

# Communion



Listen to the sound of anger.

I was there, you see, and I heard it all too well. I heard the shouting, the vile curses thrown at Him so innocent yet reviled. I felt the heat of a city wishing only to kill something, anything that could stand in for the enemy it truly hated: Rome.

Yet it was in part our impotence toward guilty Rome that drove us to vent our anger toward the blameless Son of God.

It was over. There was no turning back. Caesar himself could not have stopped the momentum that was driving Jesus to the cross.

Secretly, Peter and I followed Him to the palace of Caiaphas, where He was questioned at length before the Council. There we waited, down in the courtyard, calling the shadows friend and waiting for the Lord to emerge bearing upon His back a verdict.

Poor Peter. Caught in the offense of which we were all guilty. Always ready to speak, no matter the consequence, Peter foolishly laid himself open to charges of conspiracy. There were those of us who hated him for denying he knew Jesus, but the hate they expended on Peter could just as well have been spent on themselves, for we all knew that we would have said and done the same, had we been challenged.

At the time, I would gladly have exchanged the rest of my life for just one more day with Him. But now I realize that in His leaving, Jesus actually exchanged one terrible day of His for the remainder of mine.

When at last the theatrics of the Council and the Roman leaders were at an end, we made our way out the western gate of the city. The procession was large and boisterous. Parts of it bore an almost festive air, as if the people were celebrating some grand and happy occasion. Other parts of the procession, however, were just the opposite, carried along by the mournful dirge, heads bowed, women weeping, men glassy-eyed.

I had seen it so many times before and had passed by it almost unaware, but on this morning Golgotha seemed the most imposing, depressing site on earth. There was nothing grand about the execution field. It was little more than a sad, trampled expanse of rock and thin soil just outside the city wall, upon which people died in hideous torment—and, under the Roman oppression, with alarming regularity.

The place called “The Skull” was littered with the fragmented sticks and poles of past deaths. The used and re-used wood was coated with old blood reduced to many shades of ochre by the burning Judean sun. Below the old upright poles were heavy stones jammed into the soil for support; they, too, were splattered the same ugly shades. We hung back, Peter and I, still fearful for our sorry lives, but we saw everything. We saw too much. We saw things that are now burned permanently into our brains—images and memories that will be our companions until we die.

The soldiers pushed Jesus down and laid Him out over the ground. While several held Him there, one brute with practiced strokes drove thick rusted spikes through each of His wrists and into the crosspiece timber. Jesus was silent throughout. I would have cried out, pleading for mercy, saying anything that might help me avoid such an awful death. But Jesus, though experiencing every bit of the pain, accepted it silently. He would not revile those who reviled Him.

Several picked Him up, pinned now to the beam, and attached the crosspiece to the top of the upright pole. It dropped into place with a sickening thump. While two soldiers braced against the backside of the cross, a third shoved Jesus’ lower legs up until both knees were bent and pushed out to one side. Then the executioner drove one last spike that passed through both his ankles.

I cannot describe my misery. I cannot describe the hollow, aching ring of my guilt. No, I had not renounced Jesus, as Peter, but I have no doubt that my words would have been similar to his, had anyone so inquired. Not having the courage to speak them out loud only compounded my shame.

The sight of His tortured body hanging before us stabbed into my heart like a slowly twisting knife. I wanted to be anywhere else but there, but I felt compelled to remain, as if this silent vigil—this tortured communion—would somehow relieve me of my complicity in His death.

“Joseph,” my friend Nicodemus had said, “He’s dying, and will need a tomb. Your family has one nearby, haven’t they?”

“There’s one available,” I replied flatly.

My friend knew me well enough to accurately interpret my tone. Taking me firmly by the shoulders, he looked directly into my eyes and said, “It’s time, Joseph. It’s time to go public with what I know is in your heart.”

I couldn’t look at him. He was right, I knew it. This was a moment I had anticipated with dread. “It isn’t me,” I argued, “but my *family*. I have no thought for my own position, my standing with the Council. But this will be hard on the family.” My objection sounded as feeble as it truly was.

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,  
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!  
Yonder on Calvary’s mount outpoured,  
There where the blood of the lamb was spilt.

Sin and despair, like the seawaves cold,  
Threaten the soul with infinite loss;  
Grace that is greater, yes, grace untold,  
Points to the refuge, the mighty cross.

Dark is the stain that we cannot hide,  
What can avail to wash it away?  
Look! there is flowing a crimson tide;  
Whiter than snow you may be today.

Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,  
Freely bestowed on all who believe;  
You that are longing to see His face,  
Will you this moment His grace receive?

Grace, grace, God’s grace,  
grace that will pardon and cleanse within,  
Grace, grace, God’s grace,  
grace that is greater than all our sin.

(Julia H. Johnston)



After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body. Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.

John 19:38-41

But Nicodemus was kind. Our relationship had been built on many years of living and working together, and would not be jeopardized by my unsightly display of cowardice. He chose his words carefully. “I know what you’re feeling,” he finally said. “Remember that time I went to Him in the dead of night. I had no desire at the time to reveal even my *interest* in what Jesus had to say. It’s only a further example of His grace that He didn’t call me on it.” He turned toward me. “Joseph, He’s dying. I’m afraid of what will happen to the body if we don’t step in. You have contacts with Pilate.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Get permission for us to remove the body. I’ll see to the burial arrangements.”

“Let us use agents,” I blurted out. “There’s no need for personal involvement.” I was instantly embarrassed by my sad, last-ditch effort to keep private my beliefs. And again, Nicodemus, in his gentle grace, demonstrated that he had learned more from Jesus than I.

“Joseph, we’ve moved beyond politics now. This is no longer about taking sides, but about paying a debt. Jesus is doing this for us—you and me and everyone else. We owe Him everything. *You* owe Him everything.”

The twisted, lifeless body of Jesus was a sight almost too hideous to bear. The tender, compassionate—even beautiful—face we had come to love was a battered mask of pain that hung limp upon His chest. Ribbons of dried blood caked His forehead below the ridiculous crown the soldiers had fashioned out of thorns. The weight of His body pulling on His arms had enlarged the already gaping wounds in His wrists. The pasty white flesh of His side revealed a deep gash, through which still oozed a clear liquid. Jesus looked like nothing more than a lifeless rag doll pinned to the side of a tree. And my heart broke over the torture He had received into that body—for *me*.

It was odd, and more than a little frightening, to be handling the body of Jesus. But as quickly and respectfully as we could, we brought Him down from the cross. His weight had enlarged the holes in His wrists so that we were able to remove His arms while leaving the spikes in the wood. The spike that held His feet was finally, with great effort, extricated from the wood and His flesh.

With the help of some onlookers, and even a few of the remaining soldiers, Nicodemus and I succeeded in wrapping the body for carrying to the empty tomb. We did not see any of Jesus’ disciples.

We stood in the tomb, gazing down on Jesus, now wrapped for final burial. In a few moments we would roll the heavy stone into place, and permanently seal His body inside the limestone cave.

“How could we ever have imagined that this is how it would end?”

Nicodemus said quietly.

“He warned us.”

“Frankly, I was not always able to separate parable from fact. The temple still stands, but He is here, dead.”

“I don’t know how it will all play out,” I said to my friend. “Already His words are fading in my memory.”

“I remember some of His words,” Nicodemus said. “That night long ago, when I visited Jesus in secret, He spoke of this night—I know it now.”

“What did He say?”

“Jesus told me three things that night. He told me from where He had come, where He would be going, and how we could follow. He said that He had descended from heaven, and would be returning. Then—I understand it now—Jesus described what has just taken place. He said, ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.’”

There were happy days, long ago, when my brother and I would put out into the Sea of Galilee, visiting one of our regular sweet spots just off the shore of our town, Capernaum. The weight of the net, as we hauled it back into the boat, would be almost too much to bear. We'd throw everything we had into the ropes, straining, bending our backs to it. Sweat would pour off us, spill into our eyes till we couldn't see, leaving the rope slippery in our hands.

What pleasant pain we felt in our arms and backs once the catch was on board! Our arms would throb, our backs felt as if they would never again straighten, the palms of our hands burned from the tough rope—but soon we'd be back at it, tossing the empty net out over the waves, then hauling its new catch back in.

Ah, those were the days! How I long for them, those days of happy ignorance. I wonder now if I'll ever again know such peace. For the last three years I've lived with God—and now I've had a hand in killing Him.

Last night, after they buried Jesus, I went out into the city. The streets were so silent and black, and I wrapped the blackness about me and tried to forget what I had done. Even then I was afraid—I was so afraid someone would see me and identify me with Him. I was so ashamed, but I couldn't stop being afraid for myself. In my heart I remembered what Jesus had said—that there was a reason for His dying. But in my mind I saw only a coward who had denied even knowing Him. He had trusted me, and I had thought only of myself.

The street was empty—that twisted street that had been filled with people laughing and mocking and spitting their hatred. It was empty, and I embraced the emptiness like an old friend who understands your pain when no one else can. Now, for the first time since that day Jesus had called me, I could no longer feel Him beside me. I was alone. So very much alone.

The guard was asleep, and soon I was outside the city. Golgotha was nearby; from the city gate you could already smell the lingering death. I didn't really want to see it, but something outside of myself had brought me back. The path was still muddy from the storm. I tripped on the wet stones in the dark. I prayed that a bolt of lightning would strike me down and end my wretched misery. But soon I was there—and that ugly stand of wood was still there. Try as I might, I couldn't keep my eyes from traveling up that post, to the crossbeam that was still in place.

God in heaven! My heart was ripped in two by what I saw—the spikes still there, still embedded in the wood and still painted with His blood. I couldn't look on that cross without seeing the dying body of Jesus. I knew the cross was empty—I knew He was no longer there, but He was! He was. And I put Him there. My cowardice put Him there.

But if (as my heart tells me) I alone am responsible for His death, then that would mean that He died only for me. And that's not what He said.

**“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)**

No, we *all* put Him there. The soldiers drove the spikes, but we all held Him down so they could. And we were all pulling on that rope that lifted Him into place. We all left Him to die alone—stripped of His friends, stripped of His dignity. Jesus died for *all* of us—not just me. We're all guilty of the sins for which He died.

It was an ugly way to die, but then, He died for ugly things, didn't He. There is no pleasant way to die for the sins of all humanity. If Jesus loved me enough to die in my place, then I must find a way to love myself again. Perhaps in understanding His forgiveness of me I will discover the secret of forgiving myself.



Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, “You are not also one of His disciples, are you?” He denied it, and said, “I am not.” One of the slaves of the high priest, being a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off, said, “Did I not see you in the garden with Him?” Peter then denied it again, and immediately a rooster crowed. John 18:25-27

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'" John 20:1, 11-17



They always said I was crazy, and for most of my life I was. I guess I never was in my right mind—until, that is, I met Jesus.

There is no love stronger than the love that accepts you for who you are—and that is how Jesus loved me. When we first met I was a mess. He found me as I had been since my earliest days: mad as a wet hen. Everywhere I went I became the center of attention, because no one could ignore the foul-mouthed demons that lived in my mind and body.

He was teaching and healing the sick in our small town by the Sea of Galilee, and I was there because I was everywhere in those days—like a nagging headache that never lets you know peace. The people tried to ignore me, but I wouldn't let them. If I could have no peace, then neither could they; if I had to live with the constant torment, then I would be a constant torment to them. Don't ask me why; it's just how I was.

But Jesus didn't ignore me. Even in my state of incoherent babbling and screaming I still could understand that here was a man who cared for me as I was. No one had ever loved me like that. No one had ever reached down into my torment to lift me out; everyone else had always expected me to reach up to them.

Oh, what a cold and miserable morning it was. I don't think any of us had slept the night before. Ever since I had helped Nicodemus and Joseph place Him in the tomb I had been obsessed with the notion that we hadn't done enough for Him. Even with the extravagant amounts of burial spices Nicodemus had supplied, it didn't seem enough. Jesus had done so much for me—I simply had to do more, even if it was only to attend to His burial.

I was not one to frequent cemeteries. After the sleepless night I was bleary-eyed and disoriented—like walking the dark streets of a strange city and foolishly imagining that the lights represent familiar landmarks. The tomb looked strange, different from the last time I had been there, only a short while before.

At first it was all just a blur: the open tomb, the angels, running back for the disciples, returning with them, then being left alone there and hating the cloak of confusion that I was unable to throw off.

I thought he was the gardener. Doesn't every garden have a gardener, someone to tend and tidy and keep the riff-raff away? I only wanted to go home and sleep and forget that my Master was now gone forever. But he persisted: "Whom are you seeking?" And I still didn't recognize Him. Then He spoke once more, and it was as if that heavy cloak of confusion was suddenly lifted away—as if the voice of an old friend had just entered the conversation.

Jesus had always said my name in a warm, gentle way—like a brook gently tumbling over rounded pebbles, like song birds just waking to the dawn. In an instant I knew it was Him, and all doubt and confusion left me.

There is a tender little song we would sing in the neighborhood when I was a girl. I've forgotten most of it—except for one phrase:

*Know my name;  
Call me friend.*

My precious Lord was alive! But Jesus was more than my Master, He was my friend. He knew my *name*, you see, and in His speaking that one simple word I remembered the true depth of His love for me—His love for everyone who knew His.



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