



Journey to and from the Cross: *Way of Sorrows, Way of Victory*

Lenten Journeys in the Holy Land – Session 4

Our base for the observance of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Saturday was **the Ecce Homo Convent** of the Sisters of Mount Zion, built on the site of the Roman Augusta fortress, next to the Temple Mount. Staying in one place over the holy three days – or *tri-diem* as they're often called – helped focus our attention on the unity of events that sometimes can be fragmented with the weight of so many traditions.

The convent operates over three levels: there is a very impressive **chapel** on the ground floor. High above are **balconies** on which you can view the Jerusalem roof-scape, where we saw the sun set and the



Easter moon rise, and where we lit the Easter fire. Then down below, beneath the modern buildings, is the **Roman pavement or *lithostrotos*** – paving slabs that go back to Jesus' day. On one there is inscribed a gaming board, as Roman soldiers played dice together, and we're reminded of them gambling for Jesus' robe. To stand with my feet on that pavement, on Good Friday, gave a huge sense of connection with the events we recall each year.



John's Gospel especially presents Christ's death and resurrection (and indeed ascension) as a single event. The language of being 'raised up' applies to all – on the cross, from the tomb, to the Father. In John, Jesus' last words from the cross are 'It is finished' or 'It is accomplished': all he has been sent to do is completed. St Paul in Romans and 1 Corinthians similarly sees the two as one.



Through Christ's death and resurrection, God raises the whole creation up to himself, transforming pain and death into new life. Cross and resurrection are not so much two events following on from one another as one state of affairs turning into another: God's continuous action for the whole of creation. Theologian Maxim the Confessor wrote that on Easter Day, seeing Christ risen, God says, 'That's what I created the world for.'

We have a further short but congested journey to reach the place of the cross and the tomb. It's known as the ***Via Dolorosa***, the way of sorrows. It begins close to the Ecce Homo Convent and ends at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It's been followed by Christian pilgrims since the 4th century, and is the origins of the Stations of the Cross practised by so many across the world today. Although there are disagreements about the route Christ would have taken historically, and many of the 14 stations (or prayer points) are not directly Biblical, nevertheless it is a huge focus of devotion. We were indeed blessed to be able to do this on Good Friday itself, early in the morning, and not to be overwhelmed by crowds of other pilgrims trying to do the same thing.

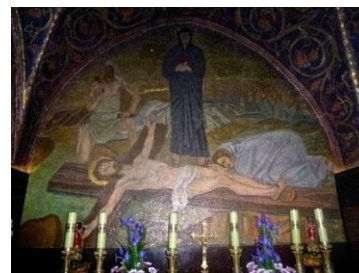
I am not going to go through the 14 stations individually: in most cases you learn little from the townscape as it is today. What was really good was that each of our group shared in leading, providing a very short reflection in each place. The significance was in the act of carrying of the cross, and not put off by anything going on around us. Jesus calls all Christians to take up their cross and follow him: this was a powerful sign of our calling. As we moved from station to station, we sang a simple verse which began to get under the skin:

*We carry the saving cross through
The roads of the world
Through the alleys of poverty and misery
Marching to a dawning day to freedom and victory
To God's life and endless glory.*

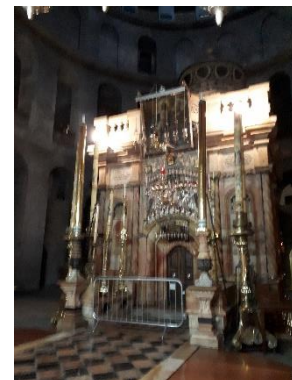


The destination of our walk is the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre**, or, as the Orthodox call it (and I prefer) **the Church of the Resurrection**. It's good to use both names: for death and resurrection are as one. First built by Constantine in the early 4th century, it encompasses both the hill of Calvary (or Golgotha) and the tomb of Christ. Originally the church opened off the Roman main road, and was designed for pilgrims to visit the holy shrines. Six different denominations share responsibility for it, each with their own areas – and struggle to agree to anything about the most important shared spaces.

Arriving, you turn to the right and up the staircase to Calvary. First you come to a Catholic chapel, identified as the location where **Christ was nailed to the cross** (below right). Next to it, a Greek Orthodox chapel localises the place **where the cross itself stood** (below left). Many like to kneel and touch or even kiss the spot. You may then return to a great stone slab near the door, where it is said Christ was laid out for burial.



To go to the tomb itself you move under a great rotunda (or dome) and see a strange building called the **aedicule**, or little house – a 19th century structure that covers what is believed to be the tomb itself. We were immensely privileged to be allowed to share an early morning Communion service there, crammed into the tiny space of the outer chamber (and peak into the inner one). I enjoyed the fact that when we came out, we were allowed to explore the rest of the church unimpeded by crowds or officialdom.





It's hard work on the imagination to absorb the fact that this place, with all its churchiness, is genuinely where it all happened. For me, most helpful is a **1st century tomb** in an almost derelict Syrian chapel. It looks little more than an impression in the wall, but actually goes in deep and contains a number of niche tombs. Here is where I recall the stone that was rolled away!

On Easter Monday we followed the instruction Jesus gave the disciples according to Matthew's Gospel: 'Meet me in Galilee'. In **Nazareth**, a lecture by Yohanna Katanacho helped explain how significant this is in tying together the themes of the Gospel.

We remember how in the wilderness the devil had tempted Jesus to show himself as Son of God in ways he rejected. Now, as he commissions the disciples on the Galilean mountain, he shows what being Son of God really means. The devil had asked Jesus for his worship, and he'd replied,



'worship the Lord your God alone.' Now, the disciples worshipped the risen Jesus on the **Galilean mountain** – for they had begun to realise for themselves who he truly was. Matthew tells us some doubted, or hesitated: it reminds us nothing is forced in the kingdom of heaven. Faith and obedience must be willingly and genuinely given.

The devil had offered Jesus authority over the earth (something that was not his to give). Now Jesus has all authority. This includes the moral authority that comes from having been through it all, every human experience of pain and humiliation and abandonment, and has come out the other side. He can look every suffering person in the face and say 'I know'. He has authority to commission his disciples – asking them to do what he has done – to make. The devil had offered him the whole world: now, his followers will go to the whole world, on Jesus' own terms. Finally, going back to the very beginning of the Gospel, Jesus' birth had been announced as Immanuel, God with us. Now at the end we have the promise: I am with you to the end of time.

Our programme was called 'Easter Experience', and actually we experienced Easter twice in our stay in Jerusalem. The **Orthodox** churches celebrated **Easter** a week after the Western, and most local Christians are Greek Orthodox. The crowds in the street and marching bands made it like Palm Sunday all over again, except this time they were mainly locals. With Jerusalem over-crowded we met them in Bethlehem – the Easter light being celebrated through the streets, candle flame passed on one to another. As the hotel receptionist said: "We Orthodox celebrate Easter outdoors where everyone can see." It seems a fitting way to end, to draw all the strands together, all we learnt about the Holy Land and its people, with a street party to celebrate one simple event: Christ is risen indeed!

