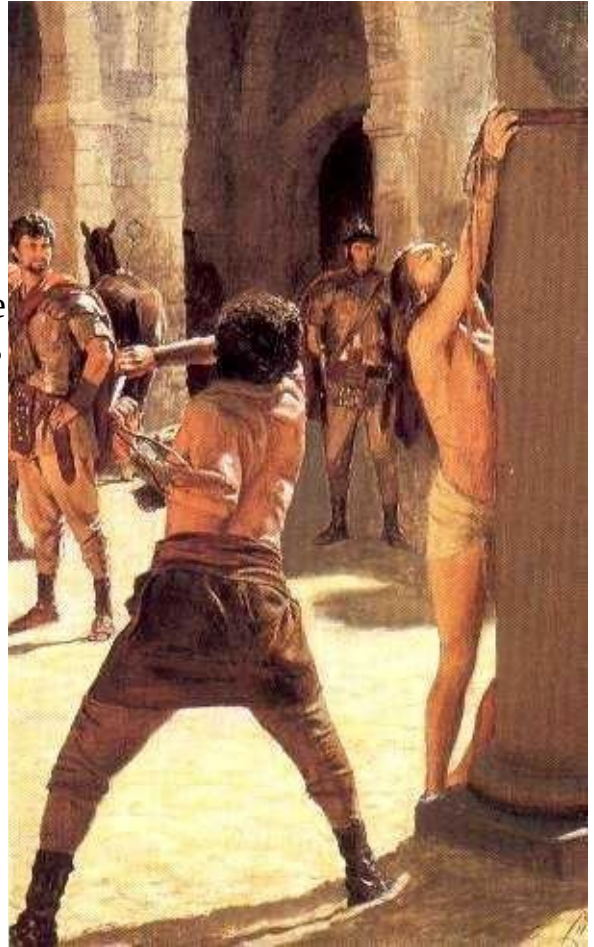


The Women who saw (The last hours of Jesus life)

Jerusalem is a city mainly made up of white stoned, single room boxes stacked one on top of another, clinging to the sides of the valleys and hills on which it has grown up over the centuries. On any place that is flat enough, or man can hack out a level area, the authorities build. So punched out of the jigsaw of the stone boxes, the soldiers of Rome have built a fort, the king has built himself a palace, and the religious princes have built an enormous Temple to the glory of Yahweh. Outside of the city wall, from our house in Bethany on the other side of the Kidron Valley, we look over those hills and valleys, revelling in the shared glory of the city at the centre of the world.

Few of the houses will take more than an extended family when we gather together for feasting, so if you need to meet with a larger number of people, you have to know where to look, and who to ask. Luckily when Rabbi Jesus asked Mary and I to arrange for a place in Jerusalem, where he, and his friends and close followers could share the Passover together, I knew just where to ask. Some of the houses are deceptively small on the outside, but at some point their owners have hacked out the rock to which their houses cling, and have created rooms that are large enough to house a family and more, in some comfort. The hills of the city are honeycombed with these house extensions.

If I had left Mary to do the organising, no one would have had any food to eat for the Passover. I sent servants out to the markets in Jerusalem, using the money that Judas gave us. They came back with bitter herbs, bread, wine and the carcass of a large lamb which had been slaughtered by the Priests in the Temple. Mary and I set a fire and roasted the lamb ready for Rabbi Jesus when he came from the Temple with his followers. The law requires that there are at least 10 people per lamb, so that all of the meat is eaten at the feast, and none left over. We were going to be a group of round about 20 people, so I made sure that there was plenty of unleavened bread to go with the meat.



When Rabbi Jesus came in, he insisted on taking the bowl of water and cloth and washing his followers feet. They were scandalised that he was doing this instead of the servant, who was hovering nearby. Rabbi Jesus just said that he was doing this because in his Father's kingdom, status didn't matter, so even though he was the Rabbi, it was as much his role to wash the feet of guests, as it was the servants. Once he had washed everyone's feet, they all sat down to eat, and the servant, Mary and I brought the bread and meat to the table. When everyone had eaten, and every scrap of meat had been cleaned off the bones, the Rabbi took a piece of bread, blessed it and broke it and handed a piece to each of his followers saying,

'This is my body, do this in remembrance of me'.

Then he took a cup of wine, blessed it and handed it to his followers one at a time saying,

'This is my blood of the new covenant. Do this in remembrance of me.' Mary and I were clearing the table, but we stopped and watched what the Rabbi was doing. His followers looked puzzled at what was going on, but they took the bread and then the wine as he gave it to them. It was a long time later before it dawned on us all, just what he meant by this. He must have known what was going to happen next, but we didn't really understand.

When everything was finished I went to sit down for a while. Rabbi Jesus led his followers out of the room, saying that he was going to take them to pray in a garden of olives at Gethsemane, which belonged to a friend. Everyone followed him out of the room. Mary slipped out after them. I sat down quietly in a corner of the room, expecting them all back later, to sleep on the floor here, so that they would be ready for the following day's celebrations in Jerusalem. I must have dropped off to sleep, as the next thing I knew, the door was banging, and Mary rushed in. She was so out of breath from running up the street, that it was a while before she could get a coherent sentence out. When she did, my blood chilled as she told me that Roman soldiers, along with servants of the High Priest had arrested Rabbi Jesus while he prayed. As she paced around the room ringing her hands, I got my brain back into gear. Eventually I came up with a sort of plan.

'We need to know why they have arrested him, and what they are going to do with him. I will go to the Temple. You are younger than me, so can you run on to the Antonia Fortress and see what you can find out there. Come back here as soon as you hear anything.'

It would be dawn before we met back here again, and by then we both knew what the fate of the Rabbi would be.

In the hours of darkness it is easier to move around the city as there are a lot less people, but there isn't much light apart from the moon. Some of the wealthier house owners put lamps outside their houses, and keep them burning through the night. Soldiers patrolling the streets carry flaming torches with them, but we wanted to be unseen. With the Passover having just finished, there were piles of bones out in the cobbled streets waiting to be collected up by the night soil men or chewed on by the packs of dogs roaming the streets. The bones are swept up into carts, along with all

the other effluent from a city full of people and animals. The carts rumble around during the night, but most people just tune the sound out. It is taken out to nearby villages to be used to fertilise the fields. Mary and I walked as fast as we could up to the Temple Mount. I peeled off to cross over on the bridge to enter the gate into the Courtyard of the Gentiles, while Mary carried on to the entrance of the Antonia Fortress which is built right against the far corner of the Temple wall.

I marched through the gate unchallenged, the guard seeming not to be worried about me, even though it was the early hours of the morning. I then passed through the colonnaded portico, where during the day the money changers and sellers of sacrificial beasts sit and ply their trade. Then I was out onto the vast expanse of the paved courtyard. It is designed to hold the many thousands of people who come for the major pilgrimages each year, and is, I am told, one of the wonders of the world. I didn't see any of the wonders, I didn't hear the echoes of the voices from all around the globe, the high-born and the lowly who had left the place after the day's ceremonies, to go and eat, and now sleep. My eyes were locked on the buildings in the centre of the courtyard. I crossed the court and passed through the balustrade, into the complex which only we Jews can enter. I crossed the Court of the Women and climbed the steps to the Nicanor Gate, and then I stopped. No woman is allowed through that gate into the Court of the Israelites. I could be severely punished if I was caught, but the dark and a momentary distraction of the guards, allowed me to slip in. Standing in the shadows, I saw a sight no woman is allowed to see. From the narrow strip of the Court of the Israelites, I could look across the Court of the Priests to the Holy of Holies. In the gentle light of the full passover moon, the gold covering its walls, shone with an unearthly glow. Behind the curtains, on the front of the building, which I am told were woven in Babylon with a panorama of the universe, were, I knew, the doors, twice as high as the tallest man, and covered with gold. It took me some minutes to stop myself from gaping, and several more minutes to drink in the scene which I knew that I would never ever see again. Then I came to my senses and looked around the torch lit courtyard to see if there was anything happening that I could eavesdrop on.

There was a large group of men gathered around in front of a door in one of the courtyard walls. I assumed that this was the house of the High Priest, Caiaphas. Keeping to the shadows, I moved as close as I dared. The group were too far away for me to clearly catch what was being said, but then Rabbi Jesus was mentioned by name. I moved closer and tuned my ears into the conversation. I gathered that he had already been here, and that the High Priest had questioned him and brought witnesses against him, for what I wasn't quite clear. There was a degree of admiration in at least one voice when he talked about Rabbi Jesus' response to the charges against him. From here it appeared that he had been taken to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, who had been unwilling to order his execution, so, on discovering that he was a Galilean, he had sent him with an escort across the city to the Place of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee. Quite where he was now, no one seemed to know. As the group soon began to break up and wander away, I slipped back through the Nicanor

Gate and into the Court of the Women, where I allowed myself to breathe for the first time in several hours, since I had heard of the arrest of Rabbi Jesus. I returned slowly to the house thinking about what I had heard and wondering what had happened to Mary.

When I left Martha at the entrance of the Temple, I picked up my skirts and ran to the corner of the Temple wall where the Antonia Fortress stands. I had no plan in mind to get me in to the fortress, so I just stood in the shadows looking up at the two tall, square, thick walled towers with the well guarded gateway in between, designed to keep the troops safe from rioting locals. And I waited. Eventually a patrol of soldiers returning to the fortress marched into view. The gate opened for them, and I slipped in behind one of the men. He looked round at me and gave me a wink, thinking, I presume, that I was a local prostitute coming in to see one of the soldiers. I blushed, but I would even have given myself to one of the soldiers, if I could have got my Teacher released safely. As the soldiers peeled off, I slunk away into a dark corner, and sunk down to the ground hoping no one would notice me there.

Little was happening in the court which was lit by the light of a dozen flickering torches. There was the odd soldier crossing from one side to another and disappearing through doors. I didn't want to draw attention to myself by moving, so I think that I must have dozed for a minute, because I came too suddenly, as a great cheer went up among a group of soldiers coming through one of the doors into the courtyard, dragging a man tied to a rope, behind them. When he raised his face, and the moon shone full on it, I knew that it was the Teacher they had there. I got up, and started to move forwards, but more soldiers poured out of another door carrying various things in their arms.

'Let's play the Kings Game' someone shouted, and a great roar went up. The next few hours were the longest of my life. I seemed to be trapped in a nightmare from which I couldn't wake up. Images kept floating before my eyes; the scratches etched by long use into the paving slabs of the courtyard; the dice falling and tumbling onto the pavement; the whips coming down again and again onto the Teacher's back and shoulders; the cruel words and taunts spewing from the lips of the soldiers; the red, red cloak that soaked up the Teacher's blood, and the crown of thorns, which one soldier won the right to jam down on the Teacher's head, so that the thorns pierced his skin and blood poured down his face. Finally the mock sceptre they forced into his hand and the mock bowing and scraping they did before him, as if they believed him a king.

If he had once cried out in pain, or once showed the agony he must have been in, I told myself that I would have run to him and taken the consequences, but he was stoic, looking almost bored, as if he had withdrawn somewhere deep within himself. The only time I heard him make any kind of sound, was just as the sun began to rise, and a group of soldiers disappeared for a while and returned carrying the crossbar of a cross which they lashed to his outstretched arms, across his bloodied shoulders. Then I heard him sigh, as if he knew that this signalled the end.

I left as soldiers were being ordered up and sent out in groups to line the streets on the way to Golgotha, the place of the skull. Again slipping out with a group of soldiers, while the guards were distracted. I ran down the hill and barrelled through the door of the house, and straight into Martha's arms.

Mary and I wove our way through the streets dodging soldiers and citizens going about their daily business. We had left behind all of Rabbi Jesus' followers cowering in the house, wondering whether soldiers would be looking for them as well. They had followed the soldiers from the garden, where Rabbi Jesus was arrested, straight to the High Priest's house, where Rabbi Jesus had been taken first to be questioned by Caiaphas and Annas, but they had been badly scared when they had been challenged by the High Priest's servants gathered around a fire near the back door, through which Rabbi Jesus had been taken. When Rabbi Jesus was marched passed them across the Courtyard of the Gentiles to the gate in the Temple wall nearest to the Antonia Fortress, shaken, they hurried back to the safety of the room where they had shared Passover.

At Golgotha, the place was crowded with people coming to watch the spectacle of a crucifixion, but on this day the crowd was silent. They had cheered the Rabbi when he arrived in Jerusalem, and we had heard from some of the crowd that Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor had wanted to release Rabbi Jesus, but the crowd that the High Priest's servants had gathered in front of the Antonia Fortress, called for a murderer called Barabbas to be released. The citizens at Golgotha were bewildered at the speed with which Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth had gone from hero to a criminal, who was going to hang on a cross until he was dead. On either side of him thieves were already stretched out against the sky waiting to die. When Rabbi Jesus was laid on the cross flat out on the ground, and the nails were hammered through his wrists and feet a collective shudder went through the crowd. If it could happen to him, so it could happen to any one of us. As the cross was raised up with his bruised and bloody body hanging on it, Mary spotted Mary of Nazareth, Rabbi Jesus' mother, and Mary of Magdala standing near to the foot of the cross, and pulled me to go and join them.

So we stood there, heads raised to heaven, prayers on our lips, our minds blank to everything apart from him, motionless, through the heat of the day, watching him die, hoping for the angels to come and release him from his pain. When at last, his follower John came and stood with us, Jesus called down from the cross asking John to look after his mother. John went to her side and put his arm around her. Words over, action done, late in the afternoon, as the black storm clouds gathered, Rabbi Jesus made one more effort to speak.

He cried out 'It is finished',
and he died.

A great bolt of lightening seemed to cut the clouds in two, and across the city a great wailing shout went up. We all turned towards the Temple Mount, expecting to see something going up in flames, but a great whisper seemed to emanate from the Temple and roll across the city, which when it reached us told us that the great curtain in front to the Holy of Holies had torn in two from top to bottom, and though the open doors, everyone in the Court of the Israelites had been able to see into the holiest place – and there was nothing there.