

BEYOND THE EMPTY TOMB

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE
RISEN CHRIST

BROTHER RICHARD CONTINO, OSF



A spiritual journey and reflective experience of what that first Easter Sunday must have been like. Imagine scene after scene of people encountering the Risen Christ. What the Gospels leave to imagination and faith one now can prayerfully imagine what those experiences may have been like.

Beyond the Empty Tomb: Encounters with the Risen Christ

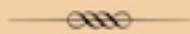
by Brother Richard Contino, OSF

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ISBN: 978-1-60145-672-4

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

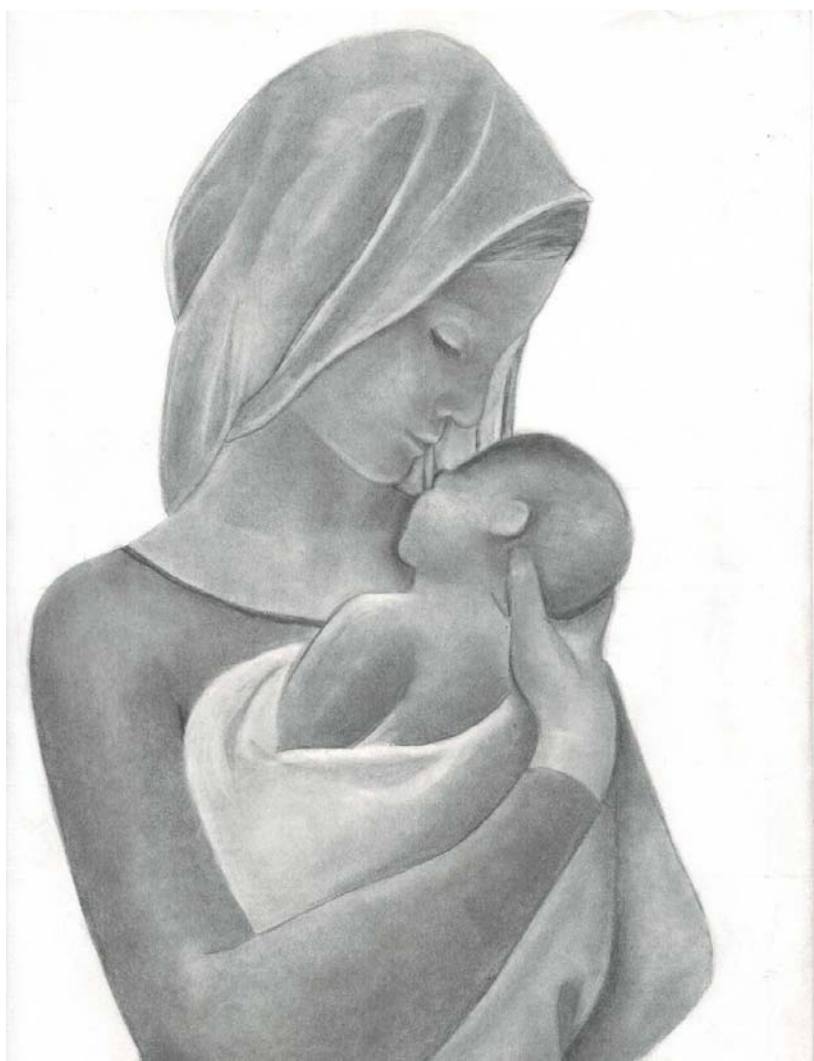
Printed on acid-free paper.

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2019

First Edition

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Chapter One: A Mother's Embrace: Mary

The fragrance lingered in the room. Though the scent was pleasing to the senses, one could not be unaware of the essence that seeped into not just the confines of the room but literally embraced the walls, floor, and furnishings with its aroma.

The enduring presence of the abiding fragrance was difficult to ignore. Such a fragrance was a perfumed ointment, extracted from aromatic nard, precious and costly to procure. This exquisite perfume had been carried within an expensive jar of alabaster into the home, and it was indeed a proper vessel to house such a treasure. The perfume and its cask would soon become the focal remembrance of the evening. Upon arrival, the bearer of the container in moments broke the jar open before the stunned guests and poured its contents lavishly over the head of the Man reclining at the table. All were amazed by the vision of this woman, the jar, and the liquid poured first upon the head and then the feet of the reclining and amazed Man. No one halted what was transpiring before everyone's eyes. Many who had followed the Man had come to expect the unexpected, but this event was beyond the ordinary and the incredible. At the table was the Man's Mother, her eyes riveted on this unfolding drama, and such an extravagant display of affection and love would be cast by others at this table with scorn and disdain, but in her heart she was pondering its meaning and purpose on such a night.

Surrounded by the lingering scent, Mary the Mother was sitting in the same room where just days earlier there was a dinner in honor of the Son and where the ointment was so

generously poured. This house where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus dwelt had become a place of joy and celebration just six days ago, but the Mother of the Son now was sitting as a Mother of Sorrows amidst the remembrance of the fragrant scent, not joyfully recalled but in profound grief and sorrow.

The Mother was mourning the loss of the Son while sitting in the home of Lazarus, the friend newly raised and reborn through the words and command of Jesus who had cried out, “Lazarus, come forth. Unbind him and set him free,” and the Friend and cherished Rabbi demanded that he live again. Thus, the Man unraveled death and its grip, and all who witnessed such an event were astonished.

But in this home that had celebrated such a spectacular return to life was shrouded, almost as if the house was a corpse itself, for the Son that the Woman bore at the Archangel’s invitation lay buried in a tomb, buried and soundly dead, and the mission to establish the Kingdom of God so abruptly terminated that in disgrace she echoed in her frame and body a mixture of grief, tainted not with perfume but with anguish.

The Woman, grieving but so filled with grace, sat transfixed by memories of all that had occurred. Undaunted, she held tight to the words she had heard so long before and with the beating of her heart, she repeated . . .

Be Not Afraid!

In vigil, the Mother was waiting on this early Sunday morning, as the light of a new day was about to break. However, before the morning rays dispelled the night, the Mother was surrounded by darkness, not of a physical design but of an

interior and spiritual nature, for her heart was heavy and burdened. She had been broken by death, torn apart and rent by the grief of her loss experienced at the foot of the Cross.

In this strange mixture of fading night and blossoming day, the Mother's face was bathed in a glow of exterior light wrapping her in a mantle of twilight, fringed with the rays of approaching dusk.

Into this embrace of competing lights, the Mother's face could not hide the glimmer of glistening moisture that flowed in a cascade of tears, weeping for her broken heart and the image of the Son, bound and laid upon a cold slab surrounded by an oppressive darkness for these three days that the Son was lying a prisoner in the grasp of death. In the darkness of the tomb, the Son's body, absent of life and void of breath, waited for the Father to proclaim, "Arise, my Son," The plan was well done, salvation secured, and mercy overflowed to wash a waiting earth and bathe a humanity hungering for cleansing. Grace married to mercy had broken through the darkness with the Almighty's ineffable Light.

The minutes of this new day, the first of the week, were moving slowly and heavily when measured by grief. In her arms, the Mother held the lifeless form: The Son she had nursed at her bosom so long ago in Bethlehem was lying bruised and torn, a Man defiled, heaped with scorn, and imprinted with an agony no one could have foreseen.

With the Cross a cruel and mocking backdrop, the Mother succumbed to unspeakable agony, in pain and suffering for the slain child she held in her outstretched arms. In death, the body of the Man concealed no sign of the toil that God's passion for

humanity had extracted as a ransom, paid and signed in the Son's blood and sealed with the marks of the wounds.

Her tears increased in their journey down her cheeks and fell upon her breasts that once nursed him, and she craved a return to that astonishing moment in the stable, but such thoughts and dreams were to no avail as she struggled to bear the burden of her grief and the weight of the Son she could no longer console.

The Mother surrendered to her pain and profound loss in spite of the words that swirl around her . . .

Be Not Afraid!

Her body released spasms of unbridled grief and sorrow, for she was mourning the Man who would always be a Son to her.

The sun's rays breaking through clouds, the Mother greeted the rising sun with a prayer formed by her life:

“Fiat, let your will be done; I am your handmaid today, as I was in Nazareth and Bethlehem, and even now in the midst of sorrow and the mystery that is unfolding within and without, I echo with my life, heart and soul: Fiat, let your will be done. In union with the Son who voiced, ‘It is finished,’ I offer my own profession of faith and trust and proclaim again in solidarity and surrender: Fiat!”

At that moment when her prayer, born out of a life in total obedience to what Yahweh had ordained, and she had proclaimed by her daily Fiat, there was within her frame a sudden and unexpected elation and joy. She gave voice to a phrase spoken long ago and uttered afresh: “How can this be? This feeling of joy as I sit in the midst of excruciating sorrow, filled not with a bounty of good but the emptiness of loss.” With

the advent of a gentle, passing breeze she distinctly heard a whisper that offered an answer . . .

Be Not Afraid!

The Mother's body sensed something amiss, for the Woman was no stranger to supernatural sounds or for the Divine to embrace her with a calm blazing, with passion yet so deeply confounding. This grieving Mother was ailing because of her anguish and aging as the breeze and whisper combined to grant her tired frame and bones the grace to rebound with fresh vigor and vibrant enthusiasm. The Mother was pondering, as she had done for so many years, and she remembered how the Spirit overshadowed her and with her assent she grew fruitful and gave birth. What then were these stirrings, so disconcerting in the midst of unbridled anguish?

The image that she was struggling against but would not vanish from within her mind, for it was seared there with her love. The Man lying prone in her arms, the weight heavy but no burden for the Mother to bear, for she would carry the very wood they had hoisted upon his shoulders. The nails they drove into the Son's hands, the Mother would outstretch her own hands to receive to spare the Child she loved, but she knew she could not bear the wood nor take the nails, for this was the reason for her "Fiat," and the Son's "It is finished!" If she had not witnessed the tortured death beneath the wood of the Cross and had she not held in her arms the weight of His brutalized body, even she, this Mother, would hope that with the morning would come the Divine Salve, and she might awaken from such a ghastly nightmare. But alas, this was no dream, nor dark shadow

of devilish delight, but the inconceivable truth, grasped in her mind and heart that the Son was indeed dead. In the wake of such feelings of a distraught heart, she pondered the tension of her grief and a consoling breeze, and listening intently she perceived a rush of grace that echoed . . .

Be Not Afraid!

The sun was rising, as Yahweh ordained each day, to bathe this room in its light, but with a difference for the Light had a celestial glow, and the Mother remembered that such a glow had come upon her when she received an Archangel as a guest. She had assented and was bathed and embraced by the fire of the Spirit and touched by a Divine kiss, as her womb, barren and still, pulsed alive with the bounty of the Divinity's love. These rays of the sun entering this room did so with such force that the solar heat, exciting the lingering fragrance, burst into a more potent perfume.

The Mother's senses were captivated by the infusion of sunlight and the refreshed fragrance that she was overwhelmed with the sensations. Swooning to her cushioned chair, she was confused by what she perceived as the twining of the physical and the spirit in union, as she remembered a similar feeling and experience years earlier when an unearthly scent filled her with joy, and on this day of desolation, she again tasted, smelled, felt, heard, and touched it. This day of misery and emptiness struggled to compete with her affections and demanded her awareness of something soaring within, and a sudden heat rising from within her soul enlivened her senses, as she perceived the whisper again . . .

Be Not Afraid!

Suddenly, the Mother's pulse quickened, the heart awakened feverishly, for her hearing was shattered by a piercing sound. Beneath her feet, the Mother felt the earth rumble and the ground sway. Yet she was not fearful but content to move from desolation to calm, a prelude to the consolation of a Visitation, a procession accompanied by a Light that overwhelmed her sight but not her hearing, for she heard the Voice utter "Mother" in a tone that she alone knew could be no other but the Son she had borne, and wondering aloud, she asked, "How can this be?" In return she heard with crystal clarity . . .

Be Not Afraid!

Through the effluence of Light, emanating outward to encircle the room, the Son, resurrected and glorious, proceeded forth to transform this quaint and tidy room into a heavenly abode.

No words need be exchanged nor verbally expressed for it was a sight alone that confirmed and then confessed and rejoiced, proclaiming that the Man of Light was the Son, her Son, and the Mother raced in bounds, leaping the chasm of the great divide, for the Son had conquered death and was fully alive!

Who could imagine the scene, surreal yet fully present in the moment? The Son was alive and standing before the Mother. Was there language to describe or emotions to identify the mingling of the divine and human love in such a moment when what was thought dead was so fully alive. Could the human mind comprehend the unimaginable or absorb the reality of what

was transpiring before unbelieving eyes. The impossible became possible because God had designed a plan with the intricacy of a detailed weaving of love and forgiveness, and when expressed in its fullness, the Son stood in magnificent glory before the Woman who bore the Child, nursed the Son into manhood, and in an agony of astounding sorrow, buried the Son who is transfigured before her.

And then she heard the words . . . *Be Not Afraid*, . . . and that allowed her trembling feelings to break forth, not in a quest to understand but in a maternal instinct to embrace the Living Son. No rebuke was there for a momentary lack of belief, only an uncompromising devotion of a Mother for her Child, and in this remarkable moment the Mother who had stood beneath the Cross shared in the triumph of the One she bore as a Child, now in exaltation as Victor crowned Lord and Christ.

The embrace was exhilarating, exuberant, and intoxicating, and the Mother stimulated beyond the normal sensations of body touching body, for this was another form of experience, and the perceptions were at once unique and mysterious. An aura encircled this embrace to become a glorified form of what just days before was a grief-stricken Mother, a Pietà in profound sorrow and despair, but now exuded nothing less than unrestrained joy.

Days before when the Son breathed his final breath, the celestial heavens had been quiet and draped with a heavy pall of sorrow, but today on this Sunday there was an ecstatic union between heaven and earth, unheard of since the days of creation, and the strains of melodious exaltation chanted their glorious lyrics of “Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, worthy is the Lamb who

was slain; all glory and honor belong to him forever and ever,” temporarily replacing the hosannas as heaven and indeed all creation sang and echoed a common theme . . .

Be Not Afraid!

“My Son, my Son” was all the Mother could express as she held him tight in a grip, filled with unrestrained joy but a hesitancy, for the Mother feared, if she let go, the Son as he now appeared would suddenly disappear. The tighter she grasped, the more light infiltrated the room that just moments before had been the center of dark gloom. Could one for a moment even imagine the encounter? One who was dead was now alive and glorified, standing before the Mother whose love without any control or impediment released a volley of kisses to match her clutching hands with a depth and hunger that only a Mother that bore the Son could unleash.

It was not passion but undignified relief that the Son she saw in such agony and held in her arms so surely dead was standing before her with a gaze that enflamed her soul and excited her mind and heart. She could not fathom the reality she was witnessing, but knew for certain this was the Child, her Son, who stood before her.

No explanation or reason was necessary, for faith alone had transfixed the gaze, and the recognition of belief that her Fiat offered so long ago had come full circle as the treasury of divine grace exploded upon the universe as a saving balm.

She touched the hands, imprinted by the marks of the nails, and she shuddered from the agony of memory. Her hands glided to the side, to the wound opened before her eyes, and she

witnessed the flow of blood and water and cried for he was dead. But without any misunderstanding and hallucination of the mind, her heart could define this was the Son she had called Jesus, and now in Resurrected Glory was the Christ, the Son of the Most High.

How could this be? The question echoed again, but this time no archangel but the Son proclaimed, “Mother, it is I,” and what her eyes perceived, her heart and mind gratefully assented to. And for the first time since the events of that first Good Friday, she understood and experienced the truth when he said . . .

Be Not Afraid!

Tears continued to fall, this time in a gentle manner for they were the tears of unmitigated joy, of love overflowing, and a gratitude that only tears could express, for the gift of life was standing majestically before her. Days earlier, she truly had been a grief-stricken widow, entrusted into the arms of the apostle and faithful companion, John, and today she was Mother again, no longer alone but in full stature becoming the New Eve of a New Creation. The Son’s eyes gazed upon the figure of the Mother, now the Woman, for she would be entrusted with the task of giving life to the community of witnesses who from this day forward would be born and raised within the glow of this Resurrected Son and the reality of the empty tomb.

How, why, when or where no longer held any sway. Human questions must bend to the Divine Order and Command and the understanding that for those who would believe no proof was necessary, and for those who did not believe, there would never be enough proof.

But before the Mother, gazing eye to eye stood the Victor and the Son. The battle was indeed done. The victory won, humanity had been retrieved from the misery of sin and death, and the tomb no longer held such power, for the Light that was aglow attested to the saving grace that death was not an end but a transit to a more enduring life. And again the Mother and the world heard the words that had become an exuberant refrain . . .

Be Not Afraid!

Held together in this embrace, Mother and Son conveyed an image of maternal grace, a tableau depicting for endless generations the union of Divinity with humanity, made possible through the suffering that the Son endured on the Cross. In a lingering, unique and intensified supernatural motif, the experience at the foot of the Cross was a birthing anew, expressed in pain and suffering through the sacrifice of the Son, so freely offered, and graciously ushered into a style of living, once unknown because of the sin of Eve was now relieved. In that moment beneath the Cross, the dying Son, a strange and unfathomable paradox of death to life was conceived, and the Church was born. The Church, impregnated was born, and then set apart as a resplendent witness, in a sublime movement upon the earth and to all the corners and reaches of the universe. By Word and Ritual, a remarkable vision of a saved and restored world where the Son was reborn, would enthrall for all time as the Alpha and the Omega, whose Voice and Resurrected Presence would intone for all ages to come . . .

Be Not Afraid!

Beyond the Empty Tomb

As a Child clothed in swaddling cloth, robed now in resplendent Resurrected Glory. Before held and bound in human form, the Son was set free, unbounded and unconstrained, for time and space held no demands but bowed to the Divine prerogative. The Nazarene, Galilean, Jew, and Rabbi had claimed the crown of the Messiah and was declared King as a new age was dawning, and the Son bore the exalted title, Lord and Savior. The Mother, herself, young and a virgin encased in innocence, was embraced by a covering of fragrance, clothing her in the scent of Divinity. She, the first virgin through surrender, became Mother beneath the Cross, and enfolded in the mantle of Divine fragrance was today and for all ages blessed among all women! Thus arrayed, Virgin, Mother and Woman for all generations would most assuredly be voiced as blessed, for this Divine embrace possessed all her form and frame to grant her stature, engraved with grace and profuse dignity. And within this enfolding and sublime embrace, she heard whispered within her ear . . .

Be Not Afraid!

Unaware that in generations and ages yet to come would be raised in her honor and for the glory of God grand and spacious basilicas where the faithful would ask in prayer for her motherly intercession and for the aid and comfort of her love and protection. In various places throughout the world would be erected immense plazas where multitudes would come to seek her favors to feed, to clothe, and to heal of the diseases of the heart and soul, as a loving Mother to her children. But foremost would be the one command that she would give to the children

of the Man: “Do whatever he tells you to do.” Such sage advice we should all endorse, and from this one sentiment would come what she most implored: a host of faithful sons and daughters, eager to follow the Son that she had borne and proclaims to be the Risen Lord. In ages without numbers yet conceived, this Mother, who was mortal, would transport her favors through the portal of human time and history, and from where we were standing today, the places marked forever by the fragrances of holiness would be a geography of grace for the woman of simple elegance: Fatima, Lourdes, Guadalupe, Kibeho, Czestochowa, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, Loreto, Kazan, Tinos, and countless others, for there was no land where this Lady’s fragrance had not reached, not because of her efforts but because of this incredible encounter and embrace. The Son did so command when from the Cross he had bequeathed to a disconsolate people the presence of the Mother, not just for this time but also for the eons yet to come.

No longer a widow or a grieving Mother, she was the New Eve and Mother reborn, who would give birth to countless sons and daughters who would follow the Way. In this room, steeped in fragrant memory, the Virgin, now Woman, would return to the Cenacle, and there waiting in prayer, pondering, and contemplating, she would tend to her Son’s disciples as they prepared to go forth as apostles. They would be confirmed and affirmed in the mission to proclaim the Good News by the Risen Son, who would breathe the power of healing and of forgiveness on them. The Mother to this extended brood, she would by her presence assure the weak of heart and by her prayer would support those who embarked upon this mission, encouraging

each by her own conviction, “Do whatever He tells you to do!” and the refrain . . .

Be Not Afraid!

echoing all around as this embrace tightened, as if to make sure this moment was real and solid.

The Mother was afraid to let go, fearing that her vision was nothing more than a broken heart wishing to rewrite the pages of yesterday’s history. But the Mother sensed this was flesh that she embraced and touched. Not a fanciful imagining of a distressed heart and a sorrowful spirit. The bruised flesh, although all aglow, still bore the reddened imprint where the nails had held the Son bound. The face she held so gently in her hands bore the marks of the thorns and crown that imprinted their violence upon his brow. Her hands in almost disbelief traced the reddish wounds and then cupped his face with the cherished smile she knew anywhere as the characteristic of the Jesus she had conceived, bore and bred. This was her Son she knew and believed in this morning hour; the sun even bowing to acknowledge that its light and rays were no match for the Son that now appeared to break the tyranny of darkness that held all humanity captive. This Light of the Son radiated outwards and embraced all who believed in a faith that could not compete with the rays of the sun that for just this moment had dimmed in reverence to the act to transform the world and the universe, now unbound, and set them free. When once a disobedient forefather and mother had lost the warmth, the Son in obedience to the Father reignited the degree of the Father’s love to warm the universe and give light to the wandering souls. The sun and the

Son mingled with the fragrance that pervaded the entire room and house just days earlier as a gesture of love and devotion and now ignited the fire blazing as a single Light and shining so bright in the Son who pierced the darkness to reassure a grateful but unaware humanity . . .

Be Not Afraid!

The Son, dazzling in an array of raiment spun by no mortal hand for he was wearing a celestial robe of delicate and intricate strands of love, compassion, forgiveness, and mercy. The strands were bound together in a weaving of grace binding these separate threads into a robe of magnificent colors to outshine the stars and even the sun in brilliance unfathomable by human reason and dwarfed by the radiance that the Resurrected exhaled and breathed such Light and Life upon an unsuspecting but redeemed people. The Mother was aware that a garment shielded her Son's frame and was not made by her hands, but sung into being by an angelic seamstress. Its texture smooth and soft, its folds abundant and flowing. Colors abounded, shimmering and shining, and for a moment the Mother became faint with this display of heavenly delight. But ever the dutiful Son, He removed from the copious folds of his regal garment the rough linen that held his body secure when surrendered to death and to the grave. Into her waiting arms and willing hands, she received a token of God's reminder to her, the Mother who believed, and to the host of the faithful that would struggle in the centuries to come in this state of faith that each was to remember the divine response to all the struggles, clouding the heart and stifling the mind . . .

Be Not Afraid!

She recalled with a pang of horror how just days before as her Son had arrived at the hill named Golgotha how the garment that she had woven with her own hands had been ripped from his body with no small amount of brutality. She recalled the hours and days as she had collected the cloth from the sheared sheep and then with nimble fingers plied the strands that became the threads she had woven upon her household loom into the robe that the Son would wear during his days of ministry. The garment was of no distinctive brand but in the style of the lowest of men. Poor and rough in quality, however, woven with a degree of love that gave the cloth and its wearer a mark of great dignity. The cloth that became his tunic was of no great repute but woven in one full piece. It protected the Son from the heat of the sun's glare, as He strode the roads and the plains to preach to all that would hear of the salvation so near. This clothing was a special gift from the Mother who knew the day would come when the Child she so loved would leave her home to embark upon the Father's plan to announce the Good News that the Kingdom was at hand.

The tunic was a fresh reminder to the Man that the Mother's love would follow wherever his heart would lead and that she alone would be the first to believe from the moment she had conceived that the King would become a Child. The tunic was woven with care and with love, and within its fibers would blend the tears that she had shed, knowing full well as the years progressed the reason for the Child would be made manifest.

There upon that hill on that awful day when the rough hands of soldiers had torn the tunic she had woven with love and care,

this garment was cast as a sign of the unique bond between Mother and Son, conceived in the phenomenal mind of God the Father so that humanity could only savor and wonder. She witnessed as that cloth of love was dragged to the dirty ground and soiled by the hands of his gruesome executioners. She watched with horror and dismay, as her body stepped forward to rescue the cloth, covered in blood and grime, and as her arms grasped what she could hold belonging to him, a man with little dignity nor concern, had rent from her trembling hands the one vestige that still claimed the scent of the Son she did so love and grieved for the pain that He had endured. With mocking faces, the soldiers who had nailed her Son to the wood would make a game of dice in full sight of the Man, securing salvation for all those grasped by human time and held bound by sin and fear, and they would gamble for the cloth that held not just the scent of this Sacred Man but the fragrance of the love that the woman had woven into the wool of the garment that the Man could no longer shoulder.

Today, however, the Son, so aware of the pain, extricated from the heart and soul of the woman He so loved that into her hands He bestowed a grateful gesture for her uncompromising devotion and dedication; a simple cloth that covered his body that He relinquished, for his coverings were of a heavenly kind to wrap the Mother with an embrace of divine acclimation. She gathered the cloth to her breast and understood the gesture as a sign, forever requested and granted to the children of man . . . that each and every generation should understand that in this moment and in their own time to listen carefully and believe . . .

Be Not Afraid!

With the cloth folded carefully and placed within a chest present in the room, it mingled with the fragrance that dominated its confines. The Son, who was anointed just days earlier, returned after a journey of cosmic proportion and universal importance. From the wood of the Cross, salvation would be achieved and redemption conceived in the mind of God, first by humbly becoming human in the womb of the Virgin, now a Mother, and then wrought to completion with a bound and deceased body, raised glorious from the ground. The fragrance mingled with the odor of resurrection, and suddenly, a sensory intoxication of sheer delight captivated the Mother; and again she nearly swoons, but the arms of the Son, so strong and renewed, embraced her in the near tumble, not from anxiety or fear but from the release of grief instantly dismissed, and in its place a new fragrance permeated the space. It was not aromatic nard but a unique and heavenly scent, a joy of a new aroma with a spirited bouquet. Such a fragrance would be necessary for the sons and daughters of this newfound Way: That a man, and not just any man, but the Man they called the Son of God, would be proclaimed as resurrected and set free was madness to be sure and most assuredly would inflict a price upon those who claimed this newfound fame. Such a folly would require the Mother to stand guard over those who might waver, and with her presence would remind all those assembled that the Son was resurrected and returned to the Father and would send us about the world to proclaim and to remember his refrain of joy mingled with hope . . .

Be Not Afraid!

With the burial cloth so secured, the Mother was seeking insight in the Son's eyes on what course this newfound life would determine for her and the others who had been scattered. He expressed in a language no longer needing words, but speaking a conversation guided from heart to heart, and in this communication invited her to join him at the table, for the morning had advanced and was in need of sustenance for the Woman who had only tears to feed upon. Seated at the table, He secured the bread placed before him, and with an adoring gaze she focused upon his face that shone with abundant grace and glory. Was this a dream that from its drama she would awaken and find in its place that grief had not been muted but made more resolute and profound? "Dispel such thoughts," her Son and Lord had implored, as she pondered all these things that filled her heart, and in a burst of tremendous combustion, the odor of the burial cloth and the fragrance of the anointing lingered, igniting an explosion that did no harm but heals the loss that plagued the heart to remind the Mother . . .

Be Not Afraid!

In a moment reminiscent of a few days earlier, the Son took the bread into his scarred hands, and raising his eyes to Heaven, called upon the Father, giving thanks for all that had been wrought by the power of love and the acts of grace. The Mother, who had spent her life in caring for the Son, waited with beating heart as he uttered with great comfort, "Take and eat, for this is My Body, blessed, broken and given, to be assured that I am with you, even to the end of time." From these hands that embraced the wood and the still-visible wounds that wrought

redemption, she accepted with intense devotion the bread, no longer such, but divinely the Son Himself in a mystical union, a memorial forever bestowed, not just in symbol but in presence perpetually.

Frozen in time, this image of the Mother in a trance of devotion consuming the bread experienced the joys of the angels. On that Friday, depicted for ages to recall, remembered and commemorated was this image of the Woman and the dead Son draped in her arms, and on this Sunday, a new scene of the Son and the Mother, a table turned altar and bread transubstantiated from wheat into the Body of the Son with the Mother in a poise of gracefulness as the depth of interior devotion displayed ecstasy with supernatural affection. As her heart swooned to a melody of joy and incomparable delight, her eyes opened, and she heard the request to tell my brothers to meet in Galilee, and before she could reply, he vanished and was gone. As her eyes adjusted in the afterglow of the ethereal visitation, there was an explosion of the rare kind, for the fragrance had permeated the room and mingled with the odor of resurrection, bathing the room and the Woman with a combustion of superb wonder, amazement and joy, dispelling the darkness of death and the wails of grief, replaced by abundant Light and the jubilant chords of “Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!” sounded in the vaults of heaven, for death had been conquered and sin forgiven by the Man who was the Son of the Woman who joined in the chorus of this resurrection song, ending with a final verse for the Mother and for us . . .

Be Not Afraid!



Chapter Two: A Treasured Veil: Veronica

The young girl experienced a restless night of sleep and so was rather unsteady when she awoke. What stirred her were not the sounds in the house, or the rooster crowing, but rather a scent so pleasing and fragrant that she felt enveloped by a sweet but overpowering aroma. She tried as best she could to determine the exact nature of the scent, but she could not. Her sleepy mind thought of herbs and flowers that she recalled to determine the design and nature of the fragrance that was tantalizing her senses. Abruptly as she awoke from a very dispirited sleep, her mind was busy identifying the most pleasurable scent sensation. It was not food preparation or a spice even, though she was familiar with them all since she prepared and cooked the meals for her father since her mother had died. It was not a scent associated with flowers in bloom, especially during the Passover season and in ample provision throughout the area and their own parcel of land. The plot boasted a vegetable garden but also herbs, and an array of beautiful flowers filled the house with various fragrances, but not the one that caught her attention this morning. It was nothing that she could easily remember or recall, but the fragrance was strong enough to the point of overwhelming, and yet she could not identify what the element was that so fascinated her senses. She turned her attention to the fragrance that captivated her rising, and she bolted upright when she thought she heard a voice, or rather a whisper, and she leaned in to be attentive and what her ears heard was one phrase . . .

Be Not Afraid!

She imagined she was still in a dreamlike state and so ignored what she surmised as someone speaking with her and through these words attempting to calm her heart and spirit. She knew that she was most definitely feeling and experiencing moments of anxiety, and her father had noticed the restless nights that robbed his daughter of peace. He was sensitive that her normal attitude was cheerful and pleasant, but now she was downcast and somber, causing him great concern. In fact, it was not just sleep, but her eating that was affected. These past three days had been difficult for the city of Jerusalem since the execution of a would-be messiah had caused such tension in the city and grave anxiety with the religious leaders who feared reprisals against the Temple if there was unrest during Passover.

Nathan had little care for the matters of state, but when that concern placed him or his daughter at risk, he grew attentive to the goings on at the Temple and the residences of Herod and Pilate. There had been much talk these days about this Rabbi from Nazareth as the celebration of Passover approached in the city of Jerusalem. Stories circulated throughout the region as to the Rabbi's teaching, the miracles that were connected to this Man and his large following that raised alarm in the Sanhedrin and in the halls of Fortress Antonia, as well as in the palace of Herod.

Nathan was aware of the numerous messiahs that had come forth in the last number of years, claiming the mantle of savior for the people of Israel. Such claims were often short-lived and resulted in the death of the proclaimer of the title and in the execution of the followers who would rather die than disown

their leader. This Nazarean was just another in a long line of claimants to that title of messiah. Nathan was sure that this teacher and miracle worker was no more than a charlatan as were the others. His concern and fear were for the people, so easily duped by the charismatic and different. They would follow anyone who gave them bread to eat and a measure of hope for better days to come.

That was precisely the problem with the Chosen People. They lived in the past when Yahweh was active in their midst and saving them, and they looked towards the future when the Messiah would come and vanquish the enemies of Israel, returning the Jews to the glory days of the reign of King David. It was the present time that caused such anxiety and confusion among the people. The people suffered under the oppressive domination of the Romans. They felt burdened by the demands made upon the ordinary people by their religious leaders who insisted upon ritual and practices that sometimes were more tiresome than worthy of worship of the One True God. Taxes and laws placed a heavy burden upon the children of Abraham so that if someone came into their midst claiming to give them rest, they listened and obeyed.

There was much consternation in this city since the events of the weekend when this Rabbi from Nazareth was said to have raised a prominent Jew from the dead, as those who witnessed the event came to believe. Throughout the region, word spread, calling this Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah. If this were not enough to stir the level of discontent, this same Rabbi entered the streets of Jerusalem and was hailed as a King and the

Messiah by vast throngs that assembled when they heard of his travels for the feast of Passover.

Calling such attention to himself, this Rabbi and his subsequent actions would ultimately bring the force of the state to bear upon him, and finally it resulted in the order to execute him. Such actions that began with his triumphal entrance into the city were only compounded when what this Rabbi did in the precincts of the Temple turned the tide of public opinion against him, especially those of the religious and political leaders. Having entered the city to the full adulation of the people who were certainly aware of what had transpired in Bethany with the raising of Lazarus who had been dead for four days. It had sparked a crowd to wave palm branches and to hail this Jesus as a King, declaring him to be the Messiah.

Entering the city, he had accepted the grateful homage of the people and had made his way to the Temple, and upon entering, he had caught everyone unaware when he began to toss the tables of the money changers aside and to free the animals meant for sacrifice from their cages. What should be a place of calm and peace was turned into an arena of confusion and hysteria. Neither Caiaphas nor Pilate looked upon this action as religious but as an outright rebellion against faith and the state. Jesus' actions had caused a chain reaction that before the end of the week this Rabbi who had preached peace would be at the center of a crisis that would not abate until he was arrested, condemned, and then executed.

Nathan was concerned because his daughter, Veronica, was swayed easily by matters of religious piety and gossip about the coming of the Messiah. Since the death of his wife and her

mother, Nathan had tried to offer his only daughter a home that was safe and secure. This Rabbi and his preaching and display of magical powers were affecting the entire nation and creating an undercurrent that was about to engulf the nation because of this one Man, Jesus of Nazareth. Nathan had forbidden his daughter to go anywhere near this Rabbi, but like any father, he knew that just like her mother, she would follow her heart, not his commands. She often would disappear in a crowd to listen for hours as this Rabbi preached.

His words and his actions touched her gentle heart, and she began to long for the days of the coming of the Messiah and hoped that perhaps this Rabbi was just that Man, as promised by Yahweh.

How everything dramatically changed when the Rabbi, betrayed, they say, by one of his own men, was arrested and placed on trial before the leaders of the Sanhedrin and condemned to death on the charge of blasphemy. Brought before Pilate for the issuance of the decree for execution, he was hung upon a cross on the hill of Golgotha, died, and buried. Nathan still shuddered when he remembered the events of that Friday, especially when he became a witness to the saga and the outlandish behavior of his daughter, who had sought to console this criminal in public view of the mob at the brutal scene of crucifixion. Had it not been for the fact that he was engaged upon the affairs of business, he would have insisted that Veronica was safe and secure at home.

Leaving to attend to business, he had advised Veronica to stay inside because since the arrest, the city was ripe with fear and saturated with intrigue. Veronica had no business in the

streets this day. Knowing her concern for the Man she believed to be the Messiah, her father insisted that for her safety she should obey and stay within the secure walls and not venture into the cauldron stirring outside, so hot with anger and sizzling with fear.

Once Nathan was gone, Veronica could hear the throng, not claiming Jesus as King, but excited with the scent of blood and calling for Barabbas to be freed and their King to die upon a tree. She needed to witness for herself what was happening to her beloved Rabbi, so rejecting the safety of her secure home, she prepared to leave, placing over her head as it is prescribed, a veil when she ventured outside. In haste, she made her way through the jumble of side streets and came upon the crowd that had assembled before the place of the procurator, just in time to hear the decree of death for the Rabbi and freedom for Barabbas. How life in this city had abruptly changed in just a matter of days. On Sunday, a King, and today, Friday, nothing more than a common criminal. Life, Veronica came to recognize was fragile and so fleeting that once the forces of life intersect with the power of leaders, the life of someone like this Rabbi was of no consequence.

She caught an image of the Man who once she had waited to see and hear his words, but now before her eyes he was nothing that she could recall. Bloodied from beatings and scourging, he wore a woven Crown of Thorns that had been placed in mocking jest upon his head to inflict pain and cause him to grimace in agony. Many took great delight in all this, but those who thought he was the One stood in profound silence and sorrow, helpless to repay the Man whose life and words gave them such hope.

Standing before her and this insidious crowd, the Man who had raised Lazarus from the dead and given sight to the blind was nothing more than an object of derision and a spectacle to satiate the mob's thirst for bloody sport.

Veronica was horrified that people could be so brutal and vicious. The Rabbi had spoken of love and peace, yet they heaped upon his head an image of hate and upon his shoulders laid a beam, attesting to the violent and arrogant cruelty.

She wondered who really was the criminal that day. Jesus or us? The mob was not always outside, but sometimes it was within! In the midst of this ugly pantomime of justice, Veronica's heart broke with pain because of what she was witnessing: beauty, horribly disfigured by the cruelty of man. How the Voice of the Man was silenced because the mob was ranting and raging to crucify him! Crucify him! They could not hear the whisper and the Voice trying to reassure her . . .

Be Not Afraid!

His body and frame were no longer a testament to confident conviction and self-assuredness but weighed down by the burden of it all. He looked forlorn and so alone. She tried to cry out to assure him that she believed and would not give in to the demands of the crowd to see him dead upon a tree. Why, she wondered, would a Man who could make the lame walk and the blind see be treated so miserably. What satisfaction did men receive to treat each other so cruelly? This, she knew, was not God's plan, and this for sure was not the Master's idea of the Kingdom of God. She gazed over the crowd that had come to watch a travesty unfold, and then her heart told her she needed to

do something to ease his pain. The mob, however, was unrelenting in its thirst for blood, and so through the gates this march of death began. She was swept up in this gruesome display of humanity, not at its finest but at its most wretched form, and she was distraught.

She pushed her way, with much needed strength, to follow the beam she could see over the mob, and in an instant it disappeared. She feared the worst, and from a small opening in a seam of this maddening crowd, she saw the Man had fallen beneath the burden of the Cross and was lying prone upon the ground. The soldiers were unrelenting and with no regard, they hollered for him to rise and continue this walk of shame. When he did not respond, instead of pity, the guards used their fists to beat and assault him. Aghast at such an awful sight, she felt her heart rend, and in that tearing of the love she held for him she heard the words that reassured her . . .

Be Not Afraid!

From deep within her slight frame came a gushing of indignation wrapped in a garment of courage, and she burst through the mob scene and knelt at the Master's side. The crowd hushed at such a sight and waited a moment to see what would happen. The courage that simmered within her body mingled with the love that she possessed for the Teacher. The phrase she had heard more than once echoed all around her as she heard with distinct rumination again . . .

Be Not Afraid!

And, as if moved to act in league with a powerful force, she did the unthinkable and removed her veil. When the veil was

removed and her hair came into view, the crowd gasped, for this unsolicited act held no decorum and was shorn of any religious propriety. Imagine the sensibilities of this mob, so offended by the sight of a gentle woman who dared to show her hair in public. But for the brutality they had heaped upon this Man in the street, they carried no regret or wonderment that perhaps they had gone too far. Grumbling surrounded this woman, as with her veil in hand, she moved closer and in an act of incredible compassion, she wiped the face of this bleeding and suffering Man. The crowd, bent on anger and hate, refusing to be robbed of this game, barbaric and blatantly sadistic as it was.

They voiced their displeasure and forced the guards to manhandle the girl and push her aside with a level of disgust, allowing this crucifixion to advance unhindered by this foolishness of a slight girl.

Off to the side with his eyes wide open, the father Nathan ventured to see what the commotion was all about, and to his surprise and horror, he saw his dear daughter so compromised. The crowd, wild with vengeance, heaped its vulgar obscenities upon the child, and ripe for some added sport used her for brutal pleasure. The father, just in time, shielded the child who seemed dazed and confounded by the few moments that had transpired. He lifted her from the ground with the veil still in her hands, and with a volley of curses toward the maddening crowd, he steered his daughter through the streets and swiftly to their home.

On the way home she was filled with fear, not for what her father would say to her, but for the Man whom the mob was leading to that hill to kill. In her hands, she clung to the veil, now filled with grime, and she could see it was marked with the

Man's blood, left there as she had attempted to wipe his face clean. She was comforted by what little respite she had offered but uneasy that she had been helpless to do more to ease his pain. In those brief moments when the crowd was in an uproar, she had gazed into his eyes as she wiped his brow. She saw no anger or hate that she could surmise, but a glance that spoke a language of deep gratitude for the peril she was confronting, and in that instant when she and he met that day the Master did whisper to her and she clearly heard . . .

Be Not Afraid!

Once at home, the father was distraught. Trying to care for his daughter, he began to rant and rave, asking how she could be so careless, knowing that the streets were no place for a woman left unguarded. "We are surrounded by dangers, and you put yourself right at the center where life and death hang in the balance, and you could be cut down so swiftly." He asked her to imagine what might have happened had he not been there at that precise moment. The tears began to stream down her face, and poor dear Nathan was filled with remorse. Little did he know that her tears were not in reply to his screams and his fears, but due instead to the remembrance of the Man and the pain that he was enduring. She failed to give ample aid that would have truly been a comfort, and the tears were her regret for failing to wipe the face clean and offer some relief from the torture he was yet to endure.

Besides, even as Nathan was concerned for her safety, he grew irate when he noticed that the veil was soiled and well beyond any remedy for use again. "Coins," he screamed, "do not

come so easily and cannot be wasted on a fantasy to wash clean every criminal that moves in the streets.” She assured him she could wash the veil clean, and she raced to her room in the back where she went to a basin filled with some water and immersed the soiled cloth in it in hopes of dislodging the grime and blood. As the veil touched the surface of the water, a fragrance wafted to her nose, and she became delirious with the scent that quickly vanished as the cloth settled into the basin and was covered with water. For the remainder of the day, she and her father were silent, and the silence was broken, not by anything they said, but by midday the skies had darkened, and by three a calamitous storm unleashed its fury upon the city and that hill. In terror, the people huddled inside their homes, and the land rocked and shook in an earthquake exposing the city to its discontent as the scene of death had unfolded upon Golgotha that day. When nature had spent its own anger, the sun once again did appear, but the people stayed shuttered in fear within the confines of their homes, and they could not hear the words that came from the hill and traveled the streets where death had just claimed the Rabbi from Nazareth . . .

Be Not Afraid!

Before she made her bed that night, the fragrance that had appeared earlier came to life again, when Veronica wrung out from the basin the veil that still required much-needed repair, and before she went to her bed to rest, she hung it over a chair in the hope that by morning she could make the cloth usable again.

In the morning when she awoke from a restless sleep, she recalled the previous day and was concerned that her father

would still be angry over her act of kindness. With her head spinning with memories of the Man and the distress she had felt at his condition, she was reminded of the veil by the recollection of its fragrance. Imagining to no avail what might be emanating from her bed, she progressed to check on the condition of the veil. As she moved closer to the place where the fragrance grew stronger, it enveloped all her senses with remarkable pleasure.

The material was dry but on her first look and inspection, she perceived some residue of the blood and grime present on the cloth. Such residue would make the material no longer viable for use, and she feared her father was right that it was worthless. Shades of dark color mingled with faded streaks that littered the garment became visible as she reached for the cloth.

Veronica, fully conscious of the sweet fragrance preoccupying her attention, took the cloth in her hands and began to unfold the material to its full length. As she did so, she gasped when she realized that what she had thought was a residue of blood and grime on the fabric was not. Holding the fabric to bear its full length, she found she was gazing on the image of the very Man she had thought to comfort. Imprinted was the very face of Jesus in all its detail and the brutal torment that He was enduring at the moment she had offered the veil, a moment overflowing with a passion of unadulterated compassion. This was no dim or faint image, but the full impression of this Man of Sorrow. Veronica's act of compassion was returned to her in kind as the face of Christ was imprinted on the fabric of the veil as an act of gratitude for her kindness.

She fell to her knees while holding the veil, a treasured remembrance of that awful day, but she was not in sorrow, but

deeply affected by the image she gazed upon, the face of the Suffering Man before her. She registered the pained expression, etched by the blood firmly affixed to the veil, as if a mysterious artist painted it. The artist was God, and the paint was the love of Christ that ignited the portrait when Veronica pressed the veil to the face of Christ out of her love.

The sun began to rise, and the image of Veronica in a stance of adoration as she was kneeling before the cloth bearing the image of the One soon to be called Lord. Three days since the events of that awful day of sorrow, Veronica was silent and restless without proper food or rest. However, on this, the first day of the week as she was surrounded by sunlight and lifted in spirit by the fragrance surrounding her, she was mystified as she contemplated the image of the Suffering Man. She saw before her the face she had hoped would be the Messiah. Gazing over the details exposed in the morning light, she searched the fabric for the figure, embossed with intricate finesse so finely defined. Veronica, in reverence, realized that before her was the face of the Man she had come to acclaim as Lord and, when needed, as Friend.

Veronica shuddered as the image on the cloth came into focus, and she saw with defined clarity all the brutality that the Man had been enduring at the moment she had pushed her way into that seething crowd. The eyes were nearly closed and swollen from the repeated blows the uncaring guards had laid upon Him. The face was streaked and caked by the dirt and spittle that mixed with the blood flowing from his head where a Crown of Thorns, deviously plaited, sat upon his brow. The lips were cracked and bleeding, and the face that reflected only days

before an image of God was nothing but a shallow depiction of what evil unchained could achieve and gain.

The image flashed into her memory and heart, the feelings of that day when she had tried with all her skill to offer the Man a caring hand. As she gazed upon the reflection, the eyes caught her attention, and she continued gazing, for the eyes were more than just an image but a reflection staring back at her in return. In a moment, all the emotions of the last few days came rushing in a torrent of tears and cries, piercing the morning quiet. Between her sobs and tears, she could barely hear the Voice that whispered ever so clear . . .

Be Not Afraid!

The tears continued to flow in a release of emotions, as the scent that welcomed her this morning grew stronger and more potent than before. It was as if this scent had developed a form and was literally pressing upon her, not in a violent manner, but almost as an embrace. As the stirring of her feelings mingled with this powerful fragrance, the light from the rising sun bathed the room in a beautiful glow. As all her senses were overwhelmed, she glanced at the image on the cloth, and almost as if in a haze, the image was replaced by an infusion of powerful Light. Momentarily blinded, she refocused her gaze, but there was no image; instead a Man in dazzling white was standing before her and voicing out loud . . .

Be Not Afraid!

Wondering if this was merely a dream or a hallucination because of the stress of the last few days and her lack of sleep, she was enveloped by this powerful Light, and she surmised that

another was in sight. She felt a Presence not her own. Rising all around her was heat, and her eyes attempted to adjust to the glow altering her sight. In the midst of this awesome radiance was a form that was not so much earthly but of another kind, perhaps of a supernatural nature. No man or woman she knew could emit such a Light and encase a room with such rising heat. Her sight so entertained was about to share space with her sense of smell, as the fragrance catching her attention in the early hours of the morning would inundate her with an unbelievable sensory delight. This was no dream, she thought, or perhaps she was in the midst of a supernatural encounter. Her mind, blazing with all sorts of possibilities about this encounter, her ears heard again the phrase, approaching ever so closer while the image she saw was bending low to whisper in her ear...

Be Not Afraid!

Stunned, not from the light or the radiating warmth, but with clear recognition she realized she knew the Voice. It was the Rabbi, the Man she had hoped to console along the Way of Sorrow. How could this be? Was she delirious and going mad! Then the image before her was lying prone near her as she was kneeling, and in a brief look she saw the Man was the same as the One she had tried to heal on that awful day. The eyes were the same as the ones imprinted upon the fabric of her veil, and she reached out her arms to be embraced by the One who was coming to acknowledge gratefully her kindness to him that day and breathe upon her a blessing, uttered so clearly that she can hear and understand . . .

Be Not Afraid!



Chapter Four: Now I See: Longinus

He had sat in the same room for the past three days. He had been startled by the events of these days, and so he had withdrawn here, frightened by his encounter with a remarkable Man and an incredible miracle. Longinus was not the type of man, easily prone to sentimentality. He was not one to swoon or experience emotional outbursts or to give himself over to the vapors of sudden fantasies. He was a Roman centurion, molded into a soldier by the stern and disciplined tradition of the Roman legion. Loyalty, courage and discipline were the virtues that each soldier was to embrace and the standard to uphold and live. Love, religious piety, and devotion to any other deity, except that of duty and to the person of Caesar, were frowned upon with intense disdain among the ranks of command.

Longinus was Roman through and through. Hardened by years of training and campaigns, he had been brought to the far-flung reaches of the empire, and it had matured him through a tough regimen of practice and engagement. These engagements of battle, whether to put down a spark of rebellion or to secure the frontiers from the barbarian hordes, impressed upon the man and the soldier the savagery of war and the exhilaration of victory. Since his earliest days as a young boy, he had been admitted into the legions of Rome and had followed the tradition of his family lineage to rise to high status of rank and command.

Seasoned by battle and the use of the sword, Longinus faithfully responded to the command to vanquish the enemies of Rome. However, when confronted by the use of such brutal and ferocious force, exerted without restraint upon the oppressed

people who had no swords or recourse, Longinus' resolve faltered. As he witnessed this cruelty and slaughter, his own heart would ache and grow burdened, filled with sadness for the suffering that had been wrought upon so many others. An enemy of Rome was given no mercy, and those who had wronged Caesar, whatever the charge, would suffer. Suffering was what was paid, and one's life was forfeited for what was owed.

Longinus was well aware of the brutality inflicted upon those Rome conquered and oppressed. The centurion understood such cruelty was to satiate soldiers' boredom, rather than to ensure the empire's security or safety. This concern for the empire was matched by an equal consideration for his men's safety, which was always his main focus. As a centurion, he could achieve more with a forceful word and his bearing than with any raised sword.

The empire was often heavy-handed when dealing with people that had been conquered and refused to be compliant to the new world order. Judea was no different from any other nation subservient to Roman rule and authority. The empire had already accorded consideration to the Jews to maintain their religious leadership, law, and worship. Such accommodation was unthinkable but for the people of Judea who considered themselves Yahweh's Chosen People. Such a relaxation of authoritative rule was a minor compromise afforded so that there would be peace.

Any hint of rebellion or treason was dealt with harshly in light of this accommodation. Jewish religious leaders were usually quick to resolve such matters so as to remain on the good side of the authorities. This political dance, so to speak, allowed

the Jewish people to remain intact as a people so that they might continue the tradition and practices of faith and worship that had existed for several millennia. All involved in this intricate relationship began to unravel with the arrival of a prophet by the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Longinus did not see the notion of an Anointed One who would set the people free as a brazen act of treason, but when this Jesus from Nazareth came into the city of Jerusalem and people proclaimed him Messiah and King, then discontent and anxiety split the relationship of the Sanhedrin and the Romans. Such discord could cast only a dark light over the people who prayed for and desired freedom.

Events moved quickly. Longinus, as he sat in his room while thinking of the events of the last days, was trying to make sense out of the fact that a Man had died horribly under his command, for Longinus was instructed to carry out the execution of this would-be Jewish king and Messiah with precision and speed. The case was not clear-cut. The Man, a Rabbi and Healer. What harm could he do to Rome or what threat was he to Caesar? Trying to understand the events that had transpired, Longinus sat in his room with a miracle unfolding. As he used his new sight to take in the breadth and depth of the room, he sensed a fragrance pervading it and realized he had experienced that same scent on that hill as he stood guard and watched the Man slowly die. With the scent in his nostrils, he was sure he heard a Voice utter . . .

Be Not Afraid!

A practical man, trained to look at the facts and make decisions not on intuition but on well-planned calculations and deliberations, he faced an odd assortment of facts. Three days ago, Longinus was blind in one eye during the execution of that Man on the Cross to demonstrate Rome's authority, and when he was decreed dead, the centurion raised his spear to pierce the side of the deceased, and what flowed from the Man's side but blood and water, which his eye had received. This bathing of the Rabbi's sustenance was enough in just a few seconds to restore his sight and change his life. With the world all trembling when the Man died and surety of foot no longer secure as the earth quaked, Longinus testified that this truly was who he said he was, the Son of God, and even in the midst of that strange afternoon upon the hill with the earth in tumult and the people filled with fear, Longinus could gaze upon the bowed head of the Man whose Heart he had just pierced without impaired vision but with his sight fully restored. In the midst of so many distracting visions, as family and friends grieved and soldiers struggled in the aftermath of the criminal's death, the inner turmoil of the commander-in-chief was lost in the disorder of the unseemly day, which suddenly grew into the darkness of night. So preoccupied were they, they could not hear the whisper of the wind saying to Longinus as he gazed at the Man on the Cross . . .

Be Not Afraid!

The soldiers quickly lowered the dead men from the crosses for the three, who had been crucified that day. A fragrance drew the attention of Longinus, as the body of the Man whose Heart he had just pierced was taken down from the Cross. One would

and could imagine that the odor of a body, just deceased and bearing the signs of a convulsed and painful death, would be distinct and offensive. However, there was no odor, no smell nor whiff of death, but a pleasing fragrance spreading over the wretched hill. Jesus, the Rabbi who was accused of blasphemy and rebellion, had died quickly, but the other two suffered more pain as their legs were broken in a final agony leading to their demise. What stayed with Longinus was how they died. The Rabbi, crucified so viciously with nails to fasten him to that tree, uttered no vulgar sounds or curses for those who maimed his body. As the Cross is raised to its final resting stance, placing the body in such excruciating pain and contorting its form, the Man, when at last he raised his head, voiced not hatred but forgiveness.

From the Cross, now planted as a disfigured tree, he uttered, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do". Intrigued, Longinus drew closer to hear what else he would say, and he detected the fragrant scent, a mocking reminder of the ugliness engulfing all around. With the scent noticeable only to him, Longinus deemed that never before in battle or in execution had he ever seen such a manner of death. This was no charade or feeble attempt to play the crowd. The Man in dying was authentic in his unrehearsed statement coming from the heart and attesting to a life lived with intent of spirit and love. Stunned, the centurion had never before witnessed such an act so grand and so humbly selfless. In the midst of profound suffering, the Man had offered a phrase of forgiveness for the cruelty they were inflicting. No anger, no hatred, and no belligerent calls for vengeance, just sheer and unrestrained love. In a gasping Voice,

the Man used what little strength and breath he still possessed to cast upon the winds the pearl of human compassion, offering to the unknowing the embrace of forgiveness for a deed so heinous.

With those words just spoken, Longinus recalled the contrasting examples of the two men crucified with him. Both criminals were consigned to the cross for offenses committed and fully paid with blood and flesh. Surrounding these two crosses was no fragrant scent but the odious smell of evil and hate. The state was satisfied, and the crowd satiated with their ranting in the throes of death, but between them in the center was the Man, whose body, though broken, spoke a language of dignity that Longinus began to admire although the crowd seemed deaf to it.

In the turmoil of their dying, one of the criminals had a premonition that perhaps the Man in the center was who he said he was. Believing the opportunity for grace and the window to eternity ajar, the criminal on the right asked the dying Man, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Longinus, intrigued, moved closer to hear the exchange and was greeted by the Man's response: "This day you will be with me in paradise." Longinus realized the fragrance that permeated the Cross in the center spread to embrace the criminal. The centurion's mind raced in a thousand directions, trying to make sense of the realities that he was experiencing and witnessing: goodness and love destroying evil and hatred. He wondered how this could be. With such assurance guaranteed, the criminal showed his relief and waited for the moment when eternity would replace the cross and with judgment bypassed through the

gracious consent of the Man granting his wish to restore what was broken and repaid by the Man's blood.

Longinus realized that far more than human words were spoken here, as he sensed an implied regal authority in them that in spite of the cross, there was a throne, the nails were the scepter, and the thorns a crown. Before him he saw and heard the voice speaking with clarity and truth, and once again Longinus heard, not in a whisper but from the raised head of the Man he was gazing upon, utter in distinctive syllables through blood-soaked features what seemed only Longinus could hear ...

Be Not Afraid!

The centurion shamed by his authority and the duty that he was forced to fulfill. He witnessed the lifeblood drift from the Man who had proclaimed forgiveness and hope, amid an atmosphere of sweet scent flavoring all that the centurion had witnessed. He knew not where to look for he was embarrassed, and his uniform could not shield him from the crime. Innocent blood, he had assisted in shedding, and he was grieved. He moved away from the Cross, but his eyes remained riveted upon the Man. He could focus only partially; physically, he was disabled by a battle injury and scar and had the vision of only one eye. But with that diminished sight, he could focus from the Cross to the woman, standing as a witness to the travesty committed. It was the Man's mother, for sure. Layered in widow's garb, she was to lose the Son and forever be an orphaned mother with no child to bear, nor one to raise and call her own. As the Son upon the tree raised himself to full dignity, he addressed the mother in words that broke Longinus' heart,

and tears streamed down his own face when he heard the words: “Mother, behold your Son; Son, behold your mother.” He could not endure more, so he attempted to flee, but again the Voice uttered for all to hear: “I thirst!” Longinus felt a deep pang of guilt as the Man they had crucified asked a favor from his executioners: to quench his thirst. He motioned for a soldier who raced for a spear and placed a sponge soaked in wine on it. By raising it, they could make an offer of human compassion.

Longinus, his eye riveted to the Cross and the drama unfolding before him, began to notice the fragrance growing stronger with a pleasing scent, while the unfolding scene remained disturbing and foul. All around noticed a startling change in weather as the wind increased in velocity and the skies, sunny and clear a moment earlier, grew ominously dark and unsettling.

The Man tasted the sponge soaked with wine and then in a struggle to speak uttered in a gargled tone but with strength enough for the words to disturb any who listened: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!” The earth began to quake, and the people who had come to witness the deaths of the men, so they might gawk and mock them, became frightened as the hill moved without recourse and many lost their balance and fell to the shaking ground. Lightning flashed, and the noise of pelting rain, trembling earth and lightning strikes perturbed even the usually calm Longinus, who commanded his men to stand bold and firm and show no fear. The Man, so exposed to the elements of nature, raised his head and in a cry so all could hear above the din, “It is finished. Into your hands, I commend my Spirit.”

Longinus watched as his head fell to his chest, and the Rabbi breathed his last.

From deep inside his own being, unable to control the emotional experience of the moment, Longinus cried out, “Truly, this Man must indeed be the Son of God.” This confession of faith, professed to the maddening skies, released within Longinus a desire to end this tragedy. As the soldiers moved to break the legs of the other two criminals, Longinus to show the dead Rabbi some dignity would not allow them to break his bones. In a final act that would become the centurion’s moment of baptism, he took the spear and lanced the side of the Man. The outpouring of blood and water completed the sacrifice as it mingled with the deluge of rain, drenching the Roman with the blood of the Man. Wiping his face clean and clear, he was stunned to realize that he saw far better than before, and the eye of no use because of past battles saw fully beneath this Cross. He understood now that this was no ordinary Man. Shocked and stunned by this reversal of misfortune, he remained within his rooms, unsure of his course of action. He tried to understand who this Man was and heard in a deep, resounding Voice, almost a command . . .

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With his eyesight restored, he was confused when out of thin air a cloud of great Light descended within his space. No matter where he looked, the Light was so overpowering that he had to close his eyes, and as he opened them and tried to adjust to the new scene, the Man he had witnessed die on a tree appeared out of a cloud of immense Light, and in that remarkable moment he

Beyond the Empty Tomb

saw clearly the Man in radiant glory. Longinus, a soldier now on bended knee, cried out, “Lord I can see,” and the Man of Light embraced the newborn in faith, who would become a faithful companion because he had seen and now believed. Embraced by the radiance and the Light, he was able to sense now the scent of the fragrance pervading the room, hearing again the calming Voice . . .

Be Not Afraid!



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