

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 4/29/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

In Jerusalem, there are several places that claim to be the location of the tomb of Jesus. Probably the most familiar is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. When Emperor Constantine became a Christian in the fourth century, he sent his mother, Helena, to the Holy Land to identify and preserve important religious sites. The first of her many such ventures was to build the Church of the Nativity on the site of Jesus' birth. Another important one was the tomb where He was buried, upon which she built a small chapel. Since then, the site has expanded to include, not only the burial location, but the nearby rock where Christ's body was prepared for burial, and beyond that, Golgotha, the rock where the cross of Christ was mounted for His execution. Over these three sites an even larger church was built, now called the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Thousands travel to Jerusalem and stand in line for hours to be able to enter the small chapel to see the place where Jesus was laid to rest.

The second most familiar site is called the Garden Tomb. In the mid-1800's, an archaeologist identified a large rock formation that, at that time, had the appearance of a skull, the description given in scripture for the execution site of Jesus. Nearby there is a beautiful, lush area like a garden (remember when Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, she believed at first that He was the gardener) and a tomb that is one like a wealthy family would have owned (Joseph of Arimathea who donated his tomb for Jesus was quite rich) and fits the descriptions in scripture of the tomb. It just feels like the place!

The challenge to the Garden Tomb being the actual location is that it wasn't identified until about 170 years ago, while the Holy Sepulcher was identified 1,700 years ago. Helena questioned many people in the area around Jerusalem who were descendants of those who had seen the events, many of whom were Christians and knew and celebrated what had been known as the empty tomb for three hundred years. It was there that she built the chapel and that for centuries was recognized as the true site. Today though, many who go to the Garden Tomb like how much it fits the descriptions in scripture and the photos from the nineteenth century showing the skull-like cliff, though the cliff no longer has that appearance.

I have a friend, Ed, who, on his third trip to the Holy Land, planned again to go to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The day that he went there, however, it was rainy and there were so many people inside the Church that there was no possibility of even getting near to the chapel. So, Ed decided to go down to the Garden Tomb. Because it was very damp and the rain was falling, not many people were at that outdoor site, and Ed was virtually alone. The owner of the Garden Tomb area introduced himself to Ed and offered to take him down to the tomb personally. At the entrance to the tomb, the owner stopped Ed and said this to him: "There are several places that you can go to that claim to be the true site of Christ's burial. You can go the Holy Sepulcher, or you can come here to the Garden Tomb, or you can go down the road to another site. But wherever you go, when you enter the tomb, you will find the same thing. It is empty."

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey