

The Gospel According to Talitha

July 1, 2018

This is the gospel according to Talitha, the daughter of Jairus, formerly a resident of Capernaum, in Galilee—now a resident of Jerusalem.

I was 12 when I was dead, and was made alive, by Jesus of Nazareth. That was eight years ago. Little did I know then that my experience would foreshadow his own.

Jesus was the least afraid person I ever met. All of us have fear—including him. He was human, after all! When he was dying on the cross, I was there, and I heard him say how he felt forsaken by God. Jesus—who raised me from the dead—felt forsaken by God!

That shook me at the time. I cried. But I write these words to tell you that there is no one in this Empire; no one in the world, who is beyond the love of God. There is new life for you, for all of us, no matter how we might sometimes feel.

I was raised in the synagogue in my hometown of Capernaum. During shabbat, I went to the upstairs balcony with my mother and the other women during prayers. I was there when Jesus first taught Torah among us. I heard what people said about him afterwards. Some people really hated him. They said he was arrogant. I thought he seemed nice.

Our villa was on the Sea of Galilee, a short walk from the synagogue. My dad, Jairus, owned lots of vineyards and olive groves. He paid really high taxes to the Romans, which he complained about a lot.

My dad was a typical Roman man—which meant he could be harsh. I think he was frightened. We were occupied. Our synagogue had been funded by a centurion. There were soldiers everywhere, and everybody had to, like, bow down to them. We all lived with fear. It was as if we were alive but dead inside. There were legions everywhere. It was hard: you never knew when the next war might break out.

My father, Jairus, was proud of being a Roman citizen, but it blinded him sometimes to the suffering of others. We had a lot of freedom, but many others did not. There were prisoners of war brought back from Roman conquests who would sometimes be marched through our city, and there were slaves who worked in our vineyards. Some of them became gladiators in the nearby amphitheater, and some of them earned their freedom that way. It always surprised me how xenophobic people who lived in the Empire were. We were afraid of strangers. I don't understand why. What did we really have to be afraid of?

Despite living with that fear, I knew I was loved by my mom and dad—especially after my accident.

My father had heard Jesus when he taught Torah in our synagogue, and I heard him debate with our neighbors about Jesus. We heard the stories over dinner—casting out demons, feeding thousands, healing the sick. Who was this man?

And then I fell out of one of our olive trees. I was playing with my brother, Virgil, and a branch that I was standing on snapped. I hit my neck on another branch on my way to the ground, and after that everything went black.

I woke up back in my room at the villa, and there was this man standing there over me holding my hand. He had the deepest brown eyes I had ever seen, really curly frizzy dark hair, and the kind of olive-brown skin that you get when you're in the sun a lot. It was Jesus! He wasn't tall, but he wasn't short—just kind of average. But he took my hand, said my name—Talitha—and told me to get up.

He spoke to me in Aramaic. So, I stood up. My mom and dad were there in the room with me, and there were three other men I didn't know—although later I got to know them well as Peter, James, and John. My mom was crying, and so was my dad—something I'd never seen happen before, and something I never saw happen again.

And then Jesus said: “You can tell no one about this. Give her something to eat—the girl's hungry!” And we didn't tell anyone—although Jesus' disciples talked about it all the time amongst themselves, and once Jesus was crucified, the story got out and everybody knew.

By then, we had moved to Jerusalem. Once we started following Jesus, it became impossible for us to stay in the synagogue in Capernaum. We were thrown out, in fact. People thought Jesus was a fake. We knew better.

It's funny—the Empire should have made people feel safe; you know, the Pax Romana and all that. People were, compared to most of the world, rich. We had lots of creature comforts. But all that military force actually turned people against one another. The Emperor Augustus had this platform that was like Make Rome Great Again. That sounded good in theory, but in practice it meant Make Everybody But the Emperor Miserable, although, in fact, the Emperor was pretty miserable, too. His family was a hot mess—really, his daughter, Julia, got exiled from Rome to this remote island for adultery. But the attitude Augustus fostered was that everybody wanted to be on top. People imitated the worst of the emperor's behaviors, unwittingly. We competed rather than cooperated. I only realized that after we started following Jesus.

Since Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of the Empire, life for us has become increasingly challenging, but also infinitely more beautiful than before. We saw Jesus again, in his resurrected body, and we heard stories from many others who saw him. But then he was gone and it was hard to know what to do. The disciples told us that we were supposed to go out and “spread the good news to every land.” That's why I wrote this down.

And then there was the day of Pentecost—when the Holy Spirit made it plain to us what we could do. We could be an ecclesia, in Greek; a church—a different kind of synagogue. We could be a peace island in the midst of a warring Empire. We could be a place where all people were welcome, strangers and foreigners and outcasts. We could be a place where people would cooperate, not compete. We could be a community of people beloved by God, whose grace drew us together around truth, goodness, and beauty—as Plato put it.

And that is who we are. Among us, we believe that the living God is more powerful than any Emperor, because the living God is sheer, loving mercy. Among us, women are fully included; some of them like Phoebe even lead prayers. Among us, there are no distinctions between slaves and free, male and female, rich and poor—for we are all one in Jesus—the Christ. And among us, music is always present, because music is prayer, and music celebrates life. And among us, we eat and drink together, in joy. Sometimes, we even dance.

And that is my simple gospel for you. I am no longer 12, but I know I will follow Jesus all of my days. I don't know what's going to happen to Jerusalem; I hear that the Emperor wants to destroy the Temple. I know there are zealots out there who might think they can fight a revolution, but that's not the way. Violence can't defeat violence. Only love can.

So, I'll live a life of love—and laughter. I like to laugh. When you've been dead, and now are alive, you find lots of things really, really, funny. People take themselves way too seriously, you know? I'm so glad that Jesus raised me from the dead. On that day, it was like my eyes were opened for the first time, and as I looked in his deep brown eyes, I said: "I'm Beginning to See the Light!"

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