

According to John

A Cycle of Easter Monologues

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The Triumphal Entry

Some people think our lives should be measured merely by our own experiences. If that is true, my life has been quite full, and I am only 24 years old.

This man has amazed me for nearly three years. Each day filled with wonder, excitement...not sensational stuff...don't get me wrong, that happened too.

Multiplying food baskets, healing a leper, making the blind see. Last month he brought a man back from the dead! You may have heard about it.

Today, we walked to Jerusalem. Word about Jesus spread before us. The streets were packed with people preparing for Passover. Bodies jostling bodies.

Jesus told Nathaniel and Simon to fetch a donkey for him to use. The donkey looked pitiful but strong. It had been cared for but was still a dirty work animal. I took my cloak and spread it on the donkey's back so Jesus would at least have a bit of padding to ride on.

On the road up to the gates, people stopped and stared at this normal, plain looking man surrounded by twelve poor and, I must admit, somewhat swarthy individuals.

A murmur passed through the crowd as first one, then ten, then thirty people recognized him as Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth and sent encapsulated stories of his purported exploits to their neighbors.

That's when it started. Some one shouted, "Hosanna" ... another, "Praise be to God." Others called out. Soon shouts, calls, and praises reverberated from the walls.

An elderly woman took her shawl from her shoulders and covered a mud puddle before the donkey. This inspired others. Within minutes, shawls, coats, cloaks, leaves, palm branches, all manner of items covered the roadway and were waving in the air.

I looked at Jesus to see his reaction ... He beamed an enormous grin that lit faces all around him. Yet, his eyes were focused far away. He did not see the city walls, the pressing shouting masses. He felt me studying him intently. Glancing at me, he winked.

Since talking in that tumult was a useless gesture, I gave an inquiring glance, to say, "What are you seeing, Rabbi?" He shrugged a bit and pointed to the eastern gate we were approaching.

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As I looked, the walls changed ... the gleaming new stone changed to an old wall pocked marked with little holes as if a stone mason had taken his chisel and dug out hundreds of little holes and chips out of the wall. The gate that had stood open before, now was sealed by stone blocks completely enclosing the gate.

There were people all around not the praising masses but crowds of frightened thousands pressed around. I felt more than saw someone beside me. Glancing to my right, I saw Jesus. Not the man on the donkey dirty from walking the dirt roads of Judea but the man we saw on the mountain top - radiant, his eyes looked at the barred gates. I did not see sadness, anger, or fear but love, so fierce and pure that it frightened me.

Jesus strode to the gate, lifted his hands. Then, I heard it. A melody sifted through the cacophony around me. A simple ancient tune that pierced my heart. The sound grew. It was coming from Jesus. I looked at him more closely, his head was thrown back and the music gushed from his mouth filling the air with tangible light. The sound grew till the music reverberated from rocks, trees, sand and even the wall.

Cracks of light appeared through the stone that sealed the gate. The cracks widened as the music built intensity. The song became a roar that split the heavens ... trees fell, the Mount of Olives crumbled and the stones barring the gate became dust.

As quickly as it had come, my vision disappeared. We walked into the eastern gate. The crush of the Passover crowd shouting praises around me became startlingly real. I touched Jesus' arm. He leaned down from the donkey and kissed the top of my head. He winked at me as if to say, "It will happen, just wait, you will see."

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The Last Supper

I have seen many Passover feasts in my 19 years. The last one, with Jesus, was like no other I had experienced. Passover celebrate God's saving grace for our people in Egypt. Yet, so much tradition is wrapped in that celebration. I did not see the reality and true purpose of the Passover celebration.

Friends gathered close around the table, the room was borrowed, the food donated, conversation light and lively, the wine sweet and cold.

I sat there next to Jesus. That was always my place. I looked around the table, we were all there. The twelve sat close talking and laughing. Jesus listened but seemed distracted. The remembrance ceremonies were approaching, the Passover tradition has not changed much since the days of Moses. Jesus talked about God's loving nature. He reminded us of the plagues and Moses' fight with Pharaoh.

Jesus talked about the Lamb that was required to die. The blood covering doorposts and lintels. The Blood ... The blood was necessary, the sacrifice mandatory. The surrender of life to rescue Israel from death. Jesus talked about the need each of us had to be cleansed. (Our sins wiped clean.) Clean ... Clean ...

Jesus stood from his place at the head of the table. He went to the door and took the foot basin and a nearby towel. The next series of events changed my life. Jesus knelt before Judas. Taking his foot, Jesus removed Judas' sandal. Cupped hand scooped water over Judas' feet. As Jesus cleaned both his feet, Judas sat shocked and amazed. Another flicker shone in his eyes. Was it fear, anger? No, it was disappointment. I didn't realize it then, but I remember it now.

Judas seemed to struggle with Jesus' act of service. It pained him to see Jesus debase himself. Glancing up, Jesus smiled warmly. Jesus touched Judas' face. Their eyes locked as a single tear rolled down Jesus cheek. Jesus rose and washed each man's feet in turn.

Peter, loud, unashamed Peter, protested as only he could. "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "Unless I was you, you have no part with me."

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well."

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Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."

Jesus came to me. I anxiously sat and watched him remove my sandals. Part of me wanted to cry, part of me wanted to laugh. The cool water ran over my feet urging the dirt and grime of daily travel to seep away. I watched as Jesus took each foot in turn and wiped it dry. I realized that Jesus took pride in this act. It wasn't debasing or belittling, but it was an act of love. By the simplicity of his effort, I learned how powerful a force humility truly is.

Sitting down, Jesus looked deep into each of our eyes. A look of pain and sorrow crept across his face as he uttered a phrase that chilled my heart. "Tonight, one of you will betray me."

Shock, pain, fear filled my mind as sudden silence crashed through the room. Peter was the first to speak, proclaiming vengeance and death on any man who considered such an act. Agreement roared as suspicions and accusations from differing parties collided in a cacophony of pain and anger.

Jesus sat, eyes closed and praying. I whispered in his ear, "Jesus, which one will betray you?"

Without moving, Jesus answered, "the man with whom I dip my hand in this cup."

By this time, Peter recovered from his initial flash of anger, which was now replaced by fear. Slamming his fists into the solid wood table, he pleaded, "Surely not I, Rabbi!" The others echoed this question. Jesus smiled sadly. He took a piece of bread from this plat and reached to dip it in the sweet sauce. Another's hand was already dipping from the bowl.

It was Judas.

As their hands touched, Judas froze. Dropping his bread, Jesus embraced him and whispered in his ear, "Quickly, go and do what you must." Hot tears stung my eyes and threatened to fall as Judas left quickly.

Jesus was speaking again. I could not hear his words because my heart beat loudly in my ears. The reality of what I had witnessed slowly, coldly, sinking in. Jesus words soothed the heated and perplexed souls around me. I struggled to bring myself back to the present. Jesus took one of the round, thin loaves of unleavened bread and lifted it high over his head. Looking up, a beaming grin exploded from his face.

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The words that came from his mouth seemed more an intimate conversation than a prayer. “Blessed are you, Lord our God, who brings forth bread from the earth.” He split the bread in two, handing one to me, the other to Bartholomew. Gesturing for us to pass it around. “Take and eat, for this is my body, broken for you.”

As we each took a piece and ate, we eyed Jesus with interest, for the tradition had been broken. What had been done for centuries would never have the same meaning again. For Jesus took the ceremonial bread that is to be broken, wrapped in a linen cloth and hidden until the end of the Passover feast, and chose to place himself to go in its place.

We finished the meal in subdued tones, watching eagerly for any signs that Jesus would alter the traditional feast any more. When dinner was concluded, Jesus took the Prophet’s Cup and raised it. Praying again, he said, “Baruch Attah Adoni Eluhainuh Melech Hayaloam, Beray Peree Agothin.”

Passing the cup to me, he said, “Take and drink this is my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins.” I sat stunned. No one in my life had dared to drink from the Prophet’s Cup. This cup was set-aside in remembrance of those prophets who had proclaimed the coming Messiah and Israel’s salvation.

The meal ended with a hymn of praise thanking God for His mercy and his Salvation of Israel.

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The Garden and Betrayal

We left the house a quiet group. Jesus seemed distracted, deep in thought. We trod a well-known path toward a quiet garden where we often stayed when visiting Jerusalem. As we entered the garden, Jesus' steps seemed more labored. I touched his arm in concern. He grasped mine in return, tightly clutching.

He asked for James, Peter, and I to follow him. Stopping, he embraced each one of us, pleading for us to pray with him. We sat down as he walked further way and knelt to pray. The meal had been good and filling and the wine strong. My emotions calmed as I bent my head in prayer.

I saw before me a large field covered with large black smoking shapes, twisted and cruel. The air was full of wailing. Horrible scraping, screeching sounds that tears at your senses. Cries of anguish reached me. The field before me moved as human like creatures struggled to grasp at each other. Death hung over the field. Smoke obscured the distance. The air shifted shape as a light foul breeze tugged my clothes.

My heart wanted to weep and beg answers to a thousand questions. No tears came. A voice, not audible, sang in my ear. A song of hope and promise whispered comfort to my heart. It seemed to say, "Others not touched by this violence and degradation wait for us." I longed to be with those few, a remnant of good.

My feet left the hillside. Birdlike, I soared and swooped over the plains and hills below. My body seemed caught on a strong wind, not the foul whisper of doom but a fresh clean breeze that lifted my heart. The smoke before me cleared as the walls of Jerusalem loomed up from the valley floor. I alighted on the city wall.

The stench of death and torture greeted my nostrils. The wailing of agony drifted through the streets below. People moved back and forth seeming to not notice their degenerate situation. Buying, selling, living, they seemed to move through the streets in a slow dreamlike manner.

From the east a light flashed, it was not the sun. The light seemed to fall from the sky. All eyes in the city saw this ember descend from heaven. I felt eyes all around that carefully watched the light. It rested on the Mount of Olives. The top of the Mount seemed to glow. No, seemed to be on fire. No, the mountaintop radiated light. The light moved from the top of the mountain into the valley below. It moved to the city gates, sealed and closed.

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The song ... I remembered the song that now echoed through the city streets and through my being. I remembered it like in a dream. I heard this song before.

The light and song moved into the city, the sealed gates shattering at its presence. The light moved in a straight line through walls and buildings. It moved up the temple mount through the courtyards. As the light moved into the Temple building, I saw a prostrate multitude in its wake. My vision cleared and I saw the light move into the Holy of Holies and approach the Ark of the Covenant. It rested above the mercy seat. The light grew in intensity and hurt my eyes.

It was a man, wounded. And, out of the wounds flowed blood that was not liquid but power, light, and love. The blood ran freely, rushing from the temple and covering the prostrate multitudes in the city, in the plains, on the mountains, everywhere. Some persons were lifted up and show with a reflected light of man on the mercy seat, some persons cowered and cried as if the blood injured them by the slightest touch. All were touched by the flow from the Mercy Seat of God. I wanted to run and jump and shout for joy.

An angel appeared in the sky over the temple. It sounded a large golden trumpet. The trumpet blast stilled even the smallest breath of wind. No sound could be heard except the ring of the blast. The sound did not diminish but grew and formed into words that rang through out the heavens: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever."

I awoke with a start. Jesus was shaking me roughly. His face was red and tear-stained. He managed a smile and said, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. But see, my betrayer comes."

Jesus helped us to our feet and walked back to the others, his head held high and his face firmly set. Lights danced in the trees and night creatures scurried away as a crowd came shouting and tramping through the grove.

Judas stepped into the clearing. He walked to Jesus. Their eyes met. Judas paused, his faced strained with struggle. Sucking in a deep breath, he threw his arms around Jesus and kissed him on the cheek. Jesus whispered, "Would you betray the Lord with a kiss?" Judas' body shuddered as he fought back tears. He tore himself away and ran.

The crowd of temple guards and Sanhedrin servants surged around Jesus. Peter grabbed the closest man to him and struck him with a sword that he had hidden in his belt. Jesus turned quickly and grabbed Peter's arm. "Those who live by the sword die by the sword." Jesus stooped to the injured man and healed. A man coming to arrest him, and Jesus healed him.

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A gruff and anxious man hauled Jesus to his feet and said, "We are looking for Jesus from Nazareth."

"I am who you seek." They dragged Jesus away.

I found my feet running away from the retreating crowd, away from Jesus, away from the Temple, away from the fate I feared Jesus faced. I ran until terror, anger, and fear tripped me from my flight. My hands dug into the earth, sobs racked my frame, as my mind tried to comprehend what happened.

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The Cross

He was my best friend. He was a good man. He never hurt anyone. He helped so many people. Why is this happening? Why him?

They took Jesus away from the garden. It had been so peaceful, a quiet night. Then, a mob, an armed crowd, torches, yelling. I knew they would take him to the Sanhedrin. My feet found their way there. I did not want to go, but I did not seem to have a choice.

An old friend saw me lingering beside the gate and offered to let me into the courtyard. I nodded and followed. I noticed that I was not alone, Peter had followed me. We did not speak. We did not even acknowledge each other. We were too afraid.

The trial – if you can call it that moved quickly. Angry men shouting falsehoods and receiving money bags on their way out the door. My heart broke anew with each accusation and defamation.

Jesus was hauled out. I followed. Herod's home. Again. Pilate's court of justice. One insult piled on another.

Mary was there. She watched her son. She saw the results of man's hatred. We followed.

He was beaten. That should have been enough. But, no. He was flogged. Still not enough. The crowd was calling for the ultimate humiliation. The crowd, many of the same people who had shouted for joy as we entered Jerusalem at the beginning of the week. Now, they show their fickleness!

Jesus looks at me. He can see me in the crowd. He does not hate them. He is not angry. He is sad. Their words, their anger are not the cause. He sees something else.

My vision shifted, briefly. I recalled a day when I was young. I was allowed to watch the priests. They were sharpening knives. Why were they doing that? We were here for a celebration.

I was back in Pilate's court, as quick as a flash. They were moving Jesus. Mary slumped against me – grief stricken. She leaned on me. I would help her go wherever they took him. We would follow.

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We waited in the street. Word had spread quickly. There was a crush of people around us with more coming. The prophet was going to be killed. It was a spectacle. The crowd loves a spectacle.

When we saw him again, he barely looked human. Blood-drenched and weak, he struggled under the heavy cross. He hauled it through the streets while the soldiers attempted to keep the pathway clear. Jesus dripped blood as the rough wood kept the wounds on his back and shoulders open.

As he fell, blood splattered.

My vision flashed again. I stood in the temple courts with a priest as he went to the pen for sheep and selected one to be the sacrifice. He carried it carefully away from the other sheep so nothing would happen to damage the sacrifice. It must be perfect.

My vision cleared. Mary struggled to keep up. Her grief was making each step its own torture. My mind was in shock, I looked on in disbelief. We continued to follow.

Golgotha, the place of the skull – a place where many had died. It was on the main road into the city – a very public place of humiliation and degradation. Jesus was placed on the cross, nails were driven into his hands and feet. The cross was lifted up and dropped into the hole cut into the bedrock. It fell jerking all Jesus's weight down against the nails.

Two other crosses went up. Their crimes on display – thieves.

Jesus crime was put on display: Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews.

The crowd voiced their anger, pent-up frustration, and fear. They taunted and jeered. Jesus looked down from on high, suspended between heaven and earth.

He swallowed and pushed up fighting for breath. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

I was stunned. He sought forgiveness for those who did this to him. He is pleading on their behalf.

One of thieves condemned to die also insulted him. The other struggling to breath did not. He asked for Jesus to allow him to go with him. Jesus smiled. He actually smiled at the man, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

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In all the pain and anguish before me, Jesus still offered a dying man peace – a peace that would transcend this world. A promise of salvation, an absolution.

Mary collapsed the pain of this time was almost more than she could bear. I knelt beside her and held her as sobs wracked her body. Jesus saw her fall. He saw me hold her.

He spoke his last words to her and to me. “Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother.” I nodded. I would care for her. She was now my mother. He did not have to ask, but it was important for her to hear. He was concerned about her and wanted her to be cared for. He had brothers and sisters. But, I was here.

As the day wore on, the men on the cross grew more exhausted. Breathing took more and more effort. Darkness began to fall, in the middle of the afternoon. Even the light was fleeing.

My vision flashed again. The lamb was placed carefully before the priest whose robe was bloodstained from other sacrifices. The priest laid his hands on the lamb’s head and whispered over the lamb. The knife flashed quickly. The lamb did not cry out. It did not move. It stood and waited. Death came quickly.

The wind whipped up spraying dust against me bringing me back to the foot of the cross. Jesus was speaking again, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Tears tracked down my face. They fell unhindered. I watched and could do nothing. I could not intervene. Jesus hung alone. His anguish far surpassed the physical pain he was experiencing. It was far worse.

He swallowed painfully. “I thirst.” They offered him some vile mixture from a bucket that stood near. He accepted it, then pushed himself up again. He gathered his strength and spoke so clearly, “It is finished.” He sank again. The wind picked up, lightning flashed, thunder rumbled.

Mary clutched at me, I quickly glanced at her. She was nodding. Their eyes met one more time. Jesus looked up and almost whispered, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

He was gone. He died. I watched as he slumped against the nails and slipped this life. The blood dripped. The storm grew worse. Then, the earth itself moved. The earth quaked. It was as if the very ground itself rebuked this death. The earthquake built in intensity, the crosses swayed. The ground split and the cross on which Jesus hung

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pitched forward. The split ran through the hole in the bedrock. No one would be crucified in that spot again.

The guards were becoming nervous. They killed the two others being crucified. They had to check to see if Jesus was still living. They pierced his side. Blood and water flowed, running down his legs, down the rough wood of the cross, spilling onto the ground.

My vision flashed again. I saw the blood of the lamb being collected into a bowl. That bowl was sprinkled on the altar. The blood was shed to atone for the sins of the people. The blood was shed and offered up.

I saw the cross again. It was over. Mary needed to leave. I gathered her into my arms. She needed rest. As we turned away, a thought flitted through my memory. What was it John the Baptist said on the day we met Jesus?

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

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Easter

I ran. My feet pummeled the ground. I sucked air in, as I tried to sprint faster. I had to get there. I had to see. Were they lying? Were they mistaken? Was this a joke? That was a cruel thought.

Questions raced through my mind, propelling my legs to pump harder. Mary said the tomb was empty. Was it really? Who would have taken him from it, surely not the Pharisees? The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the body, why they would take his body.

I wanted to know. Peter ran behind. I knew he wondered the same things.

The garden. Tree branches clutched at my hair and tunic. Roots threatened to trip me. Rocks scraped my ankles. I didn't care. I had to get ...

The tomb. The stone lay on its side next to the hewn out entrance. Had it been pulled down? The guards were gone. Did they do this? Why would they?

I collapsed against the entrance hole. Breathless. The interior was dim but I could see the slab he had been laid on. The grave clothes were there. The strips of linen still stained with blood lay on the slab.

Peter caught up and burst into the tomb. He collapsed on the stone slab gathering the linen cloths to him. He sobbed. I worked up the courage and entered the tomb behind him. I laid my hands on his shoulders and prayed for him. He started to calm and looked around the cave. Where Jesus' head had been laid, his burial cloth the one for the head was folded neatly. Blood stains still evident.

I picked up the cloth. I smelled like Jesus. I set it down in its place. My mind could not comprehend what had happened. He was not there. I looked at Peter who looked just as bewildered and somewhat scared.

"What should we do?" I asked.

"I don't know." Peter replied.

"Do you think the Sanhedrin will blame us?"

"Most likely." Peter shrugged.

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“Come, let’s tell the others.”

Peter hit the stone wall with his fist. “They won’t believe us.”

“They must.” We left the tomb and the garden in silence. We each searched for some way to tell the others.

We came to the house. A borrowed home. We had left all of our land and families in Galilee. Joseph was kind to let us stay. He ran a great risk at the hands of the Pharisees and Rabbis. Yet, he felt our pain, too.

Peter and I entered the house and locked the door behind us. We explained what we had seen. Most wanted to know who had taken the body. Others wanted to know why. There was nothing much to do but sit, think, and pray. Joseph took a scroll of scripture and started reading, Isaiah. The Messiah’s prophet.

Morning slipped away. Noon came and went. We ate nothing just sat and prayed. Evening approached. The windows and doors were shut and barred. We were sure that when it was discovered that Jesus’ body was gone, we would hear the feet of the temple guards or Roman soldiers coming for us. We all just sat and waited.

A breeze, a hint of fresh air. I looked to see if one of the windows had come open, no they were still barred and closed. I looked down again. Then I heard a chuckle and smelled a familiar scent. I looked up and in the center of the room stood Jesus. Dressed in a white robe and grinning from ear to ear.

I wanted to leap into his arms and hold him so tightly. I wanted cry and jump for joy. I wanted to do something. Yet, I stood still. I could not move. I was terrified.

“Peace be with you! Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I, myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

I stood there stunned. I did not know what to do. “Do you have anything to eat?” I handed him a piece of broiled fish from the dish by the fire. He took it and ate it with great fervor. When he had finished, I touched his arm. He embraced me and held me close. The others crowded around.

Jesus said, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.”

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He touched our foreheads and I could see it. The scriptures came alive. I knew and understood how each one had been fulfilled. I saw how each event that I had witnessed stemmed from the promises that had sustained my people for generations. They were fulfilled.

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. We went with him to the Mount of Olives where he blessed us. Then, he was taken up into the clouds. We will see him again, soon.

He will return.

Be ready.

It might be today.