

I'm married to a cat lady. Yeah, you know the type. I don't have to explain. Well, a cat lady...except with donkeys.

We live in Bethphage, my wife and I, a small village about half way from Bethany to Jerusalem. It's on the east side of the Mount of Olives, not far from the mountain top.¹

Not rich, not poor, we're as normal as normal can be. We own a small shop that sells firewood for camping to pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. Our most valuable possession, however, a donkey... kind of an older donkey, and her foal.² It's nearly weaned, never been ridden, and still follows its mother around. Yes, I'm irritated, at my wife. Wean it, break it, and the colt is worth more. But my wife...it's like...it's her precious child. She *treats it* like a precious child. Won't let me train it. Won't even let me touch it. Donkey lady.

We make extra money by renting out the donkey to those who are fatigued from walking up the Mount of Olives. And it would double if I could rent out that colt! Traffic has increased due to a, well, let's just say these are exciting, and dangerous, times. Weeks ago, less than three miles from here in the village of Bethany, Lazarus was raised from the dead. By Jesus. I mean, I don't know, it's the story, and you don't go making things up like that. Lots of people hope to see Lazarus, and you know, verify what happened to him. It's a pretty big deal. He was dead for days. Four, I'm pretty sure. So that's the exciting part. The dangerous? I've heard some of the travelers are looking for ways to kill Lazarus... eliminate any trace of Jesus' ability to raise people from the dead. It's just what I've heard.

Now, it's the Sunday before Passover. Already a steady stream of people on the road through our village coming from the countryside to Jerusalem to celebrate. The "donkey lady" and I are outside, preparing to paint some lamb's blood above the doorframe and on either side. We've got our hyssop branches to use as paint brushes. This is not a required part of modern Passover activities, but we like the reminder of the Passover story from Exodus.

We hear a noise behind us, turn around, two men untying our donkey and the foal. Stealing! In broad daylight! "Hey!" I shout.

They freeze. Just stare.

¹ The exact location of Bethphage is not known.

² Matthew 21:2

“What are you doing?!” I can’t believe how brazen, I mean, “Who do you think you are, right there, right in front our eyes,” I’m getting amped, I’m a strong guy, I chop wood for a living. This is not happening, no sir, not today...

One of them says, his voice was so soft, “The Lord *needs* it. He will send it back soon.”³

It’s like an angel has closed my mouth. I can’t say anything. I look at donkey lady, and she looks at me. We just nod our heads. The men walk away with our most valuable possessions...her precious baby.

A little while later, we hear a shout in the distance, toward Bethany. Then, a crowd comes into view. Heading straight toward us. We can hardly believe our eyes.

Some guy is leading our donkey. Behind him, another man rides on the colt. Robes draped over the colt like blankets, and he’s sitting on top.⁴ We expect the colt to bolt toward us, to its home, to its manger, to feed. But the colt stays calm, follows its mother. Passes us and heads toward Jerusalem.

A huge crowd follows the donkeys. I want an explanation. I pull this man aside. He’s reluctant to stop and lose his place, so I walk alongside. He tells me the man on the colt is Jesus. Behind him, his apostles and Lazarus. Then the crowds of people. Some are the ones from Jerusalem who went to verify Lazarus is alive. Some are Passover pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem, many look like they are from Galilee. Others are local, from Bethany.

I walk to donkey lady, who is smiling from ear to ear, by the way.

I point, “It is the Lord, it’s Jesus.”

She beams, “He...*needs*...our donkey.”

It’s like a punch to the gut. Can this be The Messiah? The Lord who created the Universe, *needs* something? He *needs* something that *we* can give him. Ordinary people, a “donkey lady” and her husband...meeting the Lord’s need?

I race to catch up with my donkeys, with Jesus. I reach him just as he crests the Mount of Olives and comes to a stop. The noise of the crowd washes over and down the west side of the Mount of Olives. The uproar crashes into the Kidron Valley and onto the east side of the Temple Mount, echoing back to the Mount of Olives. Over an area so large, hundreds of acres with thousands of campfires smoke like pots of incense, fires of sacrifice. The sun behind us reflects off of the golden Temple in front of us, through the smoke of more fires of sacrifice.

³ Mark 11:3

⁴ Mark 11:7

Jesus rides down the west side of the Mount of Olives, people throw palm branches on the path in front of him. Some throw their cloaks on the ground. The crowds near Jesus are delirious with joy.

Some of us know and some of us don't, but Jesus is fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah and Zechariah of the King of Israel entering Jerusalem. And our unriden colt is a critical piece of the prophecy.⁵ Jesus *needed* our colt to fulfill prophecy.

The people around the fires in the huge valley look up at Jesus, they see him as their king, their Messiah, they cheer, chant verses from the Scriptures.

"Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

"Blessed is the King of Israel."

"Hosanna to the Son of David."

Jesus goes down the steep path, the sound of the thousands of people... it's overwhelming. Some of the Pharisees at the front of the crowd are furious. They know the crowd is acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah. They rebuke Jesus, try to get him to quiet the crowd. With a look on his face, I can only describe as sublime, he says, "If the crowd is made to be quiet, the very stones on the ground will shout out."

The triumphant crowd approaches Jerusalem. Jesus steps down from the donkey foal, and quietly tells one of his apostles, "Take it back to its owner." I hear him. I step up. I take my two donkeys. Jesus smiles, says four words to me. "You met my *need*."

Oh! Why is my wife not with me! WHAT. A. MOMENT. And I'm going to have to go back and try to recreate it for her.

I start back to the house, and the crowd stops. Jesus sits on the ground. I'm pretty certain he's crying, I only hear a few tearful words, a lament over Jerusalem and then I'm swallowed up by the crowd.

I reach home. Hug my wife. She is the reason we were able to meet the Lord's need! And I tell her that. I tell donkey lady she was right to keep the colt unriden.

We keep track of Jesus over the next several weeks. It's hard to do. Not because of lack of information, but because it is hard to tell truth from fiction.

⁵ Isaiah 62:11, Zech. 9:9

For the first week, Jesus teaches at the temple every day. Always in conflict with the Jewish leaders. The Jewish leaders finally have enough. They arrest Jesus and arrange for the Romans to execute him. Crucifixion.

The body of Jesus disappears. The Jewish leaders say that his apostles stole the body. The rumor among the people is that Jesus rose from the dead.

Then, reports that Jesus is seen by hundreds of people, not just his followers.⁶ He is seen in Jerusalem, then Galilee.

It's been about seven weeks since Jesus rode our donkey. We have decided to keep the colt. To never let it be ridden again. My wife still treats it like a precious child.

For seven Sundays, I lead the colt to the top of the Mount of Olives. I relive in detail every moment of the day we met the need of Jesus. When I come to the top of the mountain I just stand there. Remembering the fires, the shouts, the palm leaves on the path. I return home with a feeling of disappointment. For six Sundays.

But on this seventh Sunday...in the distance is a group of men.

I take the colt and we go. As we get close, I see it's Jesus! With his apostles. I am only about a stone's throw away, and Jesus starts...starts...starts rising in the air. He goes into the clouds and disappears.

I walk toward the apostles and there are two men in dazzling white clothes approaching. "Galileans, why are you standing there looking into the sky. This same Jesus will return in the same way he went into heaven."⁷

The apostles break out in praise and happiness. They smile at me, they remember the colt, at least I think they do. Then they head to Jerusalem.

I return home. With the colt. To my wife.

"He's gone now. Really gone," and I tell her the story of Jesus rising in the air.

She doesn't even seem surprised. "We were willing to meet his need, and many people were blessed."

That makes me feel better, but I am sad that Jesus is gone.

"Now, we will meet the needs of his followers." She says.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:6

⁷ Acts 1:11

I'm so glad I married a donkey lady.

Jesus says when we help others in his name, we are helping him...meeting his need. Meeting the need of the Lord God of the Universe."

Seven is a number signifying completeness, it had great significance to the Jews of Jesus' time. In the Gospel of John, the author, John, emphasizes seven miraculous signs performed by Jesus prior to his crucifixion. I am the most qualified person to tell this portion of Jesus' story. I was the seventh of the miraculous signs.

John specifically chose these seven signs out of a large number of miracles that Jesus did for a very specific reason. John wrote, "And Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God; and that by believing you might have life through his name."¹

John says that the first of Jesus' miraculous signs was turning water into wine. On that occasion, Jesus' mother and family members were attending a wedding in Cana, as were Jesus and his disciples.

The wedding party was going well when a most embarrassing thing happened – the host ran out of wine. In that culture, that would have been a huge social disgrace and a bad omen for the newlyweds. Jesus' mother might have been part of the wedding providers, because she was aware of the problem. She came to her son and simply said, "They have no more wine." Jesus seemingly wanted to stay uninvolved, but like a good mother and friend, Mary just told the nearby servants, "Do as he says." In response, Jesus turned about 150 gallons of water into wine.

The miracle of the wine was an indication that something new was coming to replace the old Jewish religion, and the new would be far better than the old.

The second miraculous sign was a physical healing.² Jesus was visiting again in Cana, where he was certain to be a celebrity because of his first miraculous sign of turning water into wine. A royal official from Capernaum heard that Jesus had arrived in the region, and he rushed to ask him a favor.

The royal official begged Jesus to go to Capernaum and heal his young son who was close to death. This powerful official dressed in his royal robes was begging an itinerant preacher in his,

¹ John 20:30-31

² John 4:54

most likely ragged brown robe, to help him. By using the word, "Sir," the official was humbly acknowledging that Jesus had more power than he did. By asking for the favor, he acknowledged that Jesus had the power to grant his request.

Seeing the man's distress... and faith... Jesus told him to return home, his son would live. Jesus' evaluation of the man was rewarded, because the man took Jesus at his word and returned home. While the man was traveling home, his servants met him with the news that his son was living. He was told that the fever left the boy at the same time Jesus had said his son would live.

So, based on receiving a miraculous sign, the man and his entire household believed. What the Bible doesn't reveal, is how many others believed based on this sign.

The third miraculous sign disclosed by John took place by the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. The pool was surrounded by five covered colonnades. It seems there was a legend that an angel would from time to time stir the waters of the pool, and the first one entering the water after that would be healed. A great number of disabled people were crouched by the pool in hopes of beating everyone else into the water, and be healed.

Walking by the pool, Jesus noticed one particular man. He was disabled for thirty-eight years. When Jesus learned his history, he asked, "Do you want to get well?" **What was going through Jesus' mind when he asked that question, do you think? Was he pressing the man to make sure he hadn't given up? Was he allowing the man to express his faith? Was he not going to heal the man if his answer was insufficient?**

Instead of answering Jesus' question, the man said that nobody would help him, so he couldn't get in the water first. Imagine his surprise when Jesus ignored his answer and commanded, "Get up, pick up your bed, and walk!" Imagine his immense joy when he was able to do just that. Imagine his distress when the religious leaders abruptly made him stop. Especially, after not walking all those years!

One of the Ten Commandments was to keep the Sabbath holy, which the Pharisees had interpreted very strictly. They had thirty-nine different activities or works which were forbidden to do on the Sabbath, one group of which prohibited normal household chores. Picking up a mat and walking would have been a violation of their rules. Rather presumptuously, they told the man, "It is the sabbath day: it is illegal for you to carry your bed."

They placed the man in a horrible position. He was on the cusp of recognizing his dreams of being healed, attending the Synagogue, and being a productive member of society. The Pharisees could destroy every one of his dreams. All he could say was, "The man who healed me told me to pick up my bed and walk." They wanted to know who told him to do that, but he could not tell them because Jesus had left.

Apparently, the man went to the temple to have his healing acknowledged by the priests, because Jesus saw him there, and told him to quit sinning or something worse may happen to

him. The man went to back to the Jewish leaders and told them that it was Jesus who had told him to pick up his mat and walk. When the leaders confronted Jesus, he told them that he was doing his works through the Father. This infuriated the Jewish leaders, because it implied that Jesus could break the Sabbath with impunity, and that he was making himself equal with God. This caused them to try even harder to kill Jesus.

The fourth of the miraculous signs described by John was also shown in the other three Gospel accounts. Jesus fed five thousand men, along with women and children,³ with only five loaves of bread and two fish. And, he had twelve basketfuls left over. John says that the baskets were full of the pieces of the five barley loaves.⁴ This miracle was so powerful that the people wanted to use force to make Jesus king, although Jesus didn't want that.

The fifth of the seven miraculous signs occurred the night after Jesus went to a mountain to pray, and sent his disciples in a boat to go to Capernaum. About ten hours later, in the middle of the night, Jesus recognized that the disciples were stranded in the middle of the lake, rowing against a very strong wind. Jesus walked about three miles on the water, he was about to walk by the boat when the disciples saw him. They were terrified! "It is I, don't be afraid." Jesus said.

When he climbed in the boat with them, the wind died down immediately. Recognizing his ability to control the weather and nature, and to create bread miraculously, the disciples worshiped him as the Son of God. Incidentally, only Matthew gives us the detail that Peter walked on the water to join Jesus that night, but started sinking when his faith wavered.⁵

The sixth of the miraculous signs was a last straw for the Pharisees. It ensured that they would find a way to kill him. Already on their home turf in Jerusalem, and already in their crosshairs, Jesus found another way to irritate them.

He and his disciples were minding their own business when they walked by a blind man. The disciples asked, "Was this man born blind because he sinned or because his parents sinned?" They clearly thought those were the only two possible alternatives. They still labored under the misconception that physical disabilities were the result of spiritual sin. Jesus replied that the blindness wasn't caused by sin. And, he added the statement that the blindness occurred so that the work of God could be displayed in his life.

Jesus spat on the ground, mixed his saliva with the dirt, and pasted the resulting mud on the man's eyes. "Go wash in the Pool of Siloam," he said. The man walked down to the south end of the City of David and washed. And... came back with his sight.

³ Matthew 14:21

⁴ John 6:13

⁵ Matthew 14:28-31

The leaders insisted that the incident was a fraud, they questioned the man's parents. They refused to acknowledge the power of Jesus for fear of being ostracized. The Pharisees continued to harangue the man, but he continued to defend the person who healed him.

When Jesus found out that the Pharisees had thrown the man out of the Temple, he went to find him. Jesus confessed that he was the healer. The man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. Jesus remarked that he had come into the world so that the blind could see, which was an obvious dig at the Pharisees' spiritual blindness. When they complained, Jesus told them that if they were truly blind, they would be innocent, but since they claimed to see, they were self-condemned.

And this brings us to the seventh, and last, miraculous sign....me. My name is Lazarus. My sisters were Mary and Martha. Our family lived in the small town of Bethany, about two miles east of Jerusalem. Jesus was our best friend, and he loved us deeply.

One day, I became extremely ill. My sisters sent word to Jesus that the one he loved was sick. Jesus was quite a distance from our house, and when he received word, he said that God and he would be glorified through the sickness, and he stayed where he was for two more days. In that period of time, I died. Then I was buried in a tomb.

Jesus told his disciples I had died, and that now it was time to go visit me. When Jesus arrived, I had been in the tomb for four days. My quick-tempered sister, Martha, chastised Jesus for not coming sooner to heal me. He finally got her to admit that he was the Christ, and she realized he had power over death. She brought Mary to see Jesus, and they all wept over the sadness of my death.

Jesus asked that they take him to the tomb, and commanded them to roll away the stone from the entrance. Martha, ever the bold one, said, "Lord, he has been dead four days. He stinks." Jesus reminded her to believe. They took away the stone, Jesus prayed, then he shouted at me, "Lazarus, come out of the tomb!"

How do I even begin to explain what happened next? I had been in the presence of God and angels, I had been experiencing heaven, or at least what I perceived to be heaven. Then I was sucked back to my old reality. My eyes were open, but they were covered by bandages. My arms and feet were bound to my body, I could hear the binding ripping apart. I stood, as if in a trance, and walked out of the cave and into sunlight and life. I really wasn't too happy about it, but how could I complain when it made my sisters so happy.

Some of the Jews came to believe in Jesus because of my resurrection. Others wanted to kill me, along with Jesus, to hide all evidence of him being the Messiah. My healing sealed the deal for the Pharisees. Jesus would have to die. Soon.

Seven Miraculous signs. John recorded them, the miraculous signs of Jesus. "I wrote these things so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you

might have life through his name.”⁶ That’s what he wrote. That’s why he wrote it, so *you* would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and have life. Most of the Pharisees refused to believe, they did not attain life. I’m begging you, me the seventh miraculous sign. Please. Believe, and have life.

⁶ John 20:30-31

Ever feel left out? Then you can identify with me. I was Peter's brother. Peter, the outspoken one of the Apostles, and maybe the best known. As young men, we were fishing partners with James and John, the sons of Zebedee. The four of us were inseparable.

We were some of the earliest of Jesus' followers, and continued to be very close. But the longer we were with Jesus, the more I seemed to be distanced from the other three. For instance, when Jesus went on the Mount of Transfiguration, he took the other three, but not me.¹ On the night Jesus was betrayed by Judas and he went to pray, he took the other three, but not me.²

In fact, except for Jesus calling me, and then me telling Peter about Jesus, I am hardly ever mentioned, except in the listings of the apostles. Well, John did mention that I pointed out the boy with the five loaves and two fishes that kickstarted the feeding of the five thousand. And, I did get to join the other three when Jesus talked about the upcoming destruction of the Temple, but I was certainly never as important as Peter, James, and John.

I've wondered all my life why things turned out that way. Not smart enough? Not personable enough? Did I do something wrong? Maybe caused Jesus not to like me as much as the other three? I would never know during my lifetime why things turned out that way, but as I drew near to the end of my life, here is what I began to think. Jesus knew I depended too much on the other three, and he wanted me to depend only on him, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus knew that I would spend most of my adult life by myself as I went around spreading the Gospel. He knew how I needed to develop, even though it made me feel left out. Perhaps you are developing some good characteristics during your time of feeling left out?

I was with the other apostles when Jesus left Jericho and started toward Jerusalem. We didn't know it, but Jesus was nearing the end of his life, and would spend his last week on earth teaching in his father's house, the Temple. After a long day of walking from Jericho, we approached the towns of Bethphage and Bethany, which are located near the east side of the Mount of Olives, only a few miles from the Temple.

He turned to two of the disciples and told them to go to the next village and find a donkey colt there which no one had ridden, untie it, and return with it. If anyone questioned them, they were to simply say that the Lord needed it. Knowing that Jesus had friends in the area, none of

¹ Matthew 17:1

² Matthew 26:37

us thought much about the request, other than Jesus didn't seem tired enough to need a donkey.

Sometime later, they returned and reported that they had been questioned as Jesus suspected, and the owners of the donkey had let them have it after hearing their reply. Some of us tossed our cloaks on the donkey since it had no blanket, and Jesus got on to ride. And that is when things went wonky.

As our group went along the road, people started laying their cloaks on the ground. We began to understand that Jesus was enacting the role of a king, a victorious king. When we topped the Mount of Olives, it took our breath away.

Across the Kidron Valley, the Temple was gleaming in the midday sunlight. Its gold plating like an ethereal mirror. On the east side of the Temple Mount and on the west side of the Mount of Olives, thousands of families who had travelled for the Passover were camped out. Their campfire smokes rose in the air like thousands of fires of sacrifice. We disciples broke out in praise, and the louder we got, the more the crowds in the valley pitched in. As Jesus started down the steep path, more cloaks were placed on his path, people waving palm branches in joyful praise. The valley ringing with cries:

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” and “Peace in heaven and glory to God in the highest.”

Other Psalms were quoted and the people believed they were seeing their Messiah. But their enthusiasm would soon be quenched. The jealous Pharisees in the crowd immediately started demanding that Jesus silence his disciples. He told them that if his disciples were quiet, the very stones would praise instead.

As he neared the Kidron Valley at the bottom of the hill, Jesus began to weep. In words that none of us could fully comprehend, he began to prophesy about the coming destruction of the city and the Temple. He knew Jerusalem was God's special possession, and he could see its destruction as surely as he could see the dust and rocks on the path in front of him. He also knew that its future could change if its citizens would just recognize him as Lord...but he also knew they would not.

Let's pause, I need to point out something important for you to remember as you read any of the Gospels. None of them were written in strict chronological order like you are used to. The writers' intent was to impart truth, not follow a writing convention, an unimportant writing convention at that. Luke uses this time in his narrative to talk about Jesus cleansing the Temple, while Mark and Matthew placed that event much earlier in their narratives. Regardless of when Jesus cleansed the Temple by driving out the moneychangers, or if he did it two different times, you can rest assured that it did happen.

For several days in the last week of his life, Jesus kept a predictable pattern. He would rise early and pray, walk to the Temple with his disciples and teach the people, and then return to the Mount of Olives where he would spend the night. The Jewish officials were so unhappy with Jesus that they wanted to kill him, but the people were so enamored with him that the officials could not risk a riot. The Roman soldiers in the Antonia Fortress at the northwest corner of the Temple grounds were just waiting for an excuse to exert their superiority, and a riot would be a perfect excuse.

The Jewish officials tried to downplay Jesus to the people so they could maintain their own authority, but he would turn the tables on them. One day they went directly at him by asking him by whose authority he taught. They were accustomed to exerting authority that they had given each other, or the authority that came through being a descendant of Aaron. Apparently, they hadn't learned that Jesus wasn't an easy victim.

Jesus replied, "I will also ask you a question. Tell me: John's baptism – was it from heaven or of human origin?" That confounded them. Many of them had been baptized by John the Baptist, and the entire crowd revered John as a true prophet. They knew the crowd would violently turn on them if they said human origin, but they did not want to agree that John was a prophet. So, they replied that they didn't know where it was from. Jesus then refused to answer their question, which delighted the crowd.

Another time, they wanted to trap Jesus into saying something that could cause the Romans to take him away. Knowing the people hated paying taxes to the Romans, the Jewish authorities asked him the precarious question, "Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" That question was charged in other ways. First, by paying taxes to Caesar, it was almost like agreeing to the emperor worship the Romans demanded. Second, the Jews had to convert their money to Roman money in order to pay taxes, which was costly. And, the Roman money had images of the emperor on it, so it was like they were handling an idol when they handled Roman money.

Seeing through their duplicity, Jesus requested that they show him a denarius coin. Presumably someone had a denarius, and showed it to him. That in itself might have made them look bad. Then, Jesus asked, "Whose image and inscription is on it?" By using the word "image," Jesus was emphasizing the nature of the coin being an idol because the inscriptions typically glorified either the emperor or the empire, and the image on it was of the emperor. It was obvious that the coin was not of God. His conclusion was simply, "Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Rather than answering their question, he taught them about the correct way to look at life.

There are so many, many other stories to tell about the days before Jesus died, but I want to end with my most favorite in Luke's book. I like it because the hero of the story was someone who must have felt left out, like me.

Many of you are under the mistaken impression that we Jews had to give a tithe, or one tenth, of our income to God. In reality, most of us gave closer to 20% or 30%. The tithe was an

automatic, base amount. On top of that, we were required to give other sacrifices at several of the festivals, we had to pay a temple tax, and most of us gave other voluntary offerings for various reasons.

One way to give our offerings on the Temple grounds was to throw coins into some metal bowls, shaped somewhat like a Cornucopia horn. Heavy coins would bounce down the horn and make loud sounds, while small coins would barely be noticed. In other words, just by listening everyone could tell who was throwing in what amount.

As our group was standing there, an older, poor widow approached. I watched Jesus look at her, and thought maybe she reminded him of his own mother. As he watched intently, those around him began watching, and listening, too. I could hear the echoes of the rich peoples' coins as they bounced down the horns. You can just imagine that some of them tried to impress Jesus by throwing in a lot of money. Then, I watched the widow. She feebly reached out and dropped her offering. As the coins fell, I had to strain to hear the little, tiny, faint, ping...ping...ping...ping. And I felt so sorry for her since she knew we were all watching.

Then, I saw the tears in Jesus' eyes, he had to be thinking of his mother. He said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of those rich people. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." I started crying, too.

The poverty of that widow was in stark contrast to the wealth of the Temple and many of the Jewish leaders. Much of the Temple and its ornaments were gold-plated or made of solid gold. When the sun shone, the Temple was so brilliant as to be blinding. It was so overwhelming that we disciples could not help but comment on its beauty.

Jesus' response was so mysterious that we were confused then, and people are still confused two thousand years later. As pertains to the Temple buildings, Jesus seems to have been specifically prophesying how the Temple would be destroyed by the Romans forty years in the future. The very gold that was so beautiful to the disciples would be the cause for the Romans to tear the Temple and part of the Temple Mount to pieces. In order to find the gold that melted in the fires of 70 AD, the Romans would literally tear apart the buildings stone by stone. Even 2000 years later you could go to the Temple mount and see the enormous stones that were thrown down. They've left them exactly as they were. To this day. Some of Jesus' remarks appears to have caused some of the Christians to flee the city prior to the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem.

Although Jesus' prophecies seem to be relatively straightforward concerning the Temple, it is far from clear how Jesus addressed the topics concerning the end of the age, when He would return, and other subjects. For that reason, the chapters of Matthew 24 and 25, and Luke 21 are rich material for those who study prophecy. Without being flippant or understating the importance of Jesus' prophecies, I will sum up what Jesus said: "Nobody knows when the end

will come, either for any person or for the world. So, always be ready. Be ready by preparing to withstand persecution and by behaving as a disciple of Jesus.”

Every day, approximately 152,000 people die in the world. Yesterday, the world ended for approximately 152,000 people. Jesus says you are wise if you are ready for your world to end, and foolish if you are not ready. I beg you, be a disciple of Jesus and live like one, so you are ready!

I started my story telling you how I often felt left out. But, in my loneliness, I couldn't see what Jesus did. My talent was to introduce people to Jesus, and he wanted to sharpen that talent and desire in me. Peter, I introduced him to Jesus. A little boy with five loaves and two fishes, I introduced him to Jesus. A bunch of Greeks who had one chance to meet him, I introduced them to Jesus. I overcame my loneliness by introducing people to Jesus. That same thing will work for you.

You know the end of my life story, most probably, but I ask your indulgence to hear another part. My story up to mid-way through Jesus' ministry. At that point, I was still his friend.

Mine was a common name during my lifetime. Think of two original twelve apostles, Jude Thomas or Jude Thaddaeus, or even Jude the brother of Jesus.

I was the outsider of the Twelve. From the beginning. I dressed differently, talked differently, and thought differently. Although the Gospel writers don't talk of my interactions in the group, you can guess that I didn't have any close friends among the apostles, and when I struggled, nobody to confide in.

I was very skilled with money and was chosen to be the treasurer of our group, even though Matthew was known to be extremely talented in that area. The Bible doesn't say when, where or how I became a disciple. You do know it was early in the ministry of Jesus because he believed I could be a fisher of men.

I was as dedicated as any of the other apostles those first couple of years. I wasn't outspoken, but neither were six of the other apostles that you know little about. I was sent out as a pair with the other twelve, and then as a pair with the seventy. I saw Jesus do miracles and healings, and heard all his teachings. I did miracles and healings. For the first couple of years, you would not have been able to distinguish my ministry from the other eleven. Jesus did not distinguish me from them either. He loved me as much as them.

I am Judas the son of Simon Iscariot. Scholars of your day have concluded that my father's name meant that we came from Keriath, a town about 10 miles south of Hebron, or about 30 miles south of Jerusalem. Those scholars have concluded that I was probably the only one of the twelve apostles who was not from Galilee.

One Sabbath, we apostles went with Jesus to eat at the home of a prominent Pharisee. We were relegated to the cheap seats at the back of the room, but Jesus was seated near the front. As often happened, the Pharisees were trying to find a way to disparage him. A man who was an obvious leper came to stand before Jesus. He had some abnormal swelling and it was apparent to everyone in the room he needed healing. Rather than being caught in a trap, Jesus set his own by asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

What a question! The Pharisees and experts of the law knew the spirit of the law encouraged such an action, but their man-made rules prohibited such a thing. They were caught in a trap of their own making and had no out. They could do nothing except remain silent, even after Jesus

healed the man. Oh, the uncomfortable silence, everyone hoped Jesus would change the subject. Until Jesus changed the subject.

He looked around the room and made the observation that everyone had been scrambling to get seats of honor. Imagine the red faces because they had been doing just that. Jesus pointed out that it was a smarter strategy to take a lower seat, and then receive a special honor if the host moved you to the front. Eliminated the risk of being embarrassed in case the host asked you to take a lower seat. I'm sure that was embarrassing to all the guests in the room, but it was more embarrassing when they later realized he wasn't talking about seating at a dinner, but being humble in relationship to God.

Jesus then looked at his host and told him that he was not righteous when he invited friends and family to a dinner, because they could just pay him back. But it was righteous to invite those who were not able to pay him back. Must have been a shock to the host and all of the guests. Looking around, the only poor people in the room were Jesus and us— his apostles! I doubt anybody in the room had ever purposely invited a poor person to a dinner, except for a few relatives. Maybe. It was in situations like those that I began to be uncomfortable. Jesus not only insulted his host twice, but also insulted all the guests in the room.

I wanted respect from the religious leaders, always did. But I also always hoped for some financial support from them, too. Jesus never seemed concerned about money. In retrospect, I guess if you already own the whole universe, there isn't much on earth that you need. Consider that in your own life. If you are truly the sons and daughters of God, what is there on earth that you don't already own?

Back to the dinner at the Pharisee's house. There I was in the cheap seats squirming in embarrassment when one of the people near Jesus tried to change the subject again. The man said, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." That comment probably doesn't mean much to you, but it did to us in the room.

We were all Jews. We had all been brought up with the notion that only Jews would be saved when the Messiah came. We did not have a well-developed notion of what Heaven was or how you got there, but we were all certain that the Jews had exclusive claim to the benefits that would occur when the Messiah came. We were all certain that was true, especially the religious leaders of the Jews. We were all certain, except Jesus.

Jesus wanted everyone to know that the kingdom wasn't coming on their terms, but on God's terms...and Jesus had been announcing those terms. Those who weren't willing to accept Jesus' terms were going to disinvite themselves from the feast, while those who were willing to accept the terms would enjoy it. The parable Jesus told clearly showed the religious leaders as disinviting themselves, while the obviously unclean people would get to enjoy the banquet. The man's comment had been right, the ones eating at the feast were blessed, but he misunderstood who those people would be.

Needless to say, the banquet ended on a sour note, and we were not given any gifts or support. As treasurer, I was quite disappointed that Jesus not only didn't raise any money that night, but he had antagonized people that could have made our lives much better. I should have known it was only going to get worse from there.

Not long after that, large crowds were following us everywhere we went. It would have been a simple thing for the Lord to give a little uplifting message, and then pass the hat for some contributions from the crowd. Instead of doing that, Jesus raised his voice and said quite the opposite: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brother and sister ... and their own life, such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." I can assure you that that is not the kind of message that is encouraging for a treasurer hoping to get more money.

Your modern-day translators and preachers can waltz around all they want, but Jesus said "hate" and that is exactly what he meant. He meant that you not only had to be willing to do without those people and things in your life, but that you counted them as your enemies. Furthermore, he wanted you to become willing to give up your life, literally, in order to become his disciple. You can be assured that many of the crowd left before he could tell his next parable.

The parable Jesus told next is my favorite because of its simplicity and obviousness. As with many of his parables, Jesus had seen something we had all seen, but had understood its deeper meaning. We had all seen buildings which were abandoned before they were finished, but never thought anything about them. Jesus understood them in a different way.

He said, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower." He finished that sentence and looked around, nodding at a partial structure in the distance. Not many of us had wanted to build a tower, but many of us wanted to build houses.

"Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to finish? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish the building, everyone who sees it will laugh at you. They will say, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'" From his past lessons, we apostles knew Jesus wasn't talking about buildings.

I can't prove it, but when Jesus said that last sentence, I believe he looked right into my eyes, right into my soul. Maybe that was the first time I realized I was not willing to give up everything to be his disciple. And if I wasn't willing to give up everything, I probably wasn't willing to give up very much. He made me count the cost of being his disciple, and I decided that I wasn't willing to pay the price.

That was the day my doubts began. I recalled Jesus saying, "Whoever is not with me is against me."¹ Now that I knew I was not wholeheartedly for him, I started finding little ways to be

¹ Matthew 12:30

against him. At first, I just discounted some of the things he said. I quit praying as much, then not at all. I quit listening with attention. I wanted to raise as much money as I could, (long pause) so I could..... steal more. If he said I was his enemy, I would prove that I was.

You want to be a friend of Jesus? How much are you willing to give up? Or not willing, as the case may be. You can't do that, you can't be unwilling to give it all up, Jesus said that. Maybe you should quit trying to do what Jesus says you cannot do. You are either his friend or his enemy. And, from my own example, you don't want to become his enemy.

Matthew, Mark and Luke only briefly mentioned me in their Gospels. John gave me a little more recognition. He talked about how I introduced Nathaniel to Jesus, and how we came to be followers of Jesus.¹ John wrote about my role in the feeding of the five thousand.² He also recognized that I tried to introduce a group of Greeks to Jesus, with that attempt resulting in an important speech by Jesus about his impending death.³ And, John recorded the few words I said on the night before Jesus died.

Yes. Okay. So, there were two men named Philip in the Bible. One was the man who taught the Ethiopian eunuch and lived in Caesarea. The book of *Acts* talks about him. That is not me. I am Philip the apostle.

We were in the Upper Room, Jesus had just finished telling Peter that he would soon deny Jesus three times. Jesus tried to console all of us by telling us he was going away to the Father, but he would be preparing a place for each of us, and he would come back and take us to be with him. We would have been more consoled *if* we had understood what he was talking about.

Thomas blurts out, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going; and how can we know the way?” Jesus reply? “I am the way, the truth, and the life: No one comes to the Father, except by me. If you had known me, you should have known my Father, too.” Rather than catching the insinuation that we had never really known Jesus, I triggered one of the most famous passages in the Bible by opening my mouth.

I said, “Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us.” Jesus looked at me with a sad smile. In the softest voice, he said, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

I should have been embarrassed, but I was astounded. I got it. I finally got it. The Father was God. Jesus was God. They were the same! I got it! I got a glimpse of the truth! For the next twenty minutes, Jesus opened the flood gates of truth.

Jesus and the Father and the Spirit were all in each other. And we had the ability to be in them, too. Jesus was going away, but we were going to receive the Spirit and peace. Our heads

¹ John 1:43-48

² John 6:5-7

³ John 12:20-36

exploded. In a few sentences, mysteries... hidden for eons were revealed to us. How could we even begin to comprehend what Jesus was saying?

That dilemma was solved moments later. Jesus rose from the table, and told us to leave with him. After we left the room and started down the hill to the Kidron Valley, Jesus stopped...leaned down... picked up a branch from a grapevine by the path. And...he told us a story.

“I am the true vine and my Father is the vinekeeper. Every branch in me that doesn’t bear fruit, he takes away: and every branch that bears fruit gets pruned so that it bears more fruit. You are clean through the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. A branch can’t bear fruit by itself, it has to be attached to the vine. You can’t bear fruit unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. The one that abides is in me, and I in him, that’s the one who bears much fruit. For without me, you can do nothing!” Jesus kept talking, but ended the example with..., “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.”

We walked on to the Garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus continued to pour out his parting words of wisdom to us. Each sentence was worth an entire lifetime of study, but I could not get my mind off of the story of the vine and branches. For the next two thousand years, people would be interpreting it as best they could. Let me tell you how I thought of it that night.

In Israel during early September, you become accustomed to the sight of vineyards during harvest season. You see thick brown vines growing up about three or four feet from the ground. Each vine ends at a gnarl from which numerous branches grow along the different directions of the trellises. From the branches grow a lot of large leaves that vary from dark green to yellow, bright red even, depending on the exact time of the season. In fact, most of what you see is an abundance of leaves. Hidden among the leaves are clusters of dark purple or light green grapes hanging from the branches.

The branches not only bear fruit, but they bear leaves. Having the proper amount of leaves is critical to making the most and best fruit. The point of pruning and trimming is to end up with the right amount of branch that produces the right mixture of leaves to yield the right amount of fruit. The vinekeepers are never finished. Their lives are a continuum of planting, growing, pruning, and harvesting...planting, growing, pruning, and harvesting.

That night, I knew this story is all about God and his desires. God the Father is the vinekeeper, but he is also the creator and owner of the vineyard. So, it is only his desires that matter, and **his primary desire is to be glorified!** This premise is the basis for understanding the parable. The teaching is very clear that God is glorified when the branches bear much fruit and thereby prove themselves to be disciples.

Generally, we apostles knew that we glorified God by living a life of continual praise and worship, and by proclaiming and expanding his kingdom. This is exactly what Jesus did on Earth,

so at the end of his life he was able to tell the Father, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”⁴

The vinekeeper is responsible for the vine being the most fruitful by preparing the soil and the vines. He cuts off⁵ and burns branches that don’t bear fruit. A branch doesn’t bear fruit if it becomes disconnected from the vine, *or* if it is capable of bearing fruit, but chooses to be totally unproductive or to produce only leaves.

God trims and prunes fruitful branches from excess branch growth, twigs, and leaves so they will be even more fruitful. The pruning and trimming process will likely feel unpleasant to me and may possibly vary in the form of discipline that God provides because... he loves me. In my daily life, pruning and trimming probably require the elimination of activities, emotions, or thoughts which make me ineffective and unproductive.

Jesus said he is the true vine. However, it is critical to remember that just before telling the parable, Jesus had said that he, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, all are in each other. So, abiding in Jesus is equivalent to abiding in God.

The vine knows that it cannot be fruitful unless the branches are connected to it since it is the source of all important nutrients needed for life. Jesus had often talked about being the source of life, and that the connection came through belief in Him⁶.

Followers of Jesus are the branches. The purpose of each branch is to produce much fruit. In order to do that, the branch will have to optimize its input of nutrients from the vine, and optimize its output by properly allocating its resources between the two activities of making fruit and making leaves.

During this teaching, Jesus taught us that healthy branches trust God, know Jesus and the Father, have faith in Jesus, obey Jesus, have the Holy Spirit, love Jesus and are loved by Jesus and the Father, have peace, love each other, don’t belong to the world; and testify about Jesus to others.

If I am an unfruitful branch, God will either work in my life to help me become fruitful or will allow me to be cut off from the vine and destroyed. If I am a fruitful branch, God will prune me to make me more fruitful. Painful at first, these actions are necessary for my own benefit and for God’s glory.

⁴ John 17:4

⁵ Arden Autry, a Greek expert, says that “cut off” means “cut off.” However, the footnote in the NIV says “pruning” in 15:2 can also be translated as “cleaning”. I want to consider both meanings, but I tend to like “cleaning” better because that makes 15:3 make more sense.

⁶ e.g. John 6:29, 6:40

Abide means that the branches are connected in such a close way that they live inside the vine, and the vine lives inside them. Peter calls it, “participating in the divine nature”⁷. Paul phrases it as living by the Spirit and keeping in step with the Spirit.⁸ Jesus puts it simply, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home⁹ with him.”¹⁰

My intimacy with Christ, my closeness to him, as with all relationships with God, is grace driven. His grace is not only the enabler of my salvation, but is the enabler for going deeper in my attachment to him, and for bearing fruit. It is His great love for me that disciplines me to remove shortcomings so that I can respond to His invitation to have a more intimate relationship and be further transformed into a Christ-like person who can demonstrate God’s love to the world. The path to this deeper intimacy is through a lifestyle of personal abandonment and absolute trust.¹¹

It is my option to abide in Jesus, but Jesus commands me to do so. Why? Because ***I cannot bear any fruit unless I abide in Him.***¹² By this He means that although I may produce some works, I can’t produce works or fruit of value. No fruit. Nada. None. Zip. Zero. I may think I am making fruit, but I am not unless I am abiding in Him. I am entirely useless and stand in danger of being destroyed.

We apostles had already heard a story from Jesus about people who thought they were being fruitful but were going to be destroyed because in reality they weren’t being fruitful¹³. It’s the secret sauce. Abiding is the “secret sauce” to making all good deeds fruitful. It is through abiding that I am transformed from “a worker who loves to a lover who works.”¹⁴

If abiding in Jesus is so important, how can I start doing a better job of doing that? Here are some things I’ve thought of: regularly praying and reading the Scriptures, forgiving anyone that I have not yet forgiven, and setting my heart and mind on heavenly things.

According to the parable, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am abiding in Jesus if I am bearing much fruit. That is one reason why it is critical to be clear about the definition of “fruit.”

⁷ 2 Peter 1:4

⁸ Galatians 5:16, 25

⁹ Or “abode”. Abode is the noun and abide is the verb.

¹⁰ John 14:23

¹¹ This paragraph is taken from Page 78 of the Influencer’s “The Journey” participant manual

¹² Jesus was personally familiar with this concept. He said of Himself, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing.” (John 5:19) The apostle Paul reiterated the idea that sometimes I think I have something when I actually have nothing in 1 Cor. 13:1-3, “...and if I have a faith that can move mountains but have not love, I am nothing.”

¹³ Matthew 7:16-23

¹⁴ Bob Sorge, *Secrets of the Secret Place*

If I am mistaken about the definition of fruit, I may very likely expend many resources producing something that isn't fruit. Having a proper understanding of fruit is crucial to intentionally living a fruitful life.

According to the parable, fruit can be described as those things that cause God to be glorified. In the context of this parable, fruit seems primarily to mean the making of disciples by proclaiming and expanding of God's kingdom. As we apostles found, disciples are made through both sharing the Gospel and doing good works that bring glory to God.

You may have noticed that I have talked about leaves several times in this story, but Jesus did not mention them in the parable. I mention them because they are a critical aspect of how I apply this parable to my own life.

We did not understand the science of growing grapes, but we knew the practicalities of doing so. We knew you needed enough leaves on the branch to make good grapes, but not so many leaves that the grapes had too little nourishment. In my own life, the leaves stand for activities that consume my time and energy, but do not produce fruit for God. If I have too many outside activities, I cannot maximize the fruit I produce.

In my time, our outside activities were fairly limited because we were so poor. You are not so fortunate. You have an unlimited amount of diversions at your fingertips. Television, movies, sports, hobbies, computers, Internet, and a long list of other activities. Fatigue, overscheduling, sleep, drugs, alcohol. There is no doubt that you have to be dedicated to God to allocate your resources between making fruit or making leaves.

Jesus said, "This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit showing yourselves to be my disciples." Which will it be in your life...fruit, or leaves?

Peter:

Have you ever been interrupted while in the middle of a deep sleep? Perhaps you acted irrationally before you could fully wake up. That is what happened to me. But let me start at the beginning. The beginning of the end, that is.

During the last week of the life of Jesus, we settled into a simple, but uneasy, daily pattern. We spent the night on the Mount of Olives, just outside the walls of Jerusalem. The next morning, we crossed the Kidron Valley, climbed up the Temple Mount and entered the Temple grounds. Jesus taught the people, jostled with the Jewish leaders, and instructed his apostles and disciples. As the day ended, we returned to the Mount of Olives.

We knew the Jewish leaders were dangerous, but we did not know Satan had entered Judas Iscariot, one of us. He slipped away and went to the chief priests and temple guards to talk to them about betraying Jesus to them when the crowds were not present. They paid Judas thirty pieces of silver in advance for his treachery.¹ Why thirty pieces of silver, which wasn't a lot of money? Possibly to fulfill a prophetic passage in the book of Zechariah.² Possibly because that is all Judas demanded. He bargained away the most precious life ever lived for a pittance.

The day of Unleavened Bread came. This was the day during the Passover festival when the Passover lamb was to be sacrificed. I guess I was expecting Judas to make preparations since he was our treasurer³ but Jesus turned to John and me, and told us to go make preparations. He gave us detailed instructions instead of his typical vague inferences. His instructions started with, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you." I was immediately taken aback. I had been with Jesus for a week and knew he had not had an opportunity to make complex plans. The odds of seeing a man carrying a jar of water were small. Men did not typically do this type of work.

John and I found things exactly as Jesus said. We met the man, followed him to a house, and asked the owner of the house where the Teacher could eat the Passover feast with his disciples. The owner showed us a furnished room upstairs, and we prepared for the Passover. Many of your scholars believe that the owner of the house was the mother of John Mark since Christians would soon meet in her house on a regular basis.

¹ Matthew 26:15, 27:3

² Zechariah 11:4-14

³ John 13:29

When the appropriate hour came, we apostles and Jesus reclined around the table for Passover, like we had done every year of our lives. The meal did not go as we expected. The words Jesus used portrayed him as the Passover sacrifice. He even said, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." We should have been stunned and immediately started to question him about his words.

Instead, we started arguing among ourselves about who was going to be greatest. This was not the first time we had had this argument, and I'm sure Jesus was devastated that we were still so prideful. Jesus took the argument and turned it into a lesson showing that the most humble among us would be the greatest. He backed up his words by showing how he had come to serve, not to be served. I should have let well enough alone, but I continued with a haughty attitude.

Jesus turned to me and said, "Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." I did not catch his conclusion that I would fail while being sifted. I boasted, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." He looked at me with sad eyes and said, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times."

Jesus continued to talk to us for a long time, just as John recorded in his gospel account. While continuing to teach us, Jesus led us across the Kidron Valley and up the side of the Mount of Olives to a place known as Gethsemane. After a while, Jesus separated himself from us to pray to God. He had often done this, so we didn't think much of it until he asked James, John and me to keep watch with him. He felt so sorry for us because we could not even stay awake during this time of extreme danger.

I was dead asleep. A crowd of men with torches appeared out of nowhere and came toward Jesus. Judas was with the crowd and walked toward Jesus as if to kiss him in greeting. Jesus said, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" I grabbed a sword and hacked toward the nearest person to me, and cut off a man's right ear.⁴ I had just woken up, wasn't thinking clearly, just reacted. Now, I was completely in a panic. I saw that the crowd consisted of soldiers and the temple guard, probably sent by the chief priests, elders, and other Jewish officials. They seized Jesus and started walking down the hill. We apostles scattered in every direction.

From my vantage point, I could see that the torches were headed to the southeast, toward the house of the high priest. I stumbled down the path in the dark, able to stay a short distance from the crowd.

As they went into the house, I came from the backside and sat near the fire in the courtyard, trying hard to keep my face hidden. This girl came up to me. "This man was also with him!" It

⁴ It was the servant of the high priest. John 18:10. Jesus healed him.

was a servant girl accusing me of being a follower of Jesus. I, of course, denied it but my accent and clothes gave me away. I denied my Lord at the mere words of a girl. Twice more I was accused of being a follower of Jesus, and twice more I denied it.

At the exact moment of my third denial, a rooster crowed, and Jesus turned and looked straight at me. I remembered what he had said to me, and I went away and wept bitterly. In the distance, I could hear them insulting Jesus, beating him.

Pilate:

I should have just stayed in Caesarea that wretched day. Why didn't I just stay in Caesarea that day? I had been the prefect of the Roman province of Judaea, an area that was also known as Palestine or Israel. As the representative of Emperor Tiberius, I was Rome. The eternal city. I had total power and control over the province. Even the power of life or death.

I took a large group of soldiers and made the seventy-mile, up-hill, dusty trip to Jerusalem, and prepared to stay there for a few weeks. I had most of the soldiers stay in the Antonia Fortress, our military garrison on the northwest corner of the Temple Mount.

Imagine me in a deep sleep after having a little too much to drink the night before. My attendant taps at my door. I answer, he motions for me to step away so as not to wake up my wife, and tells me that a group of Jewish leaders are waiting frantically to talk to me. He says things that seem odd, but he wants to make sure we don't unintentionally set off a riot by ignoring them.

The leader of the assembled religious brass points to a bloody man and says, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes the payment of taxes to Caesar, and claims to be Messiah, a king."

At that point, I didn't care a bit about what they had to say. The man they were pointing to was badly beaten and clearly posed no threat to me or the Empire. The charges were not even worthy of my time. So, I sarcastically asked the poor man, "Are you the king of the Jews?" I knew Herod was the king of the Jews.

"You have said so," the man replied. Not a bad answer if I don't say so myself, I just laughed. I announced to the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man." I turned to leave, and the group leader frantically tried another charge.

"He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here!" Now, the leader thought he could get my attention by insinuating that this poor wretch might be causing an insurrection, but he got my attention in another way instead. He mentioned that the man was from Galilee, which meant that he was under the authority of Herod. Conveniently, Herod was only a few hundred yards away.

Herod would have to deal with a problem that had no good solution. He was either going to break Roman laws or disappoint the Jewish leaders and possibly cause a riot. Either way, I wanted to make Herod's life miserable. He was a pathetic, sad little man, and we were bitter enemies. It was an easy choice for me. I sent the crowd with their wretched prisoner to Herod, and headed back to sleep.

Now imagine my surprise a few hours later when the crowd reappeared and demanded to see me again. What had happened? I asked my assistant, and he gave me the short version. Herod was actually happy to see the man because he had heard of him, and wanted to see him do some great miracle. When the man just stood there, Herod eventually tired of his silence and had his soldiers ridicule him, beat him to a pulp, and dress him in a purple robe that signified his supposed royalty. Then, in a sign of deference to me, Herod sent him back for my judgment.

As that poor man stood there, weaving from fatigue and pain, I could easily see this was not a legal case, but some kind of religious dispute. I was in a no-win situation, and I frantically searched for a way out.

My first gambit; to tell the crowd that Herod and I both found no guilt in the man, and that I would punish him before releasing him. Rather than appeasing the crowd, this just made them more furious. The religious leaders were whipping the crowd into a frenzy, a riot was sure to break out soon.

My second tactical gambit: a brilliant maneuver, give the crowd a choice of releasing this man, or releasing a murderer, a revolutionary named Barabas. It was my custom to release someone at Passover, and I was sure of whom the crowd would not choose. Much to my surprise, they demanded the release of Barabas, and would not listen to my reasoning. "Crucify him! Crucify him!" they shouted.

They had me in a corner and they knew it, both the religious leaders and the crowd. I appealed again to them, but on the verge of a riot, and they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!" Their shouts prevailed. I released Barabas, and gave the prisoner to the crowd, which was tacit approval for him to be crucified.

Hours later, my centurion brought his report. The innocent man's name was Jesus. He was so fatigued that he could not carry his cross all the way to the hill of death, so my centurion seized someone from the crowd and had him carry it for him. My centurion was surprised at the large number of people who supported Jesus and followed them, but they were mostly women or men who posed no obvious problem.

With typical Roman efficiency, my soldiers took along two other men who were scheduled to be executed, and all three of them were crucified on Golgotha, with Jesus being placed in the middle.

As was often done, the soldiers gambled against one another to claim the clothing that would never be needed again by the prisoners. I had a notice placed above Jesus that said, "This is the king of the Jews." The soldiers and crowd delighted in mocking Jesus about his inability to save himself even though he was a king. The only one in the crowd who treated him with respect? One of the other crucified prisoners.

It was about noon, when a deep darkness came over the entire land lasting about three hours. The Jews, ever superstitious, were reminded of the plague of darkness when they were slaves in Egypt. They started to regret their actions. The enormous Temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom and the Jews went ballistic.

Jesus called out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." He died. It had taken only a few hours for him to die, when it often took several days. My centurion was amazed. And deeply moved. He said that he praised the Jew's God, and said, "Surely this was a righteous man."

No sooner had the centurion finished his report than my assistant came with another urgent request. A wealthy Jew named Joseph had come to ask for the body of Jesus so he could bury it. He was in a hurry, he said he wanted to wrap the body in linen and place it in a new tomb before the Sabbath started.

Quite honestly I was thrilled to have this unexpected request. Usually we Romans would leave crucified bodies in place for a long time. It's a powerful reminder. However, since this Jesus had so many followers, I did not want the body there as motivation for them to unite and rebel, or make a sacred martyr of him. Having the body disappear was a good solution to a potential problem. I granted Joseph permission, and that was the end of the matter. At least it was the end as far as I expected.

Peter:

As it turned out, the end was only the beginning.

I am one of the few people mentioned in all four gospels. Even Jesus' father does not have that privilege, although we share the same name. I am Joseph of Arimathea, and I have the unusual distinction of being a minor Bible character of whom you know more about than almost every other person in the Gospels besides Jesus himself.

As Matthew tells you that I was very rich, came from Arimathea, was a disciple of Jesus, went to Pilate to get the body of Jesus, wrapped the body of Jesus in a linen cloth, laid Jesus' dead body in my own new tomb, and rolled a giant stone over the tomb's entrance.¹

Mark says I was a prominent member of the Council, I was waiting for the Kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body, and was given it. I took down the body, wrapped it in linen, placed it in a tomb, and rolled a stone over the entrance.²

Luke adds the information that I was good and upright, I had not consented to the decision and action to crucify Jesus, I came from Judea, and that the tomb was new.³

John completes my information by saying that I was a secret disciple of Jesus because I feared the Jewish leaders, that I was accompanied by Nicodemus when I prepared the body of Jesus, that he and I wrapped the body in spices in accordance with Jewish customs, and that the tomb was in a garden where Jesus had been crucified.⁴ John adds that we laid the body in the tomb on the day of Preparation.

I tell you all of this detail for a very specific reason. I am uniquely qualified to tell you about the last day of Jesus' life. When you hear my story, you will also guess where the writers of the Gospels got some of their detailed information.

I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, the child of a wealthy Jewish merchant. When I was young, my family moved from Arimathea to a large house on Mount Zion, only a few hundred yards west of the Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, we could walk straight east from my house, cross the bridge you know as Wilson's Arch, and enter the Temple grounds our treasured,

¹ Matthew 27:57-59

² Mark 15:43-45

³ Luke 23:50-53

⁴ John 19:38-42

custom-made robes billowing...without having to mingle with poor people or be bothered by beggars.

My father was a Sadducee, as were many of the other wealthy Jewish leaders. We were very socially concerned, didn't believe in the resurrection, and not overly concerned with intricate theological arguments. Although we didn't believe in the resurrection, we did believe that the Messiah would restore Israel to its rightful powerful position among the countries of the world. We looked for a Messiah that would restore King David's earthly power... (wryly) although that power had not really existed for nearly a thousand years.

Since we were wealthy, I went to school and studied the Torah with other wealthy children. Sometimes, exceptionally bright children, such as Saul of Tarsus, joined our group, but mostly I knew rich people. Rich people came to our house for dinner, and my parents' friends were all powerful. Wealth was much more important to us than having perfect theology. We paid poor rabbis to be concerned about theology for us, just as some of you modern people pay your preachers to think about theology for you.

Almost a week before the death of Jesus, I learned that he and his disciples were in town. I rushed to go hear the famous teacher, and found that he was surrounded by people of all kinds. Naturally, I gravitated to stand by my friends, other rich, and very richly-attired, Jews. We looked like gaudy peacocks next to poorly-clad Jesus and his rag-tag disciples. We rich, religious Jewish leaders loved our robes.

The more Jesus taught, the more I believed. The more Jesus taught, the angrier my friends became. They grew louder, and I grew quieter. They asked him loaded questions, and he turned back every verbal challenge. The people loved watching Jesus take on the religious establishment, and I did, too. I so badly wanted to hear Jesus, and my robes kept me safe from suspicion. I wasn't paying attention to the storm that was brewing.

I started hearing rumors that one of Jesus' followers had taken a bribe to betray him to the Jewish leaders.⁵ It sounded so silly. Why would such powerful men be afraid of a homeless preacher?

On Thursday night, I celebrated Passover with my entire family. Like other rich people, we had a choice lamb, and used expensive cups and plates. I have to admit that while the service was going on, I didn't notice any difference in it and the many others I had attended in my life. My life was as normal as could be. Until about midnight, when nothing in my world would ever be the same.

There was a loud, crashing knock on my front door. I jumped out of bed, threw on the nearest robe. My servants and I arrived at the door at the same time. There were many of my friends holding torches. They shouted for me to get dressed and come with them. There was an

⁵ Matthew 26:14-16

emergency, and the Sanhedrin was going to meet. It must be quite an emergency, I thought. The Sanhedrin almost never met at night since their decisions had to be made during daylight.

We entered the Sanhedrin building, I understood the commotion. They were afraid of Jesus. They wanted to kill him because they were afraid of him. Nothing was going to stop that bloodthirsty mob. But they had no authority to kill him! That's the knowledge I consoled myself with anyway. They only had legal authority to beat him before letting him go. I settled in for a long trial, and that is what I got.

Witness after witness, their testimonies conflicted or were patently false, but they kept calling them. Out of frustration, the leaders called to take Jesus to Pilate and ask for a sentence of death. It was daybreak, almost everybody in the room voted yes, but not me. I was too cowardly to object, but I did not vote for it. I was sure that Pilate would see his innocence and let Jesus go. I knew Pilate from some of my business dealings, and I knew him to be a smart, honest man. He was so stubborn that he would never give in to the demands of the Jewish leaders.

The sun rose, we took Jesus before Pilate, and our leaders asked to have Pilate crucify him. He had the authority to kill Jesus, but they did not. Pilate was known to crucify people for a lot less reason than appeasing the Jews, but he still was an honorable man. Jesus was tried before Pilate, and I heard the precious words from Pilate. "I find no guilt in this man."

That should have been the end of it. Pilate should have given him a light beating and let Jesus go. But he could not withstand the threats and pressure from the Jewish Leaders, so he sent Jesus to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, for further examination hoping the whole mess would go away.

Herod Antipas tried to question Jesus, but Jesus just ignored his questions. Rather than be humiliated in front of everyone, Herod Antipas quickly sent him back to Pilate.

Pilate repeatedly tried to release Jesus, but the leaders' threats kept coming and coming. He had Jesus savagely beaten hoping to satisfy the Jewish leaders, but that just inflamed them more. If Pilate would not kill Jesus, they would cause a riot among the people and Pilate might lose his job. He gave in. Finally, Pilate gave in, he gave the order. Crucify Jesus.

I could not believe it. The hate from the Jewish leaders was enough to kill an innocent man. I had done nothing to stop the travesty, and it was too late now to do anything. The fate of Jesus was sealed. He was going to be crucified and would most assuredly die a gruesome death.

I was humiliated, and scared, for me and for my people. We weren't sending a guilty man to his death, and there were few things that made God angrier than the shedding of the blood of an innocent man...especially if that innocent man turned out to be the very Son of God. Like the prophets before me, I prayed for my people and for myself.

Some of the Jewish leaders followed Jesus to Golgotha where he would be murdered, but most of us went to our homes...Shamefully. There was every reason for God to end our lives that day. As the hours passed and the sky darkened, and an earthquake happened, I believed we were all going to die. And we deserved to. A messenger came to my house and told me that the massive curtain, 60 feet high, and thick (he will gesture to about 4-5") massive curtain in the Temple had been torn in half. From top to bottom. I knew that only God could have done such a thing! God had abandoned his Temple and would never return.

I could not stand it any longer. I rushed out of my house, followed by a few of my most dedicated servants. In less than fifteen minutes, I reached a horrific scene. Three men hanging on crosses. As usual, they were placed next to a major road where people could see them, eye-to-eye, jeer at them, and be reminded of the absolute power of Rome.

Jesus was barely recognizable, but he was the one in the middle. Above his head was Pilate's sarcastic sign, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." There was a small crowd of women nearby, staring at Jesus. But unlike typical Jewish women, they were praying instead of wailing.

I rushed up, just as a Roman soldier jammed his spear in Jesus' side. Involuntarily, from somewhere deep within me, I don't know where, a scream emerged but I kept it in. I couldn't let something like that happen...with who I was, and what I represented. No. Then, I watched in morbid fascination as blood and water shot from the hole in his side.

1. (extended pause as Joseph whole demeanor makes a pivot, right in front of us as he relives the moment to the point of looking down as if he's looking at his robes. He looks back up, he's different.)

He didn't feel the spear. Jesus was already dead. With his death, my fear of who I was, and what I was becoming, and the difference between them died, too. Just vanished. I nodded to an officer who stood nearby, and instructed him to follow me to Pilate. He was afraid to abandon his post, but he was more afraid of a wild-eyed rich Jew with unknown intentions headed to see his boss.

On the way, I realized that both Pilate and the Jewish leaders had a big, big problem. What would they do with the body of Jesus? Romans typically left the bodies of the crucified to rot on the cross as a deterrent to future criminals. But Pilate would be ashamed to have that body stay in the public eye since he knew Jesus was innocent.

The Jewish leaders were obligated to have the body buried within twenty-four hours after death, but they wanted to disassociate themselves from Jesus' death and just have the whole matter go away quietly.

When my small entourage reached Pilate's garden, I just walked in. I guess Pilate's body guards thought the officer with me was under orders to report, plus they were familiar with me from my past dealings with Pilate. When I entered the room, Pilate just gave me a questioning look. I

said, "Please, give me the body of the innocent man." The officer confirmed that Jesus was dead, and Pilate gave his body to me. I'm sure Pilate was appreciative that I was removing a sign of his shameful action.

Back we went to Golgotha, where the officer instructed his soldiers to remove the dead Jesus from the cross. I was sickened by the thought of them ripping his hands and feet from the nails, so my servants and I removed him from the cross. I then sent one servant to fetch linen cloth, and other servants to buy burial spices and perfumes. They had only an hour to buy those things because sundown was approaching, and the burial had to happen soon.

My servants gone, I was in a quandary. What would I do next? There was a muffled cough behind me, I turned around. Nicodemus. It was my friend, Nicodemus, another secret follower of Jesus. I said, "My new tomb is over there. We will carry him."

The blood drops of Jesus stained our robes our expensive, pompous, (he searches for a word, he's overcome)...robes that now, would never be washed. We reached the opening of the tomb, my servants began to arrive. Nicodemus and I personally prepared the body with the spices, and then carefully wrapped it with linen strips. We placed the headpiece over his face and head, and laid him down. With one last look, we left the tomb. It took six of us to lever the stone in place over the tomb face, where we sealed it. It would take a dozen strong men to remove that stone, because I had designed it that way.

Nicodemus and I were ritually unclean because we had touched a dead body. We would not be able to celebrate Passover, but neither of us really cared. Jesus was dead, and our hopes and dreams were shattered. We were no longer secret followers of Jesus, and would likely lose our seats on the Sanhedrin and our places in high society, and may lose much of our wealth. Standing there in our blood-stained robes, they seemed like treasures that no longer had any value.

There were only women left late that afternoon. The afternoon that Jesus died. All of the other followers of Jesus were gone. The male followers. They were afraid of the Jewish leaders even though there was no obvious threat against them. We had followed Jesus from Galilee, and were not about to abandon him now.

There were several women there, including Jesus' mother and me. Mary Magdalene. I had followed Jesus faithfully since he had cast seven spirits out of me.

We were exhausted both mentally and physically. We only had a few hours' sleep the previous night, because the men woke us up after Jesus had been taken by the Jewish leaders. We stayed outside while Jesus was tried before the high priest, before the Sanhedrin, and before Pilate and Herod. We tried to quiet the crowds stirred up by the Jewish leaders, but our pleas had no effect. We were a devoted group. But a group of *women*. (her tone will convey)

We watched the bloodied Jesus carry his cross a short way before Simon of Cyrene had to help him. We followed as close as possible while the soldiers led him to Golgotha, laid him on the cross, and beat the nails into his hand and feet. Shudderingly, we clustered together, when the cross dropped into the hole in the ground.

We listened to the two thieves on the other crosses berate Jesus, though one later changed his ways. Earlier, Mary the mother of Jesus, got a new son, when Jesus entrusted her to John. He had come by. Briefly. We heard Jesus say a few things through his clenched teeth and heaving lungs, saw him get speared by the soldier. We watched his dead body get carried off by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. We followed them to the tomb, saw them place the body in the tomb, and waited until the stone was levered into place.¹ It was over.

We should have gone back into town to get ready to celebrate Passover. We women—we had to prepare, but Jewish rituals were abhorrent to us at this moment. Together, we sat in the darkness across from the tomb, and prayed. Unlike the disciples...the men, we were able to stay awake and pray.

Allow me to let you in on a little secret. During that whole ordeal, none of us, including Jesus' mother, wailed or cried like Jewish women typically did at the death of a loved one. We had full confidence that Jesus would make things right, as he had always done. We didn't know how or

¹ Matthew 27:61

when, but we knew he would. It's why we stayed, while the men abandoned Jesus. They did not yet have full faith in Jesus. We....had no other options.

The next day, Saturday, we rested and tried to celebrate the Passover as best we could. Against the rules of the Pharisees, I went around the city and gathered the things that would be needed to prepare the body of Jesus for final burial. It proved difficult because nobody wanted to work or sell things on the Sabbath, but I was very persuasive. I knew that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had done their best, but neither of them had ever prepared a body for burial. That type of work was typically reserved for women.

I heard that soldiers had arrived to further secure the tomb. The Jewish leaders were worried that the disciples would steal the body and claim Jesus was resurrected, so they convinced Pilate to make sure that didn't happen. He instructed them to take a guard, seal the tomb, and post soldiers to make sure nothing happened.

Before dawn, on Sunday, I gathered my things, and headed to the tomb with several other women.² We left quietly so as not to wake the other women. I didn't have a clue how to roll back the stone, but the Holy Spirit urged me to go anyway. We arrived just as light was breaking. I was sure nothing worse could happen than what had already happened. That's when the violent earthquake hit. Mary and I went to our knees.

We saw a streak of light, blinding light, and an angel. An angel appeared before the tomb.³ It was giant, and wore clothes as white as snow. With a flick of its finger, the stone in front of the tomb was rolled back. The guards at the tomb fainted! They were petrified with fear, it was like they were dead!!

The angel said to us, "Do not be afraid." We knew then that this was a true angel, because that's what they often say when meeting humans. "He is not here, he has risen, as he said. Come and see the place where the Lord lay." We stumbled into the tomb and saw the grave clothes laying there ... but no body! The tomb had no body in it!

The angel continued, "Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead and is going to Galilee. There you will see him." If you ever talk to an angel, you will obey him immediately, just as we did. Stepping over the soldiers, we rushed to tell the disciples. The angel entrusted women to take the news of Jesus' resurrection! Can you believe it?

The soldiers had recovered sufficiently, while we went to the disciples, they went to the Jewish officials. The Jewish leaders bribed the soldiers to tell everyone that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus. Nobody needed an eyewitness like me to tell them the untruth in that

² Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1

³ Matthew 28

statement. The soldiers would have been executed if such a thing had happened, and everyone knew it. Their very lives were a testimony to the resurrection of Jesus.

We got to the disciples. They could not believe our news.⁴ Peter ran to the tomb to find out, but he was outrun by the younger John. John arrived, peeked in the cave and saw the grave clothes laying in a heap as if a body just dematerialized through them. Peter came panting up and rushed by John into the tomb. He not only saw the grave clothes on the ground, but saw the headpiece folded up. That is when he believed. No soldier would have taken the time to fold it.

Peter and John returned to the disciples and gave them the incredible news. The body of Jesus was gone!

What happened to me? I went back to the tomb to pray. As I stood outside praying and crying, I bent over to look in the tomb, and saw two angels seated where Jesus' body had been. They asked why I was crying. I was incredulous at their question. "They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they put him?"

There was a noise, I turned. It was the gardener. I asked him where he had put the body, if indeed he had moved it. Then, one word changed everything. One word announced a change in the entire course of history. That one word was...my name.

"Mary." It was Jesus! I rushed to hold him. I never wanted for him to leave me again. He told me not to hold on, but to go tell the others, which I did.

Jesus had indeed risen! Jesus was ALIVE!

I went back to tell all the others, including the women, but honestly, I did not really expect any of them to believe me. But...not long after that, Jesus appeared to Peter, and then to the rest of the apostles.⁵ He eventually appeared to over 500 believers.⁶ Like the teacher he always was, Jesus opened their eyes to the meaning of the Scriptures they had read their entire lives. He proved to them he was the Messiah.

Based on what you know about me, you can probably guess what I did next. I went back to Galilee with the rest of the disciples, and got to spend the next several weeks around them and the Lord Jesus.

Maybe you're wondering about something. The same thing I used to wonder about. Why did Jesus pick me, a woman, a woman formerly possessed with seven demons, to be the first person to know about his resurrection? Why me?

⁴ Luke 24:11

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:5

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:6

Consider this instead: Why has he chosen you to know about him? Why do you get to have a Bible and hear the Gospel story? Why do you get to see him through the lives of his followers? Why do you get to know the same thing that I know? He is alive! Jesus... is... alive!