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Title: Journey to Jerusalem: Witness

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She stepped in my office thirty minutes before worship, like I was taking attendance. In a meek voice, she announced, "I'm here but this is my least favorite day of the year." It was Good Friday. "I can't bear to witness his suffering on the cross. If it were up to me, I wouldn't be here."

She has company. Good Friday isn't the most popular day for worship. When I began the ministry, Good Friday services were just starting to decline in popularity. Businesses were beginning to tighten up their policy of closing the office in order for workers to attend services. While the market still closes for Good Friday, few companies maintain the tradition of giving workers a short day. Our midday vigil is faithfully but sparsely attended by no more than thirty or forty in a service.

The first Good Friday sermon I ever preached was at an ecumenical vigil in at First Baptist Church in Glendale, California a big old cathedral that seated over 1,000. The bottom floor was filled. The old Baptist pastor leading the worship leaned over to me and apologized that there was only 500 to hear me preach. I was shaking. It was the largest congregation I'd ever preached to; but he remembered the days when the balcony was full and people were standing in the back, waiting for a pew to open up. He offered the wisdom of fifty years of ministry to a young preacher who had been alive for only half of those years. "People don't like to witness suffering, not even when the suffering is for their salvation. So now they go in hiding until Easter."

They go into hiding until Easter. This is the tradition of the church because the evidence in the gospels is sketchy about who were the witnesses on the first Good Friday, the day Jesus died. A big crowd follows him on his journey to Jerusalem. But a big crowd of followers didn't witness his crucifixion. As always each gospel has its own perspective.

Matthew is very specific about who he reports as witnesses to the suffering of Jesus on a cross. He lists Roman soldiers, Jewish officials, passersby who mocked Jesus, and the two men crucified at the same time. Then he writes "Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee." (Matthew 27:55-56) There is no mention of the disciples. One would think that if they were there, he would have said so. At

least from Matthew's view of Golgotha, the disciples are hiding until Easter. They are not witnesses to the crucifixion.

Mark offers a similar position as to who the witnesses were. "There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee, and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem." (Mark 15:40-41)

Salome shows up along with a number of unnamed women. But there is no mention of the disciples.

To find a reference to a disciple you have to look over the gospel of John. Instead of standing at a distance, they are near the cross, close enough for Jesus to make eye contact and talk to them. John says "...standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." (John 19:25b)

But John adds this important dimension. "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." (John 19: 26-27) Finally, one of the disciples is a witness to the suffering of Jesus. Tradition holds that the beloved disciple was John. One of the disciples didn't go in hiding. Is there any possibility that any of the others made it to the cross?

Maybe. There is a slim possibility that other disciples were there if we look at Luke's report. It's just one verse, but it holds some promise if we ignore the other three gospels' narrow description of witnesses. It reads, "But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things." (Luke 23:49) How many do you think will show up for Good Friday? I don't know, but all of his acquaintances should be there. Who were these witnesses?

I suppose it depends on whether you put your emphasis on 'all' or 'acquaintances'. If you remember on this journey to Jerusalem, Luke was always talking about the crowd going along with him. Maybe this is what he is suggesting with acquaintances, a word that he uses only here. Acquaintances are the crowd that was always following, not his disciples. But if you place the emphasis on all, one might argue that all means everyone that Jesus knew and thus, all of the disciples were witnesses.

There is a suggestion elsewhere that this was true, that Peter might have been there. In the first letter that bears his name, Peter says, "...as an elder

myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ..." (1 Peter 5: 1) Are you saying you were there or simply aware?

Two men live 1000 miles apart. One is the constant caregiver of their dying father. The other offers support, to him and to his father, long distance. At his death, who has suffered more? The one present or the one who couldn't be there?

The phone rings the terrible ring of an accident. A father rushes to the emergency room. A daughter is dying. Her mother is out of town, on a business trip, trying desperately to get home, wondering if she can make it in time. Who is suffering more? The anxious father making medical decisions or the mother who is suffering because she can't get home?

Did Peter suffer because he was with "all of the acquaintances" seeing from afar Jesus nailed to a cross? Or did he suffer in hiding? Which suffering is greater? Do you have to be present in person to experience the suffering of Christ? If so, the cause of Christ would not have made it much past Easter, let alone into a 3rd millennium.

Whether present or hiding, Peter would say that discipleship requires suffering. He says, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps." (1 Peter 2:21) We are to follow in Christ's footsteps and suffer.

In a world that struggles with personal tragedy and pain, we have difficulty with this. We don't have much tolerance for this. We want things fixed, immediately. That's because we confuse suffering with pain. "Pain, according to the American Medical Association is "an unpleasant sensation related to tissue damage." Pain originates in the body. The hurt comes from swollen joints, fluid-filled lungs, damaged nerves, invading tumors. More often than not, you can lay your hands on pain. You can find the place that hurts and press on it, eliciting a howl or at least a groan. Pain happens in the flesh.¹ On the cross, Jesus experienced excruciating pain.

Suffering, on the other hand, happens in the mind. The mind assigns meaning to pain, whether it's physical pain, emotional pain, or spiritual pain. The mind decides what pain means and whether it is deserved. The mind notices who comes to visit and who does not. The mind remembers how good thing used to be and are not likely to be again. The mind makes judgments, measures losses, takes the blame, and assigns guilt."² The mind says, "If only," like Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus. "Lord, if only you had been here, our brother would not have died."

But now it is Jesus, our brother, and savior, who has died on a cross. We can only imagine the suffering that he went through, the emotional turmoil he

experienced, the mental anguish, dying for us even wondering if God had forsaken him. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2: 22-24) This type of suffering mark the footsteps which we are to follow.

If discipleship requires suffering with Jesus, then we dare not go in hiding until Easter. "I can't bear to witness his suffering on the cross. If it were up to me, I wouldn't be here." Well, it is important that you are here. You are here to be a witness to his suffering as surely as you will witness his resurrection on Easter.

We witness the suffering of Christ because it reveals his love for us.

We witness the suffering of Christ because by his wounds we are healed.

We witness the suffering of Christ in order to stand in solidarity with our fellow Christians.

We are to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn. We are to look with love at the lost and the broken. We are to have compassion on the hungry and thirsty, to touch the lives of those who are neighbors and those who you've never met.

So we are here because we are meant to be here. With all of his acquaintances, including the women, we have followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem and now to this cross. We stand watching and know it is indeed, not up to us to be here. It was up to Jesus.

¹ The Practice of Feeling Pain in An Altar in the World, B. Taylor, pg, 161.

² Taylor, pg. 161.