

Good Friday
April 15, 2022
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

John 18:1-19:42

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

That is, to me, the most poignant thing in the whole story. That Jesus was special, we have no doubt. His ministry was unique. He certainly wasn't the first person to preach that God cares about what we do and how we live in the world. But added to his insistence that God is a loving parent: creating us, forming us, and desiring us, was his declaration that the God's reign had already begun. That is, Jesus taught us that God is with us now.

And it got him into trouble. We have read the story—twice now just this week. The religious and civil authorities could not stand the upset and upheaval that Jesus' teaching caused among the people. He was a rabble-rouser. And he needed to be put back in his place. Authority cannot survive if the rabble is not kept in its place. And so, it comes to this: public execution, in the garbage dump, all of the criminals together. AND his mother was watching.

And to me that is the most poignant thing. Our mothers know us. They know the good in us. They know when we are being our best selves. And they know our failures. They know our sins. We try to hide those things, of course. The first time you stole a cookie from the cookie jar, you were trying to hide your larceny from your mom. But there is Jesus, high upon the Cross. And he is not hiding from anyone.

There were any number of points along the way when Jesus could have changed the outcome. He could have taken his ministry underground, and hidden from public disgrace. He could have knuckled under to the religious authority, and returned to prayer and Bible study as usual. He could have given in to the civil authority, and given Pilate some wiggle room to save his life so that he could live another day.

But there he is. The big, beautiful Crucifix that hangs over this church is very hard to see from where I sit, week by week. In June of 2009, I visited this church for the first time—it was a visit to meet your rector search committee. This was before cell phone cameras were a thing, so I didn't take any pictures. I returned to Westfield in August to buy a house, because the Vestry had called me to serve as your rector. And I was delighted by the call, but the truth is, I didn't remember much of what the interior of the church looked like. So when I stopped by the church to get some keys to the building, and leave some boxes in my new office, I was a little afraid to walk into the church. I had just signed up to be the rector here—the priest in charge of things—but what did "here" even look like? So I walked into this space all by myself. And looked around. And there I saw him, Jesus, high upon the

Cross. And I realized that I did not have to be in charge of anything; I just had to be faithful. Jesus is in charge, and the physical evidence is that this congregation understands that.

The beautiful carved crucifix in this church shows us Jesus, high upon the Cross. And he is not hiding from anyone. And there are figures, one on either side. And they are watching. Traditionally, figures on either side of a Crucifix depict Mary, the mother of Jesus, and John the Beloved Disciple. “Woman, here is your son.” “Here is your mother.” But if you look at these figures closely, there is nothing else that marks them as Mary and John—they could be any two people, really. Because the whole world is watching. We are watching.

We watched as Jesus took his ministry of mercy, compassion, and hope to the streets. We watched as he fed and taught and healed. We drank wine that had first been water, and saw a blind man see his mother’s face for the first time. And our nostrils flared when Lazarus walked out of the tomb, bound up in linen strips, the spices of burial mixed in with the stench of death.

And now it has come to this. Public disgrace and execution. But we have a choice today. We can leave it all there, up on that beam, under our exquisite, carved Crucifix. What we do here today could be simply an historic reading. Mary and John are watching, and we are watching them watch.

That would be easier, don’t you think? Let them be there, because we are here. And we have lives to live. We can sit here, once a year, under this historic artifact, and admire Jesus, who didn’t hide from anyone, not even his own mother. And the rest of the time, we can just do our best to get through from one day to the next.

The only problem is that I know myself well enough to know that pretty soon, my hand is going to be back in that cookie jar, and I will return to trying to get along on my own, pretending that no one is watching my larceny and sin—and worse, thinking that I am in charge.

Last night, we remembered Jesus’ last supper with his disciples. We practiced serving one another, as Jesus did, by washing one another’s feet. We gathered around the Table, and we ate Bread and drank Wine, knowing that Jesus was present with us. And then, because we were so busy remembering, we stripped the Altar of anything that reminded us of Jesus’ presence. We ate all of the bread, every crumb of those little wafers that we share week by week. We drank up all the wine, even the half cups that were left over after we had taken our ritual sips. We even ate up the gluten free wafers!

And then, we extinguished the lamp that burns over the Altar, and stripped the place bare. No lights, no brass, no greens, no silver, no silk, no linen. We carefully folded and removed this cloth, the fair linen. “Fair” means white. The prayer book tells us that every time we celebrate the presence of Jesus with bread and wine, we should first spread a fair linen cloth over the table. My mother taught me that the fair linen reminds us of the cloth that wrapped the body of Jesus in the tomb.

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the [Jews] religious authorities, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of [the Jews] their people.

So the first Altar Guild had two members, and they were men. A fair linen has five crosses embroidered on it. They are to remind us of the five wounds of Jesus—his hands, his feet, and his side. The fair linen holds and protects the body and blood of Jesus.

It has been nearly 13 years since that summer that I first entered this holy place in the middle of Westfield. And several times, you have heard me speak and teach about balanced church life. And you have seen me with a big tablet and large magic marker as I mark off four quadrants of the paper, and then draw a circle in the center. I label the sections: Outreach, Pastoral Care, Formation, Administration, and in the center? Worship. And then, together, we list the things that we do here that fit into each category.

And it is not unlike this fair linen—there are five Crosses on the linen—five sections on our chart. Because our balanced church life is based on nothing less than the outstretched limbs of Jesus on the Cross. Jesus embraces us and holds us and engages us in his passion. And Jesus' passion is not merely the story of his death. Jesus passion is the entirety of his love for us.

This cloth bears signs of the life of Jesus in these lovely embroidered crosses. And we know that the life of Jesus was poured out—abundantly, horribly, and even his mother was watching. And so his beloved friends wrapped him up in linen with sweet spices. Thanks be to God, we know the rest of the story. We are not going to talk about it today—but come back tomorrow night and watch the rest of the story unfold.

And this cloth? Embroidered as it is, to remind us of the five wounds of Christ? Let it remind us of so much more than that horrible day that we now call good. Let this cloth remind us of our lives held by Jesus in a beautiful balance—centered around the worship of God who gives us all the gifts that we need to administer and teach and reach out and love. Because this day, and every day, God calls us to be more than historians enjoying a good story.

This day, and every day, we are called to follow Jesus, who lived his life in the full view of his mother and the whole world. This Good Friday, and every other day that God gives us, we are called to follow Jesus and change the world from the nightmare it is to the dream that God has for us.