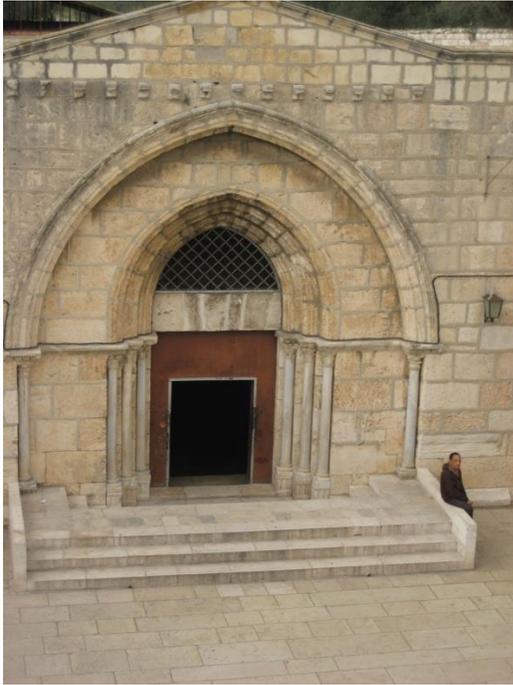


Reflection #15



This is Mary's tomb in Jerusalem.

Well, it is one of them.

Mary was "assumed" and there is a church of her "assumption" in Jerusalem. So no burial place.

Mary lived out the end of life in Ephesus and there is a famous tomb there for her. So not in Jerusalem.

And there is the tomb of Mary in Jerusalem in the picture above. Mary is in a lot of places.

Mary's tomb is not part of the official tour. If you are spending your extra day in Jerusalem on the pilgrimage, this is an option. It was a life changing moment for me.

I went to find Mary's tomb because I had been to the other two and was, shall we say, less than impressed. I just didn't get a sense.

That I didn't get a sense is not very profound scholarship. But a big piece of my journey toward becoming a pilgrim was to learn the difference between scholarship and devotion. Historians would be much more ready to send you to Ephesus as the most likely, true burial place of Mary.

Roman Catholic doctrine suggests neither burial places are accurate as the body of Mary was carried to heaven. Doctrine and history though have a limit and at the tomb of Mary in Jerusalem I met their match.

The tomb of Mary in Jerusalem is confusing; it is hard to find; and, it is bizarre. For this reason it is for me a place of wonder. If you are looking for history here, go to Masada instead. If you are looking for doctrine go to the church of the assumption in Jerusalem, very beautiful. Yet, if you are looking for a moment where you discover mystery, where you sense the truth in a broken vessel, go to this place.

The chances are pretty good that if you are a Protestant traveling to Israel, you are not seeking a moment of sublime connection with the virgin. You are looking for a sense of the landscape, a structure to the history, evidence of what has been recorded. None of these things are in the tomb of Mary in Jerusalem. This is a place of deep mystery. You have to check your sense of history at the door.

I once suggested to a man who had studied the Bible for decades that a trip to Israel would be a great moment of discovery. He said, "no." His reasoning bothered me. He said, "I don't want to ruin the images of the bible I have held for so long." This conversation was ten years ago. That it still bothers me is important.

Being a pilgrim is laying aside "images of the bible" for the truth of the landscape. And then it is so much more. What if you don't really know where Jesus was born? There is a church where pilgrims have come for 1600 years. Yet, if you stand in this church you might wonder: do I really know for sure? There is a church of the "lord's prayer", or *pater noster*, but this was not the place where he taught his disciples to pray. Why is there a church here? Being a pilgrim is walking into a moment of confusion. What if the things I held certain are not as certain as I need them to be?

When I finally found the tomb of Mary in Jerusalem, I didn't know it. It was a long, dark set of stairs that kept going deeper and deeper into the earth. As you walk it gets darker and darker-terribly confusing. There were a couple of times where I wanted to turn back and abandon the journey. But then I found myself in a place of too much light. There were shrines, multiple shrines, all confusing to a Protestant. I experienced a deep unsettling. It was then I thought: this must be the place. Mary is here.

As I walked away, I felt a great peace. I felt like I found her. I found beauty in the depth of the earth and I was walking to the light. This was a moment of salvation.

If you venture to find the tomb of Mary on your free time in Jerusalem, good luck. Here is a bit of help: the tomb is just northwest from the Church of All Nations in the Garden of Gethsemane. There are no signs; there is no invitation. It is for those who seek something mysterious.

I can't encourage you to visit this tomb. I can only remove unnecessary obstacles.

I cannot guarantee it will reveal the long path through the darkness I felt. It may be that nobody remembered to turn on the lights that illumine the quarter mile of stairs into the darkness. But I can encourage you to prepare your heart for mystery. It may be that the truth is much more than we can grasp or control or determine with doctrine or history.