

Maundy Thursday 2008

In the name of the God who gave himself up to death for our salvation, Amen.

We've all heard the story of the last evening of Jesus' life; of the Passover meal Jesus shared with the Disciples—the meal that became the Last Supper. We all know about the foot washing and how Judas slipped away from the group and betrayed Jesus to the Temple authorities who sought to try Him for breaking Jewish law.

We also know that, after the Last Supper Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. This is where we get the tradition of the overnight vigil on Maundy Thursday going into Good Friday. The synoptic Gospels all tell the story of how Jesus asked the sleepy Disciples, “Can you not wait with me one hour?” And we know about Jesus being arrested by the Temple guard and being taken away as the Disciples scattered and hid.

Tonight, I'd like for you to try to really enter into this part of the story – not by trying to put yourself in the place of one of the participants we read about, but rather as a different character. Let's call this character Michael – just so he'll have a name, but it could be Michelle if you'd like. Now close your eyes if you want, but relax and go with me into Michael's story.

Michael had been following Jesus for over a year. He was not one of the Disciples, although he knew them. He had spoken with several of them on occasion. Michael was there for a lot of the “big events,” that drew the huge crowds. He was

there when Jesus preached to them from the side of the mountain. He was moved to tears when Jesus talked about the blessed poor and those who mourned. Michael *was* one of those people and he was touched deeply by the Teacher's words. He was also there on some of the days when people were healed. Those healings were incredible. They really made him think that the Teacher, this Rabbi, Jesus was someone other than another itinerate preacher or healer, this guy was different, someone Michael could perhaps believe in. And then there was the day that Jesus fed all those people with just a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread. He would never forget that. That was the day he decided that maybe he should consider doing what Jesus said and leaving everything else behind and just following Jesus. But somehow Michael just hadn't been able to do that yet.

The day he heard Jesus talking to that rich young man about selling all his possessions, giving the money to the poor and following Jesus; he really felt sorry for the young man. Even though he was rich and Michael was poor, he felt sorry for *that* rich man. To have Jesus tell him to his face what he should do and then for him not be able to do it—that must have hurt. And Michael could certainly identify with the rich young man. He, too had trouble leaving his life, meager as it was, behind. He just could not let himself be so out of control, so vulnerable as to give up everything he knew for the uncertain promises of Jesus—even if he had seen some incredible things.

So, on this Passover night, Michael was not in the upper room with the Disciples. He was at Passover with his family. Then when Jesus and the eleven had gone to Gethsemane, he was not there either. He was having drinks with friends. But later in the evening he felt this intense pull, a *need* to go and try to talk with Jesus, or at least with one of the Disciples. Michael knew that it was time for him to give up this life and follow the teacher—wherever that journey might lead.

The Garden of Gethsemane was not much of a garden. There was no fence around it, no well-trimmed hedges and no flowerbeds. Nor were there neat rows of vegetables planted. This “garden” was, in fact a grove of olive trees standing at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Michael had heard that Jesus and the Disciples were there, so that is where he went.

As he approached the area of the Garden, he was surprised that he did not see any campfires burning. It was still a little chilly at night and he would have thought they would have a fire. As he got closer, he did see some torches and heard voices, but it was not Jesus teaching. He knew the tenor and cadence of His voice. This was not anyone teaching, or praying, or chatting. These were agitated and demanding voices. When Michael got to where the people were, he discovered that it was a couple of the Temple guards, talking to some of the town’s people. They were asking if anyone knew where the Disciples had gone, because they would like to question them. No one knew and as Michael arrived at this small group, the guards left. He

asked someone where Jesus was? They said, “Haven’t you heard? He is not here. Jesus has been arrested and will be tried by the Sanhedrin for heresy, and His disciples have run away.”

Suddenly he was hit by a wave a of mixed emotions. First, there was fear. What if the authorities somehow discovered why he had come here tonight—to join Jesus’ followers? Would he be in trouble too? This was quickly replaced by that feeling of being punched in the stomach when you get horrible news. ***He had missed his chance.*** Jesus had been around, teaching and preaching for three years now. Michael had been going to gatherings for over a year. And he had refused to let the message in—refused to be vulnerable to the changed heart that Jesus asked for. And now ***it was too late.***

He sat down on a rock—alone—after all the people had walked away. And he cried. He wept bitterly, sobbing at the grief of his loss. He ***believed*** in Jesus the Son of God. In his heart he ***knew*** that Jesus was, indeed the Messiah. And now he could not become one of his followers.

Michael could be any of us. We hear Jesus’ story. We know of the miracles, the healings, the teachings. We are invited to become disciples, but we are afraid of the cost, the vulnerability it will require – the loss of control that will accompany this change in life. So we put it off.

Now we, here tonight, are much more fortunate than the invented character in this tale. We know the end of the story. We know about the Resurrection. We know about the return to the midst of the Disciples and the final blessings upon them. We know about the mission of the Disciples and the coming of the Holy Spirit—just as Jesus had promised.

So, it is OK to heave a slight sigh of relief tonight. But as you end this Maundy Thursday service; when the altar is stripped bare; when the lights go out; when the building goes completely silent; reflect for a while on your own sense of loss and grief. Then reflect on the sense of loss and grief suffered by those who were there that night—including an unknown character named Michael, and let yourself feel the real emptiness of life without Jesus.