming a favorite Psalm. Perhaps it was, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want," or "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding . . . He will direct thy paths." (If I would have been there, I would have joined in.) Whatever they said or did, I assume it was still in a whisper as they are frightened of being heard by Jews and Romans. These sweet women are almost there, as the garden is near to the place of the skull.

### **Into the Garden:**

We learn in the Gospel of John that the tomb was in a garden just past Golgotha (Jn 19:41). So as they step off the main road, I assume they feel some relief for making it this far—their hearts stop racing and their load feels lighter as they know they are almost to there. The women have only been to the tomb only once before. Three days ago, during a violent storm, they followed the servants of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who carried Jesus' limp body and laid Him in the tomb at last, in peace. I imagine noticed that act of kindness, at the end of such a hellish day.

Now in the privacy of the garden, they may have removed their face veils to see better in the full moon light. It was, perhaps, the most beautiful garden they seen in Jerusalem. Wafts of the spring blossoms met them. I imagine as they walk across the garden, they feel enormous gratitude to Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus for going to the Governor's office and doing whatever was necessary to receive Pilate's permission to take the body of Jesus. Their positions at the Sanhedrin helped, but I'm sure they also received Divine guidance on that terrible afternoon.

Joseph of Arimathea had prepared a new tomb for himself inside his lovely garden. His servants had carved a shaft into the limestone rock and with an adjacent antechamber or mourning room. The burial shaft included a rock shelf where they laid Jesus' bruised and torn body. The servants helped wash Jesus' body, and anointed Him. Nicodemus had bought 75 pounds of ointment (the KJV says "a hundred pounds" but their weights then measured only 12 oz per pound). Once His body was cleaned and anointed, they dressed it, or

swaddled it in cloth. The strips were wrapped around and around His arms and legs, covering his cut hands and feet, gently adhering his pierced side, and wrapping up his jaw and forehead.

The women from Galilee had spent much of the last two days, their two “holy days”—the Passover and their Sabbath—preparing burial ointments for their Lord’s body. Now that the Sabbath was over, three days and three nights later, these wonderful women also wanted to add their skill and years of experience in fulfilling the Jewish burial practices of washing, anointing and clothing the deceased in preparation for their afterlife.

The women had been so frightened and worried about how to retrace their steps, that they just now began worrying about how to open the tomb. They had made it this far, but I imagine fear again overtook them, I imagine that one of them suggested they pray for God to soften the hearts of the Roman guards.

### **Empty Tomb:**

But as they came around the corner, they see the tomb open to the elements. I can almost hear the women gasp in fear and horror. I imagine in that split second, their fear and sorrow become even more intense... nothing made any sense and that they could hardly keep track of the present, let alone the past. Try to imagine in your mind's eye, what you would feel like at that moment, if you thought the body of the Lord had been stolen. Fortunately, these fearful thoughts, like an avalanche tearing through their hearts, did not last long.

### **Angels:**

As they look in the empty tomb, what they see is so frightening that they fall to the earth. Inside the tomb they saw two young men in white (JST). Luke says they were “shining,” some translations say, “dazzling in white.” Mark said they wore long white robes. “Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen, remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee . . .” (Lk). As the women took this in, I imagine their shock and fear melted into hope and joy. The angel instructs them to go quickly and tell the disciples. Can you imagine their transformation in your mind?

### **Women tell the Apostles**

The woman knew where the apostles were. And I image this time as they retraced their steps, they ran through alleys, with their long robes trailing. Much to their surprise, their excitement was met with skepticism. Mark says, “The woman didn't say anything.” Luke says, “their words seemed like idle tales and they believed them not.” and John said “We didn't believe, but Peter and I bolted to check for ourselves.” As they look in the Tomb, and see it was empty, no angels are there to explain, but I imagine, their hearts soften and they began to believe the women's witnesses.

### **Back at the Empty Tomb**

The two men left, but Mary Magdalene stayed. She was still confused and could not comprehend all the angel said. With sorrow, that only those who have experienced the death of loved one can understand, she couldn't bring herself to leave the tomb. She walks over to the opening, bends down to look in again.

As she looked inside, we are told that she saw two angels one at the head the other at the foot of where the Lord’s body had lain (Jn 20:12). And I want you to picture in your mind's eye... the tomb. Imagine where the body had been. A rock shelf has been hewn out that is wide enough and tall enough for two angels to be sitting at either end.

### **Ark of the Testament and Mercy Seat:**

Now imagine you are looking into the Holy of Holies in Moses’ Tabernacle. *There is only one piece of furniture in the entire room.* There is a gold box known as the ark of the testament or covenant, covered with a gold lid. God told Moses that the lid was God’s throne, it was called, the mercy seat” (Exodus 25:17-22). On either end of this Mercy Seat, which is the Throne of God, is carved two angels on each end. In between the angels wings point to the center, which the throne where the God. This is where the God of the Old Testament issued out mercy on the Day of Atonement. I can blend these two images in my mind—the tomb and the mercy seat. I wish Mary of Magdala was able to blend these two images in her mind as she wept that morning.

All that Mary can see is the bandages have been carefully taken off and folded and placed in different areas, which suggests the body was not stolen. The young man sitting where the body had lain speaks to her again: “Woman weep not, for He is Risen.” But in her state of devastation, she doesn’t understand the beautiful parallel between the throne of God and the risen Lord. The mercy seat is Jesus’ atoning gift of Redemption. The

most merciful seat in eternity is His resurrection, available to all humans. But her tears seem to keep the heavenly veil closed. For her it is still darkness morning of her life, and she is not able to hear the angels' comfort. I imagine she had not slept much, and she cannot think clearly. I also imagine by now, the sun is rising and she hears the gardeners arriving to water, prune and weed the garden.

### **The Gardener**

In her pain, she calls to one of them pleading, "Where is my Lord? If you have taken Him, where have you laid Him?" With her face veiled, and her eyes blurred from tears, she cannot see clearly. But she can still hear, and the Gardener answers her, calling her by name, "Mary." Can you imagine what that sounded like to Mary? Can you imagine her delight as He instructs her to be a witness and to go and tell the Apostles what she has seen?

That Easter morn, her deepest darkest despairing moments have completely changed to surges of energy and happiness. I imagine that she couldn't stop smiling, that her tears were now tears of joy, and that with a light heart she could run even faster now to share her happy news. Much to her added joy, she also finds her beloved friends from Galilee—Mary, Joanna, Susana, Solome, and the others. They tell her that they too have seen the Resurrected Lord. They bowed at his feet and worshipped Him.

### **Five Easter Visitations**

The united women are filled with hope and love as they return to the room where the apostles are staying. This becomes the happiest days of their lives. By the time the Easter day is finished, they all learn that the Lord has appeared at least five different times: First to Mary in the garden, to the women on a street in Jerusalem, to Cleophas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, to Peter with a private visitation, and finally, at the end of the day when the door is once again barricaded, to ten of the apostles.

### **CONCLUSION:**

On this Easter week, I pray that this message of joy will overcome the message of sorrow in our hearts and the message that we can all be of good cheer, for Christ has overcome the world. I pray that we will each feel a deepened love of our Redeemer. That our hearts and minds, and hands, will follow the example of these women, and be angels to those around us and share the good news! That He is not dead! That He has overcome the world! And we will be able to be embraced in His arms and feel of His love as we celebrate as Christians this highest, holy day of our year. I leave this with you in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.