

# *Luke*

*Lesson #19*

*The Crucifixion*  
**(23: 1-56)**

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# Review

Lessons 17 & 18 offered excursions on the characters and possible motivations of both Judas and St. Peter in the lead-up to Jesus' arrest and trial. We learned that Judas was an outsider, the only one of the Twelve not from Galilee; he was the "treasurer" of the group, the keeper of the money purse; and we learned that Jesus publically rebuked Judas only six days earlier at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, perhaps triggering Judas' anger and resentment. But we also learned that Judas' motivations for betraying Jesus were possibly much more complex.

In contrast, we learned that St. Peter's motivation for denying Jesus was simple: he was afraid. Peter had said at the Last Supper that he would die for Jesus, and he proved it in the garden of Gethsemane when he drew his sword to defend Jesus, surely at the risk of his own life. But trapped in the courtyard of the high priest for over an hour, surrounded by the guards who had arrested Jesus, and gripped by escalating fear and dread, Peter's courage dwindled . . . and then it finally collapsed altogether, as he denied even knowing the Lord.

# Preview

The Persians introduced crucifixion as a capital punishment as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., and the Carthaginians, Macedonians and Romans employed it until the Emperor Constantine outlawed crucifixion in A.D. 337, out of deference to Christ.

The Greeks had an aversion to crucifixion, although the historian Herodotus tells of the crucifixion of the Persian General Artayctes, who commanded forces in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Persian invasion of Greece under Xerxes (a main character in the Book of Esther), 480-479 B.C.

The Romans used crucifixion frequently, however; indeed, Crassus, the Roman General who defeated Spartacus in the slave revolt of 73-71 B.C., crucified 6,000 captive slaves, lining the Via Appia with them, and the historian Tacitus tells us that during the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 no fewer than 600,000 Jews fought the Romans and those captured were crucified, up to 500 per day.

Crucifixion involved a prolonged, excruciatingly painful death by being nailed to a cross with tapered iron spikes, 7-9" long, generally taking three or more days to die.

In Lesson #19 we bring Jesus before Pontius Pilate, and we witness his crucifixion.





Fyodor Bronnikov. *Cursed Field, Place for Execution in Ancient Rome* (oil on canvas), 1878.  
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



**At Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin he was found guilty of blasphemy, a capital offense under Mosaic law:**

*"Take the blasphemer outside the camp, and when all who heard him have their hands on his head, let the whole community stone him. Tell the Israelites: Anyone who blasphemes God shall bear the penalty."*

**(Leviticus 24: 14-15)**

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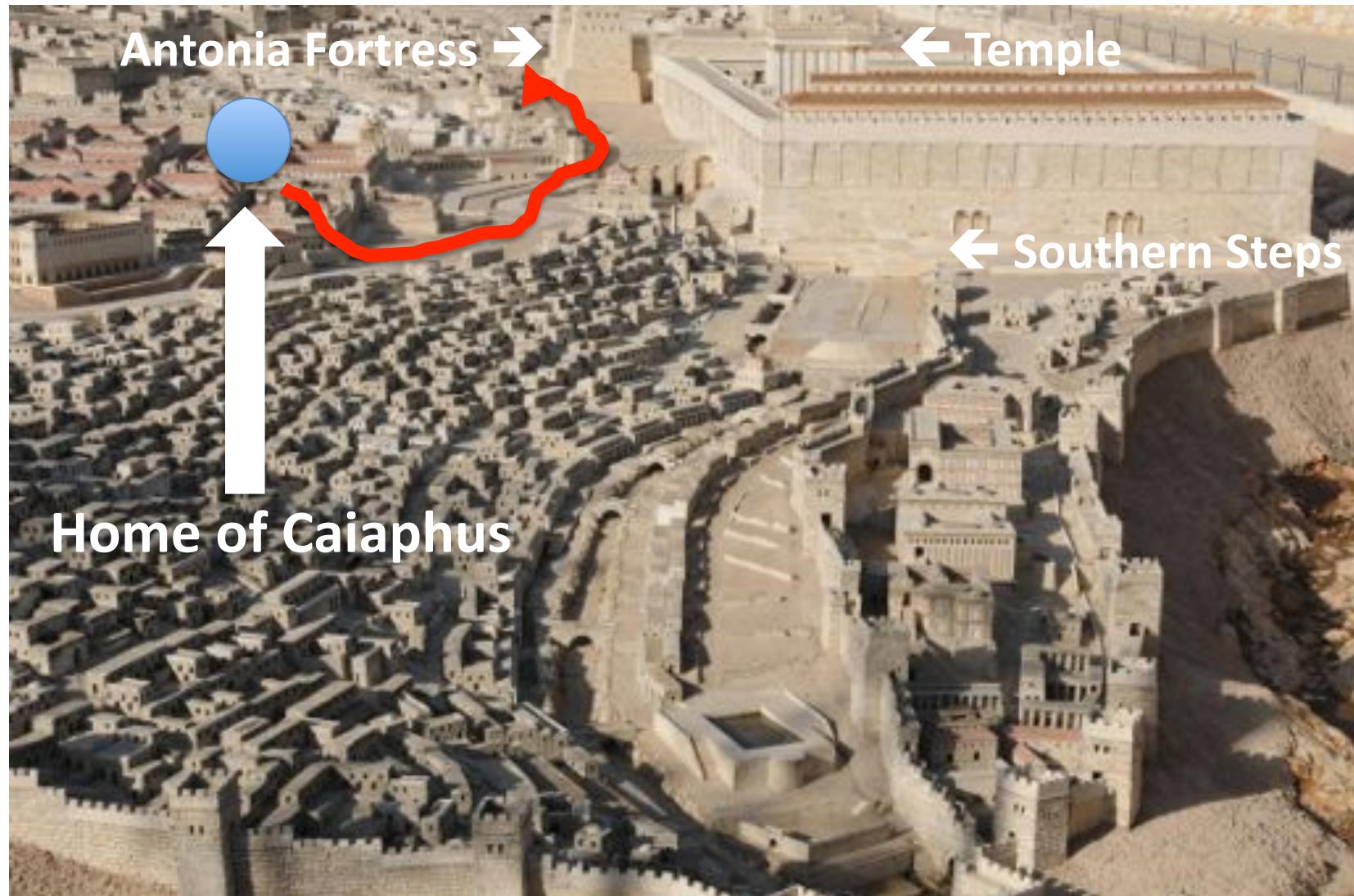


**Living under Roman law, however, the Jews were not permitted to carry out capital punishment, so they send Jesus to the procurator, Pontius Pilate, who was in residence at the Antonia fortress during the Passover festival, along with security forces from the 10<sup>th</sup> Roman legion.**

## The Trial before Pilate

“Then the whole assembly of them arose and brought him [Jesus] before Pilate. They brought charges against him, saying, ‘We found this man misleading our people; he opposes the payment of taxes to Caesar and maintains that he is the Messiah, a king.’”

(23: 1-2)



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**When the Jewish leaders bring Jesus before Pilate, they do not charge him with blasphemy, a capital offense under Mosaic law, but with treason, saying that Jesus opposes paying taxes to Caesar and that he claims to be a king—charges, which if true—are treason, punishable by death under Roman law.**

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## The Trial before Pilate

“Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ He said to him in reply, ‘You say so.’ Pilate then addressed the chief priests and the crowds, ‘I find this man not guilty.’ But they were adamant and said, ‘He is inciting the people with his teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began, even to here.’”

(23: 3-5)



Nikolai Ge. *Christ before Pilate [Quod est veritas?]* (oil on canvas), 1890.  
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

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Notice two things: First, when Pilate asks, “*Are you the king of the Jews?*” his tone is one of incredulity, if not scorn. Obviously, Jesus is not a king of anything, as far as Pilate can see.

Second, notice Jesus’ reply to Pilate’s question: “*You say so.*” The Greek is Σὺ λέγεις “You say so [yourself].” Jesus refuses to defend himself, saying in effect, with a shrug: “Whatever.”

Pilate then utters the first of three statements, saying that Jesus is innocent (23: 4; 14-17; and 22).



**The Jewish leaders then reiterate the charges, adding that Jesus has been inciting people throughout Judea, starting in Galilee.**

**That raises two issues for Pilate:**

- 1) Galilee is a hotbed of revolutionary activity, and Jesus is now tied to it; and**
- 2) Galilee is not within Pilate's jurisdiction, so it opens the door to a change of venue.**

**Pilate can rid himself of Jesus by sending him to Herod Antipas, who is in Jerusalem at the time.**

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## The Trial before Pilate

“On hearing this Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean; and upon learning that he was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod who was in Jerusalem at that time. Herod was very glad to see Jesus; he had been wanting to see him for a long time, for he had heard about him and had been hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at length, but he gave him no answer. The chief priests and scribes, meanwhile, stood by accusing him harshly. [Even] Herod and his soldiers treated him contemptuously and mocked him, and after clothing him in resplendent garb, he sent him back to Pilate. Herod and Pilate became friends that very day, even though they had been enemies formerly.”

(23: 6-12)

Recall that there are four “Herods” in Scripture:



**1. Herod the Great (37 - 4 B.C.)**

King during the birth of Jesus; slaughters the Innocents of Bethlehem (Matthew 2: 1-19)

**2. Herod Antipas (4 B.C. – A.D. 39)**

Murders John the Baptist (Luke 9: 9)

Pilate sends Jesus to him (Luke 23: 7-12)

**3. Herod Agrippa 1 (A.D. 37 – 44)**

Executes James; imprisons Peter; he is “eaten by worms” and dies (Acts 12: 1-24)

**4. Herod Agrippa 2 (A.D. 50 – 93)**

Paul makes a legal defense before him (Acts 25: 13 – 26: 32)



Duccio. *Jesus at Herod's Court* (tempera on wood), c. 1308-1311.  
Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.

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## The Trial before Pilate

“Pilate then summoned the chief priests, the rulers, and the people and said to them, ‘You brought this man to me and accused him of inciting the people to revolt. I have conducted my investigation in your presence and have not found this man guilty of the charges you have brought against him, nor did Herod, for he sent him back to us. So no capital crime has been committed by him. Therefore I shall have him flogged and then release him.

But all together they shouted out, ‘Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us.’ (Now Barabbas had been imprisoned for a rebellion that had taken place in the city and for murder.) Again Pilate addressed them, still wishing to release Jesus, but they continued their shouting, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him! . . .

## The Trial before Pilate

“Pilate addressed them a third time, ‘What evil has this man done? I found him guilty of no capital crime. Therefore I shall have him flogged and then release him.’ With loud shouts, however, they persisted in calling for his crucifixion, and their voices prevailed. The verdict of Pilate was that their demand should be granted. So he released the man who had been imprisoned for rebellion and murder, for whom they asked, and he handed Jesus over to them to deal with as they wished.”

(23: 13-25)



**Notice that Pilate declares Jesus “not guilty” for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> time. Nonetheless, the crowds demand vehemently that Barabbas be released and Jesus be crucified.**

**Barabbas and his two companions committed murder during a failed insurrection [στασις, vv. 19, 25 and Mark 15: 7]. They are not “thieves.” The Greek term in Matthew 27: 44, Mark 15: 27 and John 18: 40 is λησται, “thieves” only in the sense of those who usurp or “steal” authority. Λησται is the word Josephus habitually uses when referring to revolutionaries.**

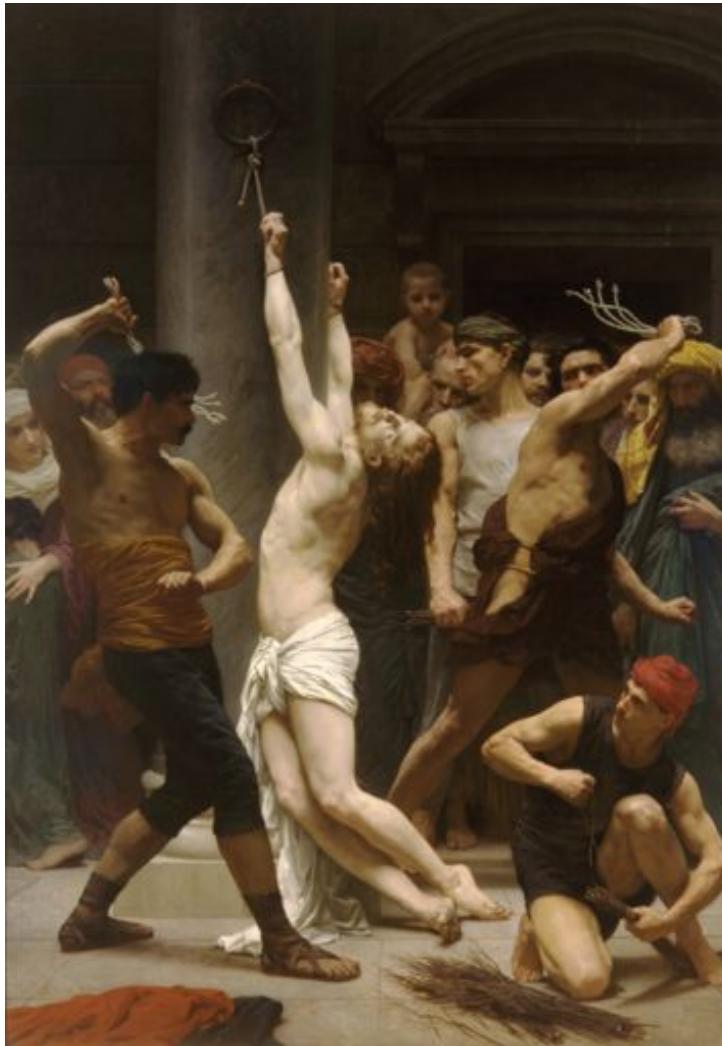
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Pilate has done everything possible to have Jesus released: Jesus has not broken any Roman law. Nevertheless, the crowd is extremely volatile, growing more and more agitated, tottering on the crumbling edge of a riot.

We read in Luke 22: 2 that the religious leaders wanted to arrest Jesus and put him to death, but “*they were afraid of the people.*” In John 11: 50 Caiaphas proclaims in no uncertain terms that it is more “expedient” that one man die than the whole nation perish. That is what’s at stake. And Pilate knows it; thus, he acquiesces to the crowd and hands Jesus over to them “*to deal with as they wished.*”

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau. *Flagellation of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (oil on canvas), 1880.  
Cathedral of La Rochelle, La Rochelle, France.

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A Roman *flagrum* was a whip with several leather thongs, embedded with lead shot and bone. Jewish law limited a flogging to 39 lashes; Roman law did not. Jesus was beaten nearly to death, which accounts for his expiring rather quickly on the cross. Evidence of over 100 lashes can be seen on the Shroud of Turin.



Roman Flagrum



**Hieronymus Bosch. *Christ Carrying the Cross* (oil on panel), between 1510 and 1535.  
Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent.**

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Andrea di Bartolo. *Way to Calvary* (tempera on panel), c. 1415-1420.  
Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid.

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## The Crucifixion

“As they led him away they took hold of a certain Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country; and after laying the cross on him, they made him carry it behind Jesus. A large crowd of people followed Jesus, including many women who mourned and lamented him. Jesus turned to them and said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep instead for yourselves and for your children, for indeed, the days are coming when people will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed. At that time people will say to the mountains, ‘Fall upon us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’ for if these things are done when the wood is green what will happen when it is dry?’ Now two others, both criminals, were led away with him to be executed.”

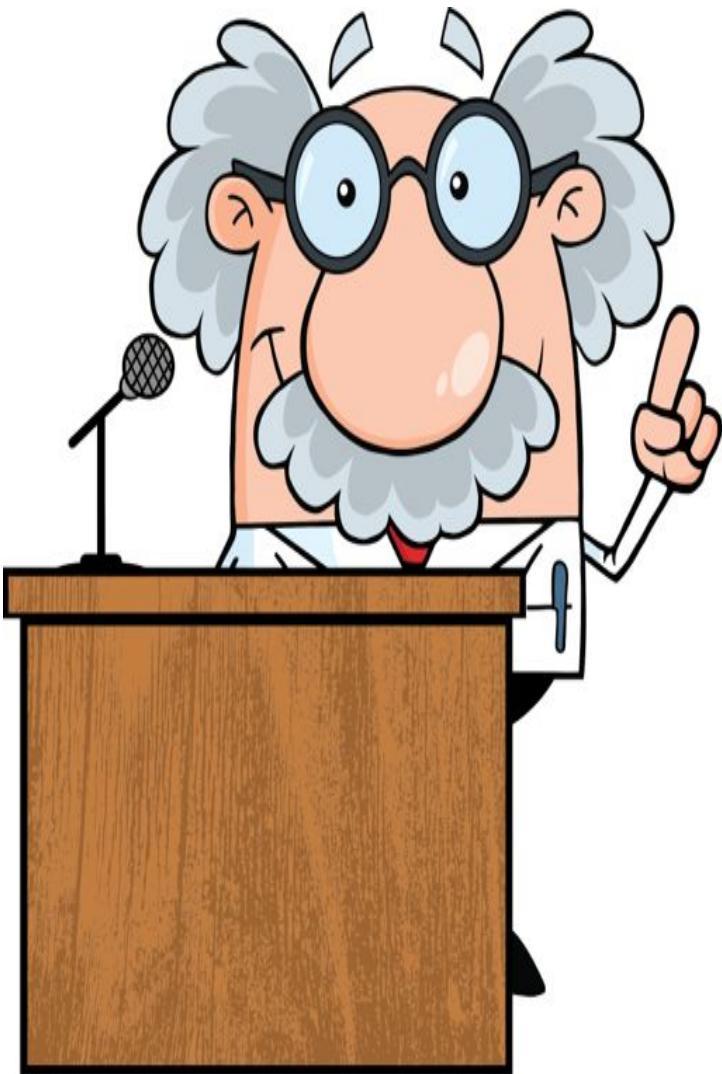
(23: 26-32)



Peter Paul Rubens. *Christ and Mary Magdalene* (oil on panel), 1618.  
Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

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In Luke Jesus clearly foresees the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, a mere 38 years in the future. He tells the women of Jerusalem to weep for the catastrophe that looms on the horizon. It would be better to have no children at all, than to watch them suffer as they surely will when Jerusalem falls.

God speaks similar words to Jeremiah regarding the Babylonians' 3-year siege on Jerusalem and its fall in 586 B.C.:

*"Do not take a wife and do not have sons and daughters in this place, for thus says the Lord concerning the sons and daughters born in this place, the mothers who give them birth, the fathers who beget them in this land: 'Of deadly disease they shall die. Unlamented and unburied they will lie like dung on the ground. Sword and famine will make an end of them, and their corpses will become food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth.'"*

Jeremiah 16: 1-4

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## The Crucifixion

“When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him and the criminals there, one on his right, the other on his left. [Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.’] They divided his garments by casting lots. The people stood by and watched; the rulers, meanwhile, sneered at him and said, ‘He saved others, let him save himself if he is the chosen one, the Messiah of God.’ Even the soldiers jeered at him. As they approached to offer him wine they called out, ‘If you are King of the Jews, save yourself.’ Above him there was an inscription that read, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’”

(23: 33-38)

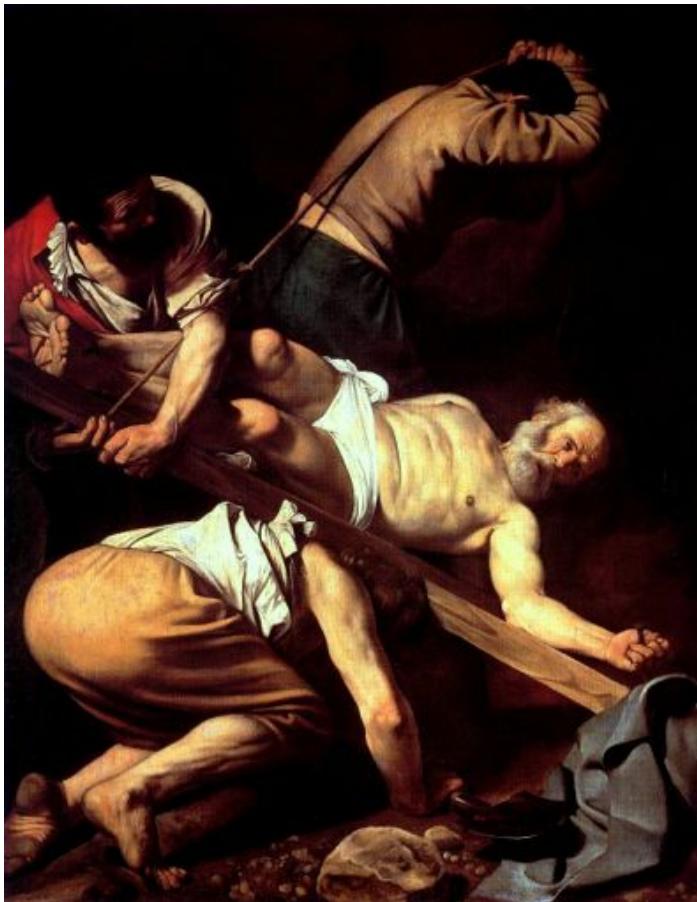


**Golgotha, the “Place of the Skull,” opposite the Garden Tomb, Jerusalem.**

*Photography by Ana Maria Vargas*

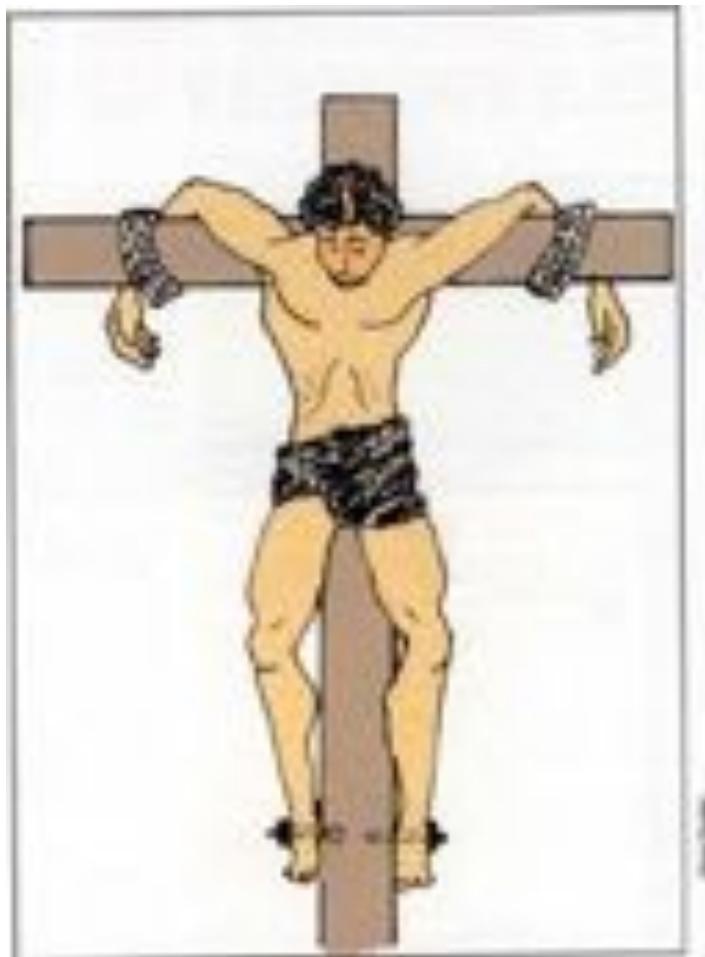
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# Crucifixion



Caravaggio. *Crucifixion of St. Peter [upside down]* (oil on canvas), 1601.  
Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.

Our historian Josephus writes in his *Siege of Jerusalem* that “*the soldiers out of rage and hatred nailed those they caught, one after one way, and another after another, to the crosses, by way of jest,*” suggesting that there was no standardized way to crucify a person: whatever worked at the time and place would do.



**Jesus was likely crucified in a manner similar to this, not tied by the arms as here, but with his wrists nailed to the crossbeam, supporting his weight. Notice, too, that his heels would probably have been nailed to the sides of the upright through the heel bones.**

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**Heel bone of Jehohanan, a crucified man in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, whose ossuary was discovered in 1968 in east Jerusalem. Israel Museum, Jerusalem.**

*Photography by Ana Maria Vargas*  
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Peter Gertner. *Crucifixion* (oil on panel), 1537.

Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland.

[*This is the portraitist Gertner's only known religious painting. Note the detailed facial expressions.*]

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← Church of the Holy Sepulcher  
(site of the Crucifixion)

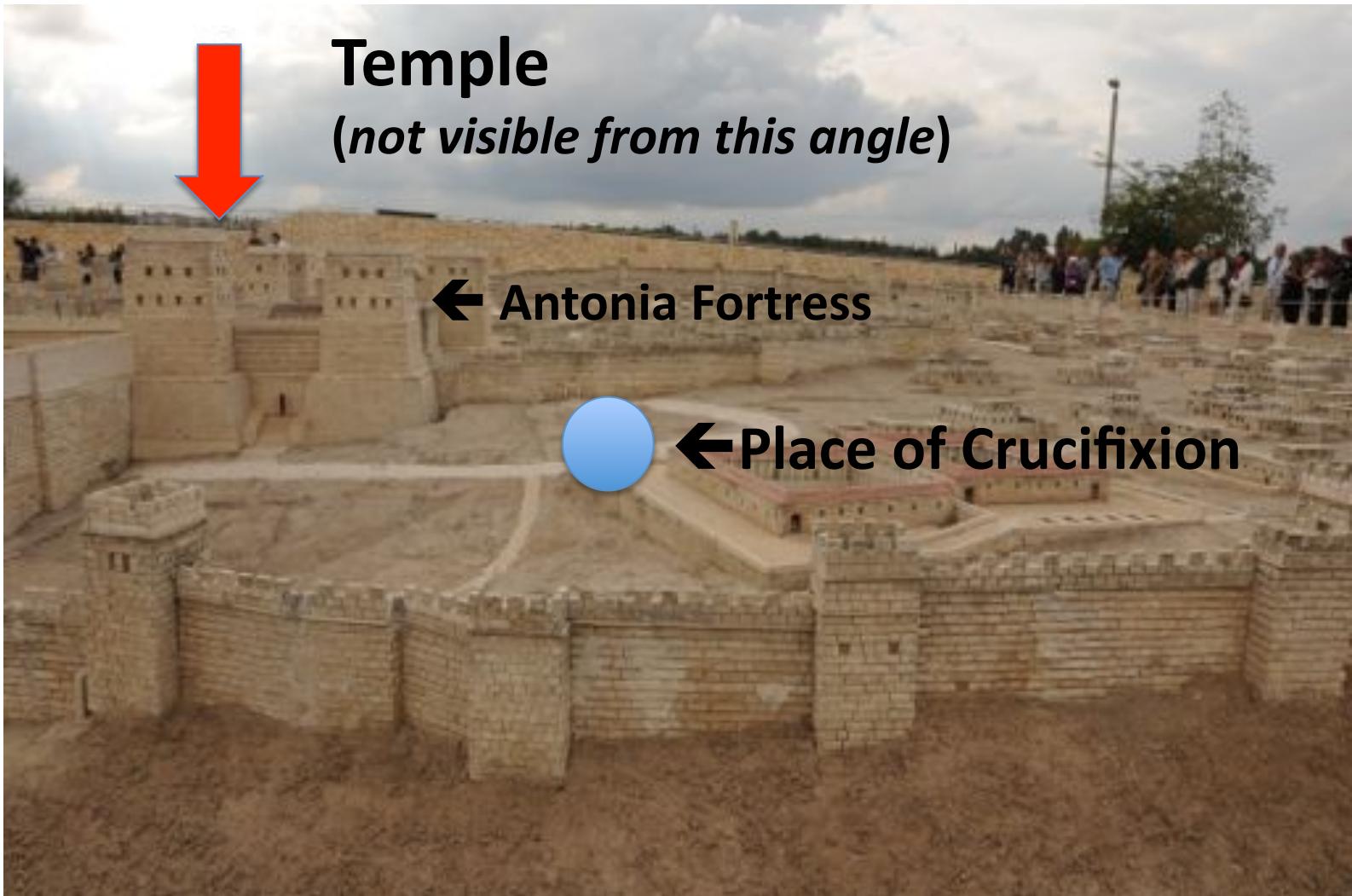
← Dome of the Rock  
(Temple in Jesus Day)

Eastern Wall

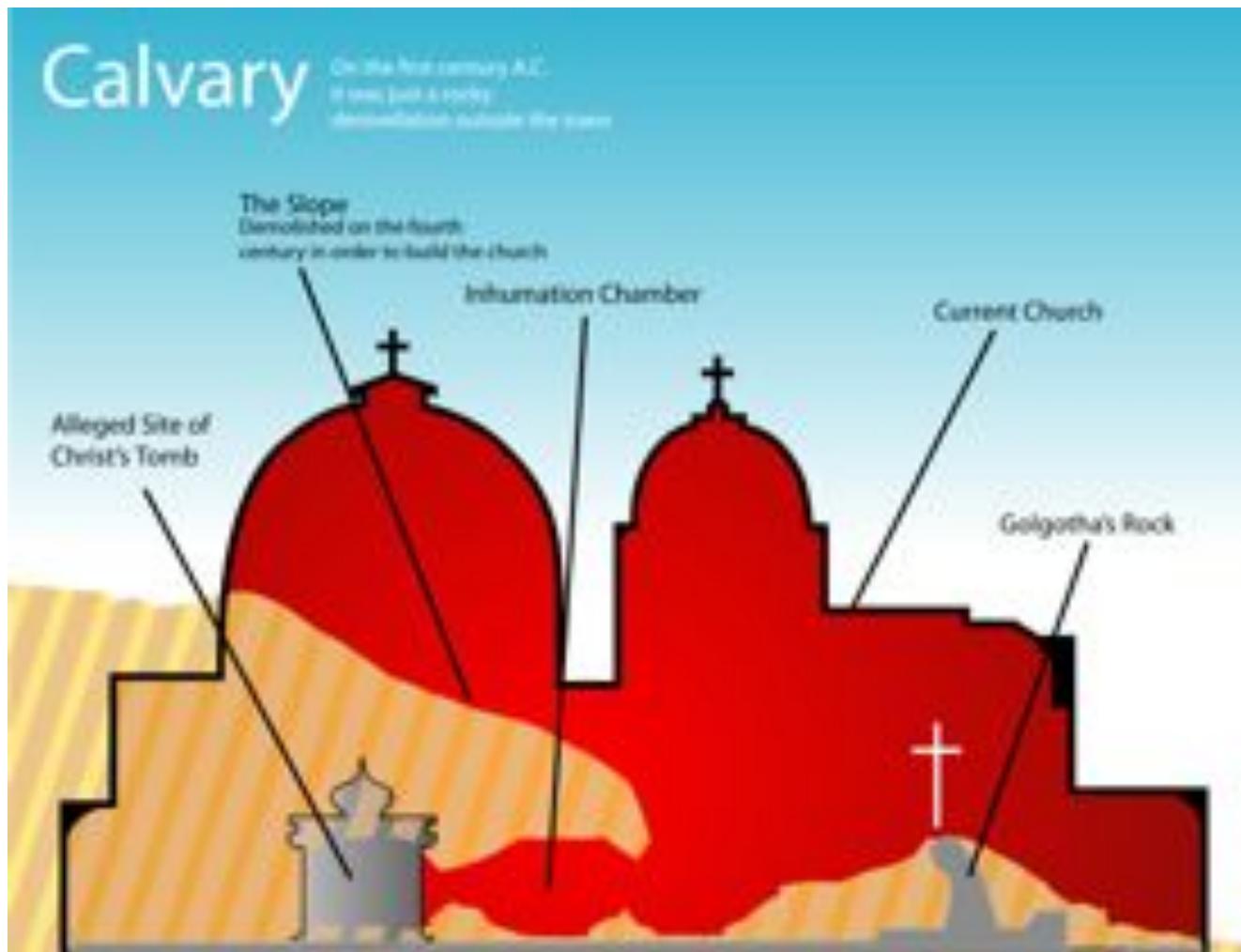


The Crucifixion

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**The Emperor Constantine and his mother St. Helena built the original Church of the Holy Sepulcher in A.D. 326. It has been destroyed/damaged and rebuilt many times throughout history.**

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## Approaching the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on the Via Dolorosa.

*Photography by Ana Maria Vargas*  
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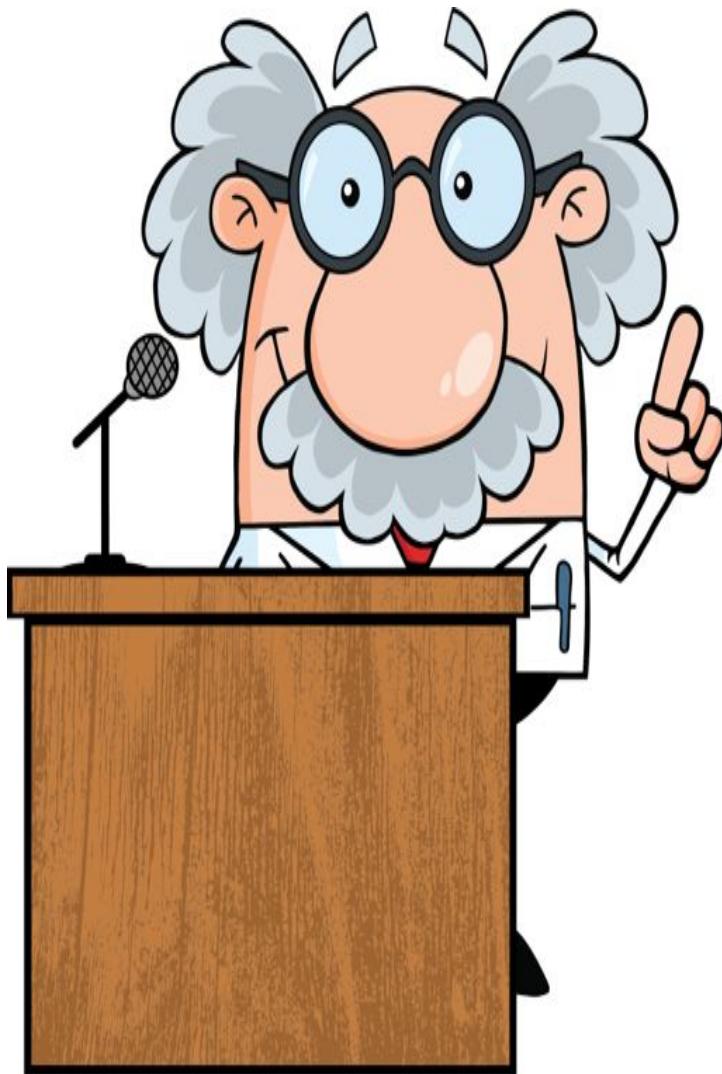
Inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher at “Golgotha.”

*Photography by Ana Maria Vargas*  
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## The Crucifixion

“Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.’ The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, ‘Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied to him, ‘Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’”

(23: 39-43)



**Only Luke's Gospel includes the story of the unnamed “penitent thief,” crucified on Jesus’ right. Consequently, depictions of the crucifixion usually portray Jesus looking toward his right, in acknowledgment.**

**The 4<sup>th</sup>-century *Gospel of Nicodemus* gives the “penitent thief” the name “Dismas,” and although not canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, he is typically referred to as St. Dismas.**

**San Dimas, California is named after him!**

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*Syriac Rabbula Gospels* (illuminated manuscript), c. 586.

Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence.

[Earliest crucifixion in an illuminated manuscript.]

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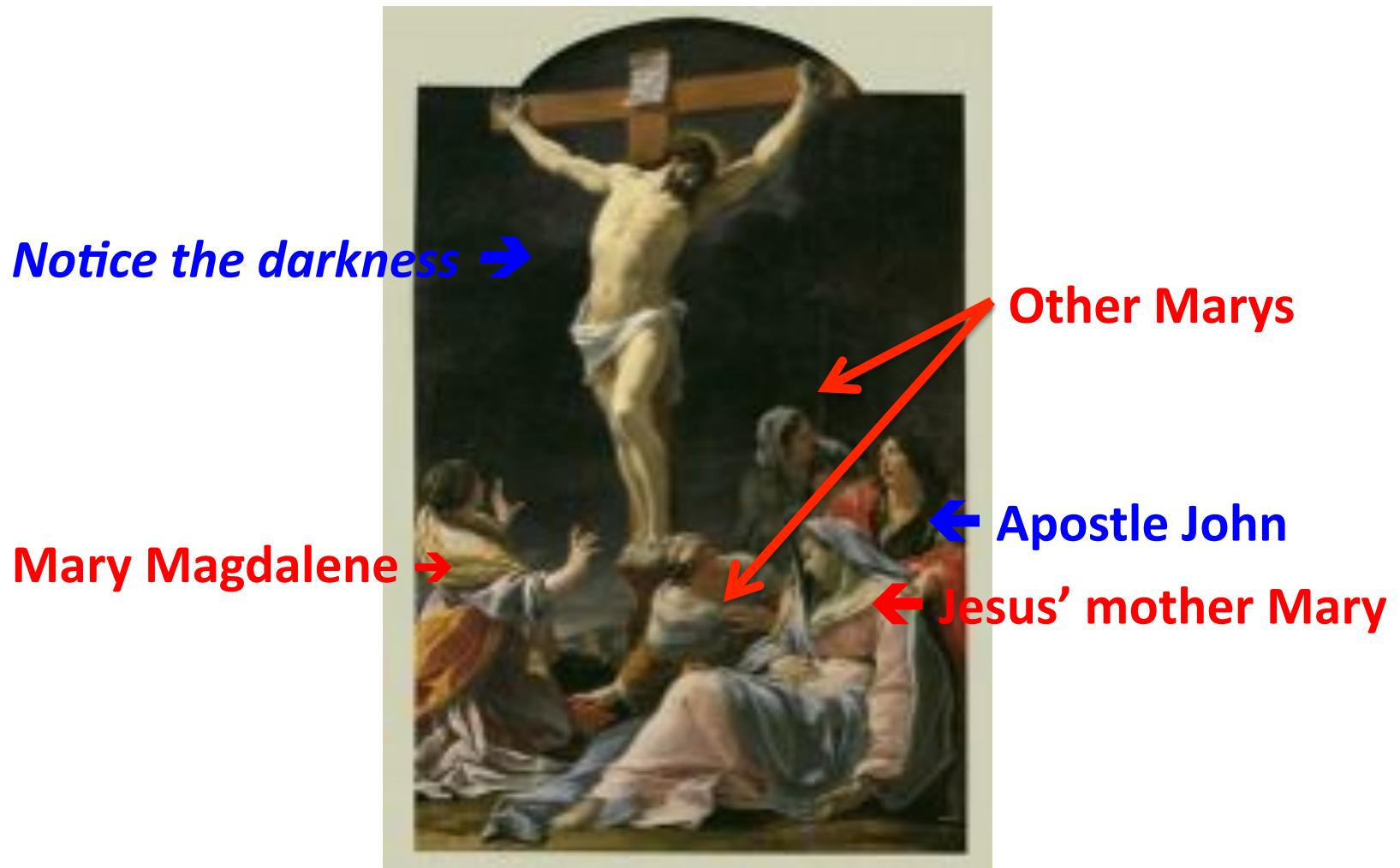
*Good Thief Enters Heaven* (Russian Icon), 17<sup>th</sup> century.  
Solovetsky Cloister, Solovetsky Islands, Russia.

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## The Crucifixion

“It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon because of an eclipse of the sun. Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’; and when he had said this he breathed his last. The centurion who witnessed what had happened glorified God and said, ‘This man was innocent beyond doubt.’ When all the people who had gathered for this spectacle saw what had happened, they returned home beating their breasts; but all his acquaintances stood at a distance, including the women who had followed him from Galilee and saw these events.”

(23: 44-49)



Simon Vouet. *Crucifixion* (oil on panel), 1622.  
Museum of Fine Arts, Lyon, France.

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# The Tabernacle



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**When the veil in the Temple was “torn in two from top to bottom” it provided open access to God, once and for all through Christ’s death on the cross.**

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## The Crucifixion

“Now there was a virtuous and righteous man named Joseph who, though he was a member of the council, had not consented to their plan of action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea and was awaiting the kingdom of God. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. After he had taken the body down, he wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb in which no one had yet been buried. It was the day of preparation, and the Sabbath was about to begin. The women who had come from Galilee with him followed behind, and when they had seen the tomb and the way in which his body was laid in it, they returned and prepared spices and perfumed oils. Then they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment.

(23: 50-56)



Pietro Perugino. *Joseph of Arimathea*  
[detail from *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*], (oil on panel), 1495.  
Palazzo Pitti, Florence.

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Rogier van der Weyden. *The Descent from the Cross*, (oil on panel), c. 1435-1438.  
Prado Museum, Madrid.

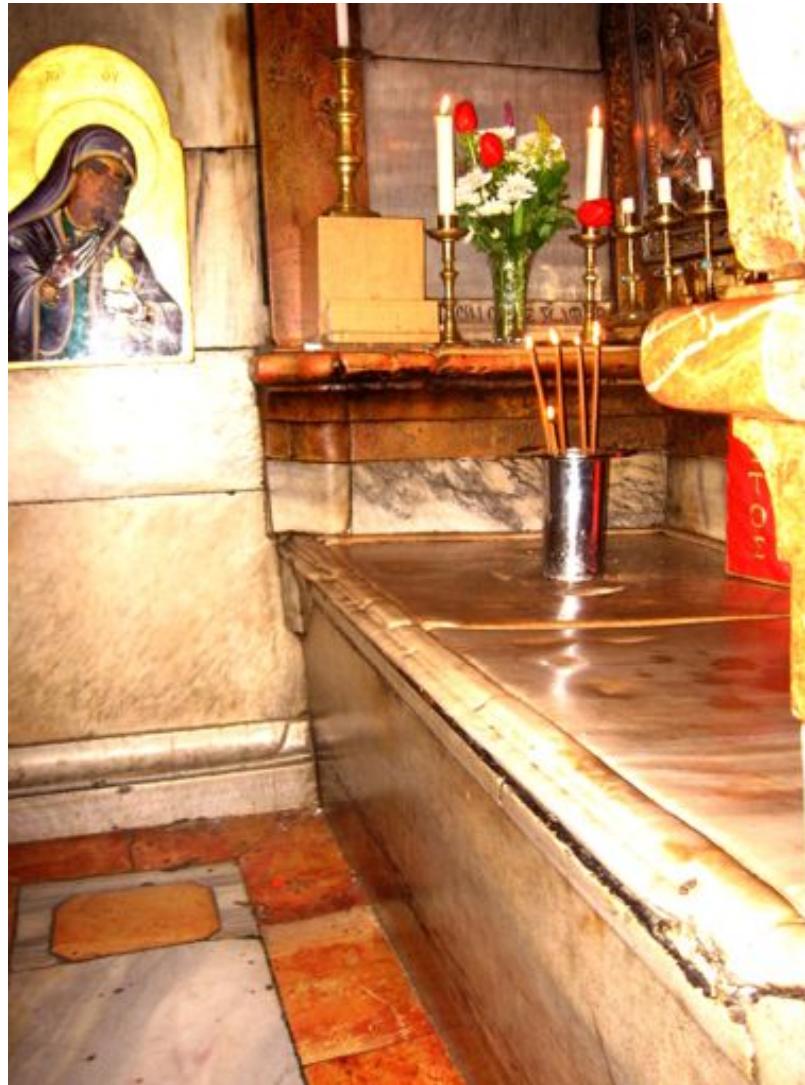
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**Jesus' tomb beneath the rotunda in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The Aedicule was originally built in 1555 by the Franciscans, rebuilt in 1810 after a fire destroyed the original, and reinforced by iron scaffolding since 1947.**

The Crucifixion

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**Tomb of Jesus inside the Aedicule at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem.**

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# Garden Tomb in Jerusalem



Although the Church of the Holy Sepulcher has a greater claim to authenticity as the tomb of Jesus, the Garden Tomb (seen here) makes a much better visual aid!

*Photography by Ana Maria Vargas*

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A “rolling stone,” sealed the tomb.

*Photography by Ana Maria Vargas*

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*Interior of the Garden Tomb, where Jesus' body would be placed.*

*Photography by Ana Maria Vargas*

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**Empty Garden Tomb: “He is not here for he is risen.”**

*Photography by Ana Maria Vargas*  
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# Questions for discussion and thought

1. Only Luke has Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross and walking *behind* Jesus. What lesson might we learn from this?
2. What crime did the other two men commit who were crucified with Jesus?
3. Who should have been on the center cross?
4. What lesson may we learn from Jesus saying to the “penitent thief”: “*Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise*” (23: 43)?
5. Who was responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion and death?

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