

The first day of the week (Based on John 20:19-25)



Dear friends,

I want to set down what I and the others experienced that first day of the week (which also turned out to be the first day of our new lives).

There we were, the ten of us, huddled together in one room, trying to stay calm. Being the first day of the week, we should have been out fishing, collecting taxes, tanning hides or whatever. But this wasn't a day to think of earning a living; this was a day of wondering how we were going to stay alive. Two of us were missing - Thomas (who knows where he was), and Judas - well, we all knew where Judas was.

And we were scared and miserable.

You see some women had come from Jesus' tomb, saying that the body was no longer there, and wittering on about men dressed in dazzling white who told them that he wasn't there any more because he had risen. We dismissed their report - what can you expect from hysterical women - but the word was passed around between us and so we met in this room behind locked doors to work out what to do next. The Jewish authorities had arrested Jesus, tried him for blasphemy and then executed him a couple of days before, and it was quite possible they would come for us too. Besides that, if the tomb was empty, you could be sure that people would say that *we* took the body away, and by Roman law, that was grave robbery, punishable by death. Peter and John went to check the story, and came back breathless, saying that it *was* true, the body wasn't there. Peter was beside himself, but John seemed to be excited, almost joyful.

"Don't you see?" he said. "Something amazing has happened."

"Like what?!" said Matthew. "This just complicates matters! Now we've got the Romans breathing down our necks!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when there was an urgent knock on the door, and we heard Mary Magdalene shouting to be let in. When we did, we found her laughing and crying at the same time. "He's alive!" she said. "He was there in the garden by the tomb. I thought he was the gardener, but then he called me by my name, and told me to come and tell you. Don't you understand, he really *is* alive!"

We tried to calm her down, but she was so excited that she wouldn't stop talking. "Oh I must tell Martha and Lazarus, and the others....." And at that, she left.

We bolted the door again.

"What do you make of that?" said Thaddeus.

"I don't believe it." said Andrew. "Mary always was flighty. The only evidence we've got is an empty tomb and the authorities on our tails."

"Well I *do* believe her!" said John. "And I think there's something in the scriptures that backs it up. I don't know how it happened, but I do believe Mary."

Peter rounded on him. "Oh what would you know?! You're just a boy compared to us. *And* you fancied yourself as the Teacher's pet."

John, red faced and humiliated, retreated into silence.

"Take it easy, Peter." said Andrew. "You're too hot headed. It's got you into trouble before, and it doesn't help matters now."

"Well I didn't get us into this mess, did I? It was that reprobate Judas, that's who! What on earth was Jesus thinking when he chose him?! He never could be trusted. He'd sell his own grandmother if he could. He was the betrayer!" Peter said vehemently.

"Look who's talking!" said Matthew. "*You* denied him three times, if I remember. And let's face it, we all deserted him when the chips were down."

By this time the stress of the past few days caught up with us, and tempers flared. We were all talking at once, our grief, our shame and self loathing turned onto each other.

But then we heard a word that cut through our noisy recriminations - "Peace!" We turned to see who had spoken and came face to face with Jesus. For a moment we stared in shock and fear. Then he said it again, only more softly - "Peace." Then we all started talking at once, only this time with joy. Like Mary, we didn't know whether to laugh or cry. We were overjoyed but ashamed at the same time. We gathered around him as he showed us the jagged wounds in his wrists and feet and side. There could be no mistake - this really was Jesus!

"Peace be yours." he said. "I am sending you out as I was sent by the Father." Then he did a remarkable thing. He breathed on us - at least that's the only way I can describe it. But this breath was rich with love that surrounded us and reached deeply into us, so that all our fear was forgotten.

Jesus then said, "Receive the Holy Spirit, that which binds me to you and you to me, so that we become one. If you forgive each other's sins and the sins of others...." then, as if to read our minds... "Yes, even Judas - if you forgive sins, they are as if they had never been. But if you don't forgive them, what will you do with them? You will spend the rest of your lives bickering. I need you for better things. So forgive as I have forgiven you."

And then he vanished.

This was the first of many encounters with the risen Christ before he - or at least his bodily form - left us almost six weeks later. Ten days after that we received an even more powerful breathing of the Holy Spirit, not gentle this time, but like a rushing wind, almost sweeping us off our feet. Then we knew what we had to do - we had to tell the world of what we had seen and heard. We were, as Jesus said, being sent out.

All that happened some time ago, but it remains fresh in my memory. And that Breath urges me to write to you, my friends, to encourage you to remain in Christ and in the Spirit which binds

us together. What happened to us that first day of the week could have blown us apart, but Christ forgave and reconciled us to each other, and in him we are able to forgive.

Tomorrow I am to be executed - what we feared from the authorities that day has caught up with me. But I am no longer afraid, because I am certain that there is nothing that can sever the deep spiritual intimacy we have in Christ. No, neither stoning, nor the sword.

Yours in Christ,

+James, Jerusalem

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