

## Day 9

Monday morning – our last day in Israel. Our tour planner really knows her business! After a very long, tiring Sunday culminating with our Dead Sea adventure – we needed a slow start to the morning. We also needed time to pack as luggage had to be outside our door by 10:15. Many of us completed our check-out tasks early and had until 11:00 to get in some last minute sites on our own.

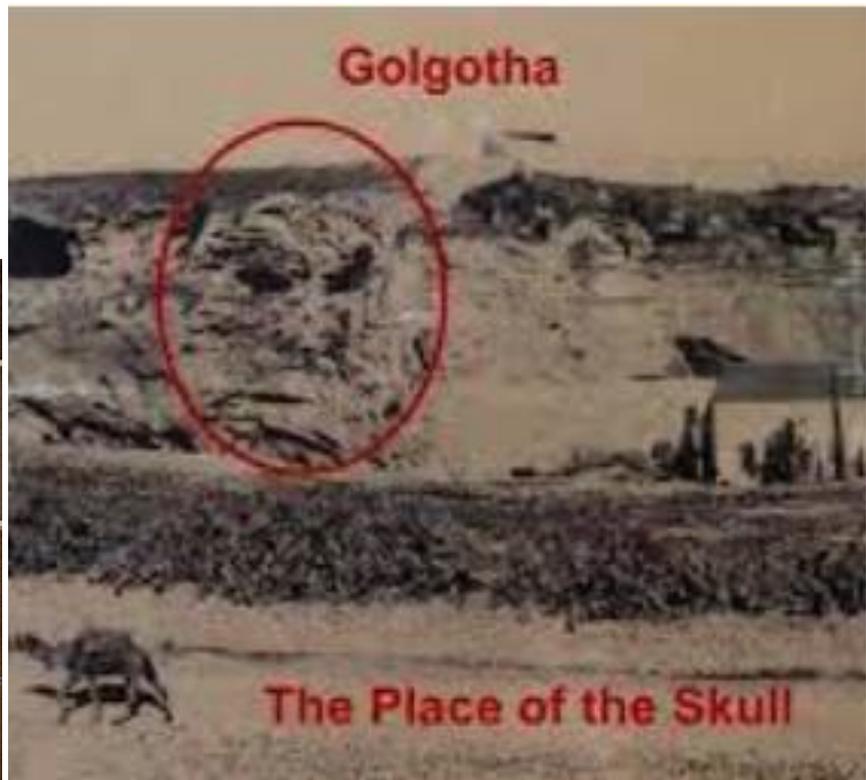
Once on the bus, we continued our daily routine. Chris Kiper was our shepherd and Beth Rosko served as our chaplain. Todd told us about a song - #179 in our UM hymnal – which none of us knew. It is the Song of Bethlehem which describes many of the places we have visited. He plans to find a place for us to use it worship!

We sang *Open Our Eyes* and Laura Katherine shared the Travelers' Prayer and then prayed with us. Our first stop for the day – lunch! – another fabulous buffet of traditional dishes. From there we moved to the Garden of the Tomb.

Located just outside the city walls of Jerusalem, this site has been recognized since the mid-1800s as a possible location for the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Christ Jesus. A beautiful garden with an ancient empty tomb, it is near to the Damascus Gate and stands in the shadow of Skull Hill (Golgotha).



We were shown the outline of the skull on the face of the hillside, we entered the tomb, and walked through the garden to a setting for our devotion.





Beth Rosko led our devotion - describing pilgrimage as an outward journey toward an encounter with the sacred and the divine – a way to tie our hearts to God with the expectation of transformation. We broke into our small shepherd-led groups and shared our most awe-inspiring moments, so far, of the journey. Beth encouraged us to look at all life as a pilgrimage, to come with our head and leave knowing with our hearts. Todd led us in singing *He Is Lord* and Doug Meckes then read the Matthew 28 story of the women at the tomb.



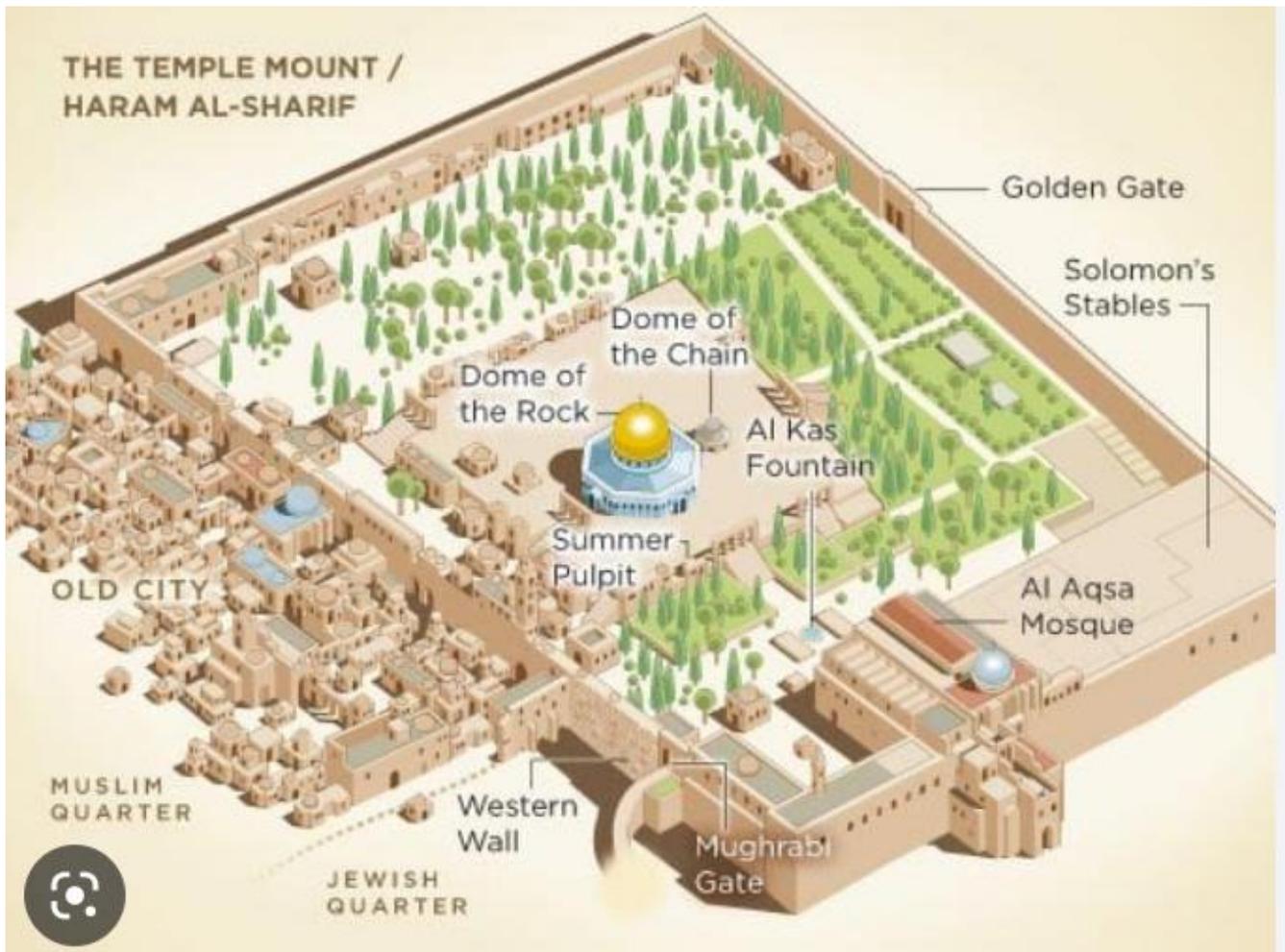
Laura Katherine's sermon reminded us that we are all searching for something. We want more than a story. Who or what was Mary looking for when she entered the garden? She came expecting to find Jesus dead. But what was her deepest desire? We hopefully came on this pilgrimage looking for a time to connect, to reset our life, to be in awe - not expecting to find Jesus dead – but knowing he is alive. The moment Jesus said Mary's name, she recognized him - Jesus was right in front of her. We pray all have that same experience when we recognize the risen Christ in our life.

One of the most emotional moments for me followed the sermon. We received communion standing in the possible place where Jesus was raised from the dead. Whether or not this was the actual spot was not the question. It was celebrating his death and resurrection because of his love for me – for us – in the land of his birth, death, and resurrection.



Leaving the garden site, we traveled toward the Western Wall. On the way, we passed by the Temple Mount. Having passed it several times over the past 4 days, we easily recognized the gold dome but Rula told us much more about the place which is now a Muslim holy site.





The Temple Mount is the holiest site in Judaism. According to Jewish tradition and scripture, the First Temple was built on that site by King Solomon, the son of King David, in 957 BC, and was destroyed with all of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The Second Temple was built over the site in 516 BC, renovated by King Herod, and destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. Temple Mount is a flat plaza surrounded by retaining walls (including the Western Wall), which were originally built by King Herod as part of his renovation in the first century AD which expanded the area around Second Jewish Temple.

Among Muslims, the whole plaza is revered as "the Noble Sanctuary" and one of the three Sacred Mosques, the holiest sites in Islam. The courtyard can host more than 400,000 worshippers, making it one of the largest mosques in the world. The plaza includes the location regarded as where the Islamic prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven, and is the first direction Muslims turn towards when praying.

It is no wonder that this site is the major focal point of the Arab-Israeli conflict as Christians, Muslims, and Jews all associate this site with King Solomon who is revered by all three religions.

From 1516 until 1967, the site was controlled by Muslims, placing ownership responsibilities with the King of Jordan. In the Six-Day war, Israeli forces took all of Jerusalem, including the Temple Mount, from the Muslims. A few days after the Six-Day War, Temple Mount was returned to the Muslims under the “status quo”. Jews were given the right to visit the Temple Mount unobstructed and free of charge if they respected Muslims' religious feelings, but they were not allowed to pray. The Western Wall remained the Jewish place of prayer.

Temple Mount is open to the public Sunday through Thursday from 7 am to 10:30 pm. Only Muslims are allowed in on Friday and Saturday. All visitors are only allowed in the courtyard due to wear and tear on the carpets and walls within the dome.

We continued traveling on the bus toward the Western Wailing Wall.

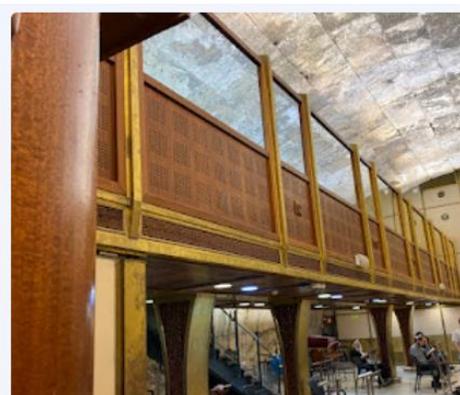


There is a misconception that the wall is a ruin from the temple. In fact, it is part of the Western Retaining Wall which surrounded the temple and sat about 300 feet from the temple. This portion of the wall was built by Herod in the expansion of the city. The bottom of the wall is about 100 feet below present ground. The large stones we can see are called Herodian stones and have a distinctive border. They average between two and six tons and can be up to 12 feet high. When looking at the stones, the smaller ones at the top were added by Muslims after 1516 to re-enforce the walls for protection.



The Wailing Wall is segregated between men on the left and women on the right. Jewish men wear tefillin for their morning prayers; small leather boxes attached to the forehead and the upper arm. Orthodox Jews wear yarmulkes (*yamakas*), or skull caps, as part of their life – all other Jews wear them at times of prayer. Male Jews also wear prayer shawls to signify the faithful are covered under the tent of God. Men have an extensive library underneath the wall for their use only.



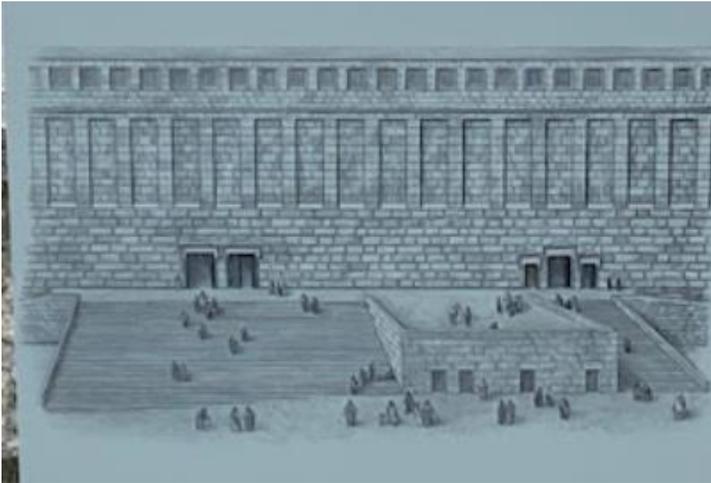


Both men and women approach the wall to pray, placing bit of paper in the cracks containing their prayer partitions. According to Jewish tradition, all the prayers of every person in the world go up from here because here the gates of heaven are open to Jews and non-Jews. The papers are removed twice a year – and because they have the word “God” written on them, the Jewish tradition requires they be treated with the same respect as the Torah. They cannot be destroyed so they are placed in bags and buried in the cemetery on the Mt of Olives. Additionally, people show respect by backing away from – not turning their backs to - the Wall.



After leaving the wall, we moved to the Teaching Steps which led up to temple entrance on the Southern Wall. This area has been (and is in the continuous process of being) excavated. An enormous flight of steps was excavated after 1967.

These are an extension of the pilgrims' road leading from the Temple Mount via the Double Gate and the Triple Gate. These are the steps that Jesus walked up to approach the Temple, especially on the great pilgrimages of Passover, Pentecost, and Booth festivals.



The stairs that led to the double gate are intact and well-preserved. The steps that led to the triple gate have been mostly destroyed. In addition to the steps where Jesus taught, excavation has uncovered the marketplace where Jesus threw out the money changers, and the ritual baths, filled only with rainwater, which were used before entering the temple.



The risers are low, a mere 7 to 10 inches high, and each step is 12 to 35 inches deep. The photo on the left shows our group on the top step, standing against the wall. It gives some perspective of how tall the wall is!



The temple was entered through the double and triple gates - known as Hulda Gates – and are still visible in the Southern Wall. There are 15 set of steps which correspond to the 15 Psalms (120 through 134) which are called the Ascent Psalms. These scriptures were sung while on the pilgrimages to the temple. They cover the themes of hope during oppression, a longing for return, and a future of peace and prosperity. I read aloud the 3<sup>rd</sup> ascent, Psalms 122, which contains the words “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem”.

We left the Temple Steps and began traveling toward Tel Aviv. Along the way, we had dinner in Bethlehem at the Tent Restaurant in Shepherds Valley Village.



This begins the end of our journey.

One of the olive wood carvings obtained in Bethlehem reassures us - angels have watched over us through these days – and now it's time to head home as we pray for travel mercies.

