

Emma

Elizabeth

John

William

Mary



One of five
unlikely women
who changed eternity
A NOVEL

UNAFRAID

Francine Rivers

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Mary walked with the women when they set off for home. Traveling with family members in a large caravan provided safety as well as camaraderie. James and Joseph ran ahead with the other boys. She hadn't seen Jesus all morning, but supposed he was with his cousins. She had given him freedom to wander Jerusalem with them over the past week and saw no reason to rein him in now that they were on the journey home. He had never given her cause to worry, and she was at ease as she visited with her relatives from Galilee. It would be another year before they saw one another again, and she wanted to enjoy their company while she could.

When they reached the Jewish estate a day out of Jerusalem, Mary didn't see Jesus among her nephews. "Have you seen Jesus?"

"Not since yesterday."

She went cold. "Yesterday? You mean he hasn't been with you all day?"

"No. He went off by himself and we haven't seen him since. Isn't he with Joseph?"

Mary raced off to talk with her husband, but found that Joseph hadn't seen him all day either. "James! Joseph!" She questioned her younger sons when they came running, but they didn't know where Jesus was either. "Oh, Joseph! He's never done anything like this before! Where could he be?"

"He must be in Jerusalem."

"Something must have happened to him! Oh, Joseph! Why didn't I keep better watch?" She saw the lines in Joseph's face deepen and knew he was as worried as she was. They went to her sister, Mary, and her husband and asked if they would watch over the other children while they went back to search for Jesus. They agreed readily, promising to keep James, Joseph, and Anne with them until Mary and Joseph and Jesus rejoined them.

"Jesus probably got caught up in the excitement of Jerusalem, Mary," her sister said. "He's probably on the road right now and will catch up with us by morning."

Mary spent a fretful night, sitting up each time she heard a noise. "Jesus?"

Joseph slept no better than she did and was up before dawn, awakening Clopas to inform him they were leaving and the children knew to go with their uncle.

“Don’t spare the rod when you find him,” Clopas called after them.

They reached Jerusalem as the sun was setting, and entered the city before the gates were closed. They went straight to Abijah’s house, hoping to find Jesus there. When they didn’t, Mary wept, pleading that they begin searching the city right away.

“You won’t find him at this hour,” Abijah said. “And if you go out now, you’ll end up being questioned by Roman soldiers.”

“How can I rest when my son is missing?” Mary covered her face. “What could have happened to him?”

Joseph put his arms around her. “We’ll start searching first thing in the morning.”

She collapsed against him. “How could I have allowed this to happen?”

“Don’t be afraid, my love. The Lord’s hand is upon the boy.”

She knew Joseph was right. All the things she had expected to happen hadn’t. Why wasn’t it more comfort? Simeon’s words at the Temple came back to haunt her: “*And a sword will pierce your very soul.*” Would she die by the sword before her son came into power? Or was this what the old prophet meant? For her heart was pierced by fear and shame that she hadn’t kept better watch over the one God had given her.

“You must rest, my love,” Joseph said, tender but firm. Though her mind rebelled, she knew she hadn’t the strength to argue. She was so exhausted she could hardly stand, let alone search the city for her son. She wept.

God, forgive me for losing him! God, forgive me for not keeping watch!

Abijah told them to search the marketplace, for that was the most common destination of boys visiting the great city. It was easy to become caught up in

the excitement of activity as foreign merchants displayed their wares and patrons haggled for better prices. Mary and Joseph spent a full day searching through the maze of narrow passageways, lined by booths displaying everything from clay lamps to gold jewelry.

Jesus was not there.

They went to the synagogue, but they didn't find Jesus among the friends who had joined them for Passover celebration, nor did they find him among the boys watching the Romans go through their military exercises, or in the Temple court among the money changers or near the pens of animals. Thinking he might have found John, they went to the Essenes Gate, hoping to find him there among the desert dwellers who had not yet returned to the encampments above the Salt Sea.

Jesus was in none of these places.

Mary prayed unceasingly as she and Joseph hurried from place to place, looking for the son God had given her. Fear gripped her as she imagined all the things that could have happened to him. He was so young. So innocent.

"Yes, my love," Joseph agreed, "but he's not foolish."

Still, she couldn't eat or sleep. "I don't even know how long Jesus has been separated from us, Joseph. I'm so ashamed. I assumed he was with our relatives. I assumed he was with the caravan. The last time I saw my son was the morning Passover ended, and I was getting everything packed for the journey back to Nazareth. He must have said something to me. He must have. I just wasn't listening. Why wasn't I listening?"

"We were all distracted that day, making preparations for the journey home." He held her close. "Mary, Mary. The Lord is with him."

"I'm so afraid God will take him from me." She closed her eyes as she leaned against her husband. When she had become distracted by her many responsibilities for her other children, and for the child she knew she was carrying now, had the Lord decided it was time to hide Jesus away until his time came to take power? She knew in her heart that the Lord was with Jesus wherever he was, that his life rested in the hands of the Father. Still she

grieved and pleaded.

Oh, Lord God of Israel, I want my son back. Please, give me my son back.

When they rose the next morning, Abijah told them he had spoken with his friends at the synagogue. “Eliakim said he saw Jesus at the Temple.”

Heart leaping with hope, Mary threw on her shawl and headed out the door, Joseph on her heels. She ran until her side ached, walked until she could draw breath with less pain, and ran again. Pressing through the throng, she made her way up the steps to the Temple mount. She hurried along the corridor, peering between the columns, searching, praying.

And then she saw him sitting in the midst of the teachers.

Mary stood staring, her heart pounding, her lungs burning as she drank in air and gave silent thanks to God that Jesus was safe. Then, astonished, she realized that he was so intent upon what these men were saying that he didn’t even notice her or Joseph standing nearby.

Does he even care about you?

The tears came, scalding, as she stood silent, watching her son. Had he been here the entire time? Had he made any attempt to contact his relatives or catch up with the family who loved him?

He is careless of your feelings. You don’t matter to him. You’re no longer important. How dare he put you through such pain and worry!

Anger welled inside her. How could Jesus do this to her and Joseph? She stepped forward, jerking her arm from Joseph’s grasp. The men stopped talking when they saw her approaching. Glancing back, Jesus saw her. He smiled and rose. She was so angry, she wanted to shake him. Didn’t he know how frightened she’d been? Hadn’t he considered her feelings at all?

“Son!” she said, her voice trembling. “Why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been frantic, searching for you everywhere.”

He searched her eyes intently, then looked up at Joseph as he stood beside

her. “But why did you need to search?” Jesus said gently. “You should have known that I would be in my Father’s house.”

See how he defies you!

Mary shook her head. She saw no defiance in her son’s eyes, but neither did she understand what he meant. His home was in Nazareth, not Jerusalem.

“Come,” Joseph said, putting his arm around Jesus’ shoulders. “Your Uncle Clopas and Aunt Mary have taken charge of your brothers and sister. They’ll all be wondering what happened to you.”

Mary took Jesus’ hand as they left the Temple. She wove her fingers between his and held on tightly.

MARY gave birth to a daughter the following summer and named her Sarah. Anne pouted every time Mary nursed the baby. She began sucking her thumb because the baby did and stole the teething toy her father made for her baby sister. The boys squabbled with one another, drawing attention to themselves.

Eighteen months later, the twins, Simon and Jude, were born. By this time, Mary had come to realize a painful truth: Only Jesus was good. His brothers and sisters were incapable of obeying for any length of time. Even when they wanted to be good, they slipped into rebellion.

It was difficult to accept that Jesus’ loving nature, faithfulness, obedience, and eagerness to learn and serve had absolutely nothing to do with her abilities as a mother.

James had come as a shock to her. Joseph, Anne, Sarah, Simon and Jude merely confirmed the nature of her purely human offspring. While Jesus found his own way through God’s heart beating within him, nothing she tried with her other children changed their tendency to give in to sin! They fought with one another. They rationalized and justified their actions when caught doing wrong. They whined to get their way. When disciplined, they pouted and claimed she was favoring one over another. Their self-centeredness couldn’t be soothed away with hugs and kisses or driven away with discipline. All of her children were strong-minded. While Jesus’ mind was

directed toward doing what pleased God, the others were bent upon pleasing themselves. Even when they were kind and thoughtful, there was an edge of self-satisfaction in their behavior. Mary couldn't count the times she'd bitten her tongue so that she would not cry out, "Why can't you be more like Jesus?" But who was she to cast hard words when she saw herself in each of them?

And yet, even in their disobedience, they were precious to her. And she loved them all equally. They were her children by Joseph. When she observed the other mothers in Nazareth, she saw that her plight was no different from others'. Life was a constant struggle. Each child came with joy, but added one more mouth to feed, one more body to clothe, one more mind to educate and train up in righteousness. And not even one among her own natural children by Joseph was righteous—not one! She had seen their will at work from the moment they left the womb. Then they had crawled and explored the world around them, reaching for things that would do them harm. "No, no," she would say. "No, no." And her son or daughter would cast her a beguiling smile and still reach out for what was forbidden.

Sometimes she couldn't help but laugh at her children's persistence, while at other times, she would weep. Sometimes they made her so angry, she wanted to cry out. She tried to be diligent in teaching them all she knew about the Law. She prayed for them constantly. She loved them fiercely. She lived each day with their development in mind. She was careful how she lived before them. After all, what good was it to teach God's ways and not live them?

With each year that passed, she watched Jesus and counted herself blessed among women for this one perfect son. She looked at him and her heart swelled with joy and anticipation. It never ceased to amaze her that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had chosen her to be the vessel for the Messiah. She was a woman like any other, as imperfect as her children. Surely the Lord was teaching that lesson to her above all else. She laughed at herself and thanked God that he had given her other children so she would know it was not by her efforts and Joseph's that this son was so perfect, so blessed, so high above all others who walked the earth. He was God's Son through her flesh.

Every day held its own trouble, but she recognized that the difficulties of life rubbed away the rough spots of her faith just as Joseph smoothed and polished a cup. She struggled to show her sons and daughters the way of faith, accepting that God was refining and sifting her in the process.

Still, there were times when she had to fight her own inner rebellion, her own nature to want to see the fullness of God's plan played out before her eyes. *Oh, Lord, let me live long enough to see Jesus in his glory.* She had been quick to say yes to God, but that same impetuous faith made her impatient to see the Lord's plan fulfilled and the world come under the reign of the Son of Man, God's Son on earth.

When, Lord? When will this Son of yours come into power? How long will we all have to wait before he makes things right and we are free? How long will your Son be content to work in the shop alongside my beloved Joseph, building tables and chairs, yokes and plows, doors and lattices, when there is a kingdom out there to build? How long will he sweep the carpentry shop clean of wood chips before the time comes for him to sweep the earth as clean as it was in the Garden of Eden? How long before he crushes the evil men who oppress Israel? Oh, Lord, how long? How long?

Finally the yearning became so strong, she gave in to it and one day asked Jesus, "Do you know who you are?"

When he didn't answer, she persisted. "Son," she said, "do you know?"

Why did he tense at the question? Why did he look at her with tenderness mingled with distress? She wasn't trying to vex him. She was only asking. . . . Sometimes he would look at her as he did now, and she would feel that she was causing him grief. But how could that be? Who loved him better than she did? Who had been more devoted to him? She came close and took his hand, turning it in hers and running her fingers over the rough calluses. How could it be that the Messiah should have hands like a common laborer's? "Oh, Jesus, should a king have hands like these? . . ."

His hand stilled hers. "I am my father's son."

But when she looked into his eyes, she wondered. Did he mean Joseph or

God? Should she tell him again how he came into this world? Should she tell him that all the world was waiting for him to come out of hiding? That *she* was waiting?

“You’re my son, too, Jesus. I only want to see you receive the honor due you.”

She had seen the signs of Jesus’ power. Even when patrons didn’t pay their debts or Roman soldiers came and took from their family provisions, there was always enough bread to fill empty stomachs, always enough fresh water to quench thirst, always enough oil to keep the lamp lit through the dark night. Even after the Romans had emptied the family’s bins and jars and cruses, there was enough.

Still, life had not grown easier as Jesus increased in wisdom and stature. His struggles seemed more intense. Whatever battles he fought within himself were not easily won, nor did he share them with her or Joseph. Would life not be easier for all when he took his rightful place?

“David was a boy when the prophet Samuel anointed him king over Israel,” she said.

“And it took more than ten years to develop his character so that he would be useful.”

“Your character is perfect, my son. You are useful now.”

Beads of sweat formed on his brow. “It is not my time, Mother.”

“But when, Jesus? When will be your time?”

“It is not my time,” he said again.

Why did he look so pressed? Anger rose. She wanted to shake him and make him tell her. Surely it was her right to know. “How long must I wait before I see what you were born to do?”

“You press me.”

“Yes, I press you for your own good. Is it not for a mother to encourage her son to fulfill his obligations to his people? I love you, my son. You know how much I love you. Joseph and I have made sacrifices for you. But sometimes I wonder. Do you know who you are?”

“Mother . . .”

“All I want is to see things made right. Is that wrong?”

“You must wait.”

“I’m tired of waiting! Look around you, Jesus. See how your people suffer!” Her voice broke. She looked away, struggling with frustration. “When, Jesus? Just tell me when and I won’t ask again. I won’t press . . .” She looked back at him through a sheen of tears. “*Please.*”

His dark eyes were moist. Sweat dripped down his temples. “It is not my time,” he said again. Something in his voice made her shudder inwardly. She sensed she had added to his travail by making demands of him, demands he had no intention of fulfilling. Perplexed and grieving, she said no more.

Instead, she went to Joseph and asked him to approach Jesus. They had always been able to talk. Surely Jesus would confide in him.

“You should not ask him.”

“Why shouldn’t I? I’m his mother.”

“God will tell him when the time is come.”

“How can you be so patient when you know all things will be made right when Jesus comes into power? Look around us, Joseph. We need him now.”

“I don’t have the right to ask why he doesn’t make himself known now.”

She heard something in his voice and turned to him in the darkness. “You don’t think I have the right either, do you?” Eve had been deceived in the Garden. Was Mary being tempted now?

“No, I don’t,” Joseph said with gentle firmness. “Though you bore him, it was God who gave him life, and God will decide what he is to do with it. Let him be, Mary.” He drew her close. “The Lord will tell him when. Don’t be in a hurry.”

She rested her head on his chest, listening to his heart beat. She let out her breath slowly and was silent for a long while, pondering the events of her life. The Lord had spoken once to her, but he had spoken four times to Joseph, directing their steps. Her husband lived with his eyes and ears open, seeking God’s will. She saw every day how much he loved Jesus, how much he loved her and their own children.

The Lord had chosen Joseph to be her husband, to be head of the household, and she would listen to his counsel.

Joseph loved to watch Jesus with his half brothers and half sisters. Their exuberance and antics often made Jesus laugh, and the sound of it made Joseph laugh also. “Quiet, my children. Give your brother a place to sit.”

“Tell us again about David and Goliath!” James said.

“No! Tell us about Joshua and Jericho.”

The boys never tired of hearing the chronicles of battles.

“Tell us about Noah and the ark again, Jesus,” Anne said, leaning against him. “Please . . .”

“You’ve heard that story over and over again,” James protested. “I’m tired of it!”

Jesus sat his twin brothers on his knees. “We begin with the beginning . . .”

Living with Jesus day to day sometimes made Joseph forget this young man was God’s Son and not his own. Then he would remember and feel a surge of awe. Jesus didn’t read the Scriptures, but spoke them naturally as if he’d written them himself. Sometimes he said more, so that he was relating what happened in a way that made it seem he was witness to the events of the Torah.

Joseph looked at his wife, smiling behind her loom, her head tilted as she worked, and listened to Jesus tell how the world was created. Joseph shivered as Jesus spoke of earth as formless and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep. Joseph's children sat around Jesus, flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone. Jesus had been conceived of the Holy Spirit, but exactly what that meant was beyond Joseph's comprehension. The boy was fifteen and had Mary's cheekbones and dark eyes. There were other men in Nazareth who were taller, others who walked with assurance, others who spoke Scripture word for word and claimed to know God's will for Israel.

How often had he heard men cry out for the Messiah to come! How often had he heard men arguing about what God wanted from Israel.

"God wants us to break the yoke of Rome from our backs!"

"It is God's judgment upon us that we suffer as we do!"

"Have we not suffered long enough? If we stand and fight, will not the Lord our God fight with us?"

"Fool! Who are you to say what God will or will not do?"

"So we sit on our hands and let the Romans take their provisions from our poverty?"

"We wait."

"How long must we wait? How long?"

Closing his eyes, Joseph leaned back. He was exhausted from the long trek to Sepphoris and back after a hard day's work. He was grateful for the denarius he'd received, though it barely stretched to cover the family's needs. He was grateful for the work God gave him, and even more grateful for the one who shared his load: Jesus.

His arm ached again. His fingertips were numb, but the pain raced up his arm and across his chest. He rubbed his arm and breathed slowly. Tomorrow was the Sabbath, and he could rest.

Joseph looked at his children gathered around Jesus, and it struck him again. The boy he loved most was not his own. *My son who is not my son. He has grown up in this small village like a tender green shoot, sprouting from a root in dry and sterile ground. He looks like any other boy. He isn't beautiful or majestic in appearance. People look at him and see a carpenter's son and nothing more. When he speaks, who but his brothers and sisters listen? And even they don't understand that Jesus is not one of us.*

He is the Son of the one who said, "I Am the One Who Always Is." God is in him. God is with us!

Will they recognize him when his time comes to proclaim himself to the nations?

Even as the question reared up in Joseph's mind, Isaiah's words came rushing in. *"He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with bitterest grief. . . . Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down . . . a punishment from God. . . . Yet the Lord laid on him the guilt and sins of us all."*

No.

"It was the Lord's good plan to crush him and fill him with grief. . . . His life is made an offering for sin."

Joseph groaned, clutching at his chest.

"What is it, Joseph?" Mary said, suddenly at his side. *"Joseph!"* He felt her arms around him, but he could only look at Jesus and weep.

Joseph felt Jesus lift him while the others were all talking at once, shaken by fear and confusion. "Hush, now," Mary said firmly. "Don't be afraid. Your brother is going to help."

As Jesus lowered him to the pallet, Joseph sensed the struggle going on inside the boy. Had there ever been a time in Jesus' life when he'd not come face-to-face with temptation and had to battle his human nature and crush it? Joseph saw the sweat bead on Jesus' brow now. "Oh," Joseph groaned, filled with anguish. Would Jesus fight and overcome evil only to be killed in the

end? How could this be?

The pain in his chest increased, along with his conviction that he was dying. “Come close, my children. Come!” As they knelt beside him, he drew each down, kissing them and blessing them. “Listen to your brother, Jesus. Obey your mother. Trust in the Lord. . . .”

“You’ll be all right, Joseph,” Mary said, receiving his blessing, her eyes tear-filled but fierce. “I know you will. Jesus has only to—”

“Hush,” Joseph said, putting his fingertips over her lips. Should they presume a miracle would be performed just because they wanted it? Should they expect Jesus, God the Son, the great *I Am*, to do their bidding? “God decides,” he whispered. “We mustn’t burden Jesus more.”

Mary looked up at her son, her face pale and strained. Joseph saw how she pleaded with her eyes. “Mary, I must speak with Jesus.”

“Yes, Joseph.” Mary rose quickly.

Every breath he drew was painful. The fingers of his hand were numb and sweat soaked through his tunic. Mary quickly gathered the children and urged them from the room. Tears welled in her eyes as she looked at her eldest son. “I know you can help him. Do so. Please. Do so.” She left the room.

Jesus sat close beside Joseph when the room was empty. Joseph smiled at him. Fighting the pain in his chest, he took Jesus’ hand and placed it over his heart. “We don’t make it easy for you.”

“You weren’t meant to.”

Anguish clenched Joseph’s throat. “Soften their hearts, Jesus. The children . . . oh, please. Soften their hearts so they will understand and be saved.”

“Each must choose.”

“Even faith comes from God.”

“Each must choose.”

“But will they choose to believe you are the Messiah? Will they . . . ?”

“Do you trust me?”

Joseph looked into his eyes. “Yes.” He drew a sobbing breath. “I was thinking of Isaiah as you were speaking to the children.” His eyes blurred with tears. “‘As a lamb,’ the Scriptures say, ‘He was led as a lamb to the slaughter.’”

He searched Jesus’ eyes and saw in them infinite love and compassion. The boy Jesus was only fifteen years old, but Joseph saw in him the Son of Man of whom the prophet Daniel had spoken. Joseph had seen the strength in him from birth and sensed the unending battle that went on around him. Not once in all his days had Jesus weakened and given in to sin. Not once had Joseph seen a sword in Jesus’ hand, even when other boys his age played Zealot or King David. Not once had Jesus given in to the human desires that plagued everyone who entered the world. Who but God could withstand the onslaught of constant temptation?

“He was led as a lamb to the slaughter.”

Weeping, Joseph closed his eyes. “You will take our guilt and sin upon you and be the offering. That’s why you’ve been given to us, isn’t it?” Joseph was overwhelmed with love for this boy he had reared from birth but never dared call his own. And he was torn by grief for what he feared would happen to Jesus. “They’ll reject you.”

Jesus said nothing. He merely laid his hand gently on Joseph’s brow as Joseph held the other over his heart.

“I love you, Jesus. Save my children. And your mother. She doesn’t understand.” How could she, and still be in such a hurry to press him on?

“Don’t worry,” Jesus said. “I’m with them.”

“I am so weak.” Should he doubt God now?

“Rest,” Jesus said softly. Joseph closed his eyes again and thought he heard

Jesus whisper, “You have been a good and faithful servant.”

The pain lifted as his children entered the room and gathered around him again. Mary knelt beside him and took his hand tightly in hers. Joseph smiled, but he had no strength to speak. He wanted to tell her she had been a good wife, a good mother, but he’d said those things to her many times before. She knew he loved her. Still, he saw the confusion in her eyes, the fear, the appeal when she looked at Jesus.

Joseph tried to speak. She leaned down, putting her ear near his lips. “Trust. Obey.” When she laid her head upon his chest and wept, he looked up at Jesus. The only one they needed stood silent near the door, tears running down his cheeks as he obeyed the will of his Father, and did nothing to keep death away. Strangely, Joseph was no longer afraid. He sighed, relieved.

Closing his eyes, he entered his reward.

“Joseph!” Mary cried out when he stopped breathing. “*Joseph!*” She pulled Joseph’s shoulders up and held him in her arms. How could this be? She looked up at Jesus. He was weeping. “Why?” she sobbed. “*Why?*” She knew he could have healed Joseph! She knew he had the power. Hadn’t he healed Anne with a brush of his hand? Hadn’t he multiplied their loaves of bread, filled their cruses with oil? Why had he allowed Joseph whom he loved to die?

Because he doesn’t care. Because it serves his purpose.

No. She refused to believe it. She could see the sorrow in Jesus’ eyes. She knew he loved Joseph. How many times had she seen them laugh together as they worked side by side in the shop? or seen them with their heads close together as they read Scripture?

And now your son just stands there and watches him die. He does nothing. And now you’re alone—a widow with seven children to feed and no man to provide for you. Is this the way God takes care of you?

No! She would not think such evil thoughts! She would not allow doubt to slither into her mind and sink its fangs into her, spreading poison.

“Jesus.” She moaned. “Jesus!”

He was beside her at once, his hands upon her shoulders. “I am here, Mother.”

She wept as she eased Joseph’s body back onto the pallet and touched his face tenderly. How would she go on without Joseph’s strength, his wisdom, his encouragement and love? Hadn’t God spoken through him and guided them to Egypt, then back to Israel, and then here to Nazareth? And Joseph had been faithful, quick to obey when God spoke.

The children were all crying, confused, frightened, grieving. She understood how they felt, for she was caught in the same feelings, drowning in them. She tried to think what to do. Reaching up, she gripped Jesus’ hand resting on her shoulder. As firstborn, he was now head of the family.

“I have no money to buy spices,” Mary told her sister. How would she prepare Joseph’s body for burial?

“We have spices, Mother.” Jesus rose and went to the box Joseph had packed in Bethlehem that night so long ago when they had fled after the angel warned them Herod would try to kill Jesus. He opened it and took out the alabaster jar.

“What is that?” Mary’s sister said.

“We can’t use that,” Mary said.

“Use it.” Jesus held it out to her.

“But it was a gift to you, my son.”

“A gift?” Her sister looked between them. “Such a jar? Who would give such a gift?”

“It is mine,” Jesus said, “and I can give it to whom I choose.” He placed it in her hands and left Mary alone in the room with her sister and the body of her husband, Joseph.

Weeping, Mary held the jar reverently. Removing the seal, she opened it

and the room was filled with the sweet scent of myrrh as she obeyed her son.

In the months following the death of her beloved Joseph, Mary was torn by confusion and anger. Sometimes she felt she was surrounded by attackers, whispering doubts and accusations. It was all she could do to cover her head and pray.

Oh, Lord God, I don't know why you've taken Joseph from us, and why life must be so hard. I don't understand why your Son must labor like every other man, putting bread on our table by the blood and sweat of his brow. I don't know why so many years have passed and he still hides himself away.

But I dwell in your promises, Lord. . . . You said Jesus will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. You said you will give him the throne of his ancestor David. You said his kingdom will never end. I remember it as if it happened yesterday. I remember. But, O Lord my God, it is so hard to wait to see the fulfillment of your promises.

Jesus worked hard to provide for the family, dealing with recalcitrant patrons who dragged their feet about paying their bills, or those who complained for no other reason than to hear the sound of their own voices. Mary never saw Jesus lose his temper.

When the time was right, Jesus arranged marriages for his sisters, finding for them young men who sought to please God above all others. Jesus continued to work with his brothers in their father's shop, teaching them the skills Joseph had taught him. Along the way, Jesus tried to teach them the ways of God. James was often difficult, and young Joseph followed his example, but Jesus remained patient, loving, firm.

"What use is studying the Torah when Rome crushes our people? I should be learning how to use a sword!" James cried out passionately, contending with Jesus yet again.

Jesus answered quietly. "Your work is to remain faithful to God."

James's face reddened. "I am faithful! How am I not faithful? I study. I recite."

"You study, but you don't understand. Your heart is given over to wrath."

“My heart is filled with righteous anger!”

“Where is the righteousness in following after those who would spill innocent blood?”

“Show me a Roman who’s innocent!”

“James!” Mary tried to calm herself. “Listen to your brother.”

James turned on her. “You always take his side. Just because Jesus is older doesn’t mean he knows everything.”

Angry, Mary rose. “You will show your brother the respect he’s due as head of this family. Listen to what he says.”

“I won’t listen.” James covered his face and wept in frustration. “I already know what he’ll say, and I’m sick of hearing it.”

Mary looked at Jesus, beseeching him to say something to turn the boy from living in resentment and anger. Jesus rose and went out to take another of his long walks in the hills.

Sitting with her boys, she pleaded with them. “You must listen to Jesus, my sons. You must allow him to train you as he desires, for one day you will see that he is more than your brother.”

Joseph looked at her. “The rabbi told us every Jewish mother looks upon her firstborn son as the Messiah.”

“And clings to that belief until proven otherwise,” James said bitterly.

Mary’s eyes filled with tears. Were they asking for signs and wonders? “Jesus healed your sister. He multiplied our loaves of bread. He kept the cruses of oil filled.”

James glared at her. “You think so.”

She went cold at their disbelief. “He brushed his fingertips across Anne’s forehead, and the fever was gone.”

“It’s more likely Jesus picked her up just after the fever broke.”

“I remember, Mother,” Joseph said in agreement. “You were so tired you couldn’t stand when Father came home. Anne was asleep.”

“Anne was dying.” She looked between these two headstrong boys who looked so much like their father, Joseph, and yet had so little faith. Anger filled her at their stubbornness. “Go out and sweep the shop for your brother. Go! Or must he do everything for you?”

She knew how hard it was to wait. But someday they would see Jesus lifted up in power, and then they would believe and stand with him. Someday!

But when? Oh, when will that day come?

Year upon year passed.

Every spring, Mary’s eldest son told her to make the preparations for the trek to Jerusalem for Passover. And every year, she would feel the rush of excitement as she looked up at him. “Is it time? Is this the year?”

Every step she took toward Jerusalem was one of anticipation. When all their relatives came together in King David’s city and reclined together for the Passover meal, she prayed fervently that this would be the year Elijah would enter and proclaim that the Messiah had come. The bread was broken and passed, the wine sipped, the parsley dipped, the herbs eaten, and the youngest was sent to see if Elijah was at the door. Mary held her breath, her heart pounding.

“Elijah is not there, Grandfather.”

Year after year. Jesus grew into manhood, and still the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth did not appear.

Every year, Mary raised her cup with the others and said: “Next year in Jerusalem.” Then she bowed her head so Jesus would not see her tears of disappointment.

MARY carried her jar down the hill to the well and took her place in line to

wait. She listened, only half interested, as the women talked about a new prophet at the Jordan River. There was always someone claiming to be a prophet of God.

“My son went down and heard him,” one woman was saying. “He came back last night and told us this man speaks the words of Isaiah with power.”

“Do you think he’s the Messiah?” another asked.

“Who but God knows?”

“My husband left this morning to hear John preach. He took our sons with him.”

At the mention of the man’s name, Mary’s heart leaped. She leaned forward. “Did you say his name was John?”

“He’s called John the Baptist.”

Containing her excitement, Mary filled her jar and lifted it to her head and plodded her way up the hill. She sloshed water as she set the water jar down and hurried through the house to the shop, where Jesus was working. “I just heard there’s a prophet named John preaching at the Jordan River,” she told him. “We must go and find out if this is Elizabeth’s son.”

Jesus continued filing a yoke. “I heard.”

He knew? Why had he said nothing to her? She came closer. “We should go right away! I’ll go at once and tell James and Joseph to make ready. They must come with us. And Simon and Jude, of course, and your sisters and their husbands. They should all come with us!”

Jesus raised his head and looked at her briefly, then returned his attention to the yoke he was smoothing.

Mary frowned. “Isn’t this the sign we’ve been waiting for: John’s appearance?”

“Everything in God’s time, Mother.”

Over the next few weeks, Mary strove for patience, but it seemed everyone in Nazareth except those of her family had gone down to hear John. The women at the well talked constantly about “the baptist.”

“There are multitudes gathering at the river.”

“I heard that some Pharisees went to hear him, and he called them a brood of snakes.”

“Even the tax gatherers and Roman soldiers are going down to hear him.”

“My son thinks John is the Christ.”

The hair on the back of Mary’s neck prickled.

“Everyone is wondering about him,” another said.

Mary had to bite her tongue to keep from crying out in frustration that her son Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. Each day added to her distress.

Finally she could bear it no longer. “I’m going to go, Jesus,” she announced. “I want to see John.” She was disheartened when he didn’t offer to accompany her.

The banks of the Jordan were teeming with men, women, and children when Mary and her younger sons arrived. The crowd was excited. Some called out questions to the wild-haired man who was sitting on a flat rock and was dressed in a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt about his waist. Was this unkempt man Elizabeth’s son? It seemed everyone had come to hear this voice crying out in the wilderness, for there were gathered by the river prostitutes and priests, Roman soldiers and Hebrew scribes, farmers and fishermen.

“Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God!” John shouted, pointing at several Pharisees who stood near the water. “Don’t just say, ‘We’re safe—we’re the descendants of Abraham.’ That proves nothing. God can change these stones here into children of Abraham.”

Even from a distance, Mary could see how his words were received. The Pharisees' heads reared up and they turned their backs, stalking away. John shouted after them, "Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever your roots. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire!"

"Mama!" Jude pointed. "There's Jesus!"

Mary spotted him among the throng near the river, where men and women around him were crying out for John to baptize them. Her heart beat faster as her son came closer to the prophet. "I baptize you with water for repentance," John said, lowering a man beneath the waters and raising him. As the man got his footing and stepped away, John looked straight at Jesus standing on the bank. He stared at him and fell silent as Jesus walked into the water and came face-to-face with the one who had recognized him from the womb.

Mary took Simon's and Jude's hands and pressed through the crowd to get closer. John and Jesus talked briefly, and then John took hold of Jesus and lowered him beneath the waters, raising him up again. John looked up sharply as though something in the sky had caught his attention. Mary looked up, but saw nothing unusual. John stepped back and spread his hands as he stared at Jesus again, his expression rapt. Her son turned and waded out of the river and walked up the bank as several young men splashed their way into the water to get close to John.

"Come, my sons. We will do as your brother has done." Mary led her sons down to the river to be baptized, searching the crowd for a glimpse of Jesus. She thought she saw him once, but decided it couldn't be him because he was going off toward the east.

When Mary and her younger sons arrived home in time to begin the Sabbath, Jesus was not there.

Nor did he return.

A week passed, then another, and another, and Jesus did not come home. Where could he have gone? Had he been attacked on the way home and left bleeding beside the road? Surely not! But what else could have happened to

him? James and Joseph were concerned and went off to seek word of him, returning a week later, unsatisfied and distressed. “No one has seen him, Mother.”

“Jesus will come home when he’s ready,” Mary said, instilling more confidence in her words than she felt. Wherever Jesus was, she knew God was watching over him and keeping him safe from harm.

She was not afraid for him until she heard rumors that John the Baptist had been taken into custody by order of King Herod. Had her son gone to Jerusalem to argue for John’s release?

“Where is your good son, Mary?” the women asked at the well. “My husband came by the shop yesterday to have his plow repaired and found only Simon and Jude there.” When Mary told them he’d gone down to the Jordan to be baptized, they shook their heads. “But that was weeks ago. It’s not right that he leave you and the boys to fend for yourselves.”

Even her sons objected to the way Jesus had gone off and left them without a word.

“He must do what his Father tells him.”

“Our father is dead, Mother, and Jesus is the head of the household.”

“Simon and Jude have read the Torah, and they’ve been apprenticed to Jesus in the shop long enough to carry on in their brother’s absence.” Even as she said the words, it occurred to her that Jesus might not come back at all. He was the Messiah! Why would he return to live in an obscure village in the district of Galilee? “Maybe he’s gone to Jerusalem.” If not Jerusalem, where?

What sort of son would leave a mother to worry like this?

She must not worry. She must trust in God.

The least he could have done is tell you where he was going and when he’d return! If he’s so good, why would he turn his back on you and walk away without a word?

Should she make demands of Jesus? He'd never given her cause to worry before. He'd never done anything without reason and prayer.

He's your son. He owes you something for the suffering you've endured.

He is God's Son and owes me nothing! Mary covered her face and wept. Never had she felt so alone, even now with James and Joseph sitting on each side of her, Simon and Jude at her feet, her daughters close by. She hadn't felt such loneliness since Joseph died. Jesus had been her consolation, her strength.

It wasn't happening the way she'd expected.

Let him come, and watch how I crush him.

"No. The promise is being fulfilled." Mary raised her head. "The Lord is with us, and Jesus will make all things right."

"Mother," James said, putting his arm around her.

She shook his arm off and stood. "The Lord is with us, and you will see the day come when the Messiah crushes Satan beneath his heel."

She saw her sons exchange looks of concern. Sorrow filled her. It would take more than her word to make them believe. It would take a change of heart.

The day before Mary left to attend a relative's wedding in Cana, Jude came racing up the hill into the house. "Jesus is coming! He's coming home!"

She ran down the hill to embrace him, weeping in joy. As soon as she put her arms around him, she was alarmed. "You're so thin!" she said in dismay. "And dark." She touched his sunburned face, seeing the signs of healing heat blisters. "Come, you must eat and rest."

Laughing, Jesus lifted her and kissed her cheeks as he set her on her feet again. "Woman, why are you always trying to tell me what to do?"

Mary laughed with him and cupped his bronzed cheeks. "Is it not like a mother to mother her son?" It was only then she noticed a group of men

watching the exchange. “Who are these men?”

“They are my friends, Mother.”

She peered around Jesus and recognized two of them. “James! John! How is my brother Zebedee?” She went quickly to greet them.

“He is well, Mary,” John said, embracing her.

“But annoyed that we’ve left his household to follow Jesus.”

She looked at the others and thought them a motley group. “Come. I have bread enough for all, and tomorrow we are invited to a wedding feast in Cana. And your friends are welcome to attend with us.” Simon and Jude were vying for Jesus’ attention as they all walked up the hill together.

She spent the evening joyfully serving her son and his friends. James and Joseph had come and drawn Jesus outside to talk with him earlier. She knew they were taking their older brother to task for worrying the family, and knew anything she might say would only add fuel to their fire. Still, she stood in the doorway, hoping her presence would still their critical tongues. Her presence did not ease their tension, but she was thankful Jesus listened as they listed their complaints. She had worried. She had slept fitfully.

“I must go where the Spirit leads,” Jesus said when they allowed him to speak.

James’s face was taut with frustration. “And what about Mother?”

Jesus put a hand upon James’s shoulder and smiled tenderly. “I have not left our mother without provision.” Mary understood as clearly as James and Joseph that it was their time to help provide for her, that the full responsibility would no longer be on Jesus’ shoulders.

They left, annoyed when Jesus would not explain his absence or make promises regarding the future. She saw all too clearly the selfishness motivating their demands on him. Without their older brother to tend to everything, their lives would be less tidy, less convenient, less self-centered.

She saw also their niggling jealousy of Jesus as the one who had captured and held her love. Perhaps she did favor Jesus over her other children, but how could she not when he was a perfect son and the others caused her endless trials and often, albeit unintentionally, hurt her feelings? She loved every one of her children, for they were her own flesh and blood. Would they never understand that Jesus was more than a child of her flesh? Would they continue to live in stubborn resistance? How was it these strangers who had come home with Jesus saw him more clearly than his own brothers did?

And what a diverse band of men they were—mixed in age, occupation, education, and district. Simon Peter, a fisherman with a graying beard, was near her own age, while Andrew, his younger brother, looked more like a scribe than a laborer. Nathanael, tight-lipped, listened to every word Jesus said without making comment, while Philip asked question after question about various points of the Law.

Still, unlike James, Joseph, Anne, Sarah, Simon, and Jude, these men hung on Jesus' every word, and hope spilled from their eyes.

As the sun set, Mary lit the lamps and went to bed content, for Jesus was home.

And all would be well now.

Mary, Jesus, and his friends walked together to Cana the next morning. She longed to have Jesus to herself again, even if for just a few minutes. But he seemed intent upon encouraging these disciples to learn what he wanted to teach them. Perhaps later she could talk with him alone. She ran her hand down his arm, pleased that the tunic she had woven during his absence looked so fine on him. The work had kept her hands and mind occupied during the long, dark days she hadn't known where he was.

They arrived in time to join the procession through the small village as the bride was carried to her husband's household. The entire village was in attendance and the food and wine given freely to all. The music of harp, lyre, flute, and drum kept many dancing far into the night.

Mary had never seen so many at a wedding feast. Though the food was replenished from time to time, the wine flowed less freely as the celebration

stretched to two, then three, days. On the fourth day, she overheard whispers of discontent. Jacob, the bridegroom, was so smitten with his new wife that he didn't even notice the look of growing strain on the servants' faces as they tried to see to the needs of his guests. One tried to gain the steward's attention, but failed.

Mary approached the servant. "What troubles you?"

"We have these pitchers of wine left, and then we have no more."

"Perhaps Jacob has a store of wine in his house."

The servant shook his head.

If the groom ran out of wine before the wedding celebration was over, he would be shamed before his guests. Poor Jacob would never outlive such embarrassment. "Come. I'll speak to my son. He can help you."

Jesus was deep in conversation with his friends when she approached. She entered the circle and knelt before her son, speaking softly. "They have no more wine."

"How does that concern you and me?" Jesus asked, not unkindly. "My time has not yet come."

She tilted her head and looked into his eyes with pleading. He knew as well as she that the lack of wine would pour humiliation on the groom's head and diminish his reputation before the community. She knew Jesus would not ignore the plight of this young relative, especially when he had brought friends with him to join in the celebration and increase the strain upon Jacob's supplies. Smiling, she took his hand and kissed his palm. Then she stood, stepped outside the circle of her son's disciples, and spoke to the nervous servants waiting. "Do whatever he tells you." Then she stood aside to wait upon Jesus' decision.

Remaining seated, Jesus looked at six large stone water-pots set against the wall. They stood empty now, but would be filled for the custom of purification. "Fill the jars with water."

Perplexed, the servants looked at one another. Mary could imagine them wondering what good that would do, for even the drunkest guest would know the difference between water and wine. However, they were so desperate they hastened to obey. They raced back and forth between the communal well and the big stone pots while Jesus returned his attention to his disciples. When the jars had finally been filled to the brim, the perspiring servants came quickly to Jesus.

“Dip some out,” Jesus said, “and take it to the master of ceremonies.”

Mary followed the servant, who dipped a pitcher into the water and carried it to the master of ceremonies. The water poured red into the man’s cup, and she felt a wave of exultation. When he sipped it, his eyes brightened. She was close enough to hear him speak to the groom. “Usually a host serves the best wine first. Then, when everyone is full and doesn’t care, he brings out the less expensive wines. But you have kept the best until now!”

Laughing joyously, Mary looked back at her son and saw astonishment on the faces of his disciples. Excited, the servants moved quickly among the guests, serving the new wine and spreading the news of what Jesus had done.

And Mary watched it all, tears of joy running down her cheeks.

Now they would believe! All the rumors that had surrounded her and Joseph would finally be laid to rest and her sons and daughters and friends would know the truth: Jesus was the one her people had cried out for over the centuries.

Jesus! The one who will save his people! Immanuel! God with us!

Soon, Israel would be free!

They all returned together from Nazareth and went to the synagogue to worship the Lord. Jesus sat near the front, his disciples around him. Mary, throat tight with excitement, strained forward to watch from the women’s gallery as the Torah was read and the men began to talk about the meaning of the Law of Moses. When Jesus rose, there was a hush, for many had already heard he had been preaching along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. And it

was rumored that he had turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana.

The old rabbi held out his hand in invitation to Jesus. Jesus drew his prayer shawl over his head and stepped up to the platform. The rabbi handed him the scroll. Jesus unrolled it and began to read. “‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has appointed me to preach Good News to the poor.’”

Mary’s heart leaped. She remembered Joseph’s words when, together, they used to marvel at Jesus’ reading of the Torah. “His voice,” Joseph would say, tears in his eyes. “His voice is like no other when he reads the Law. It doesn’t pass over his tongue by years of practice, but comes out through his heart.”

Now their beloved Jesus was proclaiming to all that he was the Anointed One, the long-awaited Messiah! Mary looked down at her other sons, sitting in the row Jesus had left. To her dismay, she saw their shoulders droop and their heads go down.

“‘He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors, and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.’” Jesus closed the scroll and gave it back to the attendant. Then Jesus stepped down from the platform and took his seat again. The silence was deafening, every pair of eyes fixed upon him. Mary’s heart was pounding faster and faster.

Jesus spoke with quiet authority into the pulsating silence around him. “This Scripture has come true today before your very eyes!”

A man came to his feet. “These Scriptures are about the Messiah! He blasphemes!”

Mary saw the one her son called Peter jump to his feet, his face flushed. “If you ask what he means, perhaps . . .” He was drowned out by the rising voices.

“I hear he’s performed miracles . . . water into wine . . . tells stories about seeds and sparrows . . . has great wisdom. . . .”

“Where does he get his wisdom and his miracles?” a man in the shadows mocked. ***“He’s just a carpenter’s son. What makes him so great?”***

Mary felt her face heat up, for she could feel the glances of the women around her as the mocking words roused in the minds of the Nazarenes the foul rumors about her and Joseph and how Jesus was conceived. “No,” she said softly. “No, no.”

“We know Mary, his mother,” someone joined in.

“And his brothers—James, Joseph, Simon, and Jude.” Her sons, mortified, were pointed out.

“All his sisters live right here among us!” another called out.

Mary glanced back and saw Sarah blush and cover her face and Anne withdraw until she was near the doorway leading down and out of the synagogue.

“No . . . no . . . no.” Mary shook her head, feeling eyes of pity and condemnation upon her.

She turned away, only to hear a woman whisper, “And I always thought Jesus was such a nice boy . . . so good to his mother. . . . She’ll never live down the shame of this day.”

Jesus remained seated. “A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown.”

“Now he’s calling himself a prophet!” a man shouted angrily.

Jesus looked down the row at his cringing brothers. “And among his own family,” he added. He stood and faced his accusers. “Certainly there were many widows in Israel who needed help in Elijah’s time, when there was no rain for three and a half years and hunger stalked the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them. He was sent instead to a widow of Zarephath—a foreigner in the land of Sidon. Or think of the prophet Elisha, who healed Naaman, a Syrian, rather than the many lepers in Israel who needed help.”

“Who does he think he is, speaking to us like this?!”

“He’s a blasphemer! Stone him!”

“No!” Mary screamed, seeing men laying hands upon her son, seeing the disciples enter the fray. She pressed through and raced downstairs. “Let him go! Let my son go!” The men below rose and pulled and shoved Jesus and his disciples from the synagogue. She tried to reach him as the mob propelled him up and up toward the brow of the hill on which the town had been built. “No!” she cried out. “You don’t know what you’re doing!”

A man shoved her back so that she fell to her knees, scraping her hands on the rocky ground. Gasping in pain, she scrambled to her feet and hurried after the crowd. Suddenly everyone stopped, and a strange hush fell over the mob. As Jesus walked back through their midst, each moved back from him as though being pushed back by unseen hands.

Panting, tears streaming down her cheeks, Mary ran to him and fell into step beside him, his disciples following. “Open their eyes, Jesus. Make them see. I know you can. Make them understand who you are!”

He stopped at the edge of town, on the road leading down the hill toward the Sea of Galilee, and looked at her. “They’ve hardened their hearts, Mother.”

“Then soften them. Please, Jesus. For me.” Never had she seen such sorrow in his eyes.

He reached out and tenderly cupped her cheek. “Mother,” he said gently, “Nazareth is no longer my home.”

Confused, she searched his eyes. “But, Jesus, how can you say that? I’m here. Your brothers and sisters . . .”

Jesus drew her into his arms and held her tightly. She inhaled the scent of her son and put her arms around him as she had done so many times in the past. But now something was different. She felt engulfed by his love, upheld in it, and yet felt him withdrawing from her. She held on tighter, but he took her hands from behind him and stepped back. He spoke in a still small voice. “Each must choose.” He searched her face for a moment and then turned from her.

As Jesus walked down the road, only his disciples followed.

Mary gathered her sons and daughters. “Your brother has left Nazareth and he won’t be coming back.”

“Even if Jesus wanted to come back, I doubt he’d be allowed back inside the synagogue.” James was downcast.

Mary grasped James’s hand and looked at the others. “He took the road down to the Sea of Galilee. I think he’s going back to Capernaum. We should go there.”

“It might be a good idea to leave Nazareth for a few days,” Joseph said solemnly. “And let things settle down again.”

“And we can talk to Jesus,” James said.

“My husband needs me, Mother,” Anne said. “I can’t go without his permission.”

Sarah looked as aggrieved as her sister. “After what happened at the synagogue, how do any of us dare go?”

Mary was stunned by their faithlessness. “Have you ever known your brother to lie?”

“No, Mother.” James’s eyes darkened. “But then, he never claimed to be God before.”

“He *is* the Son of God.” She saw how her children stared at her. She told them again how the angel of the Lord had come to her. She told them how she had conceived by the Holy Spirit. She told them how the angel of the Lord had appeared to their father in a dream, telling him that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and how he had married her and kept her a virgin until after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. She told them about the star over Bethlehem, the visit of the magi, King Herod’s decree to kill the children. When she finished, she looked from face to face and drew in a sobbing breath. “Why won’t you believe me?”

James leaned forward, clasping his hands tightly between his knees, his face haggard with concern. “We know how children are conceived, Mother. He’s our brother and we love him.”

“You think I’m lying.” They preferred the lies of gossips to the truth she spoke.

“We think—” he looked at the others and then back into her eyes—“that you’re deluded.”

Anger and hurt rose in her. “Deluded? How? By whom? Your father, Joseph? Other than Jesus, have you ever known such a righteous man so eager to please God? And Jesus. Hasn’t he always done what is right and true and noble and . . . ?”

James hung his head. “Just because he’s obeyed the Law doesn’t mean he’s God.”

She stood. She was angry, but she was even more afraid for them. What would become of her children if they rejected the Messiah? “We will go to Capernaum. Your brother will make things clear to you.”

James and Joseph rose early one morning to speak with Jesus, but they were told Jesus had already gone off on one of his habitual solitary walks. “The men he calls his disciples refused to tell us, his brothers, where he went. They act like bodyguards!” they complained.

Mary had hoped that her sons and daughters would recognize Jesus’ true identity when they heard him preaching. But instead they were even more confused by Jesus’ parables about wheat and weeds and choice pearls and mustard seeds. They were offended when Jesus did not separate himself from the others and treat them with more consideration than the hodgepodge band hanging around him day and night. There was never time to be alone with him because so many were pleading for his attention. Furthermore, they were frightened by the approach of priests and dismayed when Jesus welcomed *everyone*. He even ate with prostitutes and tax collectors!

Mary’s daughters and sons-in-law left after two days, taking Simon and Jude back home with them. James and Joseph stayed another day, and then

urged Mary to come home with them. “He doesn’t need you, Mother. He’s got a dozen men following him around like lost sheep.” She felt torn between Jesus and her other sons, and was finally swayed by their arguments.

Passover was fast approaching, and she must prepare for the yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Surely, Jesus would join them for the journey to the City of David.

It wasn’t until the family came down from Nazareth that they heard from others that Jesus had gone on ahead without them.

“Your son is in the city already,” Abijah told Mary when she arrived in Jerusalem with her family. “He’s been teaching in the corridors of the Temple.” The elderly man wore a frown.

“Everyone has been talking about him,” his wife, Rachel, said. “He seems to have a following.”

Abijah shook his head. “The Pharisees are not pleased with his teaching.”

“The Nazarenes weren’t either,” Joseph said grimly.

“I’ve heard that his disciples transgress the tradition of the elders.”

“How?” Mary said.

“They do none of the ceremonial washing of hands before eating. It was on that very matter that the Pharisees questioned Jesus, and he called them hypocrites.”

The hair rose on the back of her neck. “Hypocrites?” she said weakly, unable to imagine Jesus losing his temper.

“My friend said he told them straight to their faces that they honored God with their lips, but not their hearts. Your son said they worship in vain because they’re teaching the doctrines and precepts of men.” Abijah’s face grew more and more flushed as he spoke. “Of course, the unwashed mob that follows him loved it.” He glowered at Mary. “Where did your son get these ideas? You should speak to your son, and remind him of the respect due the

men who take our sacrifices before God!”

Your son . . . your son . . . Mary could hear the accusation in her relative’s voice. She felt the heat come into her face. Surely there was some mistake. Jesus had never been disrespectful to anyone.

“If he keeps on like this, he’ll offend King Herod and end up like John the Baptist.”

“Abijah,” Rachel said in a hushed voice.

Mary felt her blood go cold. “What do you mean, ‘end up like John’? What’s happened?” She looked round at the faces of her sons and other relatives. What were they keeping from her? “James? Joseph?”

A muscle tensed in James’s cheek. “He was beheaded.”

Mary put her hand to her throat. “Beheaded?” Tears sprang to her eyes. John, the miracle child of Zechariah and Elizabeth, was dead? John, the child who recognized Jesus from the womb, was dead?

“It was only a matter of time,” Abijah said. “He offended Herod and Herodias. You can’t shout that the king and his wife are adulterers without expecting repercussions. He said it wasn’t lawful for Herod to have Herodias because her husband is Herod’s brother Philip and still alive.”

She stared at him. “But that’s true. Everyone knows it’s true.”

His face reddened. “Of course it’s true, but it’s foolish to proclaim it. King Herod had John arrested. I think he merely intended to keep John away from the people for a while, but Herodias held a feast for the king’s birthday. Herod was drunk when Herodias’s daughter danced for him, and he promised her anything up to half of his kingdom. And you can guess what happened. Herodias closed the trap, and told the girl to ask for John’s head on a silver platter.”

Mary slowly shook her head. “No. No! How can this be?”

Abijah seemed distressed at her reaction to his news, and turned to her sons

in accusation. “How is it your mother has not heard any of this?”

“We didn’t want to worry her,” Joseph said. “John was arrested during the time Jesus was missing.”

“Missing?” Abijah looked between her two oldest. “When was this?”

“After he went down to the Jordan and was baptized,” James said.

Mary clutched her hands in her lap, struggling against the emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. Her sons must think she was weak and could not bear to hear what was happening around her. What else were they withholding from her? “John was a prophet of God,” she insisted.

“Some say so,” Abijah said sardonically.

She lifted her chin and looked at the men of her family. “A prophet of God speaks only the truth.”

James frowned. “And every prophet who has done so has died for it.”

Abijah leaned forward. “Your brother is going to get himself killed if he persists in offending everyone.”

Mary’s eyes glistened. “God brought Jesus out of my womb and made him trust in the Lord even at my breast. From conception, Jesus was cast upon the Lord. He can only do what God tells him to.”

Abijah and Rachel stared at her, openmouthed. Abijah looked at James. “Is she claiming what I think she is?”

“She believes it,” James said, glancing at her and bowing his head in shame.

“Woman,” Abijah said in pity, “you are out of your mind if you think your son, the boy who has come every year to Jerusalem and sat at *my* table, is the . . . the Messiah. . . .” He rose and moved away from her as though she were contaminated.

Mary felt Rachel's hand on her back. "Mary, Mary, my dear friend. You are a good woman, but do you really believe yourself worthy to be chosen to bear God's anointed? A poor woman from . . . Nazareth, whose husband was a humble carpenter?"

"Our father was from the line of David," Jude said, pride-pricked.

"So are a lot of other men, in higher stations than your father," Abijah said and raised his hands. "We are not speaking against our relative. He was a good man, devout and faithful. But to be the father of the Messiah?"

"Jesus is not Joseph's son."

"Mother!" James said harshly, his eyes black with anger. "Everyone in this room knows what really happened."

Mary felt the blood surge into her cheeks. She looked around at them all. "God will keep Jesus safe. Jesus will not die!" He was the Messiah! He was the Anointed One of God, the Promised One who would save Israel! "The Lord's hand is upon him."

But she saw in their eyes that they didn't believe her and, consequently, would not believe in Jesus either.

Mary returned home to Nazareth despondent. The tension in the family had increased over the Passover week. Their relatives had pressured her and her sons again and again to speak to Jesus before harm came to him. Mary had the distinct feeling that Abijah was less concerned with the welfare of her son than with the shame Jesus might bring upon his household.

When James and Joseph told her Jesus was back in Capernaum, she was not surprised that they wanted to go down and talk with him. She knew they feared for his life. But even more, they feared being excluded from the synagogue. The rabbi had been furious after Jesus' visit and said openly that anyone who believed Jesus was the Messiah would be cast from the congregation, just as the carpenter's son had been.

"We will go," she said firmly. "We will go and talk with Jesus, and then you will see."

But when she and her sons arrived in Capernaum, there was such a crowd around Peter's house that they couldn't even get close to the door. James shouldered his way through the crowd. "Make way for us! This is Jesus' mother and we are his brothers!" Hearing that, people touched them and exclaimed how blessed they were. Still, they were allowed no closer than the doorway. From there, they could hear Jesus, but not see him. Farther than that, they could not move.

James told the man in front of him to send word forward that Jesus' mother and brothers had come to speak with him. A few minutes later, Mary heard a voice call out. "Your mother and your brothers are outside, and they want to speak to you."

"Who is my mother?" she heard Jesus say. "Who are my brothers? These are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!"

Mary felt the heat surge into her cheeks as those around her glanced at her and her sons, then looked quickly away.

Your son no longer needs you, and now he rejects you!

My son loves me. He loves his brothers. He would not reject us. He would not!

James's face was red and angry, Joseph's pale, Simon's and Jude's, confused and hurt. James leaned close to her ear. "You see how it is now, Mother. Now that Jesus has a following, he doesn't care for his own flesh and blood."

"We will wait for him."

"Why?" Joseph said. "To be further humiliated?"

James put his arm around her as if to shield her from the curious glances of the crowd. "We're leaving," he whispered harshly.

If she argued with her children, she would cause further disruption. She

went with them a ways, and then she put her foot down firmly. “Are you all so proud you think Jesus must stop what he’s doing the minute we appear?” She did not say again that Jesus was about God’s work, for that would only incense them more.

“We came because we love him, and look how he treats us!” Simon said, tears running down his cheeks. “We came because we don’t want him to end up like John, with his head on a platter.”

Mary embraced her youngest sons and looked up at James and Joseph. “Wait for him. Wait! Did you come all this way to turn your back on him?”

“He turned his back on us first.” James turned away, but not before she saw the sheen of tears glistening in his eyes.

She refused to be swayed by hurt or confusion. She knew Jesus better than they did. Had she not been the one to suckle him at her breast and watch him grow into a man? Even as she walked away with them, she tried to turn them back. “Remember the parables your brother told us when he came home to Nazareth the last time. He’s teaching the people about the kingdom of heaven. He is defining the children of God. He does not think as we think, my sons. His ways are not like ordinary men’s. His ways are higher.”

As she spoke her faith, assurance came, bringing comfort with it. “He is not excluding us, my sons, but *including* all those who have come to him to hear what pleases God.” She looked back at those who craned their necks to hear her son’s words of hope. “Those who realize they need God—the gentle and lowly, the sick, those who mourn, those who are hungry and thirsty for justice . . .” She put her hand on James’s arm, stopping him. “You know him. James. Joseph. Simon. Jude. You *know* him. Can you really say in your heart that Jesus has no love for you?”

They wouldn’t listen.

She yearned to stay behind in Capernaum, but knew that if she did, these sons of Joseph would feel she had rejected them just as they were convinced Jesus was rejecting them. So, with sinking heart, she walked home with them. Every step away from Jesus made her feel more alone.

Each must choose.

The words echoed in her mind and made her heart ache. Jesus knew she loved him. Jesus knew she believed he was the Messiah. Jesus would understand that she couldn't leave her other sons.

Each must choose.

She had to stay with them and make them understand.

Each must choose.

If she left her other children, they would be hurt and angry, believing she had always favored Jesus over them.

Each must choose.

The farther she got from Capernaum and Jesus, the softer the echo of her son's words to her . . . and the deeper the ache in her heart.

Her sister, Mary, and Clopas stopped by Mary's house on their way out of Nazareth. "We've talked about it for months and decided to close our house and shut down our business so we can go with your son."

Mary's eyes spilled over with tears. At last, her sister and her husband believed! She had thought the day would never come. "Wait," she said and hurried to the box that held the last of the gifts from the magi. Mary put the incense and remaining pieces of gold into a bag and gave them to her sister. "For Jesus to use."

"Why don't you come with us?"

"I must try to sway my sons and daughters."

Soon after, Mary went once again with her sons and daughters to Jerusalem for Passover. She sat among her disbelieving relatives, overhearing rumors that King Herod was looking for Jesus because he thought he was John the Baptist come back to life. There was growing antagonism in high places against her son. Wisely, Jesus had crossed the lake to Gennesaret and was preaching in the surrounding district.

Upon her return to Nazareth, she heard that Jesus had departed from the district of Galilee and gone into the region of Judah beyond the Jordan. She heard rumors that Jesus had gone to Sidon and Tyre. But why would her son be among the Gentiles? It was Israel that awaited the Messiah.

With each day that passed, she felt the distance widen between her and Jesus, and the hearts of her sons growing harder.

“I want to go to him,” Mary said, weeping. “I want to see my son!” All her efforts to save these stubborn children had failed. She was powerless to change their minds and hearts, powerless to turn them to the truth she knew: that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Oh, Lord God of Israel, God of mercy, why are they so stubborn? I can do nothing with them. Oh, Lord, I’m placing them in your mighty hands. Be merciful. Please be merciful.

“You tried to see him in Capernaum, Mother,” her sons argued with her. “Do you not remember what happened? He has thousands of followers crying out his name. He has his inner circle of friends. He’s famous throughout Judea. He doesn’t care about us anymore.”

It did no good to say Jesus loved them. It did no good to remind them of the years he had provided for them, held them in his lap, read to them, laughed with them, taught them. What would Jesus have to do to prove his love for them?

A year passed, and another, and Mary knew the time was fast approaching when she would have to do what Jesus said. She would have to choose. And she knew she must make the same choice she had made thirty-three years ago.

She must say yes to God and stop counting the cost. Even if it meant giving up her children.

MARY traveled with her sons and daughters and their families to Jerusalem for the Passover. Everyone they met was talking about Jesus, telling stories of

his miracles and preaching. He had not gone to Jerusalem for Passover the previous year, but had spent the week with his disciples in the desert after feeding a multitude on five barley loaves and two fish.

“Rumors, just rumors,” someone near her said.

“I tell you, this man is a prophet of God!”

“He’s my brother,” Simon said proudly.

The strangers laughed at him. “Your brother!” They sneered. “Why aren’t you following him?”

Her sons and daughters made no claims after that, but they talked a great deal among themselves, speaking softly, gravely concerned. Everyone they encountered was talking about Jesus, and all were hoping “the Nazarene” would come to Jerusalem this year so they could see him.

Mary was greatly disturbed and pondered what she was hearing. What exactly were these people expecting of Jesus? These people acted like children playing flutes, expecting Jesus to dance to their tune. They could talk only of the signs and wonders her son was performing, but retained nothing of the lessons he taught. They were eager to see Jesus perform miracles, greedy to eat bread that cost them nothing, hopeful to see their enemies crushed and humiliated.

Her son hadn’t been born to do what men wanted, but what God willed.

How would Jesus do it? Mary wondered. How would her son bring redemption to these people who wanted to be entertained as much as the Roman mob did? If Jesus didn’t do what they wanted or expected, they would turn on him.

Mary felt a cold chill down her back. Hadn’t Jesus’ own brothers turned on him when Jesus hadn’t done as they wanted or expected? Could she expect more from strangers?

When they reached the gates of Jerusalem, Mary overheard someone say that the Nazarene was heard to be at Bethphage. “Let’s go and join him

there,” she said to her children. “Let’s find your brother and stay with him.”

“He may need us,” James said, looking as concerned as she felt. As head of the family, his opinion swayed the others. Simon and Jude were excited about the stories surrounding Jesus, as eager as everyone else to see what he could do, rather than hearing the word of the Lord and obeying it.

Before they had gone far, they heard shouting: “Praise God for the Son of David! Bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Praise God in highest heaven!”

The swell of voices grew until it was deafening. Mary’s heart beat faster and faster as she hurried along, knowing they were welcoming her son into Jerusalem. The day had finally come for Jesus to be proclaimed the Messiah! She saw him coming up the road, surrounded by followers waving palm branches and crying out his name. Men and women were throwing garments down for him to ride over. Others were stripping branches from trees and spreading them on the road.

There were so many, Mary and her children could not get close.

“It’s Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee,” people were saying around her.

“Not a prophet,” she wanted to cry out. “He is the Son of God! He is the Messiah!” Overcome with excitement, Mary left the others and hurried along the outer fringe of the crowd along the road, crying out, “Jesus! Jesus!” She tried to keep pace, but lost sight of him as he entered the city. The crush of people drew her through the gates after him.

“Mother!” James called, pushing his way through the throng until he reached her. Shielding her, he drew her aside until Joseph, Simon, Jude, and the others caught up, and then they fell in with the multitude following Jesus.

“He’s going to the Temple,” Mary said, breathless. “He’s going to declare himself!” Bumped and pushed, she was pressed forward through the streets of the city. They had almost reached the steps of the Temple complex when she heard shouts and saw wealthy merchants and priests darting out, covering

their heads. Doves and pigeons flew out from among the Temple's columns and out across the city. Sheep bleated and ran among the crowd. She thought she heard Jesus' voice echoing: "Don't turn my Father's house into a marketplace!"

"What's happened?" people were crying out.

"He's overturning the tables of the money changers and those who are selling sacrifices!" someone called back, laughing.

"The Nazarene is driving the money changers out with a whip!"

James's face was pale, Joseph's strained. Simon and Jude wanted to get closer and see. Her daughters and their husbands looked alarmed by the mass of people pressing from all sides to get inside the Temple complex to see what was happening.

"If there's a riot, the Romans will come," James said. "And then what will happen to him?"

Mary scarcely heard. The Passover week had begun, and the Lord had said to remove all leaven from their houses. Once, years ago, Jesus had said he had to be in his Father's house—the Temple. And now, he was there, sweeping the evildoers out.

"Everything will be all right now," Mary said, tears of joy running down her cheeks. "The Day of the Lord has come!"

By the time Mary and her family reached the corridor of the Temple, Jesus had gone. Everyone was seeking him. "He's gone back to Bethphage," some said. Others said he would go to Bethany to stay with a man he'd raised from the dead.

Exhausted, Mary went to Abijah's house and stayed with her relatives. Teary, she sat silently listening to their excited speculations about Jesus and what he might do next. She wondered where Jesus was, if he had managed to find a quiet place to collect his thoughts, what his plans were, and how long it would be before she could join him. Closing her eyes, she thought back over the many Passovers she and Joseph had spent with Jesus. Once before, she

had been separated from her son.

She felt at peace again, for she knew Jesus would return to the city in the morning, and she would find him in the Temple.

Mary sat all day in the women's court, hoping for a glimpse of her son. She prayed and watched men and women come and go, hearing clearly their heightened talk.

"The Pharisees say he casts out demons by Satan, the ruler of demons."

"But the Nazarene said a home divided against itself is doomed."

Priests stalked along the corridors, saying, "We ask for a sign, and he dares call us an evil and faithless generation!"

"Mary!" When she turned, she saw her sister running toward her, arms outstretched. They embraced, laughing joyfully.

"My son," Mary said, tearfully, "how is my son?"

"Oh, he's wonderful. You must come and listen to him, Mary. Are your sons here? Your daughters?"

Her sons had come to the Temple with her that morning, and left her at the entrance of the women's court while they went off to find Jesus and speak with him. She could only hope they would listen more than they talked.

"Come," Mary's sister said, her arm around Mary's waist as she drew her toward a gathering of women. "I want you to meet my sisters." She introduced her to Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, as well as others who had followed Jesus from Galilee. Each told Mary the story of how her son had saved her. Mary Magdalene had been possessed of demons while others had been sick or blind or hopeless. Mary wept with them, sharing the joy she saw in their faces.

Surely Israel would embrace her son as these women and the disciples had done. The Temple was filled with those who wanted to see the hope of Israel and hear the word of the Lord. Israel would repent and be united in devotion

to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

“How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites!” She went cold at the sound of her son’s anger. “For you won’t let others enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and you won’t go in yourselves.”

A low roar of voices was heard around her as Jesus walked among the pillars, his anger clear in his body and face. “You shamelessly cheat widows out of their property, and then, to cover up the kind of people you really are, you make long prayers in public. Because of this, your punishment will be the greater.”

Her heart beat in fear, for she saw the rage growing on the faces of the men he confronted. They shouted at him, but Jesus’ voice carried. “Yes, how terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn him into twice the son of hell as you yourselves are.”

She saw her sons, their faces pale and taut with fear. They were afraid of what people would say. She saw it in the way they looked around them, and then at her, beseeching. She could almost hear them plead, *“Do something, Mother. Stop him before we are all banned from the Temple.”*

Her own cheeks were on fire as Jesus cried out in anger against the hypocrisy of the priests and elders. Everyone knew what he said was true, but no one had dared speak of it so boldly. Her heart hammered as she stared at Jesus striding along the corridor. Where was her quiet son, the one who sat meditating on Scripture beneath the olive tree in the yard at Nazareth, the one who sat soaking in the readings of the Torah at synagogue, the one who walked the hills above Galilee, praying? Her body shook at the power in his voice, for she was certain that if Jesus called for the stones of the Temple to fall, they would.

“You are careful to tithe even the tiniest part of your income, but you ignore the important things of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. . . . Blind guides! You strain your water so you won’t accidentally swallow a gnat; then you swallow a camel!”

Mary had never seen Jesus angry, and she trembled at the sight of his wrath. He stood facing the rulers, his voice filled with authority and carrying through the corridors to the very heart of the Temple, though he did not shout as they did.

“Snakes! Sons of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of hell? I will send you prophets and wise men and teachers of religious law. You will kill some by crucifixion and whip others in your synagogues, chasing them from city to city. As a result, you will become guilty of murdering all the godly people from righteous Abel to Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered in the Temple between the altar and the sanctuary. I assure you, all the accumulated judgment of the centuries will break upon the heads of this very generation.”

Jesus lifted his head and wept. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God’s messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn’t let me.”

He faced the rulers once again, pointing at the scribes and the black-clad Pharisees with their prayer shawls. “And now look, your house is left to you, empty and desolate. For I tell you this, you will never see me again until you say, ‘Bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

Jesus turned and strode from the Temple.

For a moment, there was complete silence, as though all life had departed with him. And then there arose angry voices. Men shouted at one another, shoving, pushing. Mary saw her sons withdraw. The women with whom she had been talking scattered, rushing to the pillars and trying to follow their Master.

Mary was cut off, bumped, shoved. By the time she made it outside, her son was gone.

Her children surrounded her when she arrived at Abijah’s home, exhausted and depressed. “I couldn’t find him. I walked to Bethphage and back, but I couldn’t find him.”

“If he’s wise, he’ll stay out of sight and leave after Passover,” Abijah said grimly. “No good can come of what’s happened. The leading priests and other leaders of the people are at the court of the high priest, Caiaphas, right now, talking about Jesus.”

“I thought the people would riot after Jesus spoke against the Pharisees and scribes,” Joseph said. “Everyone was shouting, one against another.”

“Where could he be?” Mary said.

“He’s probably lodging with one of his leper friends or a prostitute. Your son seems to prefer their company to that of his own family.”

James’s face reddened. “And if he did come here, would you welcome him, Abijah?”

“Not now! I’d sooner house a scorpion than him in my house. He’s offended every Pharisee and Sadducee and priest in Jerusalem!”

“May the Lord open your eyes and ears to the truth.” Mary covered her head with her prayer shawl and wept.

Mary slept fitfully, dreaming of Jesus in the Temple. He was crying and raising his hands to heaven as men shouted in anger around him. She awakened, her heart pounding wildly. The room was dark. She rose and went to stand outside, wondering if it was only her imagination that made her think she heard angry voices in the distance.

All was silent.

Yet, the sense of oppression increased.

Where was her son? Surely, a mother sensed when something was terribly wrong. She was afraid. *Oh, Lord, why will you not speak to me as you did to Joseph?* She covered her face. Who was she to make demands upon God? She should have gone with Jesus the day he left Nazareth. She should have walked down that hill with him and never left his side. She should have left James and Joseph, Simon and Jude, and her daughters and their husbands in the hands of God, rather than trying to convince them Jesus was the long-

awaited Messiah.

Oh, Lord, don't let it be too late. Help me find him.

Dressing quickly, she went out. She headed for the Temple, praying with every step that God would bring her alongside her son again. When she came up the Temple mount, a man ran by her, weeping loudly. She turned sharply, for she thought she recognized him. He was one of Jesus' disciples.

"Judas!" She called out, retracing her steps. "Judas! Where is my son?"

He fled into the darkness.

Mary found a man dozing against one of the huge pillars of the Temple. When she asked him if he knew where Jesus was, he yawned and said, "They took him last night from the Mount of Olives."

Her heart raced in fear. "Who took him?"

"They all went up after him: the leading priests, the other leaders, and a Roman cohort. They took him to Caiaphas and have been giving testimony against him all night. They took him to Pontius Pilate a little while ago."

"But why?"

"Because they hate him and want him executed." The man raised his head, his black eyes boring into her. "The Law requires that a blasphemer be stoned to death, doesn't it? And since we no longer have the authority to kill our own, we must plead Roman indulgence to do it."

Mary drew back from him. She had seen him before, but where? How long ago?

The man stood slowly, the movement reminding her of a snake uncoiling. "They will kill him, Mary."

Her body went cold. "No." She drew back farther. "No, they won't. He's God's Anointed One. He is the Messiah."

"He is the great I Am," the dark man mocked. "And he is going to die."

“Jesus’ disciples will stand with him.”

“His disciples?” The man threw back his head and laughed, the sound echoing in the Temple. He looked at her again with a feral grin. “They all deserted him. They’ve run like rabbits and gone underground into their warrens.”

“I don’t believe you.” She shook her head, backing away from him. “I won’t believe you!”

“Jesus stands alone. Go see for yourself. ***Go and watch the work of my hands.***”

As she fled, she heard his laughter.

A throng was gathered before the judgment seat of Rome. Mary saw the Pharisees clustered together like black crows near the front, talking among themselves. Pilate was sitting on the judgment seat, speaking with one of his officers. He waved his hand impatiently and the doors were opened. Mary drew in a sharp gasp when she saw her son and another man hauled forward. Jesus’ face was battered and bruised, his mouth bleeding. He stood looking out at his people, his wrists chained together like a criminal. Sobbing, Mary tried to push her way through to him, but was shoved back. “Jesus!”

Pilate spoke loudly to the multitude, explaining that it was the Roman custom to show clemency to one prisoner of their choice during the festival season.

“Which one do you want me to release to you—Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” The guard nearest the governor leaned toward him in protest, for Barabbas was a notorious Zealot and enemy of Rome who had ambushed and slain Roman soldiers.

The crowd cried out, “Barabbas!”

“Jesus!” Mary cried out.

“Barabbas! Barabbas!” others shouted.

“Jesus! Jesus!”

An officer came out to Pilate and whispered in his ear. The governor frowned heavily and looked at Jesus.

The leading priests and other leaders turned to the crowd, moving among them. “Jesus is a blasphemer. Will you let him live? You know what the Law requires, what God demands.”

“Barabbas!”

Pilate waved the officer away and stood, holding his hands out for silence. “Which of these two do you want me to release to you?”

“*Barabbas!*” They wanted violence and bloodshed. They wanted rebellion and hatred against Rome. “*Barabbas!*”

Pilate held out his hand toward Jesus. “But if I release Barabbas, what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?”

“Crucify him!”

“Why? What crime has he committed?”

“Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!” The multitude was turning into an angry mob, and Roman soldiers moved into position, waiting for Pilate’s command to disperse them. But he didn’t. He motioned for his slave, who carried a bowl of water to him. Then the Roman governor washed his hands, mocking the assembly of Jews who took such pains to remain clean. Drying his hands, he called out, “I am innocent of the blood of this man. The responsibility is yours!”

And Mary heard those around her cry out angrily, “We will take responsibility for his death—we and our children!”

“No! Don’t do this!” Mary sobbed. She reached out toward Jesus as the Roman guards turned him roughly away.

The angry crowd milled around, waiting to see the crucifixion, cheering

when the doors were opened again and Jesus and two others were ushered out by Roman guards. Mary felt the blood drain from her face, and her chest tighten with anguish. A crown of thorns had been shoved down on his head, causing rivulets of blood to run down his face. His face was ashen with suffering; his back was bent over beneath the weight of the cross he dragged down the steps.

“Blasphemer!” People spit on him as he passed, their faces twisted and grotesque with hate. “Blasphemer!”

“Jesus!” Mary cried out, and saw her son tilt his head slightly. He looked straight at her, his eyes filled with compassion and sorrow. “Jesus,” she sobbed and tried again to get closer to him, to reach out to him through the crowd. He passed by, whipped by the Roman guard when he stumbled and fell to his knee and struggled to rise again, and jeered by the mob eager to see him suffer and die.

“This can’t be happening,” Mary rasped. “This can’t be happening . . .” She tried to keep pace with him, pushing her way through the throng that lined the street. She wanted her son to know she was there, that she loved him, that she would not turn away. “Jesus!” She cried out again and again, knowing he would hear her voice.

They took him outside the walls of Jerusalem to a place called Golgotha, near the main highway for all to see. The hill was in the shape of a human skull. Another man had shouldered Jesus’ cross and was shoved aside after dropping it on the ground. A Roman guard gripped Jesus’ shoulder and flung him to the ground. Another leaned down and offered him something to drink, but Jesus turned his face away. Two guards stripped off his garment and cast it aside. They took him by the arms and jerked him on the cross, lashing his arms tightly to the beams with leather straps.

One of the other two men who were being executed was screaming as a guard drove nails through his wrists. “I don’t want to die!” The other cried. “I don’t want to . . .” He fought the guards, struggling violently and screaming as he was nailed to his cross.

Shaking, Mary moved through the crowd to the front, for those around her were less eager now to draw close. Her heart fluttered like a trapped bird as

she saw a Roman guard raise a hammer in the air and bring it down. Jesus' body arched as he cried out, his feet drawing up. Sobbing, she fell to her knees. Three more times the guard hammered the nail through Jesus' palm, and each time, Mary's body jerked at the sound of her son's cries. Then the guard stepped over Jesus to secure his other hand while another hammered a spike through his feet.

Ropes and pulleys were used to raise the cross. Mary felt faint as she heard the hard >thunk as it dropped into the hole. Pieces of wood were hammered in to wedge the cross into place and then the ropes yanked free. Every movement etched the agony deeper into her son's face.

And Mary would not take her eyes away from him. She clasped her hands. *Oh, Lord, you will come now and save him. You won't let him die. He's your Son. He's the Anointed One. He's our Messiah!*

A Roman guard leaned a ladder against Jesus' cross and climbed up to hang a sign that said "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Immediately, the leading priests began shouting angrily, "Take it down! He's not our king! He's a false prophet!"

"It hangs by order of Pontius Pilate," a Roman guard said, drawing his sword when several men started up the hill toward the cross. They backed down.

The great mass of people turned to walk away, heads down. But many remained to gloat. Some hurled abuse at Jesus, wagging their heads. "So! You can destroy the Temple and build it again in three days, can you? Well then, if you are the Son of God, save yourself and come down from the cross!"

"He saved others, but he can't save himself!" someone shouted mockingly.

"So he is the king of Israel, is he?" a priest called out. "Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him!" He shoved his hands into his priestly garb and stared, his face hard.

Mary shuddered at the laughter, her mother's anger so fierce she would

have killed them herself if she had possessed the power. And then she looked into her son's eyes and felt the anger fall away, and confusion and sorrow fill her up to the brim as though she were a vial of tears that mourners wore around their necks.

Even one of the men crucified with Jesus cast insults.

Trembling in agony, Mary could not tear her eyes from her son. The crucified thieves were arguing with one another, and then one looked at Jesus, pleading with him. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom."

Jesus looked at him and smiled. "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Mary wept silently, tears streaming hot down her cheeks. She wanted to cry out in anger against those who had done this to her son. *Oh, God, why? Why?*

The soldiers divided Jesus' garments among them, and hunkered down to cast lots for the tunic she had woven for her son.

A murmur of fear went through the crowd still gathered as darkness fell over the land.

"My God," Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Mary covered her face, her body shaking with heart-wrenching sobs as her heart cried out the same question. *Why? Why?* All his life, Jesus had fought and triumphed over sin. She had seen him fight the battles and win. And now, during her people's most important celebration, her son's blood was being spilled like that of the Passover lamb.

"This man is calling for Elijah," a bystander said.

Someone ran up the hill with a sponge dripping with sour wine. He held it up on a reed so that Jesus could drink.

"Let's see whether Elijah will come and take him down!" someone sneered.

Dark clouds swirled angrily overhead and the wind came up. The sun was obscured.

“Mary,” came a quiet, tentative voice. When she looked up, she saw John, the young son of Zebedee, standing nearby. “Mary,” he said again and came close, putting his arm around her. As she buried her head in his shoulder, he whispered brokenly, “I’m sorry.” He drew in a sobbing breath as she put her arms around him. She could not condemn him for running away when she had remained so long separated from her son.

John looked up at Jesus, tears streaming down his face, his chest heaving.

“Woman,” Jesus said, looking at her, “he is your son.” His gaze moved to John, his face softening even in his agony. “She is your mother.”

Mary understood that she was being entrusted to John’s care rather than that of her other sons and daughters. When John put his arm around her, she turned her face into his chest and wept harder.

“Father,” Jesus said, and Mary looked up again, hoping to see the Lord himself come down to take Jesus from the cross. “Father, forgive these people, because they don’t know what they are doing.” She saw him heaving for breath, his body sinking lower. “It is finished!” he said, his chest rising and falling. “Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!” Having said this, his breath came out in one last, long breath, and his body relaxed.

Mary stared in disbelief, her heart breaking, her mouth open in silent denial. “No. No.”

John held her tightly.

The earth shook and people scattered. The Roman officer who was handling the executions looked up at Jesus. “Truly, this was the Son of God!”

“It’s over, Mother,” John said in a choked voice. “Come away from this place.”

“No. I won’t leave him.”

“Then I will stay with you.”

Soldiers came and broke the legs of the first man and then the second. Their screams were brief and then they gasped for breath, dying within minutes because they could no longer hold their bodies up enough to fill their lungs with air.

“This one is already dead.”

“Better to make sure.” The guard raised his spear and pierced Jesus’ side. Blood and water spilled out. “He’s dead.” They hammered out the wedges and let the cross fall. As they yanked the nails from his feet and hands, Mary approached.

One of the guards straightened, the hammer in his hand. “What do you want?”

“My son . . . my son . . .”

Grimacing, the man stepped away, going to help take down another cross.

Mary fell down on her knees at Jesus’ side and lifted his head into her lap. It began to rain, and she stroked the droplets over his face. Shifting, she sat and gathered her son closer, until the upper half of his body was in her lap, and she rocked him as she had as a child. “No,” she whispered, kissing his brow. “God said you will save us from our sins. . . .” She gently pushed his hair back and kissed him again. She cupped his cheek and ran her hand down his arm and placed it on his chest, praying to feel a faint heartbeat. There was nothing. As she held him close, rocking and rocking, she felt the warmth of his body go out of him until he was cold.

And then she knew. Her son was dead.

Raising her head, she wailed in sorrow and then screamed out the despair of all humanity. The Messiah was dead, the world left in bondage.

All around Mary danced unseen beings, gloating and prancing in pride while their master laughed and laughed.

Didn't I tell you I would kill him? The earth is mine now, and all that is on it. I have won! Behold my power. Behold! I have won!

Mary sat on the muddy hillside, carefully removed the crown of thorns, and held her son's head against her chest. The rain came down in sheets, drenching her. "Mary," John said, his voice gentle. "Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are here."

"Who?" she said dully, looking up at two finely garbed men standing at a respectful distance. They looked like the wealthy men who were members of the Sanhedrin. Mary put her hand against Jesus' cold face as though to protect him from them.

John knelt down and looked into her face with compassion. "Joseph has been given permission by Pilate to take your son's body and bury him."

Bury him? Mary stroked Jesus' cold face. John put his hand over hers, and she looked up at him. His face was etched in grief. "Mother, it will be Sabbath soon. He needs a proper resting place." She looked away at the gray sky and at the small groups of people still standing around. The bodies of the two thieves had already been taken away. If she didn't give up her son now, nothing could be done for another day. "Joseph of Arimathea has offered his own tomb."

She looked down at Jesus. The rain had washed away the blood, leaving his face white as the marble in the Temple. Leaning down, she kissed his brow as she had when he was a baby sleeping. His hair smelled of perfume. "Take him," she whispered and spread her hands.

Nicodemus lifted him enough so that Joseph could wrap Jesus' body in a clean linen cloth. Mary sat in the mud, watching. John put his arms around her and lifted her. "Come, Mother," he said tenderly. "I'll take you home with me now."

"Where is the tomb?"

"In a garden not far from here. Joseph said it's hewn from the rock. It's a beautiful place with olive trees and a cistern. Jesus will rest in peace there."

Several women came to meet them, weeping and embracing Mary. She felt so numb, so bereft of any emotion. She didn't know what to say to them. As John led her away, she saw her sons standing together. They looked at her in shame and grief. She saw in their eyes that they expected her to reject them as they had rejected Jesus. "Oh," she said, the tears coming hard again. She went to them, weeping and embracing each one, kissing them.

"Come with us," John said to them, taking the place Jesus had assigned to him beside Mary. "I have a house in the city."

As they walked away together, Mary looked back in sorrow as two men she didn't know carried her son to a borrowed tomb.

Mary and her companions joined the disciples in an upper room. Most were too ashamed to look at Mary, for they had all run away and left Jesus. The women were not among them.

"The Magdalene and the other Mary are sitting near the tomb, waiting for the Sabbath to pass," someone said.

"Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus have already anointed Jesus' body with a hundred litras of myrrh and aloes and wrapped him in linen."

"We should all get out of the city."

"He's right. The Romans will be looking for us."

"Why would they bother looking for us?" Peter said, his face anguished. "We're no threat to anyone. It's finished. Jesus is dead." He thrust his face in his hands and wept.

"It's not over," Mary said quietly. How could it be over? God had told her Jesus would save his people, that Jesus was the Messiah. She believed him. So how could this be the end?

The men all looked at her in pity and then looked away.

"It's not over," she said again.

"Mother," John said gently, putting his arm around her.

She would not be silenced. “The angel of the Lord came to me when I was a virgin and said the Holy Spirit would come upon me. He said the power of the Most High would overshadow me. He said I would bear a holy offspring, a son. He said I was to name him Jesus because he would save his people.”

They hung their heads.

“God said Jesus would save his people from their sins,” she said, tears welling again. “*God said . . .*”

They would not raise their eyes to hers. She knew they thought she was out of her mind with grief, clinging to hope when all seemed hopeless. But when God spoke, he always kept his word. “It can’t be over.” Her voice broke. “I refuse to believe it’s over!” She gulped back a sob. “God . . . promised . . .” Covering her face, she wept.

The men were silent for a few minutes, and then began to talk among themselves again.

“I tell you, we should get out of Jerusalem.”

“Yes, but how do we do it without being seen?”

“What if we are seen?” Peter said in bitter anguish. “What does it matter now? What does anything matter?”

Mary rose. She moved to the back of the upper room, lit a small lamp, and knelt down to pray to the God who had promised that salvation would come through her son Jesus.

On the morning of the third day, they heard footsteps racing up the stairs. The men moved restlessly, casting frightened looks, not knowing what to do. The door burst open and Mary of Magdalene came in. "I have seen the Lord! He's alive!" She came excitedly into the center of the room, her face radiant as she laughed and cried with joy, turning and speaking so fast, her words tumbled one over another.

"We went to the tomb with burial spices, and the stone was rolled aside. When we went inside, Jesus wasn't there."

"Woman," Peter said, raising his hands to calm her.

"We went inside the tomb, and there were two men in dazzling robes. We were terrified! They said to us, 'Why are you looking in a tomb for someone who is alive? He isn't here! He has risen from the dead! Don't you remember what he told you back in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and that he would rise again the third day?' And we remembered." She spread her hands, turning around to look at them all. "You remember, too, don't you? You talked about it because you didn't understand."

Mary stood, her body tingling with the truth of the young woman's words. "He's risen."

"See what you've done," one of the men said to the Magdalene.

"He's alive, I tell you. I saw him!"

"Saw him? How?"

"I was weeping, and he spoke to me. He said, 'Why are you crying?' I thought he had taken the Lord away, and I asked him to tell me where he had put him so I could go and get him. Then he said, 'Mary!' I would have known his voice anywhere. And I looked up, and there he was. I clung to him." She clasped her hands against her chest. "I didn't want to let go, but he said to stop clinging to him because he had to ascend to his Father, our Lord and God."

"She's out of her mind with grief."

“Mary, you’ve let your imagination run wild. Just because you want Jesus to be alive, doesn’t mean he is alive.”

The Magdalene looked at them in frustration. “How can you not believe? Jesus told you this would happen.”

The disciple John was out the door, Peter on his heels.

“Let them go,” another said dismally.

The Magdalene came to Mary, her eyes searching. “It’s true. He said once that the Son of Man would have to be lifted up on a pole, as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness.”

Mary remembered what had happened in Moses’ time: Because of the people’s sin, the Lord sent poisonous snakes among them, and many of the people were bitten and died. But when the people confessed their sin and asked the Lord to save them, he did. God told Moses to make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to the top of a pole. Whenever those who were bitten looked at the bronze snake, they recovered!

The Magdalene took Mary’s hands. “We were near the Sea of Galilee, and he said God loved the world so much, he was giving his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.” Her fingers tightened. “None of us understood.” Her gaze intensified. “Your son is alive, Mary. He is alive!”

“I believe you.” If only she had been the one to see him for herself.

Peter and John returned. “It’s true,” John said, his eyes aglow. Dismissing what John said, the disciples looked to Peter for confirmation.

“His body is gone.”

They didn’t know what to think, still afraid of what might happen to them. They feared death more than they feared God, shutting the doors and locking them because they were so certain the Council would send men to find and take them into custody for questioning.

They were all talking in low, frightened voices when a familiar voice spoke with a hint of good humor.

“Peace be with you.”

Mary’s head came up. Her son was standing among them. The men cried out in fear and fell on their faces. Mary’s other sons stared in amazed terror and covered their heads. A sob caught in her throat as she stood. “Jesus.” She rushed toward him, ready to embrace him as a mother. But when he looked at her, she was struck by the truth of who he was. *I Am Who I Am* stood before her. The sword of Truth pierced her soul, and she stopped. The son she had borne did not belong to her. Nor did he belong to Israel.

Long ago, the serpent Satan had enticed mankind to distrust and rebel against God, and then held all captive by the fear of death.

Mary looked up into the eyes of her son who was dead and was alive again.

Tears streaming down her cheeks, her heart humbled, she took Jesus’ hands and kissed them as the words of the prophet Isaiah came to her, words Joseph had read aloud to her and their children so many times before: “*I would not forget you! I have written your name on my hand.*” Now, she saw that Jesus was the Living Word. The full realization pierced her heart. Though she had carried him in her womb, he was God’s Son. He had never been hers to command. Jesus was God’s Son, God’s gift of salvation to Israel. “*The Lord has laid on him the guilt and sins of us all.*”

The awe of her first encounter with God came upon Mary again. Her soul exalted him. Her spirit rejoiced in Jesus, her Savior. All her life, she had struggled to find answers, to rise above her circumstances, to obey God and wait—not always patiently—for his plan to unfold, and now she was filled with awe at what God had done. She had mourned and was comforted with the promise of life eternal with him. She had hungered and thirsted for justice, and now beheld the one who would judge.

Mary fell to her knees before Jesus and bowed her head to the ground. “My Lord,” she said in complete surrender. “My Lord and God.”

MARY lay upon her pallet, meditating upon the years since she had last seen Jesus. John sat nearby, praying. There were others present, just beyond the door of the small house she shared with him on the edge of Ephesus. She was troubled by their weeping.

“John?”

He rose and came close, taking her hand. “Yes, Mother.”

“Why do they mourn?”

“Because they know your time with us is nearing an end.”

She sighed. “They make too much of me.”

“Because you are the mother of our Lord.”

“Do you remember the forty days after the crucifixion? Jesus did not set me above the rest. He didn’t give me an exalted place among his followers. Tell them.”

“I have told them.”

“Tell them again, John. We were all together, breaking bread with him while he told us about the kingdom of God. I served him and touched his hand and filled his cup with water.” Her mind drifted. “Oh, I remember his smile. Do you remember his smile, John?”

John’s eyes were moist. “Yes, Mother.”

“That day when we stood on the Mount of Olives and we all saw him taken up into heaven, I thought my heart would break. I missed him the instant I saw him embraced in the clouds, and wondered how long it would be before I saw his face again. I hungered so much for one more look at him.”

“We all did.”

“Yes, and we stood staring up into the heavens, waiting and expecting him to come right back.”

“Until the angels came.” John closed his eyes, joining in her memories. “They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring at the sky? Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. And someday, just as you saw him go, he will return!’”

Mary sighed. She had accompanied Jesus’ followers as they walked the half mile back to Jerusalem. She and her sons had remained with them, meeting with the men continually for prayer, and waiting and waiting. . . . She still waited. She and John had prayed together every day for Jesus to return, for Jesus to make them the instruments of faith they were intended to be. Each morning, she had risen from her pallet with the thought that today might be the day and she must be ready. But she knew Jesus would return in God’s time and not because she asked it.

Still, Jesus was with them.

On the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus had risen from the grave, while all of his believers were gathered together, the Lord had poured out the Holy Spirit on them. She remembered that day, as clearly as if it were yesterday, for the Holy Spirit was still alive within her, just as he was in every believer. The joy of her salvation still filled her with exultation, just as it had that day when she had run outside with the others to spread the Good News throughout Jerusalem.

And then the persecution had come.

“They’re all gone now, aren’t they, John?” Tears filled her eyes as she remembered all of those who had died as Satan had sought to extinguish the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. She could almost see their faces. Young Stephen had been the first to die, stoned to death by Damascus Gate. Then others followed.

The apostles she knew and loved had scattered, taking with them the gospel message and spreading it like seeds across the world. And the seeds they planted had taken root, for there were believers in Syria, Macedonia, Greece, Rome.

Word had trickled back over the years of how the apostles had died. Some

were mocked, their backs cut open with whips. Others were chained in dungeons. Some were sawed in half; others killed by the sword. Peter was crucified upside down near the obelisk in Rome; Paul was beheaded outside the walls of the city. Not one recanted his faith.

Among those martyred were her sons.

When she had heard of their deaths, she understood why Jesus had given her over to John's care. Jesus had known what was to come and made provisions for her even as he was dying on the cross. Her throat closed even now as she thought of it. Right from the beginning, Jesus had been pouring his life out for others.

John had brought her to Ephesus during the years of persecution, and she had lived under his care on the outskirts of Satan's city ever since, telling everyone who lived in the shadow of the Artemisian Temple about Jesus Christ who had died to save them. Paul had come to help the Ephesians, and then written to them as he traveled. His letter was still read at meetings.

Satan still waged battle against the truth, trying to cloud the minds of men. And so it would go on. Every day, the choice was the same: *Will God reign in my life, or will my desires win out? Will I make demands of Jesus and be distressed that he doesn't come back to us when I call?*

Waiting was the hardest thing to do. Mary had always struggled with waiting. But she was older now. She was eager now—not impetuous, not impatient. Each day was a refining fire. Each day brought the question, Will you obey no matter the cost?

“Today I say yes.”

“Mother?”

“Today I say yes. And today, and today, and today, until there are no more todays left.”

John squeezed her hand. “Each day has trouble of its own.”

“And the Lord will carry us through it.”

How was it God had chosen her, a simple peasant girl, to be his vessel? The privilege still rocked her. Jesus, born in darkness, was the Light of the World. He, the Bread of Life, had known hunger. The Living Water had known thirst. He had been misunderstood, sold for thirty pieces of silver, rejected by all, and crucified, and now he stood before the throne of God as the advocate of all those who believed in him.

She remembered how Jesus had prayed, unceasingly, in every circumstance—standing, sitting, lying down, and walking along the road. He had prayed, and now he listened to her prayers as well as to the prayers of all those who called on him. Unblemished by sin, he had given up his life as the atonement offering for all the sins of mankind, including hers. Defeating death, he had risen from the grave.

She had hoped her son would be victorious over Israel’s oppressors. She had hoped he would reign as king. How small her dreams had been! How great and mighty was God’s plan! Jesus was far beyond and above what man expected. *He is victorious! He is king above all kings! He is everlasting life, the holiness and righteousness of God. He is the Son of Man, Messiah, God in spirit and in truth.* And he had come to save not only Israel, but also the world.

Oh, Jesus, my sins are many, as you well know. I was so proud of you, so proud of the part I was given in bringing you into this world. I was so eager to see you reign on earth as king, with Joseph’s sons at your side. . . . And you knew, didn’t you? I pressed you and prodded you to that end, didn’t I? I didn’t know that even I could be used by Satan to tempt you. Even I, the one chosen to be your mother, added to your burdens. I didn’t understand you’d come to be the sacrifice. And I praise you for that. I praise and worship you for your tender mercy and compassion.

Oh, Lord God of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you were so kind to me. For how could I have lived with the knowledge that my precious baby was born to be nailed to a cross? I was in your presence for thirty years. I saw your beauty, experienced your love and mercy, witnessed your strength and righteousness, your perfection and holiness. I saw the living, breathing

fulfillment of all your promises.

Lord, it was only during those last three years that I began to see what was to come. And still, I didn't understand. Through your death, you removed the barriers, and we can come before you and speak with you as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden before sin came into the world. The fear of death no longer imprisons us.

She felt the change in her body. "I will be with him soon."

John leaned down. "I will miss you, Mother, but I will rejoice knowing you are with our Lord Jesus Christ."

Again, Mary heard the weeping just beyond the door. Deeply troubled by it, she looked into John's eyes. "More have come?"

He nodded.

Over the years, many had come to touch the edge of her garment. They thought because she was Jesus' mother, she had his power. Some had even bowed down before her, pleading with her to pray for them because they felt unworthy to do so themselves. She was no more worthy than they were. Did they not see clearly? Did they not hear the message preached?

She had always corrected them firmly and with love. "Did Jesus die for you and rise from the grave so that you could come to *me* for help? Do not be fooled! Salvation is from *the Lord!* Jesus is Savior and Lord! Jesus loves you. He listens to your prayers. Trust in him."

She smiled sadly now. "Perhaps they will understand better when I go the way of all flesh." She felt the shifting inside her body, the loosening of the bonds of this earth. "When I die, John, bury me where no one will know. Don't let them make a shrine to honor me. It is by God's grace we are saved, by *his* power. Jesus died for them so that they would be free of sin and death. Remind them to love the Lord God above all others. It has always been that way from the beginning. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul and strength, and love one another. Keep the gospel pure, my son. Keep it pure."

“I will, Mother,” John said. He stroked her hand tenderly. “I will tell them the truth. Jesus is the Word, and the Word already existed in the beginning. He was with God, and he was God. He was in the beginning with God. He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn’t make. Life itself was in him, and this life gives light to everyone. The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.”

“Yes, my son. Tell them. Tell them . . . to do what Jesus says.”

DEAR READER,

You have just read the story of Mary as perceived by one author. Is this the whole truth about the story? Jesus said to seek and you will find the answers you need for life. The best way to find the truth is to look for yourself!

This “Seek and Find” section is designed to help you discover the story of Mary as recorded in the Bible. It consists of six short studies that you can do on your own or with a small discussion group.

You may be surprised to learn that this ancient story will have applications for your life today. No matter where we live or in what century, God’s Word is truth. It is as relevant today as it was yesterday. In it we find a future and a hope.

Peggy Lynch

SEEK GOD’S WORD FOR TRUTH

Read the following passage:

God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!”

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. “Don’t be frightened, Mary,” the angel told her, “for God has decided to bless you! You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!”

Mary asked the angel, “But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin.”

The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.”

Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May whatever you have said come true.” And then the angel left.

LUKE 1:26-35, 38

From the above passage, what do we learn about Mary? (e.g., She was from Galilee.)

According to Gabriel’s greeting, what was God’s attitude toward Mary?

How did Mary respond to the angel’s greeting?

Gabriel reassured Mary and proceeded to explain his mission. List the things he revealed to Mary regarding herself. And what does he tell Mary about the child?

Mary reminds the angel that she is a virgin and asks him how she can become pregnant. What additional information does Gabriel give her?

How does Mary respond?

FIND GOD’S WAYS FOR YOU

According to the following passage from Scripture, God speaks to us today through his written Word.

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. It is God’s way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do.

TIMOTHY 3:16-17

How is God’s Word useful to us?

Mary was alone and quiet when God spoke to her. God speaks to us in small, quiet ways today, but are we available to hear? List the things that might distract us and keep us from hearing him.

When you hear God’s voice, how do you respond?

Read Jesus’ words in the following passage from Scripture:

Anyone whose Father is God listens gladly to the words of God. Since you don’t, it proves you aren’t God’s children.

JOHN 8:47

What reason does Jesus give for our not hearing God?

STOP AND PONDER

But people who aren't Christians can't understand these truths from God's Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them because only those who have the Spirit can understand what the Spirit means. We who have the Spirit understand these things, but others can't understand us at all. How could they? For, "Who can know what the Lord is thinking? Who can give him counsel?" But we can understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ.

CORINTHIANS 2:14-16

Do you have the mind of Christ?

SEEK GOD'S WORD FOR TRUTH

Read the following passage:

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was obviously pregnant by this time.

And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the village inn.

That night some shepherds were in the fields outside the village, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terribly frightened, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David! And this is how you will recognize him: You will find a baby lying in a manger, wrapped snugly in strips of cloth!"

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God:

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to all whom God favors."

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Come on, let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this wonderful thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

They ran to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. Then the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, but Mary quietly treasured these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their fields and flocks, glorifying and praising God for what the angels had told them, and because they had seen the child, just as the angel had said.

LUKE 2: 1-20

Why were Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem?

When they were in Bethlehem, what happened to Mary? What details are given?

Angels visited the shepherds. What sign was given to the shepherds regarding the event? What was their response?

What was Mary’s response to the shepherds’ visit?

List all the evidence of celebration from the above passage.

Find God’s Ways for You

The best laid plans often go awry. How do you handle interrupted plans? Share a time when you had to “make do” with your circumstances.

Read the following verse:

You can make many plans, but the Lord’s purpose will prevail.

PROVERBS 19:21

What do we learn from this verse?

Mary found reasons to rejoice and events to treasure even when her circumstances were not what she would have chosen. What causes you to treasure things in your heart?

STOP AND PONDER

We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps.

PROVERBS 16:9

How can we understand the road we travel? It is the Lord who directs our steps.

PROVERBS 20:24

Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path.

PSALM 119:105

Do you trip over—or treasure—interruptions?

SEEK GOD’S WORD FOR TRUTH

Magi from the East came seeking the newborn baby. Following a star, they arrived in Bethlehem. Read the following passage about their arrival:

When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house where the child and his mother, Mary, were, and they fell down before him and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But when it was time to leave, they went home another way, because God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up and flee to Egypt with the child and his mother,” the angel said. “Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to try to kill the child.” That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, and they stayed there until Herod’s death.

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and told him, “Get up and take the child and his mother back to the land of Israel, because those who were trying to kill the child are dead.” So Joseph returned immediately to Israel with Jesus and his mother.

MATTHEW 2:10-15, 19-21

When the magi arrive, what do they do?

What gifts do they bring the child?

After the magi leave, to whom does the angel appear? And by what means?

What is the angel’s message?

What does Joseph do and when?

Sometime later, the angel appears again. What event gave rise to this second appearance, and what was the message this time?

How do Joseph and his wife, Mary, respond this time?

FIND GOD’S WAYS FOR YOU

How do you handle the recognition and praise of people who are close to

you?

How do you respond to the praise of people you do not know well?

Read the following Scripture passage:

Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing.

PHILIPPIANS 2:3-4

According to the above verses, what should our attitude be?

Mary willingly complied/obeyed when asked to be uprooted and moved. How do you handle major changes in your life?

STOP AND PONDER

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will direct your paths.

PROVERBS 3:5-6

Do you trust God and where he may be leading you?

SEEK GOD'S WORD FOR TRUTH

Read the following passage:

Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. When Jesus was twelve years old, they attended the festival as usual. After the celebration was over, they started home to Nazareth, but Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn't miss him at first, because they assumed he was with friends among the other travelers. But when he didn't show up that evening, they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they couldn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem to search for him there. Three days later they finally discovered him. He was in the Temple, sitting among the religious teachers, discussing deep questions with them. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

His parents didn't know what to think. "Son!" his mother said to him. "Why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been frantic, searching for you everywhere."

"But why did you need to search?" he asked. "You should have known that I would be in my Father's house." But they didn't understand what he meant.

Then he returned to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them; and his mother stored all these things in her heart.

LUKE 2:41-51

What annual event took the family to Jerusalem?

When did Mary and Joseph leave Jerusalem?

What were they unaware of and why?

Describe their search.

Upon finding Jesus, what did Mary say to her son? What did her son say to her?

We are told that Mary and Joseph didn't understand what Jesus said to them. What is Mary's response to all that happened?

FIND GOD'S WAYS FOR YOU

Describe a time when, as a child, you were not where you were supposed to be. How did you feel?

How did your parents react?

What was your response to their reaction?

Read the following passage:

God has said, "I will never fail you. I will never forsake you." That is why we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, so I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

HEBREWS 13:5-6

There are all kinds of fear. Children may fear their parents when they have been disobedient; parents fear for the safety of their children, etc. What confidence does a child of God have when facing frightening circumstances?

STOP AND PONDER

You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, whose thoughts are fixed on you! Trust in the Lord always, for the Lord God is the eternal Rock.

ISAIAH 26:3-4

Where do you place your confidence?

SEEK GOD'S WORD FOR TRUTH

Read the following passage:

The next day Jesus' mother was a guest at a wedding celebration in the

village of Cana in Galilee. Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the celebration. The wine supply ran out during the festivities, so Jesus' mother spoke to him about the problem. "They have no more wine," she told him.

"How does that concern you and me?" Jesus asked. "My time has not yet come."

But his mother told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

JOHN 2:1-5

According to this passage, what event was Mary attending? Who else was there?

At the wedding, Mary noticed that the wine ran out. What did she do?

How does Jesus answer her?

How does Mary deal with her son's reply?

Read about another time:

Once when Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, they couldn't get to him because of the crowds. Someone told Jesus, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, and they want to see you."

Jesus replied, "My mother and my brothers are all those who hear the message of God and obey it."

LUKE 8:19-21

What do we learn about Mary and Jesus' relationship from this passage?

What appears to be happening to her relationship with her firstborn son?

FIND GOD'S WAYS FOR YOU

Describe a time when you embarrassed yourself or a family member at a family event.

What did it do to your relationship?

How do you go about helping family members you think are on the edge of trouble?

Read the following passages:

Share each other's troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ. If you think you are too important to help someone in need, you are only fooling yourself. You are really a nobody.

Be sure to do what you should, for then you will enjoy the personal satisfaction of having done your work well, and you won't need to compare

yourself to anyone else. For we are each responsible for our own conduct.

GALATIANS 6:2-5

Stop judging others, and you will not be judged. For others will treat you as you treat them. Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are judged.

MATTHEW 7:1-2

What do we learn about relationships and responsibility in the above verses?

STOP AND PONDER

So be careful how you live, not as fools but as those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity for doing good in these evil days. Don't act thoughtlessly, but try to understand what the Lord wants you to do.

And further, you will submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

EPHESIANS 5:15-17, 21

Are you thoughtless or considerate in your relationships?

SEEK GOD'S WORD FOR TRUTH

Read the following passage:

Standing near the cross were Jesus' mother, and his mother's sister, Mary (the wife of Clopas), and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother standing there beside the disciple he loved, he said to her, "Woman, he is your son." And he said to this disciple, "She is your mother." And from then on this disciple took her into his home.

JOHN 19:25-27

According to this passage, where was Mary? Who was with her at the crucifixion? Who was missing?

What does Jesus say to Mary?

What provision does Jesus make for her?

After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, his disciples gathered in Jerusalem. Read the following passage:

The apostles were at the Mount of Olives when this [the Ascension] happened, so they walked the half mile back to Jerusalem. Then they went to the upstairs room of the house where they were staying. Here is the list of those who were present: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas,

Bartholomew, Matthew, James (son of Alphaeus), Simon (the Zealot), and Judas (son of James). They all met together continually for prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus.

ACTS 1:12-14

Where was Mary and what was she doing?

Besides the disciples, who was with Mary this time?

Finally, Mary is remembered for her obedient servant's heart. In the Gospel of Luke, we find her song:

Oh, how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Savior!

For he took notice of this lowly servant girl, and now generation after generation will call me blessed.

For he, the Mighty One, is holy, and he has done great things for me.

His mercy goes on from generation to generation, to all who fear him.

His mighty arm does tremendous things! How he scatters the proud and haughty ones!

He has taken princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly.

He has satisfied the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands.

And how he has helped his servant Israel! He has not forgotten his promise to be merciful.

For he promised our ancestors—Abraham and his children—to be merciful to them forever.

LUKE 1:46-55

List the names and attributes of God that you find in this confession of Mary's faith.

FIND GOD'S WAYS FOR YOU

Of all the Gospel writers, John knew Mary best, and yet he wrote the least about her. It is in his Gospel that we read Mary's last recorded words: "Do whatever he [Jesus] tells you." Since Mary said to do what Jesus tells us, let's look at what Jesus has to say in the following passages:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it.

There is no judgment awaiting those who trust him. But those who do not trust him have already been judged for not believing in the only Son of God.

JOHN 3:16-18

Contrast the choices that are before you.

What does Jesus offer you?

“Don’t be troubled. You trust God, now trust in me. There are many rooms in my Father’s home, and I am going to prepare a place for you. If this were not so, I would tell you plainly. When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. And you know where I am going and how to get there.”

“No, we don’t know, Lord,” Thomas said. “We haven’t any idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus told them, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you had known who I am, then you would have known who my Father is. From now on you know him and have seen him!”

JOHN 14:1-7

What are Jesus’ instructions? What are his promises?

Who *alone* saves us?

STOP AND PONDER

Read the following words of Jesus:

Look! Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear me calling and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal as friends. I will invite everyone who is victorious to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat with my Father on his throne. Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

REVELATION 3:20-22

Have you opened the door?

THIS is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of King David and of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah (their mother was **Tamar**).

Perez was the father of Hezron.

Hezron was the father of Ram.

Ram was the father of Amminadab.

Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.

Nahshon was the father of Salmon.

Salmon was the father of Boaz (his mother was **Rahab**).

Boaz was the father of Obed (his mother was **Ruth**).

Obed was the father of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon (his mother was **Bathsheba**, the widow of Uriah).

Solomon was the father of Rehoboam.

Rehoboam was the father of Abijah.

Abijah was the father of Asa.

Asa was the father of Jehoshaphat.

Jehoshaphat was the father of Jehoram.

Jehoram was the father of Uzziah.

Uzziah was the father of Jotham.

Jotham was the father of Ahaz.

Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh.

Manasseh was the father of Amon.

Amon was the father of Josiah.

Josiah was the father of Jehoiachin and his brothers (born at the time of the exile to Babylon).

After the Babylonian exile:

Jehoiachin was the father of Shealtiel.

Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel.

Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud.

Abiud was the father of Eliakim.

Eliakim was the father of Azor.

Azor was the father of Zadok.

Zadok was the father of Akim.

Akim was the father of Eliud.

Eliud was the father of Eleazar.

Eleazar was the father of Matthan.

Matthan was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary.

Mary gave birth to Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

MATTHEW 1:1-16

FRANCINE RIVERS has been writing for more than twenty years. From 1976 to 1985 she had a successful writing career in the general market and won numerous awards. After becoming a born-again Christian in 1986, Francine wrote *Redeeming Love* as her statement of faith.

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Francine says she uses her writing to draw closer to the Lord, that through her work she might worship and praise Jesus for all he has done and is doing in her life.