

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Hebrews 10:16-25

John 18:1-19:42

Psalm 22

My name is Miriam. I come from the little village of Gadara. It's not too far from Gallilee. It's a pretty long walk from there to here in Jerusalem, but I don't mind. I've been walking for a long time. I ended up in Jerusalem just in time for Passover because I've been travelling with a group of people who have been following Jesus and they wanted to be in Jerusalem for Passover.

Let me tell you a little bit about Jesus and these folks that I am travelling with. I first met Jesus about a year ago. He was standing on the side of a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee and he was talking to a huge group of people. I don't think I've ever seen so many people in one place before. There must have been thousands of them. They were all spread out on the side of the mountain listening to him. Even with all those people around, you could have heard a pin drop. He told us things I had never heard before and he talked a lot about the Kingdom of God and what it was like. He had such a presence about him.....he was so confident and sure about what he was saying. When the sun started to go down and people were getting hungry, he did the most amazing thing I've ever seen. He held up two fish and five loaves of bread, gave thanks to God for them, broke the bread and then gave it to his friends to pass out among the crowd. The bread and the fish just kept moving through the crowd. It never ran out. Everybody got something to eat and there was actually plenty left over. After I saw that, I knew I wanted to know more.

I ended up on that mountain because I had followed some other people walking through Gadara looking for Jesus because they heard he was nearby. I had heard a little bit about him, but not much. I knew just enough to make me curious. When I decided to join these people on their walk to find Jesus, my family was really mad at me. Who did I think I was just up and walking off like that? I had responsibilities. I had younger brothers and sisters to look after and a garden to keep. What was I thinking? I had no idea who this man was.....only that people were so drawn to him that they just picked up and started walking with him wherever he went. I wanted to go, too.....so I did.....even though it was truly a scandalous thing for me to do. My parents were really mad as I walked out the door for the last time. I was relieved to find some other people from my village when I caught up with the travelers.

The people I walked with were very kind and they told me lots of stories about what they had heard and what they had seen of Jesus. He wasn't like anyone they had ever met. They told stories about how he could heal people and that he could make the wind and the waves obey him just with his voice. Some of the stories were so fantastic they were a little hard to believe, but I wanted very much to believe. Here in Palestine, the Romans make our lives miserable. They tax everything we have. They make laws that limit what we can do and where we can go and how we can behave. And every where you turn, it seems, there's a Roman soldier or two. It's almost like it's not our country any more at all. But this Jesus.....he keeps talking about a kingdom where the poor will be blessed and those with kind hearts will be powerful. It sounds wonderful.....even if it's a little hard to believe.

When we got to Jerusalem, there was such an outpouring of joy and excitement that Jesus was entering the city. Word spread fast about Lazarus. I had been there when Lazarus walked out of his tomb and that convinced me right then and there. Jesus must be the Son of God. No one else could do what he did.....all the things he did.....but if there was any doubt in my mind, there wasn't any doubt left when I saw Lazarus walking toward us. I must have been one of the happiest people in Jerusalem that day. I sang and I danced as I followed Jesus and the crowd into the city. I was waving palm leaves and shouting for joy over and over again. He's here!! The Messiah is here!! We're going to be delivered from our tormentors, the Romans, just like our ancestors were delivered from the horrible Pharaohs in Egypt. God is going to save us again!! It was so exciting. People were talking about it day and night for several days.....and then something strange happened.

We got word that Jesus had been arrested. The rumor was that the Sanhedrin had met about Jesus and decided to hand him over to the Romans to keep the peace. They were hoping that if they gave up Jesus that could shut him up and keep him from talking about the kingdom of God and keep him from doing and saying things that made people want to follow him. He was nothing but a trouble maker and if tensions mounted in Palestine, the Romans would swoop down in a fury. It was best to just get rid of Jesus. They would accuse him of saying that he was King of the Jews. That should be enough of a threat to get the Romans to take action.

We couldn't believe it!! My friends and I were just stunned. How could they arrest Jesus? He's our teacher.....our rabbi.....and we suspect he might actually be the Son of God, but we were still thinking about that. On Friday while all the preparations were being made for the Passover, we went into the center of town to see if we could hear anything about Jesus or maybe even see him. There were hundreds of people packed into the center of town, but sure enough, at a distance, we could see Jesus standing in front of a Roman official who seemed to be asking questions.....but Jesus didn't say a thing. He just stood there. A couple of times he said a few

words, but he didn't defend himself. He just let the Roman official go on and on. Finally, the Roman asked the crowd who they wanted to be released to them. There were several people scheduled for execution and one of them would win his life if the crowd yelled loud enough. We were sure the crowd would yell for Jesus, but they didn't. They yelled for Barabbas. We were just stunned. How could they not have yelled for Jesus? My friends and I yelled for Jesus, but we got drowned out.

The next thing I knew, they set Barabbas free and led Jesus away. We ran toward the edge of town to see if we could get a glimpse of him. By the time we saw him, he looked horrible. He had been beaten up badly. There was blood all over his face from the punctures that the crown of thorns had made. Bruises were already appearing on his arms and legs and his back was striped with lacerations from a whip. Our mouths dropped opened. We couldn't believe what we were seeing!

Jesus walked up the hill with the cross beam of the cross across his shoulders. He fell several times and finally the Romans made a passerby take the crossbeam the rest of the way. When we got to the top of the hill, we watched.....frozen in place.....as they stripped Jesus naked, laid him on the ground and then nailed his wrists to either side of the cross beam. When both the wrists had been nailed they raised him up and hung the crossbeam on the vertical part of the cross. The whole weight of his body was on those two nails in his wrists. Once he was vertical, they crossed his feet one on top of the other and nailed them to the cross. The only way he could take any weight off his wrists was to push down with his feet which made the wounds in his feet even larger. We couldn't believe what we were seeing.

We stood a little distance away, but stayed close enough to be able to see what was going on. We were girls, so no one paid any more attention to us than they did the dogs or goats or sheep in the street. We watched people walk by and taunt Jesus.....telling him to come down from there. They spat on him. They mocked him. It was heartbreaking. I kept turning away because it was too painful to watch.....and then I would turn my face back toward his as if trying to believe that what I was seeing was not real. The wood on the cross was rough. His back was already raw from the whipping he had gotten earlier. Each time he took a breath, that rough jagged wood made more wounds in his already raw back. Each breath was cruelly painful.

We watched for the longest time.....really we stayed there until he died.....and all the while we were thinking.....this is all wrong.....this is not how this is supposed to be! This man taught us about love and forgiveness.....and spoke about how much God loves us. He was going to be the Moses of our generation. He was going to lead us away from everything that is painful and stifling here. He was our hope. He was the future. He was going to make everything right again.

This can't be right. This is all wrong. There's been a terrible mistake. This can't happen. This simply can't happen. And all the time we are saying these things to ourselves and to each other, we are watching him die.....moment by agonizing moment.

When it was finally over.....when he died.....Joseph of Arimathea came and took his body. He and Nicodemus bathed him in oils and spices and wrapped him in linen and then very carefully put him in a fresh tomb that had never been used before. It was a tomb fit for a king. And it contained not only Jesus' body but our hearts. They sealed up the tomb when they were finished. And just to ensure that the rabble rouser did no mischief, the Romans sent soldiers to guard the tomb. The rumors of his impending resurrection were already flying around. But that can't be. I was there. I saw it. I know how dead he is and how painfully he died. Nobody comes back from that...nobody.

It is finished.

AMEN.