

One God, One City, Many Expressions of Faith

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“Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem ...” says Psalm 122:6. I offer these pictures, taken during five days of walking through the Old City of Jerusalem, July 7-11, 2010, as a way to understand a little more about some of the spiritual breakthroughs which Jewish, Christian, and Muslim people have experienced in Jerusalem.



From the east, Jerusalem looks like this. This photograph is the view from my hotel window, high atop the Mount of Olives, where Jesus prayed, was betrayed and was arrested the night before his death. Today this hilltop is an area where Palestinians live, both Arab Muslims and Arab Christians.

The Mount of Olives is also the place where Jesus began his Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem. This is the view Jesus had when, according to the Gospels, he stopped and went over the city.

Left of center, the two blue domes are part of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. That building was constructed starting in the 300's over what are most likely the sites of Jesus' death and resurrection.

The large gold dome in the foreground, called the Dome of the Rock, was built in the 600's and is holy ground for Muslims, the site of Mohammed's Night Vision.

Between the Christian and Muslim holy places is the holiest place for Jews, the Western Wall of the Temple.



The Romans destroyed Jerusalem in the year 70. This is all that remains of the Temple. It is open to all, a place of prayer for all people. It is staggering to realize these holy sites for the three Monotheistic Faiths are so close. The Dome of the Rock stands above this wall. About four blocks away stands Christianity's holiest site.

Since the early 300's, a Church has stood over the place believed to be the site of Christ's death and resurrection:



This Church is called "Resurrection Church" by Greek Orthodox Christians. It is called the "Church of the Holy Sepulcher" by most western Christians.



Immediately inside the main door is a bench for the two Muslim families who keep the key, and the peace of this holy place which is shared space for worship led by 6 Christian denominations:

Greek Orthodox,
Armenian Orthodox,
Roman Catholic, Coptic,
Syrian Orthodox, and
Ethiopian Orthodox.



Immediately, as soon as you enter the door, you may climb the ancient steps up to a marble platform and two altars built over Golgotha (Calvary) where Jesus was crucified.

The arch is very short. The steps are steep, slick and uneven. Once you are on the marble floor built over Calvary, you can pray at an altar maintained by Franciscan priests of the Roman Catholic Church and also at a Greek Orthodox altar.

Devout pilgrims and curious tourists alike are allowed to kneel beneath the Greek Orthodox altar, reach through a hole in the marble floor and touch the rock which is most likely Golgotha.



Everywhere you can see many different kinds of worship spaces, small and large (see below). Some are claimed as the common space. Some “belong” to one of the six Christian groups. Many times throughout each day Candlelight Processions, Liturgies, and Communion services take place simultaneously throughout the various worship areas of the building.



At no time did I hear anyone say that participation in any of these services was limited to practitioners of any one part of the Christian faith. I heard no announcement restricting Communion. Often those leading one of the worship experiences asked us to be quiet in our leaving in order to respect the still continuing worship and prayers of other Christians. We waited at the end of a Franciscan Candlelight Singing and Prayer Procession throughout the Church for the final steps to the Tomb because the organ they wanted to use at that point in the worship would have overpowered the voices-only singing of the Greek Orthodox worship service nearby.

There is often a lot of chaos and confusion in the Church because people are allowed to enter and engage the holy site as they wish. Periodically people are asked to make way for those who are in a Prayer Procession. Sometimes people who are acting like tourists are asked to be considerate of others.

The focal point of the whole building is the space under the big dome. This is the place believed to be the place where Christ's body was laid and the place where his Resurrection took place. People wait for hours to go into a marble structure built around the tomb. Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic clergy take turns ushering people into the tiny tomb four at a time. The space is so small that all who go in must crawl and kneel.



Overhead is the glorious dome. Sunlight streams in, symbolizing the Resurrection. The light shines on the Tomb and the pilgrims.

Why do most scholars believe that these sites are likely the places where Jesus died and was resurrected? Part of the way Roman governments tried to destroy Christianity was by covering both Golgotha and the Tomb with huge marble plazas and building massive temples to Roman gods.

The Romans' construction techniques were so excellent that they actually preserved these sites that had been the places where Christians had worshiped spontaneously. When Emperor Constantine made Christianity a legal religion in 313 his mother Helena led the effort to remove the Roman plaza and temples and began building the first Christian Church over the rock hill and the tomb they uncovered.

Today people are allowed to pray throughout the various areas of the Church as they wish, and there is peace enough in the midst of the chaos that it is possible to see some people meditating.



Or you can light a candle and place it in the old steel bracing which supports the crumbling marble walls that surround the tomb.



Many other fine places throughout Jerusalem are holy to one or more of the Monotheistic faiths. For example, significant archeological digs are underway in the original city built by King David. Nearby are stone steps that are well over 2000 years old. It's almost certain that Jesus and his friends made their way from the Last Supper in the upper room to prayer in the Mount of Olives using these steps.



Not all of the holy sites are stone. Because olive trees never die, some of the oldest trees on the Mount of Olives are well over 2000 years old, still growing on that hillside where Jesus prayed, “Not my will but Yours ...”



Two miles southeast of Jerusalem is the village of Bethany. Jesus often stayed in Bethany at the home of his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Today you cannot walk the two miles to Bethany as Jesus did. A pilgrim has to take two different buses, riding a full hour, to travel from the Mount of Olives to Bethany. The route goes through checkpoints in walls built by the Israelis to separate Palestinian communities and new Jewish settlements. It's worth the trip to see the place Palestinian oral tradition says is Lazarus' tomb. It has a tiny 24" x 12" doorway.



Was this the place where Jesus called his friend Lazarus back to life? As an Israeli student of history put it, oral cultures are very accurate in passing on details about places and events. For generations Palestinian Muslims have kept the story alive. They call Bethany "Al Azarieh," which means "Lazarus" in Arabic. Both Muslims and Christians visit Lazarus' tomb. Muslim residents freely express great respect for Christians who worship at the Church beside the tomb.



Leaving the tomb, it is possible to get a glimpse of what it might have been like for Lazarus to leave his grave, called to the light of new life.

May this photo be an image of how all people of faith are called by God's love to leave death and decay behind and embrace God's light and life.