

## Easter Footprints

*[A story based on biblical and historical facts. The name of Mary mother of Jesus is written as Marie to distinguish her from all the other Mary's]*

John was so patient. Whatever had become of that fiery tempered youth she had first encountered in Galilee? His aunt Marie, with his mother, Salome had helped him change as together they had imbibed the patience of Jesus. It had been harder work with James. Since that Pentecost when the Spirit came the peace of Jesus had empowered them, giving them strength to love the opposition, calmly trusting him. Mary may well have wondered what had become of all their former selves! She continued waiting for John to come back into the garden. He would not leave the friends he had accompanied down the hill, just so long as they wanted to talk about Jesus. She understood. How close the Master was at times, especially when they met to talk and pray together. You almost expected him to appear as he used to in Galilee with his gentle greeting – 'Peace!' Galilee! A lifetime away! Fifteen years now, but enough joy, tragedy and pain to overflow a life span.

And now they were here in Ephesus. At first it had been an awesome exciting experience. John knew the city, but Marie and Mary were overwhelmed by the size of this cosmopolitan trade centre with its many temples, baths and fountains along the wide paved streets. However, it was no less fearful than Jerusalem.

Their decision to leave Jerusalem was inevitable after the murder of James who was leader of the church with Peter and John. The People of the Way as some called them had been steadily growing in numbers, penetrating into every part of the city's life from priests to local market traders and into the Romans courts and households. Herod Agrippa's superstitious fears had made him ruthless in the extreme. After the king's death Judaea had come under direct Roman rule and Procurator Fadus was desperate to avoid insurrection.

When further religious and political persecution began the friends of Jesus were especially worried about the safety of John and Jesus' mother Marie now in his care. Peter had miraculously escaped the fate of James, but John could be next. At their weekly meeting in the upper room of the house of John Mark and his mother, Marks's uncle Barnabas had devised a plan. He had trading contacts and property in Ephesus. Even though the city was like 'Rome in Asia' it had a large colony of Jews and that gave them a degree of anonymity in their dwelling outside the city walls. They had made a home here on the lower slopes of Nightingale mountain. The community largely comprised weavers and cloth traders - renowned world-wide for their woollen goods and also for silk, some locally produced and more from the east. Best of all for Mary, being here she had a view of the Great Sea between pines and mulberries to evoke memories of Galilee.

John had established a small group of followers of the Jesus Way. His witness had been cautious. Not many Jews accepted his words even though some had known the church on visits to Jerusalem. Any work of evangelism was inhibited by the city being so dedicated to the worship of Artemis as well as to the many Roman gods. There were temples everywhere. The city was defensive against other religions although the presence of the Jews was accepted for the commercial prosperity they brought. John had written to Barnabas suggesting he and Saul might come by way of Barnabas's native Cyprus to preach here. It was not long before John and Marie of whom he was so protective had drawn many more into their small group of believers with John as their leader. The group met for prayer, as they had done this evening. John had walked down the hill with the last few friends who had come to hear his words and stories and found it hard to leave! They were attracted by the new powerful gentleness in his voice as he spoke of Jesus and the Way. Marie recognised it as becoming even more like Jesus' voice.

Chloe, who helped in the house, put down the water jar she had brought from the fresh spring shared by the community, at the same time discouraging a goat which had followed her through the gate.

*'I haven't had a chance to sweep. I'll do it later',* she called to Mary nodding towards the sand-covered tiles of the courtyard where the friends had sat together in shade.

*'It can wait till morning now,'* Mary replied.

As soon as Chloe had gone, Mary stood and walked across to the meeting place, pleased really for the undisturbed sand. She had always wanted to be alone for opportunities like this when Marie was resting inside the house. Her eyes scanned the ground.

*'Have you lost something?'*

Mary had not heard John return and, turning to meet his puzzled expression gave him a look of mixed guilt and embarrassment. He grinned. He had always loved the girlish ways which often broke through her sadness – glimpses of lost youth.

*'No.'* she stuttered. *'Well, no, but I was hoping to find something.'* John laughed and she added, *'I've never told you about it before.'*

*'Can you tell me now? Or is it secret?'* He took her arm and led her to the stone benches close to the house where he sat opposite her. John and Mary had enjoyed each other's company since their first days with Jesus and the others in Galilee. Mary had joined the women with Marie, Susana and Salome, who looked after the needs of Jesus and the twelve when they were on mission. She and John had seemed to share deeper understanding of the Master's words. She brushed back strands of her long dark hair drawing John's inquisitive laughter into the hidden mystery of her deep eyes.

*'I was looking for a footprint!'*

There was a sudden lighter note in her low soft voice.

*'It began in Joseph's garden – by the tomb he loaned for Jesus. You remember. I told you all. That wonderful morning when you and Peter left me there. Jesus came to me. I thought it was a gardener working there. Meeting him was such a fleeting moment of muddled faith, doubt and questions. He left quickly and as soon as he had gone I went again to the open tomb where he had been standing. Perhaps I thought he'd still be there. He wasn't but there was a single footprint left in the rough sand. I am sure it was his! I bent down to touch it and as I did I remembered his words from just minutes before 'don't touch me yet!' and with that a gust of wind ruffled the sand and the print was gone. I had such a wonderful feeling – like a silk worm wrapped around in its warm, safe cocoon.'*

John was amused. Mary had become entranced by the gathering of silk on the mountain and happily worked with the women, learning about their work with silk. He was no stranger to weaving. It had been part of her earliest life in Magdala.

*'But that's not the whole story,'* Mary continued. *'The hardest thing about leaving Jerusalem was the thought of not being able to visit the garden. So, I went, early the day before we left. One last visit. We had met as usual for the pre-dawn prayers and said our farewells at Mark and his mother's house - in the upper room which had become home to us all. You know what comfort we found in that refuge. From there it is easy to go through the Gennath Gate and out to the garden.'*

*'By the High Priest's house,'* John added.

Mary grimaced and went on. *'The tomb is all sealed now. No-one was around. I sat for a while. Then, just as I was about to leave, I felt tears rising and moved closer – I didn't want to be noticed crying – and there it was. In the very same place. A footprint! I know you'll think I am being fanciful but I'm sure it was his! A light breeze soon brushed it away, but oh, John. The joy!'*

She brushed a tear with the heel of her palm. *'After that I walked back into the city. Old Rebekah was still at the Market entrance – always the first – and last – begging for her poor daughter. I went into the market, bought her a loaf of bread, gave it to her and said, 'you'll have bread each day'. I had made an arrangement in the market which would be my secret. I had to hurry then. As I walked quickly along the street ... I saw him – at least the back of him – tall and straight – that definitive walk ... It had to be him! I called his name and began to run, watching him turn the corner. 'Wait! Jesus wait', I cried desperately, but at the corner were just a few ordinary marketeers staring at this mad woman! I didn't see them really. My eyes were fixed on the ground, ashamed of my tears and of creating a scene. It brought back too many memories of past days. So many feet had passed that way since first light, but there was one footprint, close to the wall. I paused, jostled by the impatient crowd and saw them tread it away. That love cocoon feeling gripped me again.'*

Mary sobbed quietly for a while. She stood to turn her face away. John watched and waited. She had never lost her playful charm, nor her graceful form. It was

the outward expression of her overall graciousness. He waited for the dark eyes to turn back to him before speaking. *'Love! Footprints of Love, Mary. It's his link with us.'* Then he asked, *'Have you seen the footprint here?'*  
*'Oh yes! There is so much of God's love here. With you and Marie he's everywhere! In our conversation – our prayers – the meetings – in the many kindnesses you and Marie share with everybody.'*

*'I have seen them too.'* Marie had come quietly out of the house from where she had heard much of their conversation. She was showing the strain of past years, yet for all the pain, loss and hardship of half a century she still shone with the deep burdened beauty of Jesus' growing years in Nazareth. Heavy tear-weighted lines could not alter her radiant glow. She sat beside Mary, taking her hand. *'Those prints have a very special significance for me. They should for you too John. You remember how we used to come to the lake sometimes to see your mother Salome – with James.'* She caught her breath for a moment giving a long loving glance at John. *'You must remember how we played that game on the beach - Who's footprint?'* John laughed. Mary stared at him – that boyish laughter was something she had not heard for a long while ..

John's laughter opened a door for his thoughts ... *'I'll be looking for his footprint everywhere now, although there is no need. Since that memorable Pentecost when God's spirit came to us. Again and again he's brought the same amazing love - God's love - which meant more to me than tongues and fire – and still does. It's in my thoughts all the time. God is Love! Jesus IS love – living Love! And wherever we share that love he is there. I'm still beginning to understand. I've tried to write down my thoughts. Love is the key. The key to the Cross – the pain – the sacrifice... It's all his love for us – for the whole world. When you told us about the footprints, Mary, I suddenly had this picture of millions upon millions of prints covering the ground – all over the world – all over heaven – all the way to his feet and his throne! Wherever there are acts of kindness and sacrifice; words of encouragement, of forgiveness, of comfort – appeasement of bitter wrangling in the synagogues ... wherever there is justice for the poor, the hungry, the despised, those we call sinners ... he will be there. His footprints will be everywhere as people discover from Jesus that at the heart of everything God is forever Love. His love is bigger and stronger than life and death.'* He paused, raising his head as though to scent the certain joy they each felt. *'Wherever there is true love we shall see his footprints.'*

The three of them joined in a circle together with not a free hand to dab their joyous, hopeful tears. Through the trees Mary saw a sun ball dropping into the sea behind distant islands. A goat bleated at the gate. Cooling wind rustled through the pines ... and nightingales sang.