

THE  
CHARACTERS  
*of* EASTER

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THE  
CHARACTERS  
*of* EASTER

The Villains, Heroes, Cowards, and Crooks  
Who Witnessed History's Biggest Miracle

DANIEL DARLING

MOODY PUBLISHERS  
CHICAGO

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DANIEL DARLING

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*This book is dedicated to my wonderful wife, Angela, who kept the home fires burning while I spent day and night working on this manuscript on a short deadline and during a global pandemic.*

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

## Why We Need Easter

*If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. And if Christ is not—  
nothing else matters.*

JAROSLAV PELIKAN

*And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are  
still in your sins . . . If we have put our hope in Christ for this life  
only, we should be pitied more than anyone.*

I CORINTHIANS 15:17, 19

I'm writing this during the strangest, hardest Easter I've ever experienced. Unlike the previous forty-one Easters in my life, our family won't be dressing up in our best church clothes. We won't be gathering with our friends and family at church. Instead, we are sitting on our couches in our living room watching a live stream.

In 2020 this is the reality for millions of Christians around the world as a deadly contagion spreading death and disease around the globe has kept us home, safe, so we don't spread it to the most vulnerable. It's necessary and it's right, but it's excruciating.

I'm writing with anticipation that when this book is published in early 2021, we have gotten a handle on the virus with anti-viral medications and vaccines and are free, once again, to gather with brothers

and sisters and worship our risen Savior. Likely, a year later, you have vivid memories of our most unusual 2020. Most of us will look back at a holiday spent at home. But for many, you might be recalling harrowing days and nights on the front lines, helping patients affected with COVID-19 get a few more desperate breaths. Or you might have been one of the important frontline workers who worked hard so we could pick up our prescriptions and have our food delivered to us and receive uninterrupted electricity and internet service. And it could be that Easter 2020 was the beginning of a bleak economic season, one that had you closing up your business or filing for unemployment benefits.

But as I write, it strikes me that while I'm despairing about missing out on the joy of Easter worship this year, the meaning of Easter has never been more relevant than it is this "plague year."

You need to know up front that I believe deep in my bones that the message we celebrate every spring is not a mere feel-good religious balm or a set of moral principles. No, it's more than that. We lament and rejoice, sing and sit silent, worship and wait because of a singular fact that changed the world: An itinerant rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus is the Son of God, human and divine, who took on the sins of a corrupted world and a broken humanity on a cruel Roman cross and then walked out of a borrowed tomb three days later, defeating the sin, death, and decay from which our pain arises.

Easter centers us in our pain, a fresh reminder that the ugliness of a fallen world—where sin's tentacles reach into every part of life, bringing death and despair to every corner of the world—has an expiration date.

In good times we too often sanitize Calvary's cross, treating it like

a mere decorative icon topping steeples and hung in sanctuaries. Or, perhaps, worn around our necks. But the real cross was a near-sadistic instrument of torture and execution, a vile and inhumane way for an oppressive state to administer punishment and preserve order around the Empire.

Let's not forget what we are looking at when we look at the Passion. Jesus was beaten so badly as to be unrecognizable, stripped naked, forced to carry that same cross up a hill as throngs wept and jeered and stared, and then nailed to that same ugly piece of wood outside Jerusalem. And yet . . . here, in literally the worst thing that ever happened in human history, is life. In the death of this innocent man is the death of death. This is the answer from a God who hates death. In 1 Corinthians 15, we are told death is the "final foe," an evil that has wormed its way through creation and infected human hearts since Eden. Sometimes Christians paper over death as if it's just a window into eternity, but we see that Jesus wept and was angry when He peered over and looked in on the corpse of His friend Lazarus.

On Good Friday, when we read Jesus' gasping words, "It is finished," know that in His agony is hope death has lost its sting and that one day, not long from now, we will see physical bodies rise to something new and beautiful.

### ♦ *Alone, So You Wouldn't Be* ♦

The most tragic reality of last Easter and too many other Easters is that so many people spend holidays like this alone, with no human connection. 2020 was agonizing because it brought funerals where loved ones couldn't gather to mourn loss, empty bedsides where those

gasping for air were denied comforting touch, and long months where elderly were isolated from meaningful community.

Humans are intensely social creatures, not made for isolation. On Good Friday, we can see the agony of Jesus in His dying moments—a true loneliness we are spared from experiencing. Jesus—the blame of humankind’s worst evil thrust upon His sagging shoulders—felt the cold shoulder of the Father, who turned His face away. Jesus was alone so you would never be alone and could enjoy communion with the One who created you.

He felt the sting of isolation so you could be baptized into a body of believers in Heaven and earth. Jesus took upon himself your sins so you could enjoy intimacy with your Father. He is the One who broke through the sting of death, who defeated sin and who ushers you into communion with God.

To the grief-stricken sisters of Lazarus, Jesus gave this promise: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die” (John 11:25).

Jesus isn’t only predicting that He would rise again. Jesus is saying more than that: He *is* the resurrection and the life. And this is why everything we say and believe hinges on this one reality. It separates Christianity from just another fantasy or religious exercise. Tish Warren writes poignantly, “It’s painfully clear that the Resurrection is either the whole hope of the world—the very center of reality—or Christianity is not worth our time<sup>1</sup>.”

This Easter we are declaring that it is worth our time because the Easter story is declaring that Jesus put death to death. It means that the curse that takes mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, children and grandchildren, coworkers and neighbors isn’t eternal.

Consider the words of Paul, the educated, elite religious leader who once thought this new Jesus movement was a dangerous fad and a fool's errand. After his own encounter with the risen Jesus, he writes passionately in the most eloquent apologetic for Easter, in 1 Corinthians 15, why Jesus' resurrection changes everything:

But as it is, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.

Easter means those who are in Christ will be made alive, spiritually and physically. It means there is a new world dawning that is better than the old one. It means there is something afoot in the world. In the words of N.T. Wright, "Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven."<sup>2</sup>

Maybe this is hard for you to see now, a year removed from coronavirus. Perhaps it's hard to make sense of it all, in the midst of whatever hardship or difficulty you are facing at the moment. The world, perhaps your world even, seems as upside down and unstable as it has ever been. But if the resurrection really happened, then it means this reality isn't forever. There's a new world coming, a new creation.

Easter is the sign that a new world is coming, that one day God will take rotted dust particles, ravaged by disease and decay, and will reconstitute them into real, physical bodies fit for eternity. This cycle of pain and sadness, viruses and death has an expiration date.

## ✦ Join The Characters ✦

So, in this season let us peer in once again on a story we know so well. At the center of Easter, at the center of gravity of world history and of the cosmos, stands Jesus. But let's learn more about Christ by learning about the ragtag cast of characters who were swept up into his story. By looking at unlikely disciples, unprepared civil authorities, and unscrupulous religious leaders, we learn more about the setting in which Jesus lived and died and gain a great love for God's long and sure plan of salvation and rescue.

We know and believe, as Peter declared on the day of Pentecost, that Easter was not an accident or series of unfortunate events, but that every single frame in the Easter drama is part of God's eternal plan from creation, when He prophesied that the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent would violently clash until one day the serpent's head would be crushed (Gen. 3:15). Peter on the day of Pentecost articulates Easter's paradox:

“Though he was delivered up according to God's determined plan and foreknowledge, you used lawless people to nail him to a cross and kill him. God raised him up, ending the pains of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by death” (Acts 2:23–24).

The plan of God and the actions and choices of humans—this is what we will explore this Easter. I want us to get inside these lives in this grand, cosmic drama. A young and unlikely band of disciples, corrupt rulers, brave women, and criminals who found freedom. Who are they?

And let's remember, if we can, that in the first century few understood the significance of what was happening. Israel was a forgotten

backwater, an outpost where no aspiring Roman up-and-comer wanted to be exiled. And among the Jewish people there was widespread cynicism and despair. Tish Warren again reminds us of the setting:

That morning in history when Jesus rose, there was no expectation of a resurrection. There was no fanfare. No churches gathering with songs of triumph, no bells ringing, nothing. A few women went out to tend to Jesus' dead body. His "nobody" disciples were laying low, lost in grief and feeling afraid. The rest of Jerusalem and the wider world had moved on. The sun rose. People went about their business gathering grain and water from wells. They started breakfast.<sup>3</sup>

All of the cosmos was changed, and it was almost entirely overlooked.

Easter was a surprise to those who first experienced it. For us, it's a familiar, even comforting ritual of sacred truth. But let's try our best to journey back to that setting and be willing to be surprised as well, to let the story of the resurrection wash over us anew.



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## CHAPTER ONE

# The Failure

### *Peter*

*After Peter came to recognize his own inadequacy, his utter inability to fulfill his destiny apart from obedience to his only true responsibility, he became a rock-solid leader. As his story unfolds in the book of acts, we can clearly see that when Peter kept his eyes on Jesus and followed Him, others followed to. And they followed by the thousands. Needed today: more Peters.<sup>1</sup>*

CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

*Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*

JOHN 6:68

When Jesus met Simon, he wasn't the Peter we know, the saint after whom children and churches and cities are named. He was Simon and he wasn't exactly looking for Jesus. Instead, he was busy plying his trade as a commercial fisherman on the shores of Lake Gennesaret. Peter and his brother Andrew were part of a fishing collective with another set of brothers, James and John. The Galilee

shores were all the brothers knew, having grown up in Bethsaida, on the northwest shore.

By all accounts, Simon was thriving in Capernaum, making a living bringing fish to market to be sold locally or shipped to Damascus via the Roman highway and exported to ports across the Roman Empire along the Mediterranean. He owned a home (Luke 7) and was married (Luke 4:38–40). It doesn't seem like Simon was either rich or poor but managing a decent life. Like most of us: an ordinary person in an ordinary place in what, he assumed, was an ordinary time.

Jesus spent much of His ministry in Galilee. These were His people: blunt, salt-of-the-earth, and hardworking. Galileans didn't much care for the elite sophisticates in Jerusalem, and the elites returned the scorn. A son of Nazareth in the southwest part of the Galilee region, Jesus made Capernaum His base of operation. Just as God chose a humble place—Bethlehem—for the entrance of Jesus into the world, so the Master Craftsman chose to build His new movement from the raw and rugged people of Galilee. This is not where you would typically recruit if you were building a movement that would shake the world, but Christ often draws His disciples from out-of-the-way places.

We don't really know when Jesus arrived in town. Did He ever pass Simon in the marketplace or sit next to him in the synagogue? In everyday interactions, they would not have noticed anything unusual about this carpenter in town. Jesus didn't have a halo above His head and an arrow pointing to His face, letting people know He was God's Son. It seems that Jesus' pursuit of Peter came patiently, in a series of fits and starts, like He seems to come to all of us, a conversation here, a conversation there. But make no mistake that the “Hound of Heaven”

named by C.S. Lewis and the poet Francis Thompson persistently pursued this prickly Galilean.

### ♦ *When Jesus Met Peter* ♦

The first encounter seems to have been brokered by Simon's brother Andrew. He was intrigued with another itinerant teacher, the rogue prophet named John. Some called him "the baptizer" for his controversial practice of calling Jewish people to new level of repentance and cleansing, beyond the cold rituals. John was unlike the staid rabbis in the synagogue. A wild-eyed nomad who declared the Kingdom of Heaven had come near, John insisted the people of God must prepare themselves. While many shrugged off John's message, Andrew listened. And the words cut straight to his heart. John didn't speak of himself, but of another whom God was sending, with a winnowing fork, dividing true believers from pretenders. A more radical, powerful baptism was coming, one of spirit and fire. Andrew wasn't sure he knew exactly what John meant, but he had a strange attraction to the message.

How did Simon feel about Andrew's fascination with this new movement? We don't know what those conversations on the water were like, but it does seem that Simon hung back a bit. Did he think Andrew was getting involved in some dangerous new movement? Did he write John the Baptist off as another fad, soon to fade from a first-century scene that featured so many religious imposters and would-be messiahs? Did he roll his eyes at Andrew's new ideas, the way we roll our eyes when a crazy uncle posts a conspiracy theory on the internet?

Galileans were ready for messages about God's coming kingdom, especially at a time when Israel keenly felt the burden of being a subject

people. But hope for a better future was shadowed by a palpable sense of despair, a cynicism hardened by crushing Roman rule and failed revolutions. In their lifetime, Galileans had been massacred in an ugly confrontation with the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate.

And yet Andrew was still listening that one day, during a trip to Jerusalem with John, when the prophet pointed at fellow Galilean, the son of Joseph, and declared of Jesus, “This one here is the Lamb of God come to take away the sins of the world.” Andrew went to the place where Jesus was staying and was captivated by this rabbi’s teaching. So he returned to Capernaum and ran toward his brother Simon and urged him to check out this Jesus.

You can almost picture the scene in your mind, can’t you? “We have found the Messiah,” John 1:20 records Andrew saying, but I see him shouting, breathless and grabbing Simon by his fishing vest. *This is the one! I know it sounds crazy. But trust me, you’ve got to come hear him and see him. I’ve never seen anything like this.*

Messiah, *anointed one*, meant a lot of things; and while the two brothers were catechized in the Torah, they were not scholars who pored over texts. And yet unlike those who did, they knew enough to follow. They didn’t and wouldn’t understand then that the Christ would not just swoop in and conquer Israel’s enemies. They couldn’t see an unjust trial, a bloody cross, and the sending of the Spirit. But they knew just enough to follow.

### ◆ Found! ◆

I think a lot about those simple words Andrew said that day. *We have found him.* Are these not the words that beckon us every year to Easter?

Are these not the words that one friend says to another, upending future generations? I think of my own father, who heard these words from my aunt, who watched them on TV, when an evangelist named Billy Graham spoke them to her on the TV. My father walked that aisle in 1971 in Chicago and changed the trajectory of his troubled family. I'm here today, writing books for Easter because my father heard those words and said them to a young Jewish girl who would become his wife, a mother who would tell her son one day. *We have found him.*

Of course when Andrew and Simon found Jesus they didn't know all that this would mean. And neither do we when we, with knocking knees walk the aisle or with trembling lips, bow our heads or feel, like John Wesley, strangely warmed. Some find Jesus on the side of the road, some after a drunken haze in a dorm room, some after late night conversations with friends. Some find Jesus in rehab, others in church, and still others, like renowned scientist Francis Collins, find Jesus at the end of a test tube.

But the important thing is: you found him. And yet as much as it seems we found Jesus, it was really Jesus who was doing the looking.

John preached. Andrew listened. John pointed to Jesus. Andrew *found*. This is how the gospel reaches you and it reaches me. God sends someone to us: a voice on the radio, a discarded tract, a persistent friend. It seems so random, and yet when we look back we see how Providence unfolds mysteriously and makes its way to us.

Simon didn't know it, but his life story was being written before he was born. It began miles away in tiny Bethlehem thirty years earlier, when an impoverished carpenter and his wife pounded on the doors of an inn, begging for a place to give birth to their baby. Simon's

story began when an aging priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, miraculously conceived and bore a child born to be a prophet. Jesus, John the Baptist, and Simon would converge, not by accident or fate, but by the silent fingers of God. The fullness of time was coming to bear down on an unsuspecting young fisherman.

And it was on the day Simon reluctantly followed that the entrepreneur fisherman became, in Jesus' words, "Peter"—meaning, "the rock." Yes, the one who had to be dragged to Jesus would become a pillar of God's new creation movement in the world, would be written into salvation history as one of the twelve apostles and would write two letters that would become Holy Writ. Jesus' closest companions, tasked with the founding of the church, would not be drafted from the finest rabbinical schools or from among the educated scribes or the bluebloods in Herod's court, but would be plucked, like so many of Israel's leaders, from the ranks of the common. The kingdom of God seems to travel away from the places of power and toward the unheralded, the unseen, the unqualified. The carpenter King, born in poverty on the backside of nobility, seeks His followers among those whom the world does not see.

### ◆ Pursuing Peter ◆

That dramatic first encounter with Andrew in Jerusalem was only the first of many appeals by Jesus to Peter. One day Jesus appeared on the shores of Galilee while the two brothers worked the deep waters for another day's catch (Matt. 4; Mark 1). "Follow me," the Master called, "and I'll make you fishers of men." What did "follow me" mean? He didn't know, but Peter followed anyway, as Jesus taught and healed

and preached in Peter's own synagogue in Capernaum (Luke 4:31).

Jesus became more familiar with Peter, staying in his home (Luke 4:38) and healing his mother-in-law of a fever, no small malady in a time before pain relievers, antibiotics, and vaccines. Peter's home became a gathering place of sorts, as word spread throughout Capernaum, and others made their way to his home, the desperate seeking healing and hope from this new rabbi.

Imagine what this must have been like for Peter to experience. What questions rattled around his head? For us, reading the text today two thousand years removed, these biblical scenes of healing don't pack the wallop they must have for those who witnessed such events. But for Peter, this was completely new. In Peter's time the blind never saw. The lame never walked. The demons never left.

While Jesus is teaching and healing, He's also pursuing Peter. One day, after Peter returns from an unsuccessful overnight fishing trip, Jesus appears again on the beach and crowds began to form, eager to listen to His teaching. So Jesus asked the brothers to lend their boat to use as a place to sit and teach the gathering crowds. The brothers' grimy and smelly boat—now a stage for the Son of God. And when the crowd dispersed, Jesus urged the men to give the nets another chance.

The Scripture suggests this tip rankled Peter, and we know why. When an amateur weighs in on our area of expertise, it raises our hackles. These guys knew the lake better than almost anyone. They were good at fishing, having spent their whole lives mastering the currents, discerning where schools of fish gathered and when exactly to cast their nets and when to draw them in. This was their business, their livelihood, their way of life. Jesus—he's good for miracles

and messages, but why was he messing with their business? Imagine LeBron James being told how to make a game-winning shot or Tiger Woods how to sink an eighteen-foot putt at the Masters or Dr. Fauci being told by one of your crazy uncles on Facebook how to diagnose infectious diseases. Peter didn't say it, but you know the internal dialogue went something like this: *Jesus, you know nothing about this business. I've been doing this my whole life. It's just not a good day out here. We'll come back and get it tomorrow.*

And yet Peter would learn, as do all who follow Jesus, that the Master is not just interested in our Sunday morning piety, but He demands lordship over all of our lives, even and maybe especially those areas we have mastered. He's a Monday-through-Friday kind of Lord.

This is what Jesus was doing with Peter that day. And to Peter's credit, he acquiesced, "Because you say so," the CSB translation renders Luke's Greek. You can feel the sigh here, a grudging, shoulders-slumped kind of obedience. But he grabbed those nets, those nets he had already cleaned and stowed away, and slung them over the side of the boat.

What followed was, well, a miracle. You can quibble about the shape of the miracle: Was it this the Lord of Creation, fashioning hundreds of prize tilapia, carp, and sardines in an instant? Or the Lord of Creation directing hundreds of prize tilapia, carp, and sardines to obey the voice of their Creator and swim toward nets?

What we do know is that in this seemingly ordinary moment, on a bad day at the office, Jesus opens up the heavens, just a crack, to show a group of shaken fishermen a glimpse of His divine power. As we've seen, Peter had witnessed miracles from Jesus before. But this

was different. Here was Jesus in Peter's boat, in the one arena where Peter was master, in the area of his life that Peter had tucked away as his own. This was not someone else's miracle he was witnessing. This was *Peter's* miracle. An empty net and an empty lake suddenly, inexplicably full of fish. Peter knew the sea, but Jesus *made* the sea.

There was a message in the miracle. Jesus is reassuring Peter that he could leave behind his profitable business and follow. That boatful of fish was a check in the mail at just the right time, a yield that would perhaps give him enough money to care for his family while he was on the road with Jesus. He had heard Jesus say to seek first the kingdom of God and all these things—important things like money and family and future—would be taken care of (Matt. 6:33). Peter could afford to deny himself, to leave father and mother, to abandon investments where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves break through and steal. A disciple of Christ can entrust those things that keep us up at night to the God who never sleeps. Not a promise of prosperity, of course, but a promise of provision.

But Jesus was delivering an even clearer message. This was a vision of Peter's future life. He was the empty net God would one day fill with spiritual power to preach to thousands of people at Pentecost, lead the early church, and write two books of inspired biblical canon.

Peter's response in this moment is really the only appropriate response when confronted with Jesus: he bowed and worshiped Jesus. "My Lord and my God," he said, and then, in awe, repented. "Get away from me. I'm a sinful man." You'll notice that nobody in Scripture is ever casual after an encounter with the living God: Moses glowed, Isaiah was "undone," Ezekiel face-planted in fear, John fainted. Peter was overwhelmed—but he left his nets and followed.

### ◆ Where Else Would We Go? ◆

Following Jesus took Peter across Galilee and Judea and to places he could have never imagined. Lepers healed. Lame walking. The blind receiving sight. He saw Jesus raise a servant girl from the dead. Peter was there, twice, when the Lord of Creation scooped up a little boy's lunch and stretched it to feed thousands of hungry, desperate people, with food left over. And there was the time Jesus, awoke from a nap and saved the disciples from shipwreck by speaking, yes speaking, to the water and turning a choppy sea smooth as glass in an instant.

There were also many moments that Peter just didn't understand.

**It seemed the more Peter messed up, the more Jesus drew him into the inner circle.**

Such as Jesus' insistence on going through Samaria, where no Galilean ever set foot. And not only did He pass through Samaria, He initiated a conversation with a sketchy woman, who astonishingly became an evangelist. He heard Jesus describe the faith of a Roman centurion, the very symbol of oppression and power, as the greatest faith in all of Israel. And there was the

time Jesus insisted on dining with the traitorous tax collectors.

And it seemed the more Peter messed up, the more he opened his mouth before his brain engaged, the more Jesus drew him into the inner circle. Peter was the only one who, when he saw Jesus walking on the water toward them, didn't stay in the boat to gaze on the miracle but impulsively leapt into the sea and began walking on the water himself (Matt. 14:28). Peter was the one who, when Jesus took him and James and John to the top of a mountain and revealed to them a glimpse of His divine glory, suggested they domesticate the

Transfiguration with a series of memorials, and was rebuked by the Father (Matt. 17:1–4; Mark 9:2–5; Luke 9:32–33).

Perhaps nothing encapsulates what this three-year journey was like for this fisherman turned follower than the words he spoke in response to a haunting question, after thousands of fair-weather followers peeled away from their movement in response to some hard teaching. Jesus offered a most human question: “You don’t want to go away too, do you?” Jesus, Son of God, knew His mission and journeyed toward the cross, but Jesus, Man of Sorrows, hurt as people rejected Him. In this moment, Peter spoke up:

“Simon Peter answered, ‘Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God’” (John 6:68–69).

*To whom will we go?* This is why we pause every spring and gaze at a bloody cross and an empty tomb, why we drag ourselves out of bed on cold Sunday mornings, week after week; why, weary and sorrowful and not sure about anything, we come to Jesus in jumbled prayer. We have nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to. Jesus has the words of eternal life.

What Peter had was a tiny seed of faith, implanted in him by the Spirit of God. We know this because we read his bold words of affirmation of Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one spoken of by the Old Testament prophets. Jesus, standing at Caesarea Philippi, on the ruins of ancient temples where sacrifices to the pagan gods had been offered, had pressed into His disciples and had asked them, “Who do you say I am?” (Matt. 16:16; Mark 8:29–33; Luke 9:20). Peter answered the question that, sooner or later, every human soul must answer. “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

He didn't understand everything. "Thou art the Christ" meant He couldn't quite reconcile a King with a crucified, arrested Lord. He didn't like Jesus' prediction of death and resurrection for himself, hardly the career trajectory of a triumphant conqueror. In fact, not long after his declaration of faith, Peter was rebuked by Jesus for opposing the journey to the cross. Peter's vision of God's kingdom involved blood, sure, but surely it would be Roman blood spilled underfoot as the righteous king put down the Roman overlords. He could not see, ahead, blood of the One he loved splattered across an ugly instrument of torture and death. But make no mistake, Peter's open declaration of Jesus as God's Son was not the safe choice. It defied the religious leaders. Soon the crowds would be howling for Jesus' death. And one day this simple declaration would make Peter an enemy of Rome.

With twenty-first-century hindsight, expressed in air-conditioned auditoriums and comfortable seating, we don't fully grasp what it would mean for a respectable Jewish businessman to sacrifice his reputation and openly declare that this teacher from Nazareth was God Himself, in the flesh. We can't feel the sting of social isolation Peter and others would endure in the years ahead, alienation from their own family and tribe and eventual martyrdom.

Jesus' response was that upon this rock—yes, Peter the impulsive, impatient, imperfect disciple—Christ would build His church. Peter and the other disciples would become Apostles, ushering in a new age of salvation history.

## ♦ I've Got This, Lord ♦

Which bring us, ultimately, to the life-defining moment of Peter's story. It's a story included in all four gospels so we know it was important to the gospel writers, who wrote their eyewitness accounts under inspiration of the Holy Spirit following decades of oral tradition in the early church. You can't tell the Easter story without talking about Peter's stunning denial.

How could a devoted disciple suddenly turn on Jesus? To understand I think we have to step into his sandals on that tragic early morning. The scenes of denial come toward the end of a long and emotionally draining week that began with great joy and promise.

Jesus and the disciples had arrived the Friday before in Bethany, a small community within walking distance of Jerusalem. The week ahead would be a week that felt like a year. It would begin with an emotional high, as Jesus triumphantly entering the city on a donkey and being hailed by crowds of palm-branch-waving supporters as the King of the Jews. Jesus was fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy of an unorthodox future king who would ride into Jerusalem, not in a chariot, but on a humble beast of burden.

Then there was a joyous meal at Simon the Leper's house, where Mary opened an expensive bottle of perfume and washed Jesus' feet in a display of extravagance that to Peter couldn't understand and that enraged Judas. But Jesus embraced Mary's gesture as a sign that she understood, unlike the others, what was to unfold in the coming days.

As the days wore on, there was a growing sense of danger. Whispers of plots by religious leaders, secret schemes to capture Jesus and

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the disciples. Word came of a conspiracy to capture and kill Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. It must have frustrated Peter and the other disciples that Jesus seemed to do nothing to tamp down danger or to fight back. At times Jesus seemed to exacerbate the division, chasing out the merchants and the grifters from the temple and predicting that Herod's magnificent edifice, Israel's source of national pride, would be unceremoniously destroyed in the not-so-distant future.

One night, Jesus gathered them at the Mount of Olives and communicated His vision for the future of Israel, of their movement, and the world. If Peter was looking for immediate revolution against their enemies, he surely came away disappointed. But Jesus talked of both His impending death and of a second coming, this time in judgment. If, all these centuries later, Christians still seem perplexed by the future, imagine how the disciples felt on that chilly night.

It all climaxed, however, when Jesus and the disciples enjoyed a Passover in a room that Peter and John had secured. This had all of the elements of a typical Passover meal, except Jesus continued to talk of His own coming arrest and death at the hands of his enemies. How could a king rule, Peter must have wondered, when he seemed so resigned to the fate of capture? But Jesus continued and mentioned His leaving them and the sending of the Spirit of God, a prospect that made them sad and a little angry.

Peter had left everything and had staked it all on the idea that Jesus was the promised Messiah. But how could the Messiah allow Himself to be captured and killed? Internally Peter must have reassured himself that he wouldn't let this happen. He'd fight and he'd give his life in order to protect his Master. But Jesus didn't seem to entertain Peter's