

Prologue...

Remember Man That Thou Art Dust

"Not a stone will be left. All of it will be torn down."
"When will all these things happen?" The apostles asked him.
No one knows. Not the angels, nor the son, only the father knows...
Stay awake!"

Mark 13

Sean Williams knew he was going to die. He even knew the day it would happen. Though he learned this through a dream, he didn't doubt the reality of it.

Sean woke up and tried to rub the sleep off of his face. He
5 dreamt the same dream six times over the course of six nights.
As soon as sleep overtook him, he heard a mix of Aramaic and
Greek voices. Then he opened his dreamer's eyes to look upon a
group of men sitting at his feet peppering him with questions
about the end of the world. He saw and heard all of this through
10 the eyes and ears of Jesus bar Joseph. The dream ended there.

Sean sat up. He still felt disoriented. He looked around his living room. The last light of the setting sun pulled

darkness over the earth. He pushed himself out of his recliner. He stood up, steadied himself and then walked into his bedroom.

15 In the hidden corner of the room he knelt down in front of a print of the crucified Christ. He lit a candle that sat atop a small block of wood beneath the frame. His breathing grew shallow; because each time he meditated on the death of Jesus it cost him. Yet, it was the only way to get in touch with that
20 special presence which lived in his lungs.

 He immediately reached for the gag that hung on a hook just to the right of the candle. He put it over and into his mouth and tied it firmly around the back of his head. On either side of the candle there were two large wooden handles firmly
25 anchored to the wall. He grabbed one in each hand, and then closed his eyes. As he swept away all of the day's trivial thoughts, the echo of the Via Dolorosa took shape in his mind's eye. In a matter of seconds he smelled the stench of the crowd and their animals pushing in around him. The weight of a wooden
30 cross bore down on his shoulder with every step. Pain encircled his head and burning pain clawed at his back. Finally gravel dug into the souls of his feet.

 He screamed, but the gag prevented him from being heard by his neighbors. Violence and the crushing burdens of life in
35 captivity drove the people who cheered when he entered the city,

to mock and jeer him in his final agony. He felt completely alone.

Sean braced himself...The executioners pushed Jesus down onto the wood. Nails struck with mallets were driven through the
40 flesh of his wrists and feet. A sudden jolt nearly ripped his body from the cross-beams as the gruesome contraption settled into a hole in the ground.

Sweat poured off of Sean's body...Jesus struggled to breathe. Sean wanted to fall onto the floor, but he gripped the
45 handles even more fiercely. He needed to know.

Rather than passing in slow motion, time sped up. Sean looked down through the slits of Jesus' swollen eyelids at the Centurion who stood at the foot of the cross. The Roman looked on, helpless, as tears flowed down his face. The horizon grew
50 dimmer with each passing second. One man, a murderer, hung on the cross to his left.

"You could save others, why not save yourself and us!" The man was bitter and resentful. The thief who hung on the cross to his right rebuked the other.

55 "How dare you. Don't you fear God? This man has done nothing wrong." Sean saw him as Jesus looked over and smiled at the man who pleaded for his soul.

"Please remember me."

"Today you will be with me in paradise."

60 He struggled to suck in another lungful of air.

"Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing." His body fell limp down the vertical length of the cross. He strained to speak one more time. It meant pulling himself up with a final measure of strength.

65 "It is accomplished."

He exhaled.

He made another effort to pull or push himself up again, but his muscles would not obey...His head fell onto his chest and the crowd beneath him vanished. A rattling sound followed
70 the vision down a long tunnel...When Sean opened his eyes again, he looked up. His perspective had changed.

There were three men crucified on three crosses. The two on either side of the one in the middle deserved their sentence; one was a thief; the other was a murderer. The man in the middle
75 was innocent. He had been sacrificed for the greater glory of the Roman Empire and its cronies.

Sean had become Longinus, a Roman Centurion. He wiped his eyes and looked away from the contemptuous stares of the Jews who stepped out of his way as he led his detail of soldiers back
80 to the garrison. The vision faded.

Sean let go of the grips and wrenched the gag from his mouth. He steadied himself. These times of prayer, fewer now than in the past, drained him of all the energy he possessed for a man of seventy three. He staggered the three or four steps
85 necessary to carry him to his bed and fell backwards onto the cool sheets. He lost consciousness.

He woke up the following morning.

It was Ash Wednesday.

Sean walked out to his kitchen and looked at the calendar
90 on the wall. He ran his finger off the page and down to the bottom of the backing. There was a schedule of masses there.

"There's a noon mass."

Sean scratched his chin and thought for a second. Fr. DeLuca would preside. Noon mass was the only mass he celebrated
95 any longer. Sean needed solid spiritual advice. Fr. DeLuca had been a missionary in Southeast Asia and Australia. Besides that, he had spent several years in a Chinese communist Gulag.

Sean headed into the bathroom and lathered up. He hadn't shaved in six days. It would feel good to have a smooth face
100 again. Sean ran his razor over the stubble and was finished in no time. He ran warm water into his cupped hands and splashed it over his skin. He dried off and dressed in the only pair of slacks he owned and a cheap cotton button down white shirt. He

grabbed his apartment key and headed out to the door. It would
105 be 11:30am by the time he walked there. Before he closed and
locked the door, he looked back inside at his sparsely furnished
home; he got the odd feeling that he wouldn't see any of it
again for a long time.

110 * * * * *

Sean climbed the steps leading up to the front doors of the
church and entered the vestibule. Fr. DeLuca stood inside
greeting the faithful.

115 "Hi Father." Sean extended his hand and the priest took it.

"How are you today Sean?"

"Not bad Father, but I haven't been feeling quite right
lately. I've been having some strange dreams."

"Do you want to talk about it after mass?"

120 "Yeah, I think I would."

Fr DeLuca looked surprised.

"I didn't think you would ever talk to me about your past."

"I didn't ever feel the need. Now I do."

Fr. DeLuca nodded his head. Sean entered and took up his
125 place in the last pew in the rear of the church.

At 11:55am Fr. DeLuca closed the front doors and stood at the back in the vestibule. Jerry Shanks took up station in front of him with the processional cross. At 12 noon exactly, old Mrs. Reid rang the bell and Shanks and Fr. DeLuca processed up the
130 center isle to begin mass.

St. John of the Cross was one of those stately old northeastern churches built in the 1880's. The masons and other skilled workmen of the neighborhood had donated time, money and sweat to build their church. It had been a mixed Irish and
135 Italian neighborhood for years, but very few of those families remained. Yet, it was still a small pocket of the past unchanged by the modern era.

Sean stood and traced the sign of the cross over his forehead and chest. The priest began the prayers. Sean closed
140 his eyes and knelt down for the remainder of the service. He only stood up once more so that he could walk up front to receive communion. Many received the small white host in their hands; Sean couldn't bring himself to touch it. He opened his mouth and Fr. DeLuca placed the host on his tongue.

145 Sean felt himself float back to his pew. Ash Wednesday began the forty days of Lent and for all Catholics and Christians everywhere this was the holiest time of the year. As

soon as he slipped back into his pew and knelt down, his head fell limp onto his folded arms.

150 He immediately passed over into another state of consciousness. Memories from the life of Longinus bubbled to the surface to commingle with the more present memories of the savior. Sean marveled at how many remembrances the dying breath of Jesus retained from every one of the other 92 hosts who had
155 accepted this unique vocation.

 He fastened a shin guard onto his leg. It was made of a lightweight metal and looked like burnished gold. He shoved his gladius, a Roman's sword, into a sheath that hung from his belt. A comrade knocked at his door and called out to him.

160 "Longinus! Are you at home? He's here Longinus; the healer is in the market place!"