

“Watching Death Die”

“All of Jesus’ close friends and the women who had come with him from Galilee stood at a distance and watched.”

This is where we find ourselves today — at a distance . . . watching. The easy thing in our case is to ask of those reported in Luke’s Gospel why they were standing at a distance, watching. Had not every one of the disciples pledged that, no matter what, they would stand with Jesus? Had they not committed themselves to Jesus’ fate, no matter how dreadful? So why were they at a distance now . . . watching? It is easy for us to “armchair quarterback” the role of the twelve.

But here we are, at an even further distance . . . still watching. Apparently a few of the women drew closer. John tells us that ***“standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.”*** At least one disciple, ***“the disciple whom [Jesus] loved”*** made his way closer. And because they were drawn into the event, they became truly involved. Jesus’ mother and this disciple (usually identified as John) were yoked as family; Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene would be mentioned specifically as eyewitnesses to the resurrection.

Is that why the rest remained at a distance, watching? Were they afraid of being drawn in . . . somehow made part of the scene? Is that why we stand at a greater distance and watch. Are we also afraid that somehow we will be included in Jesus’ suffering?

That is a legitimate fear. Jesus had been warning the Twelve for weeks that this trip to Jerusalem was to be a march toward death. Three times He predicted that the Jewish leaders would condemn Him and put Him to death. All three times the disciples tried either to distract Jesus from such negative talk, or flat-out blocked their ears from listening. Yet none of them could claim they didn’t know what was coming.

Then that last night, when all of Jesus’ speech was about betrayal and

denial and not eating the Passover again and giving up His life . . . then they began to take it seriously, but seriously miscalculated their own strength of response. They fell asleep . . . they panicked . . . they ran away . . . one denied even knowing Him.

We're inclined to think: "*What putzes.*" Why do you think the Bible includes this failure on the part of the disciples? Matthew and John were part of the ensemble. Mark probably wrote what he often heard Peter preach and teach. They could have easily manipulated the story in such a way that they looked like heroes, great men of faith and character. Luke styled himself an historian . . . but the sources he used could also have distorted the accounts they gave to make themselves look awfully good.

They did none of that . . . why not? Aside from a basic commitment to sheer honesty, I think part of the reason why they told it just like it happened was to serve us. They had been so glib about their faith. Nothing was going to get to them . . . Nothing would keep them from doing the right thing . . . They would be vigilant . . . bold . . . on task . . . righteous. Peter: "***Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!***" And so said all the disciples.

But they didn't keep that pledge . . . because such pledges are very hard to honor. I think the Gospel writers wanted us to comprehend that faith is not bold statements; faith is an ongoing relationship . . . and if we think it is left to us to manage and maintain, we likewise will wind up at a distance . . . watching.

But there is good news in this, as well. As we well know, the Gospel does not end with the dismal message: "***All of Jesus' close friends and the women who had come with him from Galilee stood at a distance and watched.***" Even this part of the story does not end there. Luke goes on to tell us about the arrangements made by Joseph of Arimathea, and then tells us: "***The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and watched how Jesus' body was placed in the tomb.***" That is a very purposeful set-up for the resurrection narratives. I believe the literary device is known as foreshadowing. And it gives us some insight

into what this standing at a distance watching may mean.

What are they watching? What did they see?

First, they watched the system twist amok. Ever a danger — leaders subvert the cause of justice to arrive at a predetermined outcome. We don't begin to pretend that this was the only moment in history that religious and political leaders bent the truth to suit their purposes. The Jewish elders and chief priests outright lied to get what they wanted. I feel it's like the prefect, Renault, in the movie "Casablanca" who announces his pretext for closing up Rick's café, a place where he has won frequently at roulette: *"I'm shocked, SHOCKED, to find that gambling is going on in here!"*

We are not shocked that somebody lied to get their way . . . it happens all the time (and in our more honest moments, we will admit to it ourselves). Whenever people think that they must "protect" God, they wind up doing things that they should not. These religious leaders were turned to evil by the very religious fervor they invoked as good. *"All of Jesus' close friends and the women who had come with him from Galilee stood at a distance and watched."* as the covenant relationship with God was perverted into something grotesque and ugly.

They also watched as leadership failed. When I read the Passion narrative I am always struck by Pilate's response when the Jewish leaders complain about the inscription Pilate had posted over the crucified Christ. They complained, *"Do not write, 'King of the Jews,' but that this man said, 'I am the king of the Jews,'"* to which Pilate responds: *"What I have written stays written."* And I think, *"How big of him to get a backbone — finally."* All through the trial of Jesus, we keep hearing how Pilate was afraid . . . more afraid . . . and yet even more afraid. With good cause, we might add.

If you haven't been caught up on this, get caught up on it — read his book First Easter or watch his video, "Jesus: Legend or Lord?" where Dr. Paul Maier provides valuable information to explain why Pilate acted as

he did on Good Friday. Explanations do not excuse, however. The trial of Jesus was a joke of jurisprudence and of governance. But again, we are not shocked to see government fail in its obligations. We may be saddened, even angered, but surprised? No!

“All of Jesus’ close friends and the women who had come with him from Galilee stood at a distance and watched.” as justice was perverted and authority abrogated. They watched also as the crowds twisted toward hatred and cruelty.

We are a little more surprised by this turn of events. But, let’s first be clear on who is reacting how. The crowd that hailed Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem is not composed of the same people as those who on Good Friday screamed ***“Crucify him!”*** The Palm Sunday crowd was composed of pilgrims who had come from all over the world — these folks despised the Temple in-crowd for their usury, deceit, and burdensome rules. They cheered for Jesus in their hope that He would oust the Romans — they were just as happy to watch Him overturn the money-changers in the Temple, maybe even more happy! The Good Friday screamers were the Temple insiders, worked into a frenzy by their bosses to demonstrate for the comeuppance of this Galilean Rabbi who deigned to threaten their cozy lifestyle. On the march to the cross, Jesus encounters women who are weeping — for Him! These are evidence of the pilgrims who learn too late that the leaders have maneuvered to have Him condemned.

But as He is lifted high on the cross, the leaders first and then others begin to mock and ridicule Him. And we wonder (at least, I wonder): *“How do you turn on a man who fed you, healed you, forgave you, nurtured you?”* How many times did Jesus extend His arms to touch a life and transform it for the good? What we see at work here is human sinfulness — and let’s not kid ourselves that we would not be capable of this — that takes the good things of God and just squeezes the goodness out of them.

“All of Jesus’ close friends and the women who had come with him

from Galilee stood at a distance and watched.” as good people showed that even good people are so filled with sin, that it comes pouring out. But the last thing they watched is something they could not have been aware they were seeing: They watch death die.

Whether you read the Passion Narratives individually, or as a single harmonized account, you really come to recognize something amazing: Throughout the whole ordeal, Jesus is in charge. You tend to miss it at first . . . He is swept up in the arrest and trundled off to Annas then to Caiaphas, to Pilate and to Herod and back to Pilate again, and finally marched up to Skull Hill.

But in all of it, you never get any sense that Jesus is anything but calm, collected, almost serene. He steps forward to the arresting mob that comes to the garden . . . He chooses resolute silence before the Sanhedrin . . . He eventually speaks to Pilate, but not out of desperation, more out of pity for this poor schmuck who cannot seem to figure out what to do . . . he suffers indignity and abuse . . . and finally actually picks the moment of His death.

Luke records: ***“Jesus shouted, ‘Father, I put myself in your hands!’ Then he died.***” Bernard of Clairvaux wrote in the beloved hymn, “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” these final words:

*Be Thou my consolation, my shield when I must die;
Remind me of Thy passion when my last hour draws nigh.
Mine eyes shall then behold Thee, upon Thy cross shall dwell,
My heart by faith enfolds Thee. Who dieth thus dies well.*

Bernard understood what we are to watch as we stand at a distance and view the dying Christ.

The glorious hope of the resurrection is a powerful message. Yet again and again the New Testament writers kept pointing us back more and more to the cross. St. Paul told the Corinthians: ***“I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.”*** [1 Corinthians 2:2] Now Paul did address the whole issue of resurrection in

chapter 15; but his overarching focus was on the cross. To the Philippians he wrote: ***“Faith knows the power that his coming back to life gives and what it means to share his suffering. In this way I'm becoming like him in his death . . .”***

“All of Jesus' close friends and the women who had come with him from Galilee stood at a distance and watched.” as Christ dismantled death itself. How? By entering into it. From a Biblical perspective, death is all that prevents us from the full and abundant life that Jesus told us He came to bring. Death is what needs to die for life to come full bloom. Jesus put it this way: ***“. . . unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”*** Death is the pathway that leads to life.

Hence the cross hangs prominently in our sanctuary. Not as a symbol of death, but as a symbol of the path to life. A not-to-familiar hymn says it well:

<i>It is not death to die, To leave this weary road, And midst the brotherhood on high To be at home with God.</i>	<i>It is not death to close The eye long dimmed by tears And wake in glorious repose To spend eternal years.</i>
<i>It is not death to bear The wrench that sets us free From dungeon chain, to breathe the air To spend eternal years.</i>	<i>It is not death to fling Aside this sinful dust And rise, on strong, exulting wing, To live among the just.</i>

Unfortunately, the hymn writer decided to add a fifth stanza:

*Jesus, Thou Prince of Life,
Thy chosen cannot die;
Like Thee, they conquer in the strife
To reign with Thee on high.*

Better had he written:

*Jesus, Thou Prince of Life
Thy chosen, too, must die;
They enter death like lifeless seeds
And burst to life on high.*

But that still does not catch the true significance of what we see as we stand at a distance and watch: We watch our own deaths.

“All of Jesus’ close friends and the women who had come with him from Galilee stood at a distance and watched” Jesus enter into death, blaze a path through death, destroy the power of death, and emerge on the other side alive. So they — and we — can follow Him, knowing full well that we can confess with St. Paul, ***“death no longer had any power over us.”*** So we no longer stand at a distance and watch — we are drawn ineluctably toward Jesus.

As David Zersen so wonderfully has written:

“Jesus came to experience all of the evil that humans could concoct, yet God refused to call that life — refused to allow such human expression to have the final word. That’s no way to run a world! In canceling the power of evil in Jesus’ death, he opens to all of us the possibility of new and lasting life through the resurrection of Jesus. As we begin our journey into this week, let’s . . . look for the meanings that will no let us go. Here we can watch the life which is ‘death’ actually put to death, and the life which is lasting offered to all who know Jesus as living Lord. This is holy ground. Let’s walk the days together.”

To which I could only add: “Amen.”