

the CROSS in the BUS station

By Ian Bach



The Church of the Holy Sepulchre

The Garden Tomb

The cliff and the bus station

It was Easter in Jerusalem. The cries of merchants rang out through the narrow cobblestoned streets of the old city, and the all-pervading scent of a thousand exotic spices hung in the air. Colorful Palestinian embroidery festooned stalls displaying glittering oriental jewelry. Rhythmic Arabic pop songs blasted from music shops as throngs of tourists, pilgrims, and locals mingled. Beneath the surface gaiety there was tension, however. Small groups of Israeli soldiers nervously fingered automatic weapons on every corner.

Inside the high stone walls of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, mysterious low chants echoed through the darkened halls. Black-robed priests swung censers that dispensed incense into the stale air. I walked silently with a few companions through winding corridors that seemed to have no end, but eventually descended into numbing cold where the feeble light of lamps on the walls was almost swallowed up by dark, repulsive shadows. A priest barked a stinging rebuke at a mortified tourist who had unwittingly stepped across an invisible line on the stone floor onto forbidden holy ground.

Was this really the place where Jesus was laid to rest and rose again to inspire His followers to spread light, love, truth, and freedom throughout the world?

Later we visited the Garden Tomb, a more recent archeological find that some have suggested as an alternative possibility for the site where Jesus' body was entombed. Excavations have revealed a first-century garden in which there is a humble tomb, hewn out of a rock face. In front of the entrance to the tomb is a distinct rut where a stone would have been rolled to close it. Other findings seem to indicate that it may have been considered a holy place by early believers. There was a serenity along the garden's winding paths, shaded by olive and pine trees, that was hard to define. A young girl was seated near the tomb, meditating. Her face also reflected peace.

Near the garden is a cliff face with a strange formation that resembles a skull. Some have postulated that this is the "Place of the Skull" referred to in the Bible, where Jesus was crucified. The cliff now forms an unobtrusive backdrop to a local bus station, just across the road from the Damascus Gate, one of

the main entrances to the throbbing corridors of the old city.

As I stood looking at the cliff and the bus station, I was struck by the apparent incongruity of the scene. In that place that might have been the scene of one of the most poignant and world-changing sacrifices in history, people were going about their simple daily lives, trying to make the best out of the struggle. A laborer on his way home from work bought a bus ticket and looked wearily at his watch. A tired mother held a child with one hand and a shopping bag in the other. A sidewalk vendor sat looking disconsolately at wares that obviously only a few had the extra cash to buy.

My traditional church upbringing had always seemed to suggest a long walk from the court of Pontius Pilate where Jesus was condemned to a remote hilltop where He was crucified. "There is a green hill far away," and "On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross," as the hymns say. But when I looked in my Bible, there it was in the Gospel of John: "The place where Jesus was crucified was near the city" (chapter 19, verse 20 NKJV).

It would make sense for the Romans to have chosen a busy location to crucify Jesus and the two malefactors that died with Him; public executions have proven effective deterrents to crime and subversion.

But I couldn't help thinking that there might have been a deeper symbolism to the location. Perhaps Jesus didn't want to be crucified in a distant remote place, unseen and untouchable, but rather in the bustling market where He could give His ultimate witness to the people He loved, where they could see and feel His pain, and where He, through His sacrifice, could ease theirs. I could almost sense those tender, tear-filled eyes still looking out over the divided city saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

As our guide at the Garden Tomb informed us, archaeology is at best a science of educated guesses. He didn't claim to know exactly where Jesus had been crucified or buried, and neither do I. It doesn't really matter.

But if I had to choose an Easter setting, I think I would choose the Easter of the Garden Tomb. The

dark interior of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre reminded me too much of the agony of introspection and self-flagellation, the aching darkness of suppressed guilt. By contrast, the Garden Tomb resonated peace and freedom that was as invigorating as the breeze that stirred the olive branches, as refreshing as the scent of the pine needles on the balmy April air.

And if I have a choice, I'll abandon the stylized, rarefied, inaccessible crucifix on the remote hill in favor of the cross near the city gate—the cross that touches our daily lives with the fragrance of its humility; the universality of its empathy; the nearness of its concern, that still bleeds to see the pain we mortals inflict upon each other and longs to redeem us. I'll choose the cross in the bus station.

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Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27 KJV).

rejoice! it's easter!

"Let not your heart be troubled,"
Let not your soul be sad.
Easter is a time of joy
When all hearts should be glad.

Glad to know that Jesus Christ
Made it possible for men
To have their sins forgiven
And, like Him, to live again.

So at this special time of year,
May the wonder of His story
Renew our faith so we may be
Partakers of His glory!

—Adapted from Helen Steiner Rice

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