

The cross is empty, the Son of God now dead. ***“Into your hands, I commit my spirit,”*** He has cried, and after His last words, His last breath, His final heartbeat — after the earth has stopped its shaking and the watchers have all turned away — the ones who love Him are left behind to wait and wonder why. We huddle together in grief and fear, our sorrow too raw, the memory of our dying master far too fresh, to make any sense of this yet. All we know for certain is that He is gone.

It is a long ordeal, this death watch. Even for us who now observe it more than 2,000 years later, there is a gut-wrenching component to the vigil. Ours is almost a make-believe, pretend vigil. Unlike those who stood at the foot of the cross — most notably John and Mary — we have the advantage of knowing the full outcome. We are not left bereft — saddened, yes (and we need to focus on that in a moment), but not bereft. But the disciples, and even the crowds — both the weepers and the taunters — had little idea that anything lay beyond the darkened skies of that Friday.

We might well argue that they should have known. ***“I will not leave you as orphans,”*** he said. But “orphaned” is exactly how they felt. Isn’t it amazing that Jesus should be able to anticipate their feelings so precisely? He could have said something like, ***“I will not leave you feeling blue.”*** or ***“I know that this is going to be sad.”*** He knew that losing Him was going to be like losing a parent — it would like being left totally alone in the universe, with no one to care for or care about you.

It is an almost matter-of-fact statement; yet it does not so much predict that they would feel like orphans as it assumes it. Feeling orphaned was a given; Jesus knew that; but it was feeling grounded in a lie — the lie being that Jesus would not care about what happened to them after He was gone.

For the Twelve, and maybe for the remainder of the others who followed with Jesus from Galilee, His death was viewed with same kind of

emotional upheaval that befalls those left behind after a suicide. Jesus had been talking about His impending conflict with the Jewish authorities for some time now. The disciples had tried to dissuade Him from such talk — mostly because they didn't want to hear it; but He kept telling them that He was going to Jerusalem, and that the elders, chief priests and scribes would condemn Him, and put Him to death . . . it almost began to sound like a death-wish to them.

So when, at what would become the Last Supper, He started up again on somebody betraying Him, and others denying Him, and all of them deserting Him — well that was just it: it was starting all up again. It was crazy talk . . . it had the flavor of suicide language . . . and when it happened, it might just have been the same as if He was the one who went out and hanged Himself.

So now they are left behind with the aftermath. How do you pick up the pieces? How do you deal with the anger at the one who had so inconveniently — all right, let's speak the true emotion — who so selfishly had taken Himself from the scene?

That's how they felt — like orphans . . . and like orphans, they didn't blame the Roman authorities, or the Sanhedrin, or the Pharisees, elders and scribes — they blamed the one who was supposed to still be there and wasn't!

***"Now is your time of grief . . .,"*** Jesus told them. No kidding.

We feel the reflected sorrow; they knew the emptiness, the loneliness, the hollowness of loss. Most of you have been there — a parent . . . a child . . . a sibling . . . a spouse . . . taken before it was time — and the horrid, horrid hole that leaves in your heart. Oh, we know grief well enough; so we can relate to the disciples in their loss, even if we do not feel it as acutely. We have known the disappointment of dreams unrealized, hopes dashed to the ground, futures thrown into disarray.

Orphans . . . that's what it feels like . . . that's what we are

***"I will come to you,"*** He promised. Yeah, well talk's cheap . . . and standing under that cross, how could anyone have imagines how Jesus could possible *"come to them."* Oh, sure, they would have memories . . . we all have memories that we carry of loved ones . . . we want never to lose those memories . . . As Paul Simon wrote

*"Time it was, and what a time it was, it was  
A time of innocence, a time of confidences  
Long ago, it must be, I have a photograph  
Preserve your memories, they're all that's left you."*

So yes, Jesus would come to them in memories. But memories can also haunt: One had betrayed Him . . . another had denied Him . . .they had all deserted Him . . .and they had misunderstood, and gotten in the way, and doubted again, and again, and again, and argued over petty nonsense . . .and . . . . . Well, there's no sense in rehashing the old stuff.

Orphans find it hard to live with all the memories. Those words continued to echo in their ears and in their hearts: ***"I will come to you . . . I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."*** He said that, remember? No, often we do not remember — because it's hard to remember promises when the pain is stabbing you at the heart. It's hard to think about the future, when the present is such a glaring loss and the past seems like nothing but one huge mistake.

But that's because this is Friday. Jesus is dead, and our faith is in shambles. Jesus is dead — that's where our focus goes. He, being dead, cannot be much hope for us now. Except . . . He words keep coming ***"I will come to you . . . I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."***

Those words ring hollow and distant as if from some other world, some other life. But wait. These are the words of Jesus. This is a promise made by God Himself. ***"I will come to you,"*** He said, and even through our doubt and sorrow, there is perfect certainty in his words.

Cling to them. Believe in them. We may be sad now . . . but ***"yet again,***

*our hearts will be joyful."* This we know because He promised. So let us wait, my friends. Let us wait and pray.

Amen.