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## **The First Easter**

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# THE FIRST EASTER

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**S. Kent Brown**

***Abstract:** Scriptural accounts are rife with information about the import of the first Easter. Understanding the events of the week before the death and resurrection of Christ can help us appreciate the words of the witnesses as well as the importance of these events in our lives.*

All Easter celebrations, Orthodox or Western, reach back to the first Easter, beginning that Sunday morning when the Galilean women followers of Jesus went to the tomb and found it emptied of his body but with two angelic messengers present, one of whom announced the resurrection in what, we may presume, were well rehearsed words. That the women were Galileans is settled by the presence of Mary Magdalene and Joanna among them (Luke 8:2–3; 24:10). That Sunday was exactly a week after Jesus had entered Jerusalem after his long climb from Jericho (Mark 11:11). Although the Gospel accounts differ about the order of events, it appears that, once inside the temple, Jesus created havoc (Luke 19:45–46) before retreating back over the Mount of Olives to the safety of Bethany on the mount's eastern slope.

Jesus and his dozens of followers had arrived almost a week before Passover to purify themselves as required by Jewish law. After immersing themselves in ritual baths and receiving a sprinkling of water mixed with the ashes of a red heifer from a priest as they stepped onto the temple grounds, Jesus and his entourage spent several days together while he taught the throngs of people who had gathered from far and wide. Each night the moon grew fuller and fuller, expanding to a full moon on Passover itself.

As always, the mood in the city was light and happy; Passover was that kind of holiday. But beneath the positive exterior of temple authorities bubbled a boiling brew of anti-Jesus sentiment. From long before the moment that he and his friends streamed through the city

gate, these officials sought means to trap him and eliminate him. But how? Even though he was almost within their grasp, crowds of adoring admirers attended his every move. It was impossible to touch him. Then, like a puff of cooling air in their stifling room, Judas appeared. With the chief priests he made a deal to deliver Jesus to them (see Mark 14:10–11). The stage was now set with all its props. What remained was for the main actors to carry out their agreed roles. And indeed they did, with Judas leading a mixed band of soldiers and temple police to Gethsemane, where, since about midnight, Jesus had been suffering terribly, even “unto death,” as Mark wrote (Mark 14:34), and sweating “as it were great drops of blood” that fell onto “the ground,” as Luke reported (Luke 22:44).

Jesus’ suffering is partially captured in his movements in the garden. In Mark’s account, evidently the earliest of the Gospels, we find a series of verbs in the imperfect tense, a Greek tense that, among other things, describes customary and repeated action. For example, “She kept running” or “She was knitting a sweater.” In Mark’s case, the scene that he presents is Jesus going forward, falling onto the ground, and praying; then going forward, falling, and praying; then again going forward, falling, and praying (Mark 14:35). Jesus’ repeated actions remind us of an athlete who, in performing at a level that causes extreme pain, adjusts the body’s position to lessen the pain, even if the adjustment brings only a tiny bit of relief. In Gethsemane, it seems plain that Jesus kept moving and falling to the earth in an effort to find any kind of relief from the pain and anguish that had suddenly engulfed him.

In quick sequence that morning came Jesus’ so-called “mock trial” before Jewish authorities and his two appearances before the Roman prefect Pilate, interspersed with his hearing in front of Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee but was in town for the Passover feast. Although Pilate declared Jesus to be innocent no fewer than three times, he caved in to the demands of the gathered allies of the priests that Jesus be executed by crucifixion — “Crucify him, crucify him” (Luke 23:21) — a type of death that Roman soldiers had perfected in all its cruelty.

It is notable that, according to Luke, Jesus kept up his litany of warnings to the people of Jerusalem on his way to the place of execution, anticipating the fall of the city 40 years later and addressing particularly the women who were watching his steps. He kept pleading, “weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children, . . . [because] the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck” (Luke 23:28–29). The Roman siege of the city, which Jesus foresaw, would bring “great tribulation on the

Jews, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, such as was not before sent upon Israel, of God, since the beginning of their kingdom until this time” (Joseph Smith–Matthew 1:18).

Hung between two criminals, Jesus helped one of them to make peace with his eternal destiny, somewhat improved because of his contrition, securing a place at Jesus’ side “in paradise,” a scene that only Luke narrates (Luke 23:43). At last, after three hours of intense suffering, Jesus gave up his spirit, speaking in “a loud voice, [and] saying, Father, it is finished, thy will is done” (Joseph Smith Translation Matthew 27:54).

While Jesus’ body lay in the tomb, on Saturday, the day before his resurrection, he betook himself not to celebrate the Jewish Sabbath but to free the spirits of people held captive in the spirit prison, where the souls of all dead persons go after death. The New Testament is home to a number of references to Jesus’ activities that day because of their significance, but without much clarifying description except in 1 Peter 3:18–19. There we read of Jesus “being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison” (see also Luke 4:18; Ephesians 4:8–10; 1 Peter 4:6). In art, in paintings typically carrying the title *Anastasis*, Jesus is portrayed as assisting Adam and Eve to escape the bonds of that prison before anyone else. We might compare D&C 138:38–39, where, in the vision of Joseph F. Smith, Adam and Eve receive first mention, hinting that President Smith saw them before seeing others.

Matthew preserves the only account that comes close to an eyewitness report of the resurrection itself. Even that rehearsal is unsure because we don’t know if the guards posted at the tomb by Jewish authorities saw Jesus depart the chamber. They apparently saw “the angel of the Lord ... [whose] countenance was like lightning” and who “descended ... and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it.” By that point, presumably, the guards were “as dead men” and did not see Jesus leave the tomb (Matthew 28:2, 4). But enough detail lies in the story to tell us that the guards talked, and people listened to their experience (Matthew 28:11–15). Yet the angel was the only on-site witness.

But witnesses of a different sort soon made themselves known to other believers. Early that Sunday, the now-resurrected Christ granted appearances to three individuals. The first was to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9). After reporting the empty tomb to the disciples Peter and John and hurrying back to it, Mary lingered near the tomb, where the risen Jesus appeared to her and empowered her to bear witness to his “brethren” about his ascent to the “Father” (John 20:1–18). From John’s narrative we

learn that she was not allowed to touch the risen Lord before she went to inform the other disciples (the Greek verb *haptomai* means more than a mere touch, instead signifying “to embrace” or “to cling to”). She simply saw him, recognized him, and heard him speak, which was enough.

Peter received the second appearance. We know almost nothing about Peter’s encounter with the Savior except that it occurred. Neither of the sources records where and what time of day. But surely this meeting was most important, because it established Peter as the chief guarantor of the resurrection, as its chief witness among the Eleven (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:3–5).

The risen Christ then went to his younger brother James. The Apostle Paul merely mentions that Jesus “was seen of James” (1 Corinthians 15:7). A fragmentary apocryphal text, excerpted by the early Christian author Jerome from the now-lost Gospel of the Hebrews, may fill in some of the details. From it we learn that James had begun to fast at the Last Supper, saying that he would not eat “until he should see [Jesus] risen from among them that sleep.” After his resurrection, we read, Jesus found James. In a scene touched by a tender familial loyalty and love, “the Lord ... took the bread, and blessed it and brake it and give it to James,” allowing his brother to break his long fast.

Other appearances occurred during that Sunday, creating witnesses in clumps. Early that morning, Jesus met the women who were rushing to tell others about the empty tomb. In an act of adoration, these women “came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him” (Matthew 28:8–10). During the afternoon, Jesus joined two believing travelers on their way to the town of Emmaus. When the travelers reached their destination, it became suddenly clear to them that they had enjoyed the company and instruction of the resurrected Christ (Luke 24:13–32).

In the evening, Jesus came to a gathering of disciples that included all the apostles except Thomas, the two travelers to Emmaus, and others of his close associates from Galilee. With them he partook of food and empowered them by giving them the gift of the Holy Ghost to begin their ministries (Luke 24:33–44; John 20:19–23). All this took place during an all-night teaching session wherein the risen Jesus “opened ... their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures.” In the early morning light, “he led them out as far as to Bethany” before ascending “into heaven” (Luke 24:45, 50–51).

This is not the end of the story, of course. We learn that Jesus spent almost six weeks with the Eleven, and perhaps others, in Galilee and Jerusalem, teaching them in a series of training meetings about “the kingdom” (Matthew 28:16; Mark 16:7; John 21:1–19; Acts 1:1–4). According

to Paul, at an important gathering “he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once,” measurably adding to the number of witnesses of his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:6). Now the resurrected Savior had created a wave of witnesses who would wash across the landscape from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond, bathing those first listeners in the fragrant liquid of the gospel and carrying all believers like boats to a celestial place, a celestial home.

That first Easter is still commemorated to this day, and witnesses to the resurrected Lord still tell the joyous and joyful message of his conquering the grave. The message rings throughout the ages: he lives, he lives who once was dead! This Easter, in a distant echo of the first, believers can still be lifted and buoyed toward their celestial home, reassured in the hope of a Christ risen and appearing still.

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