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**SECRETS FROM THE  
VIA DOLOROSA**

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**ANDY COOK**

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM HAUN**

*This book is dedicated to my pastor, Dr. Neal Wall.  
For more than 60 years, he has never tired  
of telling others about the cross of Jesus.*

Secrets from the Via Dolorosa

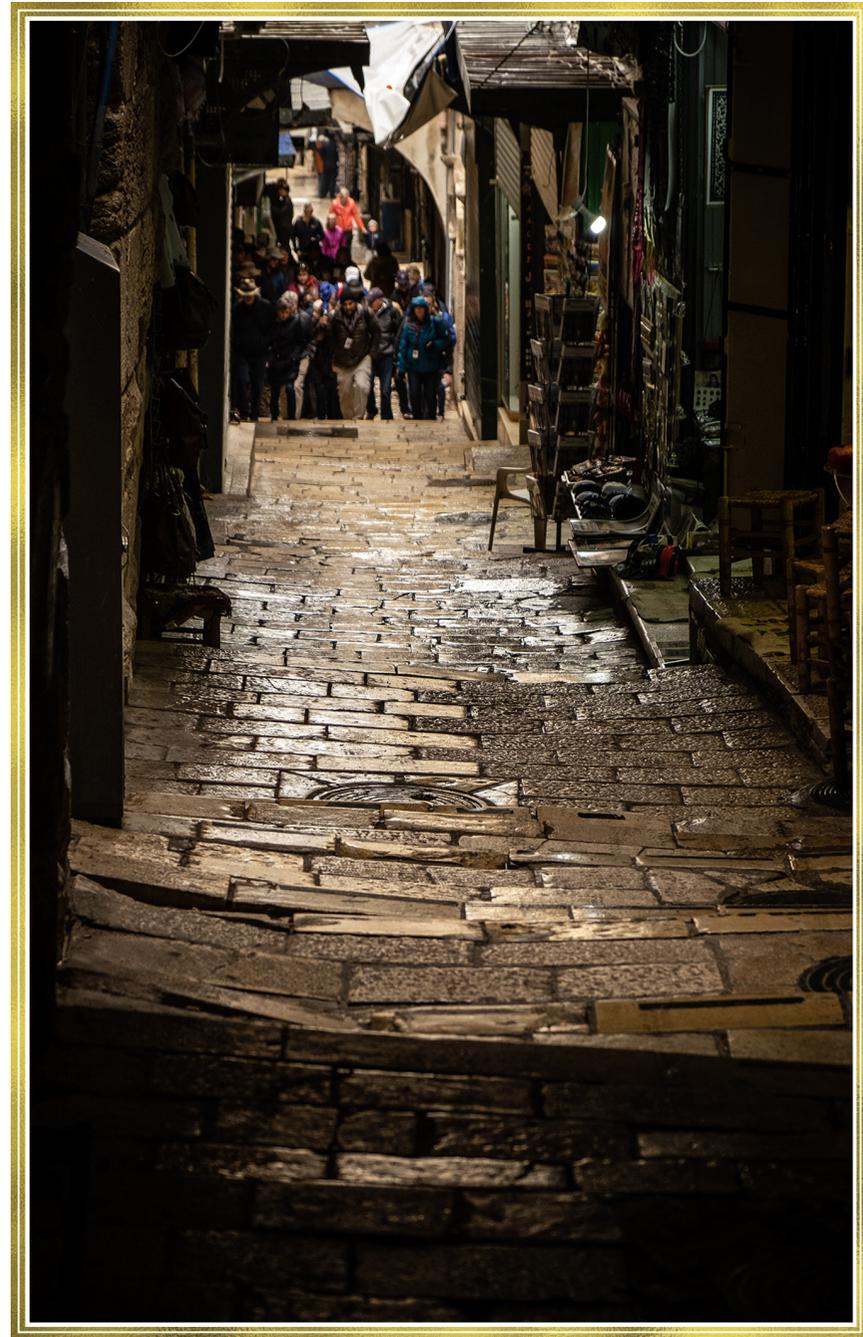
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## SEARCHING FOR THE VIA DOLOROSA

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If you grew up singing about an “old rugged cross” on a “hill far away,” walking down Jerusalem’s most famous street is likely to disappoint.

For starters, today’s Via Dolorosa is *not* the street Jesus walked as he struggled toward Calvary.

If anyone is listening, tour guides are quick to explain the relative youth of the 500-year-old pavement stones and the just-as-young city walls that surround Jerusalem’s “Old City.”

Earthquakes, fire and the sheer rage of war have laid Jerusalem low many times since Jesus was alive. Newcomers have rebuilt the city after each disaster, usually building new cities on top of the old ruins. Along with the streets and buildings, the walls of Jerusalem’s Old City have also been moved, expanded, torn down or rebuilt several times.

Therefore, the Jerusalem Jesus knew 2,000 years ago is buried several feet underneath modern-day streets and is almost invisible to modern-day visitors. It’s simply not possible to get a clear view of where Jesus died, where he was buried or where he raised to life after his execution.

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**Photo previous page:** The well-worn stones of the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem’s Old City.

Of course, that doesn't stop Christian pilgrims from flocking to the Via Dolorosa. Visit Jerusalem and you'll find hundreds of them somberly moving along the road any day of the week. On Christian holy days, the hundreds will morph into thousands, crowds so thick that it's impossible to do anything except shuffle along with the faithful.

Many groups stop as they walk along the Via Dolorosa, pausing at the fourteen "Stations of the Cross" to remember different parts of the story. Ironically, some of those stories may have never happened. Stations Three, Seven and Nine, for instance, remember three different times Jesus fell. The Bible never mentions Jesus falling. Likewise, Station Four remembers Jesus meeting his mother Mary on his way to the cross, another non-biblical tradition.

Nevertheless, the basic story is told time and time again all along the Via Dolorosa. After Jesus had been nearly beaten and whipped to death, he took a heavy crossbeam to Jerusalem's designated place of execution.

A man named Simon had to help him carry the cross, a task that surely horrified the visitor from Cyrene. Once at Golgotha, Jesus was nailed to the crossbeam, lifted up in the air until the crossbeam fell into place on a stake left permanently in the ground. His feet were nailed into place on the stake, leaving him writhing in agony until he finally died six hours later.

Despite its historical shortcomings, if you know the story well and it's your first time on this "Way of Suffering," a walk down the Via Dolorosa can be a deeply moving experience. The streets that make up the traditional route to the cross are crowded, narrow and sometimes dark. It can be noisy beyond description. Twisting and turning inside the Old City, it's easy to lose all sense of direction.

Walking such a path makes it quite possible to emotionally connect with the day the world lost its mind and killed the man who'd come to save it. Little wonder the Via Dolorosa holds such an attraction.

The journey isn't a long one. The Via Dolorosa proper covers less than half a mile from start to finish. In reality, the path walked by so many Christians today is actually a collection of roads, only one of which is actually called the "Via Dolorosa."

Besides that, the entire path is more of an idea than a real road. Jesus never walked a street named the "Via Dolorosa." The memorial walk developed centuries after Jesus lived as Christian pilgrims began visiting Jerusalem. Somewhere along the way, the path became known as the "Way of Suffering." In Latin, that's "Via Dolorosa."

Most surprising of all, if you've come looking for Golgotha at the end of the Via Dolorosa, you'll not find it. Instead, you'll find yourself in one of the world's oldest churches, a confusing collection of structures known collectively as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Inside the church you'll find hundreds of people, thousands of candles and more questions than answers.

The air is thick with the smell of incense and candle wax. Icons and ancient art grace every wall.

A cacophony of noise rises from the overwhelming swell of people inside the church, but there is no music. There is only the press of the crowd, wherever one turns.

A narrow, precarious stairway leads to an altar said to cover the very place of the crucifixion. Kneel low enough and you can touch the place where the cross is said to have once stood on top of the

rocky hill called Golgotha. Historically, it should be noted that the Romans would have been far more likely to have crucified Jesus in front of the hill rather than on top of it, but inside the church, you'll need to climb the stairs to see the traditional footing of the cross.

A vast rotunda is a few steps away. At the center of the ancient room is an ornate, enormous, box-like structure. This, one is told, represents the tomb where Jesus was laid. It is the "sepulchre" of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

There is room only for a handful of people to go inside the sepulchre at any one time. This leads to one of Jerusalem's longest lines as hundreds of the faithful wait their turn to go inside for a quick prayer.

Once inside, many take the time to light one or more candles. Some prostrate themselves before the entrance of the sepulchre. Nearly all cross themselves. Others leave the box walking backwards, never turning their backs on what they consider to be the tomb of Jesus, though it looks nothing like the tombs of ancient Jerusalem or any grave of modern culture.

The reason the sepulchre looks nothing like an actual tomb is that it is *not* the tomb where the body of Jesus was once placed. Instead, it's a heavily decorated structure that represents the tomb that once stood on that ground.

According to tradition, a Roman emperor ordered the actual tomb removed, trying in vain to stop Christianity in its tracks. The church and its representative sepulchre were built as a way to remember and honor the place where Jesus had been raised from the dead.

In time, the replacement sepulchre became as sacred as the original tomb.

Little wonder so many pilgrims consider a visit to the church the highlight of their time in Israel. Little wonder why so many others leave the church wondering what happened to Calvary.

In short, the Via Dolorosa will lead you to one of the noisiest, most crowded and most confusing places in all of Jerusalem. And at Ground Zero of Christianity, only one thing is clear.

Along every step of the Via Dolorosa, and inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, there is nothing remotely resembling the site of the actual crucifixion or the tomb of Jesus.

If it weren't for the secrets, you might say the Via Dolorosa constitutes one of the most disappointing walks in the world.

But all is not lost.

Indeed, there are lessons hidden in plain sight all around Jerusalem and the land where Jesus lived. No one has tried to hide – nor could they hide – these "secrets" the land has waiting for us.

Ready for the first insight?

The Via Dolorosa isn't limited to a half-mile stretch of well-worn pavement stones inside Jerusalem's Old City.

The actual route Jesus took to the cross measures more than 150 miles of ancient roads.

And the walk Jesus took to the cross may have started in the snow.