

A Soldier's Story

The Resurrection of Our Lord
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 31:1-6; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28:1-10

I keep comin' back here. It was over twenty years ago, probably. It still seems like it was this morning. I've seen a lot of weird things in my life. But that's the one that keeps comin' back again and again.

Still not sure exactly what happened, but I've been part of the Roman Legion for ... well, I joined up when I was a kid. You know, you get born into Northern Italy ... My father's a farmer. We didn't have more than two pieces of wood to scratch together. My parents – well, there were twelve of us – they did the best they could. I got out of there as quick as I could, because I didn't want to be scratching away at the dirt for the rest of my life.

No, I joined up as quick as I could. I got to see the whole empire. Got over to Spain for a while, into Gaul. Britannia – oh, there's a place you don't want to go. They've got two seasons: wet, and cold. On over to Macedonia, 'til I finally ended up here. We called it the "Armpit of the Empire" – Palestina. Locals here, they call it Israel.

Two-year stint. That was what I was supposed to be here for. Didn't figure I'd retire and get my five acres and a house. But, after you serve for too many years and you get too many scars, you need to stay in one place for a while. I was a whole lot younger when that happened, though. I'd been here two years or so, when it happened.

Those insurgents – we'd been puttin' them down every chance we could get. They were trying to kick us out – like they had any chance against the Roman Legions. Ha, ha. Some of them – we cut 'em right down. Others of them kept escaping out into the hills.

But there was this one fella. This one that the religious leaders – the so-called "religious leaders" – yeah, they were "religious" alright. They were religiously pursuing their coin purse. They were religiously pursuing their banquet tables, but there sure weren't religiously helping out the people. They said "This guy, this Jesus, he's a rabble rouser. We gotta get rid of him."

So, we got him arrested, took him over to their council – thought it was supposed to be a place where they talked about God. It was more like a star chamber to me. Brought this fella there. I don't what they were talking about . . . they wouldn't let me in. They said I was a "Gentile," no Gentiles are allowed. I'll tell them what's not allowed.

But after a while, I heard a big raucous in there and they had to send him over to Pilate. So we took him there. Pilate – oh yeah, there's a great backboneless governor if I ever saw one. The man would flip-flop his mind every chance he got, I tell you. But, they brought him in, and he and Pilate, they had a chat. They had a chat. I caught bits and pieces of it. I've learned to fall

asleep on my feet a long time ago. I was goin' in and out of snooze at that time.

Pilate asked him if he is the King of Jews. That's what really ticked off Herod. Is he King of the Jews? He said, "You say I am." Man's on trial for his life and he's barely fighting. Well, they talked some more and Pilate finally goes to those ... what are they ... the Sanhedrin ... that's what it was. He went to the Sanhedrin ... called those religious leaders from the Sanhedrin over and he said, "Look!" No, he didn't have a decent voice. He said, "Now look, look, at this Jesus. He's done nothing wrong. I want to release him."

Now, we had caught us a real insurgent, Barabbas bar Jonas, that lousy little guy. He had been out killin' folks. He got people in my unit. I was itching to see that one up on that tree, I tell you. But Pilate – no – Pilate's got to stand there goin' "I will release one of these people for you. Who do you want? Do you want Jesus or do you want Barabbas?" That crowd that he had stuck out there – there wasn't a single honest person in that crowd – "Barabbas!" They called. "Barabbas. Release for us Barabbas!"

"Well, what'll I do with Jesus?"

"Crucify!"

Like he'd done anything wrong. But, Pilate knows how to cover his butt, so he says, "Look, I'm going to wash my hands of this whole affair." He has us take Jesus out and beat him. Now, that was something I was good at. I could beat a man and still keep him alive. And he took a beating. Not saying I'm proud of it, but I'm a soldier and I did what I was told. We even made him a crown out of thorns and jammed it down there on his head. I can still see the blood comin' down his face. We turned him back over to Pilate, and Pilate turned him back over to them Sanhedrin.

We had to follow them up the hill. Not a pretty place, The Place of the Skull. You don't want to have a picnic up there. Not a place you want to take the women and children, if you know what I mean. But then again, you **do** want to take them so that they towed the line. So that they don't end up there outstretched on one of these crosses.

We stripped him naked and we pounded him into the cross and we put him up there along with some other pieces of garbage. We put a sign on top of him, "Jesus of Nazareth – King of the Jews." They complained about that one, but for once Pilate held his ground: "What I have written, I have written."

I was surprised at the people who came to see him. The women who came to see him. That Magdalene woman, she was there. Half-way through the afternoon the sky got pitch dark and I heard him holler and I knew it was over. Quick thing! They usually last a whole lot longer than that. The other two, we got to bust their legs. I'll tell you what, they don't last very long after you bust their legs. No! No sir! I used to enjoy that.

So, somebody came along and took him down. They brought him here and placed him in that

tomb. Those whiners, they went to Pilate. They said “Oh, you know – his people will come and they will steal his body.” So Pilate made us roll that stone in front of it. It took ten of us to move that stone in front of that cave. Then he made us seal it, pour the wax on it and put his seal on it, so that they knew nobody else was going to come along and break that seal.

I had first watch. Was able to go back to the barracks the next day, though. Get a good rest, get some food. But I had third watch the night after that. Come there pitch black. But ‘round about daybreak I heard somebody comin’ down the path. I looked over and it was that Magdalene woman again. She’s comin’ down the path, the sun’s not even up, and here she’s comin’. Next thing I know – I’ve been in earthquakes before, but never there in Palestine until that day, and never since. The whole ground shook,

I fell down and I must have whacked my head on something because I blacked out for a little bit. But the next thing I know – I swear I tell you – there was one man movin’ that stone away.

I fought people painted blue in Britannia. Up near the Germany border I had people wearin’ a head of a bear on their head tryin’ to scare me and it didn’t work. But seein’ that stone rollin’ away – I’ve never been that frightened before. Didn’t quite catch what they said, but all of a sudden Magdalene turns around and heads up the trail. I was able to sit up enough and see her and all of a sudden *he’s* talkin’ to her.

I was there on the hill. I saw the spear go into his side. I saw the water and blood pour out of him. That only happens when you’re dead. When I kill somebody dead, they stay dead. He was dead, and there he is talkin’ to that Magdalene woman. And he’s whole. His hands are whole. You put a spike through a couple of feet, they’re never gonna walk again – and *he’s* standing on those feet talkin’ to that Magdalene woman.

They say – his follows – they say that he’s God. I mean . . . I worship the old gods. I worship Rome. I’ve made my sacrifice to Caesar, thank you very much. I do not want to end up on one of those crosses myself. But, it seems to me that they might be right. They’re sayin’, too, that this Jesus God forgives you all your sins. They say that he loves us no matter what. Maybe those Palestinians he loves – but me – I don’t think so. I’m a child of Rome. I’ve done a lot of things I’m not proud of. I don’t think that God would forgive me what I’ve done . . . would he? It’d be nice if he did.

I can’t imagine, though, that anybody would think that a human being could rise up from the dead. I mean that’s just not possible. Not after they’ve been on the cross like that. Not after they’ve had everything beat out of them the night before. Still, I’ve seen a lot of things in my life. But, I’ve never seen anything like that before. Seems to me, he’s either what he says, or he isn’t. And if he isn’t, then ... well, then ... well, what’s the big deal about? Let’s just hunt down those followers of his. But his followers still keep growin’ in number, and I keep comin’ back here.

It’s been more than twenty years since that happened, but I swear it feels like it was this

morning. Seems to me like you either believe in him or not. You can't be half way. You can't say "Oh yeah, I'm goin' to follow the Roman gods and I'm gonna follow this Jesus, too." Those Roman gods that haven't ever done squat for me.

He either is or he isn't. I've seen a lot and I've done a lot I'm not proud of. I've been to countries where they got all kinds of different gods.

"He either is or he isn't." That's what I keep sayin'. The thing is – I know he is.

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