



Weekly Bible Study Resources

Excerpts from *The Great Physician* For study related to the Bible Lesson March 30 – April 5, 2015

Introductory Note – *The Great Physician*, Vols 1 & 2 were written by Vinton Dearing, a Christian Scientist, who was Professor of English at UCLA where he taught the English Bible as Literature for forty years. The book is a composite translation of the four Gospels, organized by event rather than book, and includes a commentary. Because of the composite nature of the translation and commentary, the excerpts below may cover more topics than the citation in the Lesson. These excerpts have been compiled by Doug McCormick. A paperback book with both volumes in one binding is available for purchase at vintondearing.com.

SECTION GT – (John 12:23, 32)

GREEKS ASK TO SEE JESUS

John 12:20-50.

I close this chapter with John's record of Jesus' teaching in Jerusalem. There are no parallels in the other Gospels.

“And there were some Greeks among those going up to worship in the feast. [These people are usually identified as Greek-speaking Jews, but they might have been Greek worshipers of God, something like the centurion at Capernaum, or even just tourists — Jerusalem was world-famous for the beauty of its site and buildings.] So these came to Philip, [who was] from Bethsaida [on the lake just east] of Galilee and were asking him, saying, ‘Sir, we intend to see Jesus.’²⁸⁴

“Philip comes and speaks to Andrew, Andrew and Philip go and speak to Jesus. And Jesus says to them in reply, ‘The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, if a grain of wheat doesn't fall into the earth and die it remains [a seed] only, but if it will die it bears much fruit. He who loves his soul will lose it, and he who hates his soul in this world will preserve it into eternal life. If anyone will help me, let him follow me. And where I am, there my helper will be also. Whoever helps me, my Father will honor him. Now my soul has been vexed, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ [No.] Rather, ‘This is the reason I came into this hour.’ Father, glorify Your name.’²⁸⁵

“So a voice came from heaven, ‘I both glorified [it] and will glorify it again.’

“So the crowd standing and listening were saying it had thundered. Others were saying, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’

“Jesus said in reply, ‘This voice has not happened because of me but because of you [that is, you need to know, as I know, that God is the only power]. Now is the judgment of this world, now the ruler of this world [Satan] will be thrown out. And I, if I'll be lifted up from the earth, will draw all [people] to myself.’ (And this he was saying, signifying by what kind of death he was going to die.)” This is the last occurrence in the Gospel of the theme of Jesus' being lifted up.²⁸⁶

“So the crowd replied to him, ‘We heard out of The Law [and the Prophets] that the Messiah remains forever, and how do you say that the Son of man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of man?’²⁸⁷

“So Jesus said to them, ‘The light is still among you for a little space of time. While you have the light, walk in such a way that the darkness won’t overtake you [later]. And he who walks in the darkness doesn’t know where he goes. While you have the light, trust in the light, so that you’ll be sons of light.’ [One more command to practice what they had been taught so that they would know its truth.]²⁸⁸

“These things Jesus spoke and went off and was hidden from them. And no matter how many of his signs he had made in front of them, they were not trusting in him, so that the word of the prophet Isaiah would be fulfilled, which said,

Lord, who believed our report?
And to whom was the Lord’s arm [power] revealed?

This is the reason they could not believe: because Isaiah said again,

He [God] has blinded their eyes
and He has hardened their heart,
so that they won’t see with [their] eyes
and understand with [their] heart
and turn [to good], and I will heal them.²⁸⁹

Isaiah said these [things] because he saw [that is, foresaw] his [Jesus’] glory and spoke about him. Nevertheless many even of the rulers trusted in him, but because of the Pharisees they weren’t admitting [it], so that they would not be excluded from their synagogues. For they loved the glory of men rather than the glory of God.

“And Jesus said in a loud voice, ‘He who trusts in me doesn’t trust in me but in Him who sent me. And he who sees me sees [in me the signs of] Him who sent me. I’ve come a light into the world, so that all who trust in me won’t remain in darkness. And if anyone will hear my sayings and won’t preserve them, I don’t judge him, for I didn’t come to judge the world but to save the world. He who sets me aside and doesn’t receive my sayings has one who judges him: the word that I spoke, that will judge him on the last day [that is, he will be found wanting by the standards of truth]. For I didn’t speak on my own, but the Father who sent me, He’s given me a commandment [as to] what I’ll say and what I’ll speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life. So what I speak — just as the Father has spoken to me, so I speak.’”²⁹⁰

Once more we see Jesus affirming that his teaching was God’s very word. Its truth he was now about to submit to the ultimate test. He would prove to the full Love’s power over hate, Life’s power over death, by letting his enemies attempt to destroy him.

SECTION II – B4 (Matt 8:19-22)

Luke 9:57-62 Matthew 8:18-22.

The first two of the following three dialogues are also to be found in Matthew, who says they took place when Jesus was about to cross the sea of Galilee on the journey when he calmed the storm. The speeches are almost exactly the same in the two Gospels, so they may have come from a common written source.

“And as they were on the road, a certain man [Matthew says he was a scribe] said to him, ‘I’ll follow you wherever you go off to.’

“And Jesus said to him, ‘The foxes have holes, and the birds [have] shelters, but the Son of man has

nowhere to lay his head.”

We may notice that Jesus had no worries about where he would “lay his head,” any more than he had about how to feed four or five thousand people. His sense of oneness with his Father never left him, so he never felt away from home or unsheltered. His words are therefore not wistful nor a warning but a challenge both to face up to at least some of the human cost of following him and also to put God first.

“And he said to another, ‘Follow me.’ [Matthew says this person was a student; Clement of Alexandria says it was the apostle Philip.]¹⁰⁵

“But he said, ‘Lord, permit me first to go off and bury my father.’

“But he said to him, ‘Let the “dead” bury their own dead, but you go off and spread the news of the kingdom of God.’”

The “dead” who are to bury the dead are those who have not been reborn in Spirit. The book of Tobit says that volunteering to bury the dead wins protection, help and healing from God. Many have thought, therefore, that Jesus was making a strong demand on the man. I believe, however, that Jesus was reminding him he need not assume a responsibility which others would accept, and thereby lose valuable instruction. We shall shortly see Jesus telling his friend Martha the same thing.¹⁰⁶

“And also another said, ‘I’ll follow you, Lord, but first permit me to take leave of those in my house.’

“But Jesus said to him, ‘No one putting his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God.’” [He will not be able to plow a straight furrow, and may stumble and fall.]

Jesus’ response may have surprised the man, for when Elisha had asked a similar question of Elijah, who had called him to be his student, Elijah had let him go home to say goodbye and to celebrate. Jesus’ demand for consistency we have seen in the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁰⁷

SECTION III – B6 (John 12:1...32)

JESUS GOES TO JERUSALEM

Mark 11:1-10 Matthew 21:1-9 Luke 19:28-38 John 12:12-15.

All four Gospels tell of Jesus’ coming into Jerusalem, usually called his triumphal entry. John says it took place the next day after the foregoing supper. The other Gospels, which do not have the preceding stories of Lazarus and his sisters, introduce it differently. I follow Mark, unless Matthew and Luke agree against him.

“And when they came near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage [the location of which is no longer known] and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his students, saying to them, ‘Go off into the village [on the hillside] opposite you and as soon as you enter into it you’ll find a colt that’s been tethered on which no one [has] sat yet. Untie it and lead [it to me]. And if anyone will say to you, “Why are you doing this?” you’ll say, “The Lord has need of it, and he’ll send it right back here.”’”²⁰¹

Most manuscripts of Mark agree with Matthew in omitting the word “back,” in which case the last words mean “‘The Lord has need of it,’ and he [the questioner or the owner] will send it here at once.”

Matthew continues, “And this has happened so that the statement [which came] through the prophet will be fulfilled, saying,

Say to the daughter of Zion,
‘Behold, your King comes to you,
meek, and having mounted on an ass
and on a colt the foal of a yoke-bearer.’”

The first line of the quotation is from Isaiah 62:11, the rest is from Zechariah 9:9. John also welds Isaiah and Zechariah, producing:

Don't be afraid, daughter of Zion,
Behold, your King comes
sitting on an ass's colt.

“Don't be afraid” is from Isaiah 35:4 or 40:9.

Following Mark again (and Matthew and Luke, who do not agree so exactly with Mark or each other as before): “And they went off and found a colt that had been tethered in front of a door [not in a courtyard but] outside on a street corner, and they untie it.

“And some of the [loafers] standing there were saying to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’

“And they said to them just what Jesus said, and they did not hinder them.

“And they lead the colt to Jesus, and they throw their cloaks on it and he sat on it.²⁰² And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others branches that they cut from the fields. And [when he is now nearing the descent of the Mount of Olives] those going in front and those following were shouting,

Hosanna, [I beseech You, O Lord],
blessed [is] he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

They were shouting Psalm 118:25-26, which they were accustomed to do in the ceremonies at the feast of Tabernacles. At these words, they were accustomed to wave palm branches bound with branches from other trees. John says they had palm branches with them now.²⁰³

What else they shouted is given differently in each Gospel. John: “And [is] king of Israel.” Matthew: “Hosanna in the highest [places].” Mark:

Blessed [is] the coming kingdom of our ancestor David,
Hosanna in the highest [places].

And Luke:

Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest [places].

Since Matthew has “Hosanna to the descendant of David,” instead of “Hosanna, [I beseech You, O Lord],” and Luke has “the King who comes” instead of “he who comes” in their versions of the quotation from Psalm 118 it would appear that the crowd was welcoming Jesus as a king, but evidently only in a metaphorical sense. There was no effort to make him a king, as there had been after he fed the five thousand. Still, we can see how those who thought Jesus was at least a potential revolutionary might feel their apprehensions increase.

Several other parts of Psalm 118 had relevance to Jesus, as we shall see, and he himself referred to it again in the events that followed.²⁰⁴

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SECTION IV – B7 (Matt 26:36)

IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE

Matthew 26:36-46 Mark 14:36-42 Luke 22:40-46.

Matthew, Mark and Luke agree fairly closely in what follows, Luke differing the most. I quote Matthew. "Then Jesus comes with them to a place that is called Gethsemane, and says to the students, 'Sit here, until I've gone off and prayed [over] there.' [Luke says, "And he came out and went, as his custom was, to the Mount of Olives, and his students followed him also. And when he was at the place he said to them, 'Pray that you don't come into a testing time.'"]

"And he took Peter with [him], and [James and John] the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and distressed [because his apostles seemed still unprepared to carry on his work]. Then he says to them, 'My soul is extremely sorrowful, deathly [sorrowful]. Stay here, and keep watch with me.'

"And he went a little further, and fell on his face [Luke says he kneeled down], and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it's possible, let this cup go from me. Nevertheless, not as I intend but as You [do].'" It is extremely important to recognize that Jesus' prayer did not end with the words "let this cup go from me." The words "not as I intend but as You do" are not only part of his prayer, they are its climax, and they supersede "Let this cup go from me." Jesus trusted God's eternal justice, power and love. Luke adds, "and an angel appeared to him from heaven, strengthening him [that is, refreshing his understanding that God could not create anything imperfect or give anyone the power to sin], and being in a fight [with his human will and instincts] he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling down on the ground."⁴⁰

The word I have translated "a fight" is usually translated "an agony." It is the same word, however, as in the well-known passages in the letters to Timothy, "fight the good fight of faith" and "I have fought a good fight." Still, the translation "an agony" may better suggest the intensity of Jesus' battle, and nerve his followers to be equally resolute in their own struggles with sin and fear.⁴¹

Jesus' sweat in this battle is often referred to as "bloody," but that is not exactly what Luke says.

Perhaps he meant it flowed as freely as blood. It is true that a few people's sweat is red or blue or yellow because colorifics get into their sweat glands, a condition known as chromhidrosis, but that explanation of Luke's words does not appeal to me.

I do not intend by these remarks to detract in any way from the reader's sense of Jesus' heroism in his lonely but uncomplaining struggle for himself and for the world. The more thought we give to this passage, the greater our admiration will be, it seems to me, and, if we are Christians, the deeper our gratitude and love. Jesus' determination to do God's will was not mere acquiescence in his crucifixion. By putting himself unconditionally under God's control he established his self-control over his coming proof of his teaching. At the same time, it does no harm to think of Jesus as like any other determined person working with complete concentration on a problem until he sets it right.

Continuing with Matthew (and Mark and Luke). "And he comes to the students and finds them asleep [from sorrow]. And he says to Peter, 'You weren't strong enough [in the truth] to keep watch with me one hour like this, were you? Keep watch, and pray that you don't come into a testing time. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.'"⁴²

Luke says no more about Jesus' prayers in the garden. Matthew (and Mark) continue. "He went away a second time, and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if this [cup] can't go from me unless I'll drink it, let Your will be done.'

"And he came again and found them asleep, for their eyes had been weighted down. [And they didn't know what to answer him.] And he left them again, and went away, and prayed a third time, saying the same words."⁴³

"Then he comes to the students and says to them, 'Are you sleeping for the remaining time, and resting? [It's enough.] Look, the hour's drawn near and the Son of man's given away into the hands of sinners. Rouse up, let's go. Look, he who's giving me away has drawn near.'"⁴⁴

Jesus' words "it's enough" mean "I don't need your help now, I've won my battle without it." We should see Jesus stepping forward with a full sense that his prayers had been answered, confident that his decision to do his Father's will had given him direction over future events. In making such a statement, and in saying later that Jesus may have come to the cross less weakened by what he had already suffered than many think, I may seem to be speaking merely theoretically. Indeed, I do speak theoretically with respect to what I myself have suffered, but rest my interpretations on the present-day parallels to Jesus' experience of which I gave a selection earlier.

SECTION IV – B8 (Luke 22:41-51)

See B7

SECTION V – B9 (Luke 23:1...34)

PILATE'S JUDICIAL REVIEW OF JESUS' CASE

Matthew 27:11-14 Mark 15:2-5 Luke 23:2-16 John 18:29-38.

John gives by far the fullest account of Jesus' initial examination by Pilate, so I follow him here. We should remember that dialogues with Pilate would have been in Greek, so that the Gospels may sometimes give exactly what was said.

"So Pilate then went out to them [Jesus' accusers, who would not enter the Pretorium] and says, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?'

"They said to him in reply, 'If he weren't committing an offense we wouldn't have given him away to you.'

“So Pilate said to them, ‘You take him and judge him according to your law.’

“So the Jews [Judeans] said to him, ‘It’s not lawful for us to execute anyone’ — so that Jesus’ statement that he made signifying what death he was going to die by would be fulfilled. [Jesus had said he would be crucified but as we have noted he would have been strangled had the Jews been able to execute him.]⁸⁹

“So Pilate went back into the Pretorium and called Jesus and said to him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ [All the Gospels agree that Pilate asked this fundamentally important question.]

“Jesus answered him, ‘Do you say this on your own, or did others say [it] to you about me?’

“Pilate answered, ‘I’m not a Jew, am I? Your nation and the high priests gave you away to me. What did you do?’

“Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world; if my kingdom were from this world, my under-officers would struggle so that I wouldn’t be given away to the Jews, but now my kingdom is not from here.’

“So Pilate said to him, ‘So you’re a king, aren’t you?’

“Jesus answered, ‘You say that I’m a king. [All the Gospels agree as to Jesus’ response, but the form in the others, merely the words “You say,” would appear from their unanimity to be more precisely Jesus’ words, and are sometimes interpreted as meaning “yes.”] This [is why] I’ve been born, and this [is why] I’ve come into the world: to testify to the truth. Everyone who’s of the truth [knows and lives by the truth] hears my voice.’

“Pilate says to him, ‘What is truth?’”

John breaks off here. The others, who give only the fundamental question and reply I have noted above, continue as follows. Once more I quote Matthew.

“And when he was accused by the high priests and elders he made no answer.” Luke says the accusation was this: “We found this [man] perverting our nation and forbidding [people] to give taxes to Caesar, saying that he himself is Messiah, a king.” As we have seen, Jesus had in fact told the people to pay the Roman taxes.⁹⁰

Matthew (and Mark) continue. “Then Pilate said to him, ‘Don’t you hear how many [things] they testify against you?’

“And he did not answer him so much as a word, so that the governor wondered greatly.”

Luke says instead, “And Pilate said to the high priests and the crowds, ‘I find no reason [for condemnation] in this man.’

“And they were insisting, saying, ‘He shakes up the people, teaching through the whole of Judea, even starting from Galilee to here.’

“And when Pilate heard [this] he asked if the man was a Galilean. And when he knew that he belonged to the jurisdiction of Herod [Antipas], he sent him to Herod, who was also at Jerusalem himself in these days. [Being a Jew, Antipas was expected to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem.]

“And when Herod saw Jesus he rejoiced greatly, for he [had] intended to see him for a long time, because he [had] heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign happen through him. And he questioned him with many words, but he answered nothing to him. And the high priests and scribes stood [there] vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt, and after ridiculing him, throwing around him a brightly shining garment, he sent him back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friendly with each other on that day, for they were at enmity with each other before.

“And Pilate, when he called together the high priests and rulers and the people, said to them, ‘You brought this man to me as one who perverts the people, and I examined him in front of you, you see, and found no reason [for condemnation] in this man with respect to those [things] you accuse him of. And

neither [did] Herod, for he sent him back to us, and, you see, nothing has been done by him worthy of death. So when I [have] flogged him I'll release him.”

BARABBAS

Matthew 27:15-26 Mark 15:6-15 Luke 23:17-25 John 18:38-40.

Matthew, Mark and Luke give a much fuller account than John of Pilate's next attempt to release Jesus. Continuing with Matthew. “And at a feast the governor had a custom of releasing to the crowd a prisoner whom they were intending [him to]. And they then had a prominent prisoner who is called Jesus Barabbas [that is, son of Abbas.]”⁹¹

Mark and Luke do not give Barabbas' first name. Mark adds that “he had been chained with the revolutionaries who had committed murder in the insurrection.” We know nothing more about this insurrection except that Luke says it had occurred in the city, a fact that, as I said, helps us realize why Jesus' opponents would fear an outbreak of his followers.

Continuing with Matthew (and Mark). “So when they had been assembled, Pilate said to them, ‘Whom do you intend me to release to you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus spoken of as Messiah?’ For he knew that they gave him away [to him] out of envy.”

Matthew alone then mentions Pilate's wife. “And while he was sitting on the judicial bench his wife sent to him, saying, ‘Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I suffered many [things] today in a dream because of him.”

Continuing with Matthew, once more paralleled by Mark and Luke. “And the high priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. [It has been suggested that the crowd liked Barabbas anyway, because he was a revolutionary.]”⁹²

“And the governor said to them in reply, ‘Which of the two do you intend me to release to you?’

“And they said, ‘Barabbas.’

“Pilate says to them, ‘So what shall I do to Jesus spoken of as Messiah?’

“They all say, ‘Crucify him.’

“But he said, ‘What for? What evil has he done?’”⁹³ Luke says that Pilate also repeated, “I found no reason for death in this [man], so when I [have] flogged him I'll release him.”

“And they shouted louder, saying, ‘Crucify him!’”

Matthew alone has the next incident. “And when Pilate saw that he was profiting nothing but rather an uproar was beginning, he took water and washed [his] hands in front of the crowd, saying, ‘I'm guiltless of this [man's] blood; you shall see [to it].’”

Pilate's action was one the crowd understood, for the Law of Moses required it when a corpse was found in the countryside and the murderer could not be identified. To avoid blood guilt, the elders of the nearest town had to sacrifice a heifer and wash their hands, saying, “Our hands did not shed this blood.”⁹⁴

“And all the people said in reply, ‘His blood [be] on us and on our children [if we are lying about his guilt].’”

As we have seen, those who testified in Jewish courts were held accountable for the death of the accused and of potential descendants of the accused if they testified falsely. Also, before the Romans took away the power of the Sanhedrin to order capital punishment, the witnesses took part in the executions. The men in the crowd, therefore, were saying that they were truthful witnesses against Jesus.

Samuel Sandmel and others call this passage in Matthew anti-Semitic, particularly because some Christians regard it as the biblical basis for their calling the Jews of today Christ-killers.⁹⁵

John says of the Barabbas matter only the following. “And after he [Pilate] said this [namely, ‘What is

truth?'] he went out again to the Jews [Judeans], and says to them, 'I find no reason [for condemnation] in him. But it's your custom that I'll release someone to you at Passover. So do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?'

"So they shouted again, saying, 'Not him but Barabbas.' And Barabbas was a bandit."

Mark says specifically that Pilate wished to satisfy — literally "do enough for" — the crowd. The other Gospels do not remark on his motives, which may have been complex. Francis Bacon's view, based on a detail found only in John, has remained with me over the years: "What is truth?" said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer."⁹⁶

Continuing with Matthew (and Mark and Luke). "Then he released Barabbas to them and gave Jesus away [to his soldiers] to be flogged and then crucified." [Instead of mentioning the flogging Luke repeats that (in contrast to Jesus) Barabbas was in prison for sedition and murder.]

Matthew 27:32-56 Mark 15:21-41 Luke 23:26-49 John 19:17-37.

The next incident is not in John. As Mark gives the most details, I quote him. "And they compel a certain Simon, a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross."

It has been conjectured from the way Mark refers to Alexander and Rufus that they were Christians whom his original readers knew, for it would have been more normal to identify Simon by his father's name, just as Jesus, when not calling Simon Peter by his nickname, distinguished him from the other apostle named Simon by calling him Simon son of John. Presumably Simon had come to Jerusalem from Cyrene, the capital of Cyrenaica, modern Libya, for Passover.

As we have just seen, many readers interpret this event as showing that Jesus had been much weakened by the flogging he had suffered. Another possibility, and the one I prefer, is that the officer in charge had come to respect his prisoner, as if he were another brave soldier, which in a sense he was, none braver, and that he thought it unseemly for such a man to have to carry his own means of execution. I have known American officers who respected their prisoners as good fighters, and that strengthens my belief.

The next incident is only in Luke. "And a great crowd of people was following him, and of women who were beating [their breasts] and lamenting him [out of sympathy]. But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, don't weep for me. Weep for yourselves instead and for your children, because the days are coming, you see, in which they'll say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that didn't bear, and the breasts that didn't nurse." Then they'll begin to "say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us'" [he was quoting Hosea 10:8], because if they do these [things] when wood is moist, what will happen when [it is] dry?"

As a carpenter Jesus would have known that green lumber is stronger than dry. It is still used for pilings and other structures that bear heavy loads, where shrinkage will not occur. His words then refer to a time when there will be even less strength to resist evil. He may not have had in mind any particular time in the lives of those who heard him, for mankind often faces some evil it feels powerless to resist. Or he may have presaged the Jews' rebellion against the Romans. Those who interpret his words as a prophecy that the rebellion would fail and who reject the possibility of correct prophecy may see this incident as a fiction, or as having only a kernel of fact. Others may feel that in telling the women to weep for themselves, Jesus meant they should seek to avert future disasters, for he never elsewhere taught mere weeping.

Those familiar with spiritual healing will recognize that Jesus' refusal to accept sympathy was part of his therapeutic method. Sympathy for suffering, however well meant, magnifies the suffering just as much as does the more widely understood fear of it, unless the sympathy is attended with an absolute certainty of the fundamental unreality of the suffering. Jesus' compassion was of the latter kind, the women's was not.

Luke goes on, “And two other [men, who were] evildoers[,] were being led with him to be put to death.”

All four Gospels contain the next information. Matthew’s narrative is fullest, so I follow him. Mark is most like Matthew, John least.

“And after they came to a place called Golgotha, that is to say, ‘Place of a Skull,’ they gave him wine to drink mixed with gall [Mark says “myrrh”], and after he tasted [it], he would not drink. [Luke and John say nothing about this drink, which is commonly thought to have been a sedative.]¹⁰⁰

“And after they crucified him they divided up his clothes, casting lots.” Mark adds the hour of the crucifixion.¹⁰¹ Luke adds that the people stood watching. John gives more details, as follows.

“They took his clothes and started to make four parts, a part for each soldier, including [his] tunic. But the tunic was without seam, entirely woven in one piece. So they said to each other, ‘Let’s not tear it, but cast lots for it, [to decide] whose it will be,’ so that the scripture [Psalm 22:18] was fulfilled, which says,

They divided my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garments.

So then the soldiers did these [things].”¹⁰²

Continuing with Matthew (and the others). “And sitting down, they were guarding him there. And they put up above his head his reason [for being crucified] that had been written, ‘This is Jesus the king of the Jews.’” To repeat, the words on the sign meant that Jesus had been crucified for being a revolutionary, claiming to be a king. John tells most about them, as follows.

“And Pilate also wrote a ‘title’ and put it on the cross, and what had been written was JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS. So, many of the Jews read this ‘title,’ for the place Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it had been written in Hebrew, Latin [and] Greek.

“So the high priests of the Jews said to Pilate, ‘Don’t write, “The King of the Jews” but “He said, ‘I am King of the Jews.’”

“Pilate said, ‘What I’ve written I’ve written.’”

Continuing with Matthew (and Mark and Luke). “Then two bandits are crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.” Many manuscripts of Mark, but not the oldest, add, “And the scripture was fulfilled, which says ‘And he was counted with the criminals’ [Isaiah 53:12].” Luke adds instead “And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.’”

Because Jesus’ words are so familiar, I have not ventured to alter the usual translation, but we should not forget that they mean “cancel the sins they have incurred through ignorance.” Those familiar with spiritual healing will also ask, was not Jesus praying his way through an experience of bodily and mental torment that, real as it seemed, was in the deepest sense unreal? He had refused to take refuge from pain by accepting an anodyne. Did he not choose instead to meet and triumph over all that was claiming to abort his life purpose, seeking to destroy him and it along with him? Was he not asserting the cancellation of what his human senses were telling him was the power of sin as well as pain?

There are many other ways to interpret Jesus’ words, “Father, forgive them,” but the most inclusive is the best: he was forgiving not only the soldiers who had crucified him but all those who had brought him to the cross. He had said emphatically that those who wished God to forgive them must forgive everyone at whose hands they had suffered. Forgiveness in Jesus’ sense of it allows us to see people in their true nature, created in the image and likeness of God. Of course Jesus did not need God to forgive him, but he needed God to sustain him as he went on with his proof that nothing could destroy him or his teachings. Would he not then have been convinced that love must fill his heart, forcing out or preventing the entrance of

all resentment against any of those who were determined to end his existence? How else could he escape from sharing in their sense that he and his doctrines could be blotted out?¹⁰³

Continuing with Matthew (and Mark and Luke). “And those going by defamed him, wagging their heads and saying, ‘[You] who destroy the temple building and build it in three days, save yourself, if you’re the Son of God, and come down from the cross.’

“And likewise the high priests deriding him, with the scribes and elders, were saying, ‘He saved others, he can’t save himself. He’s the king of Israel? Let him come down now from the cross and we’ll trust in him. He trusts in God? Let Him save him now if He intends [to], for he said, “I’m the Son of God.””

Luke adds that the soldiers too said, “If you’re the king of the Jews, save yourself,” and mocked him by coming to him and offering him some of their sour wine.

Continuing with Matthew (and Mark). “And in the same way the bandits who were crucified with him reviled him.” Luke, however, suggests that Jesus’ words of forgiveness had had an effect on one of them:

“And one of the evildoers who were hanged [on the crosses] defamed him, saying, ‘You’re the Messiah, aren’t you? Save yourself and us.’

“But the other rebuking him said in reply, ‘You fear God, don’t you, because you’re sentenced to the same [death and must be judged hereafter]? And we truly [have been condemned] justly, for we’re getting what we deserve for what we did, but he did nothing wrong.’ And he was saying, ‘Jesus, remember me when you’ll come into your kingdom.’

“And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, you’ll be with me in paradise today.’”

Christians commonly take Jesus’ words to the “good thief” as meaning that he would go straight to heaven with Jesus when they both died later that day. Some Christians, however, interpret the words in a double meaning, one applying to the bandit and one to Jesus, as follows. The man had begun his moral regeneration, and learning after death that he was indeed immortal he might then also learn that he need suffer no more in his body. Jesus’ spiritual being, which he said existed always, was never separated from his Father in heaven.¹⁰⁴

Continuing with Matthew (and Mark and Luke). “And from the hour before noon there was darkness over all the land until the hour between two and three o’clock.” Naturally this darkness has been attributed to an eclipse of the sun, which would indeed be a miracle inasmuch as it is a new moon that eclipses the sun whereas Passover comes at a time of full moon. Two British scientists have recently proposed that it was a sandstorm which darkened the sun, for they believe an eclipse of the moon was visible in Jerusalem at moonrise the day of the crucifixion.¹⁰⁵

Their reasoning rests on evidence in the book of Acts, as follows. Fifty days after Passover, at the festival of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised came upon his followers in an ability to speak in different languages. Those who heard the Christians speaking in this way did not know what to make of it. Peter then explained to them that a prophecy in the book of Joel had been fulfilled. Part of what he quoted from Joel was, “The sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of the Lord comes.” (Jesus, it will be recalled, had quoted the same passage in the little apocalypse.)¹⁰⁶

The moon turns red when it is eclipsed by the earth. Assuming that Peter quoted Joel’s prophecies about the moon as well as the sun because both prophecies were fulfilled on the day of Jesus’ crucifixion, then the moon must have been eclipsed that day and the sun darkened by some other phenomenon, that is, by a sandstorm. Further, say these scientists, the day must have been April 3, A.D. 33, and it must have been the day before Passover. Their well-documented article is particularly interesting for its evidence that the calendar of Jesus’ time has been repeatedly reconstructed over the years by astronomers and others without total agreement as to the date of the crucifixion.

If we do not wish to suppose that the sky was darkened, even though Matthew, Mark and Luke all mention it and so are presumably correct, we may feel that they are bringing out the significance of the crucifixion, perhaps remembering Ezekiel, who wrote that when God destroyed the Assyrians He made Lebanon go into mourning and the trees in the countryside wilt, or the statements made by many prophets that the sun would be darkened on the day of God's wrath.¹⁰⁷

Matthew (and Mark) go on: "And about the hour between two and three o'clock Jesus shouted with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' That is to say, 'My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?' [He was quoting the beginning of Psalm 22 as it appears in the Aramaic translation called the Targum.]¹⁰⁸

"Some of those who stood there and heard were saying, 'He's calling Elijah.' And immediately one of them ran and took a sponge and filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed and was giving him a drink.

"But the rest said, 'Leave off. Let's see if Elijah comes and will save him.'"

As we have said, some suppose that Jesus was no longer able to speak clearly. Another possibility is that the listeners were misled by his Galilean accent.

Brave men and women have sometimes been able to face death and endure torture without a groan — whether inflicted by violence or disease — but we are not in a position to judge between them and other brave persons from whom a cry has been racked. They all trouble our hearts and nerve our souls. The Gospel authors write about the end of Jesus' life with an apparent detachment, but perhaps because their first readers needed no expression of feeling from them. These first readers may have felt, as I and some other Christians feel today, that Jesus' torment was exceptionally severe because it was more mental even than physical and because he was exceptionally sensitive to evil. He set himself the task of utterly eradicating evil, a task that can only be accomplished by one who is aware of evil's subtlest filaments. He had said, it will be recalled, "Every plant that my heavenly Father didn't plant will be rooted out."¹⁰⁹

Most Christians believe Jesus died on the cross to rescue mankind from the curse of an inherited and otherwise ineradicable sin. To his cry, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" some of them answer, "Because you took on yourself the sins of all mankind who were to accept your sacrifice for them. You made yourself untold times more sinful than anyone else, past, present or future, so that all this sin would die with you. This was your act of sacrifice for all mankind, and to make it you had to make yourself so sinful that God had to forsake you."

Other Christians see the matter differently. Jesus' cry rends their hearts, but they see the rest of Jesus' actions and words as indicating that he answered to himself, "My loving Father cannot have forsaken His dutiful son. If fear that my life was a failure made me cry out, still I know there is nothing to fear, for God is with me, even if my followers are mute. Nothing has the power to destroy me or the words God gave me to speak. My students need this last and fullest proof of my teachings, and I will be able to complete it."¹¹⁰

By either way of thinking, this moment was the climax of Jesus' crucifixion and his death then followed.

Continuing with Matthew (and Mark). "Jesus when he had shouted again with a loud voice, gave up [his] spirit," or, in Mark's words, "breathed out [his spirit]." Luke says, "And shouting with a loud voice Jesus said, 'Father, "into Your hands I commit my spirit,"' [quoting Psalm 31:5], and after he said this he breathed out [his spirit]." If we wish to harmonize the Gospels we can equate the shout Luke records with the second shout in Matthew and Mark.

I take this last shout to be one more prayer, a reaffirmation of the beatitude, "Blessed [are] you when men will insult you and persecute [you], and say every evil [thing] against you, lying, on account of me. Don't lose your joy, be very glad, because your payment in heaven [is] great."¹¹¹

Continuing with Matthew. "And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, you see, from the top to the

bottom. [We do not know which of the temple curtains this was.] And the earth was shaken and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened and the bodies of many holy people who had slept [in death] were roused up and came out of [their] tombs and after his [Jesus' own] arousal they went into the holy city [Jerusalem, for burials were not allowed in cities] and appeared to many.”¹¹²

“And when the centurion and those with him guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and the happenings, they were very frightened, saying, ‘Truly, this was a son of God.’”

Mark and Luke do not mention the earthquake, the resurrection of the dead, or the soldiers' fright. They also say it was only the centurion who spoke, and Luke gives his words differently: “He glorified God, saying, ‘Certainly this was a righteous man.’” The agreements among the texts indicate that only the centurion spoke but that Matthew has the words right. Luke adds, “And all the people who came together to see that sight, seeing the things that happened, were returning [home], striking the breast.”

Matthew is not only alone in telling here about an earthquake, the graves opening and the dead arising, he is alone again later in telling about another earthquake when Jesus arose. Since the Gospel authors made individual selections from the facts at their disposal, Matthew is not necessarily wrong simply because he stands alone, but I believe that in these two places he was writing metaphorically. Here, the graves give up their dead when Jesus dies; later, when Jesus returns to life the guards at the tomb “become as dead men.” Introducing here the evidence that the dead revived makes the latter contrast bolder. Finally, the same language is to be found in Ezekiel, who wrote that when God destroyed Assyria He made the nations shake with the crash of its fall and that at the end of the Babylonian captivity God would open the graves of His people and cause them to come out. I therefore believe that Matthew's two contrasts of life and death were to emphasize the deeper meaning of what Jesus did.¹¹³

If we suppose that Matthew's words do not simply indicate the overwhelming significance he saw in Jesus' death and return to life, then perhaps we may suppose that Jesus' triumph over death could have caused sensitive people to feel a tremor and after his resurrection to visualize very clearly for a time that their own dead were in fact immortal, another example of seeing thoughts. Christians came to call themselves “holy people,” or “saints,” but we cannot tell whether the holy people Matthew speaks of would have been followers of Jesus or a range of men and women of good will.

Continuing with Matthew (and Mark and Luke). “And many women were there, looking on from a distance, who followed Jesus from Galilee, helping him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of [Little] James and Joseph, and [Salome] the mother of [James and John] the sons of Zebedee.” Mark says there were many other women also. Luke gives no names, but says all the men who knew Jesus were there as well.

John's account of Jesus' last words and death is different. He says nothing about the verbal abuse Jesus suffered, the earthquake, the centurion's praise, the crowd of sympathizers or the women watching at a distance. Instead he tells of the following.

“And there stood by Jesus' cross his mother and his mother's sister, [and] Mary the [wife] of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. So when Jesus saw [his] mother and the student whom he loved standing beside [her], he says to [his] mother, ‘Woman, behold your son.’ And he says to the student, ‘Behold your mother.’ And from that hour the student took her into his own [family].

“After this Jesus, knowing that all things [needing to be done] had now been finished, says, ‘I'm thirsty,’ so that the scripture will be fulfilled. A vessel was lying [there] full of sour wine, and they put a sponge full of sour wine on [a branch of] hyssop and held it to his mouth. [Psalm 69:21 says, “In my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.”]¹¹⁴

“So when Jesus received the sour wine, he said, ‘It's finished,’ and bowing [his] head he gave away [his] spirit.”

Those familiar with spiritual healing maintain that the “spirit” spoken of by Matthew and Luke as well as John is better expressed in the other translation of the word, “wind.” We have seen Jesus making metaphorical use of the two meanings when talking to Nicodemus at the beginning of his career of healing and teaching, so that the theme makes a frame around the ministry in John’s Gospel. For “spirit,” then, these Christians mentally substitute “breath,” maintaining that Jesus did not abandon his spiritual nature but insisted on it. Without such insistence, they say, his career would indeed have ended on the cross as others say it did.¹¹⁵

“So the Jews, because it was the preparation [for Passover], in order that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high holiday [that is, it was also Passover]), asked Pilate that their legs would be broken [so as to bring about their death before sundown] and that they would [then] be taken away.”¹¹⁶

The Law of Moses says corpses hanged on trees are not to be left there overnight. Peter and Paul later equated Jesus’ crucifixion with the kind of hanging referred to in the Law because there was some overlap between the two. Jewish hanging was only a display of the dead body, it was not also the cause of death.¹¹⁷

Continuing with John. “So the soldiers came and did indeed break the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with him, but when they came to Jesus, as they saw that he had died already, they did not break his legs, but one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and immediately blood came out, and water.¹¹⁸

“And he who has seen it [presumably the author himself] has testified, and his testimony is true, and he knows that he speaks truly, so that you will trust. For these [things] happened in order that the scripture will be fulfilled, ‘A bone of his shall not be broken’ [Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12, referring to the Passover lambs, and Psalms 34:20, referring to God’s protection of the righteous person]. And again another scripture says, ‘They will look on him whom they pierced’ [Zechariah 12:10].”

If we suppose that the Gospels supplement rather than contradict each other, then Jesus said seven things on the cross. The traditional order of the “seven words” is as follows.

1. “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing” [Luke].
2. “Truly, I say to you, you’ll be with me in paradise today” [Luke].
3. “Woman, behold your son. Behold your mother” [John].
4. “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” [Matthew, Mark].
5. “I’m thirsty” [John].
6. “It’s finished” [John].
7. “Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit” [Luke].

For centuries these seven words have been the texts for Eastertide sermons.

As I have noted, the words “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” are the opening line of Psalm 22. When Jesus said, “I’m thirsty,” one who heard it gave him sour wine in accordance with Psalm 69:21, “in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” And “Into Your hands I commit my spirit” is a quotation from Psalm 31:5.

Psalm 22 includes the lines

They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying,
‘He trusted in the Lord that He would deliver him.
Let Him deliver him, seeing He delighted in him.’ . . .
They pierced my hands and my feet
They divide my clothes among them

and cast lots for my garments.

Psalm 31 includes the lines

[I was] a fear to my friends,
they who saw me outside fled from me, . . .
for I have heard the slander of many,
fear [is] on every side,
they plotted against me,
they planned to take away my life.

Psalm 69 includes the lines

They that hate me without a cause
are more than the hairs of my head
The zeal of Your house ate me up
I looked for some to take pity but there was none,
and for comforters but I found none.
They also gave me gall for my food.

These Psalms fit Jesus' condition in remarkable detail, and his followers regarded him as calling attention to the fact that he was fulfilling scripture. But more important, all three Psalms end with rejoicing for answered prayer, and sensitive listeners may have realized that Jesus was providing comfort for them and strengthening himself.

Some scholars question Jesus' motives in fulfilling scripture. Because Jesus knew the Scriptures, they say, he saw to it that he conformed to them. Others go farther, saying that Jesus was not a real person and that those who pretended to write his biography modeled his fictional career on the Scriptures. It is therefore perhaps worth saying again that the evidence of spiritual healing today is against such skepticism. Those who learn from experience that they can trust the accounts of Jesus' healings learn also that they must lead honest lives, as he said they must, to continue in his way. What is necessary for them, they feel, must have been necessary for Jesus and his biographers. An evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit.

Although each of the Gospel authors expresses himself in his own words, all agree that Jesus gave up or put down his life of his own accord. Those who feel that it was taken away from him instead may conclude that he died of shock induced by his mental turmoil and physical suffering. Once more, the evidence of spiritual healing, though necessarily indirect, supports the Gospels. Spiritual healing as I described it at the beginning of Chapter III asserts the individual's control over his body and life under God and offers its successes as proof of its assertions. Further, it emphatically asserts that these healings are not intended to continue physical life indefinitely but to show the way to spiritual life. Seen in the light of spiritual healing, Jesus began his transition from physical life by giving it up. In this view, Jesus' death was fundamentally important for mankind — as important as in the more usual Christian view that his death took away the sins of others — but still left more for him to do before his students would understand what he was proving.¹¹⁹

SECTION VI – B10 (Mark 16:1-6)

RESURRECTION

[Matthew 28:1-15](#) [Mark 16:1-11](#) [Luke 24:1-12](#) [John 20:1-18](#).

All the Gospels say that when Jesus' followers first came to his tomb on Sunday morning they found the spirit of the place had changed from death to Life. It is hardly to be expected, however, that those who first became aware of Jesus' resurrection should have remembered exactly how it was borne in upon them, or have found words to describe how they arrived at their individual convictions. One of our contemporaries who experienced a spiritual healing wrote later that the pain disappeared "early in the morning; I could feel the presence of the Christ within — a feeling that cannot be described." We have seen how difficult it was for Jesus to translate divine truths into human language, and we may well believe that none of his followers had language adequate to tell except in metaphor what occurred in her mind and heart (women first found the tomb empty and first saw the risen Jesus).

The Gospel authors, it seems to me, sought each in his own way to evoke the atmosphere and significance of that hour instead of trying to learn exactly what happened. A modern biographer, then, can hope only to record the variety of individual responses that found their way into the Gospels. There is no way to determine a single series of events that can be called "historical."

Some of the women who came to the tomb remembered the time as daybreak (as recorded by Matthew and Mark), some as while it was still dark (as recorded by John). All four Gospels say Mary Magdalene was one of the women, Matthew mentions also "the other Mary," who may be the same person as Mary the mother of Little James mentioned by Mark and Luke. Mark also names Salome, who was the mother of James and John, Luke names Joanna, who was the wife of Chusa, the steward of Herod Antipas.

They came, says Mark, to anoint Jesus' body with spices, which, as Luke had said, they had prepared two days before. "And," says Mark, "they were saying to each other, 'Who'll roll the stone away from the door of the tomb?' And looking up, they see that the stone has been rolled away; for it was very large."¹³⁰

Matthew, the only author to tell of the guard at the tomb, describes how the stone had been rolled away, and, by introducing the event after telling of the women's coming there, implies that they all saw it, the women as well as the guards: "And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord went down from heaven, and came and rolled the stone [from the door], and was sitting on it. His appearance was like lightning [for brightness], and his clothes white as snow, and for fear of him the guards shook and became like dead [men]." Matthew, or whoever told him about this angel, adopted language used in the book of Daniel to picture God and one of His messengers.¹³¹

Some of the women remembered going into the tomb, some only looking in, and some just standing outside. Some felt the presence of a single angelic messenger, some the presence of two. Some could remember feeling only fear, some great joy also.

Those who remembered only one messenger, whether an angel sitting on the stone he had rolled from the tomb's door (Matthew) or a young man sitting in the tomb on the right side with a long white robe thrown around his shoulders (Mark), remembered his message more or less as follows (I quote Mark): "Don't be astounded. You seek Jesus the Nazarene, who's been crucified. He's been roused up, he's not here. See the place where they put him. But go, tell his students and Peter, 'He's going ahead of you into Galilee. You'll see him there, just as he said to you [on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane].'"

Those who remembered crouching in fear before two men in the tomb whose clothes shone like

lightning (Luke) remembered their words as, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He’s not here, but has been roused up. Remember how he spoke to you when he was still in Galilee, saying ‘The Son of man must be given away into the hands of sinful people and be crucified, and rise up the third day.’” Luke continues, “And they remembered his statements.”¹³²

Finally, the women had different memories of who brought the news to the apostles, which of them also saw Jesus and when, and what the apostles’ response had been. The matter is further complicated by the likelihood that the last part of Mark’s original narrative of these events has been lost.

Mark says, “And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling was possessing them and confusion, and they did not say anything to anyone for they were afraid.”

These are the last words in his Gospel that we can be sure are his own. The two earliest manuscripts that we have, from the fourth century, end here, and so do the commentaries on Mark by Clement of Alexandria and Origen, who lived in the preceding century. But the words “for they were afraid” are not in a grammatical construction that we should expect to find at the end of a book (the word meaning “for” comes last). No other Greek writing known to us ends with such a construction. Therefore it appears that Mark must have continued further.¹³³

Four early manuscripts, one perhaps of the sixth century, say that some other manuscripts now lost continued as follows: “And they reported briefly all the [angel’s] instructions to Peter and those with him. And after this Jesus himself sent out by them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. Amen.” This continuation is called the shorter ending of Mark. It seems too short to have been the original ending of the book.

Two fifth-century manuscripts (and most others) continue instead with what is called the longer ending. It was also known to Irenaeus and Tertullian in the second century, and the copyist of one of the fourth-century manuscripts mentioned earlier left a space for it. One of the fifth-century manuscripts also has a lengthy insertion in the longer ending. Although the longer ending makes an effective close to the book, it does not link itself well to “for they were afraid,” and so most scholars feel that it was not the original ending either. The contents of the longer ending, which I shall call “Mark” hereafter, may have been made up by summarizing material taken from the other Gospels.

“Mark” begins, “And when [Jesus] arose, early the first [day] of the week he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had thrown seven demons. She went and told those who were with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, hearing that he was alive and was seen by her, didn’t trust [her].”¹³⁴

Matthew differs from both Mark and “Mark”: “And [the women] went off quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to announce [the good news] to his students. And Jesus met them, you see, saying, ‘Good morning [everyone].’ And they came and held him by the feet and bowed before him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid, go tell my brothers to go into Galilee, and there they’ll see me’ [thus repeating what Matthew and Mark say the angel at the tomb had told them].”¹³⁵

Matthew has nothing to say about how the apostles responded. Instead he continues as follows. “And while they [the women] were going, some of the guards came into the city and announced to the high priests everything that had happened. And when they were assembled with the elders and arrived at a decision, they gave plenty of money to the soldiers, saying, ‘Say, “His students came by night and stole him while we were sleeping.” And if this will be heard by the governor, we’ll persuade him and make you carefree.’ And they took the money, and did as they were taught, and this word was widely reported by the Jews [and is] to this day.”

Luke’s researches apparently found nothing about the women’s seeing Jesus, but only that “they returned from the tomb and told all these [things] to the eleven [apostles] and all the rest. And these statements appeared to them like nonsense and they were not trusting them. But Peter arose and ran to

the tomb, and when he stooped down, he saw the linen cloths alone, and went off to his own [place of residence], wondering at what had happened.”

Mary Magdalene’s memory of events appears to have reached us in more detail through the Gospel of John, where it is supplemented as well by the author’s own memory if he was “the student Jesus loved.” John says that when Mary Magdalene saw the stone was taken away from the tomb, “she runs and comes to Simon Peter and the other student, the one whom Jesus loved, and says to them, ‘They took away the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they put him.’”

“So Peter went out, and the other student, and they were going to the tomb. And the two were running together, and the other student ran ahead more quickly than Peter and came to the tomb first. And he stooped down and sees the linen cloths lying [there] but he did not go in. So Simon Peter came following him and went into the tomb, and sees the linen cloths lying [there] and the towel that was around his head not lying with the linen cloths but having been rolled up in a place by itself. So the other student, who came to the tomb first, went in too, and he saw, and trusted. For as yet they did not know the scripture that he must arise from among the dead. Then the students went away again to their own [places of residence].¹³⁶

“But Mary stood outside at the tomb, weeping. So as she was weeping she stooped down [and looked] into the tomb, and sees two angels in white [clothes] sitting, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus was lying [two days before].

“And these say to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ [That is, you ought to be rejoicing.]

“[Misunderstanding their question] she says to them, ‘Because they took my Lord, and I don’t know where they put him.’”

“And after she said these [things], she turned back and sees Jesus standing [there] and did not know it was Jesus.

“Jesus says to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’

“She, supposing that he is the gardener [John had previously said the tomb was in a garden], says to him, ‘Sir, if you carried him [from here], tell me where you put him, and I’ll take him [away].’¹³⁷

“Jesus says to her, ‘Mary.’

“She turned, and says to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means ‘Teacher’).

“Jesus says to her, ‘Hold me no longer, for I haven’t yet ascended to the Father, but go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and my God and your God.’”

“Mary Magdalene comes and tells the students, ‘I’ve seen the Lord,’ and that he said these [things] to her.”

The words I have translated “Hold me no longer” are translated “touch me not” in the King James Version, and “stop clinging to me” by Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker and others, and so understood have seemed to many people to be a most unloving thing for Jesus to say to his devoted follower. It is surely better to recognize the Greek present imperative here as representing an “aspect” of the verb, specifically a continuing action. By that interpretation, Jesus gently brings to an end Mary’s delighted and wondering embrace, telling her he is engaged on a great work that requires him to free himself from a material sense of his identity and therefore to be alone with God most of the time.¹³⁸

Mary’s experience at the tomb exactly parallels that of Elijah on Mt. Horeb. Elijah was twice asked by God why he was hiding there, and his response was the same both times, “because my life is in danger.” After the second response, God made clear to him that he had nothing to fear. Just so, Mary was twice asked “Why are you weeping?” and in effect responded both times, “because they took my Lord, and I don’t know where they put him.” Jesus then made clear to her that she had no cause for sorrow.¹³

Please contact me (dougmcoco@gmail.com) if you have any questions or comments.