

**#DOYOUKNOWHIMTELFORD**

stories and poems of encounter



## DO YOU KNOW HIM?

*By Liz Carter*

In the beginning was the Word  
And the word crafted worlds  
Spinning galaxies and weaving stars  
Through skies of explosive light  
An echo through eons of nights

The Word became flesh,  
Wading into our mess  
Exploding into history  
Wrapped in sacred mystery  
The eternal unknown  
in a temporal home  
Do you know him?

They say he's the way, the truth and the life,  
They say he is human all meshed with divine,  
Do you know this love that blazes through time,  
And traces our pain  
With drops of holy rain?

Have you met him before, this unlikely Lord,  
This God-man who stands and knocks at your door  
Who made the first last and made the last first  
And quenches your thirst  
With rivers that burst  
Through desolate earth?

Do you know that he loves you  
like cascades of rain  
And the sound of his name  
sings through your veins  
And his love-drenched power  
shatters your chains?

Hear the whispers of hope as  
he draws you higher,  
And unlock the secrets of  
your heart's desire  
Come and know him,  
this Jesus,  
this dazzling Messiah.



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## KISS

*By Dawn James*

It began as an ordinary meal—one of those invitations that we were never quite sure why Jesus accepted. He didn't hold Pharisees as being any more important than anyone else, and he certainly had no lack of meal offers. I was surprised that I'd been invited too, to be honest, but maybe my profession made me more of a prize guest than some of the others in our group. Anyway, I wasn't fooled. I wanted to go for one reason alone: to spend as much time as possible with my Master.

But it was what happened in the middle that stands out in my memory.

We'd barely finished the salted fish and lentil stew, when I noticed that the hum of conversation had stopped. An air of uneasiness had replaced the buzz, and I turned towards the door, where everyone else seemed to be looking.

A woman had entered the room, clutching a smooth, white jar, and was walking up to where we reclined. She stopped behind Jesus' seat, then crouched down. The Pharisee sprang to his feet, but Jesus held out a hand towards him, motioning for him to be seated again.

I couldn't see her face, but I had a strong notion that I knew who the woman was. In my profession, I see all aspects of suffering humanity—the weak, the vulnerable, and the sordid—and this woman fitted all those categories.

A sniffing sound could be heard, in the silence, followed by a sob, there at Jesus' feet.

He said nothing. Just waited, eyes closed in silent compassion.

And then, I smelt the fragrance. Spicy, woody and musky, it floated into my nostrils, as she began pouring the perfume on Jesus' feet. I recognised it—I'd used it myself as a calming mood-

elevator for some of my wealthier patients, and the aroma filled the room, eye-pricking in its pungency.

The sound of her weeping was louder now, a wailing lament that couldn't be repressed, and as she leaned over, her hair came tumbling out from beneath her head scarf. With careful deliberation, she wiped away the tears that had fallen on his feet. Then, bowing even lower, her lips touched his skin and she kissed his feet ... over and over, passion and remorse evident with every dip of her head.

I glanced at the Pharisee and could see in his horrified eyes and twitching mouth that he didn't know whether or not to say something. But it was Jesus himself who took charge. He began to talk, easing the awkwardness of the situation—not by laughing or shrugging it off—but by telling one of his stories. He perforated the charged atmosphere, with that gentle way of his, and twisted it right around—managed to reprimand the Pharisee and elevate the actions of the woman in the same breath. Yet he spoke so tenderly, so sensitively, that yet again I was left stunned by his love and wisdom.

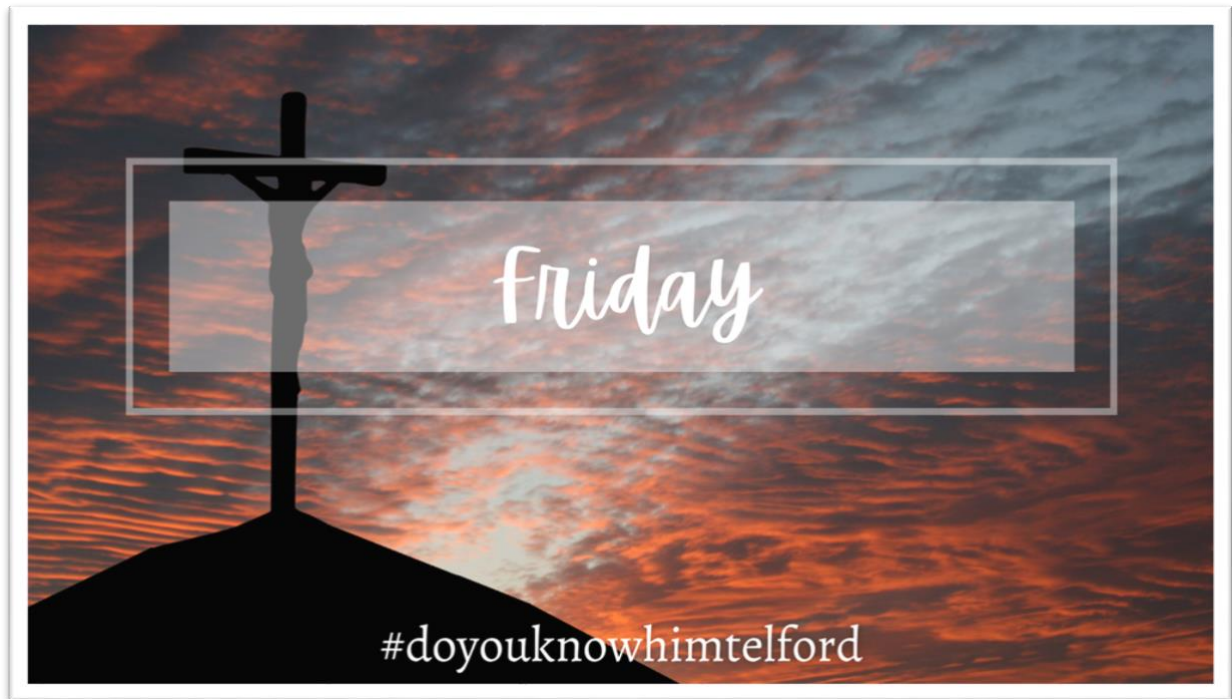
But the best part of all was when he turned to the woman and restored her dignity. 'Your faith has saved you. Go in peace,' he said.

And just like that, his words of love and forgiveness offered her his own kiss, in return.



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FRIDAY

*By Liz Carter*

*Torn.*

A lonely garden  
draped in a starry night,  
a soul ripped apart.  
*Yet not my will but yours*  
His spirit howls his fear  
His body trembles  
overwhelmed with the weight  
of us

*Torn.*

Rust-bound nails pierce uncreated flesh  
word of eternity in blood cascading  
arms spread wide in love-drenched agony

*Torn.*

A mother's heart shattered into a million pieces  
she watches—  
afraid to turn away.  
Drowned in the anguish of uncomprehending grief,

she recalls a night so long ago  
when the stars were bright and her pain was wild  
when he weighed heavy in her arms  
and myrrh weaved through the expectant air.

The God of glory  
flung into dust

*Torn.*

Son wrenched from Father  
Father wrenched from Son  
hung in forsaken desolation,  
a blackness of nothing  
crushing his spirit.

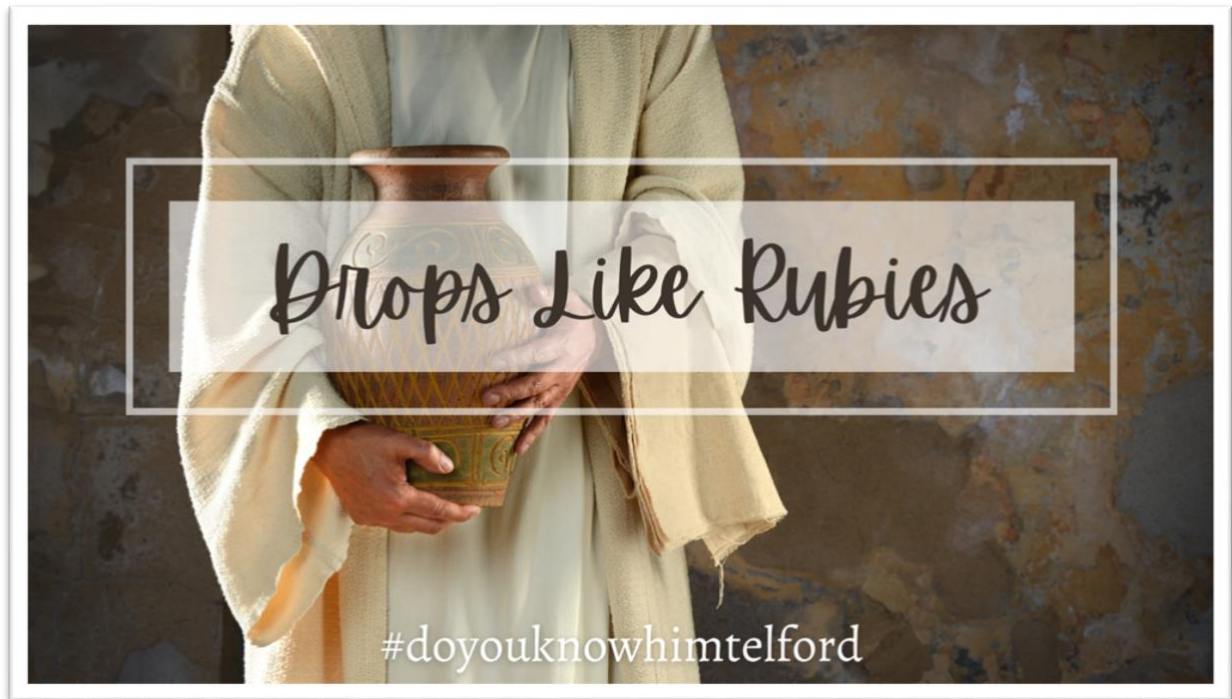
*It is finished.*

*Torn.*

The earth sighs under despair-laden darkness  
but something more.  
The skies are shaken  
the great curtain rent in two  
the triumph of history in  
pain-splintered rupture.  
Will light conquer  
these gashed shadows?



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## DROPS LIKE RUBIES

*A creative retelling of John 2:1-12*

*by Liz Carter*

There's never been a wedding like it.

The week has been long, hot and alive with celebration. I'm riding a high, delighted for my daughter and her new bridegroom and drunk with all the praise of our community for our lavish hospitality.

I planned for months and sourced the best meat and finest wines, tables laden with the freshest fruit, pomegranates and grapes, figs and dates, succulent and ripe. Rachel is exultant, clad in her wedding finery, she is royalty this week and we have done the best we could. I shove aside my anxieties for now; they can wait. I have such little money, but I kept all I could aside for this. When Reuben died, I thought I would be left destitute, just another widow without means, but my family rallied and cared for me and I saved the money Reuben left. He'd been well-to-do in our community, we are a family of standing, but now what he left is trickling through my fingers and running away from me. But my daughter would carry the shame all her days if things were not done well in this most important of weeks. I won't forget how my dear friend Miriam's family have been shunned since they didn't provide enough food at their daughter's wedding. I swallow up the ball of dread and feel it sink low in my belly like a stone. *Not now. Not today.*

Rachel's groom, Josiah, is shy and quiet, but he is a good man from a good family. His brother, Nathanael, is well known as the best of Israelites, in whom there is nothing false, and the whole family basks in his glory. Recently he's taken an unexpected turn in his life, though, and joined the



growing band following my dear cousin Mary's son around the countryside. I'd never have expected that. He seems different... less sure he's right all the time, for one thing. Josiah isn't sure about what his brother is getting into, but we all love the family, our kinsmen from Nazareth. Mary's been here all week, helping out with the food and drink, keeping the banquet master happy and sorting out the servants, and her son and his tribe have shown up today, dancing in the streets with the others. The wine is flowing and my heart is glowing.

It's late in the day when I sense something wrong. People are singing loudly and laughter ripples through the sultry air, and my clothing sticks to me as I rush around with Mary and the others, filling cups and refilling tables. The food is still plentiful, I see, and breathe a sigh of relief to myself. Rachel and Josiah are basking in the sunshine of their guests' approval, and spirits are high. Perhaps everything will be all right, after all. Perhaps this is a new turn in my favour. I stop for a second and give thanks to the Lord.

A serving girl rushes to my side and beckons me into the cool side room where the jars of wine have been stored. I cannot count how many we have gone through this week, and shudder at the memory of the chore of getting them all delivered on time. Rachel had said to me, as the wine merchant left, 'Do you think there will be enough?' I'd scanned the rows of jars and laughed. Of course there would. Too much, if anything.

'There isn't enough,' the serving girl says now, lines of anxiety etched on her forehead.

'What do you mean?' I say, looking around the room for clues. What isn't enough?

She swallows.

'What?' I say.

'The wine. It's almost gone. Look.' She tips one of the jars up and shows me the puddle of wine swirling sadly around the bottom.

'But there are more jars!'

'No,' she says. She picks up another and tips it upside down. Drops of wine scatter on the ground where they sizzle into nothing.

A cold fear clenches at my chest and snakes through my veins. I stare at her as if she will have the answer, as if she must have a plan, a stock somewhere of spares, but she's just a serving girl, hired for the occasion. She looks back at me with wide scared eyes and I wonder if she thinks I am going to punish her for the bad news.

Mary bustles in, arms full of freshly-baked loaves. 'Look at these! Just out of the oven. They smell so good...' she stops as she sees my face. 'What is it?'

'The wine,' I whisper.

Mary frowns. 'The wine?'

'It's gone.'

She opens her mouth wide and stares, then she starts lifting the pots, one by one. Empty. All empty.

'I don't know what to do,' I say, feeling the tears spring to the back of my eyes. If Reuben was here he might have an idea. Or he might have no idea but still be here, with me, standing with me.

I cannot tell Rachel.

I feel sick.

The serving girl says, 'Perhaps they won't notice. Most of them are already drunk, and to be honest they weren't that keen on the wine. Some were saying it was a bit cheap.'

That makes me even sicker.

‘They will notice,’ Mary says, but her voice is not lost in despondency like mine. ‘But I have an idea. You just wait here. Don’t tell anyone about the wine, either of you.’

I nod mutely. What else can I say? But what can she do?

She leaves the room, and I am on edge, jittery with nerves and nausea. I can’t stay here. I ask the serving girl to wait and follow in Mary’s wake, searching through the merry crowd and spotting her out on the road near to where her son and his band are singing a rousing song of celebration. I watch as she grabs her son’s arm and whispers in his ear, and watch as he shakes his head and says something I can’t hear, a slight frown playing around his eyes. I edge closer. ‘Not yet,’ he is saying, or at least I think that is what he is saying. What on earth is Mary doing? How could her son help us with this catastrophe? I will never live this down. I will live under the cloud of shame, and so will Rachel and Josiah, a fine way to start their new life. I pinch down on my arm, my anger howling through my soul, my anger at myself and my anger at Reuben for leaving me alone and my anger at God for taking Reuben from me.

Mary’s son still shakes his head, but Mary grabs his arm and leads him towards me and towards a group of servers who are clearing some of the plates. ‘Follow him,’ Mary says to them. ‘Do whatever he tells you.’

They look up in surprise, but surprise me even more when they lay their teetering piles of pottery down and walk towards them. Mary and her son lead them to another storage room where Josiah’s family keep the great stone water jars used for ceremonial washing. Six of them stand proudly in the corner like great beasts in hibernation, waiting for their awakening.

Mary’s son gestures to the jars. ‘Fill them with water.’

*What?* I think. What good will this do?

My despair is a tide sweeping over my head.

Yet the servants do as they are asked, filling the jars one by one from the great well in the courtyard, filling them to the brim, huge great weighty behemoths of stone. They need two men just to pick one full jar up.

Mary’s son smiles, and I am angry that he is smiling and making a mockery of my shame.

‘Now draw some out, and take it to the master of the banquet,’ he says.

Nausea swims in my belly and burns through my throat.

The banquet master is stood by the top food table, talking to another of the servants, a look of consternation on his face. He’s realised. He knows there’s no wine left, and now we are going to make a fool of him and of me, and I am going along with it.

Two of the servers bring one of the jars to him and set it at his feet. Mary is all impatience, hurrying them on. ‘You must try this,’ she says to him, grabbing his cup and dipping it into the jar. A flame of sheer humiliation flushes through my face and I look away. Why is she disgracing me further when I am already disgraced?

He is in a jovial mood, but tempered by uncertainty. ‘I was pretty sure the wine had run out,’ he says. ‘I was starting to prepare myself to tell everyone the bad news. All the cups on this table are empty, and I could not find more, only a frightened little scrap in the wine closet who would not tell me a thing. Luckily these men have their minds on other things.’

I follow his eyes to a gaggle of young women dancing in a circle around Rachel and Josiah who sit in state in the centre, eyes only for one another.

‘So,’ he says. ‘You have more, after all?’

I gulp.

Mary gives him the cup, half-filled with liquid. It looks dark, but only because the cup is stained earthenware. Mary is giving the master of the banquet a cup of water. Oh, dear Reuben, tell me this is a dream.

He takes a sip.

And then he sniffs it and swills it in the cup.

Another sip.

And then he downs it, the lot, and swipes his hand across his beard, drops of liquid like rubies flying out across the space and landing on my sleeve.

Drops like rubies.

Not water.

The banquet master signals to Josiah and beckons him over. Josiah’s eyebrows are a question, but he springs to his feet, kissing his bride and making his way through the dancing women to where we are stood. ‘What is it?’

The banquet master grins at him, a big, wide, conspiratorial grin. ‘I see what you did.’ He plunges his cup back into the jar and fills it to the brim, then takes another long gulp. ‘I see what you did.’

Josiah’s forehead is crinkled in confusion. ‘What do you mean? Is everything alright?’

The master laughs, a great guffaw, and holds his cup high in the air, playing to the crowd. ‘Oh, he’s funny, this one. *Is everything alright?*’

Josiah curves his mouth in a polite smile. ‘I’m not sure—’

The banquet master cuts him off. ‘Usually the hosts bring out the choice wine first.’ He swigs another gulp, and Josiah starts to speak.

‘Well, we d—’

‘But no, not you! Everyone else starts with the finest wine and lets his guests get merry on that, and then the cheaper wine later when they’re too far gone to know, or care. But you... you! You saved the best till last!’

Josiah shrugs at me, and I smile back at him. I have no words to tell him, no explanation for this miracle, no assurances that this was the plan all along. I glance at Mary who has her arm through her son’s, following him as he slips quietly away. But I saw him. I saw what he did. The servers saw what he did.

As I watch them fade into the shadows, a new joy steals over me, and it’s not just a relief about the wine. It’s something new. It’s something that rushes through the grief deep in my soul, something that pours over the anxiety and the doubt and the pain in drops like rubies. It’s a rush of abundance, a wild generosity, a reckless benevolence that snatches my breath away and makes me want to follow him, like Nathanael and the others. It makes me want to leave my safety behind and plunge into rolling oceans of surging treasures and joy unspeakable.

I gaze at the ruby droplets emblazoned on my silken sleeves, and fall to my knees.



## THE SOUND OF SILENCE

*By Dawn James*

Words wail, whistling, whirling, wild  
Maelstrom messing up my mind,  
Shouting voices, harsh and strong  
Toss me up and fling me down  
Seize my body, tense my limbs  
Overwhelm my fragile soul

Quieten down, be still my mind  
Disentangle spikes and thorns  
Let them go, withdraw awhile  
Find the joyful spacious place  
Beauty, louder than the noise  
Suffuses spirit, floods dry ground  
Silence, rich with mellow hues  
Regenerates my ragged core  
Soothing balm in winter's winds  
Breath of God, restore my soul



## HOSANNA

*By Dawn James*

Our heads are jam-packed with his words, today. From the moment we got up, he hasn't stopped. Walking, preaching, healing ... walking, story-telling, healing ... he just keeps going. And for us, it feels like being saturated with rich food and drink. And yet we're still hungry! And the amazing thing is, there's always more.

We've come to expect the unexpected with Jesus. But I was almost wrong-footed, a couple of hours ago, when he asked me and Luke to go into a village and borrow a donkey for him. I did it, of course. I've learnt not to ask too many questions—he explains in time, if needed.

And as we got to the village, we soon found that Jesus had done it again: he knew exactly what questions would be asked of us, and how we should answer. But I was still mystified. The donkey wasn't even fully grown—just a colt, really. What was Jesus up to?

The others seemed to understand that Jesus planned to ride it. They threw cloaks over the colt, as soon as we got back, while Luke and I looked at each other with raised eyebrows. I should have realised, of course. We'd been talking about the Kingdom of God earlier, and Jesus had told one of his colourful stories. This one was typical of Jesus: it spoke of the topsy-turvy kind of Kingdom he wants to usher in.

When I realised Jesus was going to ride towards Jerusalem on this humble animal, I wondered if he'd finally lost it. This wasn't what people would be expecting. He was worth so much more than this!

But as soon as he started along the road on the colt's back, people began to gather. Word must have gone round like wildfire, because crowds flocked to the route within minutes—locals and



visitors for the Passover, alike. They lined the road, throwing down garments and branches stripped from trees—anything they could find, to show their respect and cover the dusty ground beneath him.

The cheering swelled as the colt trotted placidly along, and at first I just watched and walked, dazed.

And then, I got it. Of course, the Master who preaches humility must make this significant journey to Jerusalem, living and breathing what he preaches. His life ethic is humility and grace, so to expect him to enact anything different would be to deny who he is. Didn't he say that if you want to be a leader, you must first be a servant to others?

A thrill of joy surged up into my chest, and I pushed my way through the jostling throng, to walk beside him.

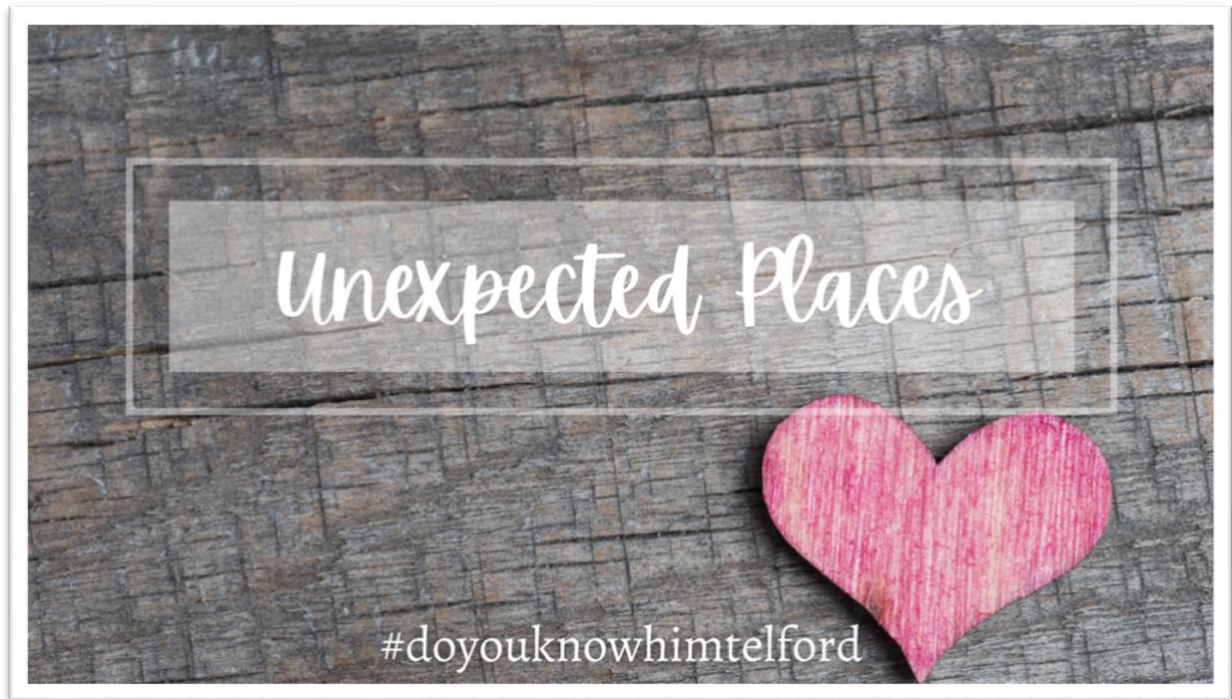
'Blessings on our King, who comes in the name of the Lord!' I shouted.

Others of our group joined in. 'Peace in heaven! Glory in highest heaven! Hosanna! Hosanna!'

I've dropped back a bit now. The crowds have surged round him as he gets nearer to Jerusalem, and it's hard to stay close. But I feel excited. Something's going to happen, here in the city. He warned us, this morning, that tough things are going to take place in Jerusalem ... gave us graphic details, in fact, which I'm desperately hoping were just figurative. I know it's not going to be easy, but I have a feeling his upside-down Kingdom is near.



**#DOYOUKNOWHIMTELFORD**



## UNEXPECTED PLACES

*By Liz Carter*

May you find love in unexpected places

Love that fills and fulfills  
and fires and inspires

Love that immerses the depths of you  
and sweeps through the agony in you

Love that holds you tight  
in your darkest night

Love that floods you in glorious light

Love that is wide and deep  
and high and long

Love that soothes your soul  
draws you into the song.

May you find love in unexplored spaces

Love that quenches and drenches

Love that pours forth with extravagant mores

Love that dives into the oceans of you  
and streams through the history of you

Love that clasps you near  
in your wildest fears  
Love that collects your starkest tears  
Love that is wide and deep  
and high and long  
Love that rests your heart  
draws you into the song.



**#DOYOUKNOWHIMTELFORD**



## UNTOUCHABLE

*A creative retelling of Luke 8:43-48*

*by Liz Carter*

There are too many people.

The crowd presses in on me and swallows me as I push through, desperate for a glimpse. A swirling, quivering mass, resistant to my presence. That's no change for me, though, used to being the isolated one, the one no one wants near them, the one who is unclean. Nothing has changed for me in all these years, and now, in the autumn of my days, I sense any remnants of hope breaking to pieces and floating to the mud-packed ground.

I see some of the stares even now as I try to make my way through to him, stares chased with pointing fingers and whispers. Cold shoulders and stiff backs turned away from me in disgust. *That woman shouldn't be here with us. Someone get rid of her. Unclean. Unclean. Unclean.*

The word whispers through my soul, joining a thousand whispers and hissed accusations of twelve long years as an outcast. I stop still for a moment, pulling my cloak further around me. Why would he want to see someone like me? If he is who they say he is, then he won't want anything to do with an untouchable like me. A woman, too. And it's not just that. If I'm seen near him—touching him—then that will mean he becomes ritually unclean. He will have to depart the crowd in order to go through ritual cleansing and change all his clothes.

I will contaminate him.

But something pulls me forward, an invisible force, as if something has grasped hold of my

hands and dragged me on. If I could just see him, I think to myself. If I could even just touch the very corner of his cloak, then maybe, surely, some of that power would stream into me? Maybe this pain would leave me if I got close to him? I don't have to talk to him, even, or make my presence known in any way. I can get near him without him being shamed by my presence.

My stomach drags, that familiar feeling cramping up my back and radiating through my body. I can feel the bleeding even now, flowing out of me. It's heavy today, like a great tide, like pieces of me are breaking off and falling out of me. My vision blurs as I struggle to see him, my feet stumbling. I'm going to faint. Again. Why did I come here? Why did I subject myself to this? At least in my outcast room I have a place to lie down when the waves of pain pound through my body.

The crowd is a lake in a storm, a tsunami breaking on me, carrying me forward relentlessly, inexorably. The air is an oven, thick with dust, stifling my lungs, bonding ragged clothes to sore skin in pools of perspiration that stream off me like dew off Mount Hermon. I don't think my packed cloths will be enough to staunch the discharge that floods from the secret parts of me.

I am faint.

A man is shouting, way in front of me where the crowd is most concentrated. I can hear him, but not see him. 'Please,' he is saying, his voice a shard of desperation. 'Please hurry.'

I turn away. The rabbi has more important things to do, more important people to see, and I cannot stand much longer.

That force again, the power of it smashing into me, physically dragging me back from the edges and into the centre of the surging tide of people, towards him. *His cloak. If I can just touch his cloak.* I whisper the words to myself over and over as I push through.

I can see the man I heard before. He's pulling the arm of the miracle worker. 'Please. She is dying. My little girl...'

*His cloak. If I can just touch his cloak.*

I sense the power of him as I move closer. I've heard the stories, of course, I've heard that he touches people and they are healed, that they are transformed. That's why I came out today. If there is any chance at all... if he could heal them, perhaps he could heal me too?

But the other voice pummels me, drowning my hope: of course he wouldn't be interested in me.

*His cloak.*

As I draw nearer, a tiny churning bubble in the depths of me bursts to life. Even the dust in the air seems to crumble in front of me and dissipate, streaks of sunlight spilling over me and lifting my head. I'm close. I can see him now, the miracle worker, the man they told me about, the one who heals. Patches of dirt on his face, hair matted, beard thick; he looks normal. He doesn't look like one of the temple priests or someone to be looked up to, no beauty or majesty to attract us to him or anything in his appearance to make us stop and stare. Just a man walking in a crowd, weary eyes and sandalled feet, hurried on by the man with the sick daughter.

Why, then, am I so captivated?

I elbow my way through, drawing hisses and whispers. *That woman.* I hardly hear them, they're echoes on the edges of my senses, meaningless noise drowned out by an avalanche rushing through my ears. *I'm near. Just a few steps...*

A face in the crowd opposite me stops me in my tracks. I recognise him... he's one of the



doctors who hurt me further than I hurt already, his treatment violent and violating. The blood flowed faster when he had finished with me, just as the money flowed out of my hands. All I owned, given to him and others like him, futile hope spewed into the gutters, drained away with the remnants of my dignity. For a moment I resist the pull on me: do I really want to expose myself once again? To be an object of mockery and scorn, just like for the last twelve years?

*His cloak. If I can just touch his cloak.*

I inch forward. ‘Excuse me, sorry,’ I whisper to a woman as I turn sideways to slink through a gap, wishing I could shrink entirely, that I could stop taking up any space at all, wishing I was unseen and unheard and nothing at all.

*His cloak.*

He is in front of me. A step away. His cloak hanging there, enticing me, gripping my heart. Just a step. Just a touch. No one will see, not in this crowd, not in this dense forest of noise.

Just a touch.

One touch.

I reach out my hand and bend over, reach my fingertip to the hem of his cloak. It’s ragged, I notice, the hem is loose and frayed, dust clinging to the seams. Just a cloak. Just a man.

My fingertip connects with rough-hewn fabric and I am thrown backwards.

A bolt through me, a shiver of fire, pounding through my veins, a rush of warmth. It’s like the force that beckoned me towards him has multiplied million-fold in my body and I stagger.

And something else. The pain in the core of me, the pain I have lived with for twelve years, is gone. Disappeared in a cascade of impossible heat. And the flow of my blood... I don’t feel it, only the familiar damp of the cloth nudging at my skin, skin that up to seconds ago was inflamed and tender, and now...

Nothing.

I begin to shake.

Then he turns around. ‘Who touched my clothes?’

I look down, hoping the ground will open up and swallow me whole, except there’s a part of me that wants to look into his eyes. To raise my hands before him. I keep my eyes pinned to the ground, though. He cannot see me. I will make him unclean.

One of his followers laughs. ‘You ask who touched you with this lot all jostling around you the whole time?’

The others join in, faces wide with mirth.

But he keeps looking around him, searching, seeing, and I know what I have to do.

I stumble over to him, nearly tripping over a small child, and fall on my knees, trembling, my whole body convulsed. But it’s not only fear smashing through my bones, it’s a melting stream of liquid warmth, like wine but a thousand times sweeter and fresher and cleaner and wilder. Like molten love.

He stands in front of me and his gaze is piercing, deep brown pools of intangible beauty, pinned on mine, like he can see into the broken places in me. I cannot look away.

‘Daughter,’ he says, and I gasp. Such an intimate term, a tender word, a balm over all the violations of years. The word hangs in the air as people around stare and point and whisper. *Unclean. Unclean. Unclean.*

But he does not mention the infringement of his ritual purity, this great shame I am bowed

under, waiting for his rebuke. He does not say he is contaminated by me.

‘Daughter.’

I am shaking with shivers of inexpressible joy.

‘Your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.’

Tears prickle at the backs of my eyes and spill over as he continues to whisper, words only I can hear. I’m aware of shouting in the background, urgency in frenzied tones, but those yelled words don’t register with me because all I can hear is these words of unexpected power that shatter my life apart and put it back together again, and all I can see are those eyes that see me, like no one has seen me in years.

He smiles at me and turns his attention to the man by his side, still tugging on his sleeve, his face twisted with terror and grief. I watch as he speaks to him in calming tones: ‘Don’t be afraid, just believe,’ he says, and his words pour over me like fresh water from a mountain spring. I stand and watch as he walks away, and for the first time in years my legs are steady, my body infused with strength.

*Go in peace.* His words echo through the caverns in my soul. I am not only healed physically, but I am set on a new course, the chains around my spirit and mind broken as much as around my body, and I know I will never be the same. No longer will I be the forgotten woman, the outcast, the ceremonially unclean wretch to be avoided, the penniless beggar without hope; now I am the seen, the heard and the loved, and in that deluge of love I am arrested in despair and turned to purpose, I am wrenched out of ashes and turned to beauty.

I am halted in agony and saved by love.



**#DOYOUKNOWHIMTELFORD**



## THE ARTIST

*By Liz Carter*

The One who wrote the heights  
and depths of space  
confined within its limits as  
you call us into grace

the poet who fell into  
his poem  
the painter who painted himself  
into his world

hurled out of glory into  
mortal dust

incarnate light  
pervading our light  
invading our waiting  
in mystical creating

you shatter our darkness  
our night of too long  
with your ancient song.

you burn through all our darkness  
your hope breaks through the night  
your love is perfect freedom  
your truth is holy light.



**#DOYOUKNOWHIMTELFORD**



## BREAD

*By Dawn James*

Candlelight flickers in his dark eyes as he reaches over for the bread. He lifts up a loaf, studies it and smiles at me, giving me a tiny nod of approval.

I let out my breath and relax into the cushions. My job is done, for tonight's meal. Peter and I had been entrusted with the preparations, and we hadn't wanted to let him down. The Festival of Unleavened Bread has felt particularly important this year, though I'm not sure why. Peter chose to prepare the lamb, so I was left with the task of preparing the bread. Not that it was a particularly difficult job, but I'd not made bread before, and I was relying on instructions passed on by Martha.

Jesus breaks the loaf with those gentle hands of his, and blesses it. I'm immediately transported back to that unforgettable day, a couple of years ago, when Jesus blessed bread—and fish—on the hillside. Except it wasn't for twelve friends then, it was for a village-load of people. Five thousand! And he had provided for every single mouth, with that incredible miracle. The trouble was, most people found it hard to see beyond the mind-blowing creation of something out of nothing. They came back for more the next day, but they wanted more bread. Or more miracles. When what Jesus really wanted was that they hunger for him. For the true bread from heaven.

Jesus hands me a slab of bread and I hold it in my hand, while he passes chunks round to the others. It's still slightly warm and a bit oily, but not a bad bake, though I say it myself. I sniff its smoky, doughy aroma, mingling as it does with the tantalising smell of roast lamb and bitter herbs. *His flesh*, he said. Such a strange analogy. He said it back then, on the hillside, along with the instruction to *drink his blood*, in order to have eternal life. It was shocking, then. Not surprising, really, that many potential disciples turned away, that day. He's always had a way of not being



afraid to say the controversial.

The others have been served now, and we all tear into the bread together. I try to ignore a twinge of pride that everyone seems to be enjoying it. This is about the Passover—not about the bread—and about Jesus. Everything seems to have a special significance this time, but I can't work out why. He even washed our feet before the meal—every single one of us—which has never been done before. A rabbi washing his disciples' feet? That's what I mean—he's unconventional and challenging.

The basket in the middle of the table is empty now. Just a few greasy crumbs, as the only remainder of the bread I kneaded into existence. But that's okay. As Jesus said, on the hillside, even the miraculous manna sent to the Israelites didn't last. The physical stuff of life runs out, gets eaten, disintegrates.

I rest my head for a second on Jesus' shoulder, as he leans against me. What this man provides is far, far more than that. Living bread. The bread of life. Peter got it about right when he said: *You have the words of eternal life*. What more could we ever want?



**#DOYOUKNOWHIMTELFORD**



## LIVING WATER

*A creative retelling based on John 4:1-30*

*By Liz Carter*

I hate this time of day.

It's bad enough that I am forced to go at a different time to all the others, and then worse because the noonday heat means I'm withering away by the time I get there, let alone when I am stumbling home with the heavy jar hitched on my shoulder. The rest of them go in the cool of the early morning or evening, of course, but I am shunned. I am not one of them. I am an outsider, that woman no one else wants to be—or to be seen with—spurned by everyone I know. I am under God's judgement, barren and useless. I see their eyes on me in the marketplace, dark with suspicion and hatred, and I know I can never do anything to gain their friendship and acceptance. I trudge through my wreck of a life and through blazing sunshine to the well, deserted and shimmering in the sultry air. My sandals flap heavily on the mud-packed ground, flinging up dust and rubbing at the sores on my feet, and I notice they are coming to pieces. Just like me.

I am a waste of space.

As I draw close to the compound around the well I see an unfamiliar man sat on the ground nearby, whittling away at a small twig. I keep my eyes down, my heart in my throat. Men have not been good to me, and this man will not expect to see me here now, not at this time. I pull my scarf further over my head and ready my jar to draw water.

He shocks me with his words, spoken so abruptly, his voice like the sweetness of honey.

‘Would you give me a drink?’

He is a Jew. I hear it in his voice and see it in his clothing and on his face. He is a Jew, and we are hated by Jews. We do not associate with them, and they do not associate with us. Even worse, though, I am a woman, as well as a Samaritan. Jewish men do not talk to Samaritans, and they definitely do not talk to Samaritan women. We are lower than the lowest thing to them, an object of disgust, something on the bottom of their sandal. Is this man mocking me? Is he planning harm to me?

His eyes are kind, and I hardly dare look into them.

‘You are a Jew. And I am a Samaritan woman. How come you ask me for a drink?’

The dust-choked air clogs my throat and I swallow, waiting for the rebuff, for the mockery and the shame that will wash over me in waves any moment.

But his eyes are kind.

Silence hangs between us for moments, like beams of sunlight dancing in the air, and then he smiles.

I look to the ground, confused. Ashamed.

Waste-of-space.

‘If you knew the gift of God,’ he says, ‘how generous God is, and who I am, asking you for a drink, you would ask me for one, instead.’

*What?*

He smiles wider and his smile is the sun.

‘You would ask me for a drink, and I would give you living water, fresh and abundant.’

Living water? What is he speaking of? Is he a madman, sat here on the ground in the midday sun, talking to a woman his countrymen would highly despise?

But something in me unlocks at his words.

‘But sir,’ I say. ‘You don’t have a bucket, even, to draw this water, and this well is deep. How are you planning to get this “living water”?’ I spread out my hands in a question, and he says nothing.

His eyes are a chasm I want to fall into.

‘Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob—who built this well? He and his sons and their animals drank from this well, and we have been ever since,’ I say.

He smiles again, just a tiny upturn as if what I say is amusing. Perhaps he is making a mockery of me, after all.

‘Everyone who drinks this water will keep getting thirsty, won’t they?’ he says.

I nod slowly.

‘They will get thirsty again and again. But anyone who drinks the water I’m offering—this living water—will never thirst. Never again.’

What does he mean?

‘The water I give will spring up inside, in cascading fountains of everlasting life.’

I gaze into the well, as if to see this living water, as if I can take hold of it here and now.

‘I want to never get thirsty again. I don’t want to come down here to the well anymore.’

It would change me, I think, to not have to make this trek every single day, the outcast and the horror. I could hide away in my home.

But that cannot be what this man means. He spins clever words that stir my soul, but they will

make no difference to me.

‘Go,’ he says to me. ‘Call your husband, and come back.’

I sigh inside.

‘I don’t have a husband.’

The man stares at the piece of wood in his hands, turning it over and over and over. ‘I know you have no husband.’

I stare and a stone sinks to the pit of my belly.

But his voice does not judge. ‘You’ve had five husbands.’

I drop my jar to the ground.

‘And the man you are with now—he is not your husband. You spoke the truth to me.’

I am aggrieved. ‘Oh, you’re one of those prophets! Well then, tell me this. You Jews, you think that the only place to worship God is in Jerusalem, right? Even though our ancestors worshipped right here, at this mountain.’

The warmth in his eyes does not fade at the anger in mine. ‘Dear one. Soon, you Samaritans will not worship either here or in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not yet know, but we worship God and salvation comes through us, the Jews.’

Is that supposed to help?

‘Yet a time is coming—in fact, has already come—when true worshippers will worship in Spirit and in truth. It’s those kind of worshippers the Father is longing for. It is how you worship that counts. It’s how you live in truth, laying yourself out, every part of you. Those who worship the Father must do it out of their deepest souls.’

So this man is saying that it’s not the where, or the who, that matters, but what is inside us?

Something in my inmost being thrills to his words.

‘I guess that when the Messiah comes, he will explain all of this to us,’ I say.

And my heart is already burning when he replies, ‘I, the one speaking to you now—am he.’

A weighty silence falls between us, and it’s almost as if I can taste the edges of the living water he was talking about.

I am thirsty. I am so thirsty.

I am so fixed on him I don’t hear the approach of a group of people until they’re almost on us. They are jovial, filling up the space with their chatter and laughter, cutting through the silent ocean I wanted to sink into. They’re surprised, I can see that, their faces a question, some of them a frown, but none of them say anything. None of them challenge him for talking to me, a woman, a Samaritan, an untouchable. And suddenly I am overwhelmed by a sense of keen sharpness, like everything coming into focus, like all I have been and all I will be is contained here in this one moment, a time out of time, an unlikely man at a well that has become like a prison to me over years. Suddenly I am taken over by him, like the water he told me about is rushing through my veins and pelting through my bones, like he has dragged me from despair and turned me towards hope.

I never had dignity, before. My husbands wrote me off, one by one, not good enough, not strong enough, not beautiful enough, not fertile enough, not enough. They abandoned me in my shame, left me alone one after the other, destitute in a world where women need a man to survive. The man I’m with now, he puts up with me but doesn’t even offer to marry me, I’m too much of a liability, a burden around his neck, too much baggage, too much dishonour.

But this man, and his friends, they make me feel different. Like I matter.

It's like the water is cascading through me, like golden drops on my upturned face, sluicing me in love, drenching me in holiness. I have to go and tell them, the people who so hate me, I have to tell them about the man who told me everything I ever did. I run like the wind and it's like I'm soaring, as if the searing heat is bounced away from me by the coolness of the water pulsing through me and speeding my feet. It's not until I reach the edges of the village that I realise I left my water jar behind. I laugh at that, at the perfection of it, at the truth that I will never thirst again, not really, not in the places that matter, the places so dried up for too long, the desert lands in me penned in by life.

I see a gaggle of them as I enter the village, picking fruit in the marketplace and stopping and staring at me. I must be a vision to them, dishevelled and panting, hair loosened from its bindings and escaping from my head-covering. Their faces are wells of disapproval, frowning out at me, but I have nothing but joy bubbling up and spilling over, nothing but the need to share this transformative power that screams through my soul.

'Come and meet him,' I say, too breathless, too wild. 'Come and see this man. He told me all I ever did.'

And the living water is a soothing deluge in my heart.



**#DOYOUKNOWHIMTELFORD**



## KEEP WATCH

*By Dawn James*

I'm feeling bone-weary. But it's not the usual sort of weariness. I'm used to physical tiredness—we've experienced long days over the past three years, crammed full from dawn to dusk with people and busyness. That kind of exhaustion is satisfying: when I know I've worked hard, seen needs met, expanded my understanding of what Jesus is trying to teach us ... when I've truly earned a good night's rest.

No, this weariness is more draining, more insidious. There's something uneasy about tonight, as we sit in the olive grove, a few feet away from Jesus. It's warm, with a soft breeze, and I can smell the citrusy fragrances that waft over on the night air. The sky is black, pin-pricked with a million stars, as it has been so many times before. But a deep sadness seeps into my soul.

Supper tonight was a poignant affair. Jesus spoke in such serious, heartfelt tones that we all sensed something was changing. Something had shifted in his manner, so we're all on high alert now. And yet, he was as relaxed and unhurried as he always is. Making time for each of us, for conversation, for answering questions, for prayer.

He suggested a walk afterwards, and I feel privileged that he's asked Peter, John and me to go further into the grove with him. It's been hard, though. I don't often see Jesus upset, and he's been overwhelmed with sorrow—physically crumpling with the weight of whatever he's carrying. I don't understand it, though I wish I did. I wish I could help to lift some of the load from his shoulders.

He's a stone's throw away now. I can just make out his silhouette in the moonlight, and catch the odd groan when the breeze lifts his voice. I wish I were more like him. Being one of his disciples



has revolutionised my life. His teaching, his character, his whole lifestyle sheds light on so many questions, for me. It's all starting to make sense, for the first time in my life. Except for this ... this talk of dying and rising, of death and resurrection. I don't get that. That makes no sense at all. We need him. The world needs him. He can't really mean that his life is over yet.

He's asked us to keep watch. So that's what we're doing. It's the least we can do for him. But I'm also processing—thinking through the huge arc of his ministry. And watching, as he wrestles with something too heavy to fully explain to us, his closest friends. It's just him, and his Father, out there in the darkness.

I'm leaning against a tree now, feeling its rough bark dig into my shoulder blades. Keeping watch. My eyelids are so heavy, though, so very drowsy ...



**#DOYOUKNOWHIMTELFORD**



## WRAPPED IN LIGHT

*A creative retelling of John 20:1-18*

*By Liz Carter*

I didn't sleep at all. My tears fell thick and fast, my gut wrenched in torment. I can't stop replaying it in my mind; the sight of him, hanging there. The *it is finished*. The flash of hope that soared through my mind for seconds as the sunlight pierced the gloom. Soon extinguished.

Gone.

Yesterday I was numb. I could not eat, I could not speak. It was unreal and yet all too real at the same time. I walked through the day like a ghost and tossed through the night like a boat in a storm. And now I must go there. I must go to his resting place to anoint his body with the spices we prepared. The scent of myrrh weaves through the air even now, in waves of pungent wretchedness. Surely there are no tears left in me? Surely I have run dry?

I drag my weary body out of bed and collect up my things. I'm meeting the others there. Dawn is streaking the sky with too much vibrancy as I arrive at our meeting place; the skies are celebrating the day in a way they should not be. It should be dark and stormy, clouds should be laden with misery, but the great expanse is painted in vivid colours. I pull my cloak tighter around me and keep my hood over my face.

The others are subdued. None of us want to be here, but it is our duty. We must do this. We must honour this man we so loved, this man who transformed us. We gather without speaking, our eyes disclosing the great sadness that sits heavy on us. We trudge through to the place of the tomb

together, resolute, gathering the strength to ask the Roman guards to help us roll the stone away.

Waves of mist hang over the garden, shrouding the tomb, mingling with the waves of sorrow tumbling from our hearts. But as we walk closer a weak light penetrates the fog. I shake my head. No light should break through here, not now, in this place. I castigate the faithless sky, the fickle light, and pray for darkness.

The darkness in my soul is almost enough.

The light is getting brighter. It reminds me a little of how the sun broke through the unearthly blackness when he died, rays piercing the gloom and caressing my face. But it's too much now. Then, there was some hope in it. It was a sign. He was going to live.

But he didn't.

I shield my eyes against the increasing luminosity. It's too much. It's dazzling me now, forcing its way into my reluctant consciousness. I trudge forward.

Stop short.

Wait.

Where are the guards?

'The stone!' Salome says, flinging her hand over her mouth. It's not there. Well, it is, but it's in the wrong place. It's rolled away, leaving a great gaping entrance. The light seems to emanate from inside the tomb, and I cannot look. Someone must have stolen his body, taken it away, not even left us the consolation of this time with him. Who would do that? Who would be so cruel?

I weep, again.

The others move backwards, their eyes wide with shock.

Some unseen force drags me forward. I don't want to go in there, not in that place, not when I cannot even see him anymore. Not in that empty place of death. But I can't stop myself.

There's something in here. No. Wait. Some *one*. No, two people—but they're not people, are they? They're something else. Ghosts? They're made of light, but their faces are real enough, shining with something I can't even begin to describe. A radiation of something which stirs a great longing in the wastes of my soul, a ragged desperate aching.

'Why are you crying?' one of them says, and my tears fall harder.

'They've taken him,' I say, stumbling over the words. 'I don't know where he is.'

A rumble echoes through my mind. Something shaken... the echo of ground shuddering somewhere. I turn around and glimpse someone else there, then look quickly away. A man—the gardener, probably. I hide my face. Hide my tears. Perhaps he took the body somewhere?

I do not want him to see me and I do not want to talk to him.

'Mary,' he says, and the word is like honey pouring over me. My name. *In his voice*.

But it can't be?

I turn around slowly, hardly daring to look.

My world is suddenly reanimated. My vision is invaded, my mind shattered apart and then mended again, all the pieces scattered at my feet are re-assembled, all the jagged shards of me are fit together into a whole that sings out for joy. The mist has dispersed altogether, and I look to the sky, ringing out with peals of praise and honour and triumph, the colours of day chasing one another in playful streams like ribbons hurtling through the heavens, twirling and whirling in their glorious hues as they shout out with rapture. And the ground is calling out beneath my feet, sending shivers up my legs and my body, the hosannas of the land and the grasses and the trees and the flowers are

a great symphony of celebration that echoes through all of history and all of me. The birds are chirping out their praise and the heavens resound with wild exultation.

And he is still here.

'Rabboni,' I say, my voice a rasp, broken with wonder.

I should go and tell the others, he tells me. There's an urgency in his words and an urgency in my heart. I have to tell them he is not dead, that he is risen, that he has been raised to glorious life and he is standing before me here, real and beautiful and brilliant. But something in me wants to linger here, here in my moment with him. Amazed that he would count me, just a woman, worthy of this great honour. I want to stay in this place where the skies shout out and the trees whisper hope and glory fills the air. I want to sit at his feet and gaze at him and be wrapped up in him. I want to stay here for all my days, like the sparrow who found herself a nest near his altar.

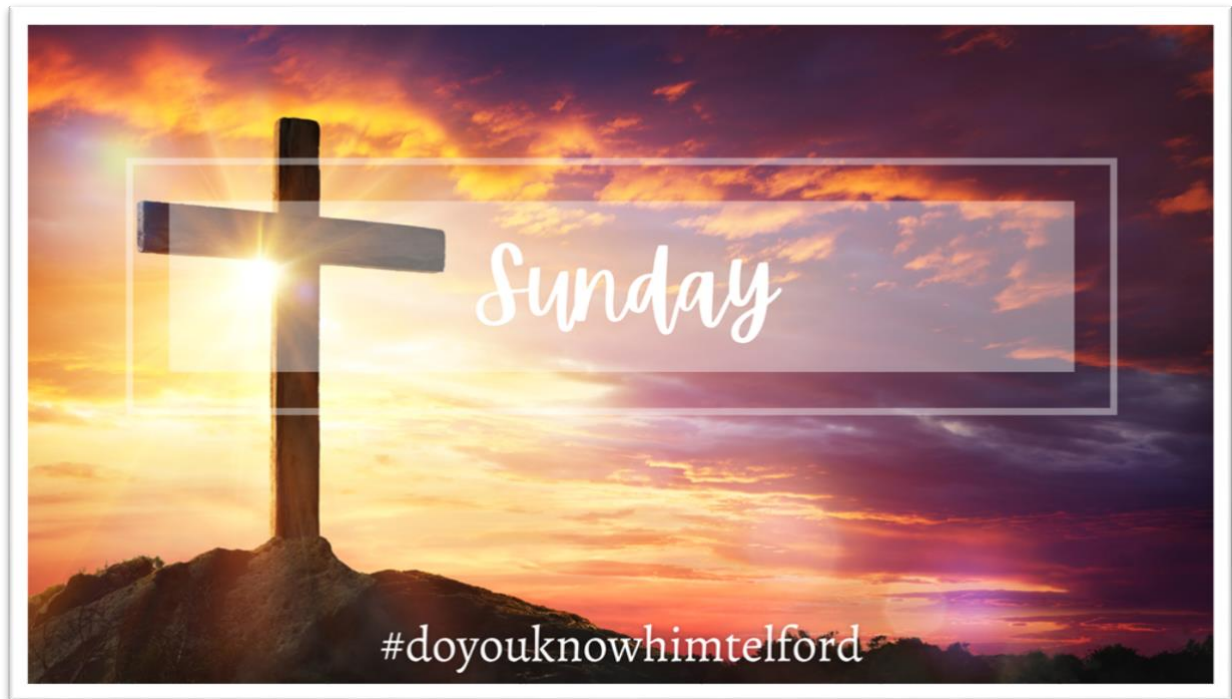
But as I turn to go a rush of desperation dashes through my heart and speeds my feet. Run. Run to tell them he is alive. *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'*

And I know that this love that has transformed me has broken into history and shattered the power of sin and death. I know that it will stream through the years and gather up all the pain and all the sorrow and all the mourning and turn ashes into beauty and sorrow into inexpressible joy. I know that the ground that has been shaken today will reverberate through all of the past and all of the present and all of the future and the alleluias will ring out loud through all our stories. I know that death has been conquered and the grave has no claim on me.

My tears still spill from the depths of me, the sorrow of the last days fusing with the rupture of joy that bursts from me now, sobbing loud through abandoned laughter as I sprint through the sun-dazed garden to find my friends.



**#DOYOUKNOWHIMTELFORD**



## SUNDAY

*By Liz Carter*

A love-song torn to bits and a morning draped in mist  
A promise in our midst, yet shattered with a twist  
You're deathly cold in stone, forsaken and alone  
Faith ripped to the bone and battered hope-wings flown.

Wrenched into a requiem of heaven's darkest hour  
I spill out all my edges and lie pinned beneath their power  
Curse the morning sky with its disloyal vow of light,  
Curse the shades of day when my heart is tombed in night.

Thunder shakes the ground and my spirit craves the sound  
My wounded soul spellbound as glory hymns resound  
Clouds arrest the night and rend apart to brilliant light  
And angels all alight paint joy through untamed heights.

A roar erupts the heavens as you're raised to glorious life  
A hope-song shouts the glory of your dazzling grand design  
An Alleluia story that blazes deep and wide  
Shattered parts inside of me are flung to open wilds.

My times of desolation are dragged from anguished mire  
I shout my acclamation as my burned-out wastes are fired  
I bow in adoration as your name is lauded higher  
I cry my exaltation to the one my heart desires.

He is risen,  
He is risen indeed,  
Alleluia!

*Some of the stories and poems in this collection are taken from **Treasure in Dark Places: Stories and Poems of Hope in the Hurting** by Liz Carter – available from all online bookstores.*



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