

VOICES OF EASTER

Peter

I can't bear to look, I daren't look into his eyes after all that terrible business last night. I feel ashamed- and afraid- what went wrong?

I feel terrible that I can't be there close to him like his mother, the women and John, after all it must be breaking Mary's heart, seeing her firstborn dying slowly, bit by bit.

I couldn't understand what he meant last night when he gave us the bread and wine, telling us it was his body and blood...it was a good Passover meal, but there was a sense of foreboding as he said these strange things.

Then he spoke of a betrayal and sent Judas off to do whatever he had to do, and afterwards took us into the Garden of Gethsemane, where I promptly fell asleep, just when Jesus seemed to need the company of his friends, as he prayed agonisingly to his Father, who didn't seem to be taking much notice. He told me he had prayed for me, that I, Peter, would be strong, but that even so I would deny him...3 times before the cock crowed I had said this would NEVER happen...but it did.

I thought I was being brave, somehow I would be able to rescue him as I followed the thugs who had arrested him. True, I kept in the shadows as I didn't want to be seen, but at least I went. Then, all it took was a young servant girl who recognised me as one of his followers and I said I didn't know the man, it was the same with the next person who came up, and the third, though by this time I was swearing, us fishermen have a good line in that, believe me.....I'll never forget the sound of that cock crowing in the dark, it went deep into my soul and will never leave it.

I didn't care anymore, I was beyond it, I simply fled out into the night, weeping bitterly, not caring who saw or heard me.

Now we are waiting, in grief and anguish, our hopes shattered, not wanting Jesus to die, but not wanting his pain to last any longer. I watch from afar, hidden, because I can't face seeing him in this state. Where his mother and the other women get their strength from I don't know. I hear the voices raised in derision taunting Jesus "if you are the Son of God come down from the cross and we will believe you".

There were 2 other men, violent bandits, being crucified with Jesus, one each side, like a disreputable guard of honour. One of them joined in the mocking, I suppose he felt he had nothing to lose "rescue yourself, if you are the Son of God, and while you're at it save us too!!!!" I wonder what the other bandit saw in Jesus? This one reprimanded his partner in crime saying "this man is innocent, we are justly condemned, but this man has done nothing wrong"...then he must have turned to Jesus as he said in a quieter voice "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom" And Jesus, replied, with some effort, "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise".

It didn't take as long for Jesus to die as it did for his companions, but it was quite long enough after all the brutal treatment he'd had, and being kept up all night, subjected to aggressive questioning.

As darkness fell over the land I crept a little nearer so I could hear what was going on...and out of the darkness came Jesus' voice very loudly "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" there was nothing any of us could do, to support Jesus at this moment when even his Father seemed a lifetime or more away. Had God turned away? Had God deserted the Son who had shown us what the love of the Father is like? Silence, coldness, thick, black darkness...Then the ground lurched, the ground shook, people cried out in terror and anguish, and animals shivered. In the silence that followed Jesus gave a loud cry "Father into your hands I commend my spirit".

Later someone told me that the curtain in the Temple had been torn in two.

Well, that's it, I have to live the rest of my life knowing that I let Jesus down at the worst point of his life, that I denied him...and that all our hopes for his kingdom are nothing.

The women received the body, once the Centurion had declared him dead. Despite their grief and pain they showed far more courage than I as they took his body to the new tomb in

Joseph's garden.

Well, what now, what is there now?

The Centurion

I can't say I have any regrets that my tour of duty in Palestine has been cut short...there's been some funny business going on between this High Priest chap and Pilate....some sort of cover up I think.

I guess you might want to know what all this is about?

Well, it was going to be a normal routine Roman style crucifixion, not very pretty.... knock them about a bit, let the soldiers have a bit of fun at the criminal's expense. But there seemed to be an urgency about this one, something to do with the Jewish Passover...and it couldn't be allowed to wait until after. The Priests were worried about some sort of riot or disturbance and we all know Pilate doesn't like that sort of thing.

When I saw this man he looked exhausted already, bruised, bloody and knocked about. Someone had even plaited a crown out of spiny thorns and jammed it on his brow. He was quiet and staggering with exhaustion...my men had to pressgang a passer by, a foreigner, to carry his cross.

Once at the Place of the Skull I gave the order to nail him to the cross. The soldiers did their job efficiently and none too gently...there really is no way of doing it any other way. As they did so, the man PRAYED "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing".

Once on the cross, all we had to do was stay on guard and wait for the inevitable to take place... A bit of crowd control and reporting when they were finally out of their misery.

There were three of them under sentence, this man Jesus of Nazareth and two violent robbers...they obviously had it coming to them, but I couldn't work out this Jesus, the charge sheet we had to put on the cross...Pilate was most insistent, read "Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews". Unusually, and this seldom happens, he had his mother and some other women and a follower or two, who stayed with him all the time, and I let them be without harassment, though my men would have tried it on if I'd given them half a chance.

Minutes and hours crept by, one of the dying robbers asked Jesus "Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom" to which Jesus replied "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise". This, I thought was a very odd conversation for convicted criminals to be having, what was going on? Could this man on the cross really be some sort of king??

Suddenly it became chilly and dark, an eclipse maybe, birds stopped singing, there was an earthquake and I was told that the curtain in the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Then, and I don't know where he got his strength from Jesus called out in a loud voice "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" and died.

There was something about this....but from somewhere deep in my mind I had a growing conviction that there was something real about this man's God.....I found my self praising this God who I didn't know, despite the whole thing looking like a defeat and before I knew anything else I *knew* and I spoke out, "certainly this man was innocent". I can only guess at what anyone overhearing me would think.

I released Jesus' body to his mother and friends, we finished off the other two, and I went my way, into an unknown future, knowing that my life could never be the same again.

Mary of Magdala

I can't quite believe it...no, NOT the resurrection of Jesus, no problem there. I *know* and believe that...but that Jesus sent *me*, to tell the others he was alive, he was quite definite about it "go to my brothers and tell them...." I am awed that he chose me to announce the Good News to them all. Why me?

What a terrible, yet wonderful few days we've just been through...well I guess you want to know what I'm on about.

It all started when Jesus came into Jerusalem on a donkey....and was hailed as king, how the crowds loved him then. But the Temple authorities, chief priests didn't. Pilate was, I think, out of his depth, he didn't seem to have a clue what was going on, though to be fair to him, I think he thought Jesus was innocent....he did try to get him released, sort of.

Anyway, I know you know all about the crooked trial, the false witnesses, the dodgy political goings on, so I'll take you to the Friday afternoon. All the fight had left the disciples, they were running scared. Peter was in a desperate state. Around the cross were us women - 3 Maries including his mother, and the disciple John.

Once Jesus was dead, the Centurion let us take Jesus' body for burial in the garden that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea nearby. I often wonder about that Centurion after what he said, when Jesus finally died...did he become one of us?? But that's to jump ahead of things.

Weeping, we placed Jesus' exhausted and wounded body in the tomb, we tried to clean it up as best we could and added spices to the burial wrappings but we had so little time because it was the eve of the Sabbath. So we left.

It was a subdued Sabbath, no one's heart seemed really in it at all. The remembrance of God's great saving deeds seemed very much in the past and had a hollow ring to them now.

We began to wonder how life would be for us all now, would *they* now come for us, could we ever return to our previous lives? I know I never could, given that I had been delivered from severe mental illness, by Jesus himself and returning to my old lifestyle was not an option. What did our futures hold. Was all the goodness, love, wisdom and compassion of Jesus to be forgotten?

I went to bed early that Saturday night, as I was determined to get up early next day and go to Jesus' tomb before daybreak.

So....early, well before daylight as I didn't want to be seen, I crept out of bed, barefoot, so as not to disturb anyone. It was still dark, Jerusalem was a sleeping city, not even a sparrow could be heard and they make plenty of chirrups once they wake up. I stole out of the house, putting on my sandals as I went.

Still dark.....rather chilly still too. I shivered as I drew near to his tomb....I approached it slowly...and looked. The horror! The stone, several tons of it, had been rolled away. If there's one thing worse than expecting to find a body, believe me, the absence of one is far worse....

All caution to the winds. I ran back to the house and once I'd recovered my breath, gasped out that Jesus was missing from the tomb and that the stone had been rolled away. Peter and John leapt up, and charged straight up there to see what was going on. I followed at a slower pace. They found it, just as I had told them, and they saw the neatly folded grave cloths, but no Jesus. In a mixture of emotion the two returned to the house. John, I think had some inkling, he "believed" though what exactly he believed I don't think even he knew at that stage....

I stayed up at the tomb, weeping. It was still not light, though by now some of the birds were waking up, and I could see more. I peered into the tomb and noticed some light....and two men in white sitting there where the body should have been. One of them asked me "woman, why are you weeping?" Fortunately I remembered my manners, though I would have thought it was pretty obvious why I was.... "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him". I turned to look outside and another man, a gardener perhaps, spoke to me, asking the same question, adding "for whom are you looking?" "Sir, If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, so I may take him away".

Then in a moment like the dawn of the first creation, the dawn of a new hope, the dawn of a new creation, the man said one word "Mary". My heart leapt for joy, fear, and darkness fled and I exclaimed "Teacher!" and fell to my knees. He *is* alive. "Go to my brothers and tell them".

As I walked back rejoicing I noticed the morning light and the birds were awake now.

Our lives will never be the same again..

Thomas

Well, I've always had a reputation for straight talking and bringing a touch of reality to some of their more far fetched ideas. Well someone has to sometimes.

Of course I was as saddened by the end of our hopes for God's kingdom and maybe as keen on kicking out of the Romans as the next man, when they got Jesus and crucified him.

Afterwards, there didn't seem much point in hanging around Jerusalem any more, after all we were possibly at risk too. So I started to make plans to return home to my old life. I was out, getting a few things together.

On my return I was greeted by a chaotic hubbub "he's alive" He's risen from the dead" "Mary has seen him" "We have seen him" "He just turned up in this very room".

Well, I didn't know what they were on about, but it all seemed total fantasy to me...how can someone rise from the dead....and we all know he was really dead. They needed some reality here and I was going to give it them.

"Look, this sort of thing doesn't, can't happen....do you *really* expect me to believe all this???? Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side I will *not* believe".

How these words came back to haunt me a week later. We were all together in the house, the doors were shut. I know this because we were being *very* careful now, and I'd shut them. And I don't know how it happened, but one moment he wasn't there and the next moment he was...it was his familiar voice as he greeted us "peace be with you".

He looked straight at me, he always seemed to know what you'd said, or what you were thinking....even when he wasn't there....and this was no exception. "Thomas, see my hands, touch them, reach out and put your hand in my side".

I can't begin to describe how I felt, words seem inadequate. I fell to my knees in front of him "my Lord and my God!", and I meant it. My demands for proof seemed so completely irrelevant now. Like the other disciples I now knew. Jesus was alive, we'd seen him, we had to tell the world and he had work for us all, even me. Though I am still sometimes named Thomas the Doubter, I have my work to do, because those who don't see Jesus as we have been able to, some, perhaps many years in the future can learn something from my story. Maybe my boneheadedness will help others to come to faith in the risen Lord Jesus.

Alleluia, the Lord is Risen

He is Risen indeed Alleluia