

Golgotha: The Place of the Skull

Reuben's corpse had been lying on my desk for three days when she knocked on my door. I say desk, but it was, apart from a spindly chair, the only item of furniture in my single room. It also served as a dining table, dressing table, and occasionally as a pillow following an over-indulgence of wine, when I couldn't drag my inebriated body the three steps to my straw mattress in the corner.

Oh, and by the way, Reuben was the mortal remains of a particularly irritating fly that buzzed around my head while I tried to figure out my last case. The biggest mystery of that assignment being that, how an apparently wealthy man, so grateful when I tracked down his wayward son, suddenly had no money when it was time to settle his bill. He could also make himself magically disappear whenever I called at this house.

I had swatted the fly with my sandal, and instantly regretted it as I watched him flail his tiny legs in his final death throes. I realised that I had taken out my frustrations on the little guy, and named him Reuben in an attempt to give him some identity and dignity in death. It seemed the least I could do. When the limbs finally stopped twitching, I made a silent blessing, and didn't have the heart to remove his body. Maybe I wanted a visual reminder to act as a guilty penance for my unwarranted violent outburst.

The knock, soft and tentative, pulled me from my melancholy reverie, and I rose to answer. I had to blink into the sunlight that cut into the darkness of my humble abode.

The owner of the knock was around twenty, cute and innocent looking. Not the kind of dame I was used to dealing with.

"Shalom," I croaked. My mouth was dry as a bone. "What can I do for you?"

"I hear that you are a private detective - you can find missing people."

"You hear correctly. Please." I gestured an invite into my dark hovel-slash-office. She entered dubiously.

I pulled up the chair for the girl to sit, while I flicked Reuben out of the way to perch on the table.

"So. Who needs finding?"

"It's my friend. And master."

"Oh-kay." This was going to be an odd one. "You're not from around here, are you?"

She smiled self-consciously. "Is it so obvious? I lived in Capernaum until I met him."

"I pride myself at spotting accents. Besides, I'm originally from the Galilee area - some years back."
 "Well, I've only been in Jerusalem for a short time."
 "You and the rest of Judea and beyond. See, miss, I gotta tell you, finding missing people in Jerusalem at Passover time is like-."

"The man that I seek is dead."

"Whoa, sweet cheeks. How can a dead man go missing?"

"That's why I came to you. His name is Jesus, from Nazareth. He was crucified on Friday."

"Yeah, I heard about that. Did he stir up a hornet's nest. Bad-mouthing our illustrious priesthood was only going to end one way."

"Yes. And he knew that." She said the words quietly, close to tears. I felt for the girl. She obviously had something for this sap.

"So, the Romans ice this guy, but then his body goes awol?"

She looked up at me, her big eyes brimming. "We took his body down, washed, anointed and dressed him, and placed him in a tomb at Golgotha."

"He had a tomb there? I thought the guy was penniless?"

"A friend, Joseph, arranged it. But when we went to visit today, his body was gone, and the stone blocking the tomb entrance had been rolled away. There was a man dressed in white outside, who told me that I shouldn't worry."

"What did this guy look like?"

"Tall, long hair. I couldn't really see his face because he had his back to the sun. I turned to check the tomb again, and when I came out he was gone."

"Okay. Miss -."

"Joanna."

"Joanna. Let me see if I got this straight. The stiff-" Joanna flinched at the word, and I cursed myself for my clumsy spiel. "Sorry, sweetheart. When you spend your life around fellow bums and drunks, you can forget there are decent sensitive people in this world. Forgive my crude words."

"I can vouch for the drunken bum part." The voice came from a dame dressed in black, draped against the doorframe. Her dark robe was full length covering her slender body, yet she still exuded sensuality

"What are you wasting your time with this guy, Jo? He's usually too sauced to find his way home, let alone find a missing person."

I failed to recognise the curves, but the sardonic wit was unmistakable. "Mary - you haven't changed one bit."

"You'd be surprised."

"Amazed. I didn't know you were in town."

"There's a lot you don't know about me."

"Why don't you come on in - you've already invited yourself into this conversation."

Mary swung into the room, her robe moving with the sway of her hips. A headscarf covered her lush silken black hair, but her obsidian shining eyes captured mine. "I have an interest in this business. I happened to know Jesus, and owe a massive debt to the great man," she went on. "And Joanna is a friend, someone too nice to get mixed up with the likes of you."

I smiled. "It's always a pleasure, Mary. I'd offer you a seat, if I had more than one."

"I prefer to stand." Except she didn't, and leaned against the table, uncomfortably close to me. Her eyes never left mine, even when she spoke to the girl. "So, has he discussed rates yet? Sam never does anything for free, and we're not exactly loaded."

"No. I was just trying to explain about our lord."

Joanna answered, almost apologetically.

"Yeah, tough break," I chipped in. "But while we're on the subject, it's five denarii per day, plus expenses. One day's pay up front."

The kid's face fell. She'd probably never see five denarii in a month.

"I guess you don't spend any of your fees on the décor. But I bet the local bar-owner owns horses." Mary was unfazed.

"Business has been kinda slow. But there it is, take it, or leave it."

"We'll leave it," Mary quickly replied. "Come on, Jo. I told you that you'd be wasting your time."

"Hold on, miss," I said to the girl, as she started to get up. "I feel for your predicament. Let's say you get the first day on credit. I'll ask around, see what comes up."

"That's very kind. Thank you, uh--"

"Samuel. Some people, a mite uncharitably in my opinion, call me Sam the Spade. Because I dig the dirt."

"That's not all he shovels," Mary added unhelpfully.

"We're making our own enquiries too. Come on, Joanna, let's go."

"Maybe if we took him to the others?" Joanna suggested.

"No," Mary slapped her down quickly.

"The others?" I asked.

"The situation is pretty volatile. There are friends of ours who would prefer to keep a low profile."

"Anything I find out is strictly between you and me. I'm not going to blab to Caiaphas or the Romans.

"I said no." Mary was adamant.

"If I can't talk to everyone involved, how do you expect to find your dead buddy?"

"I don't." Mary left, with her cute friend giving me an sympathetic half-smile as she trailed behind.

So what did I have to go on? Not much, but when in doubt, start at the scene of the crime. I pulled on my coat and headed out of the city towards Golgotha; so-named as the place of the Skull.

As I left the city walls behind, my mind strayed back to my time with Mary. She arrived at my hometown, Bethsaida, already carrying a reputation, having been disowned by her family. At the age of fifteen, she had been forced into marriage with a wool trader. The problem was, he used her as a punch-bag. That is, until the day she threw a pot of boiling soup in his face and ran. He wasn't best pleased, and neither were her parents now that their plans for wealthy grandchildren were wrecked. They cut her off and threw her out. Mary had to do what was necessary to make ends meet, but she was a little too successful, and the womenfolk chased her out of her village.

I have never put much stock in reputation, so I didn't worry about how she earned a shekel. We all got to eat, and her choices were somewhat limited. For me, still in my teenage years, Mary represented something new and rebellious. She showed me a thing or two, free of charge. I guess she took pity on my inexperienced fumbblings. I amused her, and we had an on-off relationship for a while.

But my parents weren't so open-minded, and went crazy with me when they found out. It was just the push I needed. I gave up tending the family's goats and set off for the big city to seek my fortune. I'm still searching.

"I'm looking for a tomb," I said to a tubby guy in a grubby smock, leaning on a shovel, who I took to be a cemetery attendant. He appeared to be doing more sweating than working.

"Take your pick - it's a cemetery." Funny guy, I thought.

"It's a particular tomb. It used to house a guy named Jesus, but now it's empty."

"Not another one. What is it with you guys? I don't know nothing. I aint paid to know nothing."

"Okay, slow down. I'm trying to find out what happened to the body."

"Yeah, you and half of Jerusalem." He paused to wipe his forehead. The simple act of talking was making him sweat. "There's the tomb in question. Help yourself." He pointed to a small chamber hacked out of the rock under the skull-shaped cliff that gave Golgotha its name.

I walked over to take a look, reluctantly followed by my sweaty new friend. The large stone that had blocked the entrance, which would need a couple of guys to move, lay on the ground nearby. I looked inside, but there was nothing to see.

"And this is how it was found this morning?" I asked over my shoulder.

"Sure. Look, what can I tell you? The stiff was in there on Friday, with the stone across the entrance. Today, the stone's moved, and so had the stiff. Maybe he got bored - I don't know. Now, I go work to do."

"There was a tall guy dressed in white here. Do you know him?"

"There's been loads of guys here, including some heavies sent by Caiaphas. You can't expect me to know who's who."

"I heard the tomb is owned by a rich guy named Joseph."

"Joseph of Aramathea. He's another one that's been around here. Not that I mind - he tips well. Got a swell pad on the northern slopes."

"Thanks. You've been a mine of information."

The guy held out his grubby hand expecting me to tip him. I shook it warmly and gave him my best smile before walking off.

"Huh. Whatever." He mumbled.

The tomb-guy wasn't kidding. Joseph's estate covered a hillside, accessed by a track winding through groves of vines and olive trees, attended by small groups of well-fed workers. The house, when I eventually go to it, though not ostentatious, it oozed class.

A well-dressed, well-built servant met me at the gateway to the large courtyard. The courtyard was paved with mosaics around a central water-garden, with beds of exotic plants and shrubs radiating out towards the main house, with other buildings, presumably servants' quarters and stables. A high wall completely enclosed the courtyard.

"Shalom," I greeted the servant. "Is Joseph here this morning?"

The servant looked me up and down, and silently decided I was the human equivalent of something he would scrape off of his sandal. "The master will not see anyone. So, please-"

"I'm helping Suzannah and Mary in the search for the body of Jesus."

"Let him in, Mishak." The call came from a guy tending flowers in the courtyard.

"Very good, sir." The servant moved aside for me to pass, and evaporated out of sight. Joseph, whom I had

taken to be a gardener, didn't look up from his pruning as I approached.

"Your name?" he demanded simply.

"Samuel."

"Did you ever hear Jesus teach?"

"Never had the pleasure."

"Pity. He was absolutely spell-binding. He once told a parable about a man sowing seeds, which immediately go my attention - you can appreciate my love of gardening." He paused to hold me in a steady gaze, gauging my reaction.

"In the parable, some seeds fell on stony ground, some amongst thorns and some on good soil. The seeds represent the word of Jehovah, do you understand?"

"I'm with you so far."

"Those that fell on stones were ignored, those amongst thorns made only shallow roots and were choked by worldly desires." Joseph snipped a stem with relish. "And the seeds that fell on good soil multiplied to produce a bountiful harvest of righteous people. Which category would you say you fit in, Samuel?"

"I guess I'm easily choked by thorns."

"Ah. At least you are honest. Shall we sit?"

We sat on a stone bench nearby, the sun warming our backs.

"Some wine perhaps?" he offered.

"A tad early for me," I lied. Not so honest, then. Joseph raised a hand, and a couple of servants appeared from nowhere with water and fruit, then disappeared again.

"So what do you know about Jesus?"

"Mainly, just what I've heard around town. I was jammed in a crowd when he came to Jerusalem before Passover. Everyone was cheering and singing, and saying he was the messiah. Some said he could do miracles, cure the sick and the lame. I just saw a guy riding a donkey."

"Rumour and gossip are dangerous things. But if you had met him, spoken to him, you would know he was different. Unique. His apparent ordinariness, his simplicity made his depth of wisdom even more irresistible. He didn't need shining armour or a golden chariot to prove who he was."

"Some thought he would rid Judeah of the Romans. Maybe the armour and chariot would have been better suited."

"Well, that's where Jesus was different. What great leader tells his followers to love their enemies?"

"One who is about to get wasted by those same enemies, I guess."

"Your cynicism diminishes you, Samuel. You have never experienced the liberating joy of letting your hatred and bitterness go."

"True. I also heard that Jesus told his followers to give up all of their wealth. Where does that leave you?"

"Troubled and aware of my weakness."

"See, I don't have your problem of concerning myself over what to do with excess money - although I think I could rise to the challenge. Maybe we could help each other out."

"If you find our lord's earthly remains, I can assure you that you will be amply rewarded. However, you will find such earthly treasure shallow and fleeting."

I was about to remark on how he looked quite good on it, but now that there was a meal ticket on the table, I wasn't about to burn it.

"But please do not judge Jesus on the deficiencies of those such as myself," he went on. "There are others who are stronger and have much deeper faith than I."

"These others - would they be Mary and Susannah's friends, also followers of Jesus?"

"Yes. A very noble group, but fearful of Caiaphas and his thugs."

"Don't tell me, you can't divulge their whereabouts."

"Correct," he confirmed with a patient smile.

"Let me ask you a question then. No offence, but some sects get quite attached to preserving relics of their leaders. Do you think some of his followers would have taken the body?"

"No, absolutely not. And, as they are in fear for their own lives, why would they take such a risk?"

"It's a fair point. Sharing a hiding place with a decomposing body can't be too much fun."

"Quite." Joseph was humouring my crass observation.

"There is one who will not be in hiding though. A trusted friend who became a traitor. Judas Iscariot."

Judas Iscariot was not difficult to find, because he had been splashing silver in every backstreet over the past few days. Getting to meet face-to-face was altogether a trickier proposition. I soon got word that he was being entertained in a brothel fronted by a Persian tailor.

Initially, they welcomed me in, but as soon as they realised I had no money, smiles turned to snarls, and I found myself back on the street.

I waited among the street hawkers and beggars, buffeted by the swirling currents of visitors, pilgrims and travelling merchants coursing through the narrow streets of the old town. Luckily, our man got through his entertainment quickly and I didn't have to wait too long. The dame came out of the side alley first, pulling a scarf around her head, glancing around furtively before disappearing into the crowd. Judas emerged more slowly, a self-satisfied grin on his drunken features.

I followed as he weaved lazily through the mass of people, eventually arriving at lodgings above a bakery. The room looked modest but clean - not easy, nor cheap, to come by in Jerusalem at Passover time. I watched him climb the steps and push through a timber door. I followed quickly, and swung the door open. Judas was already slumped on a cot in the far corner. "Knock, knock," I said, standing in the doorway. Judas jumped up, surprised at my intrusion. "Sorry to disturb your slumber, buddy. Mind if I come in?" "Who the hell are you?" he demanded. "Let's say I'm a friend of a friend. Of, more accurately, friend of an ex-friend of yours. Jesus of Nazareth." The lug's face fell, his eyes darting warily. "I got nothing to say, so you might as well leave." "Don't worry. I'm not going to quiz you on why you betrayed your pal. I just want to know where his body is." "What? I don't know what you're talking about." I took a few steps into his room. It was modest, but nicely appointed. "So, you just took the money, then forgot about him. I've been asking around - you've been casting coinage like there's no tomorrow." "So what? It's none of your goddamn business." "And you don't know, or don't care, what happened to the body then? You don't care what happens to your old friends? Not that I'm one to judge - I would do most things if the money was right. But even I might draw the line at sending a friend, innocent of any crime, to his death." "You don't know nothing about it. I thought he was going to be a powerful leader, one to make Israel great again. Loving your enemies don't cut no ice with the Romans." "So you were disappointed. That's no reason to set a peaceful guy up to be crucified. By the same Romans that you hate. I hope all of the whoring and drinking is worth it." Angry, Judas stepped towards me. "Who the hell you think you are? I told you to get out, or-." "Or what?" I stood my ground. I was no great fighter, but I was sure this guy was even less, and a coward too. He backed off. "I don't need to get my hands dirty. I got connections - they could make you disappear." "Those same connections could also take you out - particularly now you've outlived your usefulness. You have a good day."

I left Judas seething, and got back into the street to figure out my next move. And quickly realised that I was being followed.

The guy was obviously new to this caper, desperately trying to appear to be interested in an item on a market stall every time I glanced in his direction. I hurried through the winding streets, forcing him to rush to catch up, then darted down an alley. The alley opened up into a small yard, where an old, blind and lame beggar had taken up temporary residence. "Sorry to barge in, sir. Mind if I borrow this?" Before the beggar had time to answer, I had taken one of his crutches and stuck it across the entrance to the yard at shin height. My shadow hit the crutch and went sprawling on to the filthy flagstones. I pinned the guy down with the crutch, pressing hard on his spine.

"Who are you?" I growled in my best tough-guy voice.

"My name is Thomas. Who are you?"

"I'm asking the questions. You're eating dirt."

"Can I have my stick back now?" croaked the old man still sat behind me.

"Not yet, old timer. Not until Tommy here tells me why he was following me."

"You working for Caiaphas?" Thomas, still prone, asked.

"There he goes with the questions again. Now, if I was one of Caiaphas thugs, there's no way I would tell you. And, you wouldn't be breathing now."

I relaxed the pressure on Thomas' spine, but still wouldn't let him get up. "Now, let me make it easier for you." I offered. "I'm guessing that you are a follower of Jesus. And a friend of Mary and Suzannah. Grunt if this assumption is correct."

"You know Mary?"

"Another question. Yeah, I know Mary." In more ways than I was prepared to reveal.

"If you let me get up, I'll explain."

I decided that he was relatively harmless, and pulled the stick away. "Arise, Thomas. But don't try anything rash."

Thomas pulled himself to his feet and tried to brush the dirt and crap off of his robe.

"Now pay the man." I nodded in the direction of the old man.

"What for?"

"For the hire of his stick."

"What? I -."

"Come on - you're supposed to care for the sick and the poor. Where's your sense of charity?"

Reluctantly, Thomas put two coins in the old man's bowl, and I returned the crutch.

"Thanks for the loan."

The old man smiled toothlessly. "You're welcome. Bless you, son."

Thomas followed me out of the alley, and we found a horse trough where he attempted to mop the stains out of his robe.

"You said you know Mary?" he murmured.

"We got some history."

"I know something of her past - some people would judge her harshly for it. But she's a good woman - and takes no bull from anyone."

"Aint that the truth." I leant against a rough stone wall, chewing on a straw. "So maybe I can get to ask some questions, seeing as I'm the investigator. What can you tell me about Jesus?"

Thomas shrugged. "That he was the most remarkable man I ever met. I didn't know him that long. I heard him speak at Jericho, as he journeyed to Jerusalem. I never met somebody so wise, but so humble. Although I was part of a huge crowd, it was like he spoke to me personally. It was like he could see into your soul. It's hard to explain."

"You're doing great."

"I left my home, family, everything, so I could follow him. I hoped he would make me a disciple, with the other twelve. Then came the fight with the money-changers at the temple, then Judas-."

Thomas spat out his name.

"That snake turned him in to Caiaphas and the Romans crucified him."

"You got know ideas as to what happened to his body after he was entombed?"

"No. You know as much as me."

"What about the twelve, his disciples?"

"Eleven, now. Not that it makes much difference any more. They're just as shocked and distraught as we all are."

"Let me speak to them. See if any of them can give me something to go on."

"I don't think that's such a good idea. Caiaphas has ears and eyes everywhere. That's why I was following you, to check who are and why you were asking questions. Peter, Jesus most trusted friend, sent me because I'm not well known as one of Jesus' followers. If we get tailed going to where they're hiding, then we're all dead."

Without thinking, we both looked around us, checking the faces of the people who passed. He had a point.

Paranoia was contagious, although very understandable in the circumstances.

"Okay, I take your point. Let's keep moving." I led him through street to the busiest market square I could think of. It was easier to hide among a sea of faces.

"So, you made any progress in your enquiries?" he asked.

"Sorry, pal. I only report to those who pay me."

"You know, there's more to life than money. One of Jesus' great truths."

"And you're probably right. It's just that life is pretty hard when you've got none."

Thomas stopped at a stall and bought two large oranges. He threw one to me. I would have preferred that the orange was flavouring something alcoholic, but beggars etcetera.

"The teacher spoke out against the love of money. And I have seen what greed can do."

"Ah, you're erstwhile friend Judas. Look, I don't make moral judgements. I just find out what my clients need to know."

"You aint got such a rotten heart. If you only cared about yourself, what happened back in the alley would have played differently."

"Sure, kid. I guess you mean well. Thanks for the orange."

I turned to go, then thought of a question. "Hey, kid. Just one thing. You absolutely sure Jesus was dead when they took him down from the cross."

"I was watching from the crowd. He drew his last breath, then one of the Roman bastards speared him to make sure. I wish it wasn't so, but he died all right."

"Thanks, kid. Keep your head down."

I walked away, peeling my orange.

The sun was setting by the time I made it back to my office. I had a feeling that something was wrong, even before the door was slammed behind me. Before I could look around, I was punched in the kidneys and thrown to the floor.

A lamp was lit to reveal Barnabas, Caiaphas' head gorilla staring down at me. Two more of his goons lounged by the door. I struggled to catch my breath, but managed to wheeze, "Come on in. Make yourself at home." I raised myself up on one elbow.

"Don't try to get up, wise-guy," advised Barnabas, cracking his knuckles as he towered above me. "I guess even you can work out why we're here. You've been asking too many questions to too many people."

"What can I say? I got an enquiring mind."

Barnabas glanced at his knucklehead buddies. "I told you we'd been dealing with a real smart-ass, didn't I boys?" He kicked me casually in the stomach. I writhed on the floor, trying to grasp my breath again. The big lug went

on. "Maybe I need to explain some basic facts to you. Jerusalem is on the edge of chaos - always has been, always will be. It won't take much to make the whole place rise up in revolt. One small flame could burn the place down."

"I guess your man Jesus calling your boss a hypocrite and disturbing his money-lending scam would fit into that category."

"You're catching on. The Romans are very twitchy. If there is a rebellion, then they stamp down heavily on all of us. Most people don't appreciate the delicate position the chief priests are in. A rebellion will have no chance of success, and the only result will be that the Romans will destroy everything Caiaphas has worked for. There will be no freedom of worship, and no temple to worship in."

"And no priesthood to tell people how to live their lives."

"You want the Romans to do that instead? Inflict their pagan gods on us, with Jews getting no say in what goes?"

"What I want or not isn't the issue here. I'm just trying to find out what happened to Jesus' body. Once I know that, my interest ends."

Barnabas settled his bulk in the chair, it's poor joints creaking to capacity.

"If you let me know where Jesus' band of hangers-on are hiding out, maybe we could exchange information."

"That would mean you engaging my services. I might have an conflict of interest with an existing client."

"So now you got morals?"

"No, just the bare minimum of professional standards."

"And how much dough would it take to lower these standards?"

"Oh, now I'm offended. The very idea that I could be paid off."

Barnabas rose, much to the relief of my chair. "I suggest that aint got a conflict of interest any more, because your work just ended for your existing client."

"And just when-." My feeble protests were silenced with another kick, putting me on my back. An iron-studded sandal was applied to my windpipe.

"No more smart-ass quips, Spade. Listen good - any more prying into Jesus, or how he died, or what happened after, and you may experience difficulty in breathing. Understand? As far as you're concerned, he never existed."

I didn't know what was worse - the weight of this ogre on my throat, or the stink of his feet. I thought it prudent to keep my mouth shut for once.

"Okay, boys - we're leaving. I think he got the message." Barnabas removed his foot, but gave me another kick for good measure.

"Shall we trash the place?" one of the goons asked.

"Please," Barnabas retorted. "Would anyone notice if we did."

Then they were gone. I found the last remark the most hurtful.

A shaft of dawn sunlight from my single window, illuminating the floating dust particles suspended in the air of my room. After Barnabas and his oafs had lumbered out, I hadn't the desire or energy to carry out further investigations, and crashed on my bed of straw to sleep fitfully, cradling my sore ribs. A self-destructive stubborn streak in me prevented me from giving in to intimidation, and I would have loved to put one over on the big schmuck, despite my inherent sense of self-preservation. But, I really had made no progress and was running out of options to continue the investigation. I was no further in discovering the whereabouts of Jesus' body, and had just earned myself a beating and dire threats for my troubles.

I decided to take another crack at Judas. He was sufficiently flaky, that if I squeezed a little harder, he just might just give up something for me to go on. Despite the early hour, Jerusalem was stirring into its busy mercantile life, as I made my way across town to Judas' lodgings. I imagined Caiaphas' agents at every street corner, and I looked for significance in every glance that came my way. It was easy to become paranoid under the circumstances, particularly that the tension in the city seemed so real I felt I could almost touch it. I stole a glance behind me before climbing the steps to Judas' room, and pushed open the door.

"Anyone home?" I called as the door swung open. The buzz of flies that greeted me told me that Judas was indeed at home, but wouldn't be too talkative. The cord from his robe was tied around a roof beam, with the other end looped around his neck. An upturned chair lay on the floor beneath his suspended feet.

Immediately, my suspicious mind wondered whether this was suicide, or made to look that way. One thing I trusted about Barnabas, was his threat if I was found to still be asking awkward questions. Maybe Judas was a loose end that had to be tied. Literally.

I took a quick look around before leaving. There was no final note, no expression of remorse for his treachery. There were just a few coins on the table by his bed, next to an empty wine jug. Not much of a legacy for someone instrumental in the killing of the messiah.

I guess I had to admit defeat - this case had beaten me completely. Also, having found Judas' body, my stubborn streak had given way to an even stronger instinct for survival.

I trekked out to Joseph's villa, glad to be outside the cloying confines of the teeming city.

"Ah, Samuel. Sit, my boy - it's good to see you."

Joseph greeted me like a long-lost returning son, which made me feel more of a sap for turning up empty handed.

"Thanks for the welcome, but I gotta come clean. I got nothing on the whereabouts of Jesus' body."

"Oh, don't you worry about that. Everything has been resolved."

"So you found him?"

"Well, he found us - so to speak."

"Am I a bit slow this morning - because I'm not catching on."

"Don't look so bemused - it's the most wonderful thing to happen. Our lord has risen."

"You're telling me that Jesus is alive?"

"Isn't it absolutely fantastic? I know it's hard to believe - you're wearing the same sceptical expression as Thomas did when he first heard the news. In fact, let's invite him to join us."

Joseph sent a servant off to one of the buildings off the courtyard. I wasn't sure if this guy had lost his marbles, or I was being subjected to some elaborate practical joke.

Soon, from the servants' quarters, the figures of Mary, Joanna and Thomas appeared, and approached the stone bench where Joseph and I were sitting. Susannah and Thomas wore broad dopy grins, and Mary had a kind of serenity about her, like the weight of her troubled life had been lifted.

Joanna embraced me, and Thomas clasped my hand warmly, as you might expect from your closest friends. I'd almost forgotten what that was like. Mary looked at me, still with those piercing eyes, but without any trace of the contempt that she held for me previously.

I was still floundering something to say, much to their amusement.

"Let me see if I've got this right. Your teacher, master, friend, whatever you want to call him-."

"He was all of those things, and more," Joseph helped.

"This guy was crucified last Friday, with no doubts that he was well and truly expired, then installed at Golgotha. Two days later his body goes missing, and you're telling me it's because he got up and walked out of his tomb."

"That's about the measure of it," Mary said.

"Look, I found it hard to swallow when the others told me they had seen him," Thomas put in. "But now I've seen him myself; spoken to him; touched him."

"We all have," Joanna added.

"And now they, with the others in our small band, are planning to travel throughout the Roman Empire to carry this great news of his rising, and share his teaching."

"Won't that just be a mite dangerous? If you thought Jerusalem was risky -"

"We all know the dangers," Mary replied. "Jesus warned us of it."

"But we will face whatever awaits us with faith and courage," Thomas continued, "knowing that, whatever they do to us, our Lord's words will live on."

Incredulous, I looked at all of them, beaming at me, without a care in the world. "Well, good luck with that," was all I could muster. I hoped the words didn't register with my usual sarcasm.

"Ah, on a more temporal note," Joseph started. "There is the business with regards to your payment."

"I came here to tell you I failed. I can hardly expect to be rewarded for such a failure."

"Nonsense. Let me at least compensate you for your efforts, and putting yourself at risk for us." Joseph pressed a small purse of coins into my hand. I wasn't about to argue any further.

"I'll walk you to the gates," Mary volunteered. I said my farewells and I strolled with her in the dappled sunshine of the olive groves.

"I would appreciate it if you could still keep quiet regarding our whereabouts until we have finished preparations to leave Jerusalem."

"Sure." I turned to her. "I guess this is goodbye."

"Afraid it is. Unless you want to join us." Her suggestion wasn't entirely in jest.

"Why would you want a cynical, money-grubbing drunk to tag along. Good news and me don't seem to mix."

"You know, you could change, if you let yourself. I was the same, until I met Jesus. He was here for people like us."

I looked deep into her beautiful, beguiling dark eyes. I could have been persuaded, but I knew my motives would be less than pure.

"Sorry, it's not for me. You take care of yourself. I'm glad you found happiness."

"You know, you're not such a bad guy. Sometimes you got to let yourself be happy - you just need to work out what is really important."

She lightly kissed my cheek, and then turned to walk back to the villa. I watched her go, part of me wanting to

chase after her. Reluctantly, I went on my way back towards Jerusalem.

I hadn't got far when, out of the setting sun, a tall figure dressed in white approached me. The sunlight radiated out from behind him, giving his long hair a kind of glow, his whole body seeming to be imbued with golden light. I stopped, completely transfixed by this ethereal appearance.

"What the hell you looking at?" the man growled. As he passed, I could see that he was a farm worker, no doubt tired and irritable after a day's work in the fields.

"Sorry, buddy. I thought you might have been somebody else," I murmured, still slightly off-balance. The guy grunted and moved on.

I also walked on, and considered how close I had come to losing my precious and heart-felt cynicism. Was Jesus alive or dead? Mary and the others certainly thought he was alive. It was good to see a happy customer; a very unusual outcome in my line of work, so I guess that is all what mattered to them. I had even been tempted, albeit for no more than a few seconds, to chase off on some hair-brained adventure to share a message of universal love and peace to the world.

I paused to feel the weight of the coins in the purse that Joseph had given me, and nodded with satisfaction. This is what was real. Right?

END

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