

27 August 2023

Luke's Good News

Luke 22-24

Luke sits at his desk.

My dear Theophilus,

In my last letter, I talked about Jesus' week of confrontations in Jerusalem, ending with his Passover meal with his friends. As you'll recall, at that dinner, he told them that one of the twelve would betray him – which led to an argument over which one of them was the most loyal, the *best* disciple, the greatest among them.

Anyway, they were still buzzing about that amongst themselves as the meal ended and they rose to follow Jesus to the Mount of Olives, where he meant to spend the night in prayer. In fact, so preoccupied were they that they didn't even notice that one of the twelve was no longer with them. The absent one was named Judas Iscariot. Simon Peter pressed close to Jesus as they walked, saying, "Seriously, Lord. You know that I'm not going to betray you."

"Really?" Jesus said. "What if I told you that before this night is over you would deny three times that you even know me?"

"I'd say you were wrong!"

"I see," Jesus said, as they arrived at the garden. He turned to all his friends, "I'm going off alone to pray. You stay here. Keep watch, will you?"

Though he did go off alone, someone must have been listening, because one of the books I consulted gives details. Jesus prayed, "Abba, Father, do I really have to do this? I don't want to drink this cup that awaits me. Is there any other way?" But the Father doesn't always answer prayers – not even from the Son, apparently – because in the end Jesus sighed and said, "All right, your will be done. Not mine." Then he rose and returned to his friends at their watch post. They had fallen asleep, and a crowd of temple guards was approaching, with Judas at the head.

He walked over to Jesus and kissed him on the cheek. "Good evening, master."

"Did you have to make that the sign for your betrayal, Judas? A kiss?"

The next few moments were chaos. The soldiers moved forward to arrest the one that Judas had identified, while Jesus' friends – wakened from their sleep – jumped up in alarm, shouting instructions to each other that no one listened to. One even grabbed a sword and, waving it erratically, managed to cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus shouted, "Stop that!" He stepped up to the bleeding man and, with a touch, healed the wound. Then he looked at the guards. "You know, I haven't actually been in hiding. I've been in the temple courts every day this week if you wanted to arrest me. But I suppose some deeds will always be done in darkness."

The guards seized him and dragged him away, while the disciples scattered, afraid they would be arrested next. Simon Peter, though, followed at a distance. The guards took Jesus to the house of the chief priest, where the council awaited them. Peter slipped in the gate behind them

and mingled with the house servants, who were warming themselves at a fire in the courtyard. “Say,” a servant girl said, “I know you. You were in the temple with the Galilean.”

“You’re thinking of someone else,” Peter said.

“No,” said another. “I saw you there, too.”

“I *said* I don’t know him!”

A third servant snorted. “Right, and you just happen to have the thickest Galilean accent I’ve ever heard. You think we’re idiots, do you?”

“I don’t know the man!” Peter shouted.

Many years ago, in Rome, I heard Peter himself tell this story. He said that at that moment, Jesus turned and looked at him sadly from inside the house. Peter told this story often. He wanted to make sure that people thought of him not just as the Leader of Christ’s Church, but as the one who denied him in fear. I think this was the moment that made Peter, the moment when he realized he was not the greatest disciple or the greatest anything, but just another screw-up trailing along in Jesus’ wake. He rushed from the courtyard, weeping.

In the high priest’s house, before the council of temple elders, Jesus had his first trial. Well, “trial” may be too grand a name for it, for the result was already decided. The priests started with the sentence: death. That much they already knew. Then they had to figure out the charge to go with it. It couldn’t just be blasphemy, either. They wanted the Romans to do the actual dirty work, so the charge had to be something the Romans would care about. Eventually, the high priest demanded of Jesus, “Are you the Christ?” And Jesus, who had been silent up to that point, said, “Why would I answer that? You wouldn’t believe it anyway.” And that was enough. They made a show of tearing their robes in righteous indignation and bundled him off to the Roman governor, Pilate. The sun was just rising.

Now you know of Pilate’s reputation for brutality, so you know he’d have no problem crucifying another Jew before breakfast, but even he was confused by the charges the priests brought. “Wait, what has he done? I need something to charge him with, and don’t just say he said he was a king. Every second one of you says that. I don’t care where . . . Galilee? Is that where he’s from?” So Pilate tried to get rid of him by sending him to Herod, who had jurisdiction over Galilee. Herod played with him for a while, trying to get a miracle or two out of him, but when Jesus maintained his silence, Herod sent him back to Pilate.

By this time, having been dragged by soldiers all over the city, Jesus was battered and bloody. Pilate scowled at him with distaste. “How about if I just have him beaten? Will that be enough for you?” Of course it wasn’t. “Crucify him? But why? I still haven’t been given a reason!” But the priests stirred up the crowds to chant ever louder for crucifixion. At last, when crucifying him felt like less of a bother than not crucifying him, Pilate handed him over. He was taken out to the place of execution, surrounded by the gawking crowds – some of them weeping, others cheering, and others just there for the show. He was nailed to the cross and set up between two thieves.

I need to tell one story here – none of my written sources include it, but I heard it from one who was there. One of those two thieves, hearing who was on the cross next to him, began jeering at him along with everyone else. “I heard you were the Christ! Well, where’s your army? Tell them to get me down too, will you?” But the other thief shouted out, “Shut up! Leave him alone! We’re here because of what we’ve done! But this man’s done nothing to deserve this! Just

shut up!” Then he looked at Jesus and said, “I’m sorry, sir. Remember me when you come to whatever your kingdom may be.”

Jesus replied, “I won’t have to remember. You’ll be with me.”

I’m not sure I understand all that, nor did the person who told me, but I think it needs to be remembered.

I’ll let you imagine the rest of that day. You’ve seen crucifixions. It was like that. Jesus died a slave’s death, in torment. Through it all he said barely a word, but at the end he returned to the Hebrew scriptures and muttered from the psalms, “Father, into your hand I commend my spirit.” Then he breathed his last and it was done.

Done, but not over. A rich man named Joseph, one of the few members of the council who had *not* voted for Jesus’ death, came and retrieved his body and buried it in his own tomb. None of the disciples knew about this, of course: they were hiding. But three women saw: their names were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary of Nazareth. His mother. They noted the burial place, then went home to prepare burial spices. They couldn’t do anything the next day, because it was the Jewish Sabbath, but on the first day of the week, they rose early. They went to anoint his body and wrap it according to their customs, but they found no body. They looked around the empty for a moment, then returned to the doorway to find two men in dazzling clothes waiting outside. “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” the men asked. “He *told* you he would rise. Now, you go tell the others.”

I know. It’s unbelievable. Incredible. Impossible. And so said the disciples to the women. Gathered to mourn a death, they refused to accept a report of life. But life kept happening. Two of Jesus’ friends – not part of the twelve – left Jerusalem, heading toward a place called Emmaus, and along the way Jesus himself joined them. They didn’t recognize him at first. But then, after walking with him for hours, listening to him explain how the prophets had foretold that the Christ would suffer, their eyes were finally opened. They raced back to Jerusalem to tell the others, only to hear that Jesus had also appeared to Simon Peter. Then he appeared to them all. Jesus was alive – or even something beyond alive. I don’t understand it, either, but I trust it. I have talked to too many of the people who saw him, touched him, and were utterly transformed by his rising.

And this is why I have written you all this, dear Theophilus. Not because I wanted you to hear Jesus’ teachings – though they are well worth hearing – but because Jesus himself is more than that. He changed everything. By dying, he transformed death into a mere threshold to step over. By rising, he transformed life, beginning now and ending never. This I believe to my core. I can imagine your face, can just see the incredulity on it, and I freely admit that what I have just said is, as my friend Paul would say, “foolishness.” It is nonsense, and yet it is the nonsense that brings meaning to everything else. It is my daily prayer that you too will grow as foolish as I.

Your friend, Luke.

P.S. I hope, Theophilus, that you’ve saved all my letters. I might want to go back and work them into a book sometime. In fact, I even have an idea for a sequel. I’ll let you know if I decide to try. Luke.