

Mark 14:12-17

¹²On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples asked him, “Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?” ¹³He sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the city, and there a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. ¹⁴Wherever he enters, tell the owner of the house that the Teacher says, ‘Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ ¹⁵He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.”

¹⁶His disciples left and went into the city and found things just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover.

¹⁷When it was evening, he arrived with the Twelve.

His Final Steps Led to an Upper Room

I.

It is called the *Cenacle* (pronounced Seneckal), a word derived from a Latin word meaning: “dinning room.” This particular dining room has been important to Christian pilgrims for about 1,600 years. Why? The claim is made that the Cenacle, located on what is called Mt. Zion, a nickname given to a portion of Jerusalem’s western hill, is the same upper room where Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Last Supper.

Making the site even more impressive, it is said that the Cenacle, an upper room, is built over the ancient location of King David’s tomb. On the lower floor you will find Jews regularly gathering and praying in what has become a synagogue to them.

Yet the Cenacle that pilgrims visit today can hardly be the same room where Jesus once invited his apostles to “Take and eat. Take and drink.” Although the foundations for the building *seem* to go back to the third century, the Cenacle you’d visit today on a tour of the Holy Land is a massive room that boasts soaring Gothic ribbed vaults. It’s nothing like the architecture of Jesus’ day. Most archaeologists and historians agree it was likely constructed by crusaders around 1200 AD.

Despite this, thousands and thousands visit the Cenacle each year. In May 2014 that included Pope Francis, who celebrated a Mass there. The Pope said in his homily: “Here the church was born, and was born to go forth.”

Maybe. The precise GPS coordinates of the upper room have been lost in the mists of time. But the pull of the upper room, especially for Christians who gather on what has now come to be known as Holy Thursday—previously we called it Maundy Thursday—remains as strong as ever.

II.

Tonight in our worship, we go to the upper room, as well. This year our focus might be a little different than other years as we visit the upper room. Usually when we visit this room in the gospel accounts we focus on the Supper. We listen for the Savior’s gracious words: “Take, eat, this is my body ²⁷...Drink from it all of you” (Matthew 26:26-27, EHV).

We travel each year to the upper room in spirit because we long to hear how Jesus gave this tangible, visible preaching of the gospel for believers—a preaching of the gospel we can see and smell and taste and touch. When we stand there to receive this Supper, a weight as heavy as hell itself is lifted off our shoulders by the Savior’s guarantee! A guarantee made by Jesus’ servant distributing the Supper of the Lamb. When that servant comes by us one by one, we hear him speak those words guaranteed to be true by the Lamb’s own blood shed on his cross: “for you,” “for the forgiveness of sins.”

Tonight’s message will focus more on the setting than the Supper. Though that is the case, the visible and tangible gospel is not being swept aside in tonight’s service. Our entire Holy Thursday service—liturgy and hymns alike—is centered on the Supper. We focus on preparing for it properly with a heartfelt confession of sins, in hearing Bible readings that teach about the Supper, in receiving the Supper and in this way being restored to live a new and holy life for the Lamb who gave his life for us.

Though Holy Thursday is all about the Supper, it's not a bad idea for us all to realize that the Supper didn't just fall out of the sky fully prepared by angelic caterers. The Lord's Supper itself was carefully and purposefully rooted in the Old Testament celebration of the Passover. Passover took hours of careful preparation on the part of the disciples.

Some years ago we held a so-called Seder meal here at Holy Trinity. Christians who hold that ancient Jewish ritual add in a little bit of dialogue to that which the Jews have so carefully followed for millennia—dialogue that points to Jesus as the Messiah.

When it is done according to the ancient rituals, the meal lasts for several hours. Passover is elaborate; scripted. It consists of multiple carefully prepared dishes. It includes the karpas—an appetizer of a small piece of parsley, onion, or boiled potato dipped into salt water; matzah—unleavened bread made of nothing but flour and water, grilled rather than baked, and with holes pierced in it; charoseth—a paste like sauce made of fruits, nuts, and wine; maror—bitter herbs, usually horseradish; a roasted egg to represent the offering brought to the temple.

Each course is eaten solemnly, slowly. Each course is accompanied by a script passed down through the generations, teaching how the Lord freed his people from bondage in Egypt. And don't forget to add in four cups of wine served at intervals during the dinner. You might want to water the wine down a little bit.

Passover is a home holiday, not a synagogue festival. But all of it is done in an elegant setting, as if a state dinner. The finest set of dishes is used and the finest accommodations to host this formal affair. The day before the room is ceremonially swept clean to make sure that every last possible crumb containing any yeast is cleaned out of every last nook and cranny of the home where the meal is to be hosted.

In other words, lots of meticulous care went into preparing the setting we know as the upper room. "Tell the owner of the house that the Teacher says, 'Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' ¹⁵He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there" (Mark 14:14-15, EHV). The disciples must have been overjoyed at these words! Hours of preparation had already been done.

There was, however, *some* preparation left. The disciples couldn't just walk in to the nearest Jewish deli and bring home a pre-roasted lamb. The sacrificial lamb had to be purchased, probably at an inflated price, because it had to pass the inspection of the temple priests. The lamb had to be slaughtered early that same Thursday afternoon at the temple, and then it was roasted carefully before the evening meal.

Recently we mentioned that Jerusalem's population during Passover grew to 2 million. *Everyone* was looking for a quiet upper room in the city. The Jewish Mishnah, or commentary, did not permit carrying a lamb slaughtered in the temple outside the city walls. Large upper rooms, big enough for Jesus and his apostles, were hard to find. Furnished and ready? Good luck. It seemed impossible.

Not for the Lamb who later "Reclined at the table with the twelve apostles" (Luke 22:14, EHV). Not for the Lamb who said: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God" (Luke 22:15-16, EHV). Not for the Lamb who knew how vital the upper room was in God's plan to save you and me.

So God's Lamb sent Peter and John into Jerusalem with instructions that were fail-safe, even though they seem bewildering to you and me. "Go into the city, and there a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him" (Mark 14:13, EHV). A man carrying a jar of water stood out like a sore thumb. At that time and in that culture, men simply didn't fetch the water needed for drinking or for the elaborate Passover meal ritual washings. That just wasn't done.

But Jesus could see this man doing this task among all the millions in Jerusalem and tell his disciples: "Wherever he enters, tell the owner of the house that the Teacher says, 'Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' ¹⁵He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there" (Mark 14:14-15, EHV). Was the owner

of the home a devoted follower of Jesus? It would seem so. Otherwise, why would the title “the Teacher” be enough to secure that upper room?

It was no accident that his final steps led to the upper room. Hours of careful preparation by the disciples were needed to make the celebration happen; preparations that would have failed if not for the divine guidance of God’s Lamb. But failure wasn’t possible, because an eternity of careful planning by our Lord went into securing that upper room.

III.

It’s almost as if a death shroud covered the Savior who reclined at the table with his apostles in the upper room. The Savior regularly departed from the centuries-old Passover script on that first Holy Thursday. Sometimes he did so in ways that were shocking, as when he warned: “Amen I tell you: One of you will betray me, one who is eating with me” (Mark 14:18, EHV).

No less shocking were Jesus’ references to his coming slaughter as the Lamb of God. In the Supper itself he said: “This is my blood of the new testament, which is poured out for many.²⁵ Amen I tell you: I will certainly not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:24-25, EHV).

He also warned them. “This night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered’” (Matthew 26:31, EHV). One he directed specifically to Peter: “Amen I tell you: Today—this very night—before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times” (Mark 14:30, EHV).

On top of that were all the Savior’s words so carefully crafted and preserved for us in John’s gospel. The Lamb’s legacy; his last will and testament. “In my Father’s house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2, EHV). Life-giving words: “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father, except through me” (John 14:6, EHV). Life-saving words for times like now: “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, and do not let it be afraid” (John 14:27, EHV).

The Savior gave us all those words and more, all because his final steps led to an upper room. He needed a secluded spot, where God’s Lamb carefully prepared to die—a safe place, hidden away from crowds and unknown to his enemies, where he could enjoy a few final hours of fellowship with the Twelve one last time before his cross.

He knew all this ahead of time, and he made that clear in the instructions he gave his disciples. Yet, when we carefully piece together all the gospel accounts about the message Jesus passed along for the owner of the upper room, we learn there was a bit more than Mark records. Matthew adds a bit of essential information that added urgency to the Lamb’s request the disciples were to relay: “My time is near. I will observe the Passover with my disciples at your house” (Matthew 26:18, EHV). The chosen time. The appointed time. The time set from eternity itself was now at hand.

All the Passion History we have heard through the Wednesday services leading up to this week. All the things that were about to start as this Last Supper concluded.

Here is where the Holy Thursday message needs to get somewhat more personal. The same Savior who could pick one man out of 2 million gathered for a Passover and an owner who would open his home after merely hearing “The Teacher says...” is the same Savior who hung on the cross because he peered through the corridors of time to see you and me. He could see all the times that our lives are not an endless string of Alleluias and Praise the Lord’s, but moments of weeping and worry and fear; times that we question the Father’s plan, and even flashes of anger.

God’s Lamb knew all about that, and paid for all of it, too. Nothing takes our Lord by surprise. Nothing, not even the gates of hell, can undermine his plans. His final steps led to the upper room, exactly as planned. Mark matter-of-factly reports: “His disciples left and went into the city and found things just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover. ¹⁷When it was evening, he arrived with the Twelve” (Mark 14:16-17, EHV).

The next day, his final steps led to the Place of the Skull, exactly as planned. Amen.