



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Ah-Ha! A Journey to a Discovery

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I would introduce myself to you. I am one of Jesus' disciples – I think probably the most obscure one – the one least known – and I want to tell you the story of what happened to me.

When Jesus found me and invited me to become one of those who traveled with him up and down Palestine, my life was about as mundane and ordinary as a life could possibly be. There was absolutely nothing distinctive about me. Why Jesus noticed me I will never know, and why he allowed me to be one of his disciples is even more a mystery to me. But he did, and, although I had no idea of what I might be getting into, I accepted his invitation.

If I could have foreseen the kind of experience following him was going to be, I wonder if I would have been so quick to become one of his disciples.

Actually, I had little to lose. I had no family. I had no profession. I wasn't important to anyone insofar as I knew. I managed to live and meet my debts by taking any kind of job I could get, often accepting a pittance as pay, even though I was a hard worker and did a good job whatever it was I was doing. I was a nobody. I couldn't expect any more.

I soon learned that the followers of Jesus – like the Master, himself – had nowhere to lay their heads. The open fields and the caves along the way often were our sleeping place. Usually, we had enough to eat, although the fare was quite simple. Life wasn't a whole lot different from how it had been for me all along – except that, being with Jesus was more exciting than anything I had ever experienced.

Jesus was certainly different from anyone I had ever known. Even so, he was down to earth and very real. He cared about each one of us. And, astonishingly to me, he seemed to care equally as much about all the people we met – even the religious rulers of the Jews, although they were threatened by him and treated him as an enemy.

Everywhere we went, the people listened to Jesus and wondered at his words, but mostly they sought his special attention to heal them of all sorts of diseases and infirmities. He turned no one away, and his fame spread throughout the land.

No matter how many demands were made of him, Jesus always allowed time to teach us. We heard his message to the people, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," and wondered about it. Then he taught us what he meant.

As Jesus' popularity grew, the religious leaders were increasingly distraught, although I really didn't understand why. Soon we began to hear rumors that they had decided he must be stopped from his preaching, teaching and healing. He showed little concern about the rumors, although he seemed to sense that his very life was in danger. That's why we were so surprised when he told us he was going to Jerusalem – the enemy stronghold – for the Passover Feast.

We tried to persuade Jesus not to go to Jerusalem, especially when he told us we could expect a crisis – even his death – while we were there. That only made us plead more earnestly for him to change his mind, but he would not. He even suggested that we were free to decide not to go with him. We – all of us – quickly assured him that we would never turn from following him.

How hollow those assurances sounded in my ears when the Temple guards showed up in the Garden of Gethsemane to capture Jesus and take him before the Sanhedrin. He seemed to be perfectly calm; I wasn't. This was the crisis to which he had referred, and I was frightened for his life, as well as my own. I saw that I could do nothing for him, so, before the guards noticed me, I fled from the Garden. If I could avoid getting their attention, I told myself, I would be safe. I wasn't alone. All the other disciples fled, too.

Always from a safe distance, I watched the proceedings against Jesus, even to seeing those hardened Roman soldiers nail his hands and feet to a cross, and then raise it high on the top of Golgotha so everybody could see what Romans did to those accused of rebellion against the Empire.

Rebellion against the Empire! If it wasn't such a terrible thing they were doing to Jesus, I would have laughed aloud at the charges. "King of the Jews!" How could the religious leaders possibly be so threatened by Jesus that they had to see to it that he was killed?

But they were threatened. And they used their power to make Rome put Jesus to death. I watched him suffer on the cross, and I watched him die. When he drew his last breath and died, my life left me as well.

Oh, I didn't die – not my body – but my spirit did. It had been wonderful traveling with Jesus, listening to his teachings, seeing his mighty works – even dreaming that I – poor nobody that I was – might, somehow, be like Jesus. And now it was all over. He was dead, and so was I, condemned to a living death and burdened with my guilt and hopelessness. Utterly dejected, I could only watch them take him down from the cross and carry him off to an empty tomb. At least, I knew where they had laid his body.

I didn't know what had happened to the other disciples. I guess they had been as preoccupied with saving themselves as I had. Not knowing what else to do, I wandered back to the house where we had celebrated the Passover Feast. To my great surprise, I discovered that the other disciples had also returned there. As it turned out, they, like me, were weighted down by their feelings of guilt and hopelessness – and their continuing fear that the authorities would find them and kill them, too.

I felt some small degree of security in the company of the other disciples, so I went along when they hid themselves behind locked and bolted doors. Every outside sound and every knock at the door stirred the fear within us. We did begin to talk about

some of our experiences with Jesus, and to recall some of his words to us. There was small comfort in them. He was dead, and our dreams were dead with him. We were helpless – or so we thought.

Then came the dawn of the first day of the new week.

Shortly after the dawn, a loud knocking sounded at the door of the locked and barred room where we were. We were transfixed with fear until we heard a familiar voice shouting, “Open up. Open up. I have strange and wondrous news.”

His story was indeed strange and wondrous – unbelievable was more like it. Before dawn, some of the women of our company – not as fearful as we men – had gone to the tomb where Jesus had been laid to anoint his body properly for his burial. To their utter astonishment, they found the tomb empty. His body was not there. More than that, a messenger – an angel from heaven – said to them, “He is not here. He has risen as he told you he would.” And he instructed them to bring the message to the disciples.

I couldn’t believe – I didn’t believe – what I had heard. I saw Jesus die. There was no way he could be alive now. And even if, by some miracle, he was, what difference could that make now? As soon as the religious leaders heard, they’d be out to get him again. It was already obvious that he couldn’t win over the power of those leaders, nor of the Roman government. Even if he were alive, nothing had really changed. I knew that I wasn’t about to risk tasting the wrath of those who had seen to Jesus’ death in the first place.

However, the story of the empty tomb wasn’t the end of the matter. Jesus kept showing up among us. Sometimes he appeared to one or two, and sometimes to the whole body of us. “Appeared” was the right word, for he didn’t come and go as I knew that normally alive people did. After a few days of such experiences, I finally decided that what was happening was just the working out of our grief. I know I often felt Jesus in our midst, and it was as if I could see and hear him. I even felt comforted, but no less afraid than I had been since Gethsemane.

Despite a locked and barred door leading to an upper room, Jesus was often there among us. And just as mysteriously, he was not. It was the same way along the road, and by the sea. At first, no one would recognize him. Then it would be meal time, and, with the blessing and breaking of the bread, we – I – would know that it was Jesus. I wondered about the significance of that event. In fact, I wondered about all the strange things that seemed to be going on. I concluded that grief can cause some pretty weird reactions among grieverers.

Insofar as I could tell, there wasn’t any reason to search further for explanations. Even if, by some miracle, Jesus was actually alive again, so what. I remembered Lazarus, the little girl that Jesus had raised, and the widow’s son. I was there when life was restored to their bodies. The people immediately involved were overwhelmed with joy, but little else changed.

And if Jesus were alive, he certainly wasn't providing much leadership. True, the real Jesus – or apparition, whichever it was – kept giving us a message. “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” he said, “and you shall be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) I wondered what that was supposed to mean.

As the weeks went by, I was aware that I felt less afraid, but no less hopeless. I had spent all those months with Jesus. I liked the way he lived. I liked what he had taught. But I didn't know what to do with it. “Be my witness.” Suppose I did try to tell people what I had learned from him. I couldn't expect them to listen to me. For sure, I couldn't heal anybody as he had done. The logical thing for me to do was to go on back to Galilee and pick up the pieces of my life as best I could.

I decided to stay in Jerusalem until after Pentecost, as did the other disciples. By this time, there was a loose sort of organization resulting from our desire to stay together and gain solace from each other. We told each other that Jesus really was alive, but we hardly knew how to explain what we meant – not even to ourselves.

Because of the Pentecostal celebration, the disciples gathered with the great crowd of Jews from all over who had assembled for the festive occasion, and I was there, too.

That day the most astonishing event of all occurred.

The people recognized us as followers of Jesus, and, having heard some of the strange stories that were circulating about him, they began to ask us for more information about what was alleged to have taken place. I listened to the others as they responded, but said nothing myself. After all, I was still the least of the disciples, and I knew I wasn't very eloquent.

I did notice, though, that something was happening to those who were talking. They were becoming more animated than I had ever seen them to be. It was as if a hurricane wind swept through the house, and they – the other disciples – were as if they were afire with energy and enthusiasm. And I got caught up in the spirit of it, and found that I was talking as powerfully as the rest. I was clear headed. I was eloquent. I knew exactly what I wanted to say, and why. I had a message to give. I had my life back. All of a sudden, I knew what Jesus meant when he had told us, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” (Acts 1:8) I knew what he meant about being “my witnesses.” I knew that Jesus was truly alive, and would always be. I knew what Peter meant when he told that great crowd, “Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:36)

And I knew what Peter and John meant when they told the religious leaders, “Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:19)

“We cannot keep from peaking about what we have seen and heard,” they said, and I was just as compelled as they to speak of what I knew of Jesus. It was “a rushing, mighty wind” and “tongues as of fire” within me.

That Day of Pentecost was truly an AH – HA day for me. Although I had not realized it, the months with Jesus were part of a long journey to a life-changing and life-giving discovery. The exposure to him had been wonderful and confusing and fearful, but I hadn’t really changed in any significant way. Neither his death, nor his being alive to us after he was killed had made much real difference to me.

Oh, I knew that Jesus had been unjustly killed. I was angry with the religious leaders for what they had done to him, and I was afraid of them as well. However, those feelings just added to my misery. While I liked what I had seen in Jesus and had learned from him, I didn’t know what to do with it. If he, eloquent as he was, failed to bring about changes, I certainly couldn’t expect to have any influence. Nor could I even come close to matching his good works. Even though he had told us that we disciples would do even greater works than he, I just didn’t believe it was possible. And, before that Day of Pentecost, I had little inclination to try.

Curiously enough, I didn’t have much inclination to try to do greater works than he after my AH-HA experience, either. Getting results wasn’t what following Jesus was all about. It wasn’t what Jesus was about either, for that matter. He went about doing good. He taught us how to live with one another as God’s children. He demonstrated by living the very principles he taught. If people choose to see, hear, and heed, he was pleased for them. If not, he was sorry and left them free to live in response to their own decisions. He didn’t measure success by results, but by the consistency with which he taught and lived. Nothing he said or did was for the purpose of getting results.

Therefore, I wasn’t inclined to try to bring about changes, but I was committed to being faithful to Jesus’ way of life – no matter what happened to me. And I felt a deep need to tell over and over what I had seen and heard. It seemed to me that telling was a part of being faithful.

Although I couldn’t stop talking about Jesus, I didn’t want to. His beliefs and values were very different from those by which most people lived. They turned out to be the only ones that made any real sense to me – even such ones as “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Mt. 5:43) No matter what, I had to talk about them.

I am now an old man. My journey to discovery has not ended. Though there have been both good times and bad, I have never lost that sense of being alive that came to me on that Day of Pentecost. Nor have I ever stopped telling my story. It is just as fresh and vital to me now as it was the Day it dawned on me for the first time – that wonderful Pentecostal Sunday. I don’t know if my life and my story have made any difference to anyone else. That isn’t for me to decide. Making a difference isn’t my purpose. Telling the story with my life and with my words is what it is all about.