

THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK

“It’s time to get up.”

He stretched. The air was cool and still. It smelled strange, but not bad. The room was quiet and he seemed to have it to himself, a rare pleasure. That could account for the restful sleep.

“How do you feel?”

A strange question first thing in the morning. Not, “Did you sleep well?” or “Are you hungry?” But this whole waking was strange. He remembered things he didn’t used to know – things only God knew – but the last few days were a muddle. He couldn’t remember where he ate the Passover this year. Or whose house this was.

His stomach growled. “I feel fine. Better than fine – like God’s own son. But I’m starving. When did I eat last?”

“I believe it was Thursday.”

“Thursday? What day is it now?”

“It’s the first day of the week.”

He had never slept that long in his life. Perhaps that explained the muddle. Still, he must have needed the rest. “I had the strangest dreams. Nightmares, some of them.”

“Those weren’t nightmares.”

He felt a chill that didn’t come from the cool air. He opened his eyes at last and sat up. He had been lying on a stone shelf. Strange that it should be so comfortable, with only a little cloth for bedclothes. As he moved, the strange smell strengthened. Myrrh and aloes. He looked around at the small stone chamber – almost a cave, hewn out of solid rock. It was lit by a gentle radiance that seemed to come from the two figures at his head and feet. “Fear not,” they said together.

Angels. Interesting. “Do I look afraid?” he asked. “These aren’t my clothes.”

“No. Your clothes are now the property of a Roman soldier who won them at dice.”

“I don’t gamble.”

“You were – an unwilling spectator to the game.”

That seemed familiar. The fuzzy picture began to take on focus. It all came back now – the miracles, the followers, the movement. And what followed. “So, not nightmares?” They shook their heads. “All real?” They nodded, and he shivered. “Then I – died.” The angels didn’t say anything, for which he was grateful. He knew where he was now. A tomb. He remembered the horrible pain, though the ugly wounds were healed and clean, and he felt better than he had in years. “I only wanted to help them,” he murmured.

“Good job. They killed you for it,” one of the angels commented. “I don’t know what you see in them.”

“You wouldn’t. But they’re so full of – possibility. They’re like sheep or baby chicks or little children; they just need someone to show them the way. They deserve better than lists of rules and cruel kings.” He sighed and smiled. “If you could try their food – ”

“We may not taste food as they do, but we can appear to eat, when necessary. We understand desert hospitality.” Out of nowhere, the angel produced a bowl of curds and honey and a little basket of dates.

He accepted the food with a grateful nod. Yes, angels did understand that much. “That doesn’t mean you can fully appreciate my mother’s roast lamb,” he said. “And there are the stories – ”

“You tell stories.”

“I’m one of them, remember? Have you heard them sing?”

“Angels sing. Stars, too.”

“Not like humans, with the very breath that gives them life.” He shook himself. Angels didn’t come just to chat. “What’s your message?”

“We gave it already. ‘It’s time to get up.’”

“That’s it?”

“Also, he’s very proud of you. You did well, and you’ll be with him soon.”

“When?”

“He said you’d know when the time came.”

He pondered these strange messages. It’s time to get up? “Do you mean – I’m not dead?”

“Not anymore. You’re free to go.”

He rose and went to the cave opening, then turned back toward the angels. “My friends. Are they – ?”

“They’re safe,” an angel said. “For now.”

“All of them?”

“All but one.”

He sagged a little. All but one. He roused himself. “But Peter’s all right? And my mother?”

“Yes. Grieving, but not harmed.”

“Grieving? For me? They don’t know?”

“Not yet.”

He stepped out of the tomb. There was a big stone to one side, where it had been rolled away from the opening. He took a step and nearly stumbled over two men who lay face down on the ground. Roman soldiers. He knelt to check their breathing and pulses – alive, but stunned. “Your work, I presume?” he asked the angels.

“We might have forgotten to say, ‘Fear not’.”

He chuckled. “They’ll have a tale to tell. I hope they don’t get in trouble. But who guards a tomb?”

“You did say you’d rise again.”

“I said a lot of things. Why listen to that one? Wake them and send them home. And – try not to terrify them.”

He stood and took a deep breath. The morning was still dark, warmer than in the cave, but not yet hot as it would be later. The air was so fresh, it was like a living thing. He relished the touch of a breeze on his skin. The stars blazed brighter than he remembered seeing before, and they were singing. No morning had ever smelled so sweet since the dawn of the world. He wandered away from the tomb to lean against an olive tree. The bark felt so – real. He threw himself down on the grass and gazed through branches at the heavens. Everything felt real and alive, and every breath was like his first.

After a while, he heard the angels’ voices again, though not their words. But then a familiar voice answered. He leaped up and hurried to the tomb. One of his friends stood there, weeping as if she would never stop.

From the look of her, she hadn't slept in days. The angels stood behind her, at a loss.

"Why are you crying?" he asked. She didn't look up. "Who are you looking for?"

"Sir," she sobbed, "if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

The angels hadn't told her? And how was it that she didn't know him, after all their time together. "Mary!"

Her eyes widened and she gasped. "Teacher!" She flung her arms around his neck. "How – ? I saw you die! I saw you buried!"

"Now you see me live." He held her a moment, because it was so good to be alive and to see a friendly face. Then he gently loosened her grasp and held her hands between his.

"Don't cling to me. I can't stay; I'm going back to our Father. But go, tell the others!"

"But – "

He kissed her on the forehead. "Go. You're the only one who knows."

Speechless and beaming, she backed slowly away as if she couldn't get enough of gazing at him, then turned and ran toward the city. He watched her go, then turned back to the angels.

"Maybe I should stay here, with them. They're like sheep, or baby chicks."

"You'd never have a moment's peace. Somebody would try to make you a king. Is that what you want?"

He shook his head. That was the last thing he wanted, or they needed. "Maybe my followers could continue the work better without me. Peter could lead them."

"Are you sure about that?" an angel asked.

He smiled. "He'll surprise you – he's a rock. But I should visit them myself. Knowing them, they won't understand her message. And I want to see them again."

"They'll think you're a ghost," one angel said.

"Tell them, 'Fear not'," the other suggested.

“Then they’ll think I’m an angel. No, I’ll wish them peace, and stay for supper. I’d like to have another meal with them.”

He turned from the angels and climbed up to sit on the big stone. The sun was rising. He would see his friends again. There was time to give them instructions, and say a proper good-bye. Maybe he could go back to Galilee for a little while. But there was no rush. It was the first day of the week. A marvelous day to be alive.

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