

Thoughts on Holy Week and Easter



By Michelle Ule

Easter 2020

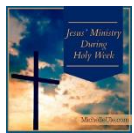
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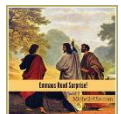
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This collection of essays reflecting on Jesus' ministry in the last weeks of his life were originally blog posts written by Michelle Ule on her website:

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Am I a Pharisee?



Jesus and the Pharisees by Gustave Doré (Wikimedia Commons)

Am I a Pharisee like those Jewish scholars in the Gospels?

Sometimes I can see where they're coming from when they challenge Jesus again and again in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John's books of the New Testament.

Not all the time; but they're such splendid targets to disdain.

Except when their misunderstandings and words echo in my heart and life.

Then I cringe—and ask God to forgive me!

What's a Pharisee?

The word means “set apart, separated,” and indicates a Jewish scholar (always a man) during the “second Temple,” period in Jerusalem.

Most of us are familiar with the term because Pharisees were frequent sparring partners of Jesus.

It was an unfair match since Jesus could read the true attitude of their heart and—in his love for them—never let them off the hook.

He called them again and again back to the Old Testament stories and Scriptures they loved—and which they examined for jots and tittles—because they so much wanted to be right.

Distinguished by their love of learning and commitment to the law of Moses, the Pharisees looked for the coming of the Messiah.



Woe unto You, Scribes and Pharisees by James Tissot (Wikipedia Commons)

They were the acknowledged experts on when he would come and how they would know it was him.

It was all laid out, passages like Isaiah 53 and Psalm 69, along with a host of others. (See the list of 40 fulfilled messianic prophecies here).

Unfortunately, despite their years spent examining the Torah, they didn't recognize him when he walked about them and fulfilled the law they purported to love.

The attitude of the heart.

God (Jesus/Holy Spirit) looked at the attitude of the heart when He dealt with the Pharisees.

He examined my heart attitude today as well.

They loved God, as do I.

They wanted to serve God, as do I.



Pharisees accusing Jesus (Wikipedia Commons)

They wanted to ensure true religion was being proclaimed—which is why they grilled Jesus time and again throughout all four Gospels.

I understand that desire—which is why I spend my time studying the Bible.

But unlike them, I focus on several points, including a passage out of their Scripture from Micah 6:8—a passage they would have known:

*He has shown you, O man, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justly,
To love mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God?*

Unfortunately, they were not humble, they did not show mercy and while they may have been better than some, their desire for position, power, and honor meant they did not always behave toward their fellow Jews, much less the Gentiles, in a just fashion.

I try very hard not to be like the Pharisees in this department.

I'm also, of course, responsible for applying this one—a direction they rejected—from Jesus:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”

Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.’ (Matthew 22:36-40; NKJV)

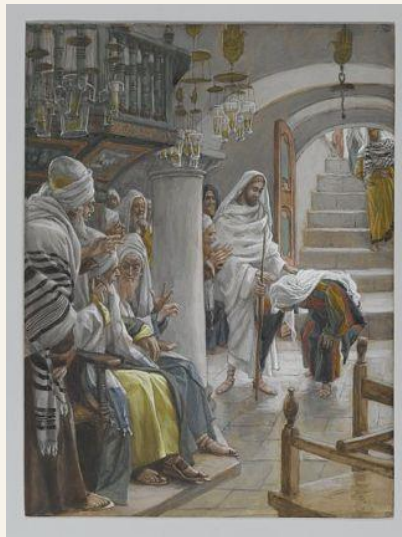
Asking questions, to make sure

I give them points for at least asking Jesus to clarify—because that’s where I often find myself.

God, himself, tells us “come now, let us reason together.” He’s not expecting blind faith.

But, when Jesus, time and again, demonstrated his Messiah-characteristics—healing the sick, bringing people back to life, knowing the truth of their hearts—they were given plenty of opportunities to recognize him.

How much did he need to show them, so they could recognize who Jesus really was?



Jesus heals a woman and they choose not to rejoice. James Tissot (Wikipedia Commons)

The Pharisees blinded their eyes, they chose not to see. Believing Jesus as the Messiah would take away their power, their status, and their authority.

They loved “the things of the world” more than they wanted to worship the Messiah.

I've asked questions like theirs, myself.

Time and again, Jesus/God/Holy Spirit has reached out to me, shown Himself for Who He is, and encouraged my oft-times fledgling faith.

How many blessings and examples of His goodness do I need?

Thanks be to God that when I behave like a Pharisee, something happens in my heart.

I get a check, a question, a gentle chide of remembrance of all the ways God has answered my questions in the past.

How can I possibly deny the Messiah?

How could they?

A love that never ends

Pride pushed a Pharisee to his decision two thousand years ago.

But Jesus kept reaching out, beckoning all the Pharisees and scribes to set aside their preconceived notions and open their eyes—all they had to do was follow Him.

My pride sometimes struggles, too.

But then I remember just who Jesus focused on during his last week on earth.

His followers stayed with him, even those who wandered off (think Peter) eventually came back.

Jesus appealed to the scribes and the Pharisees, all the way to the end.

He loved them so much, he took their blindness and sinful pride to the cross, where he died on their behalf—and mine as well.

The result?

Some of the Pharisees in Jerusalem at that time recognized their Messiah. You can read about a number of them in the book of Acts, starting with Gamaliel— a teacher of the Apostle Paul, who was a Pharisee himself.

Acts 6 and Acts 15 also refer to believers who were Pharisees.

There's always time for a repentant person to recognize and be accepted by the Messiah.

I'm so glad some of them, like me, laid down their pride.

Am I a Pharisee?

Anytime I decide not to love and not to believe Jesus, I adopt the attitude of a Pharisee.

Fortunately, Jesus' death on the cross provides a way for me to love justice, mercy, humility and those around me.

Even the most hardened Pharisee among us can do the very same.

Thanks be to God.

Why Raise Lazarus from the Dead?



Rembrandt's depiction (Wikimedia Commons)

Why did Jesus raise Lazarus of Bethany from the dead?

The story has come up in my life three times this week and since this is about the time it happened nearly two thousand years ago, I thought it worth examining.

You probably know the story (found in John 11): Jesus and his disciples were out on the eastern side of the Jordan River, when Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha sent word Lazarus, "he whom you, love is sick."

What's the hurry?

Jesus got the message, telling those with him,

"This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

They lingered for several days. On the third day, Jesus told his disciples it was time to go back to Judea.

They protested, the Pharisees had threatened to stone Jesus if he returned to the area around Jerusalem–Bethany was nearby, basically the suburbs. Jesus explained, “*Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.*”

That made no sense to his disciples who argued if the man was asleep, he’d get better.

Jesus looked them square in the eye:

“*Lazarus is dead. I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe.*”

Off they went, with the men now wondering 1. how Jesus knew Lazarus was dead, 2. what good it would do, then, to go to Judea and 3. would they all be stoned to death?

What happened to Lazarus?

By the time they got to Bethany, Lazarus had been dead and in the tomb four days.



By Nicolas Froment (Wikimedia Commons)

His sisters and other mourners were sitting *Shiva*, still wearing the mourning clothes they tore when they heard the news of his death.

(Jesus knew Lazarus was dead, but did not tear his clothing, even though he loved him because . . . “the sickness was not unto death.” Pity the confused disciples.)

The house was crowded with people including religious authorities who had come down from Jerusalem—probably because they respected Lazarus, or they hoped to catch his close friend Jesus.

Mary and Mary’s reactions to Lazarus’ death

The two sisters were in mourning, but when Martha got the news Jesus was near, she went to greet him, displaying her disappointment with words:

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.”

Jesus: “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

(Note: this is what a devout Jewish woman believed *before* Jesus was resurrected from the dead).

Jesus replied with the Gospel:

“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

Martha did. She left Jesus, returned to the house and whispered in Mary’s ear that Jesus had come.

As typical of Mary, she jumped up and hurried to meet him.

The Jewish mourners standing by were sympathetic, “she is going to the tomb to weep there.”

Not exactly. Mary flung herself at Jesus and chided him— “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Jesus wept for Lazarus

While Jesus wept in sympathy, the religious officials who had followed Mary came upon them and shook their heads.

Several sneered: “Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?”

They thought it a fair question.

Jesus went to the tomb and ordered the stone to be taken away.

Pragmatic Martha argued it would smell—he had been dead four days. Passover was nearly upon them, anyone opening the tomb would be unclean.

Jesus: “Did I not say that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” He thanked God and shouted, “Lazarus, come forth!”

Then what happened?

Basically, a mummy shuffled out of the tomb, arms, legs, body and head bound in woven cloth.

Lazarus would not have been able to walk well.

What would you have thought?

Even if you were a disciple, who by that time should not have been surprised by anything that happened, seeing a figure, four days a corpse, must have been shocking.

If you were a jeering Pharisee whose question had just been answered, you probably would have trouble believing your eyes.

If you were a mourner in black torn clothing, your mouth must have hung open.

And if you were Martha and Mary, seeing a loved brother brought back to life?

The joy would have been overwhelming.

Thank you, Jesus, indeed.

They hurried to unwrap him—and planned a party.

Why did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead?

Because he loved him?

Because Martha and Mary reproached him?

Reexamine what he said to the disciples before he had official word Lazarus had died.

Jesus knew what was happening in Bethany and what he would do.

Lazarus probably was dead by the time Jesus got the message.

But Jesus saw the reason behind the death—that Jesus and God might be glorified in a *public* place.

If the disciples thought about it, they would have remembered Jesus raised people from the dead before—or at least the terribly ill: Peter’s mother-in-law, the ruler’s daughter, the young son of the old widow.

But never before such a large audience of skeptics.

Reaction to the Resurrection

Many of the scoffing Jews who had traveled to Bethany to comfort two mourning sisters, returned home believing in Jesus.

Others scurried back to the Temple to report on what they had seen.

The chief priests and Pharisees—who had not witnessed Lazarus’ return to life—debated about what to do next.

They decided the best course of all, lest Jesus wrest their power away, was to kill him.

I shake my head every time I read that verse. How could they have been so blind?

Did they really think they could kill a man who had just resurrected a man four days in the tomb?

And poor Lazarus. The chief priests also plotted to kill him, simply because he had been resurrected. (John 12: 9-11)

Why Raise Lazarus from the Dead?

1. Jesus would be glorified.
2. Demonstrate God's power over death.
3. A loved brother restored to his sisters.
4. To draw the wavering Jews into the Kingdom of God
5. Set the stage for Passover in Jerusalem—where Jesus himself would die and be resurrected.

Lazarus, of course, died eventually like we all will. But he's alive with Jesus in Heaven today.

Jesus' Ministry During Holy Week



Jesus' ministry during the final week of his life was directed at one group of people.

Can you think which group it was?

Here's a hint: He didn't come to condemn them; He came to save the world. (John 3:17)

Jesus' ministry to those who hated him.

A close examination of that final week in Jesus' ministry shows a particular interest in reaching the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

But he came to save the lost?

Who was more lost than those who studied scripture their whole lives yet missed the Messiah?

Oh, sure, Jesus spoke to other Jews and Gentiles—anyone within hearing distance, but he paid close attention to the learned.

They were blind—deliberately in many cases—but Jesus wanted them in heaven.

Jesus did not ignore those who persecuted Him. He engaged them. Here’s a breakdown:

Palm Sunday

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the crowd went wild, laying clothes and palm branches before his donkey.

“And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, “Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.”

” But He answered and said to them, “I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out.”” (Luke 19:39-40 NKJV)

Why did the Pharisees want the disciples rebuked?

They didn’t like how Jesus—who had raised Lazarus from the dead not a few days before—looked like a conquering king coming to lay claim to their power, particularly at the Temple.

The high priest had declared Jesus should die for the good of the Jews (or at least those in power).



Entry of the Christ in Jerusalem by Jean-Léon Gérôme (Wikimedia Commons)

The Pharisees wanted to quash any enthusiasm for Jesus’ ministry.

Monday

Upon Jesus' return Monday morning, he went straight to the Temple. It was Passover week and visitors jammed the city.

Once there,

“The blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ they were indignant and said to Him, ‘Do You hear what these are saying?’”

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Yes. Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants/ You have perfected praise’?”(Matthew 21:14-17)

Displaying his healing powers on Temple grounds pointed to the inability of the high priest and his associates to do the same.

They didn't like being shown up, much less, hearing shouts of praise. (Think of King Saul watching David enter Jerusalem to shouts of praise),

Outraged by the money changers with Temple walls, Jesus' ministry also involved clearing them out and not allowing anyone to bring back saleable items.

He'd done it before, but this time, indignation ruled the Temple authorities. Jesus' ministry went right to the point, their disdain for God's house.

Jesus called them on their poor spiritual leadership (which was always His complaint against them):

“Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’”

“And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching.”

(Mark 11:16-18)



Jesus casting out money changers from the Temple by Giotto (Wikimedia Commons)

It may seem harsh, but what else could Jesus do to provoke their attention?

Until the Temple authorities were willing to acknowledge responsibility for not honoring God, how could they change?

Remember, they were planning to kill Jesus.

But he kept coming back to confront them with the truth about their hearts.

Tuesday

Authorities awaited Jesus at the Temple.

They demand to know by whose authority Jesus cleared the Temple.

“If you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?”

“And they reasoned among themselves, saying, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.” So, they answered Jesus and said, “We do not know.”

“And He said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” (Matthew 21: 24-27)

Jesus spent considerable time afterward telling parables. He wanted those with eyes to see the truth and to give one more chance to those determined to be blind.

His parables were pointed: the two sons, the vinedressers in the vineyard, the parable of the wedding feast. He also answered questions the leaders designed to trip him.

Jesus' answers enraged them.



The Pharisees Question Jesus (James Tissot, Wikimedia Commons)

Jesus then turned the tables and spoke from his heart, in Matthew 23:37-39:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

He longed to gather them into the Kingdom of God, but they rejected him.

They had hardened their hearts and Jesus' ministry to them—his attempt to draw them to the authentic Messiah standing before them—had failed with some, but not with all.

Wednesday

On Wednesday, Jesus remained with his disciples in nearby Bethany.

The Temple authorities sought out Judas and arranged to kill Jesus.

Jesus knew but did nothing to stop their actions.

Thursday

The Last Supper occurred on this day.



Plate 18, the Macklin Bible after Loutherboung. Bowyer Bible. Arrest of Christ (Wikimedia Commons)

When Judas left to help the Temple authorities in their plot against him, Jesus let the man go. Later that night in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Peter cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant, Jesus healed it.

There in the Garden, Jesus' ministry reached out again:

“But Jesus said to him, “Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?”

"In that hour Jesus said to the multitudes, "Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs to take Me? I sat daily with you, teaching in the temple, and you did not seize Me. But all this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." (Matthew 26: 52-56)

A Pharisee or Sadducee willing to hear what Jesus said, had another opportunity to change.

They had to be willing to look at the scriptures from a different point of view, and then all of Jesus' ministry would become clear.

But they chose not to.

Good Friday

Events of Good Friday are well-known. Notice that when Jesus appeared before the Sanhedrin, he used a term underscoring who he was:

"Again, the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?"

"Jesus said, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14: 61-62)

He engaged them, yet again, but they refused to consider Jesus as the Messiah.

The authorities turned Jesus over to the Romans, who, of course, crucified him.

But even on the cross as the soldiers gambled for his clothes, Jesus appealed to God: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

He forgave the thief on the cross who recognized Jesus as the Messiah.

Who knew what other witnesses thought?

After the Resurrection

Many people became believers at Pentecost and afterward—thousands, and among them were many Pharisees, according to notes in my Lutheran Study Bible.

Acts 6:7 notes many priests ultimately recognized the man they persecuted really was the Messiah.

“Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.”

That last week of reaching out to Pharisees and Sadducees, eventually bore fruit.

Jesus’ ministry to even those who hate him continues to this day.

Some need to recognize the resurrection of the Messiah as truth before they can bow their knees.

All come to God in their own time and way—but even as Jesus demonstrated during his last week on earth—he desires all to be saved.

Easter demonstrates God’s love and is the reason for Jesus’ ministry.

At the Foot of the Cross



Who stood at the foot of the cross that Good Friday so long ago?

A variety of people: Roman guards, a centurion, bystanders, disciples, people who knew Jesus, his mother, his aunt, women followers, and people Jesus loved.

The Son of God didn't die alone.

Passersby, as well.

A variety of people went past Golgotha that day, some stopped at the foot of the cross, others jeered from the road.

Their reactions at seeing Jesus were ugly

“Those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” Matthew 27:39-40 (NKJV)

Scripture doesn't tell us who those people were, but they were not alone in their nastiness.

Jesus spent Holy week reaching out to a specific group of Jews. They were the worst.

The men who claimed to know the Scriptures conspired with the hated Roman government, to have Jesus killed.

Likewise, the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said,

“He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” Matthew 27:41-44 (NKJV)

Jesus tried tough love on men who spent their lives examining the Scriptures.

They refused to seriously consider how Jesus could be the Messiah.

So, they rejected him.

Men crucified alongside Jesus



Jesus' view from the cross by James Tissot (Wikimedia Commons)

Jesus was one of three men crucified on Golgotha that day.

He hung on the cross alongside two robbers.

One shouted: “Why don’t you save us?”

The other criminal reacted:

“But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Luke 23:40-41 (NKJV)

The second criminal understood his guilt. That’s the best spot from which to ask Jesus for eternal salvation.

He said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Luke 23:42-43 (NKJV)

Family at the foot of the cross

“Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene.” John 19:25 (NKJV)

Commentators note women remained the most loyal. His mother Mary, of course, was the one disciple who knew him from the very beginning and stayed with him to the very end.

His disciple John also waited at the foot of the cross, for Jesus recommended his mother Mary into John’s care.

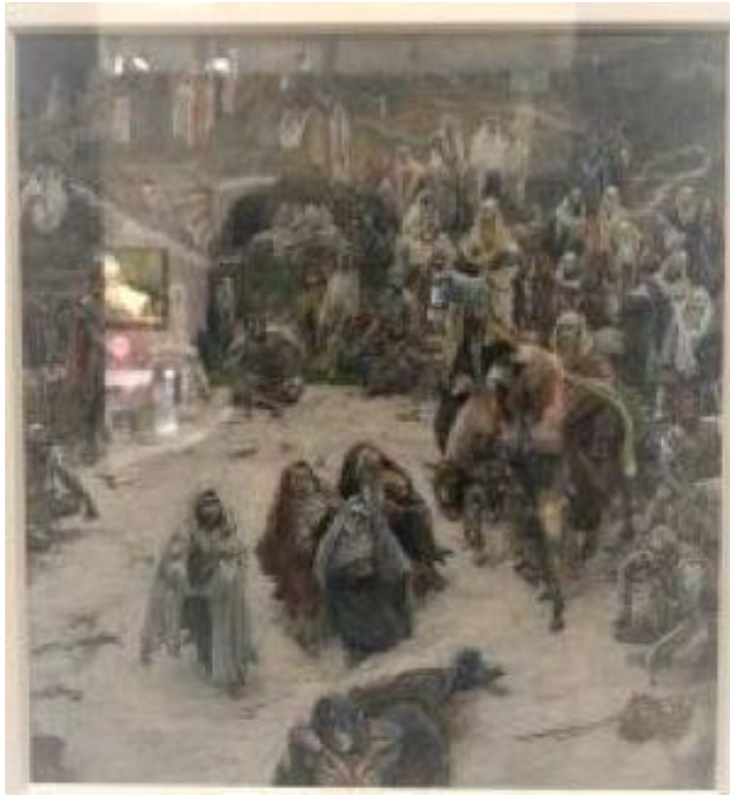
It’s possible, too, that Joseph of Arimathea also attended the crucifixion. As soon as the Roman centurion pronounced Jesus dead, it appears Joseph went to ruling authorities and asked for permission to bury Jesus.

Technically, not at the foot of the cross

Jesus died nearly two thousand years before my birth.

But as a follower, I gained from his death on the cross.

That came home to me in a startling way when I stood before this painting by James Tissot.



*Do you see my shadow in this photograph of
Jesus' View from the Cross?*

My sins were forgiven that day. Thanks be to God.

What Does it Take to Kill Jesus?



Antonio Ciseri's depiction of Pontius Pilate (Wikipedia)

What did the Romans have to do to kill Jesus on Good Friday?

Nothing.

They were pawns in God's hand.

That's not exactly true. They had to play along with Pontius Pilate, who was manipulated by the High Priest Caiaphas and his minions—men who decided it was better that one man should die (Jesus) than they lose power.

At least they thought they had decided that.

In actuality, the events of Jesus' last week on earth were orchestrated according to prophecies made long before. Jesus told his disciples what would happen.

The disciples didn't like hearing Jesus had no plans to be an earthly king and so while they heard what Jesus said ("they will take and kill me and three days later I will be raised from the dead"), they didn't want to believe it.

It's all there in the Bible—prophecies in the Old Testament, Jesus fulfilling them in the New Testament.

For Christians, Good Friday is the major stop in the holy week between Jesus Christ's triumphant entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and his glorious resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday.

Many of us spend "passion week" reviewing Jesus' last days on earth in human form.

There's an interesting story that happened prior to that week that often gets overlooked but which is pertinent.

I shake my head every time I read it.

You remember—Lazarus of Bethany raised from the dead?



Jesus resurrects Lazarus by Karl Isakson (Wikimedia Commons; omkonst.com)

It's such a dramatic moment, and Jesus himself reminds Lazarus' sister Mary that Jesus' delay in getting to Lazarus' sickbed had everything to do with God being glorified.

Jews from Jerusalem had come the seven miles to see what Jesus would do. A large crowd gathered around the tomb—where Lazarus had laid for three days, and decay would have set in.

Jesus ordered the large stone blocking the tomb to be rolled away. People worried about the possible smell, but they moved the stone.

“Lazarus, come forth!” Jesus called.

Lazarus stumbled out. Alive. Raised from the dead.

The Scriptures record a variety of responses to that resurrection. His sisters Mary and Martha were joyful. So was Jesus.

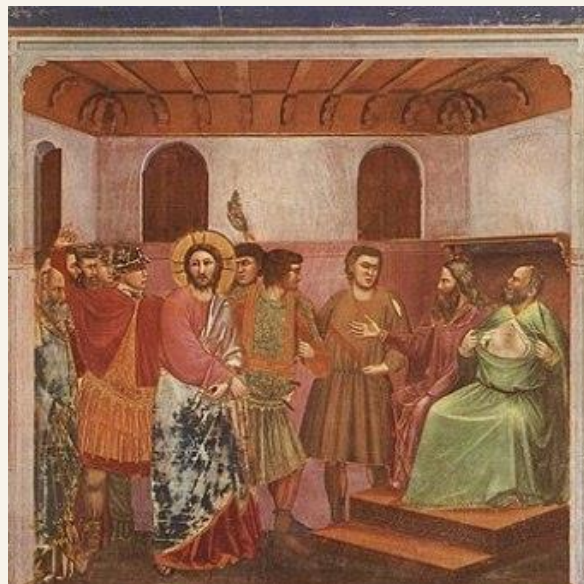
The ruling Jews, however, had a different response. From the text John 11:45:

Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him. But some of them went away to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus did. 47 Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, “What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.”

The High Priest Caiaphas, a crafty politician, had the last word:

“You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.”

From that day on, they plotted to put Him to death.



Giotto's depiction of Jesus before Caiaphas based on Luke 22 (Wikimedia Commons)

I always wonder what they were thinking. They just saw Jesus call a man back to life who had died.

How did they think they would kill Jesus himself if he had such power?

Obviously, the Pharisees weren't thinking.

God sent Jesus to earth to "give himself up to death," for the sins of the world. Christian theology teaches us that he was the "Lamb of God," as John the Baptist pointed out, "come to take away the sins of the world."

I can't explain why God put the world into this order, but this is what he required.

Old Testament prophets foretold Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. Some Bible scholars believe there are more than 300. You can review a list of forty-four of them here.

Jesus came to die. If the Romans hadn't done it, someone else would have. The point is Jesus chose to go through the crucifixion. He could have called those legions of angels down at any moment to save him—but to do so would have negated the reason he was born.

God sent him as savior of the world—Jesus had to die to do that.

Sometimes I feel sorry for the Romans and the Pharisees and High Priest Caiaphas. Even Judas. God used them to accomplish his will.

(Some traditions believe Pontius Pilate and his wife had a happier ending).

Regardless, no one really killed Jesus. Jesus willingly gave himself up to die for us.

The Good Friday Passion of Tenebrae



The Tenebrae service is our favorite service during Lent at our Lutheran church.

From the Latin for shadows or darkness, Tenebrae is an ancient service that underscores the solemnity of Jesus's last day on earth as a man.

The solemn, sober service takes place on Good Friday.

Tenebrae services usually involve candles lit in a darkened church.

As writer Carolyn Weber recounts about Tenebrae, "those of faith will extinguish candles, rather than light them, in a symbolic move toward crucifixion."

At our Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, the pastors wear black robes. The cross is shrouded in dense black, the altar stripped to bare wood from the Maundy Thursday service the night before. Seven lit candles sit on the altar.

The officiant reads passages of Scripture about Jesus and a hymn is sung, as one-by-one the acolyte extinguishes candles until the service ends in total darkness.

We sing the grand hymns of the faith to experience Good Friday's melancholy emotions.

We begin with the haunting spiritual "Were You There when they crucified my Lord."

My soul trembles as we move through a veritable "stations of the cross," to the anguished shutting of the tomb.



Judas' Kiss by Dore (Wikimedia Commons)

The readings and the music

The readings begin with Jesus's experience at the last supper (Matthew 26:20-25), "the Shadow of Betrayal."

We sing Go to Dark Gethsemane:

"all who feel the tempter's power, Your Redeemer's conflict see. Watch with him one bitter hour, Turn not from his griefs away, Learn from Jesus Christ to pray."

The acolyte snuffs out the first candle.

The lack of one candle hardly makes a difference.

The Shadow of Desertion (Matthew 26:30-35) marked Peter’s vow to stay with Jesus no matter what.

“Jesus, I Will Ponder Now on Your holy passion. With your Spirit me endow For such meditation Grant that I in love and faith May the image cherish Of your suffering pain, and death That I may not perish.”

The second candle didn’t change the light either, but as the service intensified, the room felt darker, heavier, grimmer.

The Darkness of Praying Alone (Luke 22: 39-46).

His disciples asleep, Jesus pleaded with his Father to take the cup away—if that was His will. “O Darkest Woe! Tears, overflow! What heavy grief we carry! God the Father’s Only Son In a grave lies buried.”

The acolyte quashes another flame.

Tenebrae grows darker

In **The Shadow of Accusation** (Mark 14: 43-63) Judas led the Roman guards to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and they hauled Jesus to the rulers.

It was noticeably darker in the church now as we sang a hymn like “O Dearest Jesus, What Law Have You Broken?”

Another candle extinguished.



Crucifixion by Dore (Wikimedia Commons)

The Darkness of Crucifixion (Matthew 27: 27-38) reflected on the Son of God hanging on the cross.

Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted described Jesus— “see him dying on the tree.”

Another candle’s death underscores the gravity of Jesus’ death.

The Shadow of Death (Luke 23: 44-49) told of Jesus’ anguished cry of triumphant: “it is finished.”

Bach’s music written 450 years ago underscores the agony: “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded.

After this candle is snuffed, the sanctuary sits in near blackness.

The Darkness of the Tomb (John 19: 38-42) ends the service by marking the moment Jesus was laid in the tomb.

One last candle extinguished ends with Surely He Hath Borne Our Griefs?

The pastors carry out of the church the still lit Christ Candle from the sanctuary to symbolize the death of Christ—Jesus leaving the earth.

After the back door closes softly behind them a dramatic thud rings through the church symbolizes the stone rolled shut on Jesus’s tomb.

Our congregation sings one last song to provide a smidgen of hope: There is a Redeemer.

We’ll exit in silence, trembling from the grim majesty of the service: The Son of God laid in a tomb.

It is finished.

Sin and death reign no more.

But Easter Sunday morn is just around the corner.

Holy Saturday: Now What?



The Watch over the Tomb by James Tissot (Wikimedia Commons)

Every year on “Holy Saturday,” I wonder what Jesus was doing.

We finished Good Friday with a somber Tenebrae service, which usually leaves me silent and reflective.

I know the hallelujahs, white lilies and terrific music of Easter Sunday are coming.

(Along with breaking my annual chocolate fast with . . . plenty).

But Holy Saturday catches me with melancholy surprise, plus lots of cooking.

What happened on Holy Saturday nearly 2000 years ago?

The Romans

At least one Roman centurion had concluded Jesus must have been God.

He may have spent Saturday reviewing what he saw and wondering, “what next?”

Others ran about with Jesus’ ragged clothing, their winnings from a dice game.

Pontius Pilate probably received reports of odd events—the Pharisees in disarray, the unexpected eclipse of the day before and peculiar stories of zombies.



The Chief Priests Take Counsel Together by James Tissot (Wikimedia Commons)

Mrs. Pilate may have walked through the day with a worried frown and bitter glares at her husband for not paying attention to her advice.

Or maybe they were all drunk?

Several soldiers guarded the tomb.

The Pharisees

It was the Sabbath so the Jews laid low.

They had laws about how far they could walk, what they could eat, what they could not do.

Most required them to stay close to home.

But the Pharisee authorities were dealing with a monumental catastrophe.

Forget Jesus, as if they could, what were they going to do about the temple?

The thick curtain separating the holy of holies from the courtyard was torn in half, top to bottom.

God's most sacred spot was exposed to anyone who wanted to look at Him.

What could they do?

They couldn't repair it on the Sabbath, and this one included Passover.

The temple courtyard thronged with worshippers. But even those authorized to enter the temple couldn't be allowed in—what would they say about the curtain?

That sniveling Judas, the cause of all the latest trouble, had killed himself.

“Collect his bribe and toss his carcass in a pauper's grave.” Easy.

At least the man at the heart of their problems, Jesus, was dead.

The Disciples



Two Marys watching at the tomb by James Tissot (Wikimedia Commons)

Joseph of Arimathea and a few others hastily entombed Jesus the late afternoon before—prior to the Sabbath.

As it was the Sabbath, they and the disciples could do nothing but grieve.

Their emotions must have been a scramble that Holy Saturday—how could Jesus, their beloved rabbi, be dead?

They knew to worship the God of Creation.

They would have said their usual prayers, sang songs, remembered God’s mercies and grieved.

When the official worship time concluded and they broke for a meal, they would have told stories about Jesus.

They tried to make sense of what happened and debated what Jesus meant by his statements.

“I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever.” (John 14:16)

“I will not leave you orphans.” (John 14:18)

“A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also.” (John 14:19)

“The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.” (John 14:26)

“Peace I leave with you. . . . Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” (John 14:27)

“You have heard Me say to you, ‘I am going away and coming back to you.’” (John 14:28)

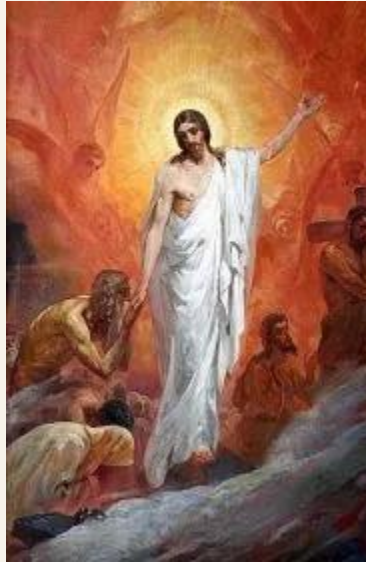
They may not have understood, but they knew to give their anguish and confusion to God.

Perhaps they said the Jewish prayers of the dead for Jesus?

The women followers knew Jesus' body needed to be better prepared and could discuss plans for the next morning.

Mary, Jesus' mother?

Mary long had pondered God's words in her heart. She had lived for 33 years trusting God for the seemingly impossible.



Jesus in Sheol on Holy Saturday by Nikolay Koshelev (Wikimedia Commons)

She undoubtedly waited and pondered on Holy Saturday.

Jesus himself?

The Christian Church had two thoughts on Jesus' Holy Saturday location.

Peter's epistle is the only Scriptural verse:

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient.” (1 Peter 3:18-20)

Theories abound as to what Peter meant.

The “conventional” Christian thought takes us to the Apostle's Creed:

“He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell.”

That’s where I think Jesus was on Holy Saturday, showing himself to those who died in faith long before— those who had longed to see the day God defeated sin.

What was Jesus doing in Sheol, a waiting place for those eventually headed to heaven?

Bringing good news.

Beyond that, I am not wise enough to say more.

God?

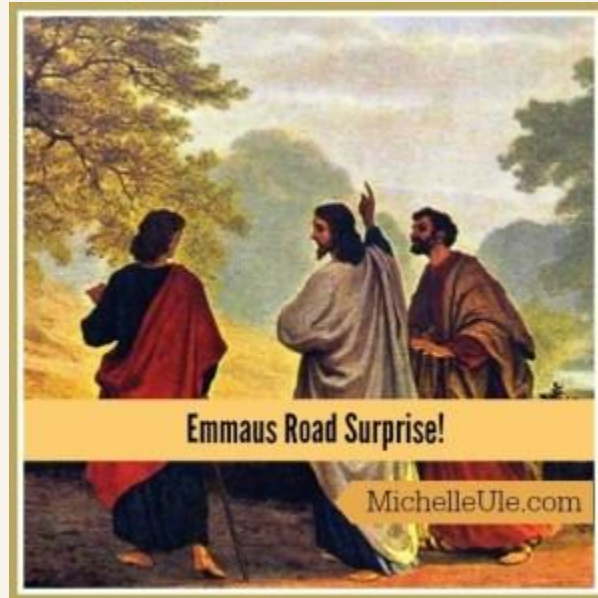
Waiting for glorification the very next day.

The Holy Spirit, of course, was already on His way.

Easter is coming and Jesus will be risen.

The very best news.

Emmaus Road Surprise!



I've always loved the story of the road to Emmaus on Easter Sunday.

The two pilgrims, of course, didn't know it was Easter Sunday—they were just headed seven miles home after celebrating Passover in Jerusalem.

Cleopas is named as one of the pilgrims. Since “Mary, the wife of Cleopas,” stood with Jesus' mother at the foot of the cross on Good Friday, she may have been the other disciple on the road.

They recalled confusing events. Such things they had heard and seen!

Perhaps they had waved branches the previous Sundays when the exciting rabbi Jesus entered Jerusalem?

Certainly, they had spent time with his apostles and were familiar with Jesus' teachings.

But nothing seemed to come from so many people's hopes, so they headed home, talking about what they had seen and heard.

What did it mean?

Incognito on the road to Emmaus

A friendly man they didn't recognize caught up with the travelers before they reached Emmaus and asked about their conversation.

He was curious—what happened in Jerusalem that Passover? Why were they so sad?

(I've always loved this song by Michael Kelly Blanchard about that encounter. You can listen to a short clip [here](#)).

His question startled the pilgrims. How could he not know?

Cleopas asked, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" --Luke 24:18 (NIV)

So, they told him.

"The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death and crucified Him.

But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened.

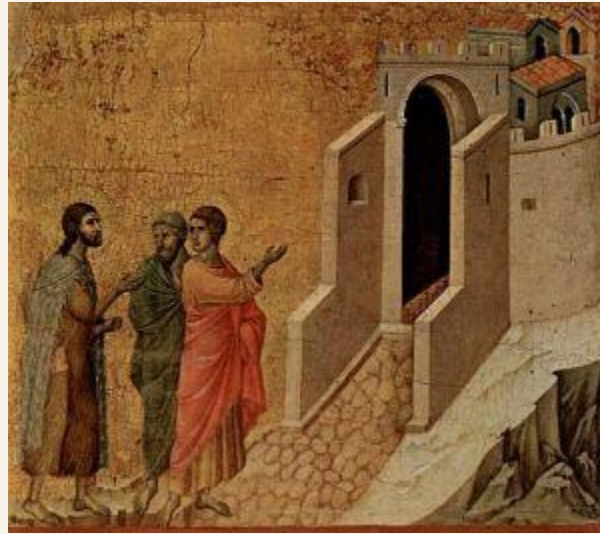
Yes, and certain women of our company, who arrived at the tomb early, astonished us. When they did not find His body, they came saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said He was alive.

And certain of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but Him they did not see." --Luke 24:19-24 (NKJV)

I bet Jesus incognito smiled the entire time.

Jesus in the Old Testament

How do you think God would explain Jesus' 33 years walking the earth?



Duccio di Buoninsegna, Duccio (Wikimedia Commons)

Cleopas and his friend soon found out.

Jesus explained his role throughout the Old Testament.

The men and others like him, including the apostles, assumed Jesus was going to redeem Israel. They thought he'd overthrow Rome.

The Messiah explained otherwise.

In Luke 24: 17-24, Bible teacher David Guzik made a list of what Jesus might have told them about his role in redemption.

Here are just some of the ways Jesus could be found in the Old Testament

- Jesus was the seed of the woman whose heel was bruised.
- High priest after the order of Melchizedek.
- The man who wrestled Jacob.
- The Lion of Judah.
- Passover Lamb.
- A prophet greater than Moses.
- Captain of the Lord's army to Joshua.
- Ruth's ultimate kinsman redeemer.
- Psalm 23's good shepherd.
- Isaiah's suffering servant.

Lists like this abound. Here's another one.

Or, you can read an entire book, like Nancy Guthrie's *The One Year Book of Discovering Jesus in the Old Testament*.

In Emmaus

Imagine what this was like for the two pilgrims. A stranger approached them between Jerusalem and Emmaus and explained exactly what they'd wondered about.

When they reached home, their fascination continued. "Would this stranger join them for dinner?"

Middle Eastern hospitality may have played a role in their dinner invitation, but, really, they wanted to hear more from this obviously learned rabbi.

Recognizing the rabbi's spiritual authority, Cleopas may have indicated Jesus should say the pre-meal blessing.



I love how surprised the men are while the cat chooses this moment to steal a fish! Painting by Phillippe de Champaigne; Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent, Belgium (Wikimedia Commons)

Jesus broke the bread, blessed it and served the men.

At that moment, everything changed.

They recognized the Messiah.

Before their eyes, Jesus vanished.

“Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?” --Luke 24: 32 NKJV

They weren't tired anymore. They rose and hurried back to Jerusalem. Someone needed to let the disciples know Jesus was alive!

Now what?

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, Jesus' apostles had experienced an extraordinary day.

Nothing was clear except that Jesus was not in his tomb.

The disciples had first fielded a bewildering excitement in the women who had gone to dress the body.

Then Peter and John raced to the tomb where an angel questioned them:

“Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here but is risen!” --Luke 24:5-6 NKJV

John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, understood immediately. It took longer for Peter— who spent his time marveling at the words.



Photo: Andreas Praefcke [Public domain]

That night, two men broke into their gathering with breathtaking information. They had seen and spoken with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus!

Before the shocked disciples could begin to process or discuss this information, Jesus himself appeared among them.

He showed them his hands and feet.

Had the Emmaus pilgrims not noticed those facts earlier in the evening?

No matter. They, and everyone else, believed from that moment on, in Thomas's declaration: "My Lord and my God!"

Have you had a road to Emmaus moment?

Thanks be to God that Jesus is risen, indeed!
A blessed Holy Week and Easter Sunday morn.