

“Left Behind”

We are at the end of a momentous week. Just a seven days ago Jesus and his entourage—the twelve close disciples plus the many other women and men who followed him—entered Jerusalem to a triumphal reception. People were shouting praises to God and putting palm branches and cloaks on the path as Jesus rode up to Jerusalem. The disciples must have been proud to see how their teacher was acclaimed by the masses gathered for the Passover observance.

After entering the gates of Jerusalem the group goes more deeply into the Holy City. For a group of hicks from Galilee this was astonishing. The disciples were agog at the crowds of people, the fortified walls, the entry gates with their massive doors, the many shops, and the massive Temple Mount which at that time took up thirty-six acres with its arcades, courtyards, walls, and rising above it all the Temple itself. The platform was huge, the walls thick and the Temple took the disciples’ breath away. But what seemed so wonderful at first started to go sour.

When they came to the Temple the next day Jesus became outraged. He saw men changing money and selling animals for sacrifices. At first we might think that these were necessary transactions. Roman money was no good in the Temple because it had the head of the Roman emperor embossed on it. It was not like having George Washington or Franklyn Roosevelt on an American coin. The Roman Emperor considered himself a god. People could not make their offering to God with the coin of a false god. The money was traded for shekels that did not have human heads on them. Similarly, people wanted to make their offering of an animal to the Temple priests. The animal had to be without blemishes. It would be hard to walk a lamb from many miles away and not have it get hurt or sick. It was better to buy an animal at the Temple.

This business was not the problem. The problem was price gouging. As Passover got near prices would rise with the increase in demand and drop in inventory. Jesus was not angry about the trade but taking advantage of people. That is what he meant by turning his Father’s house into a den of thieves.

The Temple officials and Roman soldiers saw the whole incident differently. They saw a man who was causing a ruckus. They all knew that a ruckus could escalate into a fight and then a riot. With more than 200,000 people in a city that normally held 50,000 an incident could get out of control quickly.

Then on the night of the Passover after having their final meal together, the group minus one went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. The Garden is outside of the city across the Kidron Valley. It is a quiet place to pray even today. It is also a great place to arrest someone and spirit him away if you do not want the clamoring crowds to see. That is what the Romans and Temple police did when the missing disciple, Judas, led them to the garden. Then they put Jesus on trial before a court that met at night.

By sunrise the deed had been done and Jesus’ fate was all but certain. The Temple leaders only had to convince Pilate that Jesus was a troublemaker, an insurrectionist. The best way to do that was to sow the seeds of anger within the crowds. We have seen how crowds of people can get whipped up resulting in horrible actions. They were able to do just that and Pilate, the Royal Governor, who was known

for his cruelty, obliged them with a crucifixion. That time honored Roman punishment would give pause to anyone feeling rebellious or riotous.

After all of that the disciples, men and women, went into hiding. They wondered if the Romans would start looking for Jesus' followers to make examples of them. The men were the more likely ones to be arrested so on Sunday, the day after the Sabbath, the first day of the week the women went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. It was a holy and sacred custom of the Jews. For Jesus' disciples it was the least that they could do for their teacher who had suffered and died so cruelly.

When the three women arrived at the tomb they found it empty. They saw the cloths that Jesus' body had been wrapped in when he was placed in the tomb. They were folded neatly on the burial slab. As they stood in wonder two men appeared, most likely angelic messengers of God. They told the women that Jesus had gone back to Galilee just as he had told them he would.

When the women reported this to the male disciples they did not believe them. The men thought the women were making it up. Peter was so incredulous that he took the chance of being arrested and ran to the tomb to see for himself. All Luke tells us is that Peter went home amazed at what had happened.

What amazes me in addition to the resurrection is the small detail of the linen cloths they are mentioned almost in passing. It might seem like nothing special, but it has dogged me this week. I have wondered what it is we are being invited to leave behind in the tomb in order that we might be resurrected to new life.

The question is not just rhetorical or fanciful or even mystical. We have a unique opportunity this Easter Day as we enter the empty tomb with Mary Magdalene, Joanne, and Mary the mother of James to discard our burdens. For us to enter a new and resurrected life that Jesus paved the way for, we too must leave behind those things that shroud our souls and keep us from God. Perhaps it is fear, frustration, or anger. Perhaps it is money, or drugs, or some other way to escape the humdrum or the painful aspects of life. Perhaps it is materialism, power or notoriety. Whatever it is that hinders our soul Jesus invites us to leave it behind in the tomb.

This Easter Day we thank God for the gift of eternal life found in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. But Jesus' resurrection is incomplete if we do not take the opportunity to leave behind those things that separate us from him and God.

When the luncheon feast is finished, the dishes cleared away, the guests gone home, and there is time settle into thought and prayer about the meaning of this Easter Day allow yourself the opportunity to tell Jesus that you will, with his help, leave behind your bindings in the tomb. Freed from those useless bindings, embrace Jesus in your heart. Thank God that resurrection is not some far off thing, but something that is happening this very day in your life. Go to sleep unfettered by earthly hindrance, and awaken tomorrow as Jesus did that first Easter Day unbound by all that holds you back. And ask yourself as the poet did, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild precious life?"¹ That can be our question when we accept the Resurrection as our own—here and now, and walk into the sunshine of a new day and new life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

¹ Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day" from *House of Light*, [Boston: Beacon Press ©1990]