



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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What Happened To The Disciples?

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W. Burney Overton

They – the Disciples, I mean – traveled with Jesus for many months. They saw what he did; listened to what he said; came to Jerusalem with him that last time to celebrate the Passover; observed and participated in all that happened to him in that week we now call Holy Week; and found themselves at table with him in the upper room eating the Passover Feast according to the time-honored custom of the Jews. Only this time was different. Since I was one of them, I tell the story of what happened – then, and later – as I observed it.

As I said, we gathered in the upper room to celebrate the Passover. We did all the things called for by the ritual, except that, in an incredible breach of etiquette, no one was there to wash our feet as we came into the banquet hall. None of us rose – or stooped down – to the occasion. After all, this was the work of the lowliest servant, and it was not fitting for any of us to perform the task.

Jesus seemed not to notice the breach of etiquette, so we gathered at the table as though nothing was amiss. We did take care, however, to hide our travel-stained feet beneath our robes.

I noticed that Jesus was both very attentive and, also, rather pre-occupied. Something more was going on with him than taking part in the Passover Feast, but I did not know what it was.

Jesus – all of us – followed the ritual of the supper very carefully, eating the bitter herbs, the slain lamb, the unleavened bread, and speaking the words that gave meaning to what we did. As we did so, I reminded myself of how God had taken care of my people – God’s chosen – centuries ago when they were slaves in Egypt. I thought, too, of how God has continued to take care of me – of us.

To my great surprise, in the midst of the supper, Jesus completely broke with the ritual of the Passover. He “rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash [our] feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded” (Jn. 13:4-5) Jesus, our master, became the lowliest servant and washed our feet. He washed my feet. I was embarrassed. I was ashamed. I was humiliated. At the same time, I was awed by what Jesus had done. And especially by what he said. “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” (Jn. 13:14)

Wash one another’s feet? Be the humblest of servants to one another? That didn’t make any sense to me – not by any standards that I knew. Yet Jesus, the master, had washed my feet. That didn’t make any sense to me, either. Not then.

As it turned out, this was but one of many things that happened with Jesus in the next hours – days – weeks – that, at the time, didn’t make sense to me by any standard that I knew. In fact, what he did and said at the end of the Passover Feast was one of those events.

Again, Jesus broke with the ritual of the Passover.

Although we had come to the end of the Passover Feast, Jesus seemed in no hurry to leave the upper room. He talked. We listened. And puzzled over his words. He told us that one of us would betray him, and that the Religious Leaders were going to see that he died.

Who would betray Jesus? And why? Surely not one of us. Surely not I. And the Religious Leaders? They were the leaders of the people – the keepers of the Law – our example. Surely they would not conspire to have anyone put to death, much less Jesus, who had done no harm to any person.

I thought about the months – now years – that I, along with the others, had traveled all over Palestine and the adjoining countries with Jesus. All that time, I listened to his teachings. I saw the things he did. I watched how the people responded to him. Even now, I can't adequately express my own feelings for him. I remember his smile, his look, his touch, his words, and I feel overwhelmed. How could I – or any of us who had spent so much time with him – betray him? No way. Not the way I – and all of us – felt about him. But he said one of us would.

Jesus sat in silence. Finally, he picked up a piece of the unleavened bread and looked at it for a long time. Then he broke the loaf, handed the pieces to us, and said, "Eat the bread. It is my body for you." I heard his words. I ate the bread. I didn't understand what he meant. I just knew that I was more deeply moved that I had ever been in my whole life.

Then he filled a cup with wine and passed it to us, saying, "Drink the wine. It is my blood – for you."

"For you." "My body." "My blood." Just some bread and beverage? How could it be? What did it mean? Much more would happen with Jesus, and with me, before I found any answers.

At long last, the Passover celebration was over. Subdued, puzzled, silent, we followed Jesus out from the upper room, and to the Garden of Gethsemane where we were to spend the night.

Clearly, Jesus was every distressed and troubled. That didn't stop us from settling down for the night, although I felt quite uneasy and was unable to go to sleep. If I had, I would have missed what happened next.

Jesus went deeper into the Garden to pray, taking Peter, James, and John with him. Apparently, he left them to watch while he went off by himself. I don't know just what happened, but I heard him saying to them, "Are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour?" And later, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour

has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners”. (Mk. 14:27, 41) I don’t think I have ever heard such anguish and sorrow in a human voice.

At that point, the quiet of the night was shattered by loud shouts and the sounds of running feet. A large crowd came streaming into the Garden from the city. I recognized some of them as guards from the Temple, and, to my utter amazement, Judas was in the vanguard leading them.

Judas. Coming to betray Jesus. How could he? What motive drove him to this treasonous act?

There was a great milling around of people. Amid all the confusion, I saw that, with much shouting and posturing, the guards surrounded Jesus, whom Judas identified by a kiss, and seized him.

And I was more frightened than I have ever been in all my life.

Gone was the high experience of the upper room. I wanted nothing more than to get away from that place, lest I, too, be taken prisoner by the Temple guards. I knew there was little cause for my intense fear, for no crimes had been committed against God, the people, or the Temple. But that didn’t make any difference. Jesus told us that he was going to die, and I was convinced that I would die, too, if I were captured and identified as one of his followers.

In a panic driven by that fear, I ran from the Garden to find a hiding place. So did all the other disciples. Only later, as I heard the stories of what happened to him, did I realize that I had abandoned Jesus. Then, the more I heard, the more I was overwhelmed by feelings of abject shame.

Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. I betrayed Jesus by denying him and running away to protect my life. Only now the life I had saved hardly seemed worth saving – especially when I knew that they had nailed him to a cross and that he died before the end of the day.

Shame. Misery. Hopelessness. Confusion. Lostness. And only a slight diminishing of my fear. It was the next day before I learned where the other disciples had gathered – in another upper room, behind locked doors, they just as afraid as I. There was some solace in being with them – but not much.

Nightfall came. It seemed as if the night would never end, but, it finally did. With brilliant colors that lighted the eastern sky, the first day of the new week dawned, belying the blackness of the past two days. But still, we hardly dared to stir from behind the barred door of the upper room. We were too afraid. No one made any mention of Jesus’ words to us that, on the third day after his death, he would rise from the dead.

It was Mary Magdalene who brought the first word of the resurrection of Jesus.

The resurrection of Jesus!! It could not be. It could not be. But he had told us that he would rise from the dead.

Before the day ended, Simon Peter came to the upper room, confirming Mary Magdalene's words. "The Lord is risen." he told us. "Jesus is alive. I have seen him."

And two of our number, deciding to risk being caught by our religious leaders since they needed to go to Emmaus, returned from there to tell us a wild tale of having walked and talked with Jesus. Only they hadn't recognized him until he broke bread with them at their evening meal – they, who had known him well for many months. They hadn't recognized him.

It couldn't be. It just couldn't be. Jesus had died on a cross. A Roman soldier had driven a spear deep into his side to make sure he was dead. No one rises from the dead. What could I possibly make of these stories? I didn't understand why he had to die in the first place. There was no way that I could understand that he could be alive even though he had died. What did all this mean?

I didn't have a clue.

Nor did I have a clue when Jesus, himself, appeared among us in that upper room. Though the door was securely barred, he came and stood among us, saying, "Peace be with you." And he showed us the wounds in his hands and feet and side. It was Jesus all right, even though no one could possibly survive that kind of damage to his body. It couldn't be Jesus. Could it?

As mysteriously as he came among us, he left. His words to us before he left didn't help me much. "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." (Jn. 20:21) Send me where? To do what? I could put no more meaning to that than I could to seeing him alive when I knew he had died.

However, the stories of Jesus resurrection and of his appearing among us wouldn't go away. It happened that I was there when he came back to the upper room and had that encounter with Thomas – doubting Thomas, we called him – although I had to confess within myself that I had at least as much doubt as he.

I was there, too, when Jesus' met us on the shore of the Sea of Galilee after we had been fishing all night with little success. I knew it was the Lord, but I still did not believe that it could be.

Even though they had gone down the beach a little way, I heard Jesus telling Peter to "feed my sheep – tend my lambs". What could be possibly mean by that? And, what, if anything, did it have to do with me? By this time, I was convinced that there must be some kind of answer, but I was as much in the dark as ever as to what it was.

I was there the last time that Jesus stood among us. “Go and preach,” he said. “Go teach what I have taught you.” “Go. Wherever you go, be my witnesses.” Then he disappeared from among us, and I did not see him again.

Despite what I had seen and heard, I still could not accept that, though he was dead, he was alive. Nor could I get any real meaning out of it.

However, from what Jesus said that last time he stood among us, I began to catch a glimmer of what all this might mean. He had commissioned us, the little company that had traveled with him before he died, to preach, to teach, and to be witnesses to the world of what he had said and done. In some way, we were to continue the work that he had already started while he was among us. It was now our task, and I couldn’t see that we were equipped to do it – certainly I was not.

I was the least of that little company, and, if you think for one minute that I could see myself going anywhere to tell anybody about my experiences with Jesus, or about the things he had taught me, you just don’t know nor understand me very well. And I wasn’t about to confess to anyone anywhere my cowardly behavior at the time of Jesus’ betrayal and crucifixion. As remorseful as I felt, I was much too afraid to take any such risk, and I didn’t know what to do about my feelings of guilt and shame.

Not much happened as the weeks went by after Jesus left us. True, a little company of believers and people who wanted to believe, formed around the disciples, who were now called Apostles. I was one of the company, but I didn’t think I rated being called an Apostle. We met regularly to break bread together, to worship, to pray, and to share our stories of our experiences with Jesus. Somehow, it served to assuage some of our grief to do this. Each time we gathered, Jesus’ words “Go. Preach. Teach. Be my witnesses” echoed in my mind. No one seemed to know how to respond to that commission.

For sure, I didn’t know what to preach, nor to teach, nor how to be a witness. I was a mess. My life was a mess. Only when I was with the Apostles and the little company of believers did I feel any comfort or relief or security.

The Day of Pentecost came. Dutifully, the little company of believers prepared to observe the Day, having gathered at our usual meeting place for that purpose. We were a ragtail lot, having little sense of direction in our lives, although we had chosen someone to take Judas, the betrayer’s, place after he killed himself. We were waiting – just waiting – not knowing anything else to do, and not wanting to lose such comfort and security as we got from each other.

Then it happened.

No words could describe it. Like the sound of a rushing, violent wind. Like tongues of fire resting on each of us. Suddenly, I – all of us – were empowered. Empowered beyond our wildest imagination. I – all of us – knew we had a message and

a mission. Jesus was the way. Not even death could hold him in its power. Certainly not those who had used their power to cause him to be crucified. Jesus was alive. I was alive. And it didn't make any difference if they were able to kill me. Saving my life ceased to be a priority. I was no longer held by the power of death, nor of the enemies of God.

Yes! Yes! Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. God has made him my Lord. He is the Lord of all. He is alive, and I am alive.

I can preach that message. I can teach that message. I can live that message. As Jesus did, I can wash people's feet. I can eat the bread and drink the wine – his body and blood, the source of my nurture. In all I say and do, I am a witness – a witness to the whole world. That's what Jesus meant when he told us to go – go into all the world.

On this day – the Day of Pentecost – I am filled with the Holy Spirit. I am filled with power. Not my power, but God's power. I know – finally I know – that God possesses me completely. It is my task and my way of life to live and act as Jesus did, and to do so in the name of Jesus, the Christ, who is alive – always alive. Always alive.

And so it was with all the disciples. This is what happened to the disciples.

This is the end of my story. And its beginning.